

Waste Operations Frequently Asked Questions for transitioning through the COVID-19 National Alert Levels

23 April 2020

Q: What happens to rubbish and recycling at Alert Level 3?

A: At Alert Level 3 there is still a heightened risk that COVID-19 is not contained therefore Kerbside Collection of Recycling will continue not to be picked up, The Transfer Station, Tip Shop and Recycling Centre will also remain closed. Rubbish collections will continue as they have in Alert Level 4. The processing plant where recycling is sorted will remain closed until Alert Level 2.

Q: Why is WCC stopping recycling, when other Councils are starting/continuing to do it?

A: The processing plant remains closed at Alert Level 3. The main reason kerbside recycling was postponed was due to a lot of workers who wouldn't have been able to keep the two metre rule of physical distancing at the sorting facility. There are questions around how long the virus lasts on surfaces like cardboard and plastic, and while the sorting plant is semi-automated, it still has a reasonable amount of hand sorting. These concerns still exist in Level 3.

This means that anything collected in level 3 will end up in landfill. We'd prefer to wait until the processing plant is open so that we are able to recycle what we collect. We have to acknowledge that there may be high levels of wastage once we start collecting at level 2, due to contamination and the processing plant being able to deal with significant volumes, but we will at least be able to recycle a good portion of it. Some Councils have been collecting recycling throughout and will continue to landfill what is collected – we don't feel this is a good environmental outcome, and prefer to wait for another 2 weeks.

Q: Why can't recycling trucks pick up recycling and take to Landfill now?

A: Halting the recycling collection means we can ring-fence a group of drivers who will be able to tag in to help with rubbish collection if needed. This ensures we have a group of essential workers isolated early on so they are back-up if the rubbish truck drivers reduce in their availability.

Q: Should I put glass in my rubbish bag? Isn't this dangerous? How could I do this safely?

A: We acknowledge that glass in rubbish bags has the potential to be a safety risk. We recommend that you don't fill up a rubbish bag with all glass – please make sure you have other rubbish in the bag as well so as to reduce the risk of bottles smashing together.

Q: Should we continue to stockpile our recycling?

A: We recommend that people don't stockpile, this is based on official advice from the Ministry for the Environment. However, if you are currently stockpiling, we recommend you focus on clean glass jars or bottles, and cardboard boxes that have not contained food and can be stored in bundles somewhere safe and dry.

Q: Why is stockpiling not recommended now?

A: Stockpiling is undesirable because:

- Overtime it can become a health hazard, so if you store anything, please wash it thoroughly.
- Many residents do not have capacity to store recycling long term.
- Once the alert levels reduce, the recycling system may be unable to cope with large amounts of stockpiled recyclables.

Q: Why did the Council tell us to stockpile originally?

A: This pandemic is a first for us all and we only had a couple of days to prepare for the lockdown, similar to many other essential services. We did the best we could with the advice given to us and believed that stockpiling recycling was the best option at the time. In normal times, our focus is on waste minimisation and recycling, so this is difficult for all of us. But these aren't normal times. Our priority is the safety of our staff and the public. So drastic times require drastic measures!

Q: What do I do with my stockpiled recycling?

A: You can leave your current stockpiled recycling where it is now (either in your wheelie bin or recycling bag) and then put it out for collection at the start of Alert Level 2. Please ensure that only recycling is kept in your recycling bag or wheelie bin.

Q: Will my stockpiled recycling actually be recycled?

A: It is possible that a lot of recycling will be contaminated with food residue, particularly if it has been held for more than a month. Where this is the case, it may be landfilled. We also have to take into consideration the ability of the sorting facility to process over a month's worth of recycling on day 1 of reopening, whenever this might be. We expect the focus to be initially on high value recyclables such as cardboard, clear PET 1, and glass. Whilst we will be working hard to make sure that as much as possible is recycled, it is likely that some recycling will be landfilled.

Q: What do I do with new recycling?

A: From now we recommend you begin putting all new recycling into your wheelie bin or yellow bags (depending on which one you have) until we move to Alert Level 2.

Q: Why am I expected to pay more for rubbish bags to fill them with recycling?

A: We advise putting your recycling in your rubbish bag or bin for the next 2 and half weeks. If you do have space to do so, please hold onto clean glass and bundled cardboard boxes – these are the bulkiest items that will take up space in your rubbish. Most other items can be squashed to reduce the space they take up.

Whilst the Government does not recommend stockpiling of recycling, once collections resume, we will collect all recycling that is put out at the kerbside in official recycling bags and recycling wheelie bins.

Q: Why can't you collect recycling in any bag/green/clear bags if it's just going to the landfill anyway?

