

Street Cleansing – A Position Statement

Purpose

This position statement has been prepared by Aberdeenshire Environmental Forum - AEF with the assistance of volunteer litter groups, nationally recognised professionals and practitioners in the fields of communication, public health and public cleansing from across Scotland. It has been created to inform political parties and candidates in the forthcoming May 2016 elections in Scotland on the complex interactions vital to community wellbeing that arise from the forgotten subject of street cleansing.

We hope that the weight evidence presented will convince political parties and candidates that street cleansing requires a rejuvenated focus to again play a meaningful part in creating a cleaner, healthier, safer and fairer Scotland. The evidence and the people of Scotland are screaming out for it. Just think of the transformation that could be achieved throughout Scotland by simply cleaning the streets (for a change).

Summary

Since the creation of unitary local authorities in Scotland in 1996, street cleansing has become the 'forgotten service' and, as a consequence, the significance of the impact of the service on many aspects of community life has been lost.

It is important at this point, to highlight that street cleansing is far more diverse a service than the myopic focus on the 'trending' topics of litter and fly tipping so beloved of politicians and the media. Litter is but the visible tip of the street cleansing iceberg. The focus on Litter is acting to the detriment of traditional street cleansing standards.

Street cleansing involves the following:

- statutory duty to keep streets and land clean
- a forgotten service, diminished at best, to litter clearance of 'big bits'
- widespread public criticism of standards over a protracted period
- acknowledge impact on public health - physical and mental including Community Wellbeing
- linked to low level crime and incivilities
- significant contributor to 'broken windows' syndrome
- impact on road safety especially for pedestrians and cyclists
- impact on localised flooding
- impact on tourism
- impact on economic investment

Detailed Considerations

Duty to keep streets and land clean

(The boring but important bit)

This duty, is placed on local authorities and other bodies by section 89 of the **Environmental Protection Act 1990** (1) and requires them ***“to ensure that the highway or road is, so far as is practicable, kept clean.”*** It is pertinent to point out, particularly in these financially challenging times, that the qualification *so far as is practicable* refers to what is physically and practicably possible to achieve, with no consideration as to the cost. Had the Westminster Parliament intended cost to be a limiting consideration when it framed the Act then they would have used the qualification of ‘reasonableness’ and made it *‘as far as is reasonably practicable’* but they did not. Clearly cost is a consideration but duty bodies cannot simply decide not to clean the streets.

The Act does not specify how the duty should be fulfilled. However, to assist duty bodies S 89 (2) gives the power to create a Code of Practice for the purpose of providing practical guidance on the discharge of the duties imposed. The **Code of Practice on Litter and Refuse – COPLAR** (2) was created for the purpose and has since been updated. It is understood to again be under review.

Many public bodies are failing markedly in this duty and not complying with some of the basic standards expected in COPLAR. Levels of litter across Scotland are monitored by Keep Scotland Beautiful (KSB) (3) and reported as a Performance Indicator by Councils. This can serve to mask the real problems with detritus and other debris, both naturally occurring and man-made and as a consequence, to mislead elected members of public bodies. In effect therefore, the earlier good work carried out by KSB using LEAMS could now be contributing to the overall problem and working against their valuable education and campaign roles.

The recording system used by KSB, LEAMS - Local Environment Audit and Management System (4) has itself been the subject of criticism by practitioners on the basis of its sample methodology and that it does not report conditions accurately. Additionally, by presenting snapshots in time, of random samples of the presence of litter (the tip of the cleanliness iceberg) using a low achievement level, it has allowed local authorities to use reaching the minimum standard, as a defence against criticism about the overall street cleansing standards in their area. Recent changes to LEAMS have not necessarily addressed these issues.

The recent publication by Scottish Government of a National Litter Strategy for Scotland (5) and a Marine Litter Strategy (6) are to be commended but, as their titles suggest, they serve to tackle the tip of the iceberg. Any litter strategy is doomed to failure if the streets remain grubby with weeds, detritus etc. This current situation has been compared to the Emperor’s New Clothes scenario.

Public Criticism

LEAMS has allowed Keep Scotland Beautiful and local authorities to measure trends which they say, has helped local authorities to achieve *“nine years of steady improvement in cleanliness”*. This is in contrast with the public view as expressed in many surveys over that time.

However, the KSB 2014/2015 Report (4) finds that for the first time since records began, Scotland’s cleanliness indicator has declined, with higher levels of all litter recorded and 4 out of 5 sites found to have litter present, KSB note.... *“The reasons for this are complex but are almost certainly linked to increased pressure on public spending, local environmental quality having a lack of strategic prominence and sections of the public.”*

In complete contrast, local authorities and their representative organisations (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities – CoSLA and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives- SOLACE) claim in the National Benchmarking Overview Report 2013/14 (9) :

Street cleaning costs per 1000 population continue to reduce at an increasing rate, while the cleanliness score and satisfaction rates continue to improve, indicating the great care that has been taken to protect key areas of public concern even in the context of reducing budgets. The cost of street cleaning has reduced in real terms by 25.4% since 2010/11. The introduction of shift working, a decrease in staff numbers and maximising the use of assets has driven these reductions across many councils.

Many local authority street cleansing programs are based, at best, on clearing the ‘big bits’ of litter. The real litmus test of the cleanliness of Scotland and of public opinion comes from the Scottish Government, ***Scotland’s People – Annual report from 2103 (updated Oct 2015) Scottish Household Survey.***(7) In the survey, up to 46% say that “rubbish or litter lying about is very or fairly common”. On a Scotland –wide basis this critical perception of their neighbourhood, outstrips **all** other tested concerns such as “drug nuisance or dealing”, by a factor of more than two (27% as against 13 %). Other studies corroborate this common concern.

