

**POLICY INSTITUTE**

# **Adopt A Highway**

**A Citizens' Solution To Scotland's Litter Problem**

**Stuart Crawford**

# Adopt A Highway

## A Citizen's Solution To Scotland's Litter Problem

### Synopsis

Scotland is blighted by litter. Local authorities spend £65 million a year cleaning it up, but 81% of our streets are still affected. Adopt-a-Highway is a scheme which was started in Texas and has spread across the USA and to Australia, Japan and Canada. Local organisations sponsor a stretch of road. They promise to keep it clean in exchange for equipment and permission to erect signs on the roadside recognising their sponsorship. The potential benefits are attractive: rubbish collection costs, and therefore local taxes, can fall. Sponsors have a new way to market themselves. Good citizenship is encouraged. Overall, rubbish collection becomes more effective. Similar schemes already exist in Scotland. They lack the optimum incentives, but do show that Adopt-a-Highway is entirely feasible in this country. So far the Executive has resisted the scheme. Instead, ministers should champion Adopt-a-Highway to local authorities and other bodies responsible for clearing litter.

### POLICY INSTITUTE

108 Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AS Tel 0131 620 8587

### About the Policy Institute

The Policy Institute is committed to promoting liberal market values and solutions and applying these to current economic and social issues in Scotland. Its aim is to investigate, research and advance social and economic ideas that will improve Scotland's performance and prosperity, and her standing in the world.

It pursues this aim by publishing policy papers and analysis and presenting these to the highest editorial standards through publications, articles, seminars, public debates and other events. Current areas of concern are the Scottish economy; the quality and efficiency of public services; environmental and social issues and the governance of Scotland.

The Institute, founded in 1999, is a research and educational charity. It is independent of all political parties and political organisations. It is financed by voluntary donations and support from companies, trusts, foundations and individuals.

**If you would like to help support the institute, or want to know more about its activities, please contact Tom Miers on [tmiers@policyinstitute.info](mailto:tmiers@policyinstitute.info) or phone 0131 620 8587, or visit the web site at [www.policyinstitute.info](http://www.policyinstitute.info)**

**Trustees:** Katie Grant, Prof. Peter Jones, Sir Donald MacKay, Colin McLean, Allan Massie, Andrew Neil, Ivor Tiefenbrun. **Director:** Bill Jamieson **Executive Director:** Tom Miers  
Registered charity No SC029012

## *Adopt A Highway*

### **A Citizen's Solution To Scotland's Litter Problem**

Anyone who has travelled will have realised that Scotland has a serious problem with litter and rubbish in both country and town. From Aberdeen to Ecclefechan, from Tranent to Tiree, Scotland's landscape is blighted with the unwanted detritus of an apparently uncaring population. Local authorities and other relevant agencies have long struggled to keep on top of the problem and have largely failed.

It is estimated that Scotland's local authorities spend £65 million annually<sup>1</sup> on clearing discarded rubbish, and this figure does not include the costs of clearing the results of flytipping or other specialist tasks. Nor does it include the costs incurred by other organisations like Network Rail or the trunk road maintenance contractors (currently Amey Highways and BEAR) who are required to keep their parts of Scotland tidy. The statistics are not impressive; 81% of Scotland's streets are affected by litter – 70% by smokers' litter, 50% by confectionery wrappings, 34% by discarded drinks containers, 13% by dog fouling, and 10% by fast food wrappings.<sup>2</sup>

What is particularly disappointing is the seeming lack of political will to do much about it. The usual Scottish Executive and council remedy for problems, throwing more public money at it, has had little effect. Meanwhile the good work being done by Keep Scotland Beautiful<sup>3</sup> is limited by the resources provided to it. Education clearly is a major factor but it will take at least a generation to change public attitudes and practice. And yet the negative ramifications of our litter-strewn country for Scotland's tourist industry and international self-respect are so serious that doing nothing more can no longer be an option. **A country which is unable, or perhaps unwilling, to put its litter and rubbish problems in order is signalling its lack of self-esteem to the world. Litter and poverty go hand in hand, and not just financial poverty but poverty of aspiration and spirit.**

And yet it need not be so. The purpose of this paper is to look at one example of an alternative, citizenship-based, approach to remedying the problems. **“Adopt-a-Highway”** has its origins in the United States but has spread elsewhere in the globe. It clearly has applicability and utility in Scotland too.

