

COVID-19 AND WASTE MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

This information document was produced in late March 2020. Subsequent HM Government advice may change. You should first always follow the latest HM Government advice (<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>). HM Government activity on COVID-19 is being led by the Department of Health and Social Care and PHE in conjunction with the devolved administrations.

Please note that it is not the intent of this information sheet to provide a comprehensive 'one-stop-shop' for advice on COVID-19. The emphasis here is on waste management specific issues, with some general advice. You should also read and understand the freely available HM Government advice (such as at the above web address and as given in section 6) and use this in conjunction with this document. Please see section 6 for other information and links.

This is a 'live' document and may be updated and revised as further information is released and as the issue develops. If you have a comment on this document please send it to info@wishforum.org.uk.

Tip – advice, guidance and resources on COVID-19 are available from various sources, including graphics on how to wash your hands, symptoms and similar. These are generally free to download and use. Use this type of resource as posters, hand-outs for employees and similar to reinforce issues such as good hygiene.

CONTENTS

1. COVID-19 and why it may be a problem for waste management
2. Symptoms and what to do if an employee shows the symptoms
3. Controlling the spread of COVID-19 – general precautions
4. Contingency planning and maintaining standards
5. Specific advice
 - Vehicles and collections operations
 - Landfills, MBT and transfer stations
 - MRFs and recycling plants
 - CA/HWRC sites
 - Welfare facilities on sites
 - Weighbridges
 - Customer/client issues
 - Statutory equipment inspections
6. Other information sources and links
7. Disclaimer and WISH

Note – most sections in this information document comprise two parts: a description of the problem and information on what to do, followed by manager advice - this is advice only and does not replace your statutory duties.

1. COVID-19 and waste management

We have an unprecedented situation which requires swift guidance to the waste management industry as a key service during the current pandemic. This WISH information note is intended to provide basic advice on waste management operations, information on what to do if an employee/s develops symptoms, advice on contingency planning and similar. The below is based on the advice and information available at the time of preparation and may be updated. Please check the issue date on the bottom of pages against the copy held on the WISH website (<https://wishforum.org.uk/>) to ensure that you have the most up to date version.

What is COVID-19 and why is it a problem?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that can cause illness such as respiratory tract infections ranging from mild (a common cold) to severe (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS)).

A novel coronavirus is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans. The strain which is responsible for the development of COVID-19 originated in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China and is 'zoonotic' in origin, e.g. from animals and is known as SARS-CoV-2. The virus is a problematic pathogen due to how easily it is apparently spread from human to human, currently it is thought one person may infect up to three others, even when asymptomatic (i.e. not showing any symptoms).

Why COVID-19 may be a problem for the waste industry?

To limit the spread of the disease it is important that individuals self-isolate if they, or their family, have symptoms, or if they are immunocompromised or similar. This could result in significant absence from work and large organisations should prepare for up to 20% of their workforce being unable to work, although this may not be all at the same time. Smaller organisations should prepare for 30% absence as staff may be affected disproportionately. Larger organisations should be aware that they may have several smaller sites which could also be disproportionately affected.

As the spread of the disease is national and, at the time of writing, exponential, there could be significant disruption to normal operation. It is recommended that managers consider and plan the contingency actions that they may need to take if **15–30%** of their employees were to be unavailable to work with COVID-19.

2. Symptoms and what to do if an employee shows the symptoms

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

Although we do not yet have the full information on the potential outcomes in all individuals to the virus, it has been identified as having the potential to severely impact the health of humans causing symptoms such as fever, dry cough, difficulty breathing, headache, pneumonia with the potential to progress to more critical illness. It may also cause gastrointestinal symptoms. These symptoms may be more severe than is usually the case for normal flu.

What to do if an employee shows the symptoms of COVID-19

Please also first see HM Government and NHS advice on this aspect at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19/guidance-for-employers-and-businesses-on-coronavirus-covid-19#what-to-do-if-someone-develops-symptoms-of-coronavirus-covid-19-on-site> and at <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/symptoms-and-what-to-do/>.

Current Public Health England advice is that:

If anyone becomes unwell with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature in the business or workplace they should be sent home and advised to follow the stay at home guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance>).

