



Bin collection—Alternate weekly collection

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Author: Oliver Bennett, Policy Analyst
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Waste collection can be a contentious issue, particularly when local authorities decide to move away from weekly bin collection to alternate weekly collection (AWC).

Over 59% of local authorities now use AWC of household waste—recycling is collected on one week and non-recyclable the next. AWC has been adopted as it can increase recycling rates while reducing the costs associated with managing residual waste. AWC may also lead to a reduction in overall waste generation.

While AWC can prove controversial, in many areas it has been introduced with little or no opposition, and even with public support. However, the suitability of AWC depends on the characteristics of the region. Successful introduction requires proper consultation and planning.

The principle concern raised about AWC is the potential health risk associated with food waste remaining in bins for up to two weeks. However, there is no evidence of increased health risk with AWC, provided common sense precautions are taken. Nevertheless some authorities have adopted weekly food waste collections alongside AWC.

The Government has said that while it is for local authorities to decide what waste collection system works best for their area, it wants to encourage authorities to collect waste more frequently. It said that the “public have a reasonable expectation that household waste collections services should be weekly, particularly for smelly waste”.

Following the Waste Review many commentators concluded that the Government had effectively dropped the policy of weekly bin collections. However, on 30 September 2011 Eric Pickles MP announced the creation of a £250 million Weekly Collections Support Scheme to help councils reintroduce weekly collections. At time of publication, little was known about how the scheme would function.

If local authorities with AWC revert to full weekly bin collections it could cost £530 million over the spending review period and it may have an impact on recycling rates.

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1 Alternate weekly collection

Section 45 of the *Environment Protection Act 1990* imposes a duty on local authorities to collect and dispose of household waste. There is nothing in the Act or any regulations relating to it that impose any particular frequency of collection on authorities.

English councils have been moving towards alternate weekly collection (AWC) of bins for the past ten years—over 59% now use this system.¹ AWC is when recycling is collected on one week and non-recyclable waste the next week. There can be many different variations of AWC—many councils include weekly collections of food waste.

2 What are the benefits of AWC?

Legislation requires a reduction in the amount of waste going to landfill and an increase in recycling, in order to help address the environmental impacts of waste. At the same time councils are required to deliver “good quality local services as efficiently as possible within their financial constraints”.²

As a result, AWC has been adopted by many councils as it encourages the recycling of waste and can reduce the costs associated with waste collection. AWC does this as it restrains “the extent to which recyclable waste can be put into... waste bins”, thereby releasing “money, manpower and equipment to provide high quality recycling services”.³

In a 2007 report, WRAP found that “well run” AWC schemes not only encourage recycling, but can also reduce the overall amount of waste produced as residents seek to avoid waste generation:

¹ [Alternate weekly collections and other rubbish thoughts](#), Local Government Chronicle, May 25, 2011

² [Alternate weekly collections guidance](#), WRAP, 13 July 2007

³ [Alternate weekly collections guidance](#), WRAP, 13 July 2007

- Raise awareness of the volumes of waste generated, prompting the segregation of materials for recycling and composting; and
- Prompting an overall reduction in waste arisings at the kerbside. The reduction is likely to be brought about by residents changing their habits regarding the amount of material they manage via other means (e.g. home composting) or by changing shopping habits to reduce e.g. food and packaging waste.⁴

19 of the top 20 highest performing local authorities in 2005/06 operated an AWC scheme, and all provided an organic waste collection service.⁵

However, AWC may not be appropriate for all local authorities. Individual circumstances are important.⁶

3 Is AWC unpopular?

AWC has been introduced in many areas with little or no opposition.⁷ Daventry District Council experienced a 45% increase on the yields of recyclables collected when it changed to a AWC scheme.⁸ This happened at the same time as very high levels of public satisfaction:

A total of 85 per cent of users are satisfied with the waste service. This is Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) 90. Up to 60 per cent think the council keeps them well informed. Such praise resulted in Daventry District Council winning beacon status in 2006 for waste and recycling.⁹

Nevertheless, AWC can be unpopular in certain circumstances, particularly where it has been introduced without proper consultation or planning.¹⁰ AWC may not work well in all circumstances.

4 Is food waste a health risk?

Concern about AWC schemes commonly centre on possible health risks and odour from the organic component of waste.

