

Communities and Local Government Committee

## **Litter and fly-tipping in England**

Tuesday 25 November 2014

Evidence from witnesses:

### **Panel 2 (Questions 52-95)**

Wandsworth\_Borough Council

Warwickshire Waste Partnership

Passages highlighted by Clean Highways. [www.cleanhighways.co.uk](http://www.cleanhighways.co.uk)

Panel 2 Questions [52-95]

Witnesses:

**Sean Lawson**, Head of Environmental Services, Rugby Borough Council, representing the Warwickshire Waste Partnership, or trying to.

**Shaun Morley**, Head of Waste Management, London Borough of Wandsworth, gave evidence.

**Q89 Simon Danczuk:** This is a question to both of you. How do you work with the Highways Agency in terms of ensuring that motorway trunk roads are kept clean? Do you work with the Highways Agency at all?

**Shaun Morley:** We have Transport for London, so it is not quite the same. Yes, we work with them as well as we can, but there is always a bit of conflict about who is responsible, and the lines are not as clear as they could be in some instances.

**Sean Lawson:** We find it a nightmare.

**Simon Danczuk:** Why is that?

**Sean Lawson:** It is because they do not communicate with us. They produce a wonderful glossy strategy document that says how they will work with local authorities, but we get very little engagement. We find that there is a road closure on by travelling down the road. We could have done a lot of work.

We arrange with them to go out and do work when they have road closures on, and they don't turn up. I have two or three crews out there at midnight waiting to clean a highway and they are not there.

**Simon Danczuk:** They are just wasting council tax payers' money.

**Sean Lawson:** Yes. They just don't engage with us. It is not so much the Highways Agency, to be fair to them; it is probably their contractors. If there is an incident, they respond and we are left, but we have no control. They have everything else to do with the highway network in that respect except litter.

We have had guys find dead bodies, which is quite distressing. We have had guys who have been out for a full weekend litter-picking come back on the Monday morning and cry, because they don't know and they can't see where they have been, but the costs of doing those roads for us, if we need to apply a road closure, are horrific.

In a time of limited resources, where am I going to put it? Am I going to put it on an arterial road on the edge of Coventry or in the town centre? It is not a priority for us. We will go to the town centres, where our residents will see the impact we are having.

**Q90 Simon Danczuk:** There are real lessons there. Finally from me, have cuts to local government impacted on your work at all?

**Shaun Morley:** Not so far, no.

**Simon Danczuk:** You are all right. What about you?

**Sean Lawson:** Spending choices that our politicians have made always have an effect on us. Certainly in our authority and in most of the ones in Warwickshire, they have maintained the funding and resources in the high-profile frontline services, which affect the votes that come out. Litter on the street is a big door-knocking issue.

**Q91 Chris Williamson:** On that point, you mentioned the Highways Agency. I know there are issues there, but presumably if you had more resources then you would not have to make those decisions about focusing in the town centre. Presumably, before the funding reductions you have had of late, there were more resources available to maybe go down arterial roads, were there—or have you never had the resources to do that?

**Sean Lawson:** There were never really the resources to do that. I think as we have worked—you learn lessons.

**Chris Williamson:** If it is not about resources, is it about the fact that there is lack of liaison or lack of co-operation? If you were able to get the Highways Agency to play ball, as it were, with your resources now would you be able to do that work?

**Sean Lawson:** I think we would still struggle with that. One of the issues we have is that the reduction in the Highways Agency's resources has an impact on what we do. They used to cut things like road verges three times a year, so they would apply road closures three times a year, and we could go in and clean the roads three times a year, work with them and reduce the issues of litter being chopped when it is cut. Now they do it once a year. We don't know. If we are trying to do it, the grass is longer and we can't see. There is a safety issue, because we are going to trip over stuff. It is about the combo. Personally, I would rather have nothing to do with Highways Agency roads and let them deal with litter as well, because they have full control.

**Q92 Mark Pawsey:** This is on the same point. Perhaps Mr Lawson can explain why it is so important to clear litter from the side of the road. How visible is litter at the side of the road?

**Sean Lawson:** It is extremely visible in certain locations. Depending on the time of year, the grass will grow and the vegetation will cover it and it is not as visible. Particularly if you are thundering down the road at 60 miles per hour, you do not necessarily notice it until you are stuck in a traffic jam or at a junction. They are the big issues, whereas in a town centre you walk and you are literally tripping over it.

**Q93 David Heyes:** In my part of the world, the trunk roads tend to be the gateways into the towns, and because they are not properly clean, they give a very bad first impression. That is an issue. However, I wonder who is at fault here. Can you help us to understand that? Is it that the Highways Agency are under-resourced and do not put enough money into this, or is it that they are not enforcing the terms of the contracts they have with their subcontractors? Can you remember back to the time when the Highways Agency directly managed the roads themselves with a directly employed labour force? Has there been a deterioration in conditions since they moved to a client-contractor relationship? Can you throw any more light on that for us?

**Sean Lawson:** I am not sure that is the case. It is just that they have had funding restrictions placed upon them. They have prioritised their desires, and it has come round to things like the gritting of roads in

winter, winter maintenance and filling potholes. On their list of competing priorities, litter clearance is probably not at the top.

**Q94 David Heyes:** We are probably pressing you too hard on an issue that is not your responsibility, but there is an area for us to explore as to whether this is the Highways Agency not specifying litter collection as part of a contract or, if it is specified, failing to enforce it. That is one for us to visit perhaps later in our inquiry.

**Sean Lawson:** On that point, it is quite clear. Where, as local authorities, we are involved in the litter collection on those principal trunk roads, it is not a contractual issue with the Highways Agency, because in law it is our responsibility. It is not that we are duplicating their activity. Motorways and a small number of other trunk roads are the responsibility of the Highways Agency.

It was interesting to read the submission from DCLG, which implied that the Highways Agency has the responsibility for all trunk roads. That is not the case. For the great majority of trunk roads, it falls to the local authorities. That is where we have some real challenges. As we have moved into an improved safety culture, the costs associated with doing litter-picking on those areas have just increased.

**Chair:** Would it be better, then, to transfer that responsibility on more of those trunk roads to the Highways Agency?

**Sean Lawson:** Yes, please.