

BRUSSEL (POU)BELLE

POSITION ON PUBLIC CLEANLINESS AND WASTE MANAGEMENT IN BRUSSELS

Introduction: Who are we, and what do we want to achieve

Brussels is a city we're proud to call home — vibrant, creative, diverse, and full of life. Unfortunately, Brussels faces a persistent waste problem. Littered sidewalks, overflowing bins and illegal dumping frustrate residents and visitors every day, make public spaces feel neglected and less safe, and damage the image of the capital. Clean streets are not a luxury — they are essential for a city that is safe, welcoming, and a source of pride.

BRUSSEL (POU)BELLE is a politically neutral collective of committed residents from most Brussels municipalities, including Anderlecht, Brussels City, Etterbeek, Forest, Ixelles, Jette, Molenbeek, Saint-Gilles, and Schaerbeek. In a short period of time, we've mobilised more than 1,000¹ citizens who are fed up with the daily littering of our sidewalks and public spaces. It's time to act.

Our mission as a citizen collective is clear: we want to influence Brussels politics to transform Brussels into a cleaner, safer, greener, and more liveable region. As the problem of cleanliness in the Brussels-Capital Region is structural, it requires structural solutions, and strong cooperation between citizens, authorities, politicians, and all other stakeholders involved.

This document was initially created to support the elected representatives at the municipal and regional levels to help develop a strong chapter on cleanliness in future coalition agreements. As the situation in the Brussels-Capital Region deteriorates, all the points remain more relevant than ever.

Cleanliness as a priority

Cleanliness must be a top priority for the regional and municipal governments.

Evidence² shows that low levels of street cleanliness affect the quality of the living environment, hamper attempts to create more socially mixed neighbourhoods and social cohesion, and are commonly associated with other forms of disorder and crime (e.g., drug-related violence, traffic offences). A lack of cleanliness also gives the wrong impression that anything goes in Brussels. This must stop. Brussels residents, who face one of the highest living costs in Belgium, as well as commuters and (inter)national tourists, deserve a clean and safe city where basic rules related to public space are respected.

During the political campaign for the last municipal elections (2024), all political parties agreed that cleanliness should be a priority. They were also largely aligned on the key initiatives that should be implemented (see our pre-election questionnaire³). Now it's time to materialise these good intentions and translate them into concrete action and visible results. Cleanliness must be one of the top priorities for the whole Brussels-Capital Region.

¹ <https://democratie.brussels/suggestions/i-141?locale=nl>

² Andrea Bortolotti, « Refuse of the city: rethinking waste management in Brussels », Brussels Studies, <http://journals.openedition.org/brussels/5680>

³ See <https://linktr.ee/brusselpoubelle>, section Politicians Questionnaire

We are ready to collaborate on solutions.

Institutional simplification

Responsibilities for waste management in Brussels are fragmented, ambiguous and highly complex. This too often leads to unclarity on who is responsible, a lack of transparency towards Brussels residents and conflicting agendas of different actors. The inefficient collaboration and absurdly high number of parties involved is particularly evident around train stations (e.g., Gare du Midi and Gare du Nord), borders between the municipalities, and regional roads⁴. The key to a clean Brussels-Capital Region is institutional simplification and clarification of responsibilities. Unclear and untransparent task division can no longer be an excuse for dirty streets and we can no longer accept the organically grown overlap of competences. Tasks need to be clearly assigned, and transparently communicated.

We advocate for:

- Clarification of responsibilities
 - Abandon the obsolete and illogical **street classification system** (regional vs. municipal roads). Municipalities should be end-to-end responsible for clean-up and control/enforcement within their territory.
 - **Coordinate the policy and general approach to waste management** for the entire Brussels-Capital Region at the regional level.
 - Introduce **formal agreements between actors** on who is responsible for what (at a sufficiently granular level).
 - **Allocate resources** in alignment with the agreed split of tasks.
 - Use **Clean.Brussels** structure: Facilitate a periodic exchange between the relevant parties. The Clean.Brussels framework should be revived and used for periodic consultations among key stakeholders, creating a space for discussion and problem-solving.
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Waste management

A more efficient, flexible and modern waste management system is needed. The current obsolete system of “door-to-door” collection of bags does not suit everyone and causes many problems related to cleanliness of public spaces. Garbage bags should gradually be replaced with waste containers⁵.

