



Bin collection—Alternate weekly collection

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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 while reducing waste management costs. AWC may also lead to a reduction in overall waste generation. If local authorities with AWC revert to full weekly bin collections it could cost £530 million over the spending review period.

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. Odour and flies can be managed through the adoption of weekly food waste collections alongside AWC, which is an approach that many councils have adopted.

The Government has said that while it is for councils to decide what waste collection system works best for their area, it wants to encourage them to collect waste more frequently. It introduced the £250 million Weekly Collections Support Scheme to help councils reintroduce weekly collections.

While little specific information is known about the bids that will be funded by the Scheme, it appears as though it will not lead to the widespread reinstating of weekly bin collections where they have been replaced by AWC. Instead it appears to support existing weekly collections alongside various enhancements to recycling services such as food waste collections and recycling reward schemes.

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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 residual waste bins for the past ten years. AWC is when recycling is collected on one week and non-recyclable waste the next week. There can be many different variations of AWC. Councils may include weekly collections of food waste alongside AWC and different systems can be used in each local authority area to account for regional variations such as housing densities.

Table 1: Local authorities collecting residual waste by frequency (WRAP, 2010-11)

	<i>Weekly</i>	<i>More than weekly</i>	<i>Fortnightly</i>
England	58%	2%	57%
Wales	55%	0%	77%
Scotland	63%	9%	72%
Northern Ireland	15%	0%	92%
UK	55%	3%	62%

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 economic and 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”.¹

As a result, AWC has been adopted by many councils as it is thought to encourage the recycling of waste and it can reduce the costs associated with waste collection. AWC does

¹ [Alternate weekly collections guidance](#), WRAP, 13 July 2007

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”.² 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. It said that AWC:

- 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.³

The top 10 councils in 2011-12, in terms of household and recycling rates, all offered AWC. Most of these offered weekly food waste collections.⁴ In addition, 9 out of 10 of the local authorities with the most improved recycling rates from 2010-2011 had introduced AWC.⁵ 8 of 10 of the lowest performing councils have weekly domestic waste collections. The list of councils can be seen [here](#).

Highest Household Recycling and Composting Rates (Defra 2011/12)

Authority	Region	Percentage Household waste sent for Reuse, Recycling or Composting
Vale of White Horse District Council	South East	68.71%
South Oxfordshire District Council	South East	67.92%
Rochford District Council	Eastern	67.35%
Surrey Heath Borough Council	South East	64.99%
Stockport MBC	North West	62.62%
Harborough District Council	East Midlands	61.56%
Rutland County Council	East Midlands	61.29%
West Oxfordshire District Council	South East	61.21%
Three Rivers District Council	Eastern	60.47%
West Devon Borough Council	South West	59.90%

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

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

⁴ [Alternate weekly collections guidance](#), WRAP, 13 July 2007

⁵ [Battle of the bins: Defra stats show fortnightly refuse collections INCREASES recycling](#), The Independent, 31 December 2012

Please note that AWC may not be appropriate or possible in certain areas, such as where high housing densities make storage of waste a problem. 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

A 2011 survey found that 74% of households with AWC were satisfied with their collection, compared to 83% with a weekly collection.¹⁰ While satisfaction with AWC is slightly lower, the consultant interpreted this as showing that “people aren’t worried about how often their bin is collected; it’s how good the service is that really matters”. In particular the survey indicated that weekly food waste collections would address most of the problems, perceived or real, that occur with AWC.¹¹

Another survey found that the popularity of AWC depended on the way in which it was introduced and communicated by councils. Where AWC was introduced with weekly food waste collections and enhanced recycling, opposition to its introduction reduced to 23%.¹²

Nevertheless, AWC can be unpopular in certain circumstances, particularly where it has been introduced without proper consultation or planning.^{13 14}

4 Is AWC 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 Enviros, 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”.¹⁵ It also found that “common-sense steps”, such as closing bin lids, can easily prevent odours or vermin from being a problem.¹⁶

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 [Survey shows Brits love their bins](#), Sauce Consultancy, 1 December 2011

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² [Weekly or fortnightly? Public attitudes to waste collections](#), Ipsos-MORI, July 2008

