At the doorstep

How misunderstandings increase risks for Civil Enforcement Agents

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CIVEA
Civil Enforcement Association

Civil enforcement plays a vital role in supporting public services, upholding the rule of law and ensuring fairness for all taxpayers.

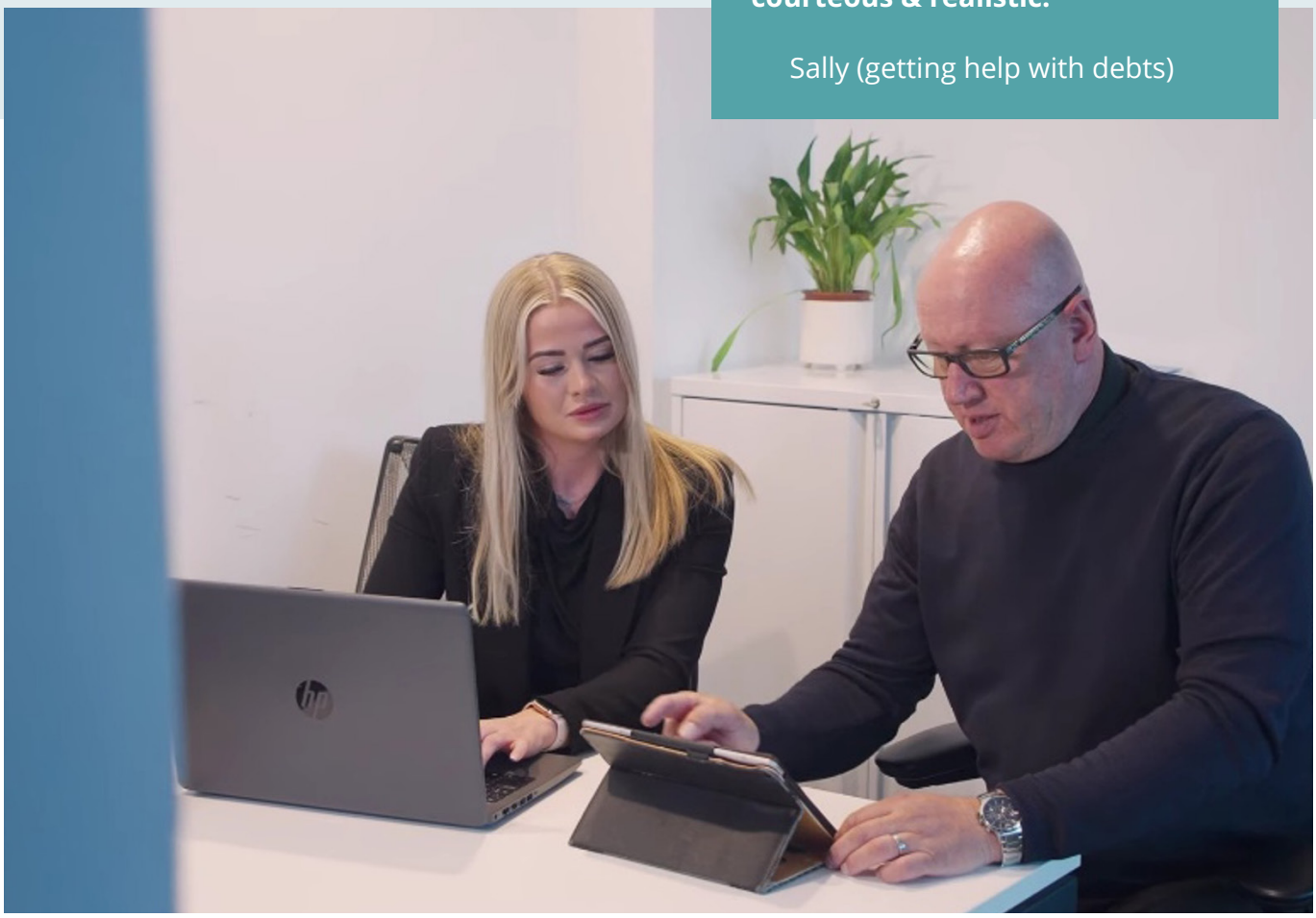
Despite this importance, overall understanding of enforcement activity remains limited and increasingly shaped by stereotypes and selective media portrayals.