In 2007 a review by Cranfield University and Enviro, found “no evidence that alternate week waste collection will cause any significant health impacts for residents, or that any health impacts are likely to be significantly greater than those associated with weekly collections”.¹¹ It also found that “common-sense steps”, such as closing bin lids, can easily prevent odours or vermin from being a problem.¹²

The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health told the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs select committee (EFRA) that “there is no evidence of health risk, provided food waste is

⁴ *Alternate weekly collections guidance*, WRAP, 13 July 2007

⁵ *Alternate weekly collections guidance*, WRAP, 13 July 2007

⁶ *Alternate weekly collections guidance*, WRAP, 13 July 2007

⁷ Communities and Local Government Committee, *Refuse Collection*, Fifth Report of Session 2006–07, HC 536i

⁸ Communities and Local Government Committee, *Refuse Collection*, Fifth Report of Session 2006–07, HC 536i

⁹ *Beacon case study*, IDeA Knowledge, August 2006

¹⁰ Communities and Local Government Committee, *Refuse Collection*, Fifth Report of Session 2006–07, HC 536i

¹¹ *Health impact assessment of alternate week waste collections of biodegradable waste*, Cranfield University and Enviro Consulting Limited, February 2007

¹² *Health impact assessment of alternate week waste collections of biodegradable waste*, Cranfield University and Enviro Consulting Limited, February 2007

adequately dealt with”.¹³ The Department for Health agreed.¹⁴ However, EFRA recommended “that the Government commission further and more detailed research if the public is to be persuaded that there is no appreciable risk”.¹⁵

4.1 Weekly food waste collections in AWC schemes

Currently 72 local authorities in England collect food waste separately.¹⁶ Separate food waste collections can happen weekly in AWC schemes.

WRAP recommended that local authorities should give “serious consideration” to weekly food waste collection alongside AWC as it “increases the amount of waste collected for recycling, is likely to be acceptable to residents and when delivered alongside fortnightly refuse collections can be a cost-effective means of diverting biodegradable materials from landfill”.¹⁷

EFRA also recognised the benefits of weekly food waste collections. It recommended that “Government encourage more local authorities to adopt both separate food waste collection and at least weekly food waste collection”.¹⁸

5 How much would it cost to revert to weekly collections?

In response to a Parliamentary Question, the Government stated that the cost to local authorities that operate alternate weekly waste collections of introducing weekly waste collections “would be in the region of £140 million in the first year, and £530 million over the period of the Spending Review”.¹⁹

[Somerset Waste Partnership](#), which manages recycling and waste services for the five districts and the county council in Somerset, has AWC for refuse, but weekly collection of recyclable materials. It calculated that reverting to collecting refuse on a weekly basis would cost it £3.2 million per annum and have a negative impact on recycling rates. David Mansell, Strategy and Communications Team Leader for Somerset Waste Partnership said:

Somerset Waste Partnership has calculated that the cost of changing fortnightly refuse collections back to weekly would be £3.2m per annum. This is an annualised total based on the average costs for the next five years. Additional collection costs contribute just over half of the total. The rest is the extra disposal costs, including landfill tax, from loss of the extra waste minimisation and recycling that resulted from the original introduction of fortnightly refuse collections.

Somerset Waste Partnership introduced fortnightly refuse collections as part of a complete service package that also involved recycling frequency changing from fortnightly to weekly and new food waste collections being introduced. If reverting back to weekly refuse, it is assumed that weekly recycling and food waste collections would continue, but that half of the improved performance associated just with the change in refuse frequency would be lost from reverting back to weekly refuse collections.

Somerset’s recycling rate is now 50% and we hope that completing the county’s conversion to weekly recycling, including food waste, and fortnightly refuse collections,

¹³ Communities and Local Government Committee, [Refuse Collection](#), Fifth Report of Session 2006–07, HC 536i

¹⁴ Communities and Local Government Committee, [Refuse Collection](#), Fifth Report of Session 2006–07, HC 536i

¹⁵ Communities and Local Government Committee, [Refuse Collection](#), Fifth Report of Session 2006–07, HC 536i

¹⁶ [Food waste set to be focus of weekly collection plans](#), Letsrecycle.com, 31 May 2011

¹⁷ [Alternate weekly collections guidance](#), WRAP, 13 July 2007

¹⁸ Communities and Local Government Committee, [Refuse Collection](#), Fifth Report of Session 2006–07, HC 536i

¹⁹ HC Deb 13 Sep 2010 c703W

and adding new materials, such as household plastic bottles and cardboard, to weekly recycling collections, will mean the rate climbs towards and over time beyond 60%.²⁰

6 Government policy

A number of statements have been made by the Secretary of State, Eric Pickles MP, regarding the Government's view that all waste should be collected weekly.²¹ Mr Pickles wrote to the Audit Commission asking that guidance "giving perverse incentives to local authorities to cut the frequency of rubbish collections" be rescinded.²²

