

Low Participation Areas: Case Study 3 – Recycling in Flats Everyday, Bristol

Improving participation in multi-occupancy high-rise blocks



Recycling in Flats Everyday (RIFE) is a CRED-funded project, which seeks to encourage greater use of mini-recycling centres or bring sites located within the grounds of apartment blocks in Bristol. Various communication and infrastructure issues have been highlighted and addressed during the project.

Bristol City: Improving participation among residents living in flats

Background

The Recycling in Flats Everyday (RIFE) Project was a three year, CRED-funded project (2004 to 2006) developed by Bristol City Council in partnership with a locally based environmental organisation The Recycling Consortium (now Resource Futures). The project was developed to address the relatively low performance of 120 mini recycling centres (MRCs) which serve just over six thousand flats and apartment properties in the city, with a particular focus on the 42 lowest performing sites. The MRCs function as bring sites, located on the premises of large apartment blocks. They accept paper, glass and cans in mainly 360 litre wheeled bins but 240 litre bins are also used in flats where lower volumes are disposed of.

Aim

The primary aim of this project was:

To promote the use of the city's MRCs and increase recycling participation amongst residents living in flat and apartment properties across Bristol. The secondary aim of the project was to promote and develop the city's network of plastic bottle bring banks. This case study deals only with the work in flats and apartment properties.

Identifying low participation areas

In 2003-04, Bristol's recycling rate was 12.09% and its statutory target for that year was 16%. Based on tonnage figures, on-site observations and anecdotal evidence from collection crews, the

council knew that there was substantial room for improvement in the collection yields of its MRCs.

Understanding the issues

At the time that the project was developed, the MRCs were known to be under performing following feedback from collection crews. Collection frequencies were limited to once a week and yet the yield was so low that vehicles were returning to the depot with substantial amounts of unused capacity.

The council was not 100% sure of the reasons for low participation at the MRC sites, although officers suspected that residents were simply not aware that the MRCs were available for them to use. Other factors were felt to be:

- lack of willingness to separate wastes inside the flat;
- distance to MRC compared to the distance to residual waste bins; and
- confusion over which materials could be recycled.

The council was aware that there were service provision and communication issues which needed to be addressed in order to increase the usage of the MRCs and plastic bottle banks. However, it was equally conscious that part of the reason for the situation was the limited resources which it had available to address these issues. The council therefore decided to go into partnership with a local delivery organisation, The Recycling Consortium (TRC), who already conducted other forms of waste and recycling education in the city. Bristol City Council provided match funding and in partnership with TRC submitted an application to the Community Recycling and Economic Development (CRED) programme. The project is managed and staffed by TRC (now Resource Futures). A service level agreement was drawn up with Bristol City Council and they

together with local collection contractors ECT and SITA, form the RIFE Project Advisory Group to which the project reports.

Defining the target audience

The project's original target audience was residents living in flats and apartments. However, as the project officers soon discovered, in many cases it was actually the caretakers and the managing agents of the apartment blocks rather than residents who had the greatest sense of ownership and the desire to see the MRCs used correctly. Indeed, the council's initial assessment was verified by the project's findings that many residents did not know what MRCs were, where they were located or what they should be used for. In most cases RIFE staff were required to make face to face visits with caretakers to explain their aims and intentions for the project.

Another specific audience defined in this project has been Somali residents. During on-site project work, four of RIFE's below average performing flat blocks were found to house large Somali refugee and immigrant communities. RIFE conducted research into the attitudes of Somali residents towards waste and recycling, and attempted to identify any specific barriers to recycling which may have existed within the community. The findings showed that, generally speaking, Somali residents did not have positive experiences of waste management or recycling from Somalia. They also showed that English was not widely spoken or read and many residents contacted during the research read little of the Somali language. Furthermore, there is no direct translation for the word 'recycling' in the Somali language.

Developing communications solutions

Resource Futures employs two members of staff (one full and the other part-time) on the RIFE project. Their role has been to design

and deliver a programme of research and community engagement in order to improve MRC and plastic bottle bank performance. The role of the two RIFE staff is broadly to make assessments of sites for MRCs, liaise with landlords for new sites, conducting all the canvassing of residents, making contact with caretakers and managing agents, dealing with day to day minor issues and ensuring that the bigger issues are dealt with by project partners.

The project was designed in such a way that feedback obtained during the project could be assessed and used to inform the use of different communication methods as the project progressed.

Initially RIFE project staff approached residents directly, as well as through locally active community groups. Posters and displays about recycling were produced and exhibited at local area housing offices and in the entrance foyers of high-rise blocks (defined as multi occupancy blocks with a single entry point, 6 or more floors, with lifts to upper floors and chutes for residual waste disposal). This approach was not very productive however as residents were reluctant to engage in these settings.