The Carnegie UK Trust report (2012), *Pride in Place: tackling environmental incivilities.*(8) found that issues such as vandalism, graffiti, litter, dog fouling and discarded rubbish have a serious and long-lasting impact on people’s quality of life. Moreover, those most affected are most likely to live in the UK’s most deprived neighbourhoods where high litter levels directly contribute to increased health inequalities. That issues such as vandalism, graffiti, litter, dog fouling and discarded rubbish have a serious and long-lasting impact on people’s quality of life.

One of our **Aberdeenshire Litter Initiative – Ali** (11) volunteers said: “Street cleansing is not rocket science. If they cannot do the simple stuff, what chance the complex issues?”

In numerous social media contributions feelings on the lack of local authority performance in street cleansing are running high, bringing to mind the song from the musical Les Miserables.....

Do you hear the people sing ?
Singing the song of angry men
It is the music of the people.....

Public Health

In the middle of the industrial revolution in the 1800’s with people moving from the country to inadequate and slum conditions in towns, public health was poor and many died as a result of a wide range of diseases. Part of the problem was that waste was disposed of into the street. Scavenging Districts, the forerunner of local authorities, were established to remove the filth from the streets. Whilst no one is advocating that the problems are anywhere near that scale, it is internationally accepted that dirty, unkempt streets have an adverse impact on the physical and mental health of residents.

Community Wellbeing suffers and residents gain the impression, if only subliminally..... *If the Council clearly don’t care... why should I ?* This can pervade their attitude to many facets of their lives with consequential impact on health and social services. This has been recognised in the ‘Broken Windows’ (10) syndrome which is vital in a preventative agenda so beloved of politicians.

Roads and pavements

Even if there was never another piece of litter dropped, a street cleansing service would be required to address the general debris that falls on streets from winds, traffic and many other sources. Grit and detritus, if not swept up on a regular basis, gets washed into road drainage systems causing chokes which lead to **localised flooding** with potential for property damage and road traffic accidents. Choked gullies are expensive to clear, may actually require specialist jetting units with, on occasion, radical and even more expensive drainage replacement interventions required. Unfortunately, recent times have demonstrated this, particularly in Aberdeenshire.

Accumulations of detritus such as those visible on roads across Scotland can obscure road safety markings in addition to causing slip / skid hazards to road users including pedestrians. With the new transportation priority on encouraging cycling, the cyclists are particularly at risk.

Councils have comprehensive winter emergency plans appropriately costed and budgeted which can include the deposit of thousands of tonnes of grit on icy roads but there is seldom provision to remove the residue of that material at the end of the season.

Road channels and pavements are frequently seen to have a build-up of detritus and debris which act like a 'window box' for weeds. In addition to the unkempt visual impact, the roots of these weeds damage tarred surfaces requiring earlier and expensive replacement. Weeds require to be treated with weed killer at added cost plus the burden on the environment of the sprayed chemicals.

Economic

While a good quality environment including clean streets is the legal right of every resident and business in Scotland, the absence of such undoubtedly has an impact on other priorities of encouraging economic investment and attracting tourists.

Conclusion

The perception may be that the picture is not as bad as is being portrayed here. To some extent that is not unexpected as members of the public do not have the training, knowledge and experience to observe the conditions of which the above descriptions are but brief highlights. In addition, the deterioration in standards of street cleansing has been gradual over many years and as such, lay observers have become immune to the lowering of standards.

This briefing note presents a criticism of street cleansing in Scotland and of the lack of appreciation within the 'public system' of the diverse impact that such standards have. Neither is acceptable and combined, they reflect poorly on Scotland.

It highlights the disparity between the views held by local authorities as 'duty' bodies and the general public that they serve.

It further highlights that recently adopted national strategies designed to tackle litter and littering are destined to fail if they are not combined with a return to clean streets.

We suggest that any Political Party or candidate in the forthcoming elections would receive widespread support by acknowledging that Scotland is not as clean as it should be and by the inclusion of commitments within their Manifesto to address this in a SMART way – Specific, Measured, Achievable, Resource Centred and Timed.

In highlighting these issues and making this proposal, we are fully conscious of the very difficult financial position that all public bodies face in the coming years. Many of the deficiencies identified are simply not down to lack of finance. However, it is clear that additional resources will probably be required once the scale of the task has been identified. In terms of the adage used in COPLAR – *if you don't measure it you can't manage it*. only when there is a full and comprehensive appreciation of the scale of the issues, can appropriate Plans etc. be developed to deliver a good quality street cleansing service that meets legal requirements and the expectations of the public who pay for it.

We desperately need transformational change in street cleansing. Just think of the boost that all of Scotland would receive from such a change in a basic service that affects everyone in the country.

*Who will be strong and stand with me?
When tomorrow comes.*

George Niblock FCIWM
Convenor, Aberdeenshire Environmental Forum

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- (10) **brokenwindows in the bigbrotherhouse environmentaljustice** How to sell snow to the eskimo
By Alan Woods, Sue Nelson and David Pickering Environmental Campaigns Ltd.
- (11)
Aberdeenshire Litter Initiative - ALi
Volunteers who adopt-a-street and keep it clear of litter.
Do a little – Change a lot
Join *Friends of Ali* on Facebook
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/47510797273/>
The more we are, together- the greater our influence in changing behaviours.
Contact: ali@niblockenvironmental.com

