Why you can't just throw anything in the recycling bin

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

For many years the recycling collected from households in the UK and other Western countries has been exported. This strategy has enabled these countries to carry on without much thought about how consumers purchase goods and dispose of all the unwanted packaging and containers. As long as there are regular collections for recycling paper,

metals and plastics, little consideration is given to where this waste goes and what happens to it. But this now has to change.

Several years ago, China woke up to the environmental consequences of having the world's recycling dumped on it to sort, process and use in manufacturing new goods. Tougher Chinese regulations came into place in 2018, aimed at improving the quality of the recycling it imported.

This should have been a wake up call to the Western world to change the way that recycling was collected and processed in order to improve the quality. But nothing changed, apart from the destination of the low-quality recycling – instead of exporting to China, the recycling was exported to several Eastern European countries and an assortment of other Asian countries, including Malaysia and the Philippines.

A dispute lasting several years over low-quality recycling that was exported by Canada to the Philippines recently saw the waste repatriated, and other countries are also set to follow this example. This solves nothing, though—this recycling has to go somewhere.

How to collect

We need to change the way we collect recycling to ensure that the collected items are suitable for use by manufacturers. This means changing the focus towards collecting clean, high-quality recyclable materials, segregated by type.

Contamination losses – which occur when non-recyclable or non-targeted) materials are included in collection boxes, bags or bins and are then rejected at sorting facilities and now by overseas markets—show that keeping the end point for these materials in mind is essential.

There is often confusion over what can be recycled at home and this

often varies between local authorities because they use different sorting facilities. A huge number of materials are recyclable, but the infrastructure does not exist in all parts of the UK, and sorting methods vary between these sorting facilities and this dictates which materials can be handled.

Collection systems need to be tailored towards the requirements of the reprocessors rather than the householder, collector or sorting facility—and this should guide householders on how and what to actually collect for recycling.

Efficient sorting ensures higher quality materials are collected and reaps benefits across the recycling chain. The Welsh Government Collection Blueprint, which works on this principle, secures higher quality recyclable materials with high levels of householder participation. With improved segregation of materials, clean recycling is able to enter the market for secondary materials either closer to home, or in China where it will pass tougher import requirements.

1. Communicating better should be a priority. Below are three ways that consumers could be helped to recycle better.
2. Clear and consistent labelling of recyclable packaging. The removal of unhelpful "check locally" labels, which only lead to confusion and incorrect disposal of some items, is a good starting point, along with better communication of local anomalies to recycling collections.
3. More information for householders on where recycling goes and what it is used for would improve understanding around the demand for high quality materials. The condition of recycling has an impact on its final use. If recycling is wet or greasy this often leads to contamination losses with items sticking together during mechanical sorting processes or just being so badly damaged they aren't suitable for use.

Better reporting of the end destination

of recyclable materials by councils. Publishing this information is currently voluntary. This should be made mandatory and include all waste collected, not just that handled by local authorities. This would ensure consistent, ethical and legal exports. This would expose poor export practices involving low grade and poorly sorted recyclables, which helps to hide illegal exports of post-consumer electronic items which have been hidden by the lack of transparency.

Other systems

Deposit and return systems for drinks containers are being investigated by the UK government, but will soon be implemented in Scotland, where environmental issues are devolved. These systems, which operate in Norway and Germany, add a deposit to the price of drinks containers which consumers redeem when they return the empty drinks containers and can use against future purchases.

These systems collect higher quality, and there are other potential benefits, such as reducing litter, but there are also arguments against. These include the cost of implementation and the impact on existing local authority household collection schemes where the value of materials collected subsidises the cost of collecting it. But a loss of income for councils may be balanced out by a reduction in collection costs as the volume of recycling goes down.

Improving the quality of the material that is collected must be addressed, and deposit and return systems are seen as a necessary step towards doing this. Ultimately, we need a fundamental shift in the way we look at the waste we produce, which goes well beyond collecting vast quantities of it for faux recycling on the other side of the world.

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