



## Food for thought

*Food can be one of the trickiest types of waste to collect and recycle, but lessons can be learned from councils that are leading the way, as Debbie Johns of APSE has discovered*

While other types of recycling have taken off, food waste has proved a more challenging prospect for many local authorities.

Efforts by local authorities have reduced landfill from 18 million tonnes in 2006 to 15 million tonnes in 2008. In APSE's latest state of the market survey on refuse and recycling activities, more than 90% of councils said they recycle paper, cans, green waste, glass and card and almost 90% recycle plastics. Only 23% recycled food waste however. When councils were asked about the difficulty of implementing schemes, food waste was thought to be the most difficult.

APSE represents some 260 local authorities providing front-line services across the UK, including refuse collection and recycling. This difficulty in dealing with food waste identified in our annual state of the market led us to undertake a specifically focused follow-up survey on food waste this autumn.

For those respondents who do offer a food waste collection to their residents, our survey showed:

- Average participation stands at 66% and ranges from 23% to 100%
- An average of 1.9kg kg of food waste is collected per property that participates per week
- 54% have weekly collections of food waste
- 61% offer alternate weekly collections
- 97.8% offer this for cooked food, 87% for uncooked food
- 48% mix food with green waste
- 87% use internal bins in the scheme

Of those who do not currently offer a food waste collection services, half expect to do so in the next two to three years. The reasons cited for not collecting food waste include: costs; there being no local facilities to treat it; the fact that the waste is being treated as part of residual waste; or for political reasons.

Despite perceived difficulties, more councils are getting to grips with food waste collection and there are clear policy drivers to encourage them to collect higher levels. The 2009 budget showed a commitment to encourage investment in low carbon jobs and energy generation using organic waste. The Chancellor announced additional funding of £10 million for anaerobic digestion and waste infrastructure and a continued increase of £8 per tonne per year to the standard rate of landfill tax up to 2013. The £10 million for food waste reprocessing will play

a vital role in providing alternative energy, diverting a further 316,000 tonnes of food waste from landfill and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) is also providing help for councils introducing separate food waste collections. It has released £3.5m to help councils in England with the introduction of new separate food waste collections. The deadline was late October for latest funding bids.

Between 2007 and 2009 WRAP provided funding and technical support to 21 authorities in England and Northern Ireland to carry out trials of separate food waste collections. The trials found that refuse collection frequency was a significant factor. The average food waste yields achieved by trial areas with fortnightly refuse collections were generally higher in comparison to trial areas with weekly refuse collections. Levels of deprivation were also found to be significant in affecting the food waste yields, with higher yields in more affluent areas. Trials involving door-to-door collections of food waste from flats reflected the challenges of collecting food waste from multi-occupancy properties.

High levels of satisfaction were recorded for containers, caddies and liners, as well as in areas where publicity materials were produced using WRAP designed templates.

The most common reasons given by respondents for not participating in the food waste collections were related to concerns about potential hygiene, odour or vermin issues. However these issues were considered less important by residents who actually participated in the collections – indicating that these are often perceived issues rather than problems experienced in reality. The single main reason stated for non-participation was not producing enough food waste. Again, for most households this is also likely to be an issue of perception rather than reality; with studies showing that even households that claim to generate no food waste at all produce on average 2.9kg per week.

APSE would encourage local authorities who are looking at introducing food waste collections to look at the lessons learnt from the trials. Our case studies also show how APSE member authorities have successfully approached food waste schemes. These examples show that, while dealing with food waste presents challenges, these can be overcome with the right approach.

### **Preston City Council**

Preston City Council's food waste scheme has been highly successful and the council has carried out a full end of trial report on the scheme. The collection and processing element of the project ran from May 2005 to May 2007. It was introduced alongside the extension of alternate weekly collections to a densely populated area of over 7,500 households in the Deepdale area of the city. Residents in the target area felt that the food waste project gave them an opportunity to dispose of their food waste weekly within a fortnightly collection service.

The project required householders to separate food waste into a 7 litre kitchen caddy lined with special compostable bags. A larger 25 litre outside container was used to store full bags and was set out on the kerbside every week. Bags and

containers were provided free to householders. A project officer was employed and a driver and one assistant carried out collections with a specially designed vehicle.

Participation began at around 56% and in some areas has been measured to be as high as 77%. Contamination was reduced to a very low level in a short space of time through doorstepping and rejection slips. Over 850 tonnes of food waste has been collected over the years of the project. On average 3kg every week could be expected from a participating household and this can be as much as 5kg where cooking involves fresh un-prepared ingredients.

The council adopted an innovative approach to communication in response to the diversity of ethnic backgrounds and languages in the area. The project focused on producing extremely visual and almost word-free literature with key text repeated in several different appropriate languages. In terms of customer satisfaction, a questionnaire was sent out in Spring 2006 and 97% of the respondents thought that the service should continue. The trial has now been mainstreamed and collections rolled out to a further 7,500 households.

### **Carmarthenshire Council**

Carmarthenshire Council, a primarily rural authority in Wales with some urban wards rolled out a scheme in February last year and by October this year, 75,000 households will be covered. Their new kerbside recycling scheme involves alternate blue bags and black bag collections with food waste collected every week by new vehicles. Food waste is put in a brown caddie in the kitchen and transferred to a bin outside.

The council appointed a Communications Officer to help deliver the communication plan alongside their waste awareness team of officer. It ran a major advertising campaign called 'Green or Mean' and have events and roadshows to schools and communities. An average of 1.72kg of food waste is being collected per household and the authority conducted a participation exercise in August 2008 which revealed that a 78% participation rate in food waste. It carried out 2 doorstepping exercises in February and September 2008 which demonstrated that over 95% of respondents were aware of the scheme and in the main the project was highly successful.

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