DE-CLUTTERING
OUR PUBLIC REALM

Report of Scrutiny Sub-Committee B

May 2010

Southwark Council

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1   Background and scope of the review

1.1   The purpose of our review was:

-      To consider the council's approach to de-cluttering the public realm of the borough
-      To make a series of recommendations that can be practically implemented to reduce the street clutter in the borough

2.   Street clutter and its causes

2.1   Street clutter can include obstructive clutter, such as bollards, and visual clutter, such as a proliferation of street signs in one place.

2.2   The main reasons for the existence of street furniture, which can become clutter, are:

-      Physical barriers to stop movement
-      Regulations and codes of practice (requirements for certain signs to be in place)
-      Schemes for specific users which affect the public realm e.g. cycle schemes; road signs; parking zone information
-      Items installed by third parties, such as post boxes and utility hubs
-      Temporary items relating to repair or installation works

2.3   Clutter in the public realm is an issue in Southwark, as in many other boroughs in the UK, both due to issues of safety for the community, and aesthetics of the places where people live. Street clutter is highly and constantly visible. The existence of unnecessary street clutter can be obstructive or visual.

2.4   Changes to the appearance and dynamics of the streetscape can be initiated or inherited, for example:

-      As a part of a commercial development
-      As a result of new enforcement requirements
-      As a response to safety concerns
-      As a result of fragmented design
-      As a result of traffic management schemes
-      As an attempt to improve access
-      As a result of utilities requirements

2.5   Issues around the streetscape and public realm are usually considered as a part of a project rather than a programme or project in their own right. In other instances, street clutter is a result of a project, which may not have focused on impact on the streetscape at all, or as a very low priority.

2.6   Against this background a scrutiny exercise has been undertaken to focus on de-cluttering in its own right, looking at the council's own policy and practices in this area, to understand better what happens now and improvements for the future.

2.7   The scrutiny process was informed by an overview of council projects and programmes implemented.

2.8   Due to time restraints, it was not possible to consider evidence from a wide variety of interested people, nor from external organisations whose work has a direct impact on the design and appearance of the streetscape.

2.9   The focus has been on the council's own work and procedures on de-cluttering and how work on de-cluttering can facilitate the highest possible quality of design and maintenance of the public realm in the future.

2.10   The sub-committee would like to thank Mick Lucas, the council's public realm asset manager for his input which has helped to inform the review.

3.   Public realm policy and design

3.1   In deliberations the contributors to the review considered the need for a balance in public realm policy between high quality, innovative and interesting design and planning, and the need for realistic maintenance costs.

3.2   The council does not currently follow an overall policy in relation to street clutter. Individual elements of street furniture and signage are introduced as a result of a range of disparate projects, and this can lead to an incremental increase in clutter.

3.3   The council is currently in the process of finalising a revised streetscape design guide. This guide will be accompanied by a design review process and appropriate training.

3.4   The review discussed the scope of the design guide and concluded that de-cluttering is an issue affecting the whole of the public realm not just the streetscapes. For that reason, the design guide should inform policy and practice on housing estates, parks and privately owned space that is accessible to the public (for example developments like More London).

3.5   For effective management of street clutter to take place, an holistic approach to the appearance of any space is necessary. With such a large number of organisations involved in the planning, management, and maintenance of the public realm this is difficult to achieve. The merits of the use of a design guide in these circumstances are considerable.

3.6   There was concern that a previous design guide had been developed in 2006 but not adopted. A new version of the guide is now being developed. This is timetabled to be completed in June 2010 for approval by the executive/ executive member in September 2010.

3.7   From a local authority perspective, a greater opportunity to pro-actively manage street clutter can be obtained, through the use of a collaborative approach. In order to improve the practical arrangements to make this happen, the review makes the following recommendations:

Recommendations:

1. The design guide for the public realm should be finalised and agreed as a cross-cutting guide for the council as a matter of urgency. The sub-committee recommends that it be added to the forward plan for approval in September 2010.

2. The design guide should be used for the wider public realm, not only for specific streetscape issues. In particular, it should be adopted for housing land and reflected in planning policies so that new developments seek to minimise clutter.

3. There should be a substantial and ongoing training programme to train council staff and consultants in the use of the design guide to ensure that the good practice it advocates is embedded across the organisation.

4. The design guide should be championed at the highest level by both members and officers so that it is clear the importance that the council attaches to the issue.

5. Ward councillors should be empowered to become decision makers on highways schemes, perhaps through community councils so that those with an intimate knowledge of and area take political responsibility for decisions on such schemes.

6. To ensure informed decision making, training on streetscape design issues should be extended to councillors.

7. To aid in the profile and focus given to street clutter issues, and to reflect the cross-cutting nature of its use, the design guide should be agreed by the council executive, rather than delegated to an individual member through the individual decision making process.

