

WR1204

Household Waste Prevention

Evidence Review:

L3 m3-5 (T) – Attitudes and Behaviours

Home Composting

A report for Defra's  
Waste and Resources Evidence Programme

**October 2009**

This research was commissioned and funded by Defra. The views expressed reflect the research findings and the authors' interpretation. The inclusion of or reference to any particular policy in this report should not be taken to imply that it has, or will be, endorsed by Defra.

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## L3 m3-5 (T) Attitudes and behaviour Home composting

This paper focuses on consumer attitudes and behaviours with respect to home composting. It provides consumer insight on:

- Current patterns in home composting – levels of participation, what people compost, and who does it
- Barriers to home composting, including reasons for not composting; reasons for not composting all compostable waste; and reasons for stopping composting
- Motivations for home composting
- Impact of home composting campaigns and projects on behaviour
- Role of compost bin promotions
- Impact of home composting on waste prevented
- Potential for further uptake of home composting
- Encouraging non-composters to start composting

Modules providing further insight or detail in relation to composting and to other waste prevention attitudes and behaviours are:

L1 m1 Executive Report (section 3)	L2 m3 Consumers – engaging L2 m5 Policy measures - encourage	L3 m3/1 (D) Extent to which waste prevention behaviours are practised L3 m3/2 (D) Motivations and barriers L3 m3/3 (D) Impacts of public campaigns and interventions L3 m3/4 (T) Attitudes & behaviour – food waste L3 m3/6 (T) Attitudes & behaviour – reuse L3 m3/7 (T) Attitudes & behaviour – everyday actions around the home L3 m5/2 (D) International review
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(D) denotes a briefing paper providing more background detail; (T) indicates a short focused topic briefing

### 1.1 Evidence reviewed

The two main information sources that this paper draws upon are:

- WRAP (2007a) Organics and Home Composting Marketing Research 2007.
- Gray, S. and Toleman, I. (2006) National home composting survey results, 1997-2005.

These are the two most extensive public attitude and behaviour surveys on home composting identified through the scoping exercise for the evidence review. The first covers a sample of 1,594 people in Great Britain, using doorstep and garden centre interviews. The second covers a sample of approximately 20,000 people in Great Britain with access to a garden, using telephone interviews. This document also makes use of survey results from 1997, 2000 and 2004 to detect changes over time.

In addition, a number of other sources, including international sources, are referred to which either touch on home composting as part of a wider discussion on waste prevention or describe a specific home composting initiative, including several WREP studies.

### 1.2 Topline summary of findings

Current patterns in home composting behaviour can be summarised as:

- Just over 1 in 3 households with access to a garden currently compost;
- More than half of households with access to a garden have never composted;

- Approximately 1 in 5 households with access to a garden can be classified as 'committed home composters';
- 2 in 5 home composters use a subsidised compost bin obtained from the local council; and
- There are socio-economic differences: composters tend to be affluent, older, owner-occupiers, with large gardens and an interest in gardening, and in higher social grades.

The most common barriers to composting (or rather, reasons for not composting) are never having thought about it and not having enough space in the garden. Not having enough waste and not needing compost were also fairly common reasons.

The main motivations for composting are an interest in gardening, environmental reasons, and being able to obtain a low-cost compost bin from the local council.

WRAP's subsidised compost bins have been widely taken up, and their impact is evidenced by a sharp increase in the number of composting households, which coincided with the distribution of the bins. There is evidence in the literature of more households being interested in taking up home composting, with subsidised compost bins frequently cited as an important motivator that could encourage them to start.

Estimates of the waste prevention impacts of home composting vary a great deal, but reach up to 220 kg/household/year for a new recruit (WRAP, 2007c). WRAP's most recent guidance is that a home composting household will compost ~150 kg/hh/yr<sup>1</sup>.

In aggregate, WRAP suggest that 1.4 million tonnes of household waste per annum could be home composted by 2020. Modelling work in WREP studies shows that the material streams that can be home composted – garden and food waste – will be two of the three fastest growing components of household waste in the future, which points to home composting being a key waste prevention tool.

## 1.3 Key findings

### Current patterns in home composting

Gray and Toleman (2006) found that 34% of households with access to a garden say they compost their garden and/or kitchen waste. The WRAP (2007a) survey, though using a smaller sample size, arrived at a very similar figure of 35.5%.