Residents' committee meetings and coffee mornings were soon identified as better starting points. This was not the case where crime and anti-social behaviour were such pressing issues that recycling was simply not on the agenda. In these cases and where no regular resident forums or meetings were held, alternatives were adopted. Posters with directional arrows were produced and these were displayed in foyers and other suitable locations to draw residents' attention to the location of the MRCs and make them easier to find.





At all sites door-to-door canvassing was undertaken and site-specific leaflets handed out which gave information about the exact MRC location, materials accepted, and recent output tonnages in order to inspire participation.



Barriers to Recycling

Feedback from residents obtained during the early stages of the project showed that one of the barriers to recycling was the lack of a suitable container in which to store and transport recyclates. In response, the project officers designed and produced 10,000 durable, reusable bags.

These bags were handed out to residents during subsequent door-to-door canvassing and proved to be a useful tool for engaging with residents on the issue of recycling, even in cases when residents hadn't been at home.



Anecdotal evidence suggests that the bags are well received by residents and have become a focus for the recycling message. They have been retained in rental properties some of which are occupied on a temporary basis by professionals working in the city and residents have even been spotted taking the bags on holiday with them! (One was spotted in an airport lounge by a RIFE worker in 2005).

Targeting communications for Somali residents

RIFE project staff were able to locate the residencies of the Somali tenants with help from caretakers who were aware of the issues facing these and other non English speaking communities.

As a result of project research, RIFE engaged an Outreach Worker and some volunteers from the Somali community. A community information stand illustrating the block-specific MRC facilities and the materials that could be recycled was set up and staffed in

each of the identified poor performing blocks. Stands were placed in foyer areas where it was possible to speak to residents as they entered and left the building. Unlike RIFE's earlier experiences with foyer displays, this method was recommended by the outreach worker for a number of reasons: in Somali culture politeness is highly valued and it would be deemed rude and inappropriate to ignore someone who is actively trying to engage with you, even if they are a stranger. The fact that Somali speakers were on hand also helped to make this approach more effective.

In addition, posters including images of Somali residents using the MRC facilities were produced and placed in the foyers of flats and waste/chute rooms on each floor. Translated leaflets were similarly produced, and distributed via door-to-door canvassing undertaken by RIFE staff accompanied by Somali volunteers acting as translators.

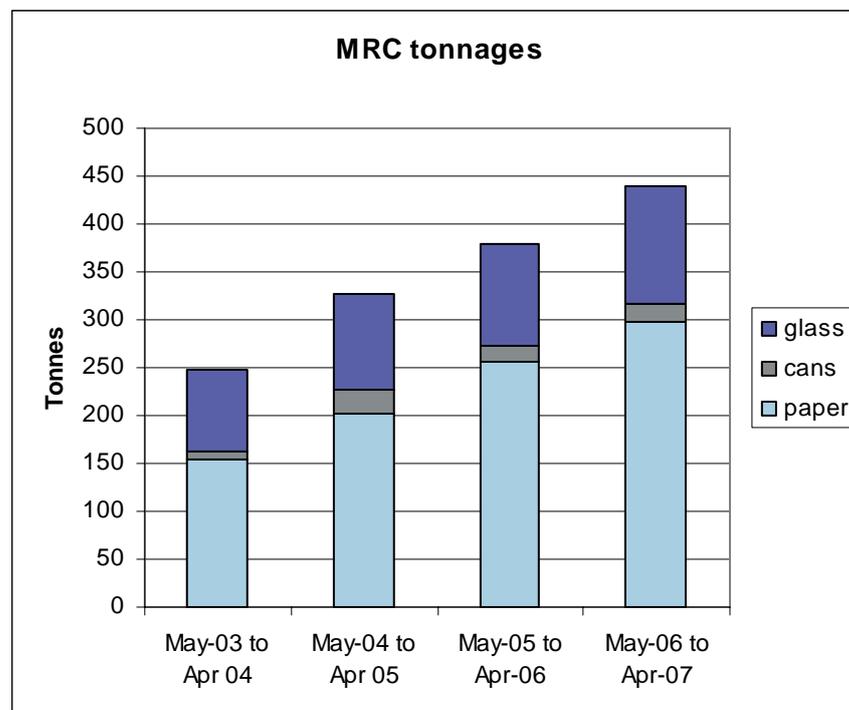
Project costs

The RIFE project received £95,000 from CRED over the initial three years of the project to December 2006. In addition, Bristol City Council contributed £15,000 per year for the first three years. A budget of approximately £26,000 (4k from CRED project funds, 6k from Bristol City Council environment award and 16k from WRAP) was used to design and develop communications materials including; site specific leaflets, and posters and signage for the MRCs.

