

TECHNOLOGY



Find out more

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FROM LEFT-RIGHT: Oldham MBC uses a specially equipped van to survey its street furniture; Belfast City Council's Titanic Trail provides an interactive tour

RIGHT: The public send photos of 'enviro-crimes' to the Love Lewisham site

At the touch of a button

1 CAUGHT ON CAMERA

Crimes against the local environment, like fly-tipping and graffiti, are problems that should be dealt with as soon as possible to stop them becoming seen as a normal feature of an area. With this in mind, Lewisham LBC launched its Love Lewisham scheme in 2005.

As part of the scheme residents, councillors and staff on the front line — street wardens, environmental officers and refuse collectors — can report environmental crimes by taking a picture of the problem on their mobile phone or personal digital assistant (PDA) and sending it directly to the Love Lewisham website. Staff then take steps to deal with the problem. Anyone who reports a problem receives a text when it has been cleaned up, which can also be viewed on the website.

Since the project started, 35,000 environmental crimes have been recorded, more than 16,500 in the past year. The amount of graffiti cleaned away has doubled and most incidents are dealt with on the same day. There are plans to issue police community support officers with PDAs so they can join in the reporting.

Susan Wise (Lab), cabinet officer for customer services at Lewisham, says: "Residents are seeing a much cleaner street scene. And if they report environmental crimes themselves they see quicker results and can have ownership of that improvement. It also

Many councils are imagining how technology can be used to improve services, and finding the resulting projects are practical and effective.

Victoria Hoban looks at some examples

prevents 'broken window syndrome', whereby residents feel less safe if their community looks run-down and derelict.

"Maintenance officers also use the PDAs to pick up jobs rather than having to come into the central office, saving time, paper and fuel."

2 COLLECT DATA BY VIDEO

Every council is required to produce a transport asset management plan by next March. Part of this is a valuation of their transport assets in order to assess replacement costs and depreciation rates.

But many councils either don't have information about exactly how much street furniture and how many highway assets they own, or the information they have may be patchy, and collecting this kind of data is an enormous task.

To tackle the problem, Oldham MBC has used video cameras to record every stretch of A, B, C and unclassified roads, which can then be analysed by its highways asset team.

The technology was supplied by Omni-com Engineering, which provided a van with

a computer system and four video cameras. The data was then fed into the council's global positioning system database where it underwent a lengthy process of analysis. This data will form the basis of the department's budget and costing for highway assets.

"The system captures 80% of the data, because of obstacles such as cars in the way, but we are hoping to have captured all illuminated signs and bollards," says Sue Eachus, Oldham's highways asset manager. "We are also using the system for assessing damage following accidents, replacing yellow and white lines, or interpreting what a resident means if they complain about an uneven footpath."

3 MONITOR RESIDENTS AT RISK

Many older people, especially those with conditions like Alzheimer's, find it difficult or impossible to remember what they did over the last 24 hours. If they live alone, this can be a source of concern for relatives and health and social care teams.

Staffordshire CC's Older Persons Team now uses an activity monitoring system called Just

Checking, which uses wireless, radio-based sensors to track a person's movements and activity patterns.

The council was an early implementer of the Just Checking scheme which has since been adopted by more than 30 local authorities and NHS mental health trusts.

"We get an independent view of what is happening. It is like a fly on the wall but very discreet. It allows people to either prove they are not putting themselves at risk or to allow the family and services to reduce risks," says Jim Ellam, service manager for the well being of older people for the council's Cannock Chase district.

There are now three systems in constant use in the district with plans to purchase more. The headline version has been now been superseded by a mobile phone version which provides ongoing information, rather than a report every 12 hours as before.

"It is cost-effective as it helps us accurately identify and manage risk. This enables many residents to stay in their homes longer and enables care packages to be adjusted. It also helps to reassure and inform carers and relatives," says Mr Ellam.

4 USE GREEN TECHNOLOGY

Technology is often viewed as a means of reducing harm to the environment, for example by using emails rather than paper or teleconferencing instead of business travel to meetings. But the energy used up by running ICT systems can be vast.

Hillingdon LBC has created a greener ICT operation by removing existing servers and replacing them with more modern, more powerful machines.

"Before we had very little capacity but not enough cooling and current to run machines," explains Roger Bearpark, the council's assistant head of ICT.

"The first phase of the project enabled us to reduce KVA [kilovolt amp] requirements from 18,700 to 3,450 — reducing our output, and therefore the amount of power and heat we produce, to a sixth of what it was."

This has enabled the team to operate from one room instead of two and has reduced service costs by 35%. The time and cost of developing and delivering ICT requirements for departments has also been reduced.

"Where there is a finite amount of money, we can implement two systems whereas before we might have only been able to develop one," says Mr Bearpark.

There are now plans to replicate the model across the West London Alliance, the partnership of the six west London boroughs.

5 MAKE TOURISM INTERACTIVE

In the past, Belfast has struggled to attract tourists, although that is now changing and Belfast City Council is using technology to maximise the potential of tourism.

Its award-winning Belfast Titanic Trail is an example of this. Using the latest GPS-based technology in the form of a portable media player, visitors are led on a tour of the

city sites associated with the Titanic. The story is brought to life by a series of still images, video footage, dramatic reconstructions, text and audio clips.

The trail, which is the world's first interactive multi-media digital tourism trail, won the Best Mobile Technology Award at the 2007 BT Goldeneye Awards.

The Belfast Titanic Trail is envisaged as being the first of many such interactive tours which the council hopes to develop. There are also plans to develop the technology using devices such as MP3 players and 3G phones and to incorporate up-to-date tourist information, such as promoting forthcoming events at landmarks on the trail.

"History is a wonderful thing and tourism is a huge product. But the Titanic is not like the Empire State Building — it does not physically exist, so this is a way of bringing it to life," says Gerry Copeland, the council's events manager.

"Belfast is not seen as a primary tourist destination but this is a cutting-edge opportunity to promote ourselves as such and raise the city's profile."

The audio-visual company Awakin, which developed the technology, now uses the trail as a showcase for its products.

