

A question of priorities

While citizens don't necessarily wish to know the nuts and bolts of efficiencies, four years on from the Gershon review, councils need to find ways of communicating why hard decisions and trade-offs sometimes need to be made for further savings to be achieved, argues Phil Brennan.

BBC1's Question Time may make good television, but a recent episode demonstrated that the complexities of trying to govern the country can never be communicated in an hour.

A member of the audience raised the point about how over-taxed the population is. Cue a vigorous round of applause. He continued that it might be more acceptable if people knew where the money was being spent rather than disappearing down a black hole. More applause.

Only a complete kill-joy would have been brave enough to point out that central and local government's accounts are publicly available.

The next Question Time topic was knife crime. A youth worker noted the need to support families in deprived neighbourhoods. Again there was total agreement and mass applause.

These ten minutes of television might beg the question of how members of the public can call for a reduction in tax in one breath and extra services in the next? It is, however, nearer the mark to conclude that people want clearer explanations of how their priorities are being considered when public money is being spent. They need to know that councils are doing their best to root out wasteful practices and procedures.

Councils have done a great job making efficiency savings since Sir Peter Garson's review in July 2004. Efficiency saving in English councils over the past four years totalled £3.2bn. This is the equivalent of £123 off the average Band D council tax bill - and £1bn more than the efficiency target they were set.

But this has not necessarily been fully communicated to residents who, according to indicators, still tend to have a poor perception of their council overall despite rating individual services highly. And, announcing the savings, local government minister, John Healey, called on councils to save a further £4.9bn over the next three years. The minister also announced plans to give residents an update on efficiency on council tax bills. But a crude efficiency rating will not be enough to show how tough decisions are made and how efficiencies savings from the back-office are being diverted into front-line services.

With financial settlement equating to an increase of just 1% in real terms and a move in efficiency targets from 2.5% half cashable and half non-cashable to 3% cashable – pressure on resources is greater than ever. The Community Empowerment White Paper, Best Value reform and new duty to involve local people in decisions about services can be seen as either yet another burden or a way of creating better public understanding of how priorities are decided and scarce funds allocated.

We at APSE hope it will be the latter. But this calls for innovative approaches to engagement. The role of front-line workers, who have every day contact with local people, must not be under-estimated as a way of engaging with residents and feeding their views back into corporate priorities.

The role of elected members is also changing as powers are devolved to local communities. While obviously concerned about winning votes, managing public expectations will be crucial. APSE's latest research *Neighbourhoods, Governance and Service Delivery* – published on 16th July – explores tensions that can exist between priorities at the local neighborhood level and strategic objectives for authorities corporately and the trade-offs that are sometimes necessary to balance the two. Councils need, more than ever, to communicate realistic expectations of what neighbourhood level arrangements can deliver in terms of local services.

At a time when people are worrying about rises in prices of food, fuel and other basics, everyone needs more for less. In explaining how each council is moving forward and why it is doing what it is doing, members and officers must address difficult questions such as 'in what areas do local people think the council is wasting money?', 'which services do they think are unnecessary?' and 'where money can be saved?'

The agenda is shifting beyond 'efficiencies' to 'transformation' - a wider concept also addressing improved customer satisfaction. More focused organisations and innovative use of technology will be fundamental. At this stage, attempts are still being made to articulate the transformation agenda within local government. In taking on board this agenda, councils must bear in mind the need to communicate what it means in practice to local people from the outset - or run the risk of seeing a lot more irate council tax payers on *Question Time*.

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