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Consultation outcome

# Consistency in recycling collections in England: executive summary and government response

Updated 23 July 2019

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## 1. Introduction

Government supports comprehensive and frequent rubbish and recycling collections. We have seen household recycling rates in England increase significantly from 11% in 2001 to 45.2% in 2017. However, in recent years, progress has been slower and rates have remained at around 44/45%. While many local authorities continue to make improvements and introduce new services, some have seen a drop in recycling rates and do not collect the full range of materials that can be recycled, or do not collect food waste separately. Householders who want to recycle more are increasingly confused about what can be recycled. Recycling from businesses is also relatively low, estimated to be around 35 to 40%. Whilst some businesses have high recycling rates others have very low rates and costs of waste collection and constraints can make it harder for smaller firms especially to recycle.

In December 2018, the government published its [Resources and Waste Strategy](#). The aim of the strategy is to make the UK a world leader in resource efficiency and resource productivity, to increase competitiveness and move away from a linear economy towards a circular economy. It outlines how the government will work towards our ambitions of doubling resource productivity and zero avoidable waste by 2050, maximise the value we extract from our resources and minimise waste and the associated negative environmental impacts.

As part of the Resources and Waste Strategy, Defra launched three consultations on 18 February 2019: Consistency in Household and Business Recycling Collections in England; Introducing a Deposit Return Scheme for drinks containers (DRS) in England, Wales, Northern Ireland; and reforming the UK packaging producer responsibility system. These measures will tackle confusion over household recycling, and ensure that producers pay the full net costs of collecting and managing packaging waste.

At the same time Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT) published the [Plastic Packaging Tax consultation](#), aimed at introducing a new world-leading tax on the production and import of plastic packaging with less than 30% recycled content, helping to incentivise the production of more sustainable plastic packaging and increase the use of recycled plastic.

This document summarises the consultation responses for the Consistency in Household and Business Recycling Collections in England and the government's response to the consultation in terms of next steps. Separate summaries of responses have been prepared for the

consultations on DRS and the reforms to producer packaging regime and HMT is publishing its response to the consultation on the Plastic Packaging Tax.

The consultation on consistency was concerned with measures to improve the quantity and quality of what we recycle both at home and at work in England. We believe that these measures would help to transform recycling in England and to increase recycling rates significantly above 50%, towards the much higher recycling rate of 65% that we have set as our ambition in the Resources and Waste Strategy. Proposals which follow from this consultation will take account of the future relationship we will negotiate with the EU on environmental matters. There have been extraordinary levels of public interest on the issue of consistency in recycling.

The proposals we consulted on were for all local authorities to:

- collect the same core set of dry recyclable materials from households
- have separate weekly food waste collections from households, including flats

Other measures we consulted on were:

- whether local authorities should provide a free garden waste collection service for households with gardens
- how to achieve greater separation of dry materials in collections, especially paper and glass, to improve the quality of dry recyclables collected from households
- whether statutory guidance on minimum service standards for waste and recycling services should be introduced
- how to develop non-binding performance indicators to support local authorities to deliver high quality and quantity in recycling and waste management
- how to support joint working between local authorities on waste, alternatives to weight-based targets and having standardised bin colours for waste and recycling
- ways to improve recycling from businesses, public bodies and other organisations

We are grateful to everyone who has responded to this consultation either by answering the questions in the online survey, writing to us or by attending one of our stakeholder events.

The government response to the recommendations sets out how we will seek to take forward the proposals from this consultation both through changes to legislation and also further consultation and guidance. This work will be taken forward over the remainder of 2019 and we anticipate bringing forward more detailed proposals early next year. Subject to that changes would come into force from 2023. The reforms for consistency in recycling are linked closely to reforms to producer responsibility and to the possible introduction of a Deposit Return Scheme and development of next steps will take account of policy developments in those areas as well.

