

Press briefing

13 October 2006

AWC. Chips in bins. They're all out to get us!

A great many local authority waste managers would be forgiven for thinking that residents are on the verge of a bloody revolt – ready at a moment's notice march on the town hall where effigies of micro-chips will be burnt whilst the masses hold placards saying “NO TO AWC” or “BRING BACK WEEKLY WASTE COLLECTIONS”.

The recent, small-scale demonstration in Scunthorpe aside, such a scenario is unlikely to ever be played out but that is not to dismiss the general tide of suspicion, mistrust and disdain many people hold towards their councils at the moment with regards to how their waste is collected. Discussions in the home, pub and workplace can be every bit as destructive and diverting as a full-scale protest.

But what has lead to this degree of animosity? Many local authorities have done some truly great work to increase recycling by introducing highly efficient and effective schemes over the past 5 years. 23% of domestic rubbish is now being recycled and most people seem willing to participate in the collection schemes provided.

Many will point the finger of blame to the national press for stirring up a storm over something that is “nobody's business but the council's”. This is to miss the far bigger issue by some margin. The only reason that these opinions exist is that too many councils have failed to communicate effectively to residents, allowing suspicion to fester into misinformed opinion.

It's not the primary job of the media to “set the record straight” on things like this. Their job is report on the public's attitude. It's up to councils to ensure that people's attitudes are based on fact.

The good news is, that this can be addressed but we must first take a step back and consider the wider communication issue.

WHY COMMUNICATE?

For the first time since the Second World War, people are being asked to “think” about their waste. How much of it they produce, what they produce and how they dispose of it. For over 60 years, people have been putting all their rubbish in the bin and once or twice a week, in the dead of night, the magical “waste fairies” come and whisk it away – never to be seen again. (“Waste fairies” being I term I tend not to use in the company of collection crews!!)

It's very wrong to expect people to change a habit of a lifetime overnight – or even over 4 or 5 years.

It's interesting to note that there exists a direct correlation between those councils in the higher reaches of the UK recycling league table and those that have committed the most to communications.

Those councils that approach their recycling services on what I call a "Field of Dreams" basis will for ever languish at the bottom of the table. (Field of Dreams: 1989 Film starring Kevin Costner whose character hears ghostly voices urging him to build a baseball pitch on his near-bankrupt farm on no stronger reason than "if you build, they will come". In this instance, the phrase would be "If you give them recycling boxes, they will use them").

For people to fully embrace recycling and use the schemes provided, they need to be encouraged, guided and told why it's needed. It's on this last point that the recycling industry has started to falter slightly.

THE MISSING COMMUNICATION LINK

Each year, EnviroComms gets involved with a lot of public engagement and consultation work – doorstepping, focus groups, research and the like.

One of the most common barriers and opinions we come across is the belief that recycling is "all about the council reaching targets".

Well, yes. This cannot be denied but what effort has been made to explain why those targets have been set in the first place?

Recycling has become a process so bogged down in procedure and a culture of "box-ticking" that the core reason for recycling (environmental protection) has been all but lost.

How many residents are aware of the current thinking amongst the world's leading scientific community that suggests we have less than 10 years to significantly reduce CO2 output before we reach the point of no return on climate change?

How many residents are aware that should this point be reached, it's thought that within a further 10 years, sea levels would rise by 20' with devastating shifts in weather patterns sweeping Britain?

Then ask, how many residents are aware that by recycling just half of their household waste, they can save approximately 2,400lbs of CO2 going into the atmosphere each year.

Times that amount by the number of households in any one council region and people then start to see that they can make a very real, positive difference. All that's required is to put different waste products in different containers.

If people are made fully aware of this, they are likely to be more willing to accept changes to encourage greater recycling such as AWC or chips-in-bins.

Of course recycling is only part of the solution but it's a pretty big part none the less.

CHIPS WITH EVERYTHING

A lot of councils appear to have been taken by surprise by the reaction to the whole chipped bin issue. The problem is that it's often difficult for waste managers to place themselves outside of their day-to-day lives and into the shoes of residents. This often leads to the perception of arrogance along the lines of "it's our bin, we'll put on them what we like".

I have heard of instances where councils have installed chips or supplied bins with chips already installed without telling residents. Naturally, when someone finds a suspicious looking electronic device on their bin, questions will be asked along the lines of "if it's that innocent, why didn't they tell us about them in the first place?"

This suspicion has thus lead to the belief that the device is a pre-cursor to a "pay-as-you-throw" strategy or a system of fining those that fail to recycle or recycle correctly, forcing these issues into the public debate many years before they can even be considered as a viable inclusion in local waste strategies. Even if they were to be included at some stage in the future, it's likely they'd require a system far more complex than the current "chip" device, which is generally only used to monitor weight collected over a certain area and assign council property to a certain location.

There are those that object to the idea on the grounds that they are being "spied on" and that these devices are peering into their day-to-day household habits. If that were the case, these same people would do well to avoid using supermarket loyalty cards, credit or debit cards for these, seemingly innocent tools, collect far more intimate details about a person's day-to-day lives than any chip in a bin could ever hope to attain.

A good way to build trust is to offer residents the option of having the chips removed from their bins. This may be seen as a high-risk strategy by the council but providing residents are fully informed as to why they are there in the first place, there's a fair chance of them accepting their presence in the first place and thus it would be an offer that will have very little take up.

AWC

The perception here is that residents are somehow receiving a reduced service. Communication needs to explain the estimate that about 70% of household waste is recyclable. Thus, if people use their recycling schemes correctly, there is no need to collect normal waste with the same regularity. This of course is on the assumption that an efficient recycling collection scheme is available in the first place. If a council is only collecting say, paper and glass, then AWC is probably not the best route to take.

In September 2005, Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council introduced AWC to a trial area comprising some 12,000 households. EnviroComms developed a communication campaign that gave details of the new scheme in a strategic and systematic manner – initial teaser leaflets, followed a week later by a more expansive information and then a pack delivered on the week of roll out that fully explained the reasoning behind the new scheme, how to use it and a collection calendar that clearly showed what was being collected on what day.

The result was near instantaneous take-up. 97% participation, minimal complaints and a jump in recycling from 20% to 50% in week one.

A similar approach was used in Kettering where recycling rose from 7% to 45% in 18 months and more recently in Bristol where a complex and potentially contentious system was successfully introduced back in August which resulted in a dramatic rise in recycling from 17% to 38% in just the first week.

What sets these schemes apart from other less-successful ones is the quality and commitment to efficient communications. Without this, well meaning councils will forever be held back as they fight the fire of misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

EnviroComms position

It should be noted that EnviroComms' remit is limited to the instructions received from our clients. We have no influence over local waste strategies and nor should we – with the exception of the recommendation that communications should be part of waste strategies rather than left as a means simply to communicate the strategy.

To clarify our position, our view of most local authorities' waste strategies for recycling is generally one of absolute support. The need to recycle and minimize waste is clear for all to see although how we do this is open for much debate.

Councils are often caught between a political rock and a practical hard place but by and large, end up with schemes and services that are the best possible option available.

In most cases, the only barrier and reason for poor recycling and/or poor resident relations has been the failure to communicate effectively with the public. WRAP have and continue to do excellent work in raising the level of awareness about recycling but it comes down to local authorities to actually get people to use their boxes, bins and sacks.

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