

Whose rubbish is it now?

Teacher's notes, card activity, worksheet and answers

Ages: Upper key stage 2 (years 5 and 6, ages 9 to 11); Key stage 3 (years 7 to 9, ages 11 to 14).

Subjects: Citizenship, Geography. Time: 30 minutes.

It opens with a short story to read aloud. The Hart family need to get rid of an old sofa and two broken chairs. In groups, pupils put the four places on the sofa's journey in order, then match each place to who must check what there and what goes wrong if nobody does. A plenary and an exit task close the lesson.

Most pupils (and plenty of adults) haven't met this idea before. Whoever hands waste over has a legal duty to check it goes to someone allowed to take it. This is the duty of care. If you give your rubbish to someone who dumps it, you can be fined too.

Learning objectives

For the class: We are learning to explain who is responsible for rubbish as it travels from a home to a recycling plant.

Success criteria, on the worksheet with tick boxes:

- I can put the steps of a waste journey in order.
- I can say who must check something at each step.
- I can explain why the person who gives rubbish away is still responsible for it.

By the end, children will know and understand that:

- waste passes through several hands on its way from a home to a recycling plant: a carrier, a transfer station (where waste is sorted and sent on) and the plant itself, and everyone who handles it has a check to make;
- the person who gives waste away stays responsible for checking who takes it, and can be fined if it's dumped, even though they didn't dump it themselves;
- registration and paperwork help stop fly-tipping (dumping rubbish where it shouldn't be). Only people who are allowed to carry waste should do it, and a record of who had the waste means dumped rubbish can be traced back.

Curriculum links

Citizenship, key stage 3. "The nature of rules and laws and the justice system", from the national curriculum programme of study. The duty of care is a law that applies to ordinary households, which makes it a good first example. Citizenship is compulsory at key stages 3 and 4 only, so at key stage 2 the activity fits the time a school gives to PSHE (personal, social, health and economic education) and to rules and responsibilities.

Geography, key stages 2 and 3. Human geography: the key stage 2 programme names "types of settlement and land use", and key stage 3 asks pupils to understand how human activity changes "landscapes, environments and the climate". Waste moving from homes to sorting sites and recycling plants, and what dumping does to a field or a lane, sit in both.

Timings

Thirty minutes in all. Without the plenary and exit task it runs in 20.

- 5 minutes. Read the story aloud (under "How to run it"). Ask who has seen rubbish dumped in a lane or a park, and who they think is to blame.
- 3 minutes. Read the three "What is...?" cards together.
- 8 minutes. Groups put the four place cards in order, then lay each check card and each "If nobody checks" card beside its place.
- 4 minutes. Read "Rex's offer" aloud and take answers.
- 5 minutes. Pupils answer the four worksheet questions.
- 5 minutes. The plenary questions, then the exit task at the foot of the worksheet.

What to print

- Pages 5 to 7, the three card sheets, 17 cards: one set for each group of three or four. Card is better than paper if you want to use them again.
- Page 8, the worksheet: one for each pupil.
- Pages 1 to 4, and pages 9 and 10, these teacher's notes and the answers: one copy for you. They hold all of these notes, so you can run the lesson from the printout alone.

How to run it

Set the scene

Read this aloud before you hand out any cards. It's also the "Start here" card at the top of the first card sheet, so each group has it on the table.

The Hart family are clearing out their shed. It is full of cobwebs and old junk. In the corner is a big, saggy sofa. Next to it are two broken chairs.

"These have to go," says Mum. "But they are far too big for the bin."

Leo looks at the sofa. "Can't we leave it by the road?" he asks.

"No," says Mum. "Dumping rubbish where it shouldn't be is called fly-tipping. It is against the law."

Grandad scratches his head. "When I was young, we gave our junk to anyone with a van."

Mum frowns. "If we don't check who takes it, and they dump it, we could be in trouble too."

So where will the sofa go? Who will carry it? And what happens to it after that?

