



Changing forces



“Almost a year on since the last Enforcement Supplement and my contribution ‘Making those Decriminalised Parking Enforcement Decisions,’ it is interesting to note the changes already taking place in the market place. As Local Authorities needs change, so too does the selection criteria for appointing an enforcement agency,” comments **Andy Rose**, Managing Director, Bristow & Sutor Civil Enforcement Agents

Left: Parking offences create the need for enforcement in the first place



We find now that local authorities know exactly what they want and how they want it delivered. The *reality* compared to the *promise* of service delivery has encouraged open dialogue and greater communication between internal departments and councils alike. When Wychavon District Council appointed Bristow & Sutor to collect their unpaid penalty charge notices, it was made clear that with the large number of out of town visitors, the ability to demonstrate and prove performance levels for tracing defaulters would be critical to the contract. Following up referrals and speaking to colleagues within the industry to validate reputation and compare performance results was one way that this local authority selected their two preferred suppliers. However, it was noted that there was an element of discrepancy in the way that suppliers presented and classified their performance results. Essential to be able to compare 'apples with apples' we find that more and more local authorities specify how information is to be presented to ensure that their analysis is clear and equally measured.

The demand for total transparency and accessibility to web based client information and case history is no longer seen as 'added value' but a stipulation. The continuous search for excellence has led to considerable resource and finances being invested in specifically the integration of technologies. We see, however, that sometimes the speed of progress can leave customers feeling frustrated in that suppliers seem to move on before sorting out issues encountered at the start of a contract. Typically within enforcement service contracts these include the transfer of information, data integrity, lack of real-time information and cross-communication. Part of our partnership approach is to encourage our existing customers to contribute to the on-going development of our client web, suggest amendments and mould the solution to best fit their requirements. Fortunately, with an in-house IT development team, this can be acted upon almost immediately rather than waiting for a new version of software to be released.

Revenue collection at all cost?

The debate continues whether penalty charge notices should be collected at all cost. Widely accepted that parking debt generates a considerable revenue stream for local authorities, the matter of applying reasonable fees becomes more and more of a burning issue. Undoubtedly the consensus is that we need to remain firm but fair with the public, however, what is fair? With a no fee, no cost service to councils, bailiff companies recoups

their costs from applying the legislative fees to the recovery of the parking debt. But at what cost? Within the legislative fee structure there is scope to apply 'reasonable fees' when you attend a defaulters property to remove goods. This is an area that attracts a varied approach and has now become the focus of attention for local authorities. Conscious of how fees can quickly accrue for what started off as a relatively small parking debt, local authorities are turning to the enforcement agencies to be accountable in the way that fees are applied and provide a transparent and open fee scale structure.

County based initiatives

We also find that as local authorities subscribe to more open dialogue, we witness a number of county based initiatives rather than a number of individual authorities each conducting their own investigation and research. This type of partnership approach means that they jointly eliminate duplication, identify any gaps in service provision and ensure that best value services are delivered. Looking to achieve real and sustained improvement, the collaborative approach aims to ensure the transfer of knowledge within each of the authorities and deliver consistency across the county.

At the same, these centrally based contracts will not only create a best practice template that embraces customer focus, but will improve performance across the board.

No doubt as decriminalised parking powers unfold across the country and the government strives to meet the objectives of managing congestion and improving traffic flow; we will see greater provision within the Traffic Management Bill to focus on more powers to pursue a more effective enforcement regime. Initiatives enforcing penalty charge notices for minor traffic offences including turning against left and right turn signs, ignoring the rules of a boxed junction or driving the wrong way up a one way street are, as we speak, being extended to authorities across England and Wales.

In a relatively short timescale Local Authorities' needs have changed dramatically. Similarly, the scope of enforcement has been extended. One wonders where we will be in another year from now? With the progression of decriminalisation, who knows to what extent we will be empowered to enforce driving offences. Will the modern day enforcement agent soon be responsible for on the spot fines for littering or other similar wrong doings? **PW**

As experience is gained through operating a DPE regime and local authorities have more hands-on knowledge of using external bailiffs to deliver this service, the selection criteria for appointing an enforcement partner is becoming more specific and coordinated. Appointments were traditionally made on a 'safe bet' approach, based on a checklist of criteria that the enforcement supplier could meet. Suppliers had to be able to provide comprehensible internal policies and procedures. Communication was largely founded on the successful completion of a 'broad' tender document with little consideration given to bailiffs that already collected other revenue streams within the council.