The vast majority of people have never met an enforcement agent yet hold strong views that often bear little resemblance to operational reality.

These misperceptions are contributing directly to a more dangerous working environment for frontline agents.

I'm sure most people mainly complain about what I imagine is a very difficult job, but I would like to say that all the bailiffs that have ever attended my property have only ever been professional, courteous & realistic.

Sally (getting help with debts)



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Key Findings

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The vast majority of the public (around three quarters) have **never met or spoken to an enforcement agent** yet hold strong views about the sector.

1 in 5

One in five people **form their opinions from television documentaries, soap operas and reality shows** rather than direct experience.

1%

When asked what **proportion of cases result in goods being removed,** the most popular answer was 41–50%. The true figure is less than 1%.

4%

Similarly, **the public estimated that 41–50% of cases result in a complaint.** The true figure is 4%.

56%

56% of enforcement agents face **verbal threats at least once a week** and 12% face violence weekly.

45%

45% of agents have suffered **negative mental health impacts;** one third have considered leaving the profession as a result.

16 per day

The Enforcement Conduct Board recorded an **average of sixteen incidents of assault or threats of assault on agents every single day** between January and December 2025.

5,896

Last year, there were 5,896 incidents of **threats and abuse and 369 physical assaults** on enforcement agents.

77% agree assaulting an enforcement agent should be treated as seriously as an assault on other public-facing workers.

SECTION 1

Executive Summary

Civil enforcement plays a vital role in supporting public services, upholding the rule of law and ensuring fairness for all taxpayers. Millions of visits are conducted every year to recover unpaid council tax, parking fines and other public debts, revenue that funds schools, care services, road repairs and local infrastructure.

Yet despite this importance, overall understanding of enforcement activity remains limited, and attitudes are increasingly shaped by stereotypes, selective media portrayals and wider social pressures. At the same time, enforcement agents are reporting rising levels of aggression and abuse - a worrying trend that threatens both the wellbeing of frontline staff and the long-term sustainability of a sector that local government depends on.

Enforcement agents are reporting rising levels of aggression and abuse, a trend that threatens the wellbeing of frontline staff.

This report draws on independent research commissioned by CIVEA, including two nationally representative consumer surveys conducted in August 2025 and March 2026, and a poll of 312 certificated enforcement agents, to explore the gap between media narratives and the operational reality of civil enforcement.

It sets out the evidence, examines the causes of misperceptions and proposes a series of practical steps that Government, the media, police and the wider sector can take to create a safer, more informed and more effective enforcement environment.

Our calls to action

1. More use of the Section 156 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022
2. Better training for police officers on the powers of certificated enforcement agents
3. A national register of incidents of assault and threats of assault against enforcement agents
4. Ministerial support for a cross-sector consensus on the protection of frontline staff
5. More responsible and accurate commentary by the media and politicians on the work of enforcement agents

SECTION 2

Why Enforcement Matters

An essential public function

In February 2025, Justice Minister Alex Davies-Jones MP told Parliament that the enforcement sector 'plays an important role in supporting economic growth, funding public services, and underpinning the rule of law.' This is not a peripheral observation; it reflects the central role that civil enforcement plays in making local government financially viable.

When individuals fail to pay council tax, parking fines or other public penalties, it is not an abstract administrative shortfall. It is a direct, meaningful reduction in the funds available for care services, libraries, road repairs and schools. Civil enforcement exists to ensure that those who can pay, do pay, and that the burden of funding public services does not fall disproportionately on those who meet their obligations. Enforcement is therefore not an optional extra – it is a necessary part of ensuring that public services remain funded and that the system is fair to those who do pay.

With the pressures of austerity, changes to the benefits system and the continuing economic aftershocks of the pandemic, many local councils lack the skilled workforce and internal capacity to pursue arrears through enforcement effectively. Civil enforcement firms provide a vital, specialist function, operating within a clear legal framework, under the oversight of the courts and, since 2023, under the independent scrutiny of the Enforcement Conduct Board (ECB).

