

KEEPING URBAN GREEN SPACES CLEAN AND SAFE

The nation may have fallen back in love with its urban green spaces during the pandemic, but keeping these spaces clean and safe has created a massive burden for local authorities that may not have the sufficient funds, writes Dyl Kurpil, Managing Director of District Enforcement. Here he outlines how they can achieve an affordable solution to environmental crime enforcement.

As one of Ireland's oldest city parks, St Stephen's Green was developed in 1664, and was swiftly followed by an array of urban green spaces in towns and cities across the country.

Littering, dog fouling, spitting and public urination are all criminal offences subject to Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN), but inconsistent enforcement by local authorities over the decades has eradicated standards of behaviour, as complaints from the general public continue to spiral.

Yet small behavioural changes often make a big impact: consistent, routine enforcement reduces littering, awareness changes attitudes, while spaces stay cleaner, safer and more enjoyable for the community.

With growing awareness of the value of these green spaces to a person's physical and mental health, can local authorities break the cycle of littering and achieve an affordable solution to environmental crime enforcement?

Outsourcing this type of enforcement not only releases a financial burden on local authorities but also achieves a behavioural change that delivers tangible community benefits.

ESSENTIAL GREEN SPACE

The importance of urban green spaces has long been established. As one of Ireland's oldest city parks, St Stephen's Green was developed in 1664, swiftly followed by an array of outdoor areas across towns and cities to improve the lives of the urban dwellers.

Following the arrival of a global pandemic, public parks became the only chance for outside exercise for the vast majority of people. This increasing awareness and usage has also tied into a more recent acceptance of the role of urban green space in improving physical and mental health, contributing to reducing



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crime and anti-social behaviour, encouraging community cohesion and environmental benefits, including clean air.

And with a growing awareness of the value of pollinator friendly habitats, local authorities are working with voluntary groups to refocus on these vital resources. Nevertheless, with the Government facing a €19bn budget deficit as the nation emerges



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from the pandemic, there is huge pressure on resources, and just how can a council prioritise clean green spaces?

Yet, without proactive intervention, the problems of littering, dog fouling and public urination will continue to undermine the safety and enjoyment of citizens.

CHANGING BEHAVIOUR

Littering is a criminal offence, although the swathes of litter and dog mess affecting our green spaces suggests that many individuals have no idea that every cigarette butt, piece of chewing gum or apple core they drop is criminal behaviour.

People either don't know or don't care that if they are caught leaving an entire loaf of bread for the pigeons or the ducks, urinating in public or spitting, they will be subject to a Fixed Penalty Notice (FPN) of up to €150.

Despite this, as the lack of consistency in issuing FPNs across the Republic of Ireland reveals, this is a difficult service for local authorities to provide both culturally and financially themselves. It is hard to manage and difficult to resource.

The resultant 'ad hoc' approach fails to achieve the education and awareness required to achieve behavioural change and, essentially, to stop people littering.

The alternative is to outsource environmental compliance, a service that can be cost neutral for councils. Turning to a trusted third party, that is driven by a desire to improve the quality and cleanliness of green spaces, is not just about authorising the

outsourcer to issue FPNs in the area. It is about embracing a service that combines compliance with education and awareness to drive behavioural change.

PROACTIVE COMMUNITY RESOURCE

Changing attitudes is key. Outsourced litter officers are trained to engage with offenders as customers, explaining why they are receiving a FPN or, in some cases, just a warning. With the right approach from litter officers, the majority of individuals typically respond with an apology, embarrassment or confusion – it is only the minority who become defensive, dismissive or, at worse, aggressive.

As a result, FPN compliance can be as high as 90%, with few individuals opting to take the case to the District Courts where, more often than not, it is the word of a known enforcement officer that is believed.

The underpinning goal is to reduce littering, which is why education and awareness are fundamental tenets of successful enforcement. In addition to local community campaigns and signage, officers also work closely with litter picking volunteers and take part in litter picks. The areas patrolled by officers are also intelligence led, with the routes created based on feedback and complaints from volunteers and members of the general public about incidents of litter and fouling.

In addition, officers will be proactive. If there is a spike in litter from a local fast food provider, for example, the officer will talk to

the manager and suggest ways to improve customer behaviour, such as new signage and more bins. Feedback is also provided to the council, raising problems such as inadequate litter disposal options or the need for more frequent bin emptying.

ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINISM

By joining up the entire process and working with the wider community, an outsourced litter enforcement service can not only provide the council with important additional revenue, including a proportion of FPNs issued, which can be reinvested in environmental services, but also drive measurable behavioural change.

Each individual change has a wider effect - the cleaner the space, the more likely people are to find a bin or take their rubbish home. When litter is everywhere, people feel less compunction about their behaviour. With the majority of FPNs issued to first time offenders – with limited numbers of repeat offenders - people's behaviour will quickly change.

Each time a council can take a more robust, consistent approach to litter enforcement, overall levels of littering fall – not only in green spaces but everywhere, from the high street onwards.

By creating an environment where accidental or lazy littering



With growing awareness of the value of pollinator-friendly habitats, local authorities are now working with voluntary groups to refocus on these vital resources.

is eradicated, the focus can shift towards the serious, repeat offenders – enforcement teams have the time and space to undertake the more complex investigations.

BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE IS KEY

The difficulty for local authorities is making the move and deciding to trust a private sector outsource provider. This is where the attitude of the outsourcer is key. The company needs to be transparent about both processes and cost model.

It needs to demonstrate that officers are not incentivised on the number of FPNs that they issue, but that the business model stands up based on jointly agreed deliverables. It needs to be part of the wider process of education, community engagement and taking a proactive approach to achieving behavioural change.

That change is long overdue. For too long the inconsistent strategies adopted by different local authorities have resulted in rising complaints about littering, dog fouling and fly tipping. Even at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic while some local authorities started to enforce FPNs, the approach was not consistent across the country.

Reliance is on dedicated teams of volunteer litter pickers. If the litter problem can be dealt with before it is dropped, our streets and our green spaces will be cleaner, healthier and more enjoyable for everyone.

The burden for cleaning and maintaining these invaluable spaces will also reduce. Behavioural change is key, and that can only be achieved through consistent enforcement of the law.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dyl Kurpil is a UK legal professional who has spent over 20 years protecting the rights of individuals and organisations; first as a police officer, then through various not-for-profit legal advisory services before he founded District Enforcement Limited (District).

Drawing on the practical experience gained during his policing career, and the academic knowledge attained achieving his Master of Law degree with distinction, Dyl has applied processes that are not only legally robust but also meet the ethical standards expected of legal professionals.

Working across a range of sectors (private land or public open spaces), his vision of effecting behavioural change via engagement, education and enforcement is embedded into the core objectives of his company.

