

# **GUIDELINES FOR MANAGEMENT OF PLASTIC BAG LITTER IN PUBLIC PLACES**

## **INTRODUCTION**

On 23 December 2002, the Environment Protection and Heritage Council agreed to a package of measures to reduce the environmental impact of plastic bags and asked that specific proposals be developed for national action, including ways of reducing the impact of plastic bags as litter. The Best Practice Guidelines for Plastic Bag Litter Management have been developed as a small part of the overall response to the plastic bag litter issues.

High consumption rates of plastic bags have led to increased inappropriate disposal of bags. Plastic bag litter impacts on the community's perception and use of public areas. It can also seriously harm or kill wildlife and domestic animals. In order to address this issue it will also be important to build on community commitment to reduce litter.

Approximately 2% of all litter items are plastic bags, which are particularly prone to becoming litter due to their low weight and ability to 'balloon' and travel in wind. Plastic bag litter can be accidental – arising during management of an intended disposal site (whether a bin or landfill) - or may be due to intentional littering behaviour. Insufficient bin coverage, or inappropriate bin placement, can inadvertently encourage plastic bag littering behaviour.

The following best practice guidelines have been developed to minimise plastic bag litter generation at outdoor public places such as recreational parks, roadside rest stops and car parks, public transport nodes, shopping precincts, sport venues and other places where large gatherings congregate. They are complemented by similar guidelines for plastic bag litter management at landfill sites and complement broader litter management guidelines.

These Guidelines are not designed to be prescriptive and are based on the premise of shared responsibility. They should be disseminated to all stakeholders associated with design and management of public places. The Guidelines are not intended to be onerous for public place managers and consideration should be given to the appropriateness of the guidelines for each site as well as the resources available. The Guidelines specify desired outcomes as well as providing suggested means of achieving plastic bag litter reduction goals.

It is recognised that in many cases the underlying principles and guidelines will already be in place. It is intended that voluntary implementation of the Guidelines by local governments, state and territory governments, public place managers and enforcement agencies will assist a national approach to best practice litter management.

Although focused on plastic bag litter, the guidelines provide advice that may have a broader litter reduction impact. However, the Guidelines are not intended to replace the wider range of existing policies that may impact on litter. Rather they are intended to complement existing litter management and prevention policies, including educational activities of local governments, state and territory governments and enforcement agencies and other public place managers.

## **PUBLIC PLACE LITTER MANAGEMENT**

To assist in undertaking the activities described below public place managers may wish to develop linkages within their community in order to plan a more strategic and coordinated

approach to litter prevention and management. Clear communication is essential to assist the community in understanding litter management systems available to them and what action is required. To support this approach, key user groups and stakeholders should be involved to build understanding and ownership of various public places.

### ***Acceptable Outcome***

Public place managers should take all reasonable steps to:

- Prevent litter through education, appropriate signage, provision of infrastructure suitable to the locality, capacity for action and enforcement.
- Maximise the capture of waste and recyclables in bins.
- Minimise litter entering waterways.
- Prevent litter arising from emptying of bins.
- Regularly clean up litter as a means of promoting cleaner behaviour.

### ***Recommended Controls to Achieve the Outcome***

Local design standards and management procedures need to be developed for waste and recycling infrastructure and services in public places. Litter controls to prevent the escape of loose and lightweight material should include as a minimum:

- a) Analysis of the littering behaviour and locations in the area to inform decisions about waste and cleaning contracting, selection and location of litter and recycling infrastructure<sup>3</sup>, and to indicate public areas that may need to be redesigned or made more attractive and clean for litter prevention purposes. The analysis need not be detailed or formal and can borrow from and integrate studies conducted in other areas to minimise resource requirements. The approach developed should provide for the upgrade of landscape design in areas prone to high levels of litter as well as more frequent cleaning. People generally respond positively to attractive, clean areas by reducing their own littering behaviour, whereas areas of high litter encourage people to consider the area uncared for and unsafe.
- b) Guidelines for the siting of bins for each type of public place that specify appropriate coverage and spacing. Priority should be given to high volume sources and consumption points such as take-away shops, canteens at sports ovals, public BBQs, bus stops, areas of public seating etc. Bin siting, however, will need to be tailored to the specific area and not solely determined by a fixed formula<sup>4</sup>.
- c) A litter education strategy to promote responsible disposal. This can include on-site and off-site elements as appropriate for each site. For some target audiences or in some locations, on-site education and litter management may not only be associated with bins. (For example,

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<sup>3</sup> Note that an Australian Standard for mobile waste containers up to 1700 litres is currently being developed. The standard will include colours for mobile bin bodies and lids. Standardised recycling and garbage bins have the potential to reduce public confusion and facilitate broader based education initiatives for litter management and prevention.

