

Fly-tipping during a pandemic

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The problem

Fly-tipping is a form of antisocial behaviour, where waste material is dumped illegally. Waste can be expensive to clear, damages the environment, offends citizens, and in some cases poses risks for those tasked with clearing it up.

What we know about fly-tipping and how we know it

The Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) publishes data on aggregate national and local fly-tipping rates for England on an annual basis.

In 2018-2019, the latest year for which figures have been published, there were in total over a million (1,072,431) incidents. London accounted for a third of the incidents.

Defra's figures are provided by local authorities, via a system called WasteDataFlow. Numbers are given for location (including highway, footpath/bridleway, back alley, railway, council land, agriculture, private residence, commercial/industrial, watercourse, other); types of item dumped (animal carcass, green, vehicle parts, white goods, other electrical, tyres, asbestos, clinical, construction/demolition, commercial black bags, household black bags, chemicals, other household, other commercial, other); and approximate volume of goods dumped (single black bag, single item, car boot, small van, transit van, tipper lorry, multi-loads).

What we think might happen in the covid-19 pandemic

Most local authority household waste recycling centres were closed by 23 March 2020. Increases in domestic fly-tipping are to be expected as a consequence of a) the removal of the normal legal place to dispose of waste material, b) the time of year, when garden waste increases, c) the time those confined to home have to sort out unwanted goods they no longer want and to engage in waste-producing DiY, and d) reduced natural guardianship with fewer people using the roads or walking in public places providing natural guardianship over potential dump sites.

By April 5th newspaper headlines were reporting an unconfirmed 300% increase in fly-tipping. This may be an exaggeration and also mask variations in forms of change. Reduced building-works and commercial activity may have led to decreases in some forms of fly-tipping (notably larger-scale, commercial) alongside increases in other types (notably smaller-scale, domestic).

Some ideas in response

The clear-up rate for fly-tipping is low. Defra figures show that in comparison with the 1,072,431 incidents in 2018-2019, 46,744 warning letters were issued, 19,608 statutory notices, and 76,016 fixed penalty notices were issued, and 2,397 prosecutions were brought (of which 101 were lost). Twenty-six custodial sentences were passed. Fines totalled £1,092,267.

Although pursuing prosecutions is clearly important in highlighting the criminal nature of fly-tipping it is equally clear that more than prosecution is needed to try to prevent it.

The first part of a strategy is to look in detail at the emerging trends, and to adapt the strategy to revealed changes in patterns of fly-tipping.

If the increase is mainly in small-scale domestic waste, as anticipated here, one strategy could be to ask refuse collectors to post notices in the households from which they collect refuse reminding them of the fact that household waste recycling centres are shut temporarily, that fly-tipping is illegal, and that it is harmful. They could also note that the recycling centres will be reopened as soon as possible, and that this will be advertised in local newspapers. In the language of situational crime prevention, this provides a *rule-reminder* and facilitates compliance. It might also help avert provocation, which is liable to occur if a householder goes to a recycling centre intending to dispose of waste legally, only to find it unexpectedly closed.

Other potential situational measures to reduce fly-tipping include the following:

Increase risks of fly-tipping

- Use CCTV at fly-tipping hot spots
- Add signage at fly-tipping hotspots
- Increase natural surveillance at hot spots (e.g. cutting down foliage)
- Publicise risks and conviction successes
- Increase uncertainty over risks by random crackdowns at hotspots

Reduce rewards of fly-tipping

- Promise temporary reduction in costs of legal disposal, when legitimate means of disposal re-emerge
- Promise temporary no/low cost of collection of bulk items once lockdown is lifted

Reduce provocations of fly-tipping

- Lengthen opening times of waste disposal recycling centres when they re-open

Reduce effort of legal disposal of waste

- Open legal disposal sites as soon as possible following lockdown and, where possible in the meantime provide temporary legitimate sites for waste storage.

Relevant resources:

Webb, B., Marshall, B., Czarnomski, S. and Tilley, N. (2006a): *Fly-Tipping: Causes, Incentives, and Solutions*. London: DEFRA and JDI.

Webb et al (2006b) *Fly-tipping: Causes, Incentives, and Solutions: A Good Practice Guide for Local Authorities*. London: DEFRA and JDI.

This is one of a series of short, speculative papers developed by the UCL Jill Dando Institute during the current pandemic. It is edited by Nick Tilley and Gloria Laycock and published by University College London. The raison d'être of the series is fully described at: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/research/covid-19-special-papers>