

25th January 2015

Dear Sirs,

Misleading Articles on Recycling

I write regarding two articles published on 11th and 13th January, under the headlines “Scandal as 280,000 tons of recycling ends up as landfill” (“The news article”) and “We ‘recycle’ yet so much ends up on landfill sites says ROSS CLARK” (“the comment article”). I believe that these two articles contain serious inaccuracies that render them highly misleading, and request that you correct or withdraw the pieces as soon as possible.

Both articles take as their starting point the statement that ‘last year’ (it is unclear whether this means the calendar year 2014), 280,000 tonnes of material separated for recycling was instead disposed of because it was contaminated. The articles call this a ‘scandal’ and suggest that it calls into question the approach councils take to recycling.

However, there are a number of problems with this viewpoint. Since the articles concern themselves with recycling collected by local authorities, I assume that the 280,000 tonnes figure is in some way related to council recycling. In 2013/14, the most recent year for which information is available, councils in England reported a total of 10.93m tonnes of material recycled (see [here](#)). This figure should exclude material that is rejected for recycling, so the 280,000 tonnes must be additional. In total, that gives 11.21m tonnes. So, 97.5% of the recycling collected by councils was... recycled. This hardly seems scandalous. The use of the 280,000 tonnes figure without context is deeply misleading, and the Express should amend the two articles so as to avoid giving readers a mistaken impression.

I would observe that, if the claim is that contamination is the problem, this appears to be inconsistent with the second paragraph of the news article, where it is stated that “280,000 tons of plastic and paper” are being disposed of. Since paper and many forms of plastic are eminently recyclable, the 280,000 tonnes must include large quantities of other, non-recyclable materials.

Both articles suggest that the reason for there being contamination in the recycling stream is that householders are confused about what can and cannot be recycled; and that this is somehow connected with householders having to sort recycling into multiple containers. Yet this is inconsistent with the evidence supplied in the news article, which draws attention to the three councils it says have the highest reject rates:

- In the [London Borough of Newham](#) residents use a single recycling bin
- In the [London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham](#) residents use a single recycling bin or sack
- In [Manchester](#), most recycling goes into one bin, with paper, card and cartons going into a blue bag.

The articles do not highlight this fact, which is clearly inconsistent with the claim that the problem is overly-complex recycling systems.

Both articles also suggest that the material that is rejected for recycling is sent for landfill. In fact, it is at least as common that rejected material is sent for incineration to generate

energy from waste. It is therefore misleading to assert that the full tonnage that is rejected is landfilled.

The comment article goes on to make a two other assertions that are factually incorrect. First, it states that:

“It is ridiculous that we are all forced to sort out our recyclables automatically [sic] when the technology exists to sort it out automatically.

Where it is used, as it has been in Maryland in the USA for years, it has resulted in higher rates of recycling than when people are left to sort their rubbish themselves.

There are one or two plants in Britain, including one near where I live in Cambridgeshire.”

It is not true that any existing technology enables fully mixed waste to be separated so as to allow high levels of recycling. In a general waste bin, materials such as paper and plastic will typically become too wet and/or dirty to be recycled.

However, the technology does exist to sort recyclables from one another – the plants are called Materials Recycling Facilities (MRFs), and I am aware of one of these being in use in Baltimore, Maryland. They are also widely used in the UK – wherever two or more recyclable materials are collected mixed together, a MRF will be used to sort them. In 2009 there were at least 93 such facilities in the UK (see [this report](#) from WRAP, p5). However, it is precisely the use of MRFs that limits the inputs that can be handled – for example, plastic bags and film tend to get caught up in the machinery and lead to down-time. The comment article is therefore misleading in suggesting that the UK has only “one or two” MRFs, or that they are the solution to the problem that the articles identify.

Secondly, the comment article asserts that:

“in Britain an unrealistic policy of always favouring recycling combined with scare stories by green activists has all but put paid to the construction of waste incinerators.

The result is that in spite of all the recycling campaigns, all the coloured wheelie bins which now jam our streets and all the man-hours spent by us sorting out our rubbish, still just over half our waste goes into landfill sites – far higher than in most other European countries.”

This is wrong in numerous ways.

- The latest Defra local authority waste statistics show that in 2013/14, less than 31% of local authority collected waste was landfilled; a little over 43% was recycled or composted, while a little over 24% was incinerated, most of it to produce energy.
- Many new incinerators are being constructed, and still more have planning permission.
- In fact, [studies](#) are now warning that, because of facilities already under construction, it is likely that by 2017 incineration capacity in the UK will exceed the supply of residual waste, leaving the UK with excess incinerator capacity, just like several of our European neighbours such as [Sweden](#).

I would be grateful if you would review the points above and make the necessary corrections to the two articles. In view of the fact that they are fundamentally misconceived, you may find that it is more straightforward to simply withdraw the articles.

If you do not propose to take this course of action, I would be grateful if you would explain your reasons, and the sources of your information.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Jones". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P" and "J".

Peter Jones