A complex and evolving role

The role of the enforcement agent has grown significantly more complex in recent years. Agents are frequently the first point of contact for individuals in acute financial difficulty; people who may be confused, frightened or in crisis. The job requires not only legal knowledge and professional discipline, but also a significant degree of emotional intelligence.

Enforcement agencies have developed increasingly sophisticated approaches to identify vulnerability early. In 2024, member firms identified 351,000 people not listed on council records as vulnerable – individuals who were then able to access support they might otherwise never have received. This is not the work of the aggressive, indiscriminate 'bailiff' of popular imagination. It is skilled, regulated, socially responsible work.

The industry has also developed strong links with organisations able to provide direct support to people in financial difficulty, including Citizens Advice, the Money Advice Trust and the National Support Network.

Investment in technology, including body-worn cameras, digital communications and case management systems, has further improved the quality and accountability of enforcement activity. More than 60% of enforcement agents view the wider use of body-worn video (BWV) positively; not just as a safeguard for the public, but as protection for themselves.

351,000
vulnerable people identified by firms in 2024, not on council records

<1%
of cases result in goods being removed

4%
of cases result in a complaint to the ECB, with half upheld

SECTION 3

Public Perception

Strong views, limited knowledge

The CensusWide survey of 2,000 nationally representative UK adults reveals a striking paradox: the majority of the public (64%) believe they have a good knowledge of the rights and responsibilities of enforcement agents, yet when tested on basic facts about how enforcement actually operates, that confidence proves largely unfounded. Survey findings also suggest changing attitudes towards civic obligation, with nearly one third (32%) saying they would risk committal to prison if they could not pay council tax.

Less than half of respondents understood that money recovered through enforcement contributes to services such as adult and children's care, schools, waste collection and road repairs.

This is not unusual in modern public discourse. Views on complex issues are often polarised and emotionally driven, shaped by vivid media narratives rather than direct experience or reliable information. When it comes to civil enforcement, this dynamic is particularly pronounced.

The vocabulary of fear

When asked to describe 'bailiffs' in their own words, the most common response among survey participants was 'debt collection' (61%). But emotive and negative descriptors were also heavily used: 'stressful' (36%), 'intimidating' (38%) and 'scary' (28%). When asked how a bailiff would make them feel, the two most frequently chosen words were 'aggressive' followed by 'authoritative'. This suggests many respondents may be reacting to the idea of authority or officialdom rather than real-world experience of civil enforcement itself.

These responses reveal a significant emotional charge attached to the very concept of enforcement, one that appears to influence behaviour before any actual interaction has taken place. Importantly, this emotional response is largely abstract: around three quarters of the public have never met an enforcement agent in real life. Only one in five respondents (19%) have ever had direct personal contact with an enforcement agent.

3/4

Around three quarters of the public have never met an enforcement agent in real life.

The influence of media and popular culture

If direct experience is rare, where do people's views come from? The survey points clearly to media and popular culture. One in five (21%) of respondents said they form their opinions about bailiffs from television documentaries, soap operas and reality shows.

This matters because dramatic portrayals of enforcement, by their nature, focus on conflict, confrontation and edge cases. They do not reflect the thousands of visits each day that are resolved through conversation, arrangement or referral to debt advice. The cumulative effect is a public perception shaped almost entirely by the most atypical and alarming episodes the sector ever encounters.

Public commentary by some politicians and campaigners compounds this effect. Calls for bans or severe restrictions on civil enforcement are frequently made without reference to how the current legal framework operates, what safeguards exist, or what would happen to public revenues if enforcement were removed. Such commentary is rarely based on the kind of verified, independent evidence that exists in abundance but is rarely cited – evidence that paints a very different picture to the prevailing narrative.

1 in 5

One in five people form their opinions from television documentaries, soap operas and reality shows rather than direct experience.

