

# Tussle over bring banks

Bring banks are being targeted by both councils and private companies. **Tiffany Holland** finds out what effect this is having

## ■ A QUESTION MARK HAS BEEN PUT OVER WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR OPERATING RECYCLING

bring banks and who actually wants to take responsibility for them. The recent move by retailer Tesco to replace council bring banks with its own contracted ones, through DS Smith Recycling, hit the headlines, with local authority representatives expressing their disappointment at the move, believing it will take a valuable revenue stream away from councils.

In 2010, Cornwall Council decided to withdraw the bring banks it operated because of the recycling service that residents received through kerbside collections. *MRW* reported in March this year that private contractors had decided to take on the bring banks themselves. Cornwall Cullet and DS Smith Recycling will offer bring banks for materials such as bottles, cardboard and paper to Tesco, Sainsbury's, Morrisons and Asda stores in the region, offering projected savings to the council of £200,000 in 2011/12.

So what do these movements towards private operations of bring banks mean? Do local authorities make money from these banks or are they a drain on resources that could be better used elsewhere?

Local Authority Recycling Advisory Committee (LARAC) policy officer Andrew Craig explains: "One of the outcomes of producer responsibility legislation is that companies in the packaging chain have to achieve recycling targets. So, in effect, this means packaging companies as well as local authorities have targets.

"So I'm not surprised that retailers want to take

### AT A GLANCE

Despite the Government's Big Society message, private companies seem to be running more local authority services, such as the operation of bring banks

more control of the packaging waste that people want to bring to their stores for recycling. It means they have greater control over where the packaging goes for recycling, so they can make sure it helps them to meet their obligation.

"But local authorities have been operating recycling centres for 20 years, sometimes involving local charities and local companies."

Bob Gordon, head of environment at the British Retail Consortium, adds: "Retailers may be seeing it as more straight-forward if they carry out recycling themselves. They can offer a standardised service that is tailored to their customers."

Craig believes that Tesco is trialling a deal with councils which will allow them to add the bring bank recycling data on to their own recycling levels in return for recycling credits.

Mandatory recycling credits are offered under a two-tier system where the district council collects the waste and the county council disposes of it. It is felt that the county council makes a saving on disposal when the district council encourages more recycling. Therefore, the county council pays the district council according to how much recycling it achieves.

Discretionary recycling credits may also be made available to organisations and charities carrying out recycling, helping the local authority out. This means that Tesco can ask for a discretionary recycling credit which would help to cover the cost of its recycling banks.

But Craig agrees that although providing recycling banks is an expensive service, councils are losing out on revenue from materials – paper, glass and aluminium cans, in particular – if supermarkets install expensive recycling machines.

"Most local authorities have kerbside schemes for the majority of recyclable materials now," he says. "So it could be said that the bring banks operated by a retailer are in competition with the local authority's kerbside system."

For the council, it may seem rather like an obligation to agree to the supermarket's offer of recycling data in exchange for recycling credit payments.

Those not affected by this move by Tesco are those operating textile banks sited on Tesco car parks. Until a few years ago, textile banks were positioned at Tesco supermarkets, where there was space. But the retailer then decided to apportion a region to each charity textile collector in which they could place their bins. →



Councils will lose out on the revenue from collected materials



The Salvation Army has had to move its textile banks off local authority sites in several areas

Textile collector and recycler Salvation Army Trading Company (SATCoL) recently announced record volumes of clothing collected at 35,500 tonnes in 2010/11, most of which is collected across its 5,000 banks. It plans to add 500 more banks this year.

SATCoL national recycling co-ordinator Paul Ozanne says: "They [Tesco] wanted to reorganise so that it was fair to all charities, and we lost some regions in the UK but gained others.

"Precipitated by the current tightening of budgets, there is a shift at the moment away from local authority waste collection operations contracted to large commercial companies. As a result, we have been tasked to move off sites in several areas, including South East Wales, Cumbria and Cambridgeshire. This trend puts the amount of tonnage we collect at risk. This is particularly relevant at civic amenity sites, where we collect a significant amount of material, and these levels of collections are only matched by textile banks on supermarket car parks."

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But Ozanne remains positive: "We are robust and diverse enough to ride the wave by moving our banks around as more private companies take over, but this will be tough for the smaller recyclers. It definitely seems to challenge the Big Society message."

Indeed Textile Recycling Association secretary and national liaison manager Alan Wheeler has seen more councils being attracted to the revenue brought in by textiles, which is usually picked up by a charity or private company.

He says: "Some local authorities seem to be taking the decision to collect textiles in-house, and are thinking of teaming up with one contractor rather than allowing various collection banks across the authority. Perhaps councils are feeling the pinch and they are looking at the material which could bring in valuable income.

"At the end of the day, it is the landowner that has the decision on whether any bank can be placed on their land."

Tesco's decision not to consult councils before asking them to remove their banks from its sites is unfortunate, Craig believes: "Local authorities would like to work in partnership with community and private sector organisations to promote recycling. We hope that before Tesco acts again, it will consult local authorities first. It is important that the private sector continues to see recycling as a partnership.

"As with waste electrical and electronic equipment, local authorities help private companies to meet required legislation by providing more information to the public, as well as collection points."

There is in fact a code of practice published in 1999 setting out a partnership between local authorities and the British Retail Consortium (BRC), which allows councils to use car parks for recycling facilities, but ensures that they are safe and do not become untidy and unattractive to the public. Craig reports that LARAC has been working with the BRC to update the code, but this has yet to be finalised.

SATCoL is continuously on the look-out for new areas to situate its banks, not just new ones but those that are affected by this trend for local authorities to control their banks.

"We look at public houses, sports centres – anywhere there is room for a bank and it is likely to be used," Ozanne explains. "We are not disheartened. We have only had one year in the past 10 years where we experienced a small decrease in textile collections. The target we have to install more [bring banks] during this year means we are confident of maintaining the level of collections."

Tesco was contacted for its views but did not respond in time. *MRW* understands that, currently, the other major supermarkets do not have plans to follow Tesco – but only time will tell. ■

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