Given the high level of public and stakeholder interest in recycling we are publishing the summary of responses earlier than required to signal a clear direction of travel. This necessarily means that specific details of policy design will be developed in the months informed by further work to analyse the responses received in more detail. We will also gather more evidence. We will continue to work with all stakeholders to develop there more detailed propositions

## 2. Respondents

The consultation on Consistency in Household and Business Recycling Collections in England closed on 13 May 2019. There were a total of 1,713 responses to the consultation. The respondents belonged to the following groups: local authorities; individuals ; businesses; business representatives/trade bodies; retailers; waste management companies; packaging producers; produce manufactures; charities and social enterprisers; consultancies; academic researchers; and those who did not categorise themselves or chose other. These responses were submitted through Citizen Space, via e-mail and by post.

The full summary of responses is provided in two parts. Part 1 summarises responses received from individuals. It should be noted that the individual responses were not necessarily a representative sample of the public, but rather from those that voluntarily completed the Citizen Space Survey questionnaire and categorised themselves as individuals. Part 2 summarises responses received from stakeholder bodies including producers, academics, local authorities and waste management companies, as well as other organisations. These two broad categories provided a range of views on the proposals in the consultation and we have carried out a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the comments made. Whilst we have noted that there is broad support for some of the proposals, some stakeholders or individuals had particular views on more specific areas, including food waste collections and garden waste collections. Where these views are significant we have sought to take account of them. Read [Part 1 and 2](#)

The government's response to the consultation is summarised below. Our next steps will be to work with local authorities, waste management businesses, as well as other organisations and businesses to develop more detailed regulations and guidance to implement consistency in recycling. We anticipate bringing forward more detailed proposals early next year and implementing the necessary changes to achieve greater consistency in household and business recycling as soon as possible thereafter. The target year for measures to come into effect from is 2023.

In line with the manifesto commitment to support frequent and comprehensive rubbish and recycling collections, the government wants to ensure that householders are not inconvenienced by being unable to get rid of putrescent or smelly waste weekly or having insufficient capacity to recycle or to remove residual waste. We will be mandating weekly separate food waste collection, and will consider whether a minimum service standard of alternative weekly collection for residual waste (alongside the weekly food waste collection) might be appropriate, subject to an assessment of affordability and value for money. We will consult on including this in the proposed statutory guidance on minimum service standards for rubbish and recycling, and will assess the costs for this to be included in our consultation on minimum service standards guidance which would take place later in 2019 or early 2020. We do not expect any local authority that currently collects residual waste on a fortnightly basis to have to reduce their capacity of collection or frequency further as a result of these measures. Many local authorities already deliver with a greater frequency, and would continue to be able to do so, reflecting the wishes of their local residents.

Government recognises the pressures on local authorities and potential new costs arising from these proposals. They will therefore receive additional resource to meet any new net costs arising from the policies when implemented. This includes both net up front transition costs and net ongoing operational costs.

Government also recognises that contractual obligations may prevent some authorities from adopting changes from 2023. We will work with stakeholders and especially local authorities to ensure that where such conditions exist we are able to progress to full consistency as soon as is practicable taking account of contractual commitments.

### **3. Government response to consultation on consistency in household and business recycling**

#### **3.1 Part 1: Measures to improve the quantity and quality of household recycling collected by local authorities**

##### **3.1.1. Dry recycling**

**Consultation Proposal 1: All local authorities should be required to collect a core set of dry recyclable materials at kerbside from houses and flats**

**Consultation Proposal 2: the core set of dry materials collected should be glass bottles and containers, paper and card, plastic bottles, plastic pots tubs and trays, and steel and aluminium tins and cans**

Proposal 1 from the consultation was overwhelmingly supported by both individuals and stakeholders. The vast majority of respondents also agreed that all local authorities should collect the core set of 6 types of dry materials, including plastic pots tubs and trays. Respondents expressed a range of views on the challenges of delivering this service to all households. Rural areas, flats and dense urban areas were highlighted as particularly challenging.

