

April 2011



**Friends of
the Earth**

The Talking Rubbish Awards

Background information

Certain newspapers and Government Ministers like to trash recycling but in reality it's got greater public support than ever. Few of us like unrecyclable packaging, products that are built to break and the feeling that the rubbish we create is harming the planet.

Recycling is also cost effective, a fast growing source of jobs in the green economy and helps tackle climate change. Ill-considered and inaccurate populist rhetoric with regard to recycling risks setting back public participation across the whole sustainability agenda.

The myth: Recycling means everyone is terrified of the 'bin police'

"The iron fist of the municipal state has come down on people for the most minor of bin breaches." Eric Pickles, Communities Secretary

Mr Pickles - and some noisy media commentators - give the impression that people live in fear of the 'bin police', for example with talk of ['recycling tyranny'](#).

The reality:

Currently it's simply not the case that most people, or even many people, are angry about their waste collections. Recycling is popular - [WRAP](#) - the taxpayer funded, and impartial, Government advisor on all things waste - [found that](#) more than 80% of the public are satisfied with their waste and recycling collection. And a clear majority can be described as committed recyclers.

In reality, many people are instead annoyed that so much of it still gets burnt or dumped in landfill. They want to be able to recycle what they don't need any more, or better still send it to be reused by someone else. And no one wants to deal with needless waste - like excess packaging or badly designed products.

The myth: Recycling means hefty bin taxes

"Rather than punishing struggling families with new taxes and fines, we will be supporting innovative schemes." Caroline Spelman, Environment Secretary

The reality:

The Coalition Government likes to brag about scrapping bin taxes. But in reality we still pay tax for our rubbish to be collected through council tax.

Variable charges for waste collection according to how much waste is produced have been shown to be capable of increasing recycling up to 40 per cent, as well as reduce overall arisings. This system works well in many other European countries (for more information, [see page 39 of this submission](#)). In the long term it would mean lower council tax for

everyone. Only the super-wasteful would carry the burden for what they chuck away - not struggling families.

Waste is expensive - both through the high and rising cost of disposal and through the unnecessary and costly consumption of resources during the production of goods that we later dispose of. In a cash and, increasingly, resource-constrained economy the effect of waste is to place more pressure on struggling businesses and public services.

In particular, residual waste treatment is costly: landfill tax hits £80/tonne in 2014 and incineration often requires vast PFI grants and ties councils to inflexible 25+ year contracts.

The majority of the public want to be free of rubbish and the vast costs of dealing with it. By recycling more local authorities would save billions in avoided incineration and landfill charges.

There are many other benefits to recycling more. For example, [Friends of the Earth research](#) shows that by moving to a 70% recycling rate for MSW across the UK we would create more than 50,000 new jobs, directly in recycling as well as indirectly in supporting roles and induced in the wider economy. That's 25,000 more jobs than would be created if the UK only went to 50% recycling - the current English target. Further, at least another 18,000 jobs would be created if we recycled C&I waste streams at the same rate.

It would also contribute enormously to the economy by saving at least £650m/year of recyclable materials sent to disposal in the UK, with the associated carbon and resource savings too. Recycling these would save emissions equivalent to grounding six million cars, and provide manufacturing with valuable raw materials.

Cutting down on waste, through prevention, reuse and recycling, would save Britain's businesses and households billions of pounds a year - and would also help reduce our impact on natural systems.

The myth: Recycling means food rots in our homes for weeks

"Fortnightly bin collections are a naked cut to frontline services and lead to problems with vermin, bin smells and fly-tipping." Bob Neill, Under-Secretary for Communities and Local Government

The reality:

So long as councils collect food waste weekly, fortnightly bin collections of black bag waste are not unhygienic as Bob Neill and Eric Pickles often claim. Fortnightly collections boost recycling at the same time as saving councils hundreds of thousands of pounds each.

We would actually free up money for better weekly food collections and recycling services if we got rid of expensive weekly collections of all our rubbish.

Weekly rubbish collections cost more - they mean trucks have to do their rounds twice as often to collect half empty bins, and people recycle less and instead generate more black bag rubbish (that the council then has to pay to dispose of).

[One estimate](#) of the damage from forcing all councils to revert to weekly rubbish collections is that it would cost councils £530million over four years and knock our recycling rate back by more than 5%.

Since most people are enthusiastic recyclers who don't need or even want weekly collections, forcing councils back to weekly collections means a central Government minority is removing the ability of elected councillors to spend money on what the majority want them to spend it on.

We throw away a third of our food, half which is edible, at a cost of £10billion. This waste could be halved by 2020. Full roll-out of separate food waste collections is essential for a massive expansion of renewable energy from [anaerobic digestion \(AD\)](#). Experience suggests that through separating their food waste householders become aware of how much they are wasting and take steps - such as buying less - to reduce the waste in future.

Friends of the Earth briefings

- **The Waste Review** – briefing explaining what we're calling for in the new waste policy for England. www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/rubbish.pdf
- **Gone to waste** – new report on the valuable resources that European countries bury and burn
www.foe.co.uk/resource/reports/gone_to_waste.pdf
- **Food waste collections** www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/food_waste.pdf
- **Recycling** – why it's important and how to do it
www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/recycling.pdf

For more information and links to our other briefings, see
http://www.foe.co.uk/community/campaigns/healthy_planet/incineration_index.html