

Clothing collections: a design to suit all parties

Councils should rethink clothes bank tenders, says **Mike Webster**

■ FORTHCOMING EVENTS FOR CHARITIES GIVE A STRONG HINT OF THE ISSUES FACING THE

sector. Conferences with titles such as 'Doing More with Less' and 'Diversifying Income' make it plain that everyone is having to tighten their belts and look at new ways of funding services.

A common way for local authorities to reduce the net cost of their waste services is by raising income from recyclate collected at the kerbside or in banks. This is either by direct renegotiation of material prices or by forming partnerships with neighbouring councils to gain greater bargaining power.

The textile sector is not immune to this, with recent increases in wholesale prices attracting the attention of councils keen to share some of the benefits of this boom – typically a tonnage-based payment for the right to collect textiles from banks placed at their sites. But although this provides extra income for councils, it can be less beneficial to others.

The textile recycling sector is different from other waste streams because of the long history of involvement of the charitable sector. Many national and local charities are highly dependent on the income from sorting and reselling second-hand clothing. In 2010, national income from charitable textile donations was estimated at £200m, supporting everything from environmental education to hospices, medical research to services for the homeless. At Traid, the charity I work for, this is the only source of income.

But tendering sites to the highest bidder is causing the third sector a headache. While councils are entitled to maximise incomes, tendering out not only reduces the funding available to charitable causes but often pushes them out of the picture completely. Following a tender process, charities are often compelled to remove their sites from entire areas. To make matters worse, these are often some of the highest yielding sites, such as re-use and recycling centres.

There are, of course, councils committed to supporting charities. Traid has had long and fruitful partnerships with Hackney, Brent and Brighton, where officers and members take an active interest in the projects we support and recognise the fresh approach we bring to waste education.

For our part, third sector partners must provide a professional, high-quality service. Traid, for example,



Selling clothes to the public or recyclers earns an estimated £200m a year for charities

AT A GLANCE

Tendering out clothes banks often pushes charitable collectors out of an area entirely, but some councils support charities in long-term partnerships

reports all tonnages so they can go towards council targets and strives to provide a responsive service at all times. It is also focusing more on its educational work with the councils offering support, so when waste education budgets are under pressure, they can enjoy the direct benefit from the clothing banks they host.

So this is not a request for special treatment. It is not even a call to keep sites free. But if payment must be taken, let it be in a way that allows all stakeholders to participate – not simply 'winner takes all' where only large textile companies will profit. Such an approach would support the many small, often local, organisations, such as hospices and homeless shelters, that have clothing banks and often help councils to deliver a broad range of social, environmental and health benefits.

Income from tendering out clothing banks is not 'free money' but is taken from elsewhere – often the most vulnerable in the community. We ask officers and members to work with us, not against us, in securing this and help us to support their communities. ■

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