



## Annual Reports don't have to be a headache

It's that time of year again, when pens are chewed, calculators are pounded and heads scratched as the deadline nears. June sees local authorities braving the annual report writing season, and among the documents that councils are producing for the public this autumn are reports about their civil parking enforcement activities.

Such annual reports are a relatively new innovation, arising from the 2004 Traffic Management Act (TMA). Since it came into force in 2008, there has been an expectation that local authorities would produce reports to help the public better understand civil parking enforcement in their neighbourhoods. Last month, there was public recognition of parking reports, with the announcement of the overall winner of the 2010 PATROL (Parking And Traffic Regulations Outside London) Annual Report Award.

While there is good work going on and some local authorities have excelled in this respect, for others it may be a stressful and confusing time knowing where to start in producing a report; what contents to include and how to write it. But the process needn't be a burden, and your report can help boost your reputation among local residents and businesses.

Annual reports can be a good way of explaining your policies and putting a caring face on the local authority. They are good for transparency, and, despite the way the press often reports these matters, can explain the nuances of how parking policy is enforced. It is often the case that Civil Enforcement Officers (CEOs) consider mitigating circumstances, and of course local authorities do listen to what local residents say – here's an opportunity to explain how.

Guidelines for what a good report should contain include those from Caroline Sheppard, Chief Adjudicator for England and Wales, the Department for Transport and British Parking Association (BPA). And while the BPA expressed concern at its Autumn Seminar about the seemingly low number of reports produced so far, it's not a particularly easy task to produce a well-written, authoritative document for public consumption. Especially if this is your first time drafting a report on behalf of your council.

Information provided in an annual report needs to be concise, accurate and relevant. The reader should not be left questioning ‘do I believe what is said?’ or asking ‘why?’ It’s important to be honest. If something relating to parking isn’t going well, then tell people. Explain your plans for future improvements. If a local authority has a negative image, this can help to turn it around.

Key tips for writing your report:

- Build on the previous year’s report, but don’t replicate it
- Use tables, graphs and pictures where it aids presentation of information
- Keep it short; ideally 12 pages, and certainly less than 20
- Keep it concise
- Keep it accurate and check the contents

In writing your report, remember that the public are your ultimate audience, although there will also be readers within the local authority and a more technical parking industry audience. The readability test is to give a draft to your partner. If he/she can understand it and doesn’t fall asleep in the process, then it’s good work.

Take advantage of any workshops or training available to help you. Your report should give a flavour of what is happening in the local parking environment, not be a committee report. And if jargon must be used, put a glossary of terms within the report.

Several styles of report can be used; a good example is the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Given that they manage one of the country’s bigger parking operations, they produce a good, pithy report. The borough copes with the demands of wealthy, highly articulate and vocal residents, and produces a concise report. So can others.

Meanwhile, examples of others that read less well include:



- Several reports contained ‘top ten contraventions’ by location but these were without commentary on why they occur and what action is being taken to reduce them
- One council reported its KPI (Key Performance Indicator) target of 95 per cent of street visits - then added that the enforcement contractor had achieved 115 per cent of street visits, without any explanation
- Another stated that abuse of CEOs had reduced, but no reason was given. A lost good news opportunity by poor or incomplete presentation of facts.

A good report provides a powerful tool to build public trust. Local authorities that publish relevant, credible information and are transparent in this way generally receive less negative press and the ethos is generally reflected in overall efficiencies.

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