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Litter in lockdown:

a study of littering in the time of coronavirus





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Litter in lockdown

Introduction

Clearly coronavirus has had a devastating impact on communities across the country and continues to present us with significant challenges. One issue of particular interest to CPRE, the countryside charity is how coronavirus has affected the way people litter. Over the past nine months, littering has occurred in new ways and different places. The level has fallen dramatically in some places, such as town centres, and rocketed in others, such as parks and the countryside. We have seen new types of litter — in particular personal protective equipment (PPE), such as disposable masks and gloves.

In this study, CPRE looks at how littering has changed during the pandemic and its impact on the environment. We make recommendations about how the government can help to reduce future littering and fly tipping, including through the timely introduction of both a Deposit Return Scheme and an Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme.

PPE

Wearing a mask became mandatory on public transport in June 2020 and was extended to shops and supermarkets from July. It was later applied to many other indoor settings. As a result, the discarded pale blue single-use disposable face mask became a very visible emblem of these unprecedented times.

A CPRE-commissioned YouGov poll, carried out in November 2020, showed that 76% of the public had noticed more PPE litter. In a litter survey carried out in Essex, 38% of sites inspected were affected by PPE litter – most commonly found were face masks (68%) followed by wipes (18%) and gloves (14%). Litter-picking volunteers also encountered them on beaches. Many local authorities reported finding discarded PPE in most areas of their districts and increasingly around educational establishments following the start of the school term.

Discarded PPE is not only unsightly, it represents a threat to wildlife, and there is evidence it is finding its way into the sea. It also poses a risk to health since the virus can remain infectious on a mask for up to seven days, which can be a hazard to both council staff and volunteers involved in collecting rubbish.

Essex case study

Although our research spanned the country, we looked in greatest depth at Essex, with 10 of the county's 14 local authorities providing information about their experience of littering in 2020.

Lockdown saw a big increase in demand on Essex's waste and recycling services, with 90% of those councils that responded reporting changes in where rubbish bins were most heavily used and all rural councils observing increased usage. Four in five councils redeployed staff away from town centres to parks and open spaces. A litter survey of over 140 sites across Essex in September and October 2020 showed the most common types of litter were smoking materials (99% of all sites), packaging of all kinds (90%), drinks containers (67%) and PPE (38%). This composition was broadly the same as in previous surveys with the notable addition of PPE.

It also demonstrated that people were more likely to drop litter in those areas that were less cared for and already had significant amounts of litter. In other words, 'litter breeds litter'.



Litter by location

Where people go, litter follows. Our poll shows that during the pandemic people spent more time in parks and the countryside and much less time in town. Around a third visited parks and the countryside more than before, while over two-thirds cut back on trips to the high street.

■ Urban areas

Many larger city centres became rubbish-free ghost towns in the early days of lockdown. As a result, many local authorities shifted their litter picking and street cleaning teams away from city centres to the areas where the rubbish was now accumulating.

The Essex litter survey, which took place after lockdown had been lifted and shops reopened, shows that four out of five high streets were affected by packaging litter, with the biggest culprit being drinks packaging, and 40% affected by PPE. The problem seems to have been greater in non-town centre local shopping areas, where street cleaning is less frequent and in out-of-town retail parks, where four out of five sites were affected by the presence of discarded PPE. The survey also found large amounts of packaging and drink litter as well as PPE at transport hubs, such as bus and train stations.

Although many town centres saw an unprecedented fall in littering once takeaway and drive-through restaurants re-opened, large numbers of disposable cups and burger boxes started appearing along town centre routes and in public areas.

■ Local parks

For many people, local parks became a focal point where they could exercise and meet up with friends. One popular pastime became the so-called 'dinner party in the park'. This led to a marked increase in discarded drinks and food containers as well as things like disposable barbecue trays.

The Essex litter survey included 30 parks and open spaces where local authority officers reported a huge rise in littering once restaurants and cafes started offering takeaway services. Nine out of 10 parks and open spaces were affected by packaging litter, with 43% of sites affected by the presence of discarded alcohol containers.

Surprisingly, nearly a third of the parks had to deal with discarded PPE despite the fact masks don't need to be worn outdoors. It maybe they were discarded along with other items after an outdoor picnic or fell from people's pockets or bags. They may even have been blown from nearby retail centres.

Local authorities in Essex saw greater use of litter bins in parks and open spaces than ever before. Many local authorities increased the frequency of bin emptying and the number of bins available but still could not keep up with the demand. On a brighter note, one of the benefits of the lockdown was that more people were visiting their local green spaces - some of whom were discovering these for the first time.

■ Open countryside

The Countryside Code says ‘leave no trace of your visit and take all litter home’. Sadly, this did not always happen in 2020. Record numbers of people visited the countryside but rubbish, litter and abandoned camps followed close behind. The Lake District National Park Authority collected 300 bags of rubbish over a single weekend in June — it had never seen anything like this before.