We advocate for:

- Install a sufficiently dense network of **underground containers** in neighbourhoods where possible and contextually relevant; use **above-ground containers** elsewhere. Initiate pilot projects in a variety of neighbourhoods.

⁴ See the report by City Tools commissioned by Net Brussel.

⁵ This solution was indicated as clear preference by practically all the political parties; see our pre-election questionnaire³.

- **Monitor** these underground containers: use sensors to measure fill levels to optimise collection; install cameras to deter disturbance around the containers. Initially, on-site staff can guide and monitor.
- **Improve the current system:** Adapt the frequency of waste collection according to each neighbourhood's needs and deploy rapid response and quality control teams. Organise local actions for bulky waste. Make waste containers (above-the-ground) compulsory for retailers exceeding a certain volume and increase controls.
- (Alternatively or on an interim basis) **introduce a single collection point for commercial waste**, located in a closed, controlled space, and accessible only to those who sign a mandatory commercial contract with the relevant waste collector.
- **Integrate waste management into the design of public spaces:** improve the visibility of bins, containers, public toilets, sorting centres and mobile recycling parks.
- **Recycparks**
 - Improve **accessibility of Recyparks:** increase the number of Recyparks and spread them across the Region (not only on the outskirts), abolish the division between regional and municipal recycling parks to ensure all Recyparks are accessible for all Brussels residents.
 - Evaluate the **pricing policy** in line with the goal to maximise the share of waste brought to the controlled environment of the Recyparks (vs. dumped in the streets).
 - Bring **mobile recycling parks** to neighbourhoods more often (monthly) and encourage donation and reuse zones.
- **Clean pedestrian walkways** thoroughly, including with water.
- **Recycling**
 - **Support recycling initiatives** in the Region (including the reuse of materials from container parks and regional worksites) and promote waste sorting and recycling applications such as the Looping app⁶.
 - Introduce a **consignment system for cans and plastic bottles**, in collaboration with the other regions.

Prevention and awareness

Unfortunately, too many people in Brussels are not very civic-minded when it comes to public cleanliness. Education and awareness-raising actions are therefore essential. The municipalities and the Region have an important role to play in this respect.

We advocate for:

- **Education**
 - Provide a **basic information package for all the new residents:** each new resident should receive, upon registration in the new municipality, an information booklet

⁶ <https://www.looping.green/>

about cleanliness rules, penalties, collection schedules, etc. Make such info available in as many languages as relevant given the local sociodemographic mix (“courtesy translations”); follow up with targeted on-site visits to areas known to be problematic from a cleanliness perspective.

- Make rules and best practices on cleanliness more prominent in the mandatory **integration programs** for newcomers.
- Incentivise **cooperation between the schools and municipalities**: co-organise regular clean-up and awareness-raising actions with children (e.g., Operatie Recyclage⁷); include rules on public space and waste management as part of civic education in schools.
- Citizen-led involvement (bottom-up)
 - Appoint “**neighbourhood managers**” or “**cleanliness ambassadors**” who act as a bridge between citizens and public administrations and play a key role in increasing control within the neighbourhood, enhancing communication with the local population, and examining problems and proposing solutions.
 - Roll-out the concept of “**comités de propreté / netheidscomités**” as already successfully implemented in several municipalities⁸. Ensure follow-up meetings at least every six months.
 - Organise (or facilitate the organisation of) **regular local clean-up actions** (similar to the “Wake up, Clean Up” initiative⁹). Provide participants with symbolic rewards (e.g., a voucher from a local retailer or a new tree in their street).
 - **Motivate citizens** to clean up the area in front of their homes.
- Targeted adjustments of public spaces
 - **Enhance and maintain public spaces**: Attractive, well-kept spaces encourage residents to take pride in their environment and reduce littering. Examples include green areas, murals and other community art projects.
 - Direct behaviour positively through **nudging**, such as arrows leading to litter bins, or temporary pavement stencils discouraging public urination or dog fouling.
- Widely **communicate** about actions and the impact achieved using traditional and social media channels; collaborate with influencers from diverse social groups to reinforce the message.

