



# CLG Select Committee Report on Refuse Collection

The report from the Communities and Local Government committee responds to the recent Waste strategy proposals, in particular, financial incentive schemes and alternate weekly collections.

TO: All Chief Executives, main and email contacts (England)

CC: All Chief Executives, main and email contacts (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland)

## **Key issues**

### **The committee make a number of recommendations including**

1. The Government is urged to develop clear, straightforward best practice guidance on information provided to householders on the introduction of AWC
2. The Government clarify how financial incentive schemes for recycling will interact with council tax and seek a detailed explanation of why the introduction of incentive schemes should not be accompanied by reductions in council tax
3. The Government should encourage more local authorities to adopt separate food waste collections and issue guidance to stress the necessity to provide householders with hard side bins or boxes.

## **1. Introduction**

This briefing summarises the report of the CLG committee on Refuse Collection. A copy of the committee report can be found at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmcomloc/536/536i.pdf>. The committee heard evidence from Defra Ministers as well as leading industry experts and received considerable press exposure.

The CLG Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Communities and Local Government and its associated bodies.

## **2. Background**

The primary purpose of the report was to identify how the ways in which local government collects household refuse can help reduce the amount of waste produced and, in particular, the proportion sent to landfill. An additional issue was how the public view the payment for refuse collection and how it is actually funded.

A key point identified is that refuse collection is one of local government's most visible services, and one of the few that is truly universal (unlike education or social services). It quotes a former local government Minister saying in May 2007 that many people see it as "*the single most important service that most households get and pay for through their council tax*".

The report makes a number of recommendations.

## **3. Recommendations**

### *3.1 Alternate Weekly Collections (AWC)*

The Government is urged to develop clear, straightforward best practice guidance on information provided to householders on the introduction of AWC. Whilst acknowledging that research has shown no evidence of adverse health impacts through AWC, the committee raised issues based on the strength of public concern and the wealth of anecdotal evidence about increased populations of flies, maggots and rats. There is a strong recommendation that the Government commission further and more detailed research if the public is to be persuaded that there is no appreciable risk.

AWC systems are now in place in approx 140 local authorities and the committee found that "this has been accompanied in most of them by rapid and substantial increases in local recycling". However, they felt the link was unproven as introduction of AWC is always part of a package of measures aimed at encouraging householders to sort more of their waste for recycling. They also identified that AWC was "clearly not appropriate to all areas, particularly highly urban areas characterised by much shared accommodation".

They concluded that AWC is a matter of local circumstance for local choice.

Additionally they felt that the term AWC was bureaucratic and confusing and a good example of how a *“potentially effective policy can be damaged by jargonistic terminology that is meaningless to most householders”*.

As a result, they felt there is no single system suitable to all authorities and recommend that the Government works with WRAP and local government to agree a core definition of what householders should expect from their refuse collection. This should include no complicated rules, rubbish collected when the council says it will and schemes that suit every household.

### *3.2 Financial Incentives*

The committee stated that “it is hard to see how a resident faced with a financial incentive scheme bill for the indicative £30 (as contained in the Defra consultation) will see it as anything other than a charge, or a tax” and that “it is hard to see why any council will want to set up a complicated charging scheme that earns it no money and risks widespread public disapproval”. The reasoning behind these claims are that revenue neutral financial incentive schemes aimed at improving local recycling will raise no money for councils and may in practice, run directly counter to the intentions the Lyons review recommended through local charging schemes.

The committee recommends that the Government clarify how financial incentive schemes for recycling will interact with council tax and seek a detailed explanation of why the introduction of incentive schemes should not be accompanied by reductions in council tax. In particular, they are concerned by the suggestion that schemes “should not” require additional funding from council tax, because whether a local authority raises or reduces its council tax to fund schemes or incentives to local householders is a matter for individual councils. Additionally, they are not convinced that enough work has been done or guidance given to local authorities on how to prevent risks such as flytipping.

A further major concern relates to funding. The committee was not convinced that local authorities already faced with increasing waste costs will be adequately funded to deal with increased administration, clear-up and prosecution costs. The committee does welcome the Government’s recognition that specific groups, such as large families or those on council tax benefit, should not be disadvantaged by the introduction of financial incentive schemes.

In terms of non payment, the committee were particularly scathing as given the small sums involved, prosecution seems an unlikely answer. Also it is felt that non collection of non-payers waste is not an option given the impact on other householders. The result is that the committee does not believe that councils possess any adequate sanction against refusal to pay and question whether that might not substantially undermine schemes that local authorities may wish to introduce.