What the public perceive vs what the data shows

	Public estimate	Reality
Goods removed	41–50% of cases	**less than 1%**
Complaints	41–50% of cases	**4%**

	Citizens Advice report	Reality
Compliance breaches in BWV research *ECB, 2024*	40% of visits break rules[1]	**6%** of interactions, and most were indiscretion, not harm
Unlawful or inappropriate conduct	64% of cases	**7 cases out of 515** reviewed by the ECB in early 2026

[1] *https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/rule-breaking-bailiffs-pushing-people-further-into-crisis-as-fees-add-250m-to-debts/*

SECTION 4

The facts of enforcement work

What 100 cases actually look like

Civil enforcement is not, in the overwhelming majority of cases, a confrontational process. The following breakdown, based on sector data and member firm evidence, illustrates what a typical caseload actually involves. The real picture is far removed from the perception.

Note: These figures are indicative, based on sector data. CIVEA is working with the Enforcement Conduct Board to establish more granular national reporting.

~40%	Cases are resolved before a visit takes place, through digital contact, payment portals or telephone
~21%	Cases are resolved with all or some of outstanding payment secured
~50%	Payments made through agreed repayments by instalment
~30%	Cases are closed due to changed circumstances, e.g. debtor moves, debt is written off or recalled
~5%	Involved a threat or abusive incident against the agent
<1%	Result in goods being removed, typically vehicles, which are often unroadworthy, untaxed or otherwise illegal

High professional standards and independent oversight

Enforcement firms and agents operate within a closely-defined legal framework. All certificated agents must be approved by the courts, and the sector is subject to independent oversight by the Enforcement Conduct Board (ECB), a body established to provide accountability, transparency and a clear complaints process for members of the public.

In 2024, the ECB commissioned research based on 600 body-worn video recordings randomly selected from across 12 enforcement firms. The findings were clear: rules were being breached in just 6% of doorstep interactions, and in the main these were indiscretions, such as a conversation being overheard by a neighbour, rather than harmful conduct of the type often portrayed in the media.

In its February 2026 Insight Report, the ECB identified that enforcement agents had failed to act lawfully and appropriately in a total of 7 cases out of 515 reviewed. Every one of those cases is taken seriously, and CIVEA and its members are committed to continuing to drive up standards. But these figures represent a sector that prides itself on its professional and lawful conduct.

The financial and social context

Understanding public behaviour during enforcement encounters requires an appreciation of the wider context. The volatile post-pandemic economy, persistent cost-of-living pressures and the energy crisis have left many households in a state of sustained financial stress. Budgets are harder to manage across all income levels, and the cumulative effect of financial pressure on mental health is well documented.

High levels of stress and anxiety can significantly affect how individuals respond in pressured situations. Enforcement encounters, even when conducted professionally and lawfully, can trigger disproportionate reactions in people who feel they have lost control of their financial circumstances. This is not an excuse for abuse or violence; it is context that the sector takes seriously and responds to with training, vulnerability identification and carefully calibrated communications. Enforcement agents encounter people from all walks of life, often in distress, and must apply judgement, professionalism and compassion in equal measure.

There is also a broader cultural dimension. Trust in, and respect for authority and the institutions of the state has declined across many societies in the post-pandemic period. Anti-social behaviour has risen across public-facing sectors, retail, transport, healthcare and hospitality. Civil enforcement agents are not uniquely affected; they are part of a wider pattern in which people in public-facing roles are experiencing more hostility.

The pattern is well evidenced. Trust in government has fallen to its lowest level since records began in 1986 – just **12%, down from 23%** in 2020 (NatCen, BSA 42, 2025). ONS recorded a rise in antisocial behaviour, from **36% to 39%,** in the year to December 2025. Frontline hostility tells the same story: Usdaw's 2025 survey found shopworker assaults have roughly doubled since 2019; NHS Staff Survey data show discrimination from patients and the public at a record high; and the Institute of Customer Service found **43%** of customer-facing workers faced hostility in the past six months – up almost **20%** year-on-year. This reflects a broader weakening of the social contract that underpins the shared responsibility for funding and respecting public services.

High levels of stress and anxiety can trigger disproportionate reactions during enforcement encounters, even when agents act professionally and lawfully.

SECTION 5

The Human Cost of Misperception

The following cases illustrate the real world consequences that can ensue when attitudes shaped by misperceptions translate into violence on the doorstep.