The proportion of those with access to a garden who had never composted was reported in these two surveys as 57% (Gray & Toleman, 2006) and 55.5% (WRAP, 2007a). The proportion of people who said they used to compost but stopped was approximately 9% in both surveys. The findings of Tucker and Douglas (2006a) tally with this figure – they found that composting drop-out rates of 8-14% are commonly reported in the literature.

Of those who currently compost at home (n=1,043 respondents with gardens), 18% are classified as committed home composters, while 82% are either not composting or, if they are, not committed composters (Ipsos MORI for WRAP, 2008b).

Gray and Toleman (2006) found that of the households who compost, only 12% reported using this as their only means of disposal for kitchen and/or garden waste. In contrast, WRAP (2007a) report that a much higher proportion, 31.7% of respondents, claim to use composting as the sole means of disposal for their garden waste.

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<sup>1</sup> WRAP, personal correspondence to the evidence review team, April 2009.

The majority of those who currently compost were found to be using compost bins – 41% subsidised council bins, 22% privately bought bins, and 19% home-made compost bins – with compost heaps being less common, used by only 30% of respondents (WRAP 2007a). Very few were found to be using wormeries, green cones or other means of composting (Gray & Toleman, 2006), although Woodard and Harder (undated) suggest that some of these options may be increasing in popularity.

In addition, 83% of people were found to compost all year round (Gray & Toleman, 2006).

## What do people compost?

Gray and Toleman (2006) report that of the households using a compost bin, 76% composted both kitchen and garden waste. Composting kitchen waste was less common among the households with a compost heap, with only 40% composting both kitchen and garden waste, and 50% using their compost heap solely for garden waste.

Tucker and Douglas (2006a, WR0112) refer to reports by:

- DETR (1998) which found that 12% of the population compost garden waste only, 2% compost kitchen waste only, and 14% compost both; and
- Burnley and Parfitt (2000) who found that 10% of the population compost garden waste only, 11% of the population compost kitchen waste only, and 23% compost both.

WRAP (2007a) report that the most common types of kitchen waste that people compost are fruit and vegetable peelings, teabags and eggshells. The most common types of garden waste composted are grass, leaves and soft plant material (with pernicious weeds and woody materials more likely to be taken to civic amenity sites).

Tucker and Douglas (2006a, WR0112) give the following figures on the proportion of the population composting different types of waste, based on various surveys:

- Grass mowing (79%);
- Kitchen scraps (79%);
- Plant debris (69%);
- Annual weeds (62%);
- Newspaper (25-53%);
- Any other kitchen waste besides uncooked fruit and vegetables (33-42%), most commonly tea bags, coffee grounds, kitchen roll, card and egg boxes and eggshells; and
- Hedge clippings (19%).

## Who composts?

The evidence suggests that affluent households are more likely to compost. The typical home composter has been found to be:

- Older, or later family stage (Gray & Toleman, 2006; Tucker and Douglas, 2006a, WR0112);
- An owner-occupier (Gray & Toleman, 2006; Tucker and Douglas, 2006a, WR0112);
- In a multi-occupancy home (Tucker and Douglas, 2006a, WR0112);
- Living in a detached or semi-detached house (Tucker and Douglas, 2006a, WR0112);
- With a large garden, interest in gardening or frequent gardening activity (Tucker and Douglas, 2006a, WR0112); and
- In one of the higher social grades (Gray & Toleman, 2006).

## Barriers to home composting

WRAP (2007a), Gray and Toleman (2006) and Tucker and Douglas (2006a) report variously on:

1. Reasons for not composting;
2. Reasons for not composting all compostable waste; and
3. Reasons for stopping composting.

### 1. Barriers: Reasons for not composting

WRAP's research suggests that not having thought about home composting may be one of the most common barriers to taking it up (although this was identified only as the most common type of response within the 'other' category – which included 36% of respondents – rather than as a specific response given by a defined proportion of respondents).

