

# INSIDE THE HEAD OF THE CONTAMINATOR

## WEBINAR QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Q** Will the slides be available?

**A** Yes, please find the link to the slides on our website [here](#).

**Q** Will there be a recording available after the webinar?

**A** Yes, please find the link to the recording on our website [here](#).

**Q** If a MRF continuously sees a waste stream that isn't one of the permitted waste streams, is a record kept so that the authority might look into a way of recycling that waste stream?

**A** MRFs are required to routinely sample and compositionally test their mixed material inputs by individual supplier and their main outputs by material stream. You can find out more from WRAP about this [here](#).

**Q** How did you recruit the survey group? Did you "close down" conversations with people who don't contaminate?

**A** The recruitment process, as in all of our research of this type, was very detailed and in this instance, tailored to the current recycling arrangements in each borough. We recruited a spread of the key demographics for the participants themselves and their current living arrangements e.g. age, gender, employment status, time spent living in borough, etc. Except for tenure, where we recruited an equal amount of home owners and renters in each groups. We used a screener questionnaire to find who we were looking for - potential participants were asked how often they disposed of a vast range of different items (both correct and incorrect recycling items for recycling for that borough i.e. and so including a range of contaminants) in their recycling bin or sack. Those who answered 'always' or 'often' to at least one of the contaminants were invited to participate in our research.

**Q** What's the timescales for the new nappy campaign please?

**A** We are currently seeking funding and partners to take forward this work, details of which can be found [here](#). Once secured, we anticipate that the development will take a short number of months. Please email [lizzie.kenyon@keepbritaintidy.org](mailto:lizzie.kenyon@keepbritaintidy.org) for further information.

**Q** Do different age groups report different constraints and barriers to recycling? I've heard a lot about young people having low recycling rates. However, if this is self-reported is there a chance older people just think they're recycling well but contaminating the bins?

**A** WRAP's Recycling Tracker 2018 reported that younger households aged 18-34 have the highest levels of contamination. In 2019 it reported that households with children aged 0-5 and 6-11 are both more likely than average to contaminate, which was also reported in the 2020 report. While the survey data is self-reported, it is also compared against information about recycling services in the local area, so there is firm evidence that younger households/households with children are more likely to contaminate.

**Q** Did all of the participating authorities provide the same service around what they collected?

**A** No - we worked with nine different local authorities, collecting different materials in different ways, as part of their kerbside collection service.

**Q** Views on enforcement action?

**A** We believe that enforcement is not a solution in of itself and needs to be part of wider strategies including education and engagement approaches. In respect of recycling, enforcement can include removing a household's recycling bin as a last resort. Households can be issued with clear recycling sacks as an alternative, so contaminated recycling can be more easily identified. Effective engagement with contaminating households such as through a direct feedback loop can mean enforcement action is rarely needed. In the recent LWARB Contamination Hit Squad demonstration project, a small minority of households ended up having their recycling bin removed - the vast majority had already corrected their contamination behaviour. LWARB will be publishing the results of this project in the coming weeks.

**Q** Did research reflect on enforcement actions and is this seen as an effective tool to tackle contamination?

**A** The research asked participants a range of questions about recycling behaviour including questions about specific campaigns and initiatives they had seen in their area. Through this we identified that many participants had received a form of direct feedback and this had caused them to change their behaviour. Additionally, a small number of participants were aware that neighbours had had their bin/sack stickered or rejected or were generally aware that their council used these types of measures.

As outlined above, we believe that enforcement should be used as a last resort and significant that improvements can be achieved using education and engagement. However, we would be interested to further explore the 'when' and 'how' of effective enforcement through our continued work on contamination.

**Q** Do you have any information on whether it's best to tell people what can be recycled or what can't be recycled?

**A** An interesting question and not one we have posed directly to households. Our view is that both are important, but these types of list cannot cover every eventuality. This approach needs to sit alongside developing householder's ability to make decisions for themselves based on a new and correct set of 'rules of thumb', not their own assumptions which are often incorrect in the case of contaminants. It may also be helpful for local authorities to try to reinforce the 'if in doubt, leave it out' message/rule of thumb to overcome the finding from this research that a large number of people are putting items that they are unsure about into their recycling in the hope that the system will resolve anything problematic. It is also important to note that any efforts in respect of this need to be salient and/or disruptive so that they are not simply overlooked in the first place.

