

Waste management in the context of the coronavirus crisis

14 April 2020



In this unprecedented crisis, we are working with the Member States and waste operators across the EU to address the challenge of ensuring a high level of protection of human health and the environment. Proper waste management is part of the essential services underpinning the well-being of our citizens delivered by numerous companies dealing with waste and keeping the circular economy going.

Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius

The coronavirus crisis has put the resilience of our society to the test. This health emergency exerts unprecedented pressure on many economic activities, including those that are indispensable to our well-being. Protecting lives and livelihoods is at the core of all actions and decisions to address the crisis at both individual and collective levels.

Proper waste management is part of the essential services to our society. Each person produces nearly half a tonne of municipal waste per year in the EU on average, which means that every week more than 20 kg of municipal waste is generated per household. Total annual waste generation in the EU amounts to 5 tonnes per capita. Preventing distortions in waste management, including separate collection and recycling of waste, is crucial for the health and safety of our citizens, for the environment and for the economy.

Member States and waste operators across the EU are making sustained efforts to ensure the continuity of waste management activities, including separate collection and recycling, which are essential to the circular economy. These efforts often involve preventing or reducing disruptions due to shortage of staff, ensuring enhanced health and safety at work, providing for safe handling of household waste produced by citizens that have fallen ill with the coronavirus, dealing with increasing quantities of medical waste or securing the smooth movement of waste from collection to recycling or other treatment.

EU law on waste recognises that protection of human health is essential in the context of waste management and that there are certain flexibilities to respond to identified risks to human health. While

it is the responsibility of the Member States to implement the EU law in the area of waste by taking the most appropriate measures to achieve its objectives, there is clear added value in working together across the EU to address the challenges that national, regional and local authorities and waste operators face.

This document provides guidance with a view to ensuring a high level of protection of human health and the environment, while preventing and reducing disruptions in the provision of proper waste management services. It is based on consultation of Member States experts on waste and key stakeholders in the area of waste management and advice of the European Centre for Diseases prevention and Control (ECDC), and will be updated as appropriate. The Commission services have issued separate advice on waste shipments in the context of the coronavirus outbreak.¹

1. Management of municipal waste

According to the European Centre for Diseases Prevention and Control (ECDC), there is currently no evidence to infer that standard waste management procedures are unsafe or insufficient in terms of the risk for COVID-19 infection or that household waste plays a role in the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 or other respiratory viruses. Concerning protection from exposure to the coronavirus at the workplace, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work has issued guidance on this matter (see section 3).

In view of the importance of proper waste management to human health and the environment and taking into account risk assessments performed by scientific bodies and applicable risk management measures, the overall continuity of proper municipal waste management services, including separate collection and recycling, is to be safeguarded in line with EU law. Preventing disruptions of separate waste collection is important for ensuring that the infrastructure for residual waste collection and treatment is not overburdened, potentially creating additional health risks, that the effort sharing in waste collection is respected and the taxpayers do not bear disproportionate share of the costs of waste management, and that citizens can keep their environmentally friendly habits. Separate collection is also essential for safeguarding the trajectory towards a more circular economy and the jobs and businesses that depend on secondary raw materials supply.

In view of Article 13 of Directive 2008/98/EC on waste², waste collection practices can be adapted in the context of the coronavirus crisis with the objective of protecting public health. Any such changes should comply with the EU law on waste, be necessary and proportionate to protect human health in particular by limiting them to areas and time periods strictly necessary to respond to the risk identified based on latest scientific advice, and strive to maintain the overall objective of separate collection and recycling in line with the waste hierarchy.

ECDC recognises the need for specific measures as regards infection prevention and control for suspected or confirmed coronavirus cases self-isolating at home³, notably that patients should have a waste bag in their room for used tissues, face masks and other waste, which should be disposed of in the residual waste.