Besides never having thought about composting, insufficient garden space was the most common reason given for not composting by respondents in both surveys, among:

- 46% of lapsed composters (Gray and Toleman, 2006)
- 33% of those who had never composted (Gray and Toleman, 2006)
- 29.1% of all non-composters, including lapsed composters (WRAP, 2007a)

Not generating enough waste was cited as a reason by:

- 21% of those who had never composted (Gray & Toleman, 2006)
- 10.8% of all non-composters, including lapsed composters (WRAP, 2007a)

Not needing compost was given as a reason by:

- 17% of those who had never composted (Gray & Toleman, 2006)
- 13.9% of all non-composters, including lapsed composters (WRAP, 2007a)

Among lapsed composters, Gray and Toleman (2006) found that the most common reasons for not composting, after insufficient garden size, were poor health or old age (19%) and not gardening any longer (18%).

### 2. Barriers: Reasons for not composting all compostable waste

WRAP's (2007a) report makes some qualitative comments on reasons why people do not compost all of their compostable waste. These fall into four main categories:

- Home composting container is not large enough for all compostable waste;
- People choose not to put certain things into the compost bin (e.g. citrus fruit) due to perceptions that it will reduce compost quality or harm the mix if present in large quantity;
- Weather can prevent people from taking stuff to the compost bin; and
- Food or garden waste is fed to pets.

In their literature review, Tucker and Douglas (2006a, WR0112) report on a previous piece of work by themselves, which aimed to identify the most common reasons why people did not compost all compostable waste. These were found to be (no sample details provided):

- Forgetfulness (34%);
- Effort, inconvenience or bother (18%);
- Not having enough kitchen waste to make it worthwhile (39%);
- Not knowing what they could compost with their garden waste (11%); and
- Other disposal methods, e.g. feeding food scraps to pets (1%).

It is not clear why there are such differences between the findings of the two projects, but it may be a result of different methodologies. Tucker and Douglas (2006a, WR0112) refer to their work as part of an extensive literature review, and do not go into the details of the methodology used. We do know, however, that WRAP's survey first asked about different methods of disposal used for kitchen and garden waste, and then went on to investigate the reasons for this – and it may be that respondents who have just outlined in detail how they dispose of their kitchen waste are unwilling to mention factors such as forgetfulness.

### **3. Barriers: Reasons for stopping composting**

While Gray and Toleman (2006) investigated the reasons for not composting among lapsed composters and those who had never composted (see above), WRAP (2007a) specifically included in their survey a question about the reasons why some respondents had stopped composting. The most commonly cited reasons were:

- Moving house (31.7% of respondents);
- Other (28.8%); and
- Insufficient garden space (13.7%).

Tucker and Douglas (2006a, WR0112) outline research findings on the reasons why people have stopped using green cones. The most common reasons were:

- Problems with flies (35% of respondents);
- Too slow (23%);
- Not enough ingredients (21%);
- Could not move the cone (19%); and
- Too smelly (17%).

Tucker and Douglas (2006a, WR0112) also note that the attitudes of lapsed composters are generally found to be more erratic over time than the attitudes of established composters. They conclude that negative experiences must influence people's attitudes, which in turn make them more likely to give up composting. In contrast, they note that attitudes are very similar among established composters, regardless of whether they have been composting for 3 months or 30 years.

### **Motivations for home composting**

Gray and Toleman (2006) investigated the reasons why composting households were composting. The most common motivations were found to be:

- Wanting or needing compost (cited by 30% of respondents);
- Environmental reasons (29%);
- Increased interest in gardening (28%); and

- Receiving a subsidised compost bin via a council promotion (19%)

Wanting to reduce waste and environmental reasons were also identified as important motivators for home composting by Tucker and Douglas in their review of the literature (2006a, WR0112).

## Impact of campaigns and projects on behaviour

WRAP's data suggest that campaigns can have a marked influence on behaviour. According to their national survey (WRAP, 2007a) only 38% of those who had seen a campaign (n=642) said that it had not influenced them at all. In addition:

- 12.6% of those who had seen a composting campaign run by the council claimed this encouraged them to start composting;
- 6.6% said they would compost a greater range of materials as a result of seeing the campaign.

Results in the WREP Dorset study were less clear cut (Dorset County Council et al., 2008, WR0116). Here, home composting was part of a package of waste prevention measures promoted through doorstepping and other activities, including subsidised compost bins and composting 'clinics'. There was some evidence that demand for bins became saturated towards the end of the project, but the composting clinics were well attended. The overall impacts of the project, however, were somewhat ambiguous: during the three years of the campaign, there was virtually no variation in reported levels of home composting, although reported composting of garden waste decreased slightly while reported composting of kitchen waste and cardboard increased slightly.