Given the strong support for greater consistency, the government will seek to amend legislation to require all English local authorities to collect at least the following dry materials from 2023:

- glass bottles and containers – including drinks bottles, condiment bottles, jars
- paper and card – including newspaper, cardboard packaging, writing paper
- plastic bottles – including clear drinks containers, HDPE (milk containers), detergent, shampoo and cleaning products
- plastic pots tubs and trays
- steel and aluminium tins and cans

We will consider carefully how this steer will interact with our proposals for a deposit return scheme, as a complementary way of driving up increased recycling rates for some specific material types.

Whilst there was strong support from individuals that food and drink cartons, as well as plastics bags and film should be included in the core set immediately, there was significantly less support for this from stakeholders, particularly local authorities. A majority of stakeholders, including local authorities, supported including food and drink cartons and we will give further consideration to including this in the core set of materials from 2023 taking into account considerations on packaging responsibility for these packaging items. Most stakeholders supported the inclusion of plastic film as one of the core materials from the beginning or phased in a later stage. Some waste management companies stated that plastic

film should not be included until after a review of materials recycling facilities (MRF) infrastructure to ensure it could be processed without causing damage to machinery but there was support for phasing these in and we will give further consideration to this taking into account evidence on costs of collection, recycling and also producer responsibility. The final makeup of the core set of dry materials for collection will also depend on final decisions regarding a reformed packaging producer responsibility scheme.

We will work with local government and waste managers to develop these proposals. We will also take account of comments made regarding challenges to collections in different circumstances as we take forward these changes.

**Consultation proposal 3: The core set of materials should be regularly reviewed by government and, if appropriate, expanded over time provided that a) evidence supports the benefits, b) there are viable processing technologies for proposed materials, c) there are sustainable end markets, d) local authorities would not be adversely affected, including financially.**

There was overwhelming support for having a regular review of the core set of materials. There were, however, a range of comments made on the details of the proposals and the proposed considerations of evidence, end markets and costs of collection. Suggestions were also made that scope should be available to remove materials from the collection list where the materials was no longer used.

The government will legislate for reviewing and amending the core set of materials. We will take into account responses to the consultations and make sure the approach to reviewing materials is transparent and evidence-based.

### **3.1.2. Separate food waste collection**

**Consultation proposal 4: All English local authorities to provide kerbside properties and flats with access to at least a weekly separate collection service for food waste, including provision of containers and liners.**

80%<sup>1</sup> of individual respondents and 72% of stakeholder responses (including 68% of local authorities who responded) agreed that there should be at least a weekly collection of food waste. 64% of individual respondents and 61% of stakeholders who responded agreed that food waste should be separately collected from garden waste. Whilst a majority of local authorities also supported this view, a significant minority supported the option of mixed food and garden waste collections. 66% of individuals and 56% of stakeholders agreed that free caddy liners should be provided to householders.

There were a significant number of local authorities and waste management companies that were of the view that there were circumstances where it would not be practical to provide a separate food waste collection. Many respondents, in both individual and stakeholder categories, cited flats as particularly problematic for food waste collections. Stakeholders also cited the need for suitable infrastructure for collection of additional food waste and also for its treatment (e.g. anaerobic digestion capacity).

Given the support for separate food waste collection government will legislate to ensure that every local authority provides householders with a separate food waste collection. Government's preference is that this should be a separate weekly collection of food waste and not mixed with garden waste. However, it is clear that further consideration is needed with respect to local circumstances (see also comments on proposal 6 below). We will work with

LAs and others to consider how best to deliver this requirement to take account of local circumstances. Particular considerations include providing a separate food waste collection for properties in densely populated areas and especially flats and properties above commercial premises as well as very rural areas. There was also support for the provision of caddy liners with more than half of stakeholders supporting this approach. We will therefore give further consideration to the costs and benefits of providing free caddy liners as a standard for food waste collections.

