

Media Release



Waste Crime in Northern Ireland

Current measures for regulating and inspecting the waste sector are not achieving best value for money and put at risk delivery of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's (NIEA) obligations to protect the environment. Those are among the conclusions of a report published today (Thursday 3 July) by the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Dorinnia Carville's report on Waste Crime in Northern Ireland examines the NIEA's approach to preventing and tackling illegal waste disposal. It highlights that, as well as causing damage to the environment, waste crime could be estimated to cost around £34 million annually (this includes costs stemming from rectifying environmental and social harm, evaded taxes and lost legitimate business).

The report notes that total potential profits from illegal dumping far outweigh the sanctions. Court fines imposed in relation to waste crime since 2019 amount to approximately £1 million but, in contrast, it is estimated that the total costs of legally disposing of the waste involved in these proceedings would have been £17m.

In addition, the report concludes that the NIEA's current inspection arrangements are insufficient to effectively detect and prevent waste crime. The number of planned inspection visits to high-risk sites has significantly reduced in recent years. In 2017-18 there were 12 planned visits per high-risk site per year, but this has now fallen to six or eight (depending on the type of site). Furthermore, no inspections matching waste materials arriving and leaving sites, or verifying waste on-site, have been conducted in the last two years.

Similarly, waste carriers are not subject to any routine inspection regime, and stop and search operations ¹ targeting carriers are relatively uncommon, with only one such operation being conducted in 2024.

Smaller-scale waste operations can qualify for exemptions, thereby benefitting from fewer regulatory controls. However, there is no inspection regime to verify ongoing compliance with the conditions for such exemptions.

¹ These operations are carried out with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs.

Today's report identifies some underlying, operational challenges facing the NIEA in its work to tackle waste crime. These include poor data collection and management information, which undermines the Agency's ability to regulate the waste management industry as effectively as it could. It also struggles to recruit and retain specialist skills in a number of key areas, which negatively impacts on the quality of its enforcement activity.

Reflecting on the report's findings, Dorinnia Carville commented:

"The existing approach to regulating waste requires significant improvement. The current operation of the inspection regime does not adequately identify or discourage criminality. Legal enforcement activities, even when successful, rarely result in polluters remediating the damage caused. Furthermore, financial penalties through fines and confiscation orders are a fraction of the costs of dealing with the waste legally."

"As a result, damage is being caused to the environment and the cost for remediation often falls to taxpayers. A review of existing arrangements and inspection regimes is recommended to help ensure future expenditure on regulating waste delivers better value for money and more effective environmental protections for Northern Ireland."

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Notes for Editors

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). She and the NIAO are totally independent of Government. The C&AG certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. She has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. Her reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. The report is available on the Audit Office website at www.niauditoffice.gov.uk. The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Thursday 03 July 2025.