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

¹⁴ [Attitudes to waste and recycling in Great Britain](#), 2011, Icaro Consulting, 2011

¹⁵ [Health impact assessment of alternate week waste collections of biodegradable waste](#), Cranfield University and Enviros Consulting Limited, February 2007

¹⁶ [Health impact assessment of alternate week waste collections of biodegradable waste](#), Cranfield University and Enviros Consulting Limited, February 2007

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 adequately dealt with”.¹⁷ The Department for Health agreed.¹⁸ 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”.¹⁹

A 2011 survey by Icaro Consulting and Sauce Consultancy found that households with AWC “are no more likely than their weekly counterparts to report a ‘serious problem’ with vermin, fly tipping, lack of bin capacity or the council refusing to take rubbish away”. However, smells and flies were found to be more associated with AWC, with 13-14% of people rating these as a serious problem. The survey concluded that a focus on improving weekly food waste collections would therefore be a “more pressing” priority “than a focus solely on the frequency of rubbish collections”.²⁰

4.1 Weekly food waste collections in AWC schemes

43% of local authorities in England collect food waste.²¹ Separate food waste collections often 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”.²²

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”.²³

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”.²⁴

[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

¹⁷ Communities and Local Government Committee, [Refuse Collection](#), Fifth Report of Session 2006–07, HC 536i

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

¹⁹ Communities and Local Government Committee, [Refuse Collection](#), Fifth Report of Session 2006–07, HC 536i

²⁰ [Attitudes to waste and recycling in Great Britain](#), 2011, Icaro Consulting, 2011

²¹ [Statistics](#), WRAP, 2011

²² [Alternate weekly collections guidance](#), WRAP, 13 July 2007

²³ Communities and Local Government Committee, [Refuse Collection](#), Fifth Report of Session 2006–07, HC 536i

²⁴ HC Deb 13 Sep 2010 c703W

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, 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%.²⁵

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.²⁶ 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.²⁷

In response the Audit Commission said that it had never issued guidance on how local authorities should organise waste collection.²⁸ 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".²⁹

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".³⁰ However, in November 2012, Eric Pickles MP indicated that local authorities that fail to provide weekly bin collections might face funding cuts.³¹

6.1 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".³² 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".³³

²⁵ Personal communication, David Mansell, Strategy and Communications Team Leader for Somerset Waste Partnership, 3 June 2011

²⁶ [Minister wants return of weekly bin collections](#), BBC News, 18 June 2010

²⁷ [Letter from Secretary of State Mr Eric Pickles MP to Eugene Sullivan](#) (Interim Chief Executive of the Audit Commission), 17 June 2010

²⁸ [Letter from Eugene Sullivan \(Interim Chief Executive of the Audit Commission\) to Secretary of State Mr Eric Pickles MP](#), 21 June 2010

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ HC Deb 13 September 2010 c702W

³¹ [Eric Pickles warns councils over weekly bin collections](#), BBC News, 22 November 2012

³² [Waste Review](#), Defra website, 11 October 2010

³³ [Terms of reference for a review of waste policies](#), Defra, 15 June 2010

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 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.³⁴

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.³⁵

6.2 The Weekly Collections Support Scheme

In September 2011 the 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”.³⁶ Mr Pickles said that no other budgets would be cut because of the scheme and that the money had come from efficiency savings in his department.³⁷

Bids were taken from councils, with applications measured against three core criteria:

- deliver a weekly collection of residual household waste to residents and in addition recyclables, or, where an authority already operates a fortnightly collection of residual household waste and they can credibly demonstrate that this represents the preference of local people, the addition of a weekly food waste (or organic) collection;
- deliver value for money (in terms of cost effectiveness); and,
- deliver an environmental benefit over current performance. Bids were also scored on innovation, and feasibility checks were applied.³⁸

³⁴ [Government Review of Waste Policy in England 2011](#), Defra, 14 June 2011

³⁵ [Government dumps promise to provide weekly bin collections](#), The Independent, 15 June 2011

³⁶ [Eric Pickles: £250m for councils to support weekly bin collections](#), DCLG, 30 September 2011

³⁷ [Pickles unveils £250M waste collection scheme](#), Localgov.co.uk, 30 September 2011

