

Recycling Tracking Survey 2021

Behaviours, attitudes and awareness around recycling

A large, solid orange rectangular graphic box is centered on the page. Inside the box, there is a white horizontal bar containing the text "TOGETHER WE RECYCLE." in orange, uppercase, bold letters. Below this bar is the "Britain recycles" logo, which consists of a white circular arrow icon with a heart shape inside, followed by the text "Britain recycles" in white, lowercase letters.

TOGETHER WE RECYCLE.

 **Britain recycles**

Report of the Recycling Tracker, Spring 2021

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WRAP's vision is a world in which resources are used sustainably.

Our mission is to accelerate the move to a sustainable resource-efficient economy through re-inventing how we design, produce and sell products; re-thinking how we use and consume products; and re-defining what is possible through re-use and recycling.

Find out more at www.wrap.org.uk

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Key findings

Introduction and methodology

The Recycling Tracker is an annual survey of UK households that gathers evidence on recycling attitudes, knowledge and behaviour. It is the largest and longest running of its kind, having been undertaken by WRAP since 2004¹.

Fieldwork was undertaken online by Icaro, between 06-12 March 2021. A total of 4,725 interviews were undertaken with UK adults aged 18+. The profile of the sample matches the known profile of the population, with survey quotas set on age interlocked with gender, region, social class and ethnicity.

Because a sample of households has completed the survey (rather than a census), the results are subject to statistical margins of error. Statistical tests have been undertaken to the enhanced 99% confidence level (i.e. 99 times out of 100 the observed difference will be real vs. 1 time out of 100 it will have happened by chance).

Analyses have been undertaken according to a range of socio-demographic variables such as age, gender and children at home. Furthermore, through a process of data matching, respondents' survey responses are compared to the kerbside waste and recycling service provision in their area (using a database of all UK Local Authority schemes maintained by WRAP²). This enables householders' behaviour to be understood in the context of the services they have access to. Not all data can be matched (e.g. those with communal collections due to uncertainties regarding service provision at multiple occupancy buildings) leading to a revised "matched base" of 3,667.

Key findings

Recycling behaviour

The Tracker results demonstrate four key findings about recycling behaviour:

1. Overall levels of recycling are high and an established norm: Almost nine in ten (88%) UK households say they 'regularly' recycle, in contrast to almost one in ten (9%) who recycle 'occasionally' and 3% who recycle 'rarely' or 'never'.
2. Just over half of UK households (52%) say they have recycled more in the past year: either an item they were not previously recycling *or* one they were already recycling but now do so more often. Some groups are more likely to report extra recycling, including 18-34s, those with younger children at home, those recycling occasionally and those who have seen the Recycle Now brand – most notably Recycle Week (among this group 81% report additional recycling).

¹ The focus of the tracker and the specific questions have naturally changed with time and so direct comparisons over time typically only cover part of this period (e.g. between 2013-2020)

² The database is updated annually via a survey of all local authorities in the UK. There are margins of error associated with the survey, and postcodes do not always align precisely with local authority boundaries. Therefore, the results are subject to small margins of error rather than being absolute.

3. Nonetheless, there remain opportunities to increase recycling capture: over half (55%) of UK households put one or more items in the general rubbish that is collected for recycling kerbside (1.6 items on average). This is most commonly foil and aerosols (26% and 23%, respectively, miss an opportunity to recycle these), followed by clear plastic trays (12%) and plastic detergent/cleaning bottles (12%). Missed capture of foil and aerosols increased in the past year, and there were also small but detectable increases for paper, card and glass.
4. There is also a key opportunity to reduce contamination: the majority (85%) of UK households put one or more items in the recycling that is not accepted locally (4.4 items on average). The items cited most are drinking glasses (34% put these in the recycling), food and drink foil pouches (28%), plastic film lids (27%), toothpaste tubes (27%) and glass cookware such as Pyrex (23%). The past year has seen notable increases in contamination of food and drink pouches, toothpaste tubes, plastic carrier bags and bubble wrap/plastic packaging.

The survey demonstrates that close to one in four (24%) UK households classify as the highest performing recyclers (because they dispose of 0-2 items incorrectly). In contrast, one in five (20%) classify as lower performing recyclers (because they dispose of 10+ items incorrectly).