Last autumn, a certificated enforcement agent was carrying out a lawful visit to recover two years' worth of unpaid council tax from a debtor who had repeatedly ignored correspondence from the local authority. The visit was conducted in accordance with the Taking Control of Goods Regulations. The agent had identified himself, explained the purpose of his visit and was following the prescribed legal process. He was ambushed by three men. In the attack, he lost the sight in one eye.

His is not an isolated case. Another incident saw a former police officer working as a county court bailiff stabbed to death in Durham. In Sheffield, an agent was threatened with having boiling water and sugar poured over him. In one case in Bedfordshire, an enforcement agent that had been severely beaten was advised by the police to call 111. The assailant admitted grevious bodily harm and threats to kill but was merely given a caution and required to attend an anger management course. These are examples of some – not all – incidents of violence that have been recorded by CIVEA members.

What these cases have in common is not a failure of process on the part of the agent. In each case, the agent was acting within the law, following a court order obtained by a public authority to recover public money.

What has changed is the environment, in which inflammatory commentary about 'bailiffs', the absence of accurate public information about what enforcement agents actually do, and a broader normalisation of aggression towards people in public-facing roles have combined to make the job increasingly dangerous.

Each of these cases could, in principle, have had a different outcome, if the individuals involved had understood that the agent had no personal interest in their debt, that the process had clear safeguards and appeal routes, and that physical violence carries serious legal consequences. Informed engagement is always an alternative to confrontation. But it requires the public to have access to accurate, balanced information, and that is precisely what current standards of public discourse fail to provide.

SECTION 6

What the Public Actually Supports

Notwithstanding the misconceptions identified in this report, the research reveals a degree of public support for effective enforcement that is rarely reflected in media coverage. This is an important finding, and one that provides a foundation on which the sector can build. Importantly, many of the strongest views identified in the research are held by people with no direct experience of enforcement agents themselves.

While public perceptions are often negative, these findings clearly show that the public does not condone violence towards enforcement agents.

On the principle of enforcement itself, the survey found that 64% of respondents agree that if people who can pay their council tax refuse to do so, there needs to be a mechanism for collecting that money. Similarly, 62% agree that if people refuse to pay a legitimate parking fine, there must be a way of recovering the debt to support public services and uphold the rule of law.

These are encouraging findings. The majority of the public understands, at a principled level, that a functioning society requires mechanisms to ensure obligations are met. The challenge is that there is gap between this understanding and the misconceptions about how those mechanisms operate in practice. It is these misconceptions that drive the hostility experienced on the doorstep.

On the question of regulatory oversight, the survey also revealed strong public support for judicial involvement in the certification of enforcement agents. 37% of respondents believe a court judge should be responsible for approving an enforcement agent's licence to operate; 67% agree that agents should be certificated by a judge to prove they are acting legitimately. This suggests that the public is not opposed to enforcement, but it wants enforcement that it can trust. That is a goal entirely shared by the sector.

77%
agree assaulting an enforcement agent should be treated as seriously as an assault on other public-facing workers.

80%
have sympathy for agents who experience verbal or physical violence.

66%
agree there should be stronger legal penalties for those who are violent towards enforcement agents.

SECTION 7

What the Sector Needs

The evidence is clear. Public misperception, fuelled by inaccurate media coverage, uninformed political commentary and low awareness of how enforcement actually works, is contributing directly to a more dangerous working environment for frontline agents. The solution is not to remove enforcement from the system; it is to ensure that those who encounter it, whether as members of the public, journalists or policymakers, understand it accurately.

A clear set of practical measures would improve the safety of enforcement agents, reduce the level of violence and abuse they encounter, and support a more informed public debate. CIVEA is calling on Government, police, the media and the wider sector to act on the following:

Government

Ensure that Section 156 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which creates a statutory aggravating factor for assaults on those providing a public service, is actively and consistently applied in prosecutions involving attacks on enforcement agents. The Ministry of Justice has confirmed this provision extends to those enforcing public debts and fines. It must now be enforced in practice.

Commission a national register of incidents of assault and threats of assault against enforcement agents, to provide a clear evidential basis for policy decisions and to track trends over time.