³⁸ [Weekly Collection Support Scheme: announcement of successful bids - frequently asked questions](#), DCLG, viewed 5 February 2013

6.3 Reactions to the scheme

The Campaign for Weekly Waste welcomed the scheme.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

However, many other groups raised concerns about the proposals. Environmental NGOs generally thought that the scheme might lead to environmental damage by lowering the amount of waste that would be recycled.⁴¹ Friends of the Earth (FoE) said that it was "an astonishing waste of taxpayers' money" and that it "will have a disastrous impact on recycling".⁴² An FoE commentator said that "it's obvious that fortnightly collections boost recycling and save councils money" and called for AWC and weekly food waste collection.⁴³

Other groups were more cautious in their assessment. The Green Alliance, an environmental think-tank, indicated that it was disappointed—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.⁴⁴

The Chartered Institution of Wastes Management (CIWM) was also cautious about the announcement.⁴⁵ 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 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.⁴⁶

³⁹ [Councils paid to restart weekly bin collections](#), The Telegraph, 29 September 2011

⁴⁰ [Waste industry blasts Pickles' weekly bin collection plans](#), BusinessGreen.com, 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 [Battle of the bins: Defra stats show fortnightly refuse collections INCREASES recycling](#), The Independent, 31 December 2012

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

⁴⁵ [Waste industry blasts Pickles' weekly bin collection plans](#), BusinessGreen.com, 30 September 2011

⁴⁶ [CIWM responds to CLG announcement on funding for weekly collections](#), Chartered Institution of Wastes Management, 30 September 2011

CIWM supported weekly food waste collections.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

6.4 Which councils will get funding and what will change?

85 councils were successful.⁴⁹ An outline of the winning 90 bids can be found [here](#). The Government said that the scheme would protect the weekly bin collections of “6 million families”.⁵⁰ It calculated that “the schemes supported by the fund will also save over one million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions by recycling an estimated 408,547 tonnes of waste”.⁵¹

No specific information is available about the winning bids, for commercial reasons. The Government explained:

What next: in the weeks to come the department will begin working with councils, the Local Government Association and Defra to support them to work together to procure the best deals as consortiums or groups to ensure value for money for the taxpayer. This means the department has provided a synopsis of each successful bid, but will not be disclosing further specific bid details as this would have an adverse effect on competition between prospective companies and potentially put local authorities in a disadvantageous position.⁵²

On the basis of the available information it appears as though the scheme will not lead to the widespread reinstatement of weekly bin collections where they have been replaced by AWC. Most of the bids appear to “support” existing weekly collections alongside various enhancements to recycling services such as food waste collections. 41 of the bids include recycling reward schemes such as shopping vouchers.⁵³

A survey conducted by trade magazine Materials Recycling World (MRW) and Jennie Rogers indicated that only one council in the scheme will move households with AWC back to a weekly collection, although some councils may partially revert back to a weekly collection.⁵⁴ This was taken by some commentators as councils rejecting weekly bin collections. John Skidmore, at the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management said that “the response shows most local authorities do not believe a mass return to weekly collection of residual waste is a positive move... for me, it underlines the fact that the government’s thinking on this front is out of line and out of date”.⁵⁵

⁴⁷ *CIWM Responds To Weekly Bin Collection Argument*, Chartered Institution of Wastes Management, 31 May 2011

⁴⁸ *Government attempt to entice councils' return to weekly bin collection threatens environment*, BusinessGreen.com, 30 September 2011

⁴⁹ *'Weekly collection saved' as government scheme delivers for 6 million families*, DCLG, 22 November 2012

⁵⁰ *ibid*

⁵¹ *Weekly Collection Support Scheme: announcement of successful bids - frequently asked questions*, DCLG, viewed 5 February 2013

⁵² *'Weekly collection saved' as government scheme delivers for 6 million families*, DCLG, 22 November 2012

⁵³ *'Weekly collection saved' as government scheme delivers for 6 million families*, DCLG, 22 November 2012

⁵⁴ *We spoke to all councils: an emphatic 'no' to ditching AWCs*, MRW, 28 September 2012

⁵⁵ *Councils snub weekly waste collections and go for recycling*, EAEM, 28 September 2012