---

<sup>1</sup> Keep Scotland Beautiful, telephone conversation 17<sup>th</sup> May 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.keepsotlandbeautiful.org](http://www.keepsotlandbeautiful.org)

## *The American Example – Adopt-a-Highway*

The Adopt-a-Highway programme originated in Texas. In 1984, James Evans, an engineer for the Texas Department of Transportation's (TxDOT) Tyler District, was driving through Tyler when he observed debris blowing out of a pickup truck he was following. Alarmed by the incident, and concerned that the cost of picking up litter was increasing then at an annual rate of 15-20%, Evans began appealing to local groups to “adopt” a section of highway. His initial appeal fell on deaf ears.

So he persuaded Billy Black, Public Information Officer for TxDOT's Tyler District, to become involved in developing the Adopt-a-Highway programme. Black was responsible not only for creating a quarterly cleanup cycle for adopting organisations, but also for implementing the initial concept, which included furnishing volunteer safety training, reflective vests and equipment - and for erecting the soon-familiar Adopt-a-Highway roadside signs that recognise adopters. The Tyler Civitan Club soon became the first group to volunteer, adopting a two-mile stretch of Highway 69.

Within months, more than 50 groups in the region - garden clubs and scouting groups among them - had joined the programme, which would blanket Texas and quickly spread nationwide. Today Adopt-a-Highway is a grassroots movement involving nearly 90,000 groups in 49 states, as well as Puerto Rico, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Japan<sup>4</sup>.

### **The Benefits Of Adopt-a-Highway**

The benefits of encouraging private organisations to adopt stretches of road are numerous:

- Local authorities reduce their rubbish collection costs. Reductions in the burden of local taxation therefore become possible.
- Adopting organisations have an additional marketing opportunity which may be more apt than parts of their existing promotional effort. Their overall costs might therefore also fall.
- By adopting a stretch of road, that organisation is publicly placing its reputation on the line. It therefore has a strong incentive to ensure that its road is kept clean. It might even compete with neighbouring schemes to have the tidiest stretch.
- The scheme encourages good citizenship. Local people and organisations are responsible for the tidiness of their own area. Likewise, they may be less likely to litter in the first place if they

---

<sup>4</sup> Typing “Adopt A Highway” into the Internet search engine Google brings up numerous web sites of the scheme in action.

know it will affect the workload of neighbours and worthy local organisations.

- This combination of voluntarism, incentives and competitiveness may well lead to more efficient rubbish collection at a lower overall cost to society.

### **Case Study – Adopt-a-Highway in Missouri**

A look at how the Mid-West state of Missouri has run its programme, and the benefits that have accrued demonstrates what can be achieved.

Conscious that the state was spending millions of dollars every year to collect the rubbish left lying around by unconcerned residents and visitors, in 1987 the Missouri Highway and Transportation Department (MHTD) began two new anti-litter programmes. These were designed to encourage volunteer groups to make year-round commitments to assisting with the maintenance of improved roadsides. MHTD is responsible for maintaining some 385,000 acres of roadside, a considerable task.

The first programme was a public relations campaign called “\$AVE CASH, DON’T TRASH” which included the distribution of collection bags with the slogan emprinted to volunteer groups who were asked to deposit the filled bags along roadsides to get the message across to passing motorists. The second programme was the Adopt-a-Highway programme itself.

Like all good initiatives the Adopt-a-Highway programme is simple. All it requires is a volunteer group or organisation and the consent and support of the local authority, which in Missouri is the MHTD. The rules are straightforward:

- Any person, organisation, club or government agency can adopt a section of state highway by contacting their department district office.
- Litter must be picked up at least four times a year. Most urban locations require litter pickup once or twice per month. In rural areas litter is picked up every few months.
- MHTD supplies the litter bags and picks up the filled bags. It also supplies safety vests, caution flags and safety tips for working along roadsides.
- Adopters sign a three year commitment to the programme. The agreement can, however, be terminated at any time. Each location is inspected periodically to ensure that both parties are fulfilling their part of the agreement.

