

Low Smoke Zone FAQ's

Frequently Asked Questions about low smoke coal and the low smoke zone.

1. General

What is the legal basis for the ban on smoky coal in the Cork Low Smoke Zone?

The sale, marketing, distribution and burning of bituminous (smoky) coal is prohibited under the provisions of the Air Pollution Act (Marketing, Sale, Distribution and Burning of Specified Fuels) (Amendment) Regulations 2016.

Why ban smoky coal?

The burning of smoky coal releases PM2.5 particles into the environment. In built up areas, as well as in private houses, these can become quite concentrated, and have a detrimental effect on health. PM2.5 gets deep into the lungs and into the bloodstream, where it is carried around the body. Other toxic substances present in coal are cadmium, arsenic and mercury.

What are the health issues associated with burning smoky coal?

PM2.5 particles released during the burning of smoky coal can spark asthma attacks, and can cause a range of respiratory problems such as bronchitis, bronchiolitis (affects one in four children under the age of 2), pneumonia, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer and others. PM2.5 has also been associated with strokes, heart attacks, and other cardiovascular conditions. The burning of smoky coal affects the external environment, but also the **internal environment** of homes where it is burned.

How do I find out if I am in the Cork Low Smoke Zone?

To establish if you are living in a low smoke zone, please see the [Map of the Cork Low Smoke Zone](#) or see the list of [Townlands in the Cork Low Smoke Zone](#).

What can/ cannot be burned in the low smoke zone?

Please see guidelines for [Fuels in the low smoke zone](#).

2. Householder in the Low Smoke Zone

Is it illegal to burn smoky coal in a low smoke zone?

Yes, Article 6 of the Regulations prohibits the burning of smoky coal in the low smoke zone.

What is “low smoke fuel”?

Low Smoke fuel is a fuel which doesn't emit black smoke. Black smoke contains high levels of PM2.5, which is harmful to the environment and to human health. Low Smoke fuel emits some smoke while igniting, but when burning efficiently, emits very little smoke.

Is “Low Smoke fuel” really smoke-free when burned?

“Low Smoke fuel” emits some smoke when burned, especially in the initial stages before it reaches a high temperature. What it doesn't emit is “black smoke”, which is high in toxins, including PM2.5, a particulate matter that is injurious to health.

What may I burn in my home in the low smoke zone?

You may burn any “low smoke fuel”. You may burn “low smoke fuel” as well as untreated wood, turf, peat briquettes, dried wooden logs, wood pellets etc. Please see guidelines for [Fuels in the low smoke zone](#)

How do I know if my fuel is low smoke?

All fuel which is sold as “low smoke coal” should come in sealed bags carrying the wording “SMOKELESS FUEL — Contents comply with the Air Pollution Act Regulations”. If it is not at least printed with the word “Smokeless” you should not burn it. In addition to this you may burn turf, peat briquettes and wood, but not treated timber. Please see guidelines for [Fuels in the low smoke zone](#)

What may I not burn in my home?

You may **not** burn bituminous coal, which is often marketed as “Polish Coal” or “Columbian Coal” or “Texan Coal” or “Russian Coal” or “Premium Coal” or “House Coal”. In addition, you may not burn scrap timber which has been treated, painted, varnished, lacquered, glued, or had any substance added. You may burn wood logs/blocks. These should be dry,

to avoid excess emissions of creosote, which can build up in your chimney and lead to chimney fires. A creosote chimney fire can burn hot enough to crack a chimney flue or even the chimney breast.

NOTE: It is an offence (regardless of whether you live inside or outside the low smoke zone) to burn domestic waste.

Is it true that low smoke fuel products are more difficult to light than Polish coal?

Low Smoke fuel will take slightly longer to light than Polish coal, but the method is the same. Start with firelighters and kindling. How much kindling you use will depend on your fuel. If you are using peat or timber briquettes or turf as a starting fuel you will need less kindling. Avoid loading your fire with low smoke fuel until the fire has started burning well. This allows plenty of air to rise through the fire in the initial stages. Generally, union nuggets will catch fire more quickly than ovoids (see [Fuels in the low smoke zone](#))

I've been told that low smoke fuel gives less heat than bituminous coal. Is this true?

There are several types of "low smoke fuel", of varying qualities, just as there are several types of bituminous coal. There are large ovoids, small ovoids, large lignite briquettes (Union Nuggets), small ovoids and pet coke. For more on fuel types see [Fuels in the low smoke zone](#). Some fuels are more suitable for open fires, while others are more suitable for enclosed appliances such as stoves. With the right type of low smoke fuel for your fire or stove, there is no reason why your heat output can't match that of a bituminous coal fire. If in doubt, ask your local fuel merchant for advice.

Low smoke fuel is more expensive than bituminous coal. How can it be cost-effective to burn it?

Yes, low smoke fuel is generally a bit more expensive to buy. However, if you are burning the right mix of low smoke fuel, your fire can burn as hot, and for longer, than the cheaper bituminous coal, thereby being more cost-effective in heating your home in the long term.

I've noticed that my low smoke fire doesn't have the comforting flame of a smoky coal fire.