In the Global Action Plan (GAP) and Hampshire small group behaviour change projects (GAP et al, 2008, WR0114; Hampshire County Council and Brook Lyndhurst, 2008, WR0117), home composting was one of the most marked areas of behaviour change. In the follow-up survey in Hampshire (n=87), 37% said that the amount they composted at home had gone up; and 42% said they now compost a wider range of things. Even though there was a high level of home composting in this group at the start of the project (72%), the number of home composters still increased by 6% by the end (see [L3 m3/9 \(T\)](#) – small group approaches to behaviour change).

## Role of compost bin promotions

WRAP have been working in partnership with local authorities to promote free or subsidised compost bins and to provide composting advice and information. They report (WRAP, 2007a) the outcomes of their home composting campaign as:

- Between 2004 and 2005 the campaign targeted:
  - 6.3 million households
  - and sold 500,000 compost bins
- By June 2007 over 1.6 million compost bins had been sold

The promotions are reckoned to create additionality to what would have happened otherwise. In the 2007 survey, half of the respondents who were composting had a subsidised bin. According to point of sale data 70-75% of those buying a subsidised bin are new to home composting, the remainder buying replacements. This is backed up by the survey data which recorded that 40% of respondents were disposing of compostable waste into their residual bin prior to using the subsidised bin.

Gray and Toleman (2006) also note an upward trend between 1997 and 2000 in the number of households that home compost, which coincides with the pattern of local authorities distributing

subsidised compost bins. Between 1997 (n=1,336) and 2000 (n=1,000) there was a significant rise in the proportion of households with gardens that compost, from 29% to 34%. Since then, the figure has remained fairly steady, with 33% in 2004 (n=2,600) and 34% in 2005 reporting that they compost.

According to WRAP (2007a), the most common reasons for acquiring a subsidised bin were:

- Low cost of the bin (30.0%)
- Environmental reasons, especially reducing landfill (26.1%)
- Receiving a council leaflet or other promotional material (15.9%)
- Seeing composting as 'a good way of getting rid of waste' (12.7%)

Tucker and Douglas (2006a, WR0112) point out that while surveys often find that those who started composting with a subsidised bin cite environmental or gardening reasons, the low-cost bin must have been a significant motivator – because despite having positive attitudes towards composting, these individuals were not composting prior to the offer being available.

### Impact of home composting on waste prevented

WRAP (2007c) estimate that for every new household that takes up home composting, 220kg of waste per year is diverted from landfill. For every household that is already composting but obtains a subsidised bin in order to compost more or different types of waste, an additional 60kg per year is estimated to be diverted. Tucker and Douglas (2006a, WR0112) are more cautious and, though acknowledging that some estimates of the waste prevention impacts of home composting predict a 8.5-12.5% reduction in waste (or between 100 and 150 kg/household/year), they refer to the NRWF toolkit which estimates a 1-3% reduction in waste as feasible. The latter estimate has now been updated by WRAP in the revised waste prevention toolkit. Latest WRAP estimates (2009) are that home composting households divert 150 kg/hh/yr (see footnote 1).

Other WRAP modelling research suggests that home composting could divert 1.4 million tonnes a year by 2020 if the right measures are in place (e.g. inclusion of home composting in LATS) (Parfitt, 2006; WRAP, 2007c).

### Potential for further uptake of home composting

In the WRAP (2007a) survey, around 5% of non-composters claimed that they planned to start in the near future, while 37.4% of non-composters felt that nothing would encourage them to start composting. Gray and Toleman (2006) found this figure was higher among their sample, with 66% of non-composters and 55% of lapsed composters unable to think of anything that would encourage them to start composting. No reason is given by the authors for the difference, but it is worth noting that the 2007 survey included a sub-sample interviewed at garden centres.

### Encouraging non-composters to start composting

The main factors likely to encourage non-composters were identified in the literature as follows.

