

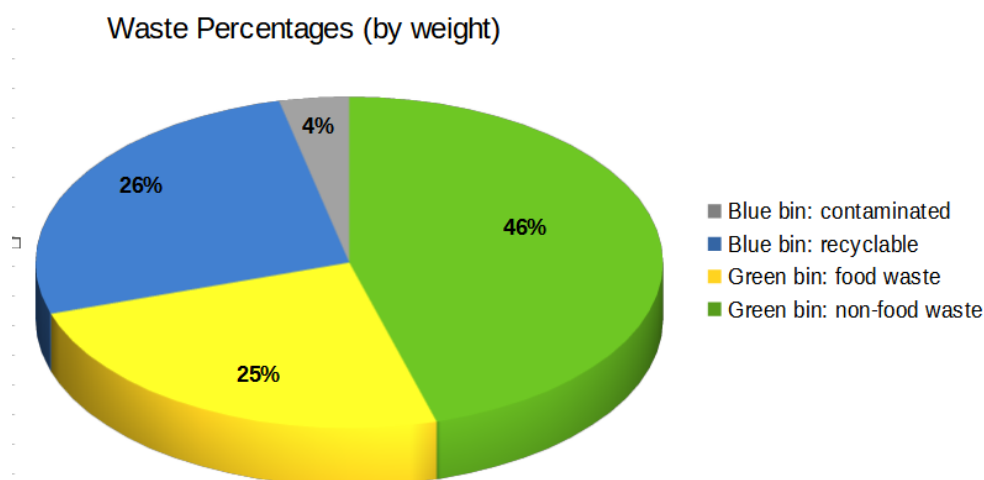
Washington Village u3a “Our Environment” Group: Notes from meeting with Marc Morley (Sunderland City Council)

N.B. The notes here have been modified to take into account data/information that has been identified since the meeting, with links given to the location of that data.

Recycling Performance

For the UK international comparisons of recycling rates are hard to make as not comparing like-with-like.

In 2021/22 Sunderland's recycling performance was 29.8%¹; that is of the total waste (by weight) that was collected in Sunderland 70% was waste, 30% was recycled.



- This is comparable with other local authorities in the region (best - Co. Durham 38.1%, worst - Stockton 25%.)
- In the league table of the local authorities in England Sunderland was 300/330¹.

The government is reviewing how recycling rates are measured to try to focus on the quality of recycling rather than just weight.

Factors affecting recycling performance:

- The league table is not comparing like with like. e.g. affluent Shires v. our demographics where deprivation is a big factor.
- Recycling performance is not based on quality or volume but weight.
- Some councils already do food recycling: so that increases their recycling percentage. The contents of blue bins are typically less dense than the contents of green (general waster) bins. 30-40% of the weight in the green bins is food waste.

¹ <https://www.letsrecycle.com/councils/league-tables/2021-22-overall-performance/>

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- Other factors that the Director of Environmental Services believes affects Sunderland’s performance (in comparison with others in the region) has been the use made of green bins.
 - It's only a few years since the end of weekly general waste collections. The places that are Higher Performers collect less frequently which then it forces households to use their recycling bin and think about their waste.
 - The council recently stopped collecting bags alongside bins for the same reason. A lot of recyclable waste has been going into green bins.
 - The council hopes to see is an incremental rise in blue bin usage as a result of these decisions – and will be monitoring the data.

What happens with the contents of the Green (General Household Waste) Bins?

The general household waste goes to a SUEZ Energy From Waste (EFW) plant at Stockton where it is used to produce electricity which is fed back to the grid². Nothing goes to landfill.

- The residual ash goes to an ash recycling plant to make an aggregate replacement in construction materials.
- There are interceptors in the plant so gas is not pumped out into the air.
- There are strict measures on what is allowed at that plant.

N.B. The food waste that goes to the plant is not classed as recycling but as recovery (which is less desirable for targets).

What happens with the contents of the Blue Bins?

At the doorstep collection the caddy contents go into a separate bin in the collection wagon from the other blue bin contents.

Paper mills pay for it – but they won’t take any paper that's been anywhere near glass, because it can ruin their process.

- In the wagon there are separate compartments with a 30-70 (paper/non-paper).

² <https://www.suez.co.uk/en-gb/our-offering/communities-and-individuals/education-tools-and-resources/what-happens-to-waste/general-waste/energy-from-waste>

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- If there is a breakdown on a split-body vehicle sometimes a single body vehicle has to do the collection. Then the collection will be mixed. This is a cost to the council.
- However, the council has just invested in a fleet of new split-body vehicles.

N.B. if you see crews NOT treating the paper and other recycling appropriately then record and report it. All vehicles have cameras so footage can be checked.

All the household recycling is taken to a depot at Washington Monument Park where the paper is kept separate from the other recycling. These two streams of recycling are then bailed up. Paper goes to paper mills, the rest goes to a to a plant in Hartlepool where it's processed in a MRF (materials recycling facility).

