

Can we combat litter on our beaches?

This country can look beautiful in sunshine. Yet that this beauty can be so easily destroyed was graphically illustrated by photographs recently published of littering at Myrtleville beach. This pretty little beach which has served Corkonians for hundreds of years is only one of many to have suffered from the Irish culture of careless with regard to littering. In 2008, the results of Bord Failte's Visitor Attitudes Survey showed that 18% of holidaymakers to Ireland regarded littering on beaches as being a real problem.

Should everyone take their rubbish home, a bin at a beach should not be necessary. But in a culture where clearly not everyone does, the bin service provided at the beaches is totally inadequate. Bins are neither large enough nor emptied often enough.

Cork County Council predicts a spend of €1.9 million on litter management this year. Although this many sound significant, the litter management budget has been reducing year on year. Since 2008, Cork County Council total income decreased by 28%. Staff numbers fell by 784. The recruitment embargo imposed on all local authorities meant that no replacement staff could be employed. Many of these staff losses reduced crews on the ground performing such services as street cleaning.

The loss in personnel is accentuated by a reduction in working hours. Overtime has been eliminated virtually entirely for all Cork County Council staff. No longer are services provided out of hours in times of pressure. Now Council crews are generally forbidden to work weekends.

The Litter Pollution Act 1997 essentially allows Cork County Council to use its discretion as to what it can reasonably achieve towards cleaning a beach over a holiday weekend. But the Act is clear with regard to littering: it is an offence. An on-the-spot fine of €150 can be imposed by litter wardens if one is caught littering. Last month, the Evening Echo reported that Cork County Council had imposed 44 such on-the-spot fines during the first three months of 2013. Yet who could even count the items of litter dropped on Myrtleville beach in merely one day of hot weather? There is only one litter warden in the South Cork administrative area who, because of the ban on overtime, is not permitted to patrol beaches at a weekend.

Hitting the public in the pocket is undeniably the best way of changing entrenched behaviours. But punitive behaviour needs to be reinforced with education. Cork County Council plans to spend almost €56,000 in 2013 on environmental awareness. This is a mere 3% of the entire litter management budget and is less than was spent on environmental awareness in 2012.

The most effective change since 2008 has been at community level. There are now 30 Tidy Towns groups and 44 Coast Care groups in South Cork. Although tasks these volunteers perform are all functions previously undertaken by the

local authority, ironically, it seems that the withdrawal of services has created a network of communities all working to make a cleaner, more attractive Ireland.

Despite being at the butt-end of head-office financial constraints, the local Area Offices of Cork County Council generally assist in whatever way they can, providing black bags and removing rubbish collected during clean-ups. Their service is invaluable and one without which many of the voluntary groups could not continue to operate.

But litter continues to be dropped on beaches during fine weather because each voluntary group generally comprises only a tiny percentage of the population of its town. Those few, who are trying to combat the attitudes of many, could be helped so much by some strategic leadership from County Hall.

The Litter Pollution Act requires every local authority to create a Litter Management Plan outlining how litter will be tackled within its functional area. This Plan is to be revised every three years. Cork County Council's only Litter Management Plan relates to 2003 – 2006. Although submissions were invited to a revision of the Plan in 2011, no new Plan has ever been published. With commitment and intent, much could be done to improve the litter issue in County Cork. Garda and Council personnel could work together to increase the litter warden resource. Innovative approaches such as compactor litter bins could be trialled. But without a strategic plan, little will be achieved.

To be fair, the back-up given to local authorities by central government is weak at best. The government contribution to the running of Cork County Council has reduced by 44% since 2008. Of all cuts in local authority services since 2008, environmental services has been hardest hit. Successive Irish governments have given minimal guidance on priorities in litter control. The cost of bringing offenders through the courts is so high that many local authorities shy away from fully enforcing the Litter Pollution Act. And as for enhancing our coastlines, the best the government has done is to fail to finalise a policy document towards Integrated Coastal Zone Management drafted in 1997.

But changes in how we manage our coastline are afoot. In 2008, the European Commission brought the Marine Strategy Framework Directive into force. The Directive is terribly ambitious, requiring all European Member States to achieve good environmental status in coastal waters by 2020. Because 80% of all marine litter comes from land-based sources, one of the key requirements to achieving this good environmental status is that the *“properties and quantities of marine litter do not cause harm to the coastal and marine environment”*.

At present, the government is producing indicators for monitoring coastal waters – a statutory preparatory step. This is the easy stage. The reality is that those who will be charged with delivering the standards required by the Directive are the local authorities. Without either a major injection of cash from central government or a significant shift in attitude and awareness from Council management and elected members, it is difficult to see how we can ever move from the litter on our beautiful beaches to the standards required by Europe.

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