#### **Consultation proposal 5**

This asked questions about the support that local authorities would need to deliver weekly food waste collections. There was interest in a broad range of support including financial, communications, contractual and technical. We will take these comments into consideration as we develop the next steps of these proposals and as we prepare for implementation of changes to achieve greater consistency in recycling collections.

#### **Consultation proposal 6**

This suggested that authorities currently using in vessel composting to process mixed food and garden waste should have separate food waste collections but be able to mix the food waste with garden waste at kerbside (for example, collected together in the same vehicle) or at a later stage to allow continued use of in vessel composting treatment. Views on this were relatively balanced. However the most significant concern raised was that separate collection of food waste only to be mixed later might undermine public confidence in recycling and in efforts to separate the food waste when it could have been collected mixed with garden waste. We will give further consideration to arrangements for food waste collection in these circumstances.

#### **Consultation proposal 7 collection of garden waste: Whether households generating garden waste should be provided with access to a free collection service with a minimum fortnightly collection of 240 litre capacity.**

80% of individuals agreed with the proposals for a free garden waste collection for households with gardens. By comparison, only 38% of stakeholders agreed with this proposal, including only 20% of local authorities. The most common concern raised by local authorities and others was the financial implications of providing a free service and the potential loss of income this might represent. Some respondents also commented that a free garden waste collection could mean that those without gardens were supporting a subsidised service for those with gardens.

With respect to the details of service provision, the majority of respondents agreed that the service should be fortnightly with a capacity of 240 litres and with further garden waste collections above that amount being chargeable.

Garden waste contributes significantly towards progress on meeting weight-based recycling targets. It is also important from an environmental perspective that this material is recycled or home composted, rather than sent to recovery or landfill. Whilst we retain the view that a free collection would be the most effective way of ensuring this, it is noted that stakeholder respondents were generally not supportive, with particular opposition from local authorities. We will therefore give further consideration to the costs and benefits of this measures before

making a final decision on whether garden waste collections should be free of charge, or whether charging should be a matter for local decision making.

#### **Consultation proposal 8: measures to promote separate collection of dry materials.**

70% of individuals agreed with proposals to promote separate collection of materials where this was necessary to achieve high quality. Just under half of stakeholders supported changes in current arrangements. Only 23% of local authorities supported the proposal on separate collection, while the majority of all other stakeholder groups, including waste management companies, were in favour of the proposal. Arguments against changing current arrangements focused on lack of space for containers especially in heavily urban areas and houses of multiple occupancy (HMOs). Some respondents also highlighted the costs of introducing separate collection being a barrier and some highlighted reports and studies on musculoskeletal risks from lifting and carrying in multi stream systems. Some respondents also commented on the lack of clear guidance. Some evidence was provided to support these concerns and we will review this as part of developing the next steps proposals.

Government continues to support separate collection of dry materials as the default to achieve high quality recycling in particular separating glass and fibres. However we also recognise that in some circumstances separate collection is not necessary to achieve high quality or is not technically, economically or environmentally practicable (TEEP). Moreover as proposals on reforming the UK packaging producer responsibility system develop producers will be increasingly concerned to ensure quality in materials collected for recycling.

We will work with the sector to ensure suitable guidance is provided on the application of separate collection provisions to achieve high quality recycling. This will include consideration of requirements related to the collection of packaging waste arising from our proposals for packaging extended producer responsibility. We will also work with the Environment Agency and local authorities to monitor the effectiveness of this guidance in driving high quality recycling.

#### **3.1.3. Standardised collection**

##### **Consultation proposal 9: bin colour standardisation**

This sought views on England moving to standardised colours for waste containers for different material streams. There was strong support for this proposal from individuals, but less support from stakeholders, with less than half overall showing support for moving to standardised bin colours and just 30% local authorities supporting the proposal. Where there was support for this proposal, it was generally suggested that changes should be phased in (either as contracts allowed for or as containers were replaced). The costs of changing to standardised colours were highlighted as a particular concern. A range of options were discussed to reduce costs, including stickers and numbering systems. Whilst there are clear benefits to having standardised bin colours and there is support for this, it is also clear that there are practical concerns about implementation and whether this should be mandated or not. We will give this further consideration as we develop the next steps on consistency.