If a member of staff has helped someone who was taken unwell with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature, they do not need to go home unless they develop symptoms themselves. They should wash their hands thoroughly for 20 seconds after any contact with someone who is unwell with symptoms consistent with coronavirus infection.

From the above, if a person has only been in indirect/potential contact with someone who has or is under investigation of having COVID-19, and is not showing any symptoms, there is no reason for them to stop work and go home. Likewise, even if an employee has been confirmed or is under investigation of having COVID-19 there is no need to send the whole of the rest of the workforce home, although thorough cleaning of the area they work in (office/cab/rest room etc) is recommended (using soap and water or alcohol based wipes).

Waste Industry Safety and Health Forum

For example, if a household collections operative has been confirmed as having or is being investigated for COVID-19 then the collections crew they work directly with should be sent home, but not all other collection crews based at the same site (unless they are also displaying the symptoms).

Workers recovering from symptoms are also required to stay away for 7 days from the commencement of the symptoms.

Managers need to be aware of any vulnerable persons in their employ such as pregnant women and carers of people who are identified as high risk. Such persons may require additional protection or isolation beyond those listed above (see below).

Manager advice: Should an employee show the symptoms of COVID-19:

- Instruct them to leave work immediately and follow HM Government advice, even if they feel well enough to continue to work
- Instruct them to stay at home to recover and follow HM Government advice, which is currently to self-isolate unless symptoms become worse, in which case they should follow NHS advice via <https://111.nhs.uk/covid-19>
- Advise them to minimise contact with other people and not return to work until free of fever, feeling well enough **AND** a minimum of 7 days have elapsed since the first onset of symptoms (see also HM Government advice on this – may need to be longer)
- Instruct them to contact their workplace should they be confirmed as having COVID-19 (provided they are well enough to make such contact)
- Instruct them to contact their workplace after the 7 days (as above) have elapsed and when they are well enough to return to the workplace

Returning employees

Employees who have recovered from COVID-19 are likely to have acquired immunity to the disease in its current form. As such they can provide a valuable resource should other employees be absent from work.

Manager advice: Managers should keep a tally of employees who have been absent with COVID-19 to allow them to use such as replacement labour (within constraints such as drivers' hours). Area/senior managers should be informed of such returnees as should human resources/personnel teams to enable cover to be provided between sites.

3. Controlling the spread of COVID-19 – general precautions

Controlling the spread of COVID-19

COVID-19 is transmitted by inhalation or ingestion in the same way that normal seasonal flu is transmitted. Normal seasonal flu is spread by three main routes. It is likely that COVID-19 is spread similarly:

- **Contact:** By hand to face/mouth/nose/eye contact after touching a person, surface, or object contaminated with respiratory droplets
- **Droplet:** By coughing and sneezing and aerosol droplets being inhaled etc
- **Airborne:** Fine droplets may stay in the air longer and spread the infection without close contact

This means the main ways it is transmitted is because a person has it on their hands and the pathogen is ingested, absorbed via mucous membranes or they inhale aerosol droplets emitted by an infected person.

General precautions

The **MOST** important control for preventing the spread of any flu is good hygiene. This cannot be over-emphasised – there has been much debate in the media and elsewhere on the use of face masks and similar, but the most important way of preventing spread is good hygiene.

Remember, preventing the spread of germs is the single most effective way to slow the spread of diseases such as COVID-19. You should always:

- Use tissues to cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze (**CATCH IT**)
- Place used tissues in a bin as soon as possible (**BIN IT**)
- Ensure everyone washes their hands regularly with soap and water (**KILL IT**)
- Clean surfaces regularly to get rid of germs (**KILL IT**)

For the above to be effective, employees need to have tissues available either provided by themselves or by their employer and, if they are not site based, bags to dispose of used tissues into.

Waste Industry Safety and Health Forum

In addition to the above, the use of 'Social Distancing' is also included in HM Government advice. This means keeping at least 2 metres (>6 feet) away from other people. This may pose issues for waste management activities – see specific advice given below. Please note that social distancing assumes no respiratory protection is in use.

Cleaning procedures etc

Cleaning procedures should be of a high order on any waste site for basic hygiene reasons.