4. An integrated approach to implementation

4.1 The review heard evidence that although design standards often require the installation of signs and other furniture, there is some flexibility in the legislative framework. An integrated approach to design of the public realm, looking at the legislative framework for example of parking enforcement at the same time as the minimum standards for a 20mph zone, can minimise the overall level of street clutter.

4.2 The review considered various examples of good and bad practice and discussed how schemes could achieve better final results. It was agreed that many improvement and de-cluttering schemes would benefit from an holistic approach. This would ensure that where possible, all elements of the streetscape are designed and improved at the same time to avoid the piecemeal results that are sometimes evident in the borough. The introduction of peer review of the overall design would assist this.

4.3 The review also discussed that local expertise should be used where available, and in particular Living Streets (an organisation which lobbies on road safety issues for pedestrians) which has a specific expertise which could assist good practice.

4.4   A similar integrated approach could assist in the effectiveness of de-cluttering projects and activities. For example, if bollards are put into place to prevent pavement parking, when they are removed it would be sensible to coordinate with parking enforcement to ensure that their removal does not create problems.

4.5   The review discussed the complex issues around the removal of street furniture, and the need to balance safety for residents with the aesthetics of the streetscape. In addition many factors change over time, such as the balance of priority given to the car vs. pedestrian and the perceived need for safety in certain places, in particular around school premises.

4.6   There was discussion on the level of commitment to reducing street clutter across the council. Whilst those in the relevant part of the highways team were up to speed on the issues, many of those responsible for installing new schemes did not show evidence of an understanding of the need to reduce clutter. Anecdotal examples of new highways schemes in particular, pointed to a continued problem with the installation of street clutter.

Recommendations:

8.   Public realm officers should be involved and consulted at the design and planning stage of all projects to facilitate cross-referencing with other projects and ensure that the principles of minimum street clutter set out in the design guide are adhered to.

9.   Relevant stakeholders should be consulted on public realm issues wherever practicable.

10.   The peer review process for design improvements should be formally embedded in the design and approval process to ensure an holistic approach.

11.   Early consultation should include the issue of maintenance costs. This will reduce unforeseen liabilities for the council in terms of the cost of maintenance of the public realm.

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5.   Engagement on de-cluttering issues

5.1   The engagement of councillors as advocates of de-cluttering in the context of developments and schemes across the borough was also discussed. Whilst schemes get presented and discussed at community councils, the information available to enable councillors to take an overview of public realm as a whole was considered limited. The review discussed the issues around this, in particular the fact that de-cluttering is often a part of many projects and not the single focus of attention, and that the availability of information e.g. interrogatable databases, does not always enable the easy digestion of better information.

5.2   The result of this is that de-cluttering is often not addressed as an important issue, until the results of failure to address it effectively become apparent, and complaints are made. Giving clear responsibility to focus on de-cluttering to an individual elected member may provide a solution to this.

5.3   The review highlighted the limited funding available for de-cluttering schemes per se. Additional funding is unlikely to be available in the near future and this makes it especially important to make best use of the funding that is available.

5.4   One scheme that is available for 2010-11 is funding through the Local Implementation Process (LIP), for pedestrian guard rail assessment and removal, including safety audits of the area. The engagement of councillors and members of the public in the selection of these schemes was considered as one practical way to deliver a profile raising de-cluttering activity.

Recommendations:

12.   That the selection process for the forthcoming guard rail removal scheme should engage councillors and members of the public who are likely to have views about priority areas.

13.   The community councils should take a more central role in reviewing and approving highways and road safety schemes.

14.   That highway officers be encouraged to be more proactive in removing temporary and redundant signage.

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6.   **Conclusion and summary of recommendations**

6.1   De-cluttering of the public realm in Southwark is an issue which is impacted on by a wide variety of issues, priorities, regulations and departments within the council.

6.2   The review saw pictorial evidence of good and bad practice in relation to street clutter, clutter removal and design collaboration across the borough.

6.3   The recommendations in this report are designed to assist the council to implement good practice in relation to de-cluttering.

6.4   The adoption of good practice in relation to de-cluttering could make significant improvements to the quality of the public realm in Southwark without having a dramatic impact on resources. In fact, in most cases, adoption of the good practice recommendations in this report would save resources.

Summary of recommendations:

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2.   The design guide should be used for the wider public realm, not only for specific streetscape issues. In particular, it should be adopted for housing land and reflected in planning policies so that new developments seek to minimise clutter.

3. There should be a substantial and ongoing training programme to train council staff and consultants in the use of the design guide to ensure that the good practice it advocates is embedded across the organisation.

4. The design guide should be championed at the highest level by both members and officers so that it is clear the importance that the council attaches to the issue.

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7. To aid in the profile and focus given to street clutter issues, and to reflect the cross-cutting nature of its use, the design guide should be agreed by the council executive, rather than delegated to an individual member through the individual decision making process.

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Scrutiny Sub-Committee B

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