This is true; generally speaking, there is less flame from low smoke fuel than from bituminous coal. You can add lignite nuggets, turf or wood for extra flame, but you will

reduce the heat output by a small amount. However, if you keep in mind that you are safeguarding your family's health and that of your neighbours by burning low smoke fuel, this is a small price to pay.

Should I report my neighbour is he/she is burning smoky coal?

Yes. Your health and that of your neighbours is at risk from your neighbour's smoky coal. The burning of smoky coal in the low smoke zone is a selfish, anti-social act, which should be reported.

How can I be sure that my neighbour is burning low smoky fuel?

This is best judged on a calm day when the fire has been burning for some considerable time. If your neighbour's chimney smoke is considerably blacker and thicker than other chimneys, then smoky coal may be the cause. However, this can also be caused by a dirty chimney. If you are living in the low smoke zone, you may in time come to notice that smoky coal has a distinctive smell. If a coalman is seen delivering smoky coal in the low smoke fuel zone, or selling any fuel while carrying smoky coal on his truck, the number of the truck should be reported, along with the name of the delivery person and the address of the customer if possible.

Do Council employees call to private houses to inspect the type of fuel burned?

Yes. If a person authorised under the 2012 Regulations suspects that smoky fuel is being burned at a private house in the low smoke zone, that person may call to investigate, and may ask you to show a sample of the fuel you are burning.

How will I know if a person calling to my home is genuinely a Cork City Council employee?

Any person authorised under the Regulations will identify himself when making an inspection, and will show you an official identification card. If you are unsure, you may ask the person to give you a telephone number which you can contact to verify that he is genuine. An authorised person will not ask to enter inside your house.

What if I refuse to cooperate with an authorised person of the local authority?

To obstruct an authorised person in the performance of his duty is an offence under the Regulations.

3. Fuel Retailer/Supplier in the Low Smoke Zone

Is it illegal to sell smoky coal in the low smoke zone?

Yes, Article 5 of the Regulations prohibits the marketing, sale and distribution of smoky coal within a low smoke zone, even to customers living outside the zone.

If I retail within the low smoke zone, may I store bituminous coal on my premises?

Yes, but only if you hold it for delivery to customers at addresses outside the low smoke zone. It should not be in view of customers, as this constitutes “marketing”. You may not have signs at your premises advertising the bituminous coal. You must record all deliveries of bituminous coal to addresses outside the low smoke zone, and you must be carrying at least one metric tonne when you leave the depot.

If I retail within the low smoke zone, may I sell bituminous coal to a customer who can prove that he/she lives outside the low smoke zone.

No. A customer living outside the low smoke zone may phone you and place an order for bituminous coal, and you may deliver it to them. The complete transaction must take place outside the low smoke zone. You must record all deliveries of bituminous coal to addresses outside the low smoke zone, and you must be carrying at least one metric tonne when you leave the depot.

Are there any circumstances wherein I can sell or give a bag of bituminous coal to a customer at my premises in the low smoke zone?

No, there are absolutely no exceptions.

If I am delivering low smoke fuels in the low smoke zone, can I carry bituminous coal on my vehicle for later delivery outside the low smoke zone?

No. It is an offence to make any sales of any fuels in the low smoke zone while at the same time carrying bituminous coal on the vehicle. On-the-spot fines will be issued to anyone found selling in the zone with bituminous coal on board.

Is it an offence to drive through the low smoke zone with bituminous coal in my vehicle?

Not if this coal is destined for addresses outside the low smoke zone. However, you must have started your journey with a minimum of one metric tonne on board, and you must have records of the quantity of each type of fuel on board, and the names and addresses of customers to whom it will be sold. You may not stop to make any sales within the low smoke zone. All sales dockets must be kept for inspection by your local authority.

The Regulations state that, if I travel through the low smoke zone with bituminous coal on my truck, there must be at least one metric tonne on board, with a destination outside the low smoke zone. If I am returning from a delivery with only a few bags of bituminous coal on board, do I risk prosecution?

No. Not as long as your records show that you began your outward journey with at least a metric tonne on board, and you have records of all sales made since then.

I retail outside the low smoke zone. Do I have to establish the addresses of customers to whom I sell bituminous coal?

No. It is an offence to burn bituminous coal in the low smoke zone. Your customer commits an offence if he/she brings it back into the low smoke zone to burn, but it is not your responsibility to establish where your customers live if you are operating outside the zone.

I retail outside the low smoke zone. Are there any restrictions on the coal I sell?

Yes, the coal you sell must contain less than 0.7% sulphur, and must comply with some recognised standard such as Swift-7. It must be **supplied** to you by a supplier who is registered with the EPA, and you must hold certification that it is compliant.

What powers does an “authorised person” of the local authority have in respect of a commercial operation?

A person authorised under the Regulations may inspect any premises or vehicle used in connection with the sale or distribution of fuel. He may also inspect all relevant documentation, take samples of fuel, and require such information from any person on the premises or vehicle as the authorised person considers necessary.

How will I know if a person wishing to inspect my premises or vehicle is genuinely a Cork City Council employee?

Any person authorised under the Regulations will identify himself when making an inspection. He will show you an official identification card, and will give you a telephone number if asked which you can contact to verify that he is genuine.

What if I refuse to cooperate with an authorised person of the local authority?

To obstruct an authorised person in the performance of his duty is an offence under the Regulations.