

Government response: Clinical waste operator breaches environmental permits

Healthcare Environmental Services, which services the NHS and operates six sites across England, has been found in breach of environmental permits by the Environment Agency (EA) .

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) is leading on the government response whilst the EA is taking enforcement action against the operator.

An Environment Agency spokesperson said:

The Environment Agency has found Healthcare Environmental Services to be in breach of its environmental permits at sites which deal with clinical waste. We are taking enforcement action against the operator, which includes clearance of the excess waste, and have launched a criminal investigation.

We are supporting the Government and the NHS to ensure there is no disruption to public services and for alternative plans to be put in place for hospitals affected to dispose of their waste safely.

Further briefing:

- The Environment Agency has found Healthcare Environmental Services in breach of its environmental permits at 4 of its 6 sites which deal with clinical waste – by having more waste on site than their permit allows and storing waste inappropriately.
- We are taking enforcement action against the operator to clear the excess waste from their sites and bring the company back into compliance with their permits.
- As part of our enforcement activity, we have partially suspended the company's permit at one of their sites. This will prevent them from accepting any more incinerator-only waste in order for them to clear the backlog of waste on-site. We are also progressing with enforcement action at the other non-compliant sites.
- We are supporting the government and the NHS to ensure there is no disruption to public services and alternative plans are put in place for hospitals affected to dispose of their waste safely.

- The offending sites are not accessible to the general public and there is no risk to public health or the environment.
- It is the company's responsibility to clear its sites and operate legally. As the regulator, we have set out a timeline for clearance of the waste and are carrying out regular inspections at each of the company's sites to monitor the situation.
- There is industry wide agreement that overall there is sufficient incineration capacity. Incinerator shutdowns do occur for maintenance, but this is mostly planned and companies should have contingency plans in place. We have recently carried out an audit of permitted sites dealing with clinical waste which indicate a high level of compliance in this sector – the majority of sites are operating at the expected level or above.
- The Environment Agency has taken a range of action with the company to bring their sites back into compliance but they have repeatedly breached permits and continued to operate unlawfully. As a result, in addition to our enforcement activity to clear the sites, the EA has launched a criminal investigation.