

# Small sparks of inspiration

The CoBRA battery recycling model involves a few people making a big difference, reports **Philip Reynolds**

**■ BETWEEN APRIL 2008 AND MARCH 2010, AN ARMY OF 58 VOLUNTEERS HELPED TO COLLECT** more than 35 tonnes of used batteries across the UK for recycling. These volunteers are members of the Community Battery Recycling Alliance (CoBRA), a model that uses local residents to champion recycling through local battery collection hubs, which are also emptied by the volunteers and taken to local civic amenity (CA) sites.

Mark David Hatwood, managing director and co-creator of the CoBRA scheme, says: "Having lived in Germany for 12 years, it was alien for me to put batteries in the bin. When I called Cornwall county Council and asked what to do with them, it was suggested I drive to the CA site. That's a 40-mile round trip and a ferry journey. I offered to collect them on behalf of my village, so that when I did travel all that way it would be worthwhile. Of course, the council told me all the reasons I couldn't [do it].

"However, following conversations with the Environment Agency, a legal loophole was found so that if a volunteer was collecting the batteries unpaid, they could collect under someone else's waste licence, such as the local council. I got calls from all over the county saying people would like to do it, so I started helping them set up the same system."

The scheme, which has spread to Cornwall, Hertfordshire and Torbay, uses an online pre-filled consignment note which is automatically completed when a volunteer enters their details for the first time. Volunteers then print out three copies of the consignment note and update it with the weight of the batteries collected.

Hatwood says: "A year on, I now have two battery compliance schemes wanting to work with me to roll out the battery model."

The CoBRA model has proven so versatile for collecting batteries that it has led to a partnership with not-for-profit producer-led compliance scheme Recolight, to create the Community Bulb Recycling Alliance. This champions the recycling of compact fluorescent lamps instead of batteries,

## AT A GLANCE

The CoBRA model was so successful for collecting batteries it attracted the attention of bulb recyclers



Recolight chief executive Nigel Harvey (left) with Hatwood and a Bulbstore Mini

using a container called a Bulbstore Mini.

Recolight has a direct arrangement with retailer Homebase to establish a Bulbstore Mini in each store. Separately, Homebase also accepts larger quantities of bulb collections from Community Bulb Recycling Alliance members in its main 'bulking up' bins in the service area. This has expanded the CoBRA 'bulking up' points by 350 stores UK-wide, and enables volunteers to take their community collections to Homebase stores for safe recycling.

Hatwood thinks the key to the success of the scheme has been its simplicity. He says: "The reason CoBRA works so well is because all it takes is one person in a community to say 'I want to do something more'. There has got to be one eco-minded person in every village in the UK, equating to 5% or 10% of the UK, and those people are going to influence the other 85% mentioned in a recent WRAP report who said they would do something if it was made easy.

"I'm very much hoping I will get funding to help me expand CoBRA; this is the issue at the moment. What I hope to get is some sort of Government funding through the Big Society, but my worries are it only seems to be giving money to reward schemes.

"I do have a future reward scheme in mind where profits made by CoBRA go back to the communities involved. Volunteers would be able to apply for the fund to put a skateboard park in their area or other community benefits, and I think that is greater than saying [to the individual] 'if you recycle one battery, you'll get x amount'."

However, he adds: "I think the main pull of the scheme is that it's not a reward scheme. It is a scheme for the minority who really care to influence the majority, who would do something different if it was easy, and that's a great impact." ■

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