HM Government advice on this is available at

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/876221/COVID19_Guidance_Cleaning.pdf and at

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>. Managers should reinforce cleaning arrangements and consider the below:

- Ordinary cleaning will kill any virus, e.g. soap and water, alcohol sprays, normal cleaning agents or disinfectant
- Damp dusting should replace any dry dusting
- Telephones and computer equipment should also be cleaned with wipes or by other means by following HM Government guidance
- If an employee has gone off sick with COVID-19, their workstation, including telephone and keyboard, vehicle cab etc should be cleaned using normal cleaning materials and methods
- Cleaning of crockery and utensils can be conducted using hot water and detergents

Handling wastes – can I catch it this way?

Some of the latest research indicates the virus could survive on cardboard for 24 hours, and metal/plastics for up to 72 hours. It is important to note this work exposed these surfaces to high concentrations in a laboratory environment and is therefore likely to be the 'worst case' scenario. It is good practice to ensure a high standard of hygiene when handling waste materials, as should always be the case in waste management activities. The virus survives on the skin for more than enough time to allow hand to mouth/nose/eyes transmission.

There may be discarded materials from individuals who are themselves infected with COVID-19. The public are being educated to:

- Double bag any discarded tissues
- Leave for 72 hours before placing them in the main residual waste bin

Waste Industry Safety and Health Forum

Where waste has already been designated as “clinical waste”, clinical waste procedures should already be in place that consider the potential for it to be infectious. Those procedures can be followed as normal.

Manager advice: Manager must enforce normal controls aimed at the hazards which may be posed by contact with wastes, whether for COVID-19 or other hazards, including:

PPE use – glove use in particular **MUST** be enforced (with nitrile gloves underneath if possible). Also see advice on glove use at <https://www.hse.gov.uk/skin/employ/gloves.htm>.

- Good hygiene practices should be enforced, and employees reminded of these at frequent intervals (see above)

Face masks

COVID-19 is mainly passed on by person-to-person spread between people who are in close contact with one another and by droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also spread through contact with a surface or object that has the virus on it.

One item of PPE which seems to have been the subject of some publicity is the use of face masks, such as surgical type masks. The need for PPE, specifically RPE (respiratory protection) to protect workers from coronavirus must be based on risk assessment. For example, current guidance states that healthcare workers undertaking high risk aerosol generating procedures on COVID-19 patients are required to wear FFP3 respirators, whereas those looking after patients with COVID-19 wear fluid repellent surgical masks. Waste industry workers are unlikely to encounter the same level of risk as those workers caring for COVID-19 patients. However, where an employee in the waste and recycling sector would usually be expected to wear respiratory protection as part of their normal job then they should continue to do so.

On the topic of face masks, Public Health England currently states: *We do not recommend the use of facemasks as an effective means of preventing the spread of infection. Face masks play an important role in clinical settings, such as hospitals, but there’s very little evidence of benefit from their use outside of these settings.*

Vulnerable persons

As with all flu persons with pre-existing conditions, or other individual factors, may be more prone to suffering more serious effects. Such potentially vulnerable persons may include:

- Serious heart problem such as heart failure
- Serious asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or long-term kidney or liver disease
- Insulin controlled diabetes
- Weakened immune system: Illnesses such as HIV/AIDS or treatment such as chemotherapy
- Pregnancy

Manager advice: Current HM Government advice is that vulnerable persons should self-isolate (stay at home and not come into work). Should an employee be suspected of or confirmed with COVID-19 managers should assess whether they employ any potentially vulnerable persons. Please note that some companies may wish to exercise a precautionary approach and send vulnerable persons home in any case.

If a vulnerable person continues to work, in the event of the discovery of an employee with confirmed or suspected COVID-19, an assessment should be made of the potential for the vulnerable person to have come into contact with the affected suspect and/or potentially to have to work in an area where the suspect has worked. Based on the outcome of that assessment it may be necessary to send them home.

4. Contingency planning and maintaining standards

Organisations should plan for between 15% and 30% of their employees being off work ill with COVID-19. This is not likely to be at any one time and overall absence in any week may be lower. During the current pandemic managers should consider how they may need to deal with the above levels of absence (see also the specific advice by operational type below). For all operational types, including offices etc:

- Identify employees who can work from home
- Use videoconferencing, conference calls etc. as an alternative to meetings
- Determine and manage potentially vulnerable employees as above

Waste Industry Safety and Health Forum

- Arrange shift hand-over so that they do not need to occur face-to-face
- Consider which are critical customers – what work can be ‘turned-off’ with the least effect and what needs to continue

Critical competencies and environmental and safety standards

Waste operations require minimum standards of safety and competency. Any measures taken in regard to COVID-19 should not compromise these.