The project has since developed to include a service level agreement for 300 sites with a contract value of nearly £40,000 per year.

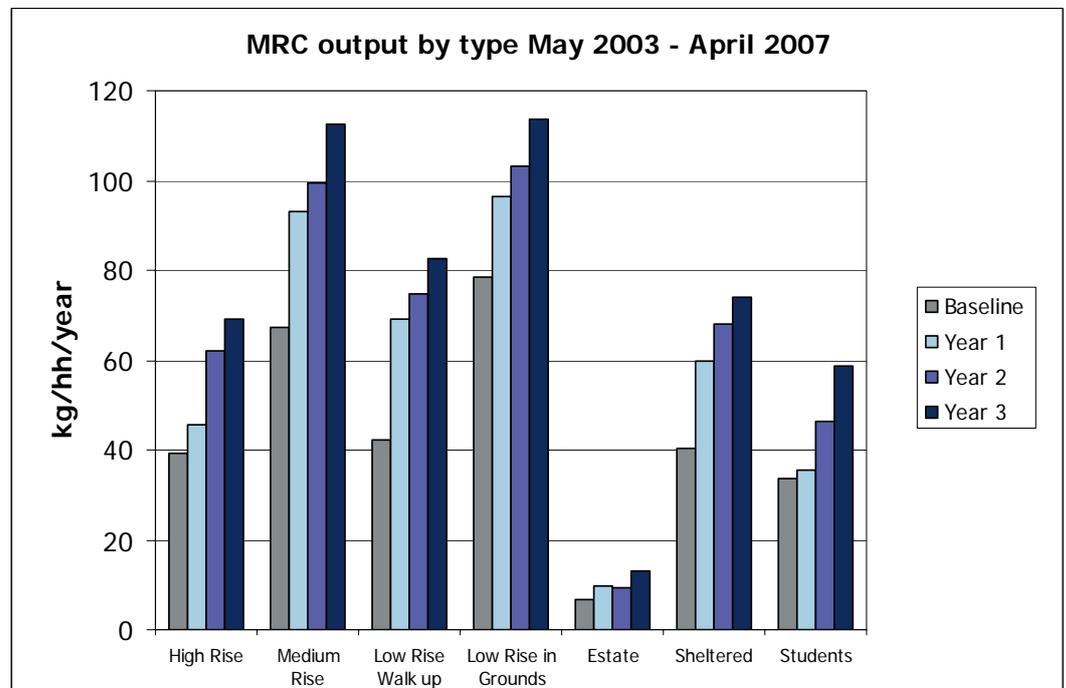
Achievements and results

RIFE is a project about behavioural change and the real driver and indicator of success is the increase in recycling tonnage output. Overall, RIFE has succeeded in increasing the amount of materials collected from its sites from a baseline figure of 247 tonnes to 378 tonnes in year 2 and 440 tonnes in the final year a 77% increase over the three years.



At the start of the project there were 85 low performing sites (less than 85kg/hh/year) this had been reduced to 60 by the end of year 3. The average output per household for the low performers rose steadily from a baseline of 32 kg/hh/year to 57 kg/hh/year in year 3. The average output per household for all sites rose from 44 kg/hh/year to 75 kg/hh/year over the same time period.

The table below shows the breakdown of tonnages by material across different types of site.



The main response to RIFE from residents has been overwhelmingly encouraging. Positive behavioural change has been observed, even from those residents who were recorded as definite non-recyclers at the start of the project. Some actively asked for a bag on the second round of canvassing. They had seen their neighbours using the distinctive green bags during the intervening year and felt excluded by not being given one.

Lessons learnt

The key lessons learnt from the RIFE project can be summarised as follows:

- involve the caretakers in the engagement process as they can be pivotal to ensuring residents know what to do, they also have a direct interest in ensuring that waste facilities are used correctly;

- understand the social demography of the residents and their relationship with recycling;
- engage and develop relationships with managing agents and Housing Association landlords, as these contacts are in touch with their residents on a regular basis eg some managing agents present the RIFE recycling tonnage data and news in their quarterly resident newsletters to keep residents inspired to continually improve;
- set up mechanisms to ensure the involvement of the contractors in the project. The establishment of the Advisory Group involving all contractors and the City Council has been critical to the success of the RIFE project;
- having staff dedicated to working on the ground and spending a significant amount of time out talking to residents, caretakers etc; and
- being aware when problems are occurring and then being able to deal with the majority of these on a day to day basis with council staff and contractors has been important to the success of the project. For example, the project staff are able to regularly feedback to partners on issues such as location suitability and the need for existing site improvements relating to security and signage. The project has developed a strong advocacy role and better two-way communication channels now exist between the partners and service providers as a result of the project.

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