

## Civic Behaviour Project – Article to appear in We Can Autumn Newsletter

### Civic involvement: finding out what works and what doesn't

The Empowerment White Paper is all about getting ordinary people more involved in their society: saying what they want and making a more active contribution. A wonderful concept to which no-one could reasonably object. But how do you actually go about engaging people – many of whom have never interacted with their local council apart from paying their Council Tax, or with the Government – except to vote?

Two academic organisations are currently hard at work trying to solve a conundrum: just how do you inspire people to become better, more involved citizens?

'Rediscovering the Civic and Achieving Better Outcomes in Public Policy' is the somewhat impersonal title for work that actually plans to get up very close and personal and understand what presses people's buttons.

The two organisations involved are the Institute for Political and Economic Governance at the University of Manchester and the Centre for Citizenship and Democracy at the University of Southampton, both of whom are putting a range of projects under the microscope.

In the words of Manchester University's Peter John, 'This is an integrated programme of research activities designed to address one of the crucial questions of the current age: how do we engage the citizens in the making of policies and in how those policies are delivered?

'These activities matter ... really matter... because we know that engagement is important for achieving the outcomes that the public and policy-makers care about such as reducing crime and anti-social behaviour, and achieving economically developed and cohesive communities and a fully working democratic system.'

The researchers will be going right down to the delivery level and, according to Peter, 'in the best traditions of applied social science, our research aims to be methodologically innovative.

This is not just innovation for its own sake, but because working out the links between individual projects and their impact on civic behaviour is notoriously tricky to tie down.'

## **The projects**

Did you realise that the waste you put into your dustbin each year could power a television for 5,000 hours? It's that kind of stunning statistic that EMERGE - East Manchester Environment and Resources Group - has been working hard to get over to local people for over 10 years now.

A randomised controlled trial, organised in partnership with EMERGE, will provide evidence of how households can be successfully encouraged to recycle household waste and to examine the impact of peer effects.

EMERGE's remit is to 'empower individuals, businesses and communities to reduce, re-use and recycle', and that word 'empower' together with their 'person-centred ethos' explains why they have been selected as part of the research programme.

## **Amongst the other projects are:**

- Creating a panel of internet users to discuss an important national issue. We will see how randomly selected citizens behave when given the opportunity to participate in a large-scale online consultation event and whether their political interest, knowledge and engagement changes as a result, and in comparison to a control group
- An experiment in Blackburn with Darwen council, exploring how staff can encourage callers who phone the contact centre to get more involved in neighbourhood activity
- A project on e-petitions with Oxford Internet Institute
- Work around Citizenship Interest Groups, which will use an experimental design to test whether local representatives respond to requests from interest groups and also whether information ... or persuasion ... is more effective.

'The results should prove beneficial all the way round,' says Peter John. 'Policy makers in government departments will gain extra knowledge about what works. Delivery agencies, such as local authorities will gain insights about how to implement projects. Researchers within civil renewal will learn from innovative research techniques.

'And, of course, citizens themselves should see more connections between what they do and think, and how governments and democratic processes respond to that.'

You can find more information at <http://www.ipeg.org.uk/civicbehaviour/>