

# Waste, Past and Present

This section provides an overview of waste in the UK today and in the past and makes comparisons with what is happening in Europe.

## A Throw-away Lifestyle

We live in a society where many products are not built to last. Strong pressure from the advertising industry also persuades us to buy new or more products. It wasn't always like this...

Some people call our way of life today 'the throwaway society'. It has not always been like this. During the Second World War and the 1950s people owned less than we do today. There wasn't so much to buy and it was normal for them to repair and reuse items, for example socks were darned and shirt collars were reversed. Household rubbish that could be burned in the grate was used to heat the house.



Supermarkets have also led to a growth in packaging. At supermarkets you collect what you want from the shelves and then pay for them at the check out. Before supermarkets, the shopkeeper who bought things in bulk, prepared what you needed and if necessary, wrapped them for you. Examples of other differences are:

- Drinks bottles used to be returned to the shop and a deposit was refunded to you. It was a good way of earning some pocket money. 'One-trip' bottles have replaced these. These are lighter and use fewer resources to manufacture and transport, but this means there are many more in use - many ending up in the bin and not being re-used or recycled.
- Instead of buying things like biscuits loose from big tins in a shop, they are now pre-packaged in boxes.
- Instead of having a piece of cheese cut from a large block, the cheese is now pre-wrapped in a variety of sizes.

The throwaway society really only began in the 1960s when manufacturers found it cheaper and easier to make things that were not meant to last or be used again. It also meant they could sell more of their product if it was thrown away rather than repaired, re-used or recycled. The manufacturers did not have to pay for their disposal.



In the more recent past waste wasn't perceived as so much of a problem because there was plenty of space for landfill sites and it was very cheap to bury rubbish. This is no longer the case as space for landfill is running out and the costs are going up. As our society has become more prosperous, we have become used to throwing our rubbish in the bin and seeing it just disappear on 'bin day'. Not having to make the effort ourselves to dispose of the waste we create has made us lazy, but our habit of endless consumption is not sustainable.

## Waste in the UK

The UK produces huge amounts of waste. Most of this is produced by industry and business but in England alone, households are responsible for nearly 29 million tonnes. Each house produces nearly one tonne of rubbish a year or 522 kg per person. You can see how the amount of waste we produce is increasing each year on the table below.

### Amount of recycling from 1997/98 to 2002/3 (United Kingdom)

	1997/8	1998/9	1999/00	2000/01	2001/02	2002/03
<b>Total household waste (million tonnes)</b>	23.3	23.6	24.8	25.1	25.6	25.8
<b>Total household recycling (million tonnes)</b>	1.9	2.1	2.5	2.8	3.2	3.7
<b>Household waste recycling rate</b>	8.2%	9.0%	10.3%	11.2%	12.5%	14.5%

The UK has to take some action against the growing waste 'mountain'. About 77% of household waste ends up buried in large holes in the ground called landfill sites but space for these sites is running out.

We could recover 70% or more of household waste, through re-use, composting or recycling, but nationally in 2002/3 we only recycled or composted about 14.5%.

Most European countries already recycle a lot more than the UK, for example, Austria recycles 64% and Belgium recycles 52% of their household waste. They have done this by providing more recycling facilities, and by legislation.

As the amount of waste continues to grow, the UK has to find more ways to dispose of it. Recycling is not the only option for dealing with waste. Different solutions work better in different places and for different kinds of waste. This is called integrated waste management.

## UK v Europe

Switzerland recycles 91% of its glass while the UK only manages 35% (British Glass website). The average European recycling rate is 50%. So why are other countries better at recycling than the UK? There are several reasons:

- Other countries have laws making people recycle. They don't have a choice!
- There are more bottle-banks. Research shows that more glass gets collected when there is a bottle-bank for every 1,500 people. In the UK, the average is 1 bottle-bank for 2,700 people. It isn't always easy for councils to find suitable new sites for bottle-banks. People argue that they may be noisy and get messy if they aren't looked after properly. They don't want them near their house - this is called the NIMBY (Not In My Backyard!) syndrome.
- Other countries may just be more aware about the benefits of recycling because of the difficulty of disposing of their rubbish (e.g. lack of space for landfill sites in Switzerland). Perhaps they have more information and education programmes.
- They have re-use schemes such as bottle deposits together with things like taxes on plastic carrier bags (Ireland).
- They may have different purchasing habits e.g. less reliance on convenience foods that has packaging that cannot easily be recycled.
- Historically, the UK has seen (and is still under going but to lesser extent) the mining and quarrying of resources in the Earth's crust such as clay and limestone. These manmade 'holes' in the ground became seen as ideal spaces to fill with waste, but over reliance on this method for centuries past, coupled with less and less excavation taking place has resulted in the delay of considering alternative ways to manage our waste.

