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To: Secretaries of Local Government Branches in England, Wales
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Refuse collection and Covid-19 - a UNISON briefing – UPDATED 21 APRIL 2020

This circular provides UNISON guidance on health and safety for refuse collectors during the Covid-19 crisis.

We continue to receive a large number of reports of concerns about social distancing and personal protective equipment (PPE). UNISON has made PPE a top priority. We are pushing the government very hard to ensure all workers have the PPE they need without delay. We are also working with the local government employers to try to ensure this happens.

We have also produced new joint NJC guidance on social distancing for local government workers. You can read it here:

<https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/03/NJC-covid-19-general-update-27-March-2020.pdf>.

We have also produced guidance on health and safety issues in refuse collection during the Covid-19 crisis.

Refuse collection and Covid-19 - a UNISON briefing

Since the Covid-19 crisis began and in particular since the 'lockdown' started, we have received a large number of reports of concerns from members in refuse and recycling services, about issues relating to social distancing, personal protective equipment (PPE) and hygiene.

The normal practice is that refuse rounds operate with collection crews made up of a driver and two loaders. This places three people in close proximity and well outside of the guidance on social distancing.

Lots of councils are still using this standard model, despite social distancing guidelines, meaning that there are often three people in the cab, literally shoulder to shoulder, making it impossible to have a two-metre gap and exposing workers to unnecessary risk.

Better practice does exist. Some councils have reduced crew numbers on vehicles to one driver plus one loader, with the additional loader following behind in a different vehicle. We welcome this. In the standard trucks used (Mercedes or Dennis low entry vehicle), this would allow around 1.5 metre spacing between them. Ideally, just the driver should be in the cab.

This needs to be coupled with various other methods: cab ventilation, weather permitting, additional PPE (disposable gloves), hand sanitizers, and regular deep cleans of the insides of cabs. With all of these in place, working practices begin to look like the standard of safety we must demand for our members.

As yet, there has been no government or local government guidance on this to councils, and we know a large number of employers have not done it – we are getting lots of reports of three or even four in a cab (coupled with a failure to provide appropriate PPE in some places).

As well the massive risk of infection for workers, this could ultimately impact on the ability of refuse services to operate effectively – particularly if people refuse to work on the grounds that it would be impossible to follow the social distancing guidance.

This could create a real ongoing public welfare issue, as having more people at home increases waste, as well as limiting the refuse sector's ability to deal with clinical waste and so on as this situation develops further.

Moving to a safer system of work could mean service reductions or the need for more fleet, so this is clearly linked to resources. The Government needs to ensure councils are properly resourced to deal with the changing ways of working needed in refuse collection, and councils must ensure the same for refuse contractors.

We welcomed the draft guidance put out by the Waste Industry Safety and Health (Forum), but we did not think it went far enough in offering protection to our members, and we submitted comments making that clear. We look forward to reading the final version of the WISH guidance.

We are also working closely with the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) on this issues, and their website contains a lot of helpful information on this issue and other concerns for frontline services.

<https://www.apse.org.uk/apse/index.cfm/news/articles/2020/covid-19-apse-information-hub/information-for-frontline-services/#>

UNISON is pushing the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Government hard on this, and we know the LGA are raising it forcefully with the Government. But

it is clear that councils and refuse contractors now need clear guidance on what is and is not acceptable.

In the meantime, it is vital that branches and regions engage with employers and local authorities on this, to ensure that refuse collection is based on:

- No more than two to a cab – and preferably just one
- Regular deep cleans of cabs
- Hand sanitiser always stocked up (bear in mind that access to toilet facilities, and hence soap and water, will be rare)
- Provision of protective gloves (which should be impermeable/waterproof, or supported by use of nitrile or similar gloves used underneath standard gloves) – with sufficient supplies so that they can be changed frequently

In addition, where staff are redeployed from another service to assist with refuse collection, there needs to be a risk assessment done – this can be dangerous and physical work and staff need to have a clear idea of what they are being asked to do and be trained to do it.

Finally, in situations where employees reasonably believe they are in serious and imminent danger, under section 44 of the Employment Rights Act there are some protections from detriment or dismissal should they decide to leave the workplace. During the Covid-19 emergency, it may be that such a situation could arise. However, members should always speak to their UNISON branch before leaving the workplace under this rule, as this is a complex area of employment law.

With best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jon Richards". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J'.

Jon Richards
National Secretary
Local Government, Police and Justice Section