

The Telegraph 21 August 2020

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/08/21/councils-managing-380000-households-sent-recycling-landfill/>

“Hundreds of thousands of households could have been pointlessly separating recycling at the height of [the pandemic](#) after councils responsible for handling the material sent it all to landfill or burnt it, a Telegraph investigation can reveal.

A Freedom of Information survey by this newspaper found that five local authorities - covering nearly 400,000 households - took "drastic" steps as households in lockdown cleared out their homes.

Some councils were forced to act because staff fell ill with coronavirus, while others shifted the blame onto homeowners for trying to mix other waste with their recycled plastic, paper and glass.

On Friday night campaigners urged councils to come clean in future so that consumers were not wasting their time sorting through their household rubbish.

The Telegraph asked 243 councils across England whether any kerbside recycling had been sent to either landfill or for incineration since the start of the coronavirus outbreak.

West Oxfordshire District Council, responsible for 104,800 people and 43,200 households, said that since June, while most recycling was being collected as normal, there was a "significant increase in contamination" and that "some mixed material has had to go for incineration".

A spokesman for the council said the decision was "made in light of the coronavirus pandemic and the increased amount of waste being presented".

They also said a quarter of recycled waste was contaminated with waste "such as used nappies, dog faeces and general waste which cannot be recycled", adding: "The Council would normally expect to see 5-10% contamination."

In the East Midlands, North East Derbyshire District Council said that it had to divert all of its kerbside recycling to landfill or an incinerator from March 23 to 28 "due to our contractor having operational problems following Covid 19 staff absences".

The council manages over 21,000 households with an estimated population of 79,238.

In Cheshire, Warrington Borough Council, managing a population of 209,500 and 96,030 households, warned that "capacity issues within the recycling industry created by the Covid 19 pandemic may result in a proportion of the material being diverted away from recycling".

"We do not currently have detail on the scale of this potential issue," the council added.

When asked whether the council had informed Warrington residents that some of their sorted recycling may end up in landfill, the council did not wish to comment further.

Chesterfield Borough Council, with a population of 104,400 and 46,796 households as of 2011, said that for four weeks to the beginning of May "mixed dry recycling (containing paper/cardboard, plastics, cans) was sent for disposal".

The council claimed this was a direct result of their recycling sorting facility being "badly affected" by Covid-19 and left unable to process or accept material for recycling.

It admitted sending 574 tonnes in total, as a "temporary measure", and that recycling services are since back to normal. A spokesman said they had not publicly informed residents at the time that their mixed recycling was being sent for disposal.

Meanwhile waste authorities for Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council - together accounting for nearly 180,000 households - said they were sending all "plastic film" to energy recovery "due to market value not the Covid Pandemic".

Officials said that out of the 2,376 tonnes of recycling collected in June this year, about 35 tonnes of low grade and contaminated plastic film had to be sent to energy recovery.

A spokesman for Greater Cambridge Shared Waste Service said: "Less than 2% of residents' recycling is sent to energy from waste because it is too low quality for re-processors or there is no market for it.

"Currently this includes thin plastic film – however depending on demand it can be recycled and that's why we'll keep asking residents to put it in their recycling."

on Friday night, Environmental charity Waste Resource Action Group told the Telegraph: "The global pandemic has put unprecedented pressure on councils delivering their waste and recycling services, often with reduced staff numbers and issues arising as a result of Covid-19.

"From the findings of this report it seems a few had to take drastic steps in the short-term, but the majority maintained their services as normal."

A spokesman added: "If councils do need to make changes to services, it is always good practice to let people know so we can continue to recycle effectively."

This investigation follows findings in April that [Cardiff City Council were burning recycling waste](#) whilst at the same time urging the public to keep separating rubbish so as not to "break the habit".