Your job: put the place cards in order to show the sofa's journey. Then decide who must check what at each step, and what goes wrong if nobody checks.

The cards

Cut the cards up before the lesson and keep each group's set in an envelope. Besides "Start here", there are four kinds: four places, four "Who checks?" cards, four "If nobody checks" cards, and four discussion cards. The sets print mixed up, so the order on the sheet gives nothing away.

Start with the journey. Most groups get home and the van quickly and argue about the transfer station, which is a good argument to have. Once each group has an order, ask them to lay the check cards

alongside. Then the “If nobody checks” cards. Stop on the Harts’ card and ask: the man with the van dumped the sofa, so why did the Harts get a fine?

“Rex’s offer” is the discussion card. Expect some pupils to say yes because it’s cheap. Push on what “no paperwork” means. A carrier who is allowed to take waste can show they’re registered, and a business taking waste away fills in a waste transfer note (the record of who handed what waste to whom).

For younger or less confident readers, use only the four place cards and the four check cards, and read them aloud.

To stretch older pupils, swap the Hart family for a café clearing out old chairs. A business has the same duty, and on top of it must fill in a waste transfer note for each load and keep it for two years. Ask what the café should keep, and why an inspector might ask to see it.

Plenary

Ask these in order, from what happened to why it matters. The model answers are under Answers.

1. Who was responsible for the sofa while it was still in the shed?
2. Name one person on the journey who must check something. What do they check?
3. What should the Harts have asked Rex?
4. Why might a cheap price be a warning sign?
5. How do registration and paperwork help stop fly-tipping?

Then the exit task at the foot of the worksheet. Each pupil finishes the sentence “Our rubbish is still our job until...” on their own.

Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

Wales has the same household duty of care as England (section 34(2A) covers both). Carriers register with Natural Resources Wales. Wales has its own fixed penalty for householders, added to the Act in 2019 as section 34ZB.

Scotland puts the household duty in section 34(2) of its own version of the Act, and the Scottish Government’s duty of care code of practice, updated in 2026, has a chapter for householders. Carriers register with SEPA (the Scottish Environment Protection Agency). England’s fixed penalty rules don’t apply. Scotland’s own householder fixed penalty, section 34ZC, came from the Circular Economy (Scotland) Act 2024 and is only partly in force so far.

Northern Ireland uses different law: the duty of care is in Article 5 of the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, which gives householders the same duty in Article 5(2A). Carriers register with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The lesson’s idea, check who takes your rubbish, is the same everywhere.

Sources

Environmental Protection Act 1990, section 34, [legislation.gov.uk](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/43/section/34).

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/43/section/34>

Waste duty of care code of practice, GOV.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/waste-duty-of-care-code-of-practice>

Guidance for local authorities on household waste duty of care fixed penalty notices, Defra, GOV.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/household-waste-duty-of-care-fixed-penalty-notice-guidance/guidance-for-local-authorities-on-household-waste-duty-of-care-fixed-penalty-notices>

Dispose of business or commercial waste, GOV.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/managing-your-waste-an-overview>

Dispose of business or commercial waste: waste transfer notes, GOV.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/dispose-business-commercial-waste/waste-transfer-notes>

Register or renew as a waste carrier, broker or dealer, GOV.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/waste-carrier-or-broker-registration>

Waste: environmental permits, GOV.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/waste-environmental-permits>

Reporting fly-tipping, large-scale dumping or other waste crimes, GOV.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/report-flytipping>

Environmental Protection Act 1990, section 34ZB (householder fixed penalties, Wales), legislation.gov.uk.

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/43/section/34ZB>

Environmental Protection Act 1990, section 34ZC (householder fixed penalties, Scotland), legislation.gov.uk.

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/43/section/34ZC>

Managing controlled waste, duty of care: code of practice (Scotland), Scottish Government, gov.scot.

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/duty-care-code-practice-managing-controlled-waste/>

Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, legislation.gov.uk.

