

Other way round: There is a circle of mistrust about local government among the public which must be broken



Behavioural change

Salami-sliced cuts are no longer enough. What we need is real behaviour change. But if councils want to change their residents, they have to start far closer to home, says **Jon Ainger**

Why is there such a furore about bins? Why is communities secretary, Eric Pickles, convinced that fortnightly bin collection is a major threat to localism? And why are so many members of all political parties so nervous of the move towards alternative weekly collection?

The answer is, of course, because they are politicians, and politicians need to be sensitive to the public mood.

What's more, our politicians know that trust in local government is at a historic low. And in those circumstances, a controversial change to a universal service feels like political suicide.

There is an ironic consequence of this lack of trust. We are ruling out a change in the way we collect waste which has triple benefits – it saves money, reduces waste, and increases recycling. And we are doing so at the exact point in the economic cycle where we are making unprecedented cuts in public spending, and asking local government to think differently as a result.

What is the cause of this lack of trust? That would require more analysis than we have space for here. But one answer is that slowly, over the years, local government has failed to notice the values of the population changing under its feet. At the same time, councils have been busy generating efficiencies by standardising and automating contact with the public and, in many cases, reducing contact as far as they possibly can. As a result, relationships have broken down.

For a while, perhaps, increased spend-

ing was masking the problem. But austerity has exposed it.

iMPOWER spoke to 100 senior executives in local government in November 2011. We found that just 22% of senior executives described community trust in their authority as high – compared with 40% a year before, and 45%, three years ago. This mirrors a June 2011 Ipsos MORI survey, which found that in a list of 21 roles, managers in local government sat fourth from bottom in terms of trust – below bankers, and just above journalists, government ministers and politicians generally. Local councillors fared slightly better, being seventh from bottom.

This position is a weak one from which to manage down the costs of the public sector with the support of the public. Moreover, our experience is that this cycle of distrust locks in waste and inefficiency at a service level.

We believe councils with dysfunctional relationships will be carrying excess demand costs, no matter how notionally efficient their services are.

iMPOWER's detailed financial research into seven key local authority services areas has identified a £3bn opportunity in behaviour change for English local

authorities, equivalent to 14% of baseline expenditure for those services.

Extrapolating this over all local government services where demand management may be applied results in a potential £5bn potential saving for English councils. In Wales, the equivalent is £500m, in Scotland, £900m.

Responding to the unprecedented financial challenge, local government is seeking new ways to save money. While there are still supply-side savings to be achieved, these are no longer sufficient to meet the challenge for this year, next year and beyond – particularly given persistently-gloomy growth and deficit forecasts, which will surely mean further financial pressure in future years.

Our field research reveals that, faced with real cuts to real services, demand management and behaviour change offer local authorities very significant opportunities to save money over and above traditional savings approaches.

Almost all executives (98%) believe they can reduce demand by changing behaviour. Almost three-quarters (72%) believe that managing demand for services and changing citizen behaviours offer significant potential to offset declining

budgets. And two-thirds (65%) claim that these present the single-greatest opportunity to reduce costs.

The best local authorities are starting to understand that citizens behave the way they do because the public sector behaves the way it does – and they are doing something about it.

Fundamentally altering the cost base of local authorities requires a new, mature and trusting relationship with the citizen – and this needs more than just a 'nudge' in a few service areas. It demands a root-and-branch change to the way local authorities engage with individuals and communities, to ensure their energy is used to positive effect – and is not wasted fighting the system.

There is a belief in local government that no administration has ever been re-elected after moving to fortnightly collection. iMPOWER's analysis across the whole of England found no such correlation. The lesson is that local authorities – officers and members – need the courage to believe that they can change the way they behave – and that if they do so in ways carefully calculated to improve their relationship with citizens, they can profoundly improve levels of trust, change behaviours and ultimately, reduce the cost of the public sector. ▀

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