

Enhanced package of cutting-edge technology to combat waste crime

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New surveillance, detection and investigative capabilities rolled out by Environment Agency to tackle waste crime.

Waste criminals will be detected and stopped before they even get started, thanks to a new package of surveillance and investigative measures announced by the Environment Agency (EA) today (Friday 20 February 2026).

As part of a major crackdown on waste crime, an enhanced 33-strong drone squad will now track down illegal dumps from the air. The drones, some of which are being upgraded to carry laser mapping technology, will capture evidence to help secure successful prosecutions.

The Environment Agency has also developed a new screening tool that enables EA officers to scan and cross-check lorry licence applications against waste permit records - with suspect operators flagged before they have a chance to move waste illegally.

The new capabilities are backed by a reinforced Joint Unit for Waste Crime - now a 20-strong group of specialists working closely with law enforcement partners to dismantle organised criminal networks. This builds on a record year for waste enforcement, with 751 illegal waste sites shut down.

Phil Davies, Head of the Joint Unit for Waste Crime Unit said:

Illegal waste dumping is appalling, and we are determined to turn the tide on this heinous crime.

With organised criminals becoming ever more sophisticated, we are adopting new technologies to find and, importantly, stop them.

Through the greater use of drones, stronger partnerships and more officers on the ground, we will build on our action so far and send a clear message to those committing waste crimes - we will stop you.

Environment Secretary Emma Reynolds said:

This Government is aggressively pursuing waste criminals and bringing offenders to justice.

By increasing the Environment Agency's enforcement budget by over 50% to £15.6 million, we're investing in cutting-edge technology that allows us to shut down illegal operators faster and more effectively.

From advanced laser-mapping to drone surveillance and new vehicle-scanning tools, this technology is helping us track, expose and stop waste crime, ensuring those who blight our communities are held to account.

Greater drone surveillance and Lidar mapping

The Environment Agency has stepped up its use of drone surveillance, with a total of 33 trained pilots putting a greater focus on waste crime. Since July last year, the EA's drones were in the air for 272 hours.

Drones will soon be equipped with Light Detection and Ranging (LIDAR) technology, which fires millions of laser points per second towards the ground below to create highly detailed maps of illegal waste sites.

Currently flown from a dedicated aircraft mainly to capture flood information, moving Lidar onto drones will allow even more precise mapping, pinpointing exactly where waste has been dumped. These maps can be used as evidence in court to and help bring waste criminals to justice.

New screening scans Office of the Traffic Commissioner data

Each week, the Office of the Traffic Commissioner publishes reports, listing all new applications for Heavy Goods Vehicle operator licences.

New software checks those applications against the EA's public register, identifying which operators hold waste permits and waste carrier licences. This enables EA officers to identify and target potential offenders before they begin operating.

The new tool has already been trialled successfully in East Anglia, where it helped the agency uncover a waste company that had secretly relocated its HGV operations to evade enforcement. The software flagged the new operating centre within a week, allowing EA officers to intervene before a licence was approved.

Recruiting more officers to the Joint Unit for Waste Crime

The Environment Agency has also increased the size of the Joint Unit for Waste Crime from 13 to 20 specialists, including former police officers.

Alongside EA enforcement officers across the country, the Unit brings together multiple organisations, including police forces and the National Crime Agency, to disrupt serious and organised waste crime.

This builds on enforcement action taken by the EA up to March 2025, which included 221 prosecutions against waste criminals.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/enhanced-package-of-cutting-edgetechnology-to-combat-waste-crime>