**Low-cost bin.** Gray and Toleman (2006) found that among the non-composting households (n=11,102), the most commonly mentioned potential motivator was a low-cost compost bin, mentioned by 14% of respondents. Similarly, WRAP (2007a) found that this was the most popular motivator, with 19.6% saying that a free compost bin would encourage them, and a further 5.9% willing to pay a nominal charge for a bin.

**Advice and information.** In addition, WRAP (2007a) report that a small but significant proportion felt that advice or information would encourage them (ranging from 2.5%-7.6% depending on the topic of advice). Gray & Toleman (2006) give a similar figure of 5% of respondents considering that receiving advice would encourage them to compost.

**Not collecting garden waste.** A small number of respondents in both surveys stated that they would only consider composting if the council stopped them from putting their garden waste in the residual bin or stopped collecting garden waste.

**Personal reasons – access to a bigger garden.** For a fairly large proportion of respondents in both surveys (13% cited by Gray and Toleman, 2006; and 19.8% cited by WRAP, 2007a), access to a larger garden would be a key factor that would encourage them to start composting – but this is beyond the influence of campaigns. Gray and Toleman (2006) do note, however, that in some cases lack of space may simply be a perception rather than a real practical barrier, and could therefore be overcome.

## 1.4 Opportunities for progressing waste prevention

### Importance of home composting for waste prevention

A significant proportion of household waste is biodegradable. Waste Strategy 2007 (p74) says that 20% of households waste is made up of garden waste, 17% kitchen waste and 18% paper and board<sup>2</sup>.

Based on earlier work by the NRWF, Tucker and Douglas (2006a, WR0112) conclude that the greatest potential for waste prevention is in food and green wastes – i.e. the waste streams for which home composting provides an alternative disposal route. In its work on updating the NRWF toolkit, WRAP states that the identification of priority areas for household waste prevention will depend on local drivers. If the local driver is to reduce tonnages for disposal then food waste, home composting and bulky waste (including WEEE<sup>3</sup>) should be the priority areas.

According to WREP modelling studies that examined future paths for waste growth, garden and food waste are predicted to be two of the three greatest areas of increase (AEA et al, 2007; Brook Lyndhurst (2007, WR0104).

### Cost effectiveness of home composting

As a means of diverting biodegradable waste from landfill, the evidence suggests that home composting is a cost-effective means of waste prevention. Salisbury (2008) calculates that, over a 10-year period, the cost of diverting a tonne of biodegradable waste from residual waste into home composting is approximately £9.02. This means that the financial savings to be achieved from the home composting initiatives in Herefordshire and Worcestershire would total £5,576,210 over the course of 10 years, compared to project running costs of £379,000 over four years.<sup>4</sup>

### Potential to increase home composting

Gray and Toleman (2006) note that home composters are still a minority among households with gardens. Considering that a significant proportion of non-composters claim that a free or subsidised compost bin would encourage them to start composting, this suggests there is more scope for encouraging people to start by running subsidised compost bin schemes (but see evidence on possible saturation under 'barriers' below).

<sup>2</sup> Defra (in England) and WRAP (Scotland and Wales) have commissioned further research into the composition of household waste. Resource Futures for Defra, *Understanding Waste Growth at Local Authority Level*, WR0121); WRAP EVA098 *Analysis of municipal waste composition in Scotland* and EVA124 *Wales waste composition analysis*.

<sup>3</sup> Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment.

<sup>4</sup> The cost saving is due to the cost difference between landfilling that waste and diverting it through home composting, i.e. if the waste had been landfilled it would have cost over £5.5 million.

Beyond behavioural campaigns, two policy measures are identified in the literature as possible means of encouraging higher levels of home composting:

**Inclusion of home composting in LATS.** WRAP suggests that as much as 1.4 million tonnes per annum could be diverted from landfill through home composting by 2020 (Parfitt, 2006; WRAP, 2007c). Eunomia et al (2007, WR0103) – together with stakeholders taking part in the evidence review (L3 m7/1 (D)) – suggest that the current set-up of LATS provides perverse incentives for local authorities to collect bio-degradable waste that could otherwise be home composted. Their argument for including home composting in LATS is that it would provide a financial signal to local authorities which would encourage or enable them to promote home composting. Defra, EA and WRAP are working together to consider whether a robust and accountable mechanism can be developed for home composting to be included in LATS. Defra will then consider the status of home composting as a technique for diverting biodegradable municipal waste from landfill but a decision will not be made until after the first target year.