The absence of the usual festival season and club nights this year led some to organise DIY festivals or raves of their own and then abandon everything, including tents, chairs and barbecues, when they left. This is more akin to fly tipping than littering and became known as ‘fly camping’. This sort of behaviour was far less common in the countryside before 2020 but the impact, on both the environment and wildlife, is serious. It has been suggested that part of the reason for this litter deluge is that many visitors were from different demographics who had less awareness of, or consideration for, nature and the countryside and had not learnt how to engage with it.

However, it is important that this suggestion is not used to stereotype against groups of people or as a reason for not enabling greater access to the countryside for all. Indeed, one significant upside is that many people have had a new and positive experience of the countryside — and the majority would not have been littering. It is important to distinguish between people who found new solace and enjoyment in the countryside in 2020 and people who simply used the countryside as a substitute for the activities that had been restricted by lockdown. Additionally, this year may have seen an increase but littering in the countryside is sadly not new and so cannot be ‘blamed’ on new visitors. However, there has been, and continues to be, a need to instil a greater understanding of and love for the countryside and a deeper awareness of the Countryside Code.

■ Beaches

People flocked to the beaches from late spring when lockdown was easing and the litter followed in unprecedented amounts. An estimated 500,000 people visited Bournemouth on one day, producing 8 tonnes of rubbish — and 33 tonnes along the whole Dorset coast.

There were similar scenes on other beaches and many authorities reported that despite their best efforts they were unable to keep up with the demand. One authority, accustomed to emptying litter bins once over a weekend, was having to empty them many times a day.

Volunteer litter-picking groups also had to increase their action to try to keep local areas clear of rubbish.

One Essex coastal authority suggested the deluge of litter could have been a direct consequence of restaurants and cafes being closed for indoor eating. This meant many people ordered takeaways or bought picnics from nearby supermarkets, with the discarded packaging, cans and bottles ending up on the beaches.



A simple solution to drinks container litter

Litter left in our countryside, streets, parks and rivers isn't just an eyesore – it can be extremely harmful to wildlife and nature, and it costs taxpayers millions of pounds in clean-up costs every year. Broken glass bottles and shredded cans are a huge threat to vehicle tyres, people and animals, while plastic bottles generally take hundreds of years to decompose – if at all – and we still don't really understand the effects of microplastics. That is why CPRE feels so strongly about preventing and reducing litter – and it is something we have been campaigning on for a well over a decade.

A key solution CPRE is campaigning for is a Deposit Return Scheme (DRS). A DRS is a simple way of incentivising the recycling of drinks containers in order to stop them from ending up as litter. We had a big win in 2018 when the government announced it would look into introducing such a scheme. It looks like the scheme will be going ahead in some form, although timings are slipping, as legislation for the scheme is going into the Environment Bill.

A DRS works by a small deposit – something like 20p – being added on to the price of all drinks containers, from your wine bottle to fizzy drinks can. This is then paid back upon returning the container to a designated machine or shop. Deposit systems are in place all over the world and are a key way to prevent waste, littering and increase the use of recycled content in packaging.

However, as always, the devil is in the detail. We are still awaiting the scope of the system and with producers of drinks containers (those that make and profit from the sale of single-use drinks containers) continuing to lobby government for a limited system that leaves out certain types of materials or sizes, there's a risk private profits will be put before people and our planet. We are calling for an all-in DRS which includes all sizes and materials of drinks containers. This system would not only see the biggest reductions in litter and CO2 but also create over £2 billion for the economy. An all-in scheme is clearly vital – let's hope the government remains committed to introducing it in a timely fashion by 2023.

Fly tipping

Reports of fly tipping via the media indicates significant increases during lockdown. Reports to Clearwaste, an app to report fly tips and deal with illegal dumping of rubbish, rose by 75% while 40% of those in our CPRE commissioned poll said they had noticed more taking place.

The nature of this fly tipping also seems to have changed. Industrial fly tipping and illegal waste operations fell dramatically. But this was replaced by a big rise in domestic fly tipping. The City of London Corporation reported a 52% increase in the number of fly tips in Epping Forest in the spring of this year, consisting mainly of furniture, household items and garden waste.

The fine weather combined with people having extra time on their hands led many to start tending neglected gardens and doing DIY jobs they'd been putting off. The problem was that most 'local tips' were



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closed in the first few months of lockdown and many local councils had paused collection of garden waste and bulky household items. As a result, grass cuttings and other waste ended up being dumped in woods, lay-bys and even the open countryside.

There was also a surge in 'careful' fly tipping — where people placed their pre-bagged rubbish beside full bins and recycling banks or left items for re-use outside still-closed charity shops. The intentions were good but the result was a litter hazard in many town centres.

Why did we drop so much litter during lockdown?

One principal reason is that people were using many more disposable items as takeaway services — which tend to involve single-use items — became more popular and after initial, although unfounded, concerns about the hygiene risks of reusable options. But this has had a direct impact on the volume and type of litter. We have also seen the return of single-use coffee cups, instead of re-usable ones. Additionally, many supermarkets and food outlets are now wrapping individual items of bakery and fruit in plastic. People are also using — and discarding — more disposable plates, cups and bottles when they eat outdoors.