In practical terms, after discussion of the adopting organisation’s interests and agreeing an appropriate location for the adoption, a simple work plan is set out. Upon completion and acceptance of the plan, MHTD makes and installs the appropriate signs at the adopted area boundaries informing the public that the road has been adopted for litter clearance purposes by the relevant organisation.

The Missouri scheme has been hugely successful. From a standing start in 1987, by 1995 more than 5,600 groups and organisations – average size 13 individuals – had adopted roughly one quarter of Missouri's highways for litter control, extending to approximately 8,600 miles of roadway. Litter picked up comprises 33% fast food waste, 29% paper, 28% aluminium, 6% glass, 2% plastic and 2% "other".

To quote MHTD's own publication: "Citizens picking up trash along the side of the road is a common sight. They are seen as responsible today. A decade or two ago those same citizens were considered odd."

### *Could We Adopt A Highway In Scotland?*

Is the US experience applicable to Scotland? Of course it is.

Our inability to keep "the best small country in the world" in any state remotely approaching tidiness is, sadly, all too self-evident. Those struggling to cope with the problem – the Scottish Executive, local authorities, trunk road contractors, statutory providers – should welcome any assistance on offer, and especially one which might actually reduce their costs. And introducing a new exercise in citizenship and 'social responsibility' should be right up the Scottish Executive's street.

### **Existing Schemes In Scotland**

Indeed, there are some examples of similar schemes already established in Scotland. During the Edinburgh Festival, the Royal Bank of Scotland has deployed 'rubbish busters' to clean up the Royal Mile in return for advertising opportunities. And in at least one village the author knows of a voluntary scheme operates whereby local residents co-operate with the council to conduct regular litter clean-ups. Meanwhile in June the DIY retailer B&Q teamed up with Keep Scotland Beautiful to sponsor 'Clean Up Kits' for voluntary cleaning groups from schools and other bodies.

The missing link in these otherwise excellent schemes is the exchange of long-term responsibility for a specific area for sponsorship by the group actually doing the cleaning. It is this incentive link which makes Adopt-a-Highway such a runaway success in the US and elsewhere. Nonetheless, these three examples do demonstrate that adopting a highway would be entirely feasible in Scotland.

### **A Political Roadblock**

Despite this, the Adopt-a-Highway model has so far failed to find favour with those who govern us. The author has, off and on over the past few years, drawn the attention of the Scottish political

establishment to the possibilities of the scheme. Most recently it was the subject of one of the earlier petitions to the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee<sup>5</sup>, submitted on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1999.

The Public Petitions Committee (PPC) certainly processed the petition in a proper manner, given that it clearly fell within the devolved competencies of the Scottish Parliament. The petition was passed to the Transport and Environment Committee for further consideration, which discussed it at its meeting of 19<sup>th</sup> January 2000. It was agreed that the Scottish Executive and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) should be consulted before deciding what, if any, action was to be taken.

In its response to the Transport and Environment Committee of 22 February 2000, the Executive's Environment Protection Unit (EPU) killed the idea stone dead.

The essence of the EPU's arguments was as follows. Whilst acknowledging that littering was "a social problem", it considered that "existing legislation [was] adequate to deal with offenders"; that the only long-term solution was to educate the public, particularly the young; that the Executive showed its commitment to dealing with the problem by its grants to Keep Scotland Beautiful and its community environment campaigns; and that there was no need for Adopt-a-Highway because the relevant authorities were there to do the job. The final paragraph is so fatuous that it is worth reproducing here in full.

