

# Building trust in the community

Trust can't be demanded, only earned, says **Barry Quirk**. And unlike the plight of national politicians, local government must build trust in its communities.

**G**ood governance requires trustworthy conduct from those elected, and trustworthy conduct among those who advise and serve them.

English local government has its problems, but overall, its record of trustworthy governance is a good one.

In January this year, I was asked to lead a seminar for the Committee on Standards in Public Life about how local government goes about building trust and confidence in its actions.

The committee approached me because Lewisham had, together with several other councils, been involved in a research project on 'trust' with the think-tank Demos.

The committee was in the middle of a wide-ranging examination of how public bodies could improve trust through practical measures.

At the seminar, the focus was on trust in professional actions – in light of mistakes and errors in the Baby P case, among others – as well as in trust in local government generally.

My argument was that we needed to approach the issue of trust with utmost care. Trust could not be demanded, it could only be earned.

Moreover, while it takes a long time to earn trust from others, it can corrode in a trice. We try to be trustworthy so that others may trust us. And in local government, we have the problem of trying to earn trust as individuals, as professional groups, as politicians and as corporate bodies.

Over the years, councils have moved from being simply focused on the delivery of services to being focused as much on solving social problems with their citizens. And this can only work in conditions of high trust.

When it comes to trust in professionals, local government has a strong tradition of expecting professionals to give their advice impartially, openly and honestly, and for this advice to be available to all

politicians as well as to the public at large. At the same seminar, Onora O'Neil gave a short lecture on how public bodies and professionals needed to develop their trustworthiness. She made an extremely powerful point about how current systems of inspection and audit undermined rather than buttressed trustworthiness.

She argued that service-users wanted competent, reliable and honest advice from any professional that they dealt with – whether they were doctors, lawyers, planners, psychologists, social workers or auditors.

And therefore, any system of inspection and regulation which surrounded the actions of these professionals ought to be designed so as to improve their

doubted. Words, actions and emotions get us so far, but genuine trust requires people to make a judgment of the motives of the professionals serving them. And when people begin to feel that these professionals care more about serving themselves than serving the public, trust corrodes at an astonishing pace.

The expectation that professionals may not surrender their own interests to the interests of the public is nothing new.

The late 18th century in Europe and the US was a cauldron of international debate about the competing imperatives of self-interest, governance and the public good.

In 1776, Adam Smith argued in *The Wealth Of Nations* that, 'People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance, to raise prices'.

This line of thinking has led to wholesale systems of regulation which ensure the public interest is served by competi-

tion rather than through the creation of monopolies – although despite Mr Smith's concerns, while companies are precluded from having monopolies, professions retain theirs.

This thinking also influenced 18th century constitutional design. After all, politicians are professionals too, and they may be subject to the same self-interested imperatives.

Indeed, David Hume – who died in 1776 – said in relation to designing constitutions that, 'In contriving any system of government, and fixing the several checks and controls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a knave and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest.

'By this interest, we must govern him and, by means of it, notwithstanding his insatiable avarice

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overall competence, reliability and honesty.

However, she argued that many of these systems appeared to do the opposite, and instead encouraged, through the over-reliance on upward reporting, gaming and scheming rather than improvements in professional practice.

The over-riding point is that trust must be seen from the perspective of the citizen, the service-user, and the public.

In respect of the relationship between service-users and professionals, trust is experienced in words, actions and emotions... 'I can trust what he says is correct and credible'; 'I can trust her to deal with me competently and reliably'; and, 'I am comfortable discussing personal issues with him'.

By contrast, trust is corroded when motives are



# Trust me. I'm a doctor.

and  
ambition, co-operate to the public good.'

This encouragement to scepticism in the face of public-spirited politics seems coldly cynical but this mood of cynicism is currently back with a vengeance. Let's hope it's just temporary.

One of the founding fathers of the American Revolution, James Madison – who was deeply influenced by Hume – was more realistic about politics and human nature. He knew that everyone had flaws – he thought it best not to pretend otherwise – so he wrote, 'But what is government itself, but the great-

est of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary.

If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this – you must first enable the Government to control the governed, and in the next place, oblige it to control itself.

The demands for transparency in the modern

world are refracted through the swirl of rolling 24-hour news media.

And if, as a public, we demand transparency, which we know that no human being can continually withstand, we need also to recognise, as a public, that we have a corresponding duty of forgiveness in the face of minor wrongdoings.

By contrast, major wrongs by real knaves must and will receive the usual weight of the criminal law. Our experience in local government has taught us how not to confuse major with minor wrongs.

The lengthy experience of transparency and disclosure in local government has served greatly to improve the governance of communities.

People want good services, but they also want to know that they are governed well and governed fairly, and that if they choose to, they can engage with their own governance.

From being up close and personal with our communities locally, we have learned that our focus is not on building trust but developing our trustworthiness. ■

*Barry Quirk is chief executive of Lewisham LBC*