

Local government should remember the interests of the taxpayers

Much of our political debate is about refugees, economic migrants, people on benefits and in poverty. It is about cultural attitudes, the use of language, the abuse of power and the need to reduce inequalities. These are important matters, and most of us want to work away at reducing poverty, alleviating suffering and reducing community conflicts.

It is also important on the eve of local elections to remember that democracy is also the system by which we appoint Councillors to run services for us, to spend taxpayers money wisely and to assist us in our daily lives. Beneath all the sound and fury of national politics, claims of malfeasance and arguments over net zero we do need sometimes to discuss what Councils can achieve to make the lives better for all who pay their own way, work hard for family and community and who seek to do the right thing.

There are three things Councils do that are experienced by all voters. They impose a Council tax on us. They collect our refuse and recycling. They provide a network of roads and paths free at the point of use as monopoly provider. There is too little talk about these.

Keeping the Council Tax down should be a prime aim. This can be done by limiting the number of policies and areas of intervention to the essential. Councils do not need to run leisure, sporting facilities and entertainment in competition with private companies doing the same. They do not need large direct works departments where contractors can do a cheaper and better job. It can be done by driving efficiency and higher quality throughout the main service areas. This is especially necessary where they have a monopoly over provision. They need to control the size of the overhead.

Providing a first class refuse and recycling service is important. There should be a minimum standard of weekly collection, with shorter gaps in service in large urban areas especially in summer. The more they can do to recycle in a way which cuts landfill costs and adds to revenue from the recycled product or energy generated, the better.

Everyone who goes out daily has regular experience of the roads and pavements. Too many Councils seek to drive the car, delivery lorry and service sector van off the road. We are affronted by a growing array of differential and frequently changing speed limits, light controlled junctions with long built in delays, priority lanes, badly designed intersections and a galaxy of road signs and painted instructions on the carriageway. There are even more restrictions and complications should you wish to park your vehicle other than at home.

They insist on putting main service pipes and cables under the middle of main roads to maximise the inconvenience of repairing and upgrading them by closing all or part of the highway to do so. Bad Councils spend a small

fortune on regular and incremental changes to reduce the flow of traffic. Hours of time are lost in jams and slow moving traffic. The single biggest annoyance mainstream voters have with Councils is their collective refusal to improve junctions to smooth flows, to tailor capacity to need and to see that good roads are crucial to getting food to shops, patients to hospitals, fire engines to fires, children to school and many of us to work. We have just witnessed the commuter rebellion against the return to five days a week in the office. This is a protest against the railways and the road system. Good Councils improve roads and recognise the need for less congestion. That improves safety and reduces pollution. Keeping people safe must include having some roads for through traffic that work and do not mix cars with pedestrians.