

Elastic Band Position Paper



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Introduction

Keep Wales Tidy has carried out cleanliness surveys on 723 streets in Wales, business waste was found on 18.8% of the streets surveyed¹. Almost all of this business waste is a result of red elastic bands dropped by Royal Mail employees. This source of litter can have quite a significant impact on overall street cleanliness in Welsh local authorities. Streets that may otherwise have been awarded grades A or B+ can fall to a B grade, which has implications on the overall Cleanliness Index for the authority. The dropping of elastic bands is a littering offence under Part 4, section 87 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, and therefore offenders are liable for a £75 fixed penalty notice.²



Background

Stephen Perry first invented the elastic band in 1845 to hold papers and envelopes together³, these bands are still used today by the Royal Mail for exactly that reason. Recently the Royal Mail made the decision to dye their bands red to make them more identifiable. A Royal Mail spokesman said 'We regularly remind staff to pick them up. They are biodegradable but if they are dropped they are classed as litter. Their colour means they are more noticeable now too'⁴. Regular reminders to staff is admirable, but as one flytipping officer from Tameside said '... where they've failed is making sure their own staff are onside with the initiative and understand why litter dropping is anti-social behaviour that will not be tolerated'⁵. Not only is the dropping of elastic bands a littering offence it also represents money lost to the Royal Mail, for each band dropped on the streets that is an extra band that the Royal Mail has to purchase.

The Problem

The Royal Mail estimates that they use about 342 million elastic bands each year⁶, and say that the majority of bands are reused. However, the Royal Mail needs to educate their staff to collect and reuse their bands, instead of littering the streets of Wales. Postal workers need to understand that dropping elastic bands is an offence, and that they can be issued with a £75 fixed penalty notice for littering, under section 87 of the the Environmental Protection Act. Adrian Booth a Royal Mail spokesman said 'They are used to bundle post together and to separate post for different streets, but they do have a habit of pinging off sometimes. Post men and women are busy people who do a busy job. Sometimes the amount of effort required to pick up an elastic band is counter productive'⁷

The Royal Mail claim that their red elastic bands are biodegradable, taking approximately six to eight weeks to break down depending on weather conditions⁸. If this is the case Royal Mail workers in Wales must be dropping a phenomenal amount of bands for them to be present on 18.8% of Wales' streets, with one street in Cardiff having 13 red elastic bands over a 50metre transect⁹. A



Photo: News and Star 2006

Keep Wales Tidy estimate puts the number of elastic bands dropped on Wales' streets by postal workers at 1915 per week. Given that the Royal Mail use 342 million bands per year we can assume that approximately 0.6% of Royal Mail elastic bands are being dropped on the streets of Wales. (see Appendix 1). Lewisham Council estimates that up to 5,000 elastic bands are dropped in the borough by postal workers every month⁶, and one resident from Carlisle claims to have picked up 315 red elastic bands in one day.⁴

Options for Improvement



Tameside Council is looking into the possibility of organising a competition with the borough's local schools with the aim of raising awareness to the problem of the littering of elastic bands. The idea of the competition is for the schools to collect red elastic bands found on the streets of the county and make a ball – the school with the largest ball winning some sort of anti-litter prize⁵. Although this raises awareness of the problem within the local community, it does not tackle the cause of the problem.

Keep Wales Tidy propose several options to help deal with the problem of elastic band littering. Firstly Royal Mail staff need to be educated about the problems associated with dropping elastic bands. Postal workers need to understand that dropping bands is an offence and that they personally could be issued with a £75 fixed penalty notice, not the Royal Mail. The cost of dropping bands may be small to the Royal Mail but it is greatly increased for the authority which has to employ somebody to pick up the littered bands, this cost is ultimately passed onto the tax payer, which includes Royal Mail workers. The other option that the Royal Mail has is to adopt a change of procedure such that the use of elastic bands be obviated.

Keep Wales Tidy suggest that Local Authorities and members of the general public write to the Royal Mail with their complaint regarding the quantity of elastic bands found on the streets of Wales. Rhondda Cynon Taf have taken such an approach, two senior members of the cleansing department made a visit to the Royal Mail sorting office in Pontypridd, and spoke to the manager and his operatives¹⁰. The meeting was arranged following a Keep Wales Tidy LEAMS report which found business waste present on 13.3% of the streets in the county borough council, nearly all of this business waste was attributed to red Royal Mail elastic bands¹.

Conclusions

18.8% of the streets in Wales were recorded as having a presence of elastic bands, this can make a difference between a street being of excellent cleanliness and acceptable cleanliness. The presence of elastic bands on the streets of Wales can have significant implications on the cleanliness index achieved by local authorities.

Keep Wales Tidy's policy on elastic bands is to 'encourage the Royal Mail to educate their staff about the problems associated with the dropping of elastic bands and to ensure that all workers are aware of the implications of littering.'

References:

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Appendix 1

County	Population	Streets
Conwy	110,700	2215
Denbighshire	91,300	1548
Cardiff	306,600	3681
Rhondda Cynon Taf	239,000	4827
Total	747,6000	12271

$7476000/12271 = 60.92 =$ average population per street in Wales

Total population of Wales approximately 3 million

$3 \text{ million}/60.92 = 49245$ streets in Wales

$49245 * 0.188 = 9258$ streets with elastic bands ($0.188 = 18.8\%$ of Wales' streets found to have business waste present)

$9258 * 1.5$ (average number of bands per street on streets which have an elastic band presence) = 13887 bands on the streets of Wales

$13387/7.25$ (average breakdown period for an elastic band = 7.25 weeks) = 1915 bands dropped per week in Wales.

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