

People and Communities Committee

Tuesday, 11th August, 2015

MEETING OF PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Control of Graffiti in Belfast

(Mr. S. Skimin, Head of Cleansing Services, attended in connection with this item.)

The Committee considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide members with information in respect of the control and removal of graffiti in the city. The report specifically deals with the following:

- **current operational practice**
- **cost implications**
- **council initiatives to prevent graffiti**
- **best practice research**
- **future approach to tackle the issue of graffiti**

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 Members are asked to:

- (i) Note the complex issues and significant costs associated with tackling graffiti removal across Belfast and the responsibilities of property / site owners to carry out maintenance at their own expense.**
- (ii) Approve the future approach, outlined in Section 3.16 of the report, to further develop initiatives to tackle the issue of graffiti, including:**
 - **engagement with external partners to raise the profile of graffiti within their organisations, to highlight their responsibilities in relation to graffiti removal on their properties and sites, and to agree actions for them to address the issue of graffiti, including site monitoring and graffiti reduction / removal programmes;**
 - **creation of an internal group to coordinate activities within Belfast City Council;**

- a review of the present school education and awareness programme to incorporate a comprehensive anti graffiti message;
- further engagement with communities to explore initiatives for graffiti reduction in their areas;
- where appropriate, the use of FPNs and Defacement Removal Notices; and
- Committee write to the Department of the Environment requesting them to review Councils' current enforcement powers, with a view to widening the scope of Council powers to issue Defacement Removal Notices.

(iii) Note that a progress report will be presented to Committee in approximately six months.

3.0 Main report

Key Issues

- 3.1** At the Committee meeting held on 21 April 2015, Members requested that a report be presented to Committee outlining the current policy in respect of the control and removal of graffiti, together with details of the cost implications and potential benefits of Council working in partnership with the community and business sectors to address the issue.
- 3.2** Graffiti is a prevalent and obvious environmental problem, linked to anti social behaviour in many areas of Belfast. It is unsightly and can sometimes be contentious and offensive, degrading streets, properties and public amenities. Although it is recognised that graffiti is widespread, most graffiti does not appear on Council owned property.
- 3.3** Belfast City Council does not have a statutory duty to remove graffiti. The Council's current practice is to deploy Cleansing Services resources to remove graffiti from Council owned property and, in the case of contentious or offensive graffiti; we will remove it from private property, with the owners signed permission. This approach is in line with many Local Authorities across the UK. During the period 2014/2015, 439 incidents of reported graffiti were removed by the Council from 307 locations.
- 3.4** In all other cases removal of graffiti from property forms part of the normal maintenance responsibility of the person or organisation responsible for the upkeep of the property / site. This includes public and private landlords, other statutory bodies, business owners, private householders, education authorities, utility companies etc.

3.5 Cleansing Services have limited resources to remove graffiti and are unable to assign a dedicated team to this function under current resources. One Cleansing Services Team undertakes graffiti removal as part of its multidisciplinary functions which include, power washing streets, gum removal, land clearance, fly posting removal and bulky household waste collections. This team can manage the current workload generated by the requirement to remove graffiti from council properties and requests to remove contentious or offensive graffiti elsewhere.

3.6 The Council also has some limited enforcement powers:

There are 2 powers to deal with graffiti.

Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs)

Belfast City Council can only issue FPNs in respect of graffiti in certain circumstances and only against the individual when the offence is being committed.

Defacement Removal Notices (DRNs)

The Council's powers in relation to DRNs were greatly curtailed with the introduction of the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, in that prior to this Act the Council could serve DRNs on almost any property owner. Currently the Council is restricted to serving DRNs on the owners, occupiers, operators (such as telecommunication companies and outdoor advertising companies) of "relevant surfaces" (including street furniture), statutory undertakers and educational institutions whose property is defaced with graffiti. The general guidance however indicates that the Council should endeavour to enter into constructive partnerships with relevant bodies to remove graffiti within agreed times and minimise the need for DRNs, which should only be issued as a last resort.