Paper recycling

The paper from the black caddies goes straight to designated paper mills. This is a separate contract from the MRF one. The value of this paper is much greater than if it ends up in the Hartlepool plant.

Non-paper recycling

This is processed in a MRF (materials recycling facility) at Hartlepool.

- The first step is a manual picking station where a conveyor belt brings all the waste past manual pickers who remove the materials that shouldn't be in there, which can be dirty nappies, engine parts, dead animals, ...
- Then it goes through various automated sorting systems, using ultraviolet lights which will pick up some of the plastics, little eddies to blow the light materials up, magnets to pull out some of the cans, etc.
- The separated materials go via chutes to different end points (aluminium cans, steel cans, plastic bottles, ...).
- At the end the stockpiles of different materials are bailed and sent for reprocessing.

“And if you've ever wondered what happens to your recycling once it's been collected from your blue bin, you can find out [in this video](#)”.

Around 12% of what is collected from the blue bins is “non target” or “contamination” and t destroys the value of the bin's contents.

This is why if “non target material is detected at the roadside the whole bin's contents will be rejected.

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Use of the recycled material

Of the recycled material: 67.5% is reprocessed in the UK, around 12% is in Europe, the rest of it is mostly to India, a little to Vietnam and Taiwan.

Waste is a worldwide commercial commodity: the material needs to go to where they're making products using it. So if we're not making enough in the UK (and manufacturing has shrunk in the UK) contractors have to find a market for it. They have to find the right processor to be able to use the material.

Value to the Council

In the Council's contract they pay certain fixed elements of the recycling contract (e.g. the haulage) then they have a risk-sharing contract where they get a percentage of the sale price (managed through the contract).

- Fixed price contracts (with all of the risk on the processor) don't happen any more.
- The monthly sale prices are known because they they're published in the waste industry press (e.g. the price for aluminium cans). The process is managed and monitored.
- If the markets are buoyant they get a lot of income (as in early in 2022) so the contract income offset the fixed costs. If the market prices are bad, income decreases.

What about Food Waste recycling?

The government is trying to bring in consistency in collections. It's proposing legislation which will introduce food waste collections, and specify certain things that need to be collected. The council is doing what most of what will be wanted (with the exception of the food waste collection).

Counter-intuitively recycling food waste doesn't necessarily improve the environment because our general waste (including food waste) does not go to landfill but to the SUEZ EFW (Energy from Waste) plant where it produces electricity which is fed back to the grid³.

Pros

A separate food waste recycling stream would boost the recycling rate

Cons

A separate waste contractor would be needed to process this at an anaerobic digester (which would produce gas to burn

³ <https://www.suez.co.uk/en-gb/our-offering/communities-and-individuals/education-tools-and-resources/what-happens-to-waste/general-waste/energy-from-waste>

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Pros	Cons
	to create electricity).
An anaerobic digester would produce gas that would be burned to create electricity).	The food waste currently goes to the EFW plant to create electricity.
A by-product of the process is the digestive which can be put on the on the land:	The contractor has to find the right land for this: there are requirements and restrictions (e.g. avoiding watercourses).
	Operationally the council would need: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate vehicles to collect the waste. • Households to separate food waste into different bins or bags for collection. • More vehicles on the road. • More bins for people to manage.

Reduce the volume of waste created: the best way to deal with waste

The best way to deal with waste is at the start of the supply/retail chain and to reduce packaging. Otherwise customers (residents) and the council are dealing the impact.

- This is dependent on how manufacturers and suppliers behave.
- Currently there is no come-back on them if they use mixed materials in packaging, excessive packaging. But this is expected to change via legislation and levies.
- The current situation leaves residents with the problem of deciding what goes into which bins.
- The councils are left with the problem of recycling or recovering the resultant waste. As a council we can only recycle what we can get somebody to take off our hands.

The government has introduced legislation which will kick in next year, and it's called the "Extended producer responsibility for packaging"⁴.

- In principle if companies are using lots of packaging, they'll pay a levy which will then get passed on to councils somehow.
- They'll pay less of a levy if the materials they use are easy to recycle.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/packaging-waste-prepare-for-extended-producer-responsibility#check-if-you-need-to-take-action>

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- The government's tried to shift the responsibility onto the producers. What it ultimately wants to do is reduce packaging. Using levies to penalise companies should shift business practices. They'll pay less if it's easier to reuse and recycle, but they'll still pay. The aim is to drive out as much packaging as possible.

What are the most common recycling mistakes made by residents?

The main issue is plastic bags with contents: the roadside collectors don't know what is in these - it could be food waste, nappies or anything else. So the bin will be rejected on that basis.

- The advice is not to put recycling in a bag to carry from a kitchen to the bin, as it's too easy to forget to remove the bag.
- This is a particular difficulty for people (especially in flats) with communal bins.

If residents are in doubt about whether a product could be recycled it is safest to put in the green (general waste) bin.