##### **Consultation proposal 10 statutory guidance on minimum service standards for recycling**



There was strong support for having statutory guidance on service standards in recycling. This was supported by over 90% of individuals and 70% of stakeholders. 54% of local authorities also agreed with this proposal. A wide range of comments were made on the content of guidance and the approach to review. Many comments highlighted the need for some local flexibility to take account of local circumstances, as well as the need for guidance to be set out best practice and encourage waste collectors to drive innovation and improvement in service delivery. Proposal 10 also suggested that the statutory guidance should set a minimum service standard for residual waste collection of at least alternative weekly. 77% of individuals agreed with this approach, whereas only 43% of stakeholders supported this approach with local authorities strongly opposed.

Given the overall support for proposal 10 government will work with local authorities and other stakeholders to prepare statutory guidance on minimum service standards for waste and recycling. We will use comments made during this consultation to inform the content of the guidance, as well as discussions with the sector. We will give further consideration to the proposals for a minimum frequency of residual waste collection and prepare further analysis of costs and benefits with a view to including the standard.

#### **Consultation proposals 11 – 13 communications and end markets**

Proposals 11 to 13 covered measures to improve communications on recycling. This included commitments to continue working with Recycle Now, and to improve information on end destination of recycled materials. Unsurprisingly, there was strong support for improving and increasing communications, particularly on greater transparency for end destination of recycling. Funding, in particular, was seen as an important requirement to enable effective communications. This, alongside national and local communications campaigns and clear on-pack labelling were all seen as important. This supports views expressed in the parallel consultation on reforming the UK packaging producer responsibility system where there was strong support from respondents for a mandatory obligation on producers to label their packaging as recyclable or not recyclable. There was also strong support for using producer fees for communications campaigns at both a national and local level.

The need to have reliable end markets for recycling was also recognised by the majority of individual and stakeholder respondents.

Through the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) we will continue work with the sector to develop good practice on communications and, in particular, explore ways to promote transparency on the end destination of materials. A number of suggestions were offered to improve stability in end markets for recycling, including support for government investment in processing infrastructure and building reprocessing capacity in the UK. Other respondents also stated that the proposed changes to achieve greater consistency would go a long way to improve investor confidence in recycling.

#### **Consultation proposal 14 introducing non-binding performance indicators for local authority waste management**

#### **Consultation proposal 15 alternatives to weight based metrics**

Over 60% of individuals and stakeholder responses were in favour of the development of non-binding performance indicators. 60% of local authorities also supported this proposal. There was also support for having indicators based around yield for different material streams

and for residual waste and there was general support for this approach as well. We will work with local authorities on the development of these indicators and seek to trial them over the next few years, alongside taking forward other measures in this consultation. In particular, given we also intend to reform the UK packaging producer responsibility system for packaging, we will work to ensure that the metrics devised will also support the efficient functioning of that system wherever appropriate.

70% of stakeholder respondents supported the proposal to develop alternatives to weight based metrics, with slightly fewer agreeing that these should ideally sit alongside current measures of recycling. Individuals were also supportive of this approach, however many did not express an opinion. A number of alternative metrics were proposed and we will consider these further as we develop metrics for this area.

#### **Consultation proposal 16 support for greater collaboration and partnership working between authorities.**

This proposal was broadly supported by stakeholders and individuals alike. There was general support for having greater collaboration and partnership working between local authorities. Respondents identified a range of barriers that might prevent collaboration including local political differences; lack of alignment on policies or contractual arrangements and timescales and also an absence of clear incentives. Some also identified legal and practical barriers, such as topography and demographics, as well as resources required to make partnership working effective. Suggestions were made for how government could support greater collaboration between local authorities, including government providing practical support such as tools and guidance, or facilitating space for discussion between local authorities. Issues around two-tier arrangements were also discussed and suggestions made to review the recycling credits scheme.