Fear and frustration have also been factors. Fear of infection drove the increase in the number of single-use items and encouraged takeaway packaging. The pandemic seems to have propelled a jump backwards in weaning ourselves off single-use plastics and single-use takeaway containers such as coffee cups, with loose items in supermarkets becoming rarer and many cafes refusing to use reusable cups, despite scientists defending the safety of reusable alternatives that can be washed easily. This false notion that single-use items are safer likely increased the number of people opting for single-use items and increasing opportunities for littering.

Also, much of this littering was more negligent than wilful, probably reflecting a lack of familiarity with how to use open spaces. Many people who were used to socialising in cafes, bars and restaurants would not be familiar with the different conventions that apply in parks and open spaces and might not be aware of the consequences of discarding their litter. For instance, some people may simply think they're doing someone a favour by creating a job for someone to clean up litter without considering the burden on cash-strapped councils or wildlife. Let's not forget though that the majority respected the environment and took their litter home or left it in the bins provided.

Understanding the reasoning behind littering behaviour in lockdown will help us prevent similar problems in the future and there is clearly a need for more formal research into this. But clearly, we cannot rely on people's good will alone. A concerted push from the government is needed to change this type of behaviour, including the use of incentives.



Following the polluter pays principle

The way that waste is disposed of, and how that is funded, needs a major review. CPRE welcomed the government's efforts in this area with the announcement in 2018 that they plan to apply a principle of 'Extended Producer Responsibility' (EPR) to how resources are used and in waste disposal. At present, cash-strapped councils foot the bill for around 90% of the costs of dealing with waste and recycling – that includes the costs of bin and recycling collection, litter picking and the processing of materials. Meanwhile, excessive use of materials, and single-use plastics in particular, has soared with no consequences for the producers of these items and all the impact being felt by councils and the environment.

It is time the polluting producers pays the full costs associated with the products they place on the market. EPR should be designed encourage more sustainable, lower-impact design of packaging while raising money to cover the costs associated with dealing with packaging waste.

We, along with other environmental organisations, want to see a future proof EPR system that can tackle the dual crises of plastic pollution and the climate emergency. At minimum, the EPR system must:

- ***Address the root cause of the problem:** the EPR scheme must be designed to encourage a wholesale move away from non-essential packaging, with a shift into reusable and refillable alternatives.*
- ***Make sure 'full costs' mean full costs:** packaging doesn't just become a problem at the point of disposal. From sourcing through to consumption, there are social and environmental costs all along its life cycle. Producers must be made to consider these under EPR requirements to properly satisfy the 'polluter pays principle'.*
- ***Set producer fees to ensure sustainable design:** non-recyclable, excessive and toxic packaging must be phased out through the 'approved list' for packaging design, with a fee system designed to encourage reusable and sustainable design choices.*

An EPR that follows these principles will enable a drastic reduction in waste and a lasting reduction in litter.

Conclusion

The pandemic has had a big impact on littering, fly tipping and how we dispose of our waste. As our places for recreation and socialising moved from indoors to outdoors, so the litter and waste followed.

Discarded PPE is particularly concerning because of its potential to spread the virus. One suggestion would be for shops and businesses to provide receptacles for discarded PPE outside their premises, similar to the cigarette bins for smokers outside many public buildings.

But clearing up rubbish, though vital, only tackles the symptoms, not the cause. The rise in single-use, takeaway packaging saw a direct increase in littering – it is worth noting that very few reusable masks for



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instance were found, and reusable cups are rarely littered. We need to reduce packaging at source and change people's behaviour — and that requires government involvement.

We have a prolific throw-away culture in the UK in which packaging and other single use items are discarded without much thought as to where they end up. Producers pay little attention to how their products are disposed of or the damage they may cause, so it is little wonder this feeds through to consumer behaviour.

According to our survey four in five members of the public think the government should take more action to tackle litter. We call on the government to commit to curbing our throwaway culture and begin a wholesale shift to valuing and effectively disposing of all materials. Only solutions that tackle the root causes of litter will stop us regaining our traditional title of 'the dirty man of Europe'.

Recommendations

In particular, we recommend that the government:

- Commits to a comprehensive Deposit Return Scheme, involving glass, plastics and metal drinks containers of all sizes, by the end of 2023, to reduce littering of these items.
- Introduces a full Extended Producer Responsibility scheme by the end of 2023, to ensure producers bear the cost of cleaning up when their items are littered.
- Uses a combination of taxes and charges to incentivise a reduction in single use items and packaging right across the supply chain.
- Promotes the benefits of re-usable masks wherever possible, emphasising their safety, and encourages people to dispose of any single-use masks responsibly when these are used.
- Supports the promotion of the Countryside Code, with its clear anti-littering guidance, through online advertising and engagement with schools.
- Provides renewed commitment to the aims of the government's 2017 Litter Strategy for different local groups, local authorities, Highways England and businesses to reduce litter through cooperation and collaboration.

For further information on the research that underpinned this study, [see here](#).

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