Soft/flexible plastics

The quantity and value of these as recyclable commodities makes it uneconomical for the council to recycle them.

- Supermarkets are collecting them as they can deal with them at scale. What they do is independent of the council and not monitored by them.
- See <https://flexibleplasticfund.org.uk/> for further information about recycling flexible plastics.

Black plastic

This can not be recycled because it is not detected by the optical scanners at recycling plants.

- It goes into the green (general waste) bin.
- It is gradually being phased out by manufacturers, often replaced by grey plastic.
- Other colours (including brown, grey) can be detected by the optical scanners and so can go into the blue bin.

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Paper

Into the caddy

Any “normal” paper: magazines, takeaway flyers, phone directories, envelopes (even if they've got a plastic window), etc.

Into the green (household) waste bin

Any paper that's got waxy coatings on.
Anything that's wrapped in plastic.
Greetings cards.

Main compartment if the blue bin

[washed/rinsed items to reduce contamination]

Into the blue bin

plastic bottles, yohurt pots, tubs, trays, shower gels, etc, brown, grey, other colour plastic containers.

Into the green (household) waste bin

Black plastic containers

Large/Bulky Items: Special Collections

The current policy is now *“All bulky waste collections booked from 1 April 2023 will be free of charge, subject to availability and eligibility.”* ([Bulky Waste FAQs April23](#)).

- These have to be booked, but there is no limit as to how many can be requested.

The council would prefer it if households could:

- hold onto (and use) items.
- Pass items on to others personally (via gumtree or Facebook marketplace, freegle, etc.)
- Pass items on to others via charity shops or the “Revive” shop at Pallion Household Waste and Recycling Centre.
- Use special collections as a last resort: the collected items go as household waste to the EFW plant.

Household Waste and Recycling Centres (HWRCs)

The new facilities and systems at Pallion and Campground (Springwell) are working very well. With extensive use being made of the booking system.

People wanting to go to the Revive shop can bypass those waiting to drop off waste. But they have to merge with them to leave the site (as it's a one way system).

- The “Revive” shop is also receiving and selling/donating substantial amounts of goods.

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- It can take working electricals for reuse (after PAT testing).
- It can't take fridges/freezers.

Garden Waste Collections (brown bins)

There is a contract with a company to take away the garden waste.

- It costs the council £80 less per ton to process contents of brown bins than green: hence the value to the council of householders signing up for the brown bin collection.

The following are **not** permitted in the garden waste collection:

- Vegetable peelings, tea bags (which may contain plastic), coffee grounds: To prevent any risk of contamination.
- Compostable plastics: since the decomposition rates of different plastics vary dramatically.
- large items of garden waste (such as tree trunks and large branches), wood/timber, soil, turf as the wagons used cannot cope with these.

The collection of brown bins ends in the autumn as the operators are put onto winter maintenance duties (including gritting, etc.).

External Waste Collection

The Council has no jurisdiction over shopping centres etc (the Environment agency has that remit).

Volunteer-Supported Environmental Projects in Sunderland

Laura Farrell-Pronesti is the Waste & Recycling Visitor Education Centre Coordinator. Marc will get her to contact us.

- The Washington Clean and Green team do sterling work with litter-picking.
- There are “*Friends of xxxx park*” at several parks in the city including Usworth and Princess Anne.

What Environmental Improvements are Happening/Planned for Washington?

- The Washington plantations are being managed and tidied to enhance carbon capture. The plantations are suffering because of the victim of the success of the initial tree-

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planting for the new town. Many more tree survived than expected. The ash trees are also being examined for Ash dieback disease.

- As part of “The Great North Forest” the council has been awarded funds to increase the tree coverage. This is being undertaken by contractors.

Reporting Fly Tipping or Overgrow Vegetation

It is supposed to be possible to report locations for fly-tipping, etc. using “drop pins” as well as postcodes. The system used doesn’t support “what three words”.

Water Quality, Sewerage

- This is not an area covered by Environmental Services. It comes under the Highways department and/or the Environment Agency.
 - Seaburn and Roker beaches have again been awarded “blue flags” for water quality.
-

After Marc left we discussed our practical follow-up with the rest of our u3a.

Suggestions included:

- Meeting with Laura to investigate volunteering opportunities.
- Inviting Laura to talk at a monthly meeting.
- Us running a quiz along the lines of “which bin does this object go into” – with physical objects and a handout to mark up and take home as an aide-memoire.

Also at the next committee meeting we will ask for the following to be formally considered:

- Asking members to bring their own mugs to use at monthly meetings (this would be environmentally beneficial as well as being a cost saving since fewer disposable cups would be needed).
- Asking that in tables where recyclable cups have been used one person is nominated each time to take away, rinse out and dispose of these in their blue bins (rather than putting into general waste as currently happens)
- Collecting the used biscuit wrappers and delegating someone to dispose of them at a supermarket’s flexible plastic collection point.