In terms of potential rewards of £20 to £30 per annum, the committee felt that this was too little reward. They state that they *“cannot believe that giving some households £20 or £30 a year will remotely outweigh the negative psychological impact of making*

*other households pay more for a service they believe they already pay for through taxation. Breaking the link with council tax and establishing refuse collection as a utility, like gas or sewerage, might have the radical impact the Government say they want. The half-hearted tilt in the direction of charging contained in their current proposals will not”.*

### *3.3 Food Waste*

The committee identifies that if councils are to collect food waste only once every two weeks as part of an AWC system, then Government guidance must stress the absolute necessity to provide householders with sealable containers, such as hard-sided wheeled bins or boxes. They also recommend that Government encourage more local authorities to adopt both separate and (at least) weekly food waste collection.

### *3.4 Recycling systems*

The collection of recyclable materials has grown in a piecemeal, haphazard fashion across England and has resulted in many local systems leading to public confusion. Whilst the committee concluded that a national recycling system is not feasible in the short term, it urges the Government to evaluate means of achieving more public understanding and co-operation by reducing random and unnecessary differences in practice across local authorities. It suggests that wider application of WRAP’s national colour-coded recycling system could give both clarity and simplicity and long-term economies of scale.

### *3.5 Joint Waste Authorities*

The committee welcomes the powers to create joint waste authorities as they could bring about cost efficiencies, an increasing degree of shared practice and, possibly, some standardisation of approach to collection of different recycling streams and such things as a colour-coded system for different streams.

### *3.6 Commercial and Industrial Waste*

The committee identify that household waste (9% of total UK waste – source Waste Strategy 2007) is only part of the problem and recommend that the Government urgently investigate means of improving financial incentives to reduce the amount of commercial, industrial and construction waste that will otherwise continue to go to landfill. They also recommend the rapid roll-out of a programme of affordable recycling services for businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises.

### *3.7 Performance Framework*

The committee endorses the Government’s indication to include measures on waste among the 200 indicators being developed for the new local government performance framework and recommend that such indicators be priorities for inclusion among the 35 local improvement targets identified for each authority.

### *3.8 Local Autonomy*

The autonomy of local authorities to use their expertise to implement the best solution for their own areas is recognised but it is recommended that the Government commission research to evaluate the best local collection, recycling, re-use and reduction schemes operated by local authorities and to develop a strategy to

encourage their widespread adoption. It is noted that the Government has set recycling performance targets for local authorities and recommends that Government enter into discussion with local authorities about the creation of statutory targets.

#### **4. APSE Comment**

This report adds to others that highlight the increasing importance of waste management. As such APSE welcome the findings of the select committee as a well thought out, if at some points cautious, summary of the issues facing local authorities in terms of refuse and recycling collections. It is unfortunate that the national media focused its reporting on the report in a narrow and negative manner by focusing on the criticisms of AWC without balancing the other comments made by the report.

In terms of financial incentives, APSE agree with the select committee that it should be up to individual local authorities to decide whether to introduce such schemes. Additionally, the call for the Government to clarify exactly how financial incentive schemes for recycling will interact with council tax is an area that APSE supports. It is essential that the public are made aware of the true costs of dealing with waste (both collection and disposal).

The committee felt strongly that the proposed financial incentives on offer to recycle are inadequate would not influence people to recycle. A recent WRAP report indicates that 62% of the public say they are committed recyclers despite there being no incentives on offer. It is debatable whether the amounts on offer will influence the remainder of the public if the extra costs would amount to only £1 per week. Although research from Europe indicates that charging does bring results with typical charges of £35 to £50 per household per year, whether this would work in the UK immediately remains inconclusive. For example in Holland and Belgium it has taken 10-15 years to achieve change following significant increases in Landfill Tax, producer responsibility and new waste infrastructure. The UK faces having to make a step change over a far shorter timeframe.

In terms of AWC, the select committee seems to be basing some of its criticisms on anecdotal evidence and the fact there is no conclusive proof they do actually increase recycling rates. APSE accepts that while AWC will not be appropriate for all properties or for all types of waste (e.g. food/kitchen) it does have an important role to play. There are many areas where AWC are operating successfully and the key to this is where local authorities have good communications and have delivered a clear message to residents. Changing public behaviour is the key to success not only in implementing AWC and good communication and engagement are the only ways that the correct balance between reducing tonnages going to landfill and delivering a service that is acceptable to residents will be achieved.

In line with the report, APSE supports the select committee recommendations for greater Government encouragement for food and kitchen waste recycling collections to reduce the amount of organic waste going to landfill. While the select committee identifies the issues with food waste it is disappointing that little is mentioned about

the issues of packaging and how Government could put increasing pressure on retailers and manufacturers. The Waste Strategy 2007 acknowledged that all sectors of the economy need to share responsibility. APSE believes that Government needs to be bolder in tackling the business, manufacturing and the retail community in addressing waste minimisation issues.

APSE will be responding to the waste strategy consultation and comments should be sent to John Marsh ([jmarsh@apse.org.uk](mailto:jmarsh@apse.org.uk)).

An APSE publication "The Future for Waste Management" highlights many of these issues and can be downloaded from the APSE website ([www.apse.org.uk](http://www.apse.org.uk)).

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