

BOX 6.9 GREAT YARMOUTH: ENVIRONMENTAL RANGERS



Environmental Rangers publicity

On a mission to improve coordination, education, and enforcement in the public realm, Great Yarmouth Borough Council have trained and deployed Environmental Rangers. Directly relating to the improved management of external public space, the rangers are recognisable council operatives who have the means – through each having a dedicated van and equipment – to quickly respond to and coordinate public space management issues. This includes cleaning, collecting and cleansing anything from broken glass to fly-tipped items, and if the problem cannot be solved immediately, to liaise with other council services, including the Boroughworks depot team.

The ranger will typically inform the public of what the council systems are for dealing with the problem, how long it will take, and any contact numbers if a member of the public wants to follow issues up. The rangers also liaise with Neighbourhood Wardens who patrol the residential areas in the town, and with the Town Centre Wardens. All three sets of employees were trained together.

The second role of the Environmental Rangers job is education, getting out onto the streets, being friendly, meeting the local community, meeting parish councils, and visiting schools. The rangers recruit community voluntary wardens to help educate local people about using and caring for public space, and to help in ‘detective work’ (i.e. finding out where perpetrators of antisocial activities live). Rangers will also help in getting local environmental initiatives off the ground such as community litter groups.

The final role of the rangers is enforcement under byelaw by issuing of £50 fixed penalty notices for littering or failing to clear up after dogs. While the fixed penalty notices are not easy to enforce, they are effective in educating residents to change bad habits; as one ranger said: ‘word gets around’. The council are also considering investing in portable CCTV equipment to help gather evidence for when those issued with fixed penalty notices appeal.

to destroy abandoned vehicles with a value of less than £300 and then recover costs from the last registered keeper.

Collectively, the authorities identified three key challenges. First, the proper coordination of the range of agencies with responsibility for different regulatory and enforcement regimes. Authorities admitted that these problems exist within local authorities as well as between different authorities and other agencies and in part relate to the severance of those responsible for enforcing laws and byelaws from those charged with delivery tasks. The second key challenge has already been mentioned and concerned the lack of resources to employ monitoring and enforcement staff. A police-led scheme in Lancaster involving the retraining of surplus traffic wardens to police anti-social behaviour instead is helping to address this problem.

The final challenge surrounded the difficulties in successfully prosecuting those in breach of public space related regulations (i.e. fly-tipping). In many cases there is the need to establish proof of culpability at the higher level of criminal law rather than at the level of civil law, leading to costly and time-consuming legal cases which local authorities cannot afford and are very difficult to win. Indeed, the time-consuming nature of all enforcement procedures was a point raised by many local authority officers.

In this context, many of the officers interviewed emphasise prevention and education rather than enforcement as the best approach to delivering good quality public spaces. An example was Great Yarmouth who had appointed Environmental Rangers with the power to issue fixed penalty notices for dropping litter or failing to clear up after dogs. The rangers regularly speak to community groups and schools in the area, while enforcement is seen as a last resort (Box 6.9).

MAINTENANCE

Authorities identified a number of major process problems relating to the third major challenge, maintenance. Perhaps most fundamental was the insufficient level of investment in maintenance, for three key reasons, because this activity has historically not been recognised as important by council members, because of an associated squeeze on local authority finances generally, and as a result of CCT contracts in the recent past that have driven costs and service levels right down. The latter problem was gradually being corrected as best value mechanisms encourage a more holistic and integrated approach to service provision. Harlow, for example, has recently completed a best value review and has now set about implementing a 15-year plan to improve street scene maintenance services. Bristol, on the other hand, improved the maintenance of its public realm in one residential ward by integrating the maintenance, cleansing