PARTICIPATION

As targets and other recycling drivers increase, local authorities need to do more than just provide recycling services. We also need to maximise public involvement through increasing the number of households that regularly and fully use these services. Increasing participation can also ensure that the recycling infrastructure provided is operating to maximum efficiency and as cost effectively as possible.

UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATION

When considering how to increase participation, it is important to understand that a wide range of factors can influence household recycling behaviour. The most significant ones currently are the type of recycling services provided, how well these are promoted and also the characteristics of the population served.

A series of controlled recycling trials undertaken in Bath in 1993 demonstrated that providing collection containers, such as boxes, to householders had the effect of nearly doubling recycling rates achieved, when compared to providing an identical service but asking householders to put materials out in bundles or carrier bags. These trials also found that householder participation was significantly greater with weekly collections compared to fortnightly or monthly services. Subsequent performance comparisons in other areas have confirmed this and suggest that yields for weekly collections are normally at least 25% higher.

From these and other results, it can be concluded that increasing service convenience leads to increases in participation. The easier we make it for households to recycle, the more they will participate. Similarly recycling services need to be reliable and easy for households to understand how to participate. Participation is nearly always reduced where services are not reliable or where collection arrangements are complicated, such as collecting different materials for recycling on alternating collection cycles.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES

The significance of socio-economic and demographic variables on participation is often over-looked.

A study I undertook in 2000 with The Recycling Consortium of 2,500 representative households in Bristol, receiving weekly kerbside collections with boxes, found a strong relationship between participation and property values, with participation increasing with Council Tax banding as shown in the chart.
The study also found that:

- Household characteristics associated with high recycling participation were owner occupation, being retired, living in the area for more than 2 years and being in older age groups.
- Lower levels of recycling were associated with living in rented housing, living in the area for less than 6 months, being in younger age groups, being unemployed, having children under 5 and being a single-parent.

Similar relationships between Council Tax bands and participation have also been found in Bath & North East Somerset and South Somerset, although direct comparisons cannot be made between areas due to variations in property values on which Council Tax bands are based.

The Bristol study also found that in some areas non-recycling households generated about half as much recyclable waste as recyclers. While the South Somerset study found that there was some variation in the weight of recyclables put out for recycling by households between areas, but that the variation in participation rate was even greater.

In all these studies, which included both weekly and fortnightly box collections, the set out rate (households putting out each collection) was about 35-40% lower than the participation rate (households putting out at least once over a 4-week period).

DEPRIVATION INDICATORS AND RECYCLING

In a 2002 study for the Community Recycling Network on maximising recycling rates, analysis was undertaken to compare recycling performance between areas according to their socio-economic characteristics using deprivation indicators. In an attempt to focus on the variation in recycling with deprivation, a number of Districts were selected with good kerbside recycling services operating close to district-wide. A strong association was found between recycling and deprivation, with recycling increasing as deprivation scores decreased, as shown in the chart. In areas with low deprivation scores (15 or less), participation rates for a good kerbside recycling service should be 70% or more, whilst in areas with mid deprivation scores (25-30) participation rates are likely to be about 50%.
THE ALTERNATING EFFECT

There is growing evidence that providing alternating (fortnightly) refuse collections can have a strong positive effect on recycling participation, providing that the arrangements are well-managed and introduced with care. Daventry and Huntingdonshire are amongst several to report that their recycling tonnages increased considerably after introducing alternating refuse collections. The 2004 UK Plastic Bottle Recycling Survey published by WRAP reported that alternating refuse and recycling collections resulted in 15% more plastic bottles being collected compared to the average from weekly collections.

COMMUNICATION EFFECTS

Good promotion of recycling services is undoubtedly important but there are few studies where the direct effects of communication activities on participation have been clearly measured. One reason for this is that communication campaigns are frequently implemented at the same time as services are enhanced, which makes it difficult to separate the influence of communication from those resulting from service changes. Another reason is that communication activities aimed at raising awareness, rather promoting the use of specific services, may be more likely to have a gradual effect over time rather than lead to instant dramatic increases in recycling participation.

Doorstepping is a communication activity that is easier to monitor than some and there appears to be reasonable evidence that it has a positive effect, especially in ensuring households understand recycling arrangements and identifying those without collection containers for whatever reason.

FUTURE INFLUENCES

As recycling becomes even more of a mainstream activity and an accepted part of life, through improved services and communication campaigns, recycling participation should continue to grow. It is also to be hoped that the variation in participation between different socio-economic groups will also diminish, so high levels of participation are achieved across all groups.

In future, new sets of factors may also have a significant influence on participation in the UK. These may include incentives, such as refuse charging, or enforcement policies for mandatory recycling participation. In other developed countries, it is common to charge for refuse collections and the evidence appears strong that it encourages both waste reduction and recycling. There have been less examples of mandatory recycling, but it has been recently introduced in Barnet. Personally, I think variable charging for refuse collection is the better approach, as it provides an on-going motivation that encourages recycling behaviour rather than tries to enforce it. When it comes to enforcing mandatory recycling, I wonder whether this may eventually prove to be a fairly weak stick, which soon gets ignored.