

1st March 2015

Dear Ms Ludlow,

IPSO Complaint reference 00639-15

Many thanks for responding to my complaint and for the attention you have given to the points I have raised. I am grateful for the amendment I see has already been made to the Ross Clark comment piece regarding incinerators, and I am content that the correction made adequately tackles that element of my complaint.

However, I am less satisfied with the remainder of the response. I apologise for the need to write to you at length, but in order to explain to you why the articles are erroneous and misleading it is necessary for me to summarise what I take to be the ways in which you have arrived at your figures, and the understanding the *Express* has of how recycling works, before being able to show that these are incorrect.

I have four main concerns regarding the 280,000 tonnes article:

- 1) Quoting the reject tonnage without putting it in the context of the overall tonnage of recycling misleads readers regarding the scale of the issue that the newspaper describes as a “scandal”.
- 2) The figures you provide regarding what you describe as the “worst offenders” have been miscalculated, and are overstated.
- 3) You have fundamentally misunderstood what “rejects” are and where in the process they occur, and therefore mislead readers regarding their significance.
- 4) Because of this error, you misleadingly associate high levels of rejects with the proliferation of different bins, a correlation in no way supported by the information on which the article is based but which any reader would be likely to infer from the article.

I will address these concerns in turn.

1 – 280,000 tonnes in context

I understand from your e-mail that the source for the 280,000 tonnes figure is the 2013-14 Defra waste statistics package. The total figure for rejects from household recycling for waste disposal authorities and unitary authorities is 274,463 tonnes, which I assume you have rounded up.

As you correctly observe, the 10.9m tonnes figure I quoted in my complaint was for all local authority collected recycling. Of this, 9.98m tonnes was collected from households in 2013-14. The contamination is additional to this, so represents a little less than 2.7% of the total. This is not my ‘opinion’ – it is simply placing the seemingly large number “280,000 tonnes” in its proper context; this is relevant because, without this context, it is impossible to assess the significance of the 280,000 tonnes so that it can be understood. Indicating the performance of the “worst offenders” gives readers no way to understand how much better many councils’ figures are than the three quoted.

I therefore reiterate that it is highly misleading to describe the successful reprocessing of 97.3% of household recycling as 'scandalous': exactly what level of performance would the *Express* consider satisfactory?

2 – “Worst offenders” miscalculated

It appears that the figures quoted for “the amount of bins per 100 that are rejected” in certain authorities are a whimsical way of expressing the percentage of those authorities' material that is rejected. After some effort, I believe I have been able to work out how they have been calculated, and am concerned that they are misleading in two ways:

- The figures have been produced from Table 1 of [this data](#) by dividing the column labelled “Household - estimated rejects” by the column labelled “Household - waste sent for recycling/composting/reuse”. While Defra’s notes on the spreadsheet are not entirely helpful, the latter column in fact already excludes the rejects counted in the former column. One needs to refer back to the [Waste Data Flow definitions](#) on which the statistics are founded in order to confirm that: ‘*Sent for*’ means delivered to and accepted for re-use, recycling or composting by a company, individual or organisation which will reprocess waste that is an acceptable form for inclusion in the re-use, recycling or composting process. Therefore, any material collected for reuse, recycling or composting but rejected to disposal whilst under the possession or control of the local authority is excluded.... Rejects may occur at collection, during sorting (e.g. at a MRF) or at the gate of the reprocessor. The *Express* therefore overstates the contamination percentage. The correct figures are derived by dividing the rejects by the sum of the material sent for reprocessing and the rejects. This reduces the percentage for Newham to 16.6%, H&F to 16.4% and Manchester to 15.0%
- The language used is misleading in suggesting that it is whole bins of material that are rejected, when in practice we are talking about the accumulation of small amounts of rejected material from each bin.

The figures that you use to provide “context” are therefore erroneous, and expressed in a misleading way.

3 – Misunderstanding of “rejects”

The key disagreement between us concerns the characteristics of the material that is rejected from the recycling process and the reasons why it is rejected. The article asserts that “280,000 tons of plastic and paper put into eco-friendly bins was treated as ordinary household waste last year because it was labelled “contaminated”.” I do not know the source of the assertion that paper and plastic are the main components of the rejects. It is certainly not to be found in Defra’s statistics. I believe it to be erroneous.