**Charging for residual waste.** In their scenarios of direct variable charging for household waste (based on international evidence – see L2 m5), Eunomia et al (2007, WR0103) found that this stronger measure would be likely to encourage much greater levels of composting – as much as 5 million to 6 million tonnes per annum in total<sup>5</sup>. In these scenarios, the compost effect is the main minimisation/prevention outcome of the measure, and is expected to be of a similar magnitude to the predicted increase in recycling.

## 1.5 Barriers to progressing waste prevention

It is clear that a large proportion of non-composters are simply not interested in composting, and it seems constructive to consider how the barriers to composting can be overcome among those who claim that they could be encouraged to start.

**Poor awareness of promotions.** The analysis carried out by Gray and Toleman (2006) suggests that, while subsidised compost bins are an important motivator, lack of awareness of their availability can create barriers to uptake. Their data show that only 16% of non-composters were aware that subsidised compost bins were available, compared to 24% across the entire sample.

**Householder perceptions.** Gray and Toleman (2006) also found that the most common reasons for not being motivated by the offer of a subsidised compost bin were not having enough space in the garden (cited by 42% of those who were uninterested) and considering it to be too much effort (by 32%). As previously noted, the authors also point out that these types of barriers may in fact be a question of perception, and therefore possible to overcome.

**Possible market saturation.** In February 2009, the website letsrecycle.com reported that WRAP is due to stop subsidising compost bins in England (though subsidised bins will continue to be available in Scotland) and to move towards more of an advisory role, continuing and improving its guidance to local authorities and householders on how to make and use compost. This development is due in part to reduced funding, but also to a sense that the market for compost bins is in fact becoming saturated.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Worst and best case scenarios, tables 47 & 48.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.letsrecycle.com/do/ecco.py/view\\_item?listid=37&listcatid=217&listitemid=11023](http://www.letsrecycle.com/do/ecco.py/view_item?listid=37&listcatid=217&listitemid=11023) Accessed 01.05.09.

## 1.6 Researchers' recommendations

Gray and Toleman (2006) conclude that, as an interest in gardening currently appears to be the main motivation for home composting, the next logical step would be to find a way of promoting home composting to non-gardeners.

More recent research by WRAP (2007a) has already suggested an answer to this question: they tested a number of messages about home composting among their respondents, and found that the most popular types of messages were to do with the environmental and waste prevention benefits of composting. The top three were:

- "Good for the environment" (40.2% of respondents liked this);
- "Good way of getting rid of waste" (19.8%); and
- "Reduced waste to landfill" (10.9%).

Gray and Toleman (2006) also make recommendations on how some of the perceptual barriers to home composting (discussed above) could be overcome through education.

## 1.7 Practical issues and lessons

Home composting tackles specifically those elements of the household waste stream that make the largest contributions to landfill both in terms of weight and carbon impacts, so needs to be a priority in waste prevention approaches. This is observed both in the UK and internationally (see [L3 m5/2 \(D\) International Review](#)).

WRAP's behavioural change campaign, that combine subsidised compost bins with information and advice, has had a significant impact on the uptake of home composting according to the evidence reviewed. There is also evidence of scope for further uptake, as more households are expressing an interest in home composting and citing the subsidised bins as an important motivator. WRAP's (2007a) work suggests that, in the current climate of rising interest in environmental issues, messages about the environmental and waste reduction benefits of home composting, combined with the subsidised bins, are likely to be effective in encouraging further uptake of home composting.

Furthermore, given the links between food waste and home composting, it may be worth giving consideration for promoting home composting and food waste prevention in conjunction. Not only is home composting of food waste preferable to disposal in residual waste, but collecting food waste in a kitchen caddy may increase its visibility, thereby bringing it into people's consciousness and triggering efforts to reduce food waste.

Finally, evidence reviewed in relation to policy measures (L2 m5) suggests that a significant increase in home composting activity – beyond what is being achieved through consumer campaigns – could result from high level policy measures that would make home composting more financially attractive.

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## **Basis of this report**

The material in this paper is derived from a large scale evidence review of household waste prevention conducted by Brook Lyndhurst, the Social Marketing Practice and the Resource Recovery Forum for Defra's Waste and Resources Evidence Programme.