"The Executive does not consider that the American experience can be translated without modification to Scotland. Bearing in mind the differences in topography, roads and traffic between the American Mid-West and Scotland, the Executive considers that it could be dangerous for groups of untrained and inexperienced people, however well-meaning they may be, traversing the verges of often very heavily used through routes."<sup>6</sup>

### *What Needs To Be Done*

Clearly, if the most litigious nation on earth can make Adopt-a-Highway work then there's no excuse for Scotland, notwithstanding what the Executive may opine. The question is, of course, where do we go now if we want to continue to pursue this tried and tested initiative? That favourite Scottish Executive panacea for all ills, money, is not the answer. Firm political leadership is, and to date none has been forthcoming.

---

<sup>5</sup> Scottish Parliament petition number PE 33.

<sup>6</sup> The letter is reproduced in full as an appendix to this paper.

## **Grounds For Inertia**

Why this should be so is puzzling. After all, it seems to offer an inexpensive, useful and effective solution to a perennial public problem whilst at the same time encouraging and engendering the spirit of social responsibility and citizenship. It gets people outdoors and exercising. It's socially inclusive with no hint of privilege or elitism. Further, it removes a source of potential health hazard and is good for tourism. What other initiative presses quite so many buttons on the Scottish political establishment's collective agenda? Why hasn't it been seized with both hands?

There are a number of possibilities. The first is that Scotland has become so besmirched with rubbish and litter that too many Scots have become inured to it to the point of not noticing it at all. For many if not most of them it is the norm. If you're brought up in a byre you tend not to notice the dung, as they say.

A more sinister explanation is that our councillors and politicians are afraid of upsetting those currently paid to collect the rubbish. Scots politicians in hock to producer interests against the interests of their constituents? It seems scarcely believable!

Which brings us back to the Executive's point that the only long-term solution to Scotland's littering will be in educating the public as a whole. A crucial prerequisite to this is to educate the politicians first. The Green Party should be well aware of the arguments already, given their overall ideology, but even they have failed so far to raise the issue to national prominence despite having seven MSPs at Holyrood.

The other major hurdle to be overcome is local authority inertia. **There is absolutely no reason why individual councils should not instigate Adopt-a-Highway independently of the Scottish Executive** but, so far, none has chosen to do so. Many of the reasons will be the same as at national level – lack of political will and leadership and worse. Cosy relationships have been established between councils and contractors who carry out rubbish collection (or environmental services as they have been coyly renamed), and there's no doubt that voluntary services can threaten paid jobs.

But Adopt-a-Highway should be seen as a supplementary, not a replacement, service. If the US experience in Missouri is at all illustrative, up to a quarter of roadsides might be cleaned by volunteers, leaving contractors to concentrate on doing the other three-quarters better. Who knows, residents might even end up with reductions in council tax!

## **Grounds For Hope**

There are, however, the beginnings of a flicker of interest. The Scotland and Northern Ireland Forum for Environmental Research (SNIFFER) recently published the first research on the link between environmental quality and social deprivation.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, it found that there is a strong link between deprivation and low environmental quality. The research did not in fact look at litter itself, concentrating mainly on industrial pollution, derelict land and river water quality, but the parallels are clear. The report's impact resulted in a call for legislation to allow every citizen in Scotland to live in an environment with clean land, clean air and clean water.<sup>8</sup> Is this the first sign of the Parliament taking notice?

## **Wanted: A Political Champion**

There isn't really any sound argument against introducing the Adopt-a-Highway scheme in Scotland. It deals with a real and burgeoning problem using a tried and tested method, whilst fostering citizenship and social responsibility, all at relatively little cost. Cleaning up the Scottish countryside and towns would be a sign of pride in our country and encourage tourism, one of Scotland's most important industries.

**For Adopt-a-Highway to succeed in Scotland it needs not legislation and budgets, but a political champion.** Someone who, at national level, has the wisdom and foresight – and indeed the energy and leadership – to grasp the opportunities that the scheme offers and overcome the political inertia that exists. Who might this champion be? Well, ideally the First Minister himself, but to be fair he has such a wide portfolio he may not be able to devote the personal resources required to get the idea off the ground in Scotland. However, we also have a Minister for Environment and Rural Development into whose bailiwick this matter clearly falls. Perhaps he should now be directing his staff to look at this more positively.

