

**BLOG:**

## MY ENTRY INTO THE WASTE MANAGEMENT INDUSTRY

— Emily Bullimore



I never thought that post-university I would end up in the waste management industry... I didn't acknowledge or consider where my rubbish went after I was done with it, and even less so in university where we had one general waste bin, and a makeshift recycling bin (that was just a cardboard box from one of the hundreds of deliveries we had arriving each month because we were all girls). Also, we only used this box to collect glass and cardboard in because we didn't want the general waste bin to be heavy when taking it through the kitchen... into the corridor... into the lift... through another corridor... outside... around the building... you get the idea.

So, avoiding really thinking about bins and rubbish was great until I moved back home and got my first graduate job. I had no option but to face the thing I dreaded doing the most at university (and still do at home); I was faced with the challenge of bins. I had no idea bins and rubbish caused so much chaos for so many different people. And, oh, do I wish I was still slightly naïve about it.

I was working within a local authority as a waste and recycling assistant helping households and flats understand different waste processes and which bins they should be using for different materials. Within 10 months of that role, I think I

had seen every sight you could think of when it comes to domestic waste collections, bins and the public. Some more pleasant than others, but some that have been engrained in my brain ever since. Every week we were faced with bin stores that had recycling bins brimming with black bags, textiles and other non-recyclable objects that continued to grow due to collection restrictions.

Just from my own actions, I think waste disposal and recycling can take a seat on the back burner for many different reasons (and not just because it might be slightly gross). It is quietly easily forgettable when it comes to our everyday lives which are increasingly chaotic and busy. We use items for what we need them for and then they just go in the bin. Therefore, when it comes to disposing of our waste, it is only a passing thought with usually no further consideration about what happens once it has been taken. At least that is how I felt prior to working in the industry. It takes me back to my time at university where I now feel apologetic and wish I had the knowledge I do today about waste and recycling, as simple actions can make such a big difference. I now know that the wrong item being in the wrong bin can cause lots of issues later down the line.

### **Learning as I go...**

At the beginning it was a real test for me to absorb all this knowledge about kerbside collections, contamination, Material Recovery Facilities (MRF) and whatever else. It was a whole new language, and I guess this can be said for anyone going into their first roles or changing careers into entirely new sectors.

Becoming a part of a waste education team where no previous residential communications had been established worked in my favour, as it has meant that we, as a team, were effectively starting from the drawing board with only a blueprint of waste services, collections and other bits to help. This seemed to be the case for many other local authorities I had spoken to, and helped me understand why people struggle with, and may not want to think about, recycling and waste disposal. It is because the information is never usually

there to begin with, or it is limited. So, how can we expect people to make the right choices if there is no guidance?

Now I know that education and resident communications can really influence the efficiency and knowledge of different waste management services local authorities offer and, of course, inform residents on what to do and how to do it correctly, helping protect the environment. The biggest issue I found is that all local authorities have their own unique way of waste collection, using different bin colours, sacks or boxes, and allowing different items to be disposed of in each bin. This is something of which I have learned even more about since joining RECOUP.

There is no standardised procedure for waste disposal, and that became a difficult challenge when trying to overcome contamination rates. Combined with the lack of communications for residents to read, it really felt like we were fighting a losing battle. Hopefully, with introduction of the new Simpler Recycling legislation this will cut the confusion and make recycling more straightforward.

Speaking with residents was difficult. It highlighted the challenge of not having the correct procedures and information in place to address these issues when waste collections have been implemented for so long. At the beginning, I felt like a fraud speaking to them about their waste and recycling when I had no idea about it either; every step was a learning curve but soon it became second nature. Answering questions like: “why wasn’t my bin collected?”, “why didn’t we know about this?” or “what do I actually put in each bin?” became a regular occurrence.

What was obvious from these encounters was that people find household recycling really challenging, and I agree. This was especially prevalent when speaking to people who had recently moved houses from different cities or counties. Research from DEFRA finds that the recycling rate was at 43.3% at the end of March 2023<sup>1</sup>. Unisan suggests that the reason for lower recycling rates is due to collection difficulties because of contamination from misinformation

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<sup>1</sup> [Local authority collected waste management - annual results 2022/23 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/114444/local-authority-collected-waste-management-annual-results-2022-23.pdf)

and lack of awareness, and that there should be a larger effort to improve recycling infrastructure<sup>2</sup>.

These difficulties lead to a significant loss of resources that could have been recycled and can create an accumulation of waste and environmental problems. When researching into this further, I found that WRAP released a report in 2022 stating that 84% of UK households unintentionally contaminate their recycling bins through “wish-cycling”<sup>3</sup>. This tells us that the want to recycle is there, but it can be complicated knowing what your local authority accepts for recycling due to differing MRF contracts and methods of collection.

Therefore, changes to recycling collections through the Simpler Recycling legislation is ambitious, but necessary. Commitment towards a “common-sense approach” is what is needed<sup>4</sup>, but then the issue of infrastructure to support this change comes into question. However, from a household perspective this could be the change that is needed to reduce the contamination rates and “wish-cycling”. Standardising what we should be recycling is the first hurdle but communicating that to residents should be prioritised afterwards as this is what is going to make the biggest difference to the quantities we recycle. Stopping the confusion that many people face by addressing the issue at hand seems simple, but will it be enough?

## What I have learned...

Having now been in the waste management industry for nearly a year I can say that, despite the ordeal I have experienced seeing many different bin stores and answering the same questions repeatedly, it is quite rewarding knowing that you are a part of a magnitude of different people who are working towards a common goal of a cleaner, healthier Earth, and rallying for a more circular economy when it comes to waste and sustainable choices.

I think as we progress and implement recycling policies, more local authorities will produce educational campaigns and be more active in their pursuit for less

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<sup>2</sup> [Recycling in the UK: How Much Recycling Actually Gets Recycled? | Unisan UK](#)

<sup>3</sup> [84% of UK households are unintentionally contaminating their recycling bins | WRAP](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Simpler recycling collections and tougher regulation to reform waste system - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

contamination, which in turn will mean higher quality recycling. It is beneficial for them, the world, and for us. It is about time we took the waste we create more seriously. From finishing university to now, I can confidently say that I have found the challenge of understanding the waste management industry very interesting, and I am still learning every day. There is still so much room for improvement, and choices made in the future through developments in technology and government legislation will have a major impact on public wellbeing and ultimately the future health of our planet.