<sup>4</sup> Guidance and training on siting and design of bin systems (BInS®) is available for local councils and public event managers from BIEC. For more information about BInS please contact the Beverage Industry Environment Council on 02 9518 6566 or [biec@biec.com.au](mailto:biec@biec.com.au).

managers of some non-urban park/recreation reserves have purposely not provided bins and successfully promoted the taking of waste home for responsible disposal/recycling. This strategy will only be successful in some areas and any strategy needs to carefully consider local conditions. Money saved can be put towards other services and infrastructure.)

d) Where possible, bins should not be sited in the area of the public place most prone to high winds and urban design principles should be applied to ameliorate wind impacts in new developments.

e) Where feasible, water sensitive urban design concepts should be incorporated into urban design to prevent litter from entering waterways. Such concepts would include planting of vegetation to trap litter, and design of drains so that litter does not have direct access to the waterway.

f) Local guidelines for the design of bins should address prevention of entry by animals, loss of windblown material, minimise vandalism, and provide for recycling infrastructure, cigarette butt disposal and ease of collection. Designs need to take account of the setting. For example:

- A heavy receptacle with a latched lid may be appropriate in an area frequented by possums.
- Outside a takeaway shop, it may be a wheelie bin locked to a stand featuring a mechanism that allows adequate opening of the lid to accept waste, while minimising the potential for windblown litter.
- Where a more aesthetically pleasing design is required bins may be locked inside aesthetic housings featuring openings of an appropriate size and shape for the intended materials.
- Bins in snow-prone areas should be designed to allow full accessibility for litter disposal and maintenance in all seasons.
- Wherever possible bin signage and recycling options should be similar to that used in homes in the area so that it is familiar and understandable.

g) Local guidelines for the emptying of bins and cleaning of sites should be developed. Ideally these two functions take place at the same time so that litter resulting from bin emptying is immediately addressed<sup>5</sup>. In any event, contracts for bin emptying should require a litter-wise approach and immediate attention to inadvertent litter.

Public place cleaning and bin emptying contracts, or their management, should be combined to ensure that the most effective overall approaches are taken. This cooperation could also be extended to those who are responsible for parks and gardens. Specifications for collection frequency should be based on best available information, with the flexibility to make adjustments so as to avoid overflowing bins. Site cleaning should be regular and frequent enough that the most users encounter a litter-free site, with frequency adjusted at high usage times eg weekends and summer time at beach locations. This is because the level of litter already at a site is a significant determinant of littering behaviour.

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of contract clauses that incorporate these functions can be provided on request to the Department of Urban Services, ACT NOWaste, email: [no.waste@act.gov.au](mailto:no.waste@act.gov.au).

h) Public place managers should regularly inspect sites to monitor cleaning and collection services, initiate the replacement of damaged bins, and to recommend further improvements for litter prevention.

i) An approval system for holders of public events should require the provision of specified levels of waste management infrastructure and services. The aim would be to cater for all waste materials generated in a manner that minimises litter and maximises recycling. Site cleaning services should aim to minimise litter generated during the event and return the site to a litter-free state.

j) Appropriate litter law enforcement by an appropriate authority. This requires training of enforcement staff and setting of effective penalties. Penalties could involve community service (litter clean up) work orders or public naming of offenders and/or fines. The public should also be educated on what constitutes a litter offence and how they are handled. Litter enforcement procedures and legislation should be well publicised and provide a clear message.

k) The public should be provided with an appropriate phone number for reporting litter matters. This may include a local number and/or a state territory based enforcement agency number.