**Stuart Crawford is the founder and senior partner of Stuart Crawford Associates, an Edinburgh based consultancy specialising in public affairs, defence and security, and media communications. He is also currently Convenor of the Association for Scottish Public Affairs.**

---

<sup>7</sup> Scotland and Northern Ireland Forum for Environmental Research, Project UE4(03)1 Final Report *Investigating Environmental Justice in Scotland: Links Between Measures of Environmental Quality and Social Deprivation*, March 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Scottish Parliamentary Motion S2M-2950, Rosie Kane: Clean Law.

## *Appendix*

### **PETITIONS TO THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT PETITION PE33: LITTER ON ROADS AND OTHER PUBLIC PLACES RESPONSE BY THE SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE**

By letter dated 28<sup>th</sup> January 2000 the Transport and Environment Committee of the Scottish Parliament sought information from the Scottish Executive following the submission of a petition by Mr Stuart Crawford relating to the litter on roads and other public places. This note explains the statutory background and contains the Executive's response to the issues raised.

#### **Responsibility and powers as regards litter clearance**

Part IV of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 places a responsibility on local authorities to ensure that public areas within their control, including roads, are kept free of litter. The Scottish Executive has a similar responsibility for roads for which it is responsible. The Act also provides that littering is an offence, attracting a penalty of up to Level 4 (currently £2,500) on the Standard Scale.

In discharging their litter responsibility, local authorities have several powers available to them, viz:-

The power to designate non-publicly owned land as a litter control area. The effect on this is to extend the duty to keep land free of litter to the owner or occupier of that land.

The power to serve a Street Litter Control Notice on the occupier of premises, such as fast food outlets, which give rise to a litter problem. Such notices allow the local authority to require the occupier of the premises to take measures specified in the notice aimed at keeping the immediate vicinity clear of litter.

The power to appoint Litter Wardens with authority to serve a £25 fixed penalty notice on litter offenders. This is a "fast track" (and, for the offender, possibly cheaper) alternative to referring the offence to the Procurator Fiscal for prosecution in the usual way.

In addition, DETR, DfEE and the former Scottish and Welsh Offices have produced joint statutory guidance for local authorities and others with a litter responsibility. The "Code of Practice on Litter and Refuse" defines standards of cleanliness which are achievable in different types of location and under different circumstances. It also provides advice and information on the means by which those standards may be achieved. The Scottish Executive subscribes to the standards and targets set by the Code.

#### **Response to issues raised by the petitioner**

The petitioner is concerned about litter generally. The Executive is also concerned and agrees that litter is, at best, unsightly and, at worst, constitutes a potential hazard to wildlife. The Executive considers that existing legislation is adequate to deal with offenders but has to acknowledge that littering is a social problem and that the only long term solution will be in

educating the public as a whole. Only a change in people's attitudes, particularly in the young, will bring about the improvements we seek. To this end, the Executive pays core grant to the community environment charity, Keep Scotland Beautiful, as an expression of our support for the anti-litter and other community environment campaigns it conducts and the practical training it provides to local authorities on combating litter and flytipping.

The petitioner expresses particular concern about the extent to which roads, implicitly major roads, were affected by litter and suggested the introduction of the "Adopt A Highway" scheme practised by the State of Missouri and elsewhere in the USA, whereby voluntary and community groups take on the amenity maintenance of a stretch of road in their area.

Roads authorities (either local authorities or, in the case of trunk roads and motorways, the Scottish Executive) are responsible for the management of roads in their area. It is for them to decide how roadside cleaning is to be carried out, taking into account a number of factors such as traffic management and the health and safety of those carrying out the work. The overriding imperative is to ensure that when roadside cleaning, verge maintenance, etc, is being carried out neither road users nor those involved are placed at any risk or danger.

The Executive does not consider that the American experience can be translated without modification to Scotland. Bearing in mind the differences in topography, roads and traffic between the American Mid-West and Scotland, the Executive considers that it could be dangerous for groups of untrained and inexperienced people, however well-meaning they may be, traversing the verges of often very heavily used through routes.

SERAD:EPU  
22 February 2000