In response the Audit Commission said that it had never issued guidance on how local authorities should organise waste collection.²³ The Commission said that its role was simply to "challenge ineffective or inefficient services and put our evidence-based findings and recommendations in to public domain". It went on that it did "not impose particular policy approaches on democratically elected councils".²⁴

Richard Benyon MP, environment minister, said that it was the Government's view that local authorities should "determine what waste collection system works best for their local areas in consultation with their residents".²⁵

1.1 The Waste Review

On 15 June 2010 the Government announced a Waste Review to "ensure that we are taking the right steps towards creating a 'zero waste' economy, where resources are fully valued, and nothing of value gets thrown away".²⁶ The review would consider a range of issues including how the Government "can work with local councils to increase the frequency and quality of rubbish collections and make it easier to recycle". It also sought to "tackle measures that encourage councils specifically to cut the scope of collections".²⁷

The review was published on 14 June 2011. The Government reiterated its commitment to weekly waste collection. It indicated that it would seek to increase the frequency of collections by working with local authorities to deliver efficiencies:

The Government will be working with local councils to increase the frequency and quality of rubbish collections and make it easier to recycle and to tackle measures which encourage councils specifically to cut the scope of collections. Waste services are a matter for local authorities to develop fit for purpose local solutions. However the Government believes that better procurement and joint working can improve the efficiency of collections while improving the frontline service for the public in an affordable and practical manner.

The Government understands that the public have a reasonable expectation that household waste collections services should be weekly, particularly for smelly waste. The Government has already moved to remove Audit Commission guidance and

²⁰ Personal communication, David Mansell, Strategy and Communications Team Leader for Somerset Waste Partnership, 3 June 2011

²¹ [Minister wants return of weekly bin collections](#), BBC News, 18 June 2010

²² [Letter from Secretary of State Mr Eric Pickles MP to Eugene Sullivan](#) (Interim Chief Executive of the Audit Commission), 17 June 2010

²³ [Letter from Eugene Sullivan \(Interim Chief Executive of the Audit Commission\) to Secretary of State Mr Eric Pickles MP](#), 21 June 2010

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ HC Deb 13 September 2010 c702W

²⁶ [Waste Review](#), Defra website, 11 October 2010

²⁷ [Terms of reference for a review of waste policies](#), Defra, 15 June 2010

inspections which marked down councils who do not adopt fortnightly rubbish collections; and to abolish Local Area Agreements imposed by Whitehall which created perverse incentives to downgrade waste collection services. The Government will work with WRAP to monitor service levels to understand whether and how they are changing, keeping the quality, affordability and frequency of household waste collections under review.²⁸

Although the Government reiterated its commitment to weekly bin collections, the lack of specific measures to increase the frequency of collections led many to conclude that the Government had effectively dropped the policy.²⁹

7 The Weekly Collections Support Scheme—latest situation

Two days before the 2011 Conservative Party Conference, Communities Secretary Eric Pickles MP announced the Weekly Collections Support Scheme—“a new fund of up to £250million [to] support councils to deliver a weekly collection of household waste and improve the environment”.³⁰ Mr Pickles said that the no other budgets would be cut because of the scheme and that the money had come from efficiency savings in his department.³¹

The scheme will “both support weekly collections and enable councils to invest in schemes and projects that will benefit the environment including through raising recycling rates”.³² Caroline Spelman MP, Environment Secretary, said that the scheme will help councils to “reinstate weekly bin rounds for smelly waste, while also seeking new and innovative ways to increase recycling and look after the environment”.³³ In an interview with the BBC, David Cameron also said the scheme would encourage the weekly collection of “smelly food waste”.³⁴

7.1 How will the scheme work?

Little detailed information is available at present. The press release announcing the scheme on 30 September 2011 stated that councils will be able to bid for funds in “coming months”. Further detail about the scheme will be published in “due course”.³⁵ Eric Pickles MP in a statement to the House on 10 October 2011 said:

On 30 September, my Department announced a new fund of up to £250 million to support councils to deliver weekly collections of household waste. The new weekly collections support scheme will support councils which switch from fortnightly to better weekly collections, and will support weekly collection councils which wish to keep and improve the weekly service they offer, such as through better procurement, new technologies and reward schemes like Recyclebank and others.

Councils will be able to bid individually or in consortiums, and with the private sector, where that increases value for money. In order to encourage the most innovative and locally tailored solutions, authorities will be able to bid for a mix of revenue and capital funding.

