

26 June 2020

Guidelines for Volunteer Litter-pickers on How to Carry Out Litter Clean-ups in a Safer Way

1. Introduction

These guidelines are intended to help anyone planning to go out and pick up litter to prepare properly and to take some simple precautions to avoid as far as possible the risks associated with handling potentially contaminated items of litter.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for great care to be exercised to avoid the spread of infection from contact with contaminated surfaces or objects that we come across in our daily lives. Such care also applies when volunteers go out to collect litter.

While caution is especially relevant in times of Covid-19, a safer approach should be taken to collection of litter at any time because there is always the risk that a discarded item may be either contaminated (e.g. with infectious pathogens or hazardous substances) or intrinsically dangerous (e.g. broken glass, jagged metal objects, fireworks or syringes).

With the right preparation and the right approach when out litter-picking, the danger is relatively low – but it is important to be *careful at all times and avoid taking unnecessary risks*.

Today, in addition to the range of items that are often littered, we are now witnessing a small but growing number of discarded items of used personal protection equipment such as single use protective gloves and both single use and reusable masks and visors. These items carry a heightened risk of contamination with infectious pathogens including but not limited to coronavirus but with careful handling the risk can be minimised.

2. Check local rules & regulations in advance

Before setting out for a clean-up, whoever is organising the activity is advised to contact the local/regional authority in the area where they plan to pick up litter well in advance to make certain that they know the rules or measures that apply. This is particularly important when there is a programme to contain an epidemic of an infectious disease such as Covid-19 as there may be specific restrictions in place. The kind of information you should check on includes:

- How, when and where to properly dispose of the collected litter, which may include sorting it into recycling streams.
- Whether purpose-designed litter-picking devices may be borrowed for the clean-up exercise (if not, your local litter prevention group may be able to help).

When and where virus containment programmes are in operation:

- The **number of people** allowed to group together and whether this is restricted to family members only.
- The **required distance between individuals** to respect local social distancing rules.
- Any **disruption or modified operation of the waste management collection schedule** during lockdown periods, where applicable.

3. Before going out to pick up litter

The following steps are advised before you go out on a clean-up:

- In general, **avoid convening really big groups**, which is best done by litter prevention organisations or local authorities who are experienced in such exercises.
- If **children** are involved:
 - *explain to them the purpose of the exercise and make sure that they understand the need to be careful – of course, without frightening them;*
 - *take into account the length of time that they will be able to maintain attention to the task.*
- Plan how much **time** you wish to spend on a clean up – a short, intensive session is advised rather than continuing for a very long period as this may result in becoming over-tired or accumulating too much collected litter to transport conveniently.
- Ensure that you have enough **collection sacks** for the litter you plan to pick up.
- Usually, you will need to **bring home the litter that you collect**, so anticipate where to store the extra bags once home and to sort the litter items for recycling according to your local government requirements.
- Ideally, collect litter with the aid of a **litter picking device or “waste grab”**
 - *When using a litter-picking device, it is advisable to sanitise it thoroughly before going out to collect litter (and again when you have finished).*
 - *Wearing protective gloves adds an extra layer of security but is not essential.*
- **Litter can also be collected safely by hand** with the following precaution.
 - *Wear protective gloves to avoid transmission of any contaminants on the litter to your skin.*
 - *Very thin gloves may tear while you are working; we advise heavier duty gloves, such as household “rubber/latex” gloves or rubberised garden gloves.*
- It is always advised to carry **sanitising gel** with you, especially if you will not be wearing gloves.
- **If you are feeling unwell**, stay at home to avoid potentially transmitting any viral infection to others.
- Make sure you **dress appropriately for the conditions** you expect to encounter and think about sun-protection in particular, especially for children.

When and where virus containment programmes are in operation:

- Avoid busy or popular areas where social distancing may be compromised.
- Do not participate if you are over 70 years old or belong to a segment of the population that may be particularly vulnerable to viral infection, such as Covid-19 or influenza.

4. While on a litter clean-up

One of the first precautions when out picking litter in a group with small children is to *supervise the younger members attentively* and make sure that they are not exposed to dangerous littered objects.

The golden rule is not to pick up litter without protection and to always proceed with caution:

- Wear gloves when picking up litter by hand and ideally also when using a litter-picking device.
- Put the litter items straight into a collection bag.
- Take care when removing or putting on gloves that you avoid touching the exterior which is where any contamination is likely to be.
- If you are not wearing gloves, then disinfect your hands frequently with a sanitising gel.
- As soon as you have the opportunity to do so after you have finished litter-picking, wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm water.
- Whether wearing gloves or not, always avoid touching your face with your hands as the mouth, nose and eyes are easy access points for infection.
- It is always a good idea to wear a mask.
- Fresh litter should be treated with extra precaution as it has a higher chance of being infectious.
- If by any chance litter of an unknown nature is encountered, it should not be picked up.
- Take care to cover mouth and nose with a paper handkerchief when coughing or sneezing and then dispose of it in a bin for residual waste. Alternatively, cough or sneeze into the inner fold of one's elbow.
- If you need to blow your nose, use a paper handkerchief and then dispose of it in a bin for residual waste.
- Only collect as much as you can carry home or to an agreed disposal point.

When and where virus containment programmes are in operation:

- Ensure that everyone participating respects the social distancing rules, including avoiding close contact such as hugging or kissing when you gather or say farewell.
- Respect the general rules about coughing, sneezing and blowing your nose.
- Wear a protective mask and/or visor.
- Do not share gloves, masks or litter-picking devices.
- Avoid sharing waste bags.
- Do not approach people from vulnerable groups of the population such as elderly persons or those with a health condition.

5. When to stop

Volunteers are advised not to go on for too long as this may result in over-tiredness, especially if young children are involved. It is generally best to stop when you have collected as much as you can reasonably carry to the disposal site, which may be home. Remember that, once you get it to the disposal site, you may need to sort it for recycling according to the local waste management arrangements.

6. What to do when finished

Once the litter clean-up session is completed, volunteer litter-pickers are urged to be thorough in the way they finish off the job:

- Bring the collected litter to the *appropriate disposal point*, which will often simply mean bringing it home.
- Take care to *sort the collected litter* – either at the end of the clean-up exercise or at home – according to the local waste management arrangements for collection and recycling of household waste (e.g. into material streams and residual waste).
- Safely *disinfect or safely dispose of* used personal protection equipment.
- Safely *disinfect litter-picking devices* you may have used
- *Wash your hands thoroughly.*
- If you borrowed them for the occasion, remember to *return litter-picking devices in a timely manner* so that they are available for others to use.

7. Afterwards

- If you wish and it is possible, consider sharing with friends and “followers” on *social media* your experience with safe litter picking. It is a great way to raise awareness.
- *Consider encouraging other individuals or small groups to do go out and do the same.* You can always refer potential volunteers to these common European guidelines for safe litter picking.
- *If you are feeling ill following the clean-up activity*, contact your doctor immediately and assist in tracing and alerting members of the clean-up group in the event that you appear to have an infectious disease and that there is a risk of having passed it on to others.

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