Convene a cross-sector ministerial roundtable bringing together enforcement, retail, healthcare, transport and other sectors to address the shared challenge of violence against public-facing workers, and to develop a coordinated Government response.

Support public awareness communications that explain how civil enforcement works, what safeguards are in place, and what rights people have when an agent visits, reducing the information vacuum that is filled by misunderstanding.

The Police

Ensure that assaults on enforcement agents are treated as substantive crimes, not occupational hazards. Attending officers must record incidents formally, investigate them properly and pursue prosecutions where the evidence supports them to do so.

Provide training for frontline officers on the legal powers of certificated enforcement agents, so that agents calling for assistance are properly supported rather than dismissed.

Work with CIVEA and the National Police Chief's Council to embed the Safer Enforcement toolkit, including the template police statement developed for reporting enforcement-related crime, into standard policing practice.

The Media and Political Commentators

Engage with verified, independent evidence when covering civil enforcement, including the ECB's compliance data, CIVEA's polling and the statistical reality of how cases are resolved.

Distinguish clearly between the legal, regulated process of civil enforcement and historic, unregulated bailiff activity. These are not the same thing, and treating them as equivalent does significant real-world harm.

Exercise responsibility in the language used to describe enforcement agents and their work. Commentary that depicts the sector as inherently abusive or illegitimate has consequences for the safety of authorised individuals carrying out lawful public functions.

The Enforcement Sector

Continue to invest in training, welfare support and mental health provision for enforcement agents, recognising that the personal cost of frontline work has increased significantly in recent years.

Expand the use of body-worn cameras and digital communications to improve transparency and provide an accurate record of all interactions.

Work proactively with the Enforcement Conduct Board to develop standardised national reporting on incident types, outcomes and complaints, providing the sector with a robust evidential base from which to counter misperception.

Engage in proactive community and stakeholder communications to explain the sector's role, standards and social value, reducing reliance on others to tell the sector's story.

SECTION 8

The Safer Enforcement Campaign

In direct response to the findings of this research, CIVEA has launched its Safer Enforcement campaign, a coordinated, evidence-based initiative designed to raise awareness of enforcement agents' roles and responsibilities, provide better protection for frontline staff and improve the public conversation around civil enforcement.

Campaign objectives

1. Ensure frontline enforcement staff feel safe, supported and valued in carrying out their lawful duties.
2. Promote clear, accurate public understanding of the community value of civil enforcement and the public services it supports.
3. Improve recruitment and retention across the sector, reducing the long-term impact of reputational damage and safety concerns on workforce numbers.

The Safer Enforcement toolkit

Working with the Police National Business Crime Centre, CIVEA has developed a practical toolkit of resources for enforcement professionals and their employers. The toolkit includes:

- A fact sheet explaining the legal framework protecting enforcement agents under Section 156 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022.
- A Guidance document for staff and employers on reporting a business crime, adapted from the toolkit used by the retail sector and the British Parking Association.
- A Safer Enforcement employer framework, signposting sources of advice on preventing violence, responding to abuse and protecting employee wellbeing.
- A template police statement containing all the information required for the police to formally record a business crime involving an enforcement agent.

The Police National Business Crime Centre is firmly behind the principle of safe working environments – a principle that sits at the heart of the police service's own efforts to address attitudes towards its officers. CIVEA has also raised with the police the discouraging practice of attending officers treating agent assaults as an occupational hazard. Neither CIVEA nor senior police officers consider this acceptable, and collaborative work is underway to improve reporting rates and increase prosecutions.

Legal framework

Section 156 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 creates a statutory aggravating factor that courts must take into account when an assault is committed against a person who is providing a public service, performing a public duty, or providing services, goods or facilities to the public. The court must treat this as an aggravating factor and state in open court that the offence is so aggravated.

The Ministry of Justice has confirmed that this provision applies to those enforcing public debts and fines, meaning enforcement agents are explicitly covered by this legal protection. The challenge now is ensuring that this protection is consistently applied in practice.

