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Waste crime: the multi-million pound swindle

Christine Cole

4 July 2017

In Britain and other developed countries, disposing of unwanted things is taken for granted. There is (lots of) legislation in place to ensure waste is collected, transported and treated safely without having an impact on either health or the environment. But waste management is a costly business, increasingly seen by organised criminals and opportunists alike as an easy way to make quick money.

Two recent instances of waste crime, in my local area, show how this can happen. In the first, a deserted factory, used for the illegal storage of 5,000 tonnes of partially treated waste [was deliberately set alight](#) using an accelerant. It contained combustible materials, such as plastics and decomposing food, making it particularly fire prone. The police investigation looking for the source of the waste, as well as the reason it was set alight, is ongoing.

Illegal waste dumps such as this are becoming an [increasing problem](#), both in open countryside and hidden in rented buildings due to the potential income available from these crimes. Estimates from waste industry experts put illegal profits from this one operation somewhere between £400,000 to £500,000 for the cost of just two weeks rental on the building.

This kind of thing appears to be a victimless crime, [but it isn't](#). The building owner in the case of the illegal storage fire (who appears not to have been involved) faces losses. And we are all victims: burning this illegally stored waste has polluting impacts on both local air quality and local watercourses. The incineration of waste is one of [the most highly regulated](#) waste management processes, and rightly so.

Fire services managed to control the fire, so estimate that only 10-15% of the waste present was burnt. This leaves the problem of moving what remains to proper treatment facilities – who pays for this? Or the cost of the 65 fire service personnel it took to control the fire?

In the second incident, [a large quantity of asbestos was dumped](#). Asbestos [was widely used](#) in the UK in buildings for insulation, flooring and roofing until it was discovered that it can cause [serious lung conditions](#), including cancer, asbestosis and pleural disease. It is now banned in the UK, but is still present in buildings built before 2000.

The removal, transport and disposal of asbestos is highly dangerous, heavily regulated and consequently expensive. This makes it attractive to criminals. Charging high rates for removal and dumping for free generates an easy profit. Again, wider society is the victim: there are [serious health implications](#) for anyone coming into contact with this waste, including the people that dumped it.

The bill for clearing this incident will be paid by local council tax payers. Nationally, clearing [fly-tipping](#) (leaving waste on land that doesn't have a licence to accept it) costs tax-payers [in excess of £200m a year](#). Clearance of fly-tipping on private land falls to the landowner, be that a private individual or charity such as the Woodland Trust, who report an annual clearance bill [in excess of £350,000](#).

Easy business

These waste crimes are taking place in plain sight. There are underlying causes to these crimes, which are allowing waste crime to flourish. Correct, legal waste disposal is expensive, with landfill and incineration charges now [around £100 per tonne](#). This is why the profits of these crimes are high.

It seems that the traditional deterrents for these crimes, [fines and prison sentences](#), are not working, or are not tough enough. It is too easy for criminals to obtain documentation that makes their operations appear compliant. For example, waste carrier's registration and waste exemptions, [can be easily and quickly obtained online](#). These make waste operations - on the surface - appear legal.

It is also too easy for criminals to gain access to waste. On a small scale "scrap men" informally remove white goods and other metal objects from housing estates across the country. They have the implied consent of the householder who leaves unwanted items out and does not report their disappearance as a crime. Parts of these items which don't have a resale value [are often fly-tipped](#) meaning the householder also, unknowingly, [commits a crime themselves](#). There are more complaints to the local authority [about the noise these collectors make](#) with their bugles and loudspeaker appeals for "any old iron" than about the removal of items.

Outright theft

These informal or bogus collectors do not restrict themselves to scrap metal iron items. Used, unwanted textiles are worthwhile waste stream targets too [because of the high prices](#) they command in both secondhand markets and as a scrap.

Here, different tactics are employed, from the small-scale individual "fishing" for [the contents of textile banks](#) in car parks ([with some fatalities](#)) to the organised collection of bulk unwanted textiles from households. This is done either by the distribution of [bogus collection bags](#) to all households in a defined area, or the kerbside collection of bags distributed by a reputable charity before their own collection teams can retrieve them. Either way, it deprives honest charities of a much-needed funding source.

On a larger scale, the offer of cheap waste collections can be quite tempting. Waste is removed, the service paid for and then the waste is fly-tipped or stored at illegal, unregulated, waste sites leading to an immediate profit at a cost to us all. Assets of almost £1m have [recently been recovered](#) from one such waste crime through the [Proceeds of Crime Act](#).

The [Environment Agency and local councils](#) respond to these crimes when they take place. They also work with other agencies, such as HM Revenue and Customs and the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency to “disrupt” waste crime. Householders should make use of local council waste collections and check their local council’s website for [information on the disposal of larger items](#). Bogus collections of textiles can be avoided by checking with your local council’s [trading standards team](#), or checking the [charity register](#).

Across the UK illegal waste management practices are now a multi-million pound problem, with some serious underlying problems that need to be addressed. Apart from the associated criminality, fly-tipping damages the environment, poses risks to human health here and abroad, undermines legitimate businesses, reduces tax income so others have to pay more, and just looks really ugly. With the potential for easy, high profits - waste crime is joining the ranks of organised crime alongside drugs and human trafficking, cyber-crime and child exploitation and this has wider implications for society.

We must remember that many environmental regulations have been put in place as a response to serious incidents and resist the prospect of further deregulation. This may stand to cost us in terms of damage not only to the economy and environment – but also to human and public health.