

Reducing fly-tipping in West Mercia

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Practice note: Using partnership problem-solving and forensic marking to reduce fly-tipping of waste tyres

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Fly-tipping is a major problem for both rural and urban communities. It is unsightly, sometimes dangerous and costly to clear up. Tyres are expensive to dispose of and often form a significant portion of all waste that is dumped.

The UK produces 55 million waste tyres every year, 15,000 of these are dumped illegally according to [**official statistics from 2020/21**](#) (Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), 2023).

This is likely to be an underestimate because of low reporting levels and issues with recording. Higher numbers of fly-tipping may be partly due to tyres no longer being accepted at landfill and the cost of tyre disposal has roughly doubled since 2006. Local authorities and the Environment Agency have a range of enforcement tactics to tackle this problem, so why did West Mercia Police become involved in a project to reduce fly-tipping?

In 2021, a West Mercia rural and business crime officer found that the rural community was becoming increasingly frustrated with police and partners for seemingly not taking fly-tipping seriously. The officer had started a project in which garages marked their waste tyres with postcodes, the theory being that garages would be less likely to use illegal waste handlers as a result, but this hadn't proved successful. The acrylic pen could easily be removed, and it was time-consuming for garages to write a postcode on every tyre. There was also no significant follow-up process to check whether the garages were implementing this process.

A multi-agency meeting was held with the Environment Agency and local authorities, and it became clear there was an issue. There was an 85% increase in fly-tipping involving tyres in 2020/21 across West Mercia compared to the previous year. In 2019/20, West Mercia Police received over 400 calls about fly-tipping, with an estimated cost for police and local authorities in managing fly-

tipped tyres of over £200,000 a year. A [2018 Defra review](#) concluded that many of those involved in fly-tipping were also involved in organised criminality.

As part of the 'We Don't Buy Crime' workstream, I suggested using forensic marking to mark the tyres to provide a forensic link directly to the garage. Forensic marking provides a durable method of marking that can withstand fire and is incredibly difficult to remove. We wanted to use the deterrence effect of forensic marking and our We Don't Buy Crime campaign to prevent criminal illegal waste carriers approaching these garages. Forensic marking was done using a bespoke bingo-style dabber full of marking fluid, making the process simpler and quicker for mechanics to stamp each waste tyre.

Key aims and objectives

- Reduction in number of tyre fly-tips, calls for service, removal costs for partners, use of illegal waste carriers.
- Disruption to organised crime groups.
- Increase in levels of intelligence, partnership working and confidence and satisfaction.

Project implementation

Our project team consisted of West Mercia Police rural and business officers, local authority enforcement officers, representation from DeterTech (a local security company) and the Environment Agency.

- Police and local authority teams jointly signed up 110 garages across the force area.
- Exploitation and vulnerability training was provided to garage staff.
- Waste handlers, garages and local authority enforcement officers were given UV torches to check compliance and dumped tyres.
- Garages were provided with forensic marking dabbers and 'We Don't Buy Crime' signage.
- Frequent unannounced visits were conducted by police and local authority enforcement officers to check compliance.
- Identified 'red' garages not complying would be subject to enforcement activity by the local authority.

Results

The key findings, through independent evaluation by the University of Worcester, were as follows.

- The project was successful in reducing tyre fly-tipping and improving engagement with garages and businesses.
- Telford and Wrekin Council was able to provide the largest amount of data, which showed a 50% reduction in the number of incidents.
- Using Defra's estimated clearance costs, clearance cost savings in Telford and Wrekin alone may have amounted to some £3,500.
- The project achieved a 97% success rate in the sign-up of garages.
- Almost all businesses stated they were compliant with the project and clear on the procedures.

The operation was a success and data indicated calls to police around fly-tipping had reduced. Garages appreciated the project as the overt signage highlighted them as being responsible/law-abiding businesses with the potential to encourage extra custom. Garages also wanted to root out businesses that used illegal waste carriers.

As a result of the recommendations, local authorities have been invited to take the lead and continue the project, with the support of the Environment Agency and West Mercia Police. Telford & Wrekin Council is looking at the possibility of using forensic marking sprays to mark other waste items, such as in roadside operations targeting waste handlers.

- This article was peer reviewed by PC Gareth Frith, Cheshire Constabulary.

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