

A matter of life and death: why businesses must check their bins

Every winter, as temperatures drop, some of Britain's most vulnerable citizens seek shelter wherever they can find it. For rough sleepers, a large commercial waste bin might seem like temporary refuge from the cold. But this desperate act of survival can quickly become a death trap.

In May 2024, Vitalij Maceljuch, 36, climbed into a cardboard recycling bin behind a kitchen store in Chester seeking shelter. Hours later, the bin was collected and tipped into a waste lorry. Despite the driver following proper checking procedures (looking into the bin, calling out, and shaking it on the lorry's forks), Mr Maceljuch was not discovered until his body was found on a conveyor belt at a recycling depot in Flintshire. The coroner concluded he died from severe head and neck injuries, likely caused by being crushed.

This tragedy serves as a stark reminder that this is not a theoretical risk. It is a real and present danger that demands continued vigilance from businesses and waste collection services alike.

This video from the Environmental Services Association gives waste operatives an overview of how to check if someone may be sleeping inside or around a waste container and what to do if you do find someone:

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has published comprehensive guidance on [preventing people getting into large waste and recycling bins](#), developed in partnership with the Waste Industry Safety and Health (WISH) Forum. This guidance sets out simple, practical measures that can save lives.

Tim Small, HM Principal Inspector of Health and Safety for Waste and Recycling, said: "No one should die because they sought shelter from the cold. Businesses and waste collectors have a clear responsibility to implement simple checks that can prevent these entirely avoidable tragedies."

The solution lies in two fundamental approaches: preventing access to bins in the first place and checking bins before they are emptied. Neither of these measures requires significant investment or complex procedures. What they require is vigilance, particularly during the colder months when rough sleepers are most likely to seek shelter.

Businesses managing bin storage areas should review their waste-storage arrangements. These are the risk factors that increase the likelihood of tragedy:

- Bin areas that are isolated, dark, and easily accessible
- Bin lids that are unsecured and easy to open
- Storage containing dry materials like cardboard and textiles that might attract those seeking comfortable shelter

- Areas stored for long periods, unemptied and undisturbed

The [Waste Industry Safety and Health Forum's guidance](#) makes clear that waste producers and businesses managing bin storage areas have the primary responsibility for ensuring people do not get into bins. Where practicable, this means locating bins in secure areas, ensuring proper lighting, and training staff to watch for and report signs of people attempting to access bins.

Where there are signs of people getting or trying to get into bins, businesses should use appropriate bin types to minimise risks. Those with lid locks, lid-opening restrictors, fixed or lockable grilles, or other access-restrictors. These security devices must be properly maintained and used at all times. During periods of cold or wet weather, these checks become even more critical.

Employees who discover someone in a bin need to understand how people in such vulnerable circumstances are likely to behave and how to manage the situation and their own safety. There is potential for aggression or violence, and workers should not attempt to restrain anyone, especially if they try to flee. The priority is helping people get out safely and reporting the incident appropriately (including under [RIDDOR regulations](#) if there are fatalities or serious injuries requiring hospital treatment).

As we approach the coldest time of the year, every business that manages commercial waste bins should review their procedures. Recording incidents where people are found in or near bins (even when no injury occurs) and sharing this information between waste producers and collectors can help all parties assess whether their control measures are adequate and identify where improvements are needed.

These are simple measures. They cost little. But they could save a life.

Notes to editors:

- [The Health and Safety Executive](#) (HSE) is Britain's national regulator for workplace health and safety. We are dedicated to protecting people and places, and helping everyone lead safer and healthier lives.
- Full guidance: [Preventing people getting into large waste and recycling bins](#) on HSE.gov.uk
- Industry guidance: [Waste Industry Safety and Health Forum \(WISH\) guidance on managing access to large waste and recycling bins](#) (scroll down to ref no WASTE25).
- Watch: [Situational Awareness: People in Bins](#) (an industry awareness video for waste operatives)
- Posters and information cards: [Awareness post.pdf](#), [Situational awareness – huddle card – fit for work](#).