SECTION 9

Conclusion

Public perceptions of civil enforcement are shaped by a complex mix of limited knowledge, media portrayal, financial stress and broader societal shifts. The evidence presented in this report shows a clear and widening gap between how enforcement is imagined and how it actually operates. While many people hold strong views about 'bailiffs', these views are often based on outdated stereotypes rather than the regulated, accountable and increasingly sophisticated system that exists today.

The reality is that enforcement agents perform a vital public function. They help to fund essential services, uphold the rule of law and ensure fairness for taxpayers. They identify vulnerable individuals who might otherwise be missed by the system, and they carry out their duties within a strict legal framework overseen by the Enforcement Conduct Board. Yet despite this, they are facing rising levels of hostility, threats and violence, fuelled not by evidence, but by misperception.

This disconnect has real consequences. It affects the safety and wellbeing of frontline staff. It undermines public confidence in the enforcement process. And it risks weakening the social contract that underpins our shared responsibility to contribute to the services we all rely on. When misconceptions go unchallenged, they create an environment in which aggression is normalised and legitimate public duties are made harder to carry out.

But the findings also point to a constructive path forward. The public does not condone violence; in fact, most people express sympathy for enforcement agents and support stronger protections. There is also clear recognition that unpaid taxes, fines and penalties must be collected to maintain essential services. This provides a foundation for rebuilding trust and improving understanding.

The challenge, and the opportunity, is to close the gap between perception and reality. That requires clearer public information, more responsible commentary, stronger protections for frontline staff and continued commitment to high standards across the sector. It also requires collaboration between government, regulators, enforcement firms, the police and the media to ensure that enforcement is understood, respected and carried out safely.

> Civil enforcement is an essential part of a fair and functioning society. By **addressing misconceptions, strengthening accountability and supporting those who carry out this difficult work,** we can create a safer environment for agents and a more informed, constructive relationship with the public. The recommendations set out in this report offer a practical route to achieving that goal, ensuring that enforcement continues to serve communities effectively, safely and with integrity.

Certificated enforcement agents say:

The enforcement sector has evolved considerably. Regulations are stronger, expectations are higher and transparency is central to how we operate. Structured training and ongoing professional development and clear standards support consistency across the sector.

We uphold the legislation, but we do so with respect and understanding. Every visit, every conversation, is an opportunity to resolve a problem and restore balance. That's why I'm proud of what I do, and proud to help shape the next generation of Enforcement Agents to do the same.

Mark Bytheway, Dukes

I do believe that it's good for the public to see what we as enforcement agents have to deal with on a daily basis. But its not all about taking goods. We have to deal with welfare, mental health situations, anger, threats. But again this is part of the package of doing the job – we spend a lot of time talking. The public will never have a good perception of anyone who is collecting debt no matter how well you handle the cases.

People forget that there are so many opportunities for people to pay their debt long before an enforcement agent knocks on their door. It's annoying when TV shows and soaps keep using these images in their storylines. It's just not the reality of modern enforcement.

Jodie Pickard, CDER Group

I knock on the door, introduce myself and I ask open-ended questions so that I can listen to why they haven't paid their council tax, because potentially there may be vulnerability issues that we need to consider, before we start negotiating paying the debt over a period of time.

Just because someone is dealing with vulnerable circumstances doesn't mean they don't have to pay their council tax, but we might need to make changes to our process, so I always proceed on the side of caution.

If it's needed, I give contact details for the Citizens' Advice Bureau, StepChange and Christians Against Poverty.

Lee Tuplin, Bristow & Sutor

When I started, the idea of bodycams being standard would have seemed strange. Vulnerability recognition was largely learned through experience. Welfare processes were nowhere near what they are today. You passed your exam, got your certificate, got handed a stack of cases and learned very quickly whether you were cut out for the job.

Today agents receive training in legislation, vulnerability, conflict management and professional standards. There are audits, reviews, oversight and far greater scrutiny than ever before.

That's not to say the industry is perfect. It isn't. There are still conversations to be had around reform, welfare, retention and standards.

But when people talk as though enforcement is the same industry it was 10 or 15 years ago, I struggle to recognise the picture they're painting.

Adam Harrison (self-employed)

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CIVEA
Civil Enforcement Association