3.7 As stated previously, the responsibility for removal of graffiti should form part of the responsibilities of the person or organisation accountable for maintaining the premises / site. It would be a considerable burden on the rates if Council decided to undertake graffiti removal on sites which are the responsibility of others.

3.8 By way of example, in 2013 Cleansing Services participated in a three month, multi partnership regeneration initiative, in an area comprising 74 streets in the Lower Falls area. Cleansing Services deployed one priority waste team which removed graffiti from one hundred and fifty sites in the area. The graffiti ranged in size and type and was removed from all properties following completion of the necessary disclaimer. Several issues evolved during the project which included problems obtaining the necessary signed disclaimer from property owners, access difficulties and staff being threatened. On occasions staff had to be accompanied by local representatives during the graffiti removal process. The cost to remove graffiti in this 0.3452km², over a three month period, amounted to £30,000 which was funded from non recurring monies. A recent review of the same area identified that new graffiti had occurred, despite attempts by local communities to control it. If a priority waste team were deployed to remove the current build up of graffiti, it is estimated that it would require one dedicated priority waste team, working full time for two weeks, at a cost of approximately £5,000. Therefore it can be established that, undertaking intensive graffiti removal, across the 4,688 streets in Belfast, would have significant cost implications for the Council.

3.9 Any future decisions on allocating additional resources around this function would need to be considered in detail, and appraised, in terms of the impacts on the rate setting process. Figures estimate that the annual cost of graffiti removal throughout the United Kingdom exceeds £1 billion. It should be noted that in most cases UK Mainland authorities carry out the functions of housing, education, roads etc therefore have responsibility for much of the public realm.

3.10 In addition to the ongoing activity to remove incidents of graffiti, Belfast City Council has also implemented several initiatives aimed at tackling graffiti problems. These include:

- **North Queen Street Project**

Sectarian graffiti was removed by the local community and replaced with graphics depicting local historical events. Anti graffiti paint was used to protect the new graphics.

- **South Belfast Markets Project**

This project was delivered in partnership with Community Restorative Justice Ireland and included a graffiti removal scheme in the Markets area of South Belfast.

- **Murals in South and East Belfast**

The local community were involved in designing murals to enhance the local environment.

- **Interface Projects**

These include programmes to soften interface areas and have incorporated graffiti removal.

- **Divis Environmental Project**

Graffiti removal is planned in the Lower Divis area following on from the Divis intervention project.

City Cemetery Decorative Arts projects. Removal of sectarian and racist graffiti throughout the site and the installation of a sculpture to increase community ownership.

3.11 Research undertaken in other Councils has identified a number of common elements which are applied to deal with graffiti problems more effectively. These include:

- **Partnership working**

There is strong evidence of partnership working both internally and externally to share intelligence and resources. Local authorities in England and Wales have wider responsibilities than in Northern Ireland such as education, social services, trading standards, roads, highways and transportation and housing. Given this, collaborative working to address graffiti problems is less complex. Nevertheless, SLAs, that include funding commitment, are developed with external partners to support the cost of graffiti removal.

- **Community engagement**

Local communities are encouraged to actively participate in removal and prevention programmes such as attending professional graffiti removal training, provision of graffiti removal kits, community cleanups, planting schemes, guardianship of hotspot areas and support for community murals.

- **Regeneration**

Significant support is provided for regeneration of areas in decline and, with the assistance of Planning Service, a proactive design approach is taken to prevent future opportunities for graffiti.

- **Improved security**

Working in conjunction with partners, enhanced security and CCTV systems are developed to increase the detection rate of offenders, following which a robust enforcement process is implemented.

- **Communication**

Advice and guidance regarding how best to protect property and how to report incidents of graffiti is widely communicated. Additionally the cost of graffiti removal and its impacts on local areas are published to encourage partner assistance in preventing graffiti occurrences.

- **Positive interventions**

Education programmes are delivered in schools, colleges and universities which seek to inform potential offenders of the costs and impacts associated with graffiti and its removal.