Government has already committed to reviewing the recycling credit scheme and will take this forward alongside reforms to the UK packaging producer responsibility system and funding arrangements arising from that. We will review comments made on partnership working in more detail and take this forward with local authorities and other bodies, such as WRAP and the Local Government Association (LGA).

### **3.2 Part 2: Measures to increase recycling from business and other organisations that produce municipal waste**

**Consultation proposal 17: Businesses, public bodies and other organisations that produce municipal waste should be required to separate dry recyclable material from residual waste so that it can be collected and recycled.**

Over 95% of respondents supported this proposal. Support was also very high across all stakeholder groups. Option 3 for separation of dry recycling, food waste and glass was the most popular approach of the three options proposed for collection of business waste with both stakeholders and individuals. However some respondents highlighted that local circumstances might influence specific arrangements and others suggested the need for consistency with arrangements for householders.

A clear majority of individual respondents and just over half of stakeholders were of the view that it should be possible for businesses to segregate waste in all circumstances, although the extent of segregation might need to respond to local circumstances and TEEP considerations.

Some commented that segregating waste for recycling may not be practical in all circumstances, for example due to space limitations.

Given the strong support in the consultation for having businesses segregate dry materials to be recycled we will seek to amend legislation so that businesses must make arrangements to separate recyclable waste from residual waste. We will give further consideration to measures to reduce the costs of collection for small and micro firms, taking into account comments and evidence provided from the consultation, as well as discussions with stakeholders and business on implementation.

**Consultation proposal 18: Where a business, public body or other organisation produces sufficient quantities of food waste we propose to legislate for this to be separated from residual waste and other recycling and arrangements made for it to be collected and recycled.**

94% of individual responses and 90% of stakeholders supported this proposal. 37% of individuals and 46% of stakeholders agreed that this should only be required where sufficient quantities of food waste were produced. Some suggestions were made as to where specific exceptions might be necessary. There was also a mix of views as to whether there should be a de minimis threshold for food waste collection and how to define food waste producing companies.

Given the strong support for having businesses separate food waste for collection we will seek to amend legislation to require this. However, given the range of views on how this provision should be applied, we will discuss options further with the sector and with businesses and prepare more detailed proposals for consideration early next year.

In addition to the above proposals, we also sought views on options to manage the impact of any new costs of waste management for small and micro firms especially. A range of comments were made on the options outlined in the consultation document. Common suggestions included the need for financial support, incentives, guidance and/or transition periods for implementation. On the specific options proposed to reduce costs, there was support for greater collaboration and sharing of services, as well as support for zoning or waste franchising. On the other hand, some operators thought that such approaches had the potential to be anti-competitive and wanted more information on how the options might work in practice.

Government will give further thought to the development of measures to reduce costs of waste collection for businesses and will speak further to industry stakeholders on how best to support small and micro firms especially to recycle more.

**Consultation proposal 20: As part of implementing our recycling consistency reforms, we will work with waste producers and waste collectors in the non-household municipal sectors to improve reporting and data capture on waste and recycling performance of businesses and other organisations. Any requirements will be subject to consultation.**

There was general support for improving data collection on waste and recycling performance in the non-household municipal waste sector. This was seen as necessary to have a full picture of waste generation in England. Some proposed that reporting should be mandatory and others suggested that it should align with local authority reporting requirements. Other respondents highlighted the need to limit burdens on industry and to target reporting on those most able to report data such as waste collectors. Further consideration will be given to data

collection for this sector as we develop these proposals and also to align with other work on data reporting.

1. Figures shown are based on the numbers of respondents for each question, which differ between questions. The number of responses for each question can be seen in the summary of responses. [↩](#)