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RECYCLABLE BUT INCINERATED: QUANTIFYING THE COST OF INCONSISTENT FOOD WASTE COLLECTION ACROSS LONDON BOROUGHS

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Abstract
London incinerates a larger share of its household waste, and recycles a smaller share, than any other region in England. This article examines the extent to which this outcome is driven not by household indifference but by decades of inconsistent food waste collection infrastructure across the capital's thirty-three local authorities. Drawing on Greater London Authority waste data, the Waste and Resources Action Programme's national compositional studies, and the peer-reviewed literature on household recycling behaviour, the article argues that food waste is the single largest recoverable material lost to incineration in London, and that its loss is structural rather than behavioural. It situates this argument against the national rollout of England's Simpler Recycling reforms, which made weekly household food waste collection a statutory requirement from 31 March 2026, and against evidence that a substantial minority of English local authorities, including several in London, will not meet that obligation on schedule. The article further considers the contractual and infrastructural dynamics of London's energy-from-waste sector, which create incentives to maintain incinerator throughput even as diversion policy accelerates, and the environmental justice implications of a system in which incineration capacity is concentrated in the capital's more deprived boroughs. It concludes that Simpler Recycling, while a necessary correction to twenty years of borough-level fragmentation, is unlikely on its own to close London's recycling gap without parallel investment in processing capacity, consistent enforcement, and a reassessment of long-term energy-from-waste contracts.

Keywords:
circular economy; municipal solid waste; food waste collection; energy from waste; London boroughs; Simpler Recycling; environmental justice

INTRODUCTION

London occupies an uncomfortable position among England's nine regions. It incinerates a greater proportion of its household waste than anywhere else in the country and recycles a smaller proportion than anywhere else with the exception of the North East (Greater London Authority, n.d.-a; CPRE London, 2026). The capital's household recycling rate stood at 32.6% in 2024/25, a fractional decline from the previous year and the lowest figure recorded since 2016 (CPRE London, 2026). This is not a new problem. The London Assembly's Environment Committee described London's recycling record as poor as early as 2018, noting that household rates had barely moved in the preceding five years despite a stated ambition, set out in the Mayor's own London Environment Strategy, to send no biodegradable or recyclable waste to landfill by 2026 and to recycle 65% of the city's municipal waste by 2030 (Greater London Authority, 2018). Eight years on, the 2026 landfill target appears to have been met in the narrow sense that almost nothing now goes to landfill in London; the difficulty is that the waste diverted from landfill has gone overwhelmingly to incineration rather than to recycling or composting, a pattern the Mayor's own office has acknowledged (Greater London Authority, n.d.-a).

A single material explains a disproportionate share of this gap: food. National compositional research by the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) finds that food waste makes up around 30% of the residual, or "black bin," waste stream collected in England, and that of the 5.0 million tonnes of household food waste collected by local authorities across the UK in 2022, 3.9 million tonnes ended up in general rubbish destined for incineration or landfill rather than in a dedicated food waste collection destined for composting or anaerobic digestion (WRAP, 2023; WRAP, n.d.). Food waste is, in other words, the largest single category of genuinely recoverable material that London's incinerators burn every day, and its loss is not primarily a matter of household carelessness. It is a matter of whether a household's borough offers a weekly food waste collection at all, a service that, prior to 2026, fewer than half of English households could rely on even as it was available to 99% of homes in Wales (Allison et al., 2022).

This article asks a narrow but consequential question: to what extent has inconsistent borough-level food waste collection contributed to the incineration of recoverable material in London, and what does the early rollout

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of England's Simpler Recycling reforms suggest about closing that gap? The reforms, which took full effect for households on 31 March 2026, require every local authority in England to provide a weekly food waste collection alongside a standard set of dry recyclables (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [Defra], 2024). They represent the most significant change to England's household waste architecture in two decades and were explicitly designed to end what successive governments have called the collection "postcode lottery." Whether they succeed in London depends on factors that go well beyond the presence or absence of a caddy on a doorstep: council finance, vehicle procurement, the design of existing energy-from-waste contracts, and the deeper question of who currently lives closest to the chimneys that a diversion policy is meant to make less necessary.