On average UK households dispose of 6.1 items incorrectly, either by missing an opportunity to recycle or putting something in the recycling that is not accepted. There are some key observable trends, as follows:

- Age: 18-34s are more likely to dispose of items incorrectly (7.5 items)
- Gender: men are more likely to dispose of items incorrectly (6.5)
- Children living at home: households with children aged 0-17 at home are more likely to dispose of items incorrectly (7.2).
- Home ownership/occupancy: private renters are more likely to dispose of items incorrectly (7.0).
- Recycling service: fewer items are disposed of incorrectly by households who:
 - Have a restricted residual waste capacity (i.e. 120 Litres or less collected per week) (5.9)
 - Have a multi-stream recycling scheme (5.7).
 - Live in a "Blueprint" local authority in Wales where there is a clear and consistent collection service (5.3).
- Geography: those living in urban areas are more likely to dispose of items incorrectly (6.9 items). Households in Wales (5.7), South East England (5.3) and South West England (4.7) are *less* likely to dispose of items incorrectly.
- Recycling norms: those who perceive a strong recycling norm in their local area dispose of fewer items incorrectly (5.7 items) while those who perceive a negative recycling norm dispose of more items incorrectly (7.4). A similar trend is evident for food waste recycling – with those reporting a strong norm in their area significantly more likely to report higher levels of food waste recycling.

Recycling capacity

Almost three in ten (28%) UK households report frequently running out of space in their recycling bins/bags/boxes (10% 'all the time' and 29% 'fairly often'). A further 24% say this happens 'sometimes', compared to 27% who say it happens only on the odd occasion (e.g. at Christmas) and 21% who say it never happens. Groups more likely to report a lack of recycling capacity include those with children aged 0-12 and younger age cohorts (18-34s and 35-44s).

Contamination: a closer look

The research suggests that contamination is largely the result of well-intentioned or misplaced attempts to recycle, as opposed to a lack of concern or care. For example, of those mistakenly putting drinking glasses in the recycling, the vast majority (86%) think that it is accepted in their kerbside collection. The same pattern is true for other key contaminants, such as toothpaste tubes (84% think it is accepted in their collection) and light bulbs (72%). The survey also highlights the following about contamination:

- Three in ten UK households (30%) say they regularly check recycling information, whereas almost half (45%) say they sometimes check (e.g. for a new item or something they are unsure about). However, checking and in and of itself is not always associated with correct disposal choices.
- A council leaflet is the main source for what can and can't be recycled (cited by 29%), closely followed by recycling labels on product packaging (22%) and information on bins/bags/boxes (15%).
- On pack recycling labels are widely recognised, with 84% recalling the mobius loop, 73% the On Pack Recycling Label (OPRL), 57% the Recycle Now Swoosh, 55% some version of plastic PET (polyethylene terephthalate) labelling and 43% the Green Dot. However, there is misunderstanding about what the labels indicate – for example, over three quarters (76%) of those who have seen the Green Dot take this to mean they can recycle the packaging (which is not what the label means). Given that significant numbers of households who say they check do so on pack, and that they take any recycling-based labelling as a cue to recycle, it is likely that a lack of consistency in on pack recycling labelling is contributing to contamination.
- Opinion among households is divided about the impact of contamination, with just over half (51%) believing that it could have a serious impact (e.g. rejected loads/inferior end product) compared to 35% who believe it has less impact and 14% who are not sure.
- The language of contamination makes sense to citizens, with close to three in five (59%) already having heard the term in the context of recycling. However, it is interpreted primarily as more severe forms of contamination involving medical items (e.g. syringes), soiled items (e.g. nappies, pet litter) and items containing chemicals. It is interpreted far less in terms of the incorrect type of a material (e.g. the wrong type of plastic, or drinking glasses and Pyrex in with glass bottles).