A: When we resume recycling, where the recycling is clean and not contaminated with food residue, we will be recycling as much as we can.

While our aim is to recycle as much as we possibly can, there will be some materials that are mouldy, deteriorated, or contaminated so these items will likely end up in landfill.

Q: What if I stockpile anyway?

Whilst the Government does not recommend this, and we support that view, once collections resume, we will collect any recycling that is put out at the kerbside in official recycling bags and recycling wheelie bins.

Q: Why are we not making Landfill and yellow bags free?

A: The Southern Landfill and rubbish and recycling kerbside collections are paid for by Landfill fees and the purchase of yellow rubbish bags – it is not paid for by rates. We need to keep these costs in place to maintain these essential services.

Q: Why aren't the public allowed at the Southern Landfill transfer station in Level 3?

A: Normally the transfer station is a very busy facility, and this is managed with two staff in the weighbridge kiosk. Under Level 3 and 4, we cannot maintain appropriate physical distancing, and the kiosk being staffed by a sole operator. We do not have the capacity to manage public visitors with this level of staffing.

Some extra details on landfill –

- We will allow all account holders access.

- There will be NO additional vehicles added to existing accounts in Level 3 - this is to avoid people being added to their builders/plumbers mates account. The exception of this is for where it relates to special waste permits. Note also we can assess on a case by case basis.
- New account opening will be permitted, but note that we will advise people that there is a 10 working day time period to enable our finance people to do what they need to do in OneCouncil as well as get it set up in our weighbridge software. We will also advise that there is a minimum charge on accounts.
- NO cars will be permitted to be set up on an account - essentially these will be deemed domestic vehicles and considered public.
- There should only be one occupant per vehicle, as per the physical distancing guidelines.
- The number of vehicles to the transfer station will be limited – every other vehicle bay will be closed off to allow for appropriate distancing.

Q: What happens to rubbish and recycling services at Alert Level 2?

A:

Kerbside Collection

Kerbside Collection will resume, however it may not be possible to colour sort glass bottles because of the risk of the virus being present. Under normal collections glass bottles are individually hand sorted into colours at the kerbside by Envirowaste staff. We will be able to collect glass at level 2 and it will be recycled, although noting we will receive less revenue for a mixed colour product.

Southern Landfill Transfer Station

The Transfer Station will open, however with some restrictions:

- cash will not be accepted;
- contactless transactions only; and
- social distancing and PPE to be deployed for staff.

Tip Shop & Recycling Centre

At level 2 our course of action is to keep the Tip Shop and Recycling Centre closed to the public.

At level 2 the risk is reduced but it is not eliminated. Businesses are expected to start remote working, doing shifts and physical distancing. This is not possible at the shop/recycling centre.

Q: What happens to rubbish and recycling services at Alert Level 1?

A:

Kerbside Collection

Normal collection services will resume and safety protocols will remain for collections staff around the use of PPE, social distancing and hand washing.

Southern Landfill Transfer Station

The transfer station will be open but with additional protocols around the use of PPE, social distancing and hand washing.

Tip Shop & Recycling Centre

The risk is reduced to the point that the Tip Shop and Recycling Centre drop-off can operate. Risks will be managed with additional protocols around handwashing and PPE.

Other notes:

Illegal dumping/fly tipping

Rubbish is an essential service and has been collected since lockdown started, and will continue to be, so there is no excuse for dumping rubbish or fly tipping in our parks, coasts, and environment. This behaviour is putting our staff's health at risk as they try to clean it up. If anyone is caught illegally dumping, they can face prosecution and a fine. We ask if anyone witnesses illegal dumping to please report it to our Contact Centre team on 499 4444, use the FixIt app, or email info@wcc.govt.nz.

Charity Stores

Just a reminder that Charity stores are not open during the Covid-19 lockdown, yet they are reporting huge piles of material, furniture and rubbish being left at their doors. This is causing a health hazard and is dangerous to foot traffic too – not to mention unpleasant for neighbours and the volunteers who will have to return to the mess in front of the store when the lockdown is lifted. Our waste crews are helping clean up these areas, but leaving these items outside these charity stores during the lockdown could be considered illegal dumping, and offenders may be prosecuted and fined.

Annual delivery of recycling bags

We are planning on resuming the delivery of the annual distribution of recycling bags under **Level 2**. These will only be distributed to those who are due to receive them – we cannot facilitate delivery of bags to wheelie bin addresses. Service centres should reopen at Level 2 as well, so they will be available there too. The distribution normally takes place over 6 weeks, so please bear with us as we work through our normal delivery schedule. If the service centres open in Level 2, we will ensure that they have a stock of bags so that residents can purchase them in the meantime.