## EU recycling league table 2002

Amount of the total waste recycled and composted.

Country	Recycling %	Composting %	Total %
<b>Austria</b>	24	40	64
<b>Belgium</b>	37	15	52
<b>Germany</b>	/	/	48
<b>Netherlands</b>	24	23	47
<b>Denmark</b>	25	14	39
<b>Finland</b>	30	3	33
<b>Sweden</b>	25	8	33
<b>Spain</b>	16	11	27
<b>Italy</b>	7	9	16
<b>France</b>	8	6	14
<b>UK</b>	9	2	11
<b>Portugal</b>	4	5	9
<b>Greece</b>	8	0	8

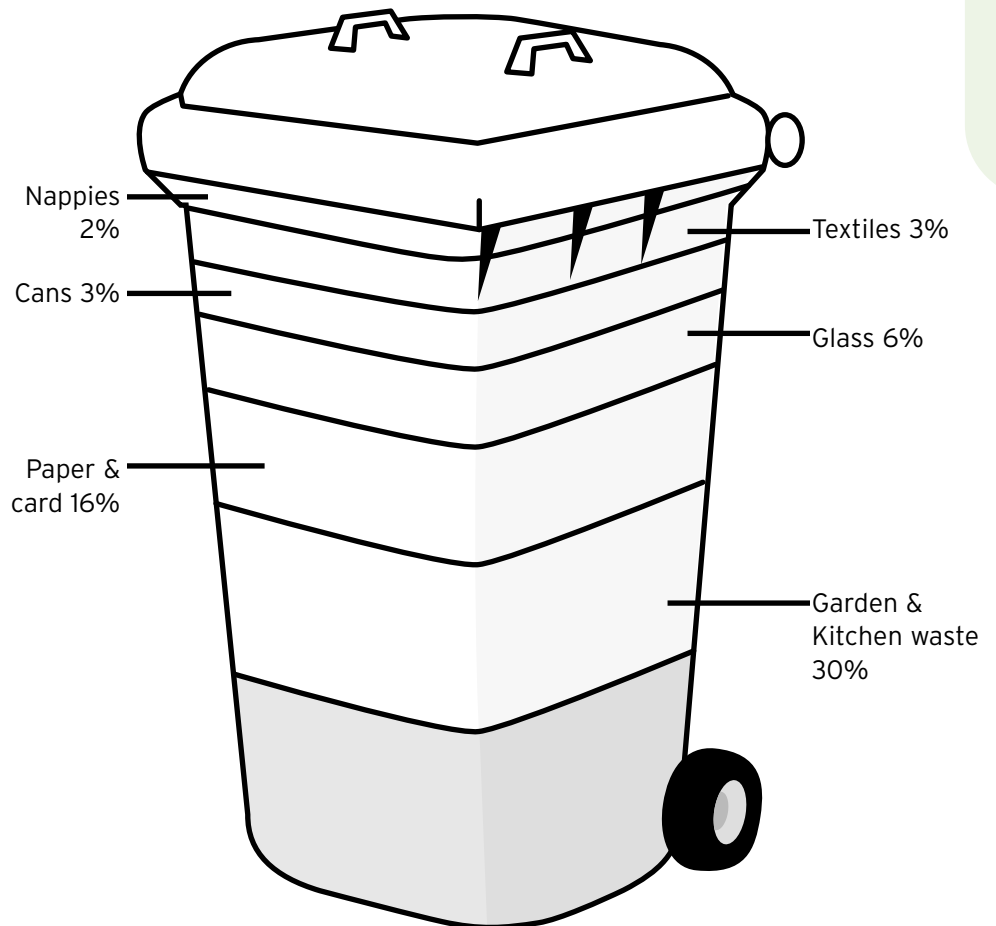
(Source: Environmental signals 2002  
- European Environment Agency)

## The Average Bin

Being responsible about waste means taking a look at what we throw away and trying to find alternatives to throwing it in the dustbin.

Not everything has to end up in the dustbin. Lots of things can be repaired or re-used by passing them on to someone else or to a charity shop. One person's 'waste' is often another person's treasure.

(Also see the colour poster 'What's in your bin?' at the back of this pack.)



## Lifestyle Changes

So today we have a problem - too much waste! And to make it worse, it is very difficult to get people to change their behaviour and buy less, use less, re-use, repair and recycle more.

### Zero Waste

The Eden Project in Cornwall has launched a scheme to tackle the waste generated by its thousands of visitors each year. Under the Waste Neutral scheme any material on site which cannot be reduced or re-used must be able to be recycled. To complement this the Eden Project has pledged to buy more recycled products to 'close the loop'. So far, the café uses tables made from recycled washing up bottles and it plans to replace throwaway cups with non-disposables. They are also installing a bio-digestion unit to process food waste; that will cut their waste to landfill by 64%.