Enforcement and consequence management

No rules are respected without effective enforcement (cf. traffic safety rules). One of our priorities is to step up enforcement on littering and illegal waste dumping. Stricter, more targeted, and more frequent controls, as well as effective penalties, are essential to raise public awareness and reduce tolerance of littering.

⁷ <https://leefmilieu.brussels/onderwijs/operatierecyclage>

⁸ For example, in Brussels City: <https://www.brussels.be/cleaning-committees-1>, or in Ixelles:

<https://www.ixelles.be/site/864-Comites-proprete>

⁹ <https://www.arp-gan.be/en/wake-up-clean-up>

We advocate for:

- Efficient fine system & consequence management
 - **Maximise the use of existing fine systems** (e.g., communal administrative sanctions or communal taxes).
 - **Fine offenders immediately**, without prior warning (which is an administrative burden and often an excuse not to fine at all).
 - Make **community service** mandatory for illegal dumpers (subject to changes in legislation¹⁰).
 - **Increase the number of controls** to increase the probability of being caught, including for inappropriately deposited waste bags.
 - For **contractors** found guilty of illegal dumping, **withdraw their authorisation to operate** in the Brussels-Capital Region, in addition to a fine, and **exclude them from public tenders**. Also, apply an additional fine to the lead contractor in case the offense is done by one of its subcontractors.
- More and effective resources
 - **Empower and train more regional & municipal staff to (be authorised to) impose fines**, or even privatising enforcement (as already done for parking fines). This would increase the probability of being caught and alleviate the workload of police forces.
 - Extend the **responsibilities of the “gardiens de la paix/gemeenschapswachters”** to address people for their misbehaviour when seen littering (and if possible, authorise them to issue fines for such behaviour).
 - Increase **on-street presence of police officers** and instruct them to also act on cleanliness offences.
- Use of data & smart technologies
 - Use **smart mobile cameras** in places where illegal dumping is known to occur frequently.
 - **Leverage data** (e.g., from FixMyStreet app, complaints from citizens) to identify problematic areas and focus more efforts there. Ensure such data is accessible by all relevant actors across the entire Region.
- Increase focus on commercial activities (“low-hanging fruits”)
 - Apply stricter **controls on all commercial actors** with respect to the compliance with mandatory waste collection contracts. Frequently verify that the declared volume under the contract is in line with the expected volume for their respective business activity. Ensure that new commercial actors are well aware of their obligations before being allowed to start their activity.
 - Revise the **enforcement competences of Bruxelles Propreté** in that respect (conflict of interest as they are also active in the commercial waste collection).

¹⁰ As we understand it, this measure would require a change in legislation at the regional level, as community service can currently only be carried out on a voluntary basis.

- Enforce the **obligation to keep the sidewalk in front of their premises clean**¹¹.
- Control vendors on the usage of **banned non-reusable plastic bags** (e.g., open-air market vendors).

Efficient management

Efficient management of public resources is crucial to make a lasting and visible difference, especially given current budget constraints at both the regional and municipal levels.

We advocate for:

- Define ambitious, measurable objectives (KPIs)
 - **Set neighbourhood-level outcome targets** (e.g., zero cans in the streets), rather than input targets (e.g., frequency of cleaning). Measure progress frequently against these objectives, using state-of-the-art technologies.
 - **Report publicly on progress** towards these targets.
- Insight generation and sharing
 - **Research the underlying drivers** of littering at a sufficiently granular level (e.g., through local questionnaires) in partnership with the urban planning or sociology departments of VUB/ULB or with specialised consultancies.
 - Make better **use of available data** (e.g., mine and share citizen-sourced FixMyStreet data across all actors, including citizens) to identify hotspots and target efforts.
- Bruxelles Propreté functioning
 - **Abolish the “fini fini” rule** (teams return home as soon as their route is finished, regardless of the time of the day), which discourages rigour and increases accident risk.
 - Carry out **periodic, preferably external, evaluations** of the operations of Bruxelles Propreté to identify areas for improvement and provide targeted recommendations.
- Budget management: Optimise budgets and **reinvest fine revenues** in cleanliness.

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¹¹ Article 17 of the Police Regulations, https://www.bruxelles.be/sites/default/files/bxl/Reglement_de_police_-_Politiereglement.pdf