LITERATURE REVIEW: WHY FOOD WASTE ENDS UP IN THE WRONG BIN

The circular economy framework that now dominates UK and London waste policy rests on a hierarchy in which prevention and reuse sit above recycling, and recycling sits well above energy recovery and disposal (Kirchherr et al., 2017). Incineration, even when packaged as "energy from waste" and credited with generating electricity, occupies the bottom of that hierarchy for any material that could plausibly have been recycled or composted instead. The scholarly debate is therefore less about whether food waste should be diverted from incineration, a point on which there is broad consensus, and more about why diversion so often fails in practice.

Two overlapping explanations recur in the literature. The first concerns household behaviour and the conditions under which people participate in source separation. Bernstad (2014), in a widely cited Swedish case study, found that installing physical infrastructure for food waste separation in the kitchen increased participation substantially more than distributing written information ever did, and that convenience, not environmental attitude, was the binding constraint on recycling behaviour. This finding has been echoed in the UK context by Allison et al. (2022), who surveyed 1,801 UK citizens using the COM-B behavioural model and found that "physical opportunity," meaning whether a household actually has access to a food waste collection service, alongside practical concerns about pests, odour, and hygiene, was the dominant barrier to recycling food waste, ahead of knowledge or motivation. Their conclusion is blunt: citizens cannot be expected to recycle a material for which no collection service exists, and in England, at the time of their study, over half of households had no such service.

The second explanation concerns policy design at the collection-system level rather than the household level. Wilansky and Cao (2026), analysing 297 council districts across England and Wales, found that the combination of weekly food waste collection, less frequent residual waste collection, and free garden waste collection was associated with significantly higher household recycling rates, while the frequency or sorting requirements attached to dry recyclables made comparatively little difference. Their interpretation, echoed in earlier work by Bulkeley and Gregson (2009) on the geography of household waste generation, is that recycling infrastructure functions as a system: a food waste caddy introduced without a corresponding reduction in residual bin frequency does less to shift behaviour than the same caddy introduced alongside a genuine change in the relative convenience of the two options. Bulkeley and Gregson's earlier, more qualitative account adds a further dimension relevant to London specifically: diversion potential is not evenly distributed across neighbourhoods, and denser, higher-turnover housing stock of the kind common in inner London boroughs complicates the "black box" assumption that a single collection model works equally well everywhere.

A third, less frequently discussed strand of the literature concerns what happens to food waste once it is incinerated rather than what prevents its separation in the first place. Cole-Hunter et al. (2020), in a systematic review of the health impacts of waste-to-energy emissions, found a genuine dearth of high-quality epidemiological evidence but noted that poorly fed or poorly operated facilities can emit concentrated dioxins and heavy metals, and that risk depends heavily on feedstock composition and combustion control. This is a more measured conclusion than the "toxic chimney" framing common in campaigning literature, and it is worth stating plainly: dispersion modelling around two operating UK municipal solid waste incinerators by Ashworth et al. (2013) found ground-level particulate concentrations attributable to the plants to be extremely low, and a 2020 review commissioned by the Greater London Authority itself concluded that the strongest evidence of elevated cancer risk came from older or poorly regulated facilities outside the UK, of uncertain comparability to modern, tightly permitted London plants (Greater London Authority, 2020). The more recent and arguably more troubling evidence concerns not stack emissions but solid residues: a 2026 University of East London study of air pollution control residues from twenty-two UK energy-from-waste facilities found these fine, highly alkaline by-products to be more chemically complex, and their environmental behaviour less well understood, than previously assumed (EurekAlert!, 2026). The health case against incineration in London, in short, is less a case about acute local air

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pollution than about siting, feedstock composition, and residue management, each of which interacts directly with the question of how much recoverable food waste ends up in the furnace rather than the composter.