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1997/2778/article/5>

The national curriculum in England: framework document (Figure 1, which subjects are compulsory at each key stage), Department for Education, GOV.UK.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7db9e9e5274a5eaea65f58/Master_final_national_curriculum_28_Nov.pdf

National curriculum in England: citizenship programmes of study, Department for Education, GOV.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-citizenship-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-citizenship-programmes-of-study-for-key-stages-3-and-4>

National curriculum in England: geography programmes of study, Department for Education, GOV.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-geography-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-geography-programmes-of-study>

Cut along the dashed lines.

Start here

The Hart family are clearing out their shed. It is full of cobwebs and old junk. In the corner is a big, saggy sofa. Next to it are two broken chairs.

"These have to go," says Mum. "But they are far too big for the bin."

Leo looks at the sofa. "Can't we leave it by the road?" he asks.

"No," says Mum. "Dumping rubbish where it shouldn't be is called fly-tipping. It is against the law."

Grandad scratches his head. "When I was young, we gave our junk to anyone with a van."

Mum frowns. "If we don't check who takes it, and they dump it, we could be in trouble too."

So where will the sofa go? Who will carry it? And what happens to it after that?

Your job: put the place cards in order to show the sofa's journey. Then decide who must check what at each step, and what goes wrong if nobody checks.

Place: at the transfer station

Jo drops the load at Puddlewick Transfer Station. Here waste is sorted into piles and sent on.

Place: at home

The Hart family clear out their shed. They find an old sofa and two broken chairs. They are too big for the bin.

Place: at the recycling plant

The wood from the chairs arrives at Northbrook Recycling Plant. It is chopped up to make new boards.

Place: in the van

Jo drives a van for Puddlewick Clearance. Jo loads the sofa and chairs and drives away.

Cut along the dashed lines.

Who checks? Jo, the waste carrier

Am I allowed to carry waste? I must be registered. I must only take this rubbish to a place that is allowed to take it.

Who checks? Ben, who works at the recycling plant

Is this the waste the paperwork says it is? I must check what arrives before we use it.

Who checks? The Hart family

Is the person taking our rubbish allowed to carry it? We should ask to see that they are a registered waste carrier.

Who checks? Priya, who runs the transfer station

Is my site allowed to take this waste? I need a permit. I must only send it on to places that are allowed to take it.

If nobody checks

Nobody checks a load. Old paint is hidden in it, and it spoils a whole batch of wood.

If nobody checks

A site with no permit takes far too much. The rubbish piles up, it smells, and rats move in.

If nobody checks

Jo tips the load in a field to save time. The field is spoiled, and Jo's firm can be taken to court.

If nobody checks

The Harts give the sofa to a man with a van. He dumps it in a lane. The council finds the Harts' name and they get a fine.

Cut along the dashed lines.

What is duty of care?

If you hand your rubbish to someone, it is your job to check they are allowed to take it. That job is called a duty of care.

What is a waste carrier?

A person or firm who moves other people's rubbish. They must be registered. That means their name is on an official list of people allowed to do the job.

What is a permit?

A permit is a written OK from the people in charge. A place that sorts or recycles waste needs one before it can take any.

Rex's offer

Rex knocks on the door. 'I'll take that sofa for you. Cheap, cash only. No paperwork.' What should the Harts do?

Worksheet

Name:

Your task

The Hart family need to get rid of an old sofa and two broken chairs. Put the cards in order to show their journey. Then decide who must check what at each step.

We are learning to explain who is responsible for rubbish as it travels from a home to a recycling plant.

- ☐ I can put the steps of a waste journey in order.
- ☐ I can say who must check something at each step.
- ☐ I can explain why the person who gives rubbish away is still responsible for it.

1. Put the four places in order. Write them in the boxes, from where the rubbish starts to where it ends up.

1	2	3	4
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2. Pick one place. Who must check something there, and what must they check?

3. Rex offers to take the sofa. He is cheap, and he has no paperwork. What should the Harts do? Why?

4. Rex dumps the sofa in a lane. Who could be in trouble? Why?

Exit task. Finish this sentence.

