

The loss of the Chinese market for recyclates
Question to Wiltshire Council Environment Select Committee,
16th January 2016
South West Wiltshire Green Party



We voiced our concerns to the Environment Committee in November regarding China's plans to reduce recyclate imports as of 1st January 2018.

China has now banned the import of most waste we have previously exported to them.

China introduced a previous ban in 2013 named "Operation Green Fence" when hundreds of thousands of tonnes of poor quality recyclates were no longer accepted in the country. This was unfortunately ignored by the UK Government and Local Authorities and no provision was made in any contracts let by Wiltshire Council

In 2017, China notified the World Trade Organisation of its intention to ban 24 types of solid waste by the end of the year, including unsorted paper and plastics.

They now require that any such waste has <0.3% contamination including cross contamination before it will be accepted.

There is no doubt that this issue will massively impact collection and disposal contracts and needs to be addressed by both Local Authorities and Contractors to avoid additional cost and the potential for more waste to end up in landfill and incinerators. This is a clear example of why it is short sighted in waste management to have long term contracts that cannot absorb change.

However, rather than a problem, Local Authorities can make it an opportunity to add maximum value from the recovery of waste from the kerbside.

Extremely low contamination is something that can be achieved by today's technology, but needs investment in:

- improvements to existing collection regimes to better removes contaminants, particularly food waste, at the kerbside
- remodelling and adding new technology to the mechanical treatment plant to refine sorting into single stream recyclates
- further cleaning of recyclates to remove cross contamination.

This will not only make recyclates exportable but will significantly add to their value to the market, improving income levels for Local Authorities.

If no action is taken Wiltshire Council will face increased costs for disposal of material collected and sorted which now has no market.

Question

Can Wiltshire Council confirm that they have taken account of the additional challenge posed by the Chinese ban, and state how they have factored it into the new strategy to:

- ***ensure that no additional material is either sent to landfill or to incineration because of this ban;***
- ***confirm that there will be no additional costs to taxpayers;***
- ***take positive steps to improve quality through adjustments to collections and recyclates processing Contracts in order to maximise the opportunities for additional quality recyclates that this presents.***

COUNCIL RESPONSE

The media reporting has been accurate in that China is changing the quality specification for recyclable plastics (not just bottles) and mixed papers which it will receive. The market for recyclable materials is global so this is a national issue and hence the reason it has received high profile media coverage.

The council has been actively engaged with representatives from Defra, the LGA and the Environment Agency on this subject. There is a view that this should force local authorities to improve the quality of the materials we collect. However, we do have a duty to collect the materials residents choose to dispose of. The best way to improve the quality of recyclable plastics in particular is to ensure that manufacturers use higher quality plastic in their production and packaging processes.

Whilst the Chinese market is an important destination for secondary materials, we note that there are also other export markets, in addition to UK based outlets. Many UK operators of materials recovery facilities have already improved their cleaning and sorting processes in order to improve the quality of their materials as a result of the more stringent acceptance policies of international markets.

At present the only impact we have seen is a drop in the value of recyclable mixed papers. These markets are volatile so it is not possible to attribute this solely to the impact of the decisions made by China. Our contractors will notify us at the earliest opportunity of any impact on their contracts with the council.

The longer term solution is to require producers to take responsibility for the quality and recyclability of the products and packaging they manufacture – the ‘polluter pays’ principle. In the meantime we will continue to work with our contractors to monitor the impact of these changes and manage any issues arising as cost effectively as we can.

In terms of the future waste management strategy, alongside the introduction of new waste collection contracts from July 2018, we plan to improve both the percentage of waste that we collect which is recycled whilst also improving the quality. Informing the public in the lead up to our new services, where we will commence kerbside collections of plastic pots, tubs and trays in addition to plastic bottles, will be key. Prior to this service commencing on 30 July we will be contacting all residents to explain the changes and one of our key messages will be regarding quality. The provision of good quality recyclable materials starts with the manufacturers, but residents play an invaluable role in ensuring they clean and separate as much recyclable material as possible.

At present it is not possible to foresee what the global implications of the changes to quality specifications in China will be. We will continue to monitor this. Until the impact is known it is not possible to give assurances about the impact on cost to the council or on the quantity of recycling the council achieves.