

## Blog - Alternate Weekly Collections and other rubbish thoughts

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There are moments – perhaps a minute or two a month – when I almost wish our local government was fractionally less, rather than immensely more, localised. Last month's moment was about AWC – Alternate Weekly Collection of domestic refuse – which, coincidentally, featured prominently in the local elections exactly four years ago, in May 2007. Indeed, I had a similar thought then: wouldn't it be good if there was an official, comprehensive and reliable table – as opposed to a partial one (in every sense) produced by, say, the *Daily Mail's* Great Bin Revolt campaign – taxonomising councils' bin collection policies, so people like me could know exactly what 'Fortnightly' or AWC means in practice?

The answer, of course, is NO! It would mean autocratically inclined Ministers like Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, would be not just trying to, but actually, dictating to councils how to carry out what even the DCLG acknowledges is a service best determined by those who know their localities and residents best. And then monitoring their obedience.

As a householder, I expect to be informed in mind-numbing detail what forms of waste are being collected in what type, size and colour of containers, when, and from where – and to have been properly consulted about it. As a mildly curious and indolent academic, I accept I have no such right. If I'm desperate, I can check council websites; if I'm lucky, as here, there may be a good fairy around.

The rubbish fairy's disappointingly worldly name is Jennie Rogers, who since 2004 has run the **AskJennie.com** database, containing detailed profiles of all council recycling schemes in the country. Access is limited to local authorities, but serendipitously Jennie recently started a column in the industry's trade journal, *Materials Recycling Week (MRN)*, in which she revealed (8 April) that **259 (64%) of the UK's 402 refuse-collecting authorities already or will soon have AWC schemes.**

This is a far more authoritative picture than that provided by a recent and more widely reported Press Association (PA) survey, although, to PA's credit, its headline figures were very similar: 59% of 117 responding councils now operating AWC systems. Confirmation, were it needed, of an all too rare good news story – one, moreover, with several dimensions.

**Most obviously, it shows councils defying, or at least ignoring, en masse and irrespective of party control, Pickles' efforts to persuade councils to retain or revert to weekly collections for all refuse** – decreed, in his mind's eye, in Magna Carta: 'It's a basic right for every English man and woman to be able to put the remnants of their chicken tikka masala in their bin without having to wait a fortnight for it to be collected'.

Not for the first time, Pickles' almost Wildean enthusiasm for the quotable headline does him no favours. There is a serious point here, of which more later. For the moment, even if AWCs had no other merit, their increase would still have struck a pleasing blow for localism.

However, although they are not the easy, off-the-peg solution they were sometimes taken to be, AWCs do have numerous other merits. They save operating costs, cut air pollution and traffic congestion. But, above all, they help push us up the so-called **Waste Hierarchy** – from the least environmentally-friendly **disposal**, through landfill and incineration, towards **recovery**, through recycling, composting and energy recovery, to **re-use**, and ultimately waste **minimisation and prevention** – which is why they were necessary in the first place.

**Historically, the UK has been the dustbin of Europe, dumping more household waste into landfill (83% in 1998/99) and recycling or composting less (9%) than any other major EU country.** By 2009/10, these figures had moved to 46% and 40% respectively - [www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/environment/waste/wrfq22-wrmswqtr](http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/environment/waste/wrfq22-wrmswqtr) (<http://www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/environment/waste/wrfq22-wrmswqtr>) - an improvement that was kicked off by the imposition of stiff national targets in the 1999 European Landfill Directive, which were then translated into local targets and penalties in National Waste Strategies, and reinforced by the Chancellor's ratcheting up the Landfill Tax. In addition, the 2003 Household Waste Recycling Act required authorities to introduce collection of at least two types of recyclable waste from households by 2010.

Lacking even a rudimentary AskJennie database, it seemed that the then 354 refuse collecting authorities in England alone responded initially to these pressures by developing roughly 354 subtly differing collection systems. **Public and media consternation, however, was directed overwhelmingly at what were initially known as 'fortnightly', and later 'Alternate Weekly' Collections.**

The latter term was technically more accurate, since most of these schemes still involved weekly collections, but of recyclable materials one week and residual waste the next. Cynics, however, suggested it was an unconvincing, bureaucrat-conceived euphemism, and you can see their point of view.

As ever with local government, some AWC schemes were well-designed, developed in consultation with users, thoroughly explained, and sensitively introduced – and some weren't. But, embracing as it did the EU, town hall Hitlers, rampant vermin, endangered public health, and 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY PLAGUE (Campaign for Weekly Waste Collection), it was the near-perfect issue for populist outrage, which peaked politically at the 2007 local elections.

The *Daily Mail* in particular listed the 150 or so authorities operating AWCs, and more than 30 underwent some form of changed control – several dramatic and, bewilderingly to national commentators, in different directions. The Lib Dems lost 24 seats in Waverley (Surrey), 23 in Bournemouth, 14 in Torbay; in Salisbury and North Lincolnshire it was the Conservatives who suffered; in Blackburn with Darwen, Telford, and Charnwood it was Labour.

Some councils did bring back weekly collections. Not many, though, especially once the Audit Commission – Pickles' 'Whitehall bin bullies' – warned that councils failing to show they had at least considered fortnightly schemes would risk being marked down in inspection reports. Once in government, Pickles ordered the Commission to withdraw its guidance, scrapped councils' waste and recycling targets, and, despite being a minister at DCLG rather than DEFRA, did everything possible to persuade councils to abandon fortnightly collections.

The headline figures, as we saw, suggest he has totally failed. But, pleasing as that thought is, I'm not so sure. **My strong suspicion is that, while he may have lost this particular skirmish with local authorities – what the hell: there'll be plenty more of those – he's probably substantially won his chicken tikka masala leftovers battle, if that really was his prime objective.**

The concern over fortnightly collections of food waste, especially during the summer, was and is much more than *Daily Mail* alarmism. It has long been shared by the World Health Organisation, Friends of the Earth, and substantiated in international studies. And, while it has taken longer than it should have, the principle of weekly food waste collection, is now, I believe, increasingly accepted among UK local authorities as one of the basic tenets of best practice.

My problem – returning to my opening remarks – is that I can't be certain, because **'fortnightly' or AWC are, it seems, terms with no precise or agreed meaning whatever:** little better indeed than 'biweekly', which is also occasionally used and really can mean twice a week or every two weeks.

I am clear, though, that not just many, but most, of the councils cited in the media recently as switching to 'fortnightly' systems are, according to their websites, providing alternate weekly collections of recyclable and non-recyclable refuse, including in many cases garden refuse, **but weekly collections of separated food waste.** Increasingly, these latter are assisted by council provision of small kitchen caddies, bigger outdoor bins, or the equivalent, and are going not to landfill, where the waste would rot, produce methane gas and global warming, but being converted into electricity and soil conditioning fertilisers.

West Oxfordshire is one such council, from whom the helpfully illustrative diagram is pinched – and recycled. **No, Secretary Pickles, it's not 19<sup>th</sup> Century-style weekly**