1. https://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/shipments/pdf/waste_shipment_and_COVID19.pdf

2. OJ L 312, 22.11.2008, p. 3

3. ECDC technical report "Infection prevention and control in the household management of people with suspected or confirmed coronavirus disease (COVID-19)", 30 March 2020
<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/infection-prevention-control-household-management-covid-19>

The guidance also comprises a specific section on management of household waste in such cases:

- An individual waste bag should be placed in the patient's room.
- Paper tissues and face masks used by the patient should be immediately put in the waste bag that was placed in the patient's room.
- Gloves and face masks used by the caretaker and by the cleaner should be immediately put in a second waste bag, placed near the door to the patient's room, when the caretaker or cleaner leave.
- The waste bags should be closed before they are removed from the patient's room and replaced frequently; they should never be emptied in another bag.
- These waste bags can be collected together and placed in a clean general garbage bag; the closed patient waste bags can be put directly in the unsorted garbage. No special collection activity or other disposal method is necessary.
- After handling waste bags, strict hand hygiene should be performed: use water and soap or alcohol-based hand disinfectants.

Source: ECDC technical report "Infection prevention and control in the household management of people with suspected or confirmed coronavirus disease (COVID-19), 30 March 2020

In case staff shortages result in reduced service, Member States should ensure continuity and sufficient frequency of collection of residual waste and bio-waste in order to prevent any immediate risks to public safety and health. Based on the assessment of such risks, the frequency of the collection of dry recyclables could be adjusted temporarily, but not stopped.

Certain waste items the collection points of which have been temporarily closed can be delivered upon the reopening of those collection points, in particular as regards waste electric and electronic equipment (WEEE), batteries or bulky waste.

In the context of the coronavirus crisis, it is even more important that citizens separate well their waste and ensure the flow of clean streams of recyclables towards the waste treatment facilities. Citizens should be informed about any temporary changes to the waste collection practices that affect the way they deliver waste for collection and further treatment. Where necessary, citizens should be reminded of the requirement not to discard WEEE, batteries or household chemicals in residual waste.

Member States should ensure proper planning of temporary storage capacities for waste collected for recovery in anticipation of any disruptions in sorting and other treatment processes.

2. Management of waste from healthcare facilities

Waste from healthcare services, laboratories and related activities associated with coronavirus patients should be handled and treated according to the EU law on waste (and in particular Directive 2008/98/EC on waste and articles 17, 23, 24 and 25 thereof concerning hazardous waste and permitting requirements) and national provisions applying to this category of infectious waste, while taking into account the most updated guidance provided by the ECDC⁴ and national health authorities.

Furthermore, specific ECDC guidance⁵ applies to waste from cleaning environments in healthcare and non-healthcare settings potentially contaminated with the coronavirus, whereby waste from cleaning healthcare facilities should be treated as infectious clinical waste category B (UN3291), waste from non-healthcare settings should be disposed of in a separate bag, and waste from general settings should be disposed of in the residual waste.

4. <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/infection-prevention-and-control-and-preparedness-covid-19-healthcare-settings>

5. <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/disinfection-environments-covid-19>

Member States should ensure proper planning of capacities for treatment and, where necessary, storage of medical waste. In case of treatment disruptions due to lack of dedicated disposal or incineration capacity for medical waste, it is paramount that waste is safely stored temporarily until the capacity issue is solved. Storage should consider the use of sealed containers in secured areas where access is limited only to authorised personnel. The inner and outer surfaces of the containers should be treated with a suitable disinfectant. The containers should be stored locally. Additional capacity for the treatment of medical waste to deal with its infectious properties may be required.

If Member States decide to exceptionally authorise alternative treatment processes of medical waste in line with EU law and applicable national rules, including in state of emergency conditions, they should ensure that where such processes have less beneficial overall environmental outcome than the normal practice, their use is limited in time and strictly necessary to address identified storage and treatment capacity shortages. The appropriate precaution as regards health and safety measures at the workplace should be applied.