- Health and safety requirements, such as plant operator licences, permits to work, machinery lock off and isolation etc. **MUST NOT** be compromised: COVID-19 is not an excuse to reduce safety or training requirements. For example, reducing crew size in collections to the point that safe reversing procedures cannot be followed
- Environmental permit/licence and other legal requirements must be maintained as much as possible even during any widespread COVID-19 outbreak

5. Specific advice

Vehicles and collections operations

Obeying the 2-metre rule of Social Distancing is difficult or impossible for personnel who must work together in the cabs of waste collection vehicles. However, as a key service it is important waste collection operations continue, and if procedures are followed ensuring workers with suspected symptoms are sent home immediately, the risk should be low.

Consideration should be given to reducing the number of persons who must share cab space where this is practicable. For example, in some cases it may be possible to reduce crew numbers (provided safety standards are maintained). In some urban environments it might also be possible for crews to travel independently to a particular area or estate and work as a group to fill RCVs that are sent with individual drivers and which go off to tip sequentially as they are filled and return. It is recognised however that there will be many cases where such alternative collection methodologies cannot be used. Where this is the case the primary control method for the risk of infection is maintain high standards of hygiene.

Whatever method of transporting employees to collection points, and collection, is used organisations should take suitable and sufficient measures to ensure that employees have access to a sufficient supply of soap and water, alcohol based sprays or wipes and other materials for them to be able to maintain a high standard of hygiene.

Waste Industry Safety and Health Forum

Where possible maintain consistent crew rosters (same crew members in each team every day) and minimise close interactions between crews. It is recognised that employee absence and crew competency requirements may limit the extent to which this is possible.

Cabs should have available alcohol or soap-based cleansing spray and/or wipes available for all surfaces which should be cleaned periodically throughout the day and especially at the end of each shift. Door-handles, hand holds/rails, dashboards, steering wheels, hand-brake levers, gearbox controls and indicator stalks etc should be paid particular attention to. Where a vehicle may have contained a confirmed case then the vehicle should be parked up for a minimum of 72 hours before being cleaned down. See advice at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>

Collections operations may result in contact between collection operatives/drivers and members of the public/customer employees. In these cases, social distancing should be followed (keep at least 2 metres/>6 feet away from other persons). Should this prove impossible, such as a member of the public not being willing to 'stand away from their bin' the waste should not be collected.

Transfer stations, MBT and landfills

In addition to the above general measures:

- Issue of instructions to site employees aimed at reducing the risk of transmission from those third parties using sites. Minimise face to face contact – keep mobile plant windows closed, and if you must speak directly maintain at least 2m separation etc.
- Thorough cleaning of vehicle/plant cabs between shifts

MRFs and recycling plants

In addition to the above general measures:

- Issue of instructions to site employees aimed at reducing the risk of transmission from those third parties using sites. Minimise face to face contact – keep mobile plant windows closed, and if you must speak directly maintain at least 2m separation etc
- Picking cabins may be an issue because of their enclosed nature and proximity of pickers to each other – consider rearrangement of the work to allow every other waste chute to be used to maintain adequate Social Distancing of 2 metres

Waste Industry Safety and Health Forum

- Access and egress from picking cabins may also need to be considered, such as operatives entering and leaving a cabin one-by-one to avoid the need for people to pass near each other (save for in emergency situations such as a fire where the normal rules will still apply)

CA/HWRC sites

As CA/HWRC sites are places where members of the public may meet in numbers local authorities can be encouraged to consider closing the sites until Social Distancing is relaxed. If there is necessity and it is essential for CA/HWRC sites remain open, then in addition to the above general measures:

- Issue instructions to site employees aimed at reducing the risk of transmission from those third parties using sites. Minimise face to face contact – keep mobile plant windows closed, and if you must speak directly maintain at least 2m separation etc
- Issue instructions to cease assisting members of the public with wastes, keep Social Distance from members of the public to reduce the risk of transmission (note – most CA/HWRC sites are contracted to local authorities and contact should be made with the authority as regards such measures)

Welfare facilities and offices on sites

To reduce the opportunity for person to person transmission and maintain Social Distancing consideration should be given to staggering rest breaks. For example, people number could be limited. For example, in a small room, no more than 3 persons at any one time, a large room, no more than 6 at any one time. Where capacity is reached the facility should operate a “one in, one out” situation. Staff and supervisors should be given responsibility to police and control this.