- **Enforcement**

Where opportunities exist, intelligence is shared through communication and task forums. Evidence is collated and distributed to enforcement agencies for further appropriate action. Additionally overt high visibility patrols, based on targeted intelligence gathering, are carried out to deter graffiti.

3.12 Dublin City Council has developed a Litter Management Plan which includes 1 dedicated city centre graffiti team that removes graffiti from Council owned property and reported contentious graffiti that is visible from public places. During the period 2008 to 2011 Dublin City Council's budget for graffiti removal across the city was €750,000 which was supported with additional funding from the Government anti-graffiti scheme. Dublin City Council proactively encourages all public and private partners to address their responsibilities regarding

graffiti removal and works in partnership to devise effective graffiti removal programmes.

- 3.13 Glasgow City Council has 8 dedicated graffiti removal teams that remove graffiti from Council owned property and sites, as well as removing instances of offensive contentious graffiti in public places. The annual cost of this service to Glasgow City Council is £600,000. Similar to Dublin City Council, Glasgow City Council proactively promotes partners corporate and civic social responsibilities to remove graffiti whilst encouraging a coordinated approach to develop effective graffiti removal programmes.
- 3.14 In line with most other Local Councils, both Dublin City Council and Glasgow City Council have a significantly broader range of functions than Belfast City Council and would therefore have responsibilities for the upkeep of much of the wider public realm. Much of the graffiti they remove would be on properties and sites for which they are responsible.
- 3.15 Research suggests that although Councils and Local Authorities actively promote best practice in dealing with graffiti problems, graffiti prevention presents many challenges, is costly to remove and impossible to eradicate completely. It is recognised however that the extent to which graffiti affects the city can be diminished if it is high on organisations priorities.
- 3.16 In further developing this work, it is recommended that Belfast City Council's future approach should involve the following issues.
- engagement with external partners to raise the profile of graffiti within their organisations, to highlight their responsibilities in relation to graffiti removal on their properties and sites, and to agree actions for them to address the issue of graffiti, including site monitoring and graffiti reduction / removal programmes;
 - creation of an internal group to coordinate activities within Belfast City Council;
 - a review of the present school education and awareness programme to incorporate a comprehensive anti graffiti message;
 - further engagement with communities to explore initiatives for graffiti reduction in their areas;
 - where appropriate, the use of FPNs and Defacement Removal Notices; and
 - It is recommended that Committee write to the Department of the Environment requesting them to review Councils' current enforcement powers, with a view to widening the scope of Council powers to issue Defacement Removal Notices.

3.17 All future work in respect of graffiti removal must support and align with the Belfast Agenda and Community Planning.

3.18 Finance & Resource Implications

Cleansing Services has a limited budget and resources to deal with graffiti removal. At present, resources are sufficient to deal with graffiti removal from Council properties and sites together with the removal of reported contentious graffiti from public places. Any increase in the scope of service provision for graffiti removal will have significant cost and resource implications.

3.19 Equality or Good Relations Implications

Incidents of reported contentious graffiti include political, sectarian and racist remarks. Council recognises the importance of removing such graffiti, where possible, as quickly as possible to reduce interface and community tension.

3.20 The Parks and Leisure Department will work in partnership with Cleansing services to remove contentious graffiti. In the instance where high volume of non-offensive graffiti has accumulated, contracted services will be used

3.21 All graffiti removal is undertaken in line with Council's equality and good relations policies and procedures."

During questions from the Members, the Head of Cleansing advised that his team would be engaging with the utility companies and other statutory bodies to address the issues of Graffiti removal and that the Council no longer provided Graffiti removal kits due to the associated Health and Safety implications, but there would be a more detailed discussion on this in the future.

The Committee acknowledged the hard work of the Cleansing Services Team which carried out graffiti removal as part of its function and commended their speed of customer service.

After discussion, the Committee noted the contents of the report and approved the future approach in the control of Graffiti, as outlined above. The Committee also noted that a progress report would be presented to Committee in due course.