### Doing your bit...

A lot of today's environmental issues, such as pollution, affect many areas and so need to be tackled by governments. However, individual people can also contribute to solving these problems. What we do ourselves, in our homes, schools and local communities is very important and can make a difference. It may not seem to make much difference if one individual recycles their waste paper and buys recycled paper but if thousands of people do it, then it can make real change. And who are these thousands of people? They are made up of single individuals, like you, doing their little bit!

You can read more about what you can do in the chapter '**Making a difference**' (p.123).

**Babies don't have to cost the earth**

The average baby uses 4,500 disposable nappies...

...or you could buy just 24 re-usable nappies.

**It's only rubbish if you throw it away!**

www.wasteaware.org.uk      Tel: 08457 425000

YOUR NAME

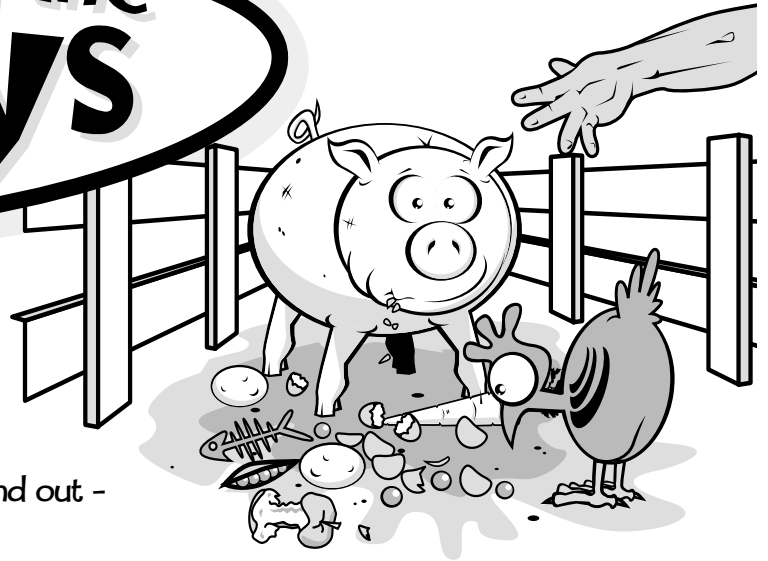
TODAY'S DATE



# Waste in the Old Days

You will find out about waste and how it was dealt with about 50 years ago by asking an older member of your family or a friend's family.

Here are a few things you might like to find out - but think of your own questions too.



How were soft drinks packaged? Cans, glass bottles, plastic bottles, etc.  
What happened to the packaging when the drink was finished?

What did people do with food cans after they had been emptied?

What was the main type of waste put in the bin? (Hint: not many houses had central heating).

What was done with vegetable peelings?

What was done with food left over at the end of a meal?

# Waste in the Old Days



Did people take a bag when they went shopping or were they given shopping bags at the shop?

From where did people get their milk, vegetables, groceries and how were they packaged?

What did people do with: broken pots, broken radios, broken lawn mowers, socks with holes in, shirts with worn collars?

What kind of packaging was used for food and other products bought at the shop?

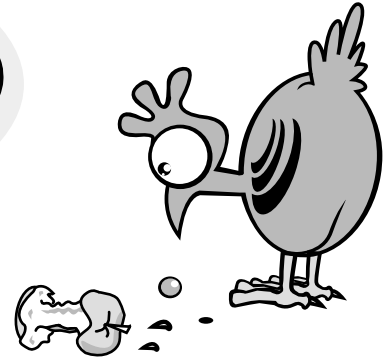
Also, give the people you are interviewing an opportunity to tell you more if they wish and write notes below...

YOUR NAME

TODAY'S DATE



# Waste in the Old Days



## Additional Questions

What are the main differences in the type of waste thrown out 50 years ago and today?

What are the main differences in what families did with waste 50 years ago and what they do today?

What do we do better with our waste today than in the past?

What did people do with waste 50 years ago that is better than today?