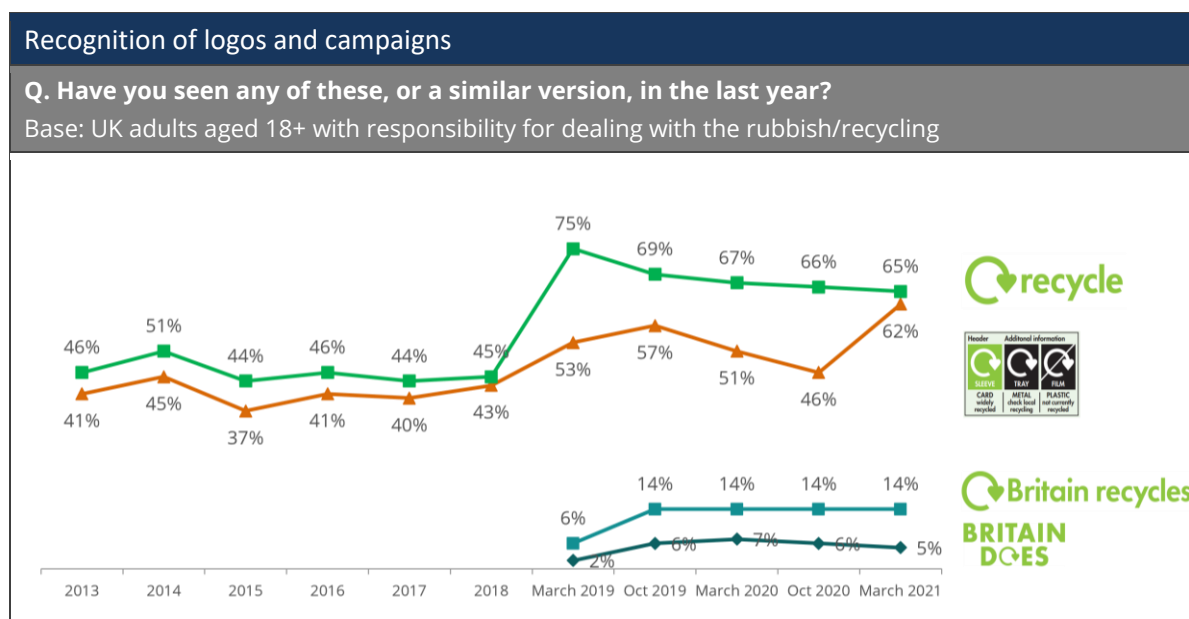
Recycling norms and habits

When asked for their view of how many residents in their local area recycle, over seven in ten (72%) UK households think the majority of those around them recycle (i.e. they perceive a positive social norm), in contrast to 8% who perceive a negative norm. For food waste recycling, fewer households (49%) with access to a collection perceive a positive social norm while more households (21%) perceive a negative norm.

Recycling Communications

Close to two in three (65%) UK citizens have seen the Recycle Now Swoosh in the past year, and a similar proportion (62%) the On-Pack Recycling Labelling (OPRL). Smaller proportions have seen the Recycle Now campaigns 'Britain Recycles' (14%) and 'Britain Does' (5%) – both recent additions in 2018.

Recognition of the Swoosh has dropped back in the past year compared to March 2019 when it reached 75% (the highest level recorded) but it remains significantly above previous years (e.g. 44% in 2017; 45% in 2018). Recognition of 'Britain Recycles' and 'Britain Does' increased significantly in a short amount of time since their introduction but has now plateaued.



When the Recycle Now brand is seen there is a highly positive association with reported behaviour change (particularly the 'Britain Recycles/Does' social norm messaging). What is also clear is that they are useful at accessing key audiences. For example, recognition of 'Britain Recycles/Does' is highest among 18-34s, those in urban areas, and lower performing recyclers (i.e. those disposing of 10+ items incorrectly).

Implications and discussion

While recycling is an established norm and there is a trend towards more recycling, there is a key opportunity to reduce contamination. Contamination is largely the result of well-intentioned or misplaced attempts to recycle, accompanied by checking 'fails'. While the majority of UK households check, at least sometimes, if items can or cannot be recycled, this does not always result in the correct recycling behaviour.

On pack recycling labels have a key role to play in supporting checking behaviours, but they need to be consistent and clear to avoid inadvertently contributing to contamination. Over one in five UK households use these as their main source of information about what can and can't be recycled, but there is also confusion and misunderstanding about what the labels indicate. Work is needed to make checking more successful and the council leaflet continues to be an important source of information. It is vital that local authorities continue to provide regular advice and guidance about what can and cannot be recycled locally. WRAP continues to provide guidance and templates for use by local authorities.

As in previous years, the tracker continues to demonstrate the influence of recycling service design, with fewer items being disposed of incorrectly by households with restricted residual waste capacity, higher numbers of materials collected for recycling and multi-stream schemes. Defra's Resources and Waste Strategy makes provisions for improving recycling rates by ensuring a consistent set of recyclable materials is collected from all households and that they are provided with separate food waste collections. WRAP continues to encourage and support Local Authorities in transitioning to greater consistency in household recycling.

WRAPs Local Authority Advisors provide advice and guidance to design and implement effective recycling and waste collection systems, making it more effective for councils and others to provide services, and improve the quantity and quality of materials. Recycle Now also offer workshops to help partners understand our citizen insights around recycling behaviours and how to implement them into recycling communications (please email partnerenquiries@wrap.org.uk to arrange a workshop).

Another service-based finding that emerged from this year's research is that the majority of UK household have had some experience of running out of space in their recycling bins/bags/boxes. WRAP urges local authorities to communicate what residents can do in these instances. If you are a local authority and make provisions available for residents to set out additional recycling or allow them to order additional recycling containers and communicate this service effectively this could elevate capacity issues and help drive up recycling rates.

Finally, when the Recycle Now brand is seen there is a positive association with reported behaviour change, particularly the 'Britain Recycles/Does' social norm messaging. These resources need greater amplification and reach to being about sustained behaviour change at scale.

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