Our rubbish is still our job until...

Answers

The journey, in order, with the cards that go with each place:

1. At home. Who checks: The Hart family. Is the person taking our rubbish allowed to carry it? We should ask to see that they are a registered waste carrier. If nobody checks: The Harts give the sofa to a man with a van. He dumps it in a lane. The council finds the Harts' name and they get a fine.
2. In the van. Who checks: Jo, the waste carrier. Am I allowed to carry waste? I must be registered. I must only take this rubbish to a place that is allowed to take it. If nobody checks: Jo tips the load in a field to save time. The field is spoiled, and Jo's firm can be taken to court.
3. At the transfer station. Who checks: Priya, who runs the transfer station. Is my site allowed to take this waste? I need a permit. I must only send it on to places that are allowed to take it. If nobody checks: A site with no permit takes far too much. The rubbish piles up, it smells, and rats move in.
4. At the recycling plant. Who checks: Ben, who works at the recycling plant. Is this the waste the paperwork says it is? I must check what arrives before we use it. If nobody checks: Nobody checks a load. Old paint is hidden in it, and it spoils a whole batch of wood.

The worksheet:

1. Put the four places in order. Write them in the boxes, from where the rubbish starts to where it ends up. At home, then in the van, then at the transfer station, then at the recycling plant.
2. Pick one place. Who must check something there, and what must they check? Any one of the four checks on the cards. For example, at home the Hart family must check that the person taking their rubbish is a registered waste carrier.
3. Rex offers to take the sofa. He is cheap, and he has no paperwork. What should the Harts do? Why? Say no, and find someone who is allowed to carry waste: a registered waste carrier, the council's collection, or the tip (the household recycling centre). A cheap price with no paperwork is a warning sign.
4. Rex dumps the sofa in a lane. Who could be in trouble? Why? Rex, for dumping it. The Harts could be in trouble too, because they didn't check he was allowed to take it. They can be fined even though they didn't dump it themselves.

The exit task:

Our rubbish is still our job until we hand it to someone who is allowed to take it, like the council's bin collection or a registered waste carrier. Even then, we should check where it's going.

The plenary:

1. Who was responsible for the sofa while it was still in the shed? The Hart family. It is their rubbish, and it stays their job until they hand it to someone allowed to take it.
2. Name one person on the journey who must check something. What do they check? Any of the four. For example, Jo must be a registered waste carrier and must only take the load to a place allowed to take it.
3. What should the Harts have asked Rex? Whether he is a registered waste carrier, and where he will take the sofa. If he can't show he's registered, they should say no.
4. Why might a cheap price be a warning sign? Taking waste to a proper site costs money. Someone who charges much less than everyone else might be planning to dump it instead.

5. How do registration and paperwork help stop fly-tipping? Registration means only people allowed to carry waste do the job. Paperwork records who had the waste, so dumped rubbish can be traced back to them.

The law behind it, for you. Section 34 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 puts a duty of care on anyone who imports, produces, carries, keeps, treats, or disposes of waste, or controls it as a dealer or broker. For a household, the duty (section 34(2A), in England and Wales) is to take reasonable steps to hand household waste only to someone authorised to take it: the council's collection, a registered waste carrier, or a site with a permit or a registered exemption. Putting rubbish out for the council's bin collection needs no checks. In England, a council can give a householder who breaks the duty a fixed penalty notice (a fine paid instead of going to court). The amounts, and the advice that councils shouldn't fine people for minor breaches, are in Defra's guidance for councils in the sources. Breaking the duty is also a criminal offence, and a court can fine anyone convicted of it (section 34(6)). Businesses have the same duty and must also complete a waste transfer note for each load and keep a copy for two years.

The cards simplify in two places. A site that sorts or recycles waste needs an environmental permit or a registered exemption, and the cards say only "permit". And the checks at the transfer station and the plant are part of the same duty of care, which runs all along the journey.