

Keep Scotland Beautiful: Tackling Scotland's Declining Local Environmental Quality

The Centre for Scottish Public Policy features the work of charity Keep Scotland Beautiful in highlighting a worrying decline in local environmental quality in Scotland. The environmental charity argues that greater strategic leadership, in tandem with action involving “more innovation and more integration” is needed across the public, private and third sectors.

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In the run up to the Scottish parliamentary elections on 5 May, debate has tended to focus on issues of tax, spending, health, education and welfare – particularly with the devolution of new powers from the UK level set to occur. However, environmental charity Keep Scotland Beautiful (KSB) has recently warned that progress in an area of key importance to the wellbeing of our people and places – local environmental quality – is experiencing a reverse, and requires urgent attention over the coming parliament.

Local environmental quality in decline

Local environmental quality (LEQ) refers to the quality of our local places, measured by indicators such as litter, dog fouling, flytipping, vandalism, weed growth, abandoned vehicles and flyposting. Beyond keeping town centres and local communities tidy, [evidence suggests](#) that good LEQ can help to underpin individual health and wellbeing, community cohesion, and social and economic prosperity; particularly in a country whose natural beauty attracts tourists internationally. However [a recently published review](#) of KSB's National Cleanliness Benchmarking Report has found that following a period of continuous improvement up to 2013, over the past three years LEQ has begun to stall and even decline, with levels of fly-posting, weed growth, litter and graffiti all showing observable increases. Further, while there is much to recognise in efforts to improve our places in recent years, it is highlighted that this decline is occurring at a difficult moment, with overall local authority spending power reduced by 11% in Scotland since 2010-2011, and difficult choices being made over local environmental and waste management services.

In addition to the impact this trend may have on health, wellbeing and prosperity, such a development poses a question for the Scottish Government's Fairer Scotland agenda. The importance of creating “great places” for attaining social justice goals was recognised by a range of stakeholders in town and urban development during a [series of discussion forums](#) organised by the Centre for Scottish Public Policy and Scotland's Towns Partnership in late 2015. The National Children's Bureau has also highlighted in an [independent UK poverty review](#) how low LEQ has “a detrimental impact on the social and economic outcomes of those who live in such communities”. Indeed KSB's [report](#) points out that poor LEQ is more likely to affect children growing up in more deprived areas, affecting their behaviour, wellbeing and long term outcomes.

In response to KSB's findings, the charity's chief executive Derek Robertson called for action, stating: “In a country where we owe so much of our economy to attracting visitors from across the globe, and where civic and social justice are so important to our national sense of wellbeing - this report makes it clear that we cannot stand by and watch whilst standards are clearly starting to decline”.

Taking action

As such, KSB itself is making the reversal of current trends in LEQ a priority. It will actively contribute through leading, planning and implementing a strategy, including:

- involving all sectors in a conversation to explore what needs to be done collectively to conserve and improve Scotland's environmental quality;
- encouraging all political parties to include environmental quality in action plans;
- advocating for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament cross-party group on environmental quality;
- and, exploring ways to improve support of local authorities, public bodies, landowners and communities working on environmental quality.

The charity coordinates the Scottish Local Environmental Quality Network which supports land managers across Scotland to tackle the indicators of LEQ. In addition, current and on-going actions [include](#):

- Delivering the multi-stakeholder environmental quality improvement campaign, Clean Up Scotland.
- Training local authority and duty body officers on how to use environmental laws and regulations.
- The annual LEQ conference and [awards ceremony](#), which took place in March with [key presentations](#) from leading stakeholders on the conservation and development of our places.

Beyond this, KSB Operations Director Carole Noble explained to the CSPP the role that different actors could take to contribute to the solution. "Across the sectors, our asks are the following," she stated. "For the Scottish Government to provide strategic leadership and direction; the public, private and third sectors to take a more strategic, integrated and coordinated approach; and for communities and individuals to be better supported to take action to tackle environmental quality issues". In the context of the squeeze in public finances, it was suggested that this will require "more innovation and more integration" in order to succeed – echoing the networked approach required to tackle many other pressing policy challenges.

Moving forward

KSB's findings highlight that the quality of our local places is central to the wellbeing of Scotland's people. As a result, we cannot afford to allow the decline in LEQ to continue. However, at a time of fiscal constraint, the response requires coordinated action across sectors, with prioritisation and strategic action coming from government. Ensuring such an approach is taken is a challenge for all of Holyrood's political parties after 5 May, as well as representing a propitious moment for other stakeholders to consider how best they can contribute to ensuring Scotland's places remain as clean, healthy and attractive as they can be, to the benefit of the wellbeing and prosperity of us all.

Appendix: Keep Scotland Beautiful Recommendations to Improve LEQ

We ask the Scottish Government to take the lead and:

- Make tackling Scotland's declining environmental quality a higher strategic priority
- Consider how environmental quality can be embedded into the National Performance Framework

- Develop a long-term strategic approach to drive up and maintain national environmental quality standards
- Establish a task force, led by a designated minister, to develop a long-term approach connected to all relevant policy areas
- Support the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, and public bodies to take consistent action to raise the profile of low level environmental crime
- Prioritise existing resources to enable and empower local communities to take action
- Support an integrated programme of education that addresses behaviour change for all ages and all sectors

We ask the public, private and third sectors to take a more strategic, integrated and coordinated approach to environmental quality.

- Local authorities and partners should continue to work through community planning partnerships to ensure that environmental quality has high priority and is a main strand of local outcomes improvement plans
- All sectors should work together to drive up and maintain environmental quality standards
- Where possible, the public and third sectors should pool resources particularly in relation to infrastructure and equipment
- The private sector should increase national and local activity on environmental quality giving this priority, for example, within their Corporate and Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies and environmental plans
- All sectors should support, and resource where possible, communities to take positive action

We ask individuals and communities to take action on environmental quality.

- Individuals who consistently offend need to take responsibility and change their behaviour, or pay the penalty
- Local communities should take pride in, and ownership of, their surroundings
- Existing community action networks should be expanded and utilised to share and develop good practice from local projects
- Local communities should continue to actively participate in CPPs using the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 to effect positive change
- Communities should access resources and support to allow them to play a meaningful role in driving up and maintaining environmental quality standards