You explain in your recent e-mail that you believe the 280,000 tonnes is “material that could be recycled but because it has been contaminated, it is not practical to recycle it, mainly because it would be too costly to separate the contaminate from the waste that could be recycled”. By contrast, I claim that the vast majority of the material counted as “rejects” is non-recyclable. So who is correct?

One might ask what the *Express* believes the recyclables have been contaminated with, if the assertion is that the whole 280,000 tonnes is recyclable material. Surely you will accept that, if it is “contaminated”, some of the material in question must not be recyclable.

However, the *Express* is labouring under a misconception regarding what a “reject” is. The article implies a picture in which the “rejection” of material mainly takes place at the “whole load” level: a recycling vehicle turns up, the MRF operator or reprocessor takes a look in the back and says “that’s contaminated” and turns the whole lot (recyclable material and all) away. On relatively rare occasions, this does occur. A 2013 committee report by the Greater Manchester Waste Disposal Authority (GMWDA) indicated that of 100,000 recycling deliveries to its MRF from local councils, 572 loads were wholly or partially rejected – that’s about half a bin in every 100, in *Express* parlance – and the material had to be tipped as residual waste.

But the great majority of the “rejects” comprise largely non-recyclable material that is separated from mixed recycling once the load has been accepted. A certain level of input contamination is an expected feature of mixed recycling. The facilities (MRFs) that are used to sort the recycling into separate streams are designed to reject this input contamination so that it can be disposed of.

Such processes are not 100% reliable, and some of the “target materials” – the recyclables that the facility is designed to sort – will also be lost in the process. However, the majority of the material lost in the sorting process will be non-target material. [This video](#) from GMWDA may be helpful in illustrating the range of random objects that members of the public put in the recycling bin, and which the MRF quite properly “rejects” from the process.

So, the *Express* is wrong about where in the process “rejects” occur, and this leads to the mistaken idea that all – or even most – of the material rejected is recyclable. By publishing this error, you mislead the public regarding how mixed recycling collections work, and give the impression that large amounts of recyclable material are routinely going to waste. The Defra statistics in no way support this view, and the article should be corrected so as to remove these implications.

4 – Proliferation of bins

You are of course tautologically correct in stating that “Mistakes as to what rubbish goes in to recycling bins can start as soon as a family has more than one bin”. Where there is only one bin, there can be no such mistakes. Perhaps your argument, then, is that we should put everything in one bin – but very little recycling is practically possible unless people separate recyclable material from other rubbish.

You say that the article “does not claim that there is a direct link between the number of bins and the amount of contamination” and that “the proliferation of bins” is identified as “one of the criticisms” of “attempts to reduce the amounts of rubbish going to landfill”.

However, public confusion about what material goes in each bin is the *only* cause you identify for contamination. Presumably, if it is the only one the *Express* deems necessary to bring to readers’ attention, readers will be likely to draw the conclusion that it is the chief cause of the problem (mis)described in the article.

In your e-mail it appears that you are claiming that in the article:

- “Proliferation” refers to any situation where householders have even one recycling containers in addition to a residual waste bin; and
- The article does not imply a link between the number of such bins, the extent of householders’ confusion and the level of contamination in recycling.

I do not see how you could expect readers to draw these conclusions from the article when it states that:

- “The drive to recycle more rubbish is being hampered by people who put the wrong items in **bins**”
- “householders are confused about which items go in which **bins**” and
- “Far too many councils have baffled residents with a kaleidoscope of colourful **bins**.”

On each occasion you refer to “bins” plural, giving the impression that you believe the problem to be multiple recycling bins. One recycling bin hardly makes for a kaleidoscope – so readers would be likely to infer that the wider the range of colours, the more baffled people would be. If it was not your intent that readers should infer this, perhaps you might wish to make this clear in the article.

It is just as well that you are not seeking to claim that more bins means more contamination. Newcastle under Lyme, highlighted by Ross Clark as having too many different bins and bags, achieved a zero rate of contamination, which would rather fly in the face of the claim that confusion about which bin to use is the source of the problem.

Where householders separate materials into multiple stream in smaller containers, or where material is sorted at the kerbside by council operatives (for example North Somerset North Devon, or the collection authorities that fall under Somerset County Council), non-target material is easier to exclude from recycling at the outset. There is no need for a MRF, and so there is no material lost in the process of sorting. All the authorities I mention have zero contamination rates.