A regime should be put in place to ensure that rest areas are thorough wiped down and cleansed after rest breaks and other uses (for example morning brief and afternoon debrief sessions).

All surfaces, crockery, cutlery etc. should be thoroughly washed after use, and as with vehicles, door handles, hand holds / rails etc. to be cleaned periodically throughout the day. Hand washing to be promoted and actively encouraged, and provision of wipes, sanitisers, soap to be made. **HOT** running water is essential. It might be required to issue guidance on diluting bleach to use also as gel supplies become low.

Waste Industry Safety and Health Forum

Employers who have people in their offices or onsite should ensure that employees are able to follow Public Health England guidelines including, where possible, maintaining a 2 metre distance from others, and washing their hands with soap and water often for at least 20 seconds (or using hand sanitiser gel if soap and water is not available).

Smoking areas – where possible, these should be extended or secondary areas made, and instruction to maintain 2m separation during smoke breaks issued. Consideration should be given to providing a secure and sanitary disposal container for smoking residues (fag butts, packs, wrappers and similar from vape and e-cigarettes).

Weighbridges

In addition to the general precautions listed above:

- Where practical weighbridge windows to be kept closed (you may want to consider installing transparent shields, as is being introduced at some supermarket check-outs)
- If paperwork needs to be exchanged, latex or similar gloves to be used, along with frequent washing of hands by weighbridge staff
- Frequent cleaning and disinfecting of items such as digital signature pads

Customer/client issues

It must be assumed that customers will also be as affected. For commercial and industrial customers, many of these may have already closed. Contact your customers – do they still need their waste collecting, or could they have their waste collected less frequently? Taking this action could free-up resource to maintain services to essential clients and customers.

Statutory equipment inspections

Concerns relating to the examination of equipment, such as under the Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations (LOLER) have been raised. At the current time, the HSE (Health and Safety Executive) has not issued any exemptions or relaxation of these requirements. Inspections of equipment should continue to be done, and can be done safely, following Public Health England guidance:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19/guidance-for-employers-and-businesses-on-coronavirus-covid-19>.

Waste Industry Safety and Health Forum

Engineers who are working on sites where there are restrictions arising from the risk of COVID-19 infection should comply with site rules and Public Health England advice regarding good hygiene practices and separation distances. Consideration needs to be given to protecting the engineers but also, where relevant, any vulnerable persons who may be affected by their work.

6. Other information sources and links

There are various information sources, most of which are being continuously updated. Links for information are:

- ✓ <https://111.nhs.uk/covid-19>
- ✓ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>
- ✓ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-employers-and-businesses-about-covid-19/guidance-for-employers-and-businesses-on-coronavirus-covid-19>
- ✓ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>
- ✓ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/factsheet-health-professionals-coronaviruses>

Disclaimer and WISH

This information document has been prepared by health and safety practitioners to assist health and safety improvements in the waste management industry. It is endorsed by the WISH (Waste Industry Safety and Health) Forum. This information document is not formal guidance and represents good practice, which typically may go beyond the strict requirements of health and safety law.

Nothing in this information document constitutes legal or other professional advice and no warranty is given nor liability accepted (to the fullest extent permitted under law) for any loss or damage suffered or incurred as a consequence of reliance on this document. WISH accepts no liability (to the fullest extent permitted under law) for any act or omission of any persons using this document.

This information document is not a substitute for duty holder and/or professional safety advisor's judgment. Notwithstanding the good practice in this document, duty holders are responsible for ascertaining the sufficiency and adequacy of their internal and independent procedures for verifying and evaluating their organisation's compliance with safety law.

The Waste Industry Safety and Health (WISH) Forum exists to communicate and consult with key stakeholders, including local and national government bodies, equipment manufacturers, trade associations, professional associations and trade unions. The aim of WISH is to identify, devise and promote activities to improve industry health and safety performance.