²⁸ [Government Review of Waste Policy in England 2011](#), Defra, 14 June 2011

²⁹ [Government dumps promise to provide weekly bin collections](#), The Independent, 15 June 2011

³⁰ [Eric Pickles: £250m for councils to support weekly bin collections](#), DCLG, 30 September 2011

³¹ [Pickles unveils £250M waste collection scheme](#), Localgov.co.uk, 30 September 2011

³² [Pickles unveils £250M waste collection scheme](#), Localgov.co.uk, 30 September 2011

³³ [Pickles unveils £250M waste collection scheme](#), Localgov.co.uk, 30 September 2011

³⁴ BBC Breakfast News, 4 October 2011

³⁵ [Pickles unveils £250M waste collection scheme](#), Localgov.co.uk, 30 September 2011

In due course, I will make a further statement on the detail of this scheme, and the details for inviting councils to submit innovative bids for funding. This initiative will help councils deliver better weekly collections.³⁶

On 29 September 2011 the Telegraph reported that “councils will be paid to cover the costs of weekly bin collections providing they guarantee the service for at least five years. They will also have to show that they have introduced recycling schemes”.³⁷

7.2 Reactions to the scheme

The Campaign for Weekly Waste welcomed the scheme.³⁸ The scheme was also welcomed by the Environmental Services Association (ESA), an industry body representing waste collection businesses. ESA said that it would provide welcome money for councils:

We must acknowledge that local authorities deal with a wide range of different pressures, needing to deliver both a great service for residents and maximum recycling of their wastes in a cost-effective manner... There will be no 'one size fits all' solution and it will be down to local authorities to decide which system best fits their local circumstances.³⁹

However, many other groups raised concerns about the proposals. Some local authorities that have retained weekly bin collections were concerned that they would not be able to benefit from the scheme, although these concerns have now been addressed by Eric Pickles MP (see above).⁴⁰

Environmental NGOs generally thought that the scheme would lead to environmental damage by lowering the amount of waste that is recycled.⁴¹ Friends of the Earth said that it was “an astonishing waste of taxpayers' money” and that it “will have a disastrous impact on recycling”.⁴²

Other groups were more cautious in their assessment. The Green Alliance, an environmental think-tank, indicated that it was disappointed by the change—a spokesman said “we know fortnightly collections save councils money and we know they help increase recycling rates”. However, the Alliance went on that if the scheme focused on weekly food waste collection rather than general waste collection, it could prove valuable in reducing the large amount of food waste that is land filled. This could have positive environmental outcomes.⁴³

The Chartered Institution of Wastes Management (CIWM) was also cautious about the announcement.⁴⁴ It questioned “whether the focus of the £250 million fund will deliver the best environmental and economic outcomes” and suggested that the money could better be spent on alternative options. It went on:

...the additional money could more usefully have been focused on delivering improvements in three key areas: supporting more recycling, either by expanding the range of materials collected or improving participation; supporting an expansion in food

³⁶ HC Deb 10 October 2011 c1WS

³⁷ [Councils paid to restart weekly bin collections](#), The Telegraph, 29 September 2011

³⁸ [Councils paid to restart weekly bin collections](#), The Telegraph, 29 September 2011

³⁹ [Waste industry blasts Pickles' weekly bin collection plans](#), BusinessGreen.com, 30 September 2011

⁴⁰ [Pickles unveils £250M waste collection scheme](#), Localgov.co.uk, 30 September 2011

⁴¹ [Pickles unveils £250M waste collection scheme](#), Localgov.co.uk, 30 September 2011

⁴² [Waste industry blasts Pickles' weekly bin collection plans](#), BusinessGreen.com, 30 September 2011

⁴³ [Waste industry blasts Pickles' weekly bin collection plans](#), BusinessGreen.com, 30 September 2011

⁴⁴ [Waste industry blasts Pickles' weekly bin collection plans](#), BusinessGreen.com, 30 September 2011

waste collections, which is the main area of householder concern regarding collection frequency; and supporting waste prevention initiatives...

In economic terms, with so many constraints on council budgets, it is important to ensure that this policy initiative does not lock local councils into significantly higher waste collection costs, for which we will all have to foot the bill long after the Weekly Collections Support Scheme funding has run dry.⁴⁵

CIWM supported weekly food waste collections.⁴⁶

Other commentators have noted that the £250 million scheme will not cover the estimated £530 million cost of moving councils back to full weekly bin collections.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ [CIWM responds to CLG announcement on funding for weekly collections](#), Chartered Institution of Wastes Management, 30 September 2011

⁴⁶ [CIWM Responds To Weekly Bin Collection Argument](#), Chartered Institution of Wastes Management, 31 May 2011

⁴⁷ [Government attempt to entice councils' return to weekly bin collection threatens environment](#), BusinessGreen.com, 30 September 2011