If the *Express* is genuinely concerned about high levels of rejects, then it should perhaps be calling for householders to be separating materials into more containers, or for more councils to move to “kerbside sort” collections like those in Somerset. The data on which the article is based in no way shows that a “proliferation” of bins, as this might normally be understood, is correlated with high reject rates.

So, the government data and the logic of the recycling process both dictate that “contamination” and “rejects” are inherently more of a problem where materials are collected mixed together than where they are source-separated. The article completely misdescribes and misdiagnoses the problem, and therefore misleads readers.

Turning to Ross Clark’s article, I accept that it is an opinion piece. However, Mr Clark’s opinions appear to be based largely on the claims refuted by my arguments above, and several of the erroneous claims are repeated in Mr Clark’s article. These and his other mistaken factual claims should be corrected; whether his opinions change in the light of the corrected information is of course a matter for Mr Clark. Perhaps it would be helpful to list the factual claims in question.

- 1) Mr Clark states that “It is intensely annoying, therefore, to learn that last year 280,000 tonnes of material collected for “recycling” last year actually ended up in landfill sites.” You have accepted that the material is not necessarily landfilled, and this misleading factual assertion should be corrected. I hope this may also serve to lessen his unnecessary annoyance.

- 2) Mr Clark states that “after all those hours spend tearing the foil from yogurt pots and carefully washing them, they ended up buried in the ground”. I have explained that (a) it is mistaken to assume that rejects are landfilled rather than incinerated, and (b) Mr Clark’s yoghurt pots and foil are unlikely to fall within the material rejected, which is primarily non-recyclable material. This misleading factual assertion should be corrected.
- 3) Mr Clark states that “Tales abound of people fined £100 or so because they have accidentally placed the wrong item in the wrong recycling bin, or have left their wheelie bin lid open by half an inch.” It would be helpful if the *Express* could back this assertion up with some recent substantiated examples of such tales, given that the newspaper [announced in 2013](#) that such fines had been “scrapped”.
- 4) Mr Clark states that “They [i.e. councils] say that recycling is rejected by factories because it is contaminated.” As I have explained, councils **do not** say this. Very little recycling is rejected because it is contaminated. Most of the 280,000 tonnes of material rejected *is* the contamination, which is mechanically removed from mixed recycling so as to allow the remainder (the great majority) to be recycled.
- 5) Mr Clark states that “In the London boroughs of Newham and Hammersmith and Fulham, 20 containers are rejected for every 100 accepted.” I have explained that these figures are miscalculated, and expressed in a highly misleading way. It is not containers that are rejected, but a fraction of the overall quantity of material as it passes through a MRF. This misleading factual assertion should be corrected.
- 6) Mr Clark 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. But still we have to sort our waste, even if not into quite as many containers as before.” These remarks are confused and confusing. It appears that Mr Clark is saying that a facility near his home would allow a large amount of recycling to be separated from a general waste stream, but that he and his fellow Cambridgeshire residents are still required to sort their recycling. In fact, no technology exists that will effectively separate a high percentage of recycling from mixed waste. The dichotomy between “automatic” and “householder” sorting is therefore false. High levels of recycling can only be achieved where householders sort recycling into a separate container from other waste. The misleading text should be corrected.
- 7) Mr Clark is mistaken in stating that “There are one or two plants in Britain, including one near where I live in Cambridgeshire.” As I have explained, there are almost 100 such facilities, and almost half of councils use a single recycling bin system. The misleading factual assertion should be corrected.

Mr Clark is entitled to what you say is his view: that more recycling should be collected co-mingled and separated automatically, in the way that it is in Cambridgeshire – although it appears that he is also unhappy with that. However, he is not entitled to make inaccurate factual claims to justify his view. He must also accept that if more material is sorted automatically, there will be more rejects, not fewer. The article needs to be amended to remove the misleading claims it contains.

I am pleased to learn that the *Express* is concerned that the UK should meet its 2020 recycling target of 50%. However, if we are to do this, we need to encourage people to separate more of the millions of tonnes of recyclable material they currently put in the residual waste, as evidenced in [this study](#), rather than 280,000 tonnes of largely non-recyclable material correctly separated out from household recycling. The *Express*'s support in trying to encourage people to co-operate as best they are able with the collection systems that councils put in place would be helpful to those seeking to advance this aim.

I look forward to hearing that you will now arrange for the articles to be amended or withdrawn.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Peter Jones', written in a cursive style.

Peter Jones