

Recycling flat-out?

Recent research shows that recycling in housing estates and high-rise blocks can succeed, writes Hugh Thomas

It is often assumed that any attempt to introduce recycling into areas of high-density housing such as housing estates and high-rise blocks is doomed to failure. But new research carried out for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) shows this is far from true.

The Local Authority Unit of Defra's Waste Implementation Programme commissioned environmental organisation Waste Watch to study the approaches taken by local authorities tackling this issue. Support was provided by charity the Safe Neighbourhoods Unit. The groups' remit was to investigate case studies of recycling and composting schemes in housing areas where conventional kerbside collections are difficult or inappropriate.

The 16 local authorities selected for the study included 10 London boroughs. Data was gathered by conducting structured interviews with local authority staff and, where involved, personnel from local non-profit community organisations.

Common drivers for providing flats with recycling schemes were found to be: meeting statutory recycling targets; commitment to social inclusion; demands from residents; and the availability of external funding.

A number of different collection methods were discovered, the overriding concern being to provide convenient and secure services at a reasonable cost. Four main approaches were identified: central collection facilities; near-entrance collection facilities; door-to-door collection; and kerbside collection from flats.

Appropriate location of containers is also determined by several factors, such as convenience, space constraints and other pressures on land.

Choice of containers is influenced by matters like the number of households served, material segregation arrangements and space availability.

Whether kerbside recycling from flats is suitable is affected by the number of floors in the block, the floor level of the flat, the number of flats in the block, and if the flat already has separate refuse collections.

A recurring theme in the findings was the innovative work carried out by community groups, who were actively involved in eight case studies. For example, the two authorities found to be providing organic waste schemes at blocks of flats both had community sector involvement.

Involvement of residents and other stakeholders is

another major plus-point for the voluntary sector. In Manchester, EMERGE Recycling has recruited more than 20 volunteer recycling champions, predominantly from the Hulme community.

In communication and awareness-raising there were examples of good practice from Tower Hamlets Community Recycling Consortium, which has developed an extensive outreach programme, and in Birmingham, where Brumcan has introduced estate-based recycling newsletters.

Community sector

groups also won plaudits for sensitivity to the needs of the cultural diversity of the communities they serve, developing incentive schemes and overcoming difficulties.

Of the door-to-door collection schemes in Tower Hamlets and Hackney, the report adds: "It is interesting that both these door-to-door schemes are undertaken by community recycling enterprises. With their strong local connections and their links to national networks of recycling organisations, enterprises like these may be well placed to provide the innovative and flexible approaches required to develop complex flats recycling schemes."

Clearly, the twin message of the Defra-sponsored study is that high-rise recycling can be highly successful, and that the community sector can often play a big part in that success.

Community groups are often involved in high-rise recycling schemes



"A number of different collection methods were discovered, the overriding concern being to provide convenient and secure services at a reasonable cost"