The Commission will request further information from Member States and stakeholders on the current situation and the planning as regards the collection, storage, treatment and possible shipments of medical waste in the context of the current crisis. Further questions and information can be sent to the contact in section 5.

3. Health and safety of waste management operators

Taking measures to protect the health and safety of workers and providing them assurance about how employers are addressing the risks related to the coronavirus crisis are essential for increasing workers' confidence and ensuring continuity of waste management services. The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work has provided general guidance how to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus at the workplace.⁶

Good practices communicated by stakeholders in the waste management sector include:

- Adapting the organisation of staff to avoid passing on infection among teams, i.e. respecting distancing between individuals, reducing to the minimum the number of workers present in the same area;
- Ensuring the availability and appropriate use of adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) as well as of suitable disinfecting products;
- Ensuring strict adherence to enhanced hygiene standards, including frequent change and cleaning of PPE and professional clothing; replacing professional gloves in the event of breakage or any incident of potential contamination; sanitizing regularly facilities, vehicle cabins and clothes;
- Ensuring that where masks are usually worn, strict protocols on how to put and take off PPE are followed, thus avoiding incidental contact and contamination;
- Where appropriate, encouraging specific working conditions for vulnerable people, such as elderly workers and persons with specific chronic health problems.

6. <https://osha.europa.eu/en/highlights/covid-19-guidance-workplace>

4. Support from EU funds and state aid

For the 2014-2020 period, Member States have allocated €4.9 billion of cohesion policy funding to waste management. This includes support to waste prevention and awareness-raising, separate collection systems (incl. equipment and vehicles), treatment infrastructure, administrative capacity-building and other investments linked to local priorities⁷. By the end of 2019, 31% of this amount has not yet been allocated to specific projects. Managing authorities in regions and Member States can give more information about existing funding opportunities. Funds may be available also under other priorities, such as disaster risk management or healthcare.

In response to the current crisis, the Commission has adopted the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative⁸. As part of this initiative, cohesion policy funds will be mobilised to provide immediate liquidity to Member States' budgets. In addition, maximum flexibility will be used to make coronavirus crisis related expenditure, including healthcare costs, eligible under cohesion policy funds. This also means providing greater flexibility for countries to reallocate financial resources, making sure the money is spent in the areas of greatest need. This could provide the possibility for Member States to address specific challenges related to proper waste management in the context of the coronavirus crisis, such as ensuring greater automation of waste recovery, enhancing health and safety at the workplace, managing medical waste, etc.

The Commission also proposed to include public health crises in the emergencies covered by the EU Solidarity Fund. The goal of the new measures is to make sure that the hardest hit areas can have access to additional support of up to €800 million.

In addition, under EU rules on state aid, support in the form of direct grants or tax advantages can be granted by Member States (national funding) to undertakings in all sectors, thus including waste management, that find themselves facing a sudden shortage or unavailability of liquidity. To address the current crisis, on 19 March 2020 the Commission adopted a new temporary State Aid Framework, under which Member States can grant different forms of aid including grants of up to €800 000, public guarantees for loans or measures to enable loans with subsidised interest rates. Member States can use all of these possibilities to ensure that economic operators that are involved in waste management have access to the necessary funding to cope with the coronavirus crisis.

5. Exchange of information and awareness raising

The Commission will continuously monitor the situation with the Member States and waste operators and invites them to communicate measures taken in response to the coronavirus crisis in the area of waste management to ENV-WASTE-COVID-19@ec.europa.eu.

The Commission draws the attention to a useful overview of the current practices across the EU published and updated by the Association of Cities and Regions for Sustainable Resource Management⁹ and encourages stakeholders to also contribute to its completion and updating.

7. <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/stories/s/xqec-t5kv>

8. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/newsroom/crri/fs_crii_0204_en.pdf

9. <https://www.acrplus.org/en/municipal-waste-management-covid-19>