

# Is dealing with litter only the job of the Council and its contractors?

I am not a fan of social media, and the initial response to my post about our last litter pick on the Forum's Facebook page did nothing to endear me to it. Somebody had taken it upon themselves to ask: "Isn't that the Council's job?" At first sight, that seemed a cynical response. I take exception to the implication that our volunteers are wasting their time or covering up for the failure of the Council to do its job properly. I am not prepared to enter into a shouty 'debate' on Facebook, but I am prepared to provide some thoughts about the value of community litter picks to our members and others who might read our Newsletters via links on our website.

In terms of numbers, 115 volunteers (72 adults, 43 children) collected at least 86 bags of rubbish from about 16 locations in Hitchin on Sunday, 12<sup>th</sup> October. Several local groups were involved, including Holy Saviour Guides, 3<sup>rd</sup> Hitchin Cubs, Hitchin Tennis Club and Bubbleworks Community Running Group. The overall volunteer figures are pretty much stable from one event to the next. Given that we provide litter pickers which need to be distributed and collected, the total number is relatively easy to manage.

Would the waste and recycling our volunteers collect be removed by Council contractors if we didn't run our events? The answer to that is a resounding 'no'. Much of what we collect is entangled in vegetation and may have been discarded long ago (We have on occasions found items such as the discarded Spam tin from well over 30 years ago). Considering the lengths to which our volunteers go to extract this material, were it not for them, it would remain in situ. Much of that material consists of food packaging, cans, plastic bottles and some glass, all in their way damaging to the environment.

There are some limitations to what volunteers are supposed to collect: North Hertfordshire's instructions on community litter picks ask that we do not collect glass, broken or intact, at all, as a safety measure to protect workers. Nevertheless, some volunteers, frustrated by this, will take unbroken glass home to ensure that it is cleaned and recycled. Plastic items and aluminium cans are often so heavily soiled as to make recycling unrealistic, but again, some volunteers take them home if they feel they can clean them. There are sometimes items that pose a serious threat to the environment. Two years ago, a lead-acid battery was extracted from deep in a hedge on Bancroft, and most recently three plastic containers full of used engine oil were found on St Michael's estate. Occasionally abandoned knives have been taken away by police.

Should the Council (through its contractors) be doing this? The details of North Hertfordshire's contract with either its ground maintenance contractor (John O'Conner) or contractor responsible for emptying bins and street cleaning other than on green spaces (now Veolia, but previously Urbaser) are unavailable. Obviously, the terms of the contracts will be constrained by budget. I wonder how



*Heavily rusted remains of a spam tin found on Butts Close*

much the Facebook questioner would be prepared to see added to their council tax in order to pay for a comprehensive clean-up. Maybe there are council services that they don't use for which they resent paying. They might believe that the contractors should be made to work harder. If the rubbish was not removed, what would be the consequence? There is evidence from Keep Britain Tidy that, when visiting locations where litter is obvious, people think it doesn't matter if they too don't take their litter home.



*Volunteer at Purwell in search of embedded*

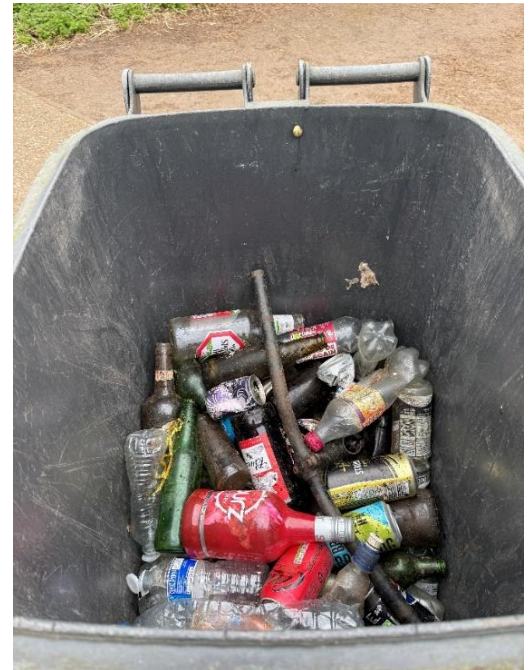
In addition to those organised by Hitchin Forum, several other groups pick litter on a regular basis. A number of individuals regularly clear their local area. Were it not for these public-spirited efforts, I am sure the difference would be noticed very quickly.

There is a social benefit beyond the immediate environmental impact. Of our approximately 280 contacts, the majority have taken part in one or more of our litter picks. The remainder have at least expressed an interest in doing so. I estimate that about half of our participants turn out for every event. If they have other commitments, they are keen to make it clear that they want to be involved next time. They enjoy

being involved and want to see the town looking its best. Children are particularly keen, and it is often through them that their parents have become involved. Volunteers want to make a statement that the town is something they value; they enjoy working alongside people who share their aims. People notice that.

The willingness of volunteers to take responsibility for doing something about a problem not of their making should be celebrated. Children enjoy making a difference and take away important lessons in citizenship. Apart from the environmental benefits, the contribution of activities like litter picks to community morale should not be underestimated.

If members would like to be involved in future, please email [hflitterpick@gmail.com](mailto:hflitterpick@gmail.com).



*One volunteer brought their grey bin to collect glass to clean and recycle at home.*

*Bill Sellicks – Co-Chair*