**Q** Is the step forward to push for a large-scale switch to compostable packaging and uniform-recyclable packaging?

**A** We believe that there are three strategies to addressing contamination - turn your contaminants into an accepted material, change resident behaviour so they don't contaminate, and stop contaminated recycling from being collected through the actions of crews. Uniform-recyclable packaging would certainly help the first strategy, but there is a danger that compostable packing could actually make contamination worse with residents confused about how to treat the items in question - composted at home or through local authority collections which may or may not be able to handle such items..

**Q** Was there any questions around incentives or disincentives being used to change behaviour?

**A** Whilst this was not a particular strand of exploration in this project, there is good evidence from our other work and wider behavioural insights on incentives and disincentives. These can be seen as broadly as incentivising the desired behaviour by making it seem more attractive and dis-incentivising the undesired behaviours by making them the less attractive option, not just as through the provision of direct incentives/disincentives. Our approach to incentives is to focus on social rather than personal benefit, as there is evidence to show that personal rewards don't result in sustained changes in behaviour, rather short-term engagement which drops off. This has been used successfully in projects such as Bin it for Good, where local charities benefited from small donations when more litter was binned correctly.

**Q** Did you have location information for the 137 residents e.g. postcode? If so did you use Acorn / Mosaic social demographics or was sample considered too small? (Useful for targeting messages)

**A** Participants had to live in one of the nine partner boroughs. We did not profile participants using geo-demographic profiling systems as it wasn't necessary for this project which was to understand behavioural drivers of recycling contamination and potential ways to change this behaviour.

**Q** Do you have any insights as to how we could most effectively use social media or other online methods to 'disruptively communicate' these messages? Our normal methods are still disrupted due to covid-19.

**A** Even beyond COVID, we believe that council websites and social media will continue to be a cost-effective way for councils to get messages out. As you say, the key will be to create interest, salience and disruption to get messages noticed and/or noticed by those who aren't actively looking for recycling information. Approaches which use questions, polls and quizzes may be helpful to engage people for example, in discussion about confusion / confusing items. There may also be opportunities to utilise and target local community social media groups and forums to disseminate messages - including neighbourhood forums, green and environmental groups - where some of our committed recyclers may be reached, and parent groups for nappy contaminators etc. A number of participants in the research talked about these localised groups as being a source of information. This could also be achieved through targeted social media advertising which can be very cost effective.

**Q** With this group did the word "Contamination" seem to work or more basic terms as "wrong item"?

**A** We didn't use the term contamination in our research – people were recruited simply by having ticked as putting an item into their recycling which we knew to be a contaminant in their area. Instead, we had in-depth conversations over three days probing on the issue by asking a wide variety of different questions to get participants to tell us what items they put in their recycling bins, why they put that item in there, what influences which bin they use for the different items, what they do to the items (if anything) before putting them in the recycling bin, things that make it easy or difficult for them to recycle, etc.

**Q** Communal recycling in flats is a problem, any ideas?

**A** Resource London's Flats Recycling Project has given a clearer and deeper understanding of the broader social context and barriers to recycling in flats. In particular, we know that carrier bags are often the receptacle of choice for residents and that most will put the whole bag into the recycling bin. Furthermore, residents can be 'forced' to use the wrong bins when their plans are disrupted by overflowing bins, or they act impulsively as a means of exiting unpleasant communal bin areas as quickly as possible.

There is a growing body of evidence around how to improve the performance of flats recycling, both in terms of quality and quantity. Indeed, tackling contamination in flats recycling should be considered as part of a wider programme of enhancing flats performance, which is likely to require greater investment in service provision. However, at the very least, lockable reverse-opening bins and clear signage seem to offer a good first step at preventing contamination with black sacks.

**Q** Does anyone have any examples of how to provide feedback to residents in the new world of Covid?

Feedback to residents can take a variety of forms, but the main building blocks includes:

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1. Identifying contaminated bins and leaving them unemptied with a record kept of the corresponding address
  2. Providing feedback to the resident through a tag or sticker informing them that action is required before the bin will be emptied
  3. Following up with written communication taking an increasingly serious tone after each repeated contamination incident
  4. Removal of recycling bins as a last resort if behaviour change is not seen
  5. Household visits can be employed prior to bin removal to help avoid this action

This feedback loop can run through COVID times - simply minus the household visit. Please email [anna.scott@keepbritaintidy.org](mailto:anna.scott@keepbritaintidy.org) for further information about how to utilise feedback loops.