

I've spent £60,000 cleaning up after roadside litterbugs

Sick of rubbish thrown by motorists blighting his neighbourhood, one man pays £2,000 a month on an army of pickers-up



Danny Lucas was converted into an anti-litter activist after a family holiday to Vienna and now spends £2,000 a month of his own cash on picking it up.

Driving back home from Gatwick, he was horrified by the contrast between the immaculate Austrian capital and the rubbish-strewn roads of the UK.

Lucas, 55, who “always” picks up any litter he sees, now pays a contractor to clean a four-mile stretch of the A20 outside his family business in Wrotham, Kent, and asks his staff to do the same. So far he has spent £61,000. Between them, the litter-

pickers fill 50 refuse bags a month. And in all that time, Lucas has not seen a single council cleaner on the road.



Not everybody is grateful. Some locals, unaware of Lucas's pro bono arrangement, berate his crew over other problems, such as fixing broken pavements.

Litter is particularly bad on the country's motorways and major A-roads, managed by National Highways. The agency does not have enforcement powers, which means litter louts can expect to get away scot-free unless they are nabbed in flagrante by a passing police officer. If they are caught on local roads — where councils are in charge of enforcement — they face fines of between £65 and £150.

Between April 2020 and March 2022, an astonishing 45,094 bags of rubbish weighing approximately 451 tonnes were collected on the 230-mile course of the M6 motorway.

At least ten tonnes of rubbish were collected on each of 14 other motorways and A-roads, according to information disclosed by National Highways under freedom of information (FOI) laws. An insider at National Highways said: “I am unaware of any successful prosecutions on motorways. It’s very difficult to catch litterers.”

Dirty roads

Total number of rubbish bags collected on each major road, April 2020 - April 2022

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Road	Rubbish bags	Tonnes*
M6	45,094	451
M1	12,524	125
M5	11,126	111
A1	9,786	98
M25	9,465	95
M55	8,343	83
M4	4,012	40
M11	3,763	38
M42	2,773	28
A13	2,296	23

*Assuming each rubbish bag weighs on average 10 kg
Table: The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: National Highways

The FOI request was made by Andrew Kemp, an entrepreneur who believes that standards will improve only if technology is harnessed to penalise offenders. He has run a pilot camera scheme for Transport Scotland, but is frustrated that he has been unable to convince National Highways or the Office of Rail and Road (ORR), the official watchdog, to give his company, LitterCam, serious support.

His service uses artificial intelligence to scan video footage. It can spot rubbish being thrown out of a car window and link the offence to the named keeper of a vehicle. A fine can then be issued.

Alison Ogden-Newton, chief executive of the charity Keep Britain Tidy, says the state of the roads is “completely unacceptable” and that there needs to be a change both in public attitudes to littering and to enforcement. “For hardcore litterers, the only thing that works is enforcement.”

Some are so brazen they criticise her to her face for volunteer litter-picking in her free time on the grounds that she is “taking work away” from paid cleaners.



Motorway verges might be out of sight and therefore out of mind, but she says: “They should not be treated like wasteland. These stretches are vital to our natural habitat.”

Birds of prey hover above motorways because around them live voles, shrews and field mice that have fled agricultural land to avoid pesticides. But this haven is under threat from litter. “We estimate 3.4 million voles die inside drinks containers each year. We have found a single container with the remains of ten voles in it. They are attracted by the sugar but cannot get back out.”

An insider at National Highways defended its record, saying that clearing verges disrupts traffic because it involves lane closures. “We cannot just go out any time there is a bit of litter and clear our roads. It causes huge disruption.”

The insider claims the focus is on behavioural change. “If people didn’t drop litter, we wouldn’t have to clear it up. If we clear litter, within 24 hours it can be absolutely awful again.”

National Highways plans to continue displaying “sporadic” anti-littering messages, but the source says that if they are too frequent they “don’t have a big benefit”.

There will also be a pilot scheme in the Midlands and on Humberside to penalise people dumping rubbish in lay-bys. “We don’t think we need a huge number of prosecutions to send the right message to people that we do care about this.”

Freda Rashdi, head of customer journeys at National Highways, said: “If people don’t drop litter in the first place it wouldn’t need to be picked up — so we urge road users to take their litter home instead of throwing it out of their windows.”

This is too little, too late for campaigners such as John Read, founder of Clean Up Britain, who points angrily at pictures he has taken of verges so soiled they look as if refuse trucks have simply dumped their contents by the roadside. Last month

Mishcon de Reya, the law firm, issued a pre-action letter on his behalf accusing National Highways of breaching its duty to keep the roads clear of litter. Sir Mike Penning, a former roads minister, has tabled an early day motion in the House of Commons, urging it to fulfil its duty.

Until the government gives National Highways powers of enforcement, the state of the roads will continue to depend on the efforts of volunteers.

So for now, our roads continue to depend on volunteers. Jonathan Castro, 50, a software developer from Guildford, has in the past six years picked up 1,100 bags of rubbish on nearby A3 slip roads, not far off the 1,682 bags collected by the government body along the entire stretch of the 67-mile road in two years. Yet while well-wishers give him gifts, he has also been taunted by drivers throwing junk at him. They may soon come to regret it.

He will shortly move to Salisbury and will no longer be picking up the mess left behind in one of Britain's most prosperous areas. "People will notice I am not here anymore."

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