# The average bin

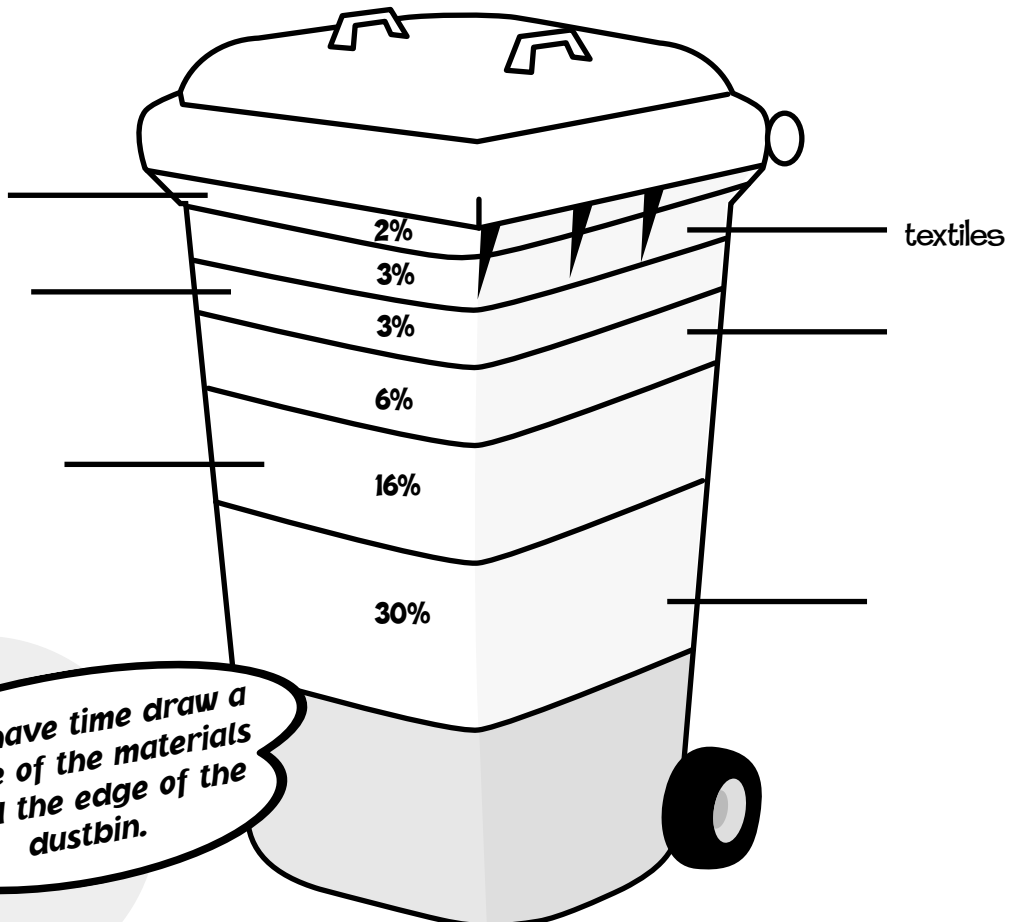
Listed below are the items commonly found in a household bin that could actually be easily recycled or composted in Hertfordshire.

For example, the average bin will be 30% full of garden and kitchen waste, but that could be composted instead which would save it from going to landfill when it doesn't really have to.

Material...	% of the average bin that can be easily recycled/composted in Hertfordshire
Garden & Kitchen Waste	30
Glass	6
Cans	3
Nappies	2
Paper & card	16
Textiles	3

## What can be recycled in the average bin?

Colour the sections of this dustbin and label the material by using the table above.



YOUR NAME

TODAY'S DATE



# The average bin



The table below shows that 71% of the contents in the average UK bin can easily be recycled in Hertfordshire. Great news!

Material...	% weight of average UK household bin	% easily recyclable/compostable in Hertfordshire
Kitchen waste	17	9
Garden waste	24	21
Paper & card	18	16
Plastic	7	2
Glass	7	6
Scrap metal/ Electrical goods	5	5
Wood	4	3
Textiles	3	3
Metal cans and foil	3	3
Nappies	2	2
Furniture	1	1
Other	9	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>71</b>

## Questions for discussion

1. The average bin is made up of 18% paper and card. Only 16% can be recycled in Hertfordshire. Why is this?
2. Why can all metal cans and foil from households be recycled?
3. Plastic forms 7% of the average UK household bin, yet only 2% can be recycled in Hertfordshire. Why is that?
4. Why do you think only 9% of kitchen waste can be composted at home in Hertfordshire?
5. What makes up the 1% of glass that cannot be recycled in Hertfordshire?

YOUR NAME

TODAY'S DATE



# Understanding the Statistics



Country	Recycling %	Composting %	Total % (recycling and composting)
Austria	24	40	64
Belgium	37	15	52
Denmark	25	14	39
Finland	30	3	33
France	8	6	14
Germany	-	-	48
Greece	8	0	8
Italy	7	9	16
Netherlands	24	23	47
Portugal	4	5	9
Spain	16	11	27
Sweden	25	8	33
UK	9	2	11

## Look at the 'EU recycling league table'

- List the EU countries in order of the amount of waste they recycle. The one with the highest amount should be number 1.

Number	Country	Number	Country
1.		8.	
2.		9.	
3.		10.	
4.		11.	
5.		12.	
6.		13.	
7.		14.	

- Where does the UK come in the league table?

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- Why do you think the UK is in that position?

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- Why is Switzerland not mentioned in the table? (even though they are recognised as excellent recyclers)

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