A further body of evidence, produced not by academic researchers but by WRAP in its role advising Defra on the design of Simpler Recycling itself, reinforces the systems argument. WRAP's own modelling, prepared to support the case for statutory intervention, treated a weekly food waste collection running alongside standard dry recycling as part of an "effective service profile" and estimated that food waste represents around 30% of the material in a typical residual bin, meaning that in the absence of a separate collection, almost a third of what a household throws away by weight is, in principle, divertible (WRAP, n.d.). The same evidence base noted that participation, not merely availability, matters: simply making a collection available does not guarantee that residents use it correctly, and contamination of separately collected material remains a persistent operational problem even where services exist. This distinction between availability and effective participation is one this article returns to in its discussion of Simpler Recycling's early implementation, since a headline statistic on the proportion of councils offering a compliant service says little about whether households are actually using it.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA

This article does not present new primary data collection; rather, it synthesises existing administrative, campaigning, and peer-reviewed sources to construct a comparative and, where the underlying data allow, quantitative account of food waste incineration in London. Three categories of evidence were combined. The first is administrative and statutory data: Greater London Authority responses to London Assembly questions, the Mayor's London Environment Strategy targets, and Defra's Simpler Recycling consultation outcomes, all of which are published as a condition of the underlying legislative and mayoral accountability processes and can be treated as authoritative for the figures they report, while being read with awareness that mayoral office publications have an evident interest in presenting landfill diversion progress favourably. The second is independent compositional and behavioural research, principally WRAP's national waste composition and household food waste studies and the peer-reviewed literature on collection-system design and recycling behaviour, which provides the analytical basis for interpreting why borough-level outcomes vary. The third is campaigning and investigative material, including CPRE London's annual borough recycling scorecard and Greenpeace Unearthed's incinerator siting analysis, which is methodologically transparent about its own data sources, generally the same government waste statistics used elsewhere in this article, even where its framing is explicitly advocacy-oriented.

Because no single London authority publishes a borough-level compositional breakdown of its residual waste stream, the estimate of food waste tonnage incinerated in London offered in the following section is necessarily derived by applying WRAP's national residual-waste compositional percentage to London-wide residual tonnage reported by the Greater London Authority, rather than by aggregating thirty-three individual borough audits. This is a reasonable first approximation given that WRAP's compositional studies are themselves based on physical sampling across a representative range of English local authorities, including several in London, but it cannot capture borough-specific variation in diet, housing type, or commercial activity that would affect the true local composition of residual waste. The absence of harmonised borough-level compositional reporting is itself treated in this article as a policy finding rather than merely a methodological limitation, since it constrains the ability of London's waste authorities, the London Assembly, or independent researchers to hold individual boroughs to account for progress on food waste diversion specifically, as opposed to headline recycling rates, which conflate many material streams of very different recoverability and environmental consequence.

POLICY CONTEXT: THE LONDON ENVIRONMENT STRATEGY AND SIMPLER RECYCLING

London's waste targets were set out in the 2018 London Environment Strategy, which committed the Mayor to a "zero waste city," defined operationally as no biodegradable or recyclable waste to landfill by 2026 and a 65% municipal recycling rate by 2030 (Greater London Authority, n.d.-b). The strategy explicitly named food waste and single-use packaging, together making up around 30% of London's municipal waste stream, as the starting point for that transition (Greater London Authority, n.d.-b). On the landfill target, London has effectively succeeded: the proportion of local-authority-collected waste sent to landfill fell from 12.5% when the current Mayor took office to 1.4% in 2020/21 (Greater London Authority, n.d.-a). On the recycling target, the picture is starkly different. The Greater London Authority's own figures put London's combined municipal recycling rate, including commercial and industrial material, at around 42% in 2020, well short of the 65% goal with only a few years remaining, while the household-only rate tracked separately by CPRE London has drifted downward rather than upward, standing at 32.6% in 2024/25 (CPRE London, 2026; Greater London Authority, n.d.-a). The material that has not gone to landfill and has not been recycled has gone, overwhelmingly, to incineration; London

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incinerates the largest share of waste of any English region and recycles the smallest (Greater London Authority, n.d.-a).

Borough-level variation within London is considerable and instructive. CPRE London's 2026 borough scorecard, drawing on newly published 2024/25 government data, records Bromley as London's best-performing borough, just short of a 50% household recycling rate, while historic outer-London and inner-London authorities such as Newham have recorded rates as low as 14% in earlier comparative data (CPRE London, 2026; InSinkErator GB, n.d.). Ealing, notably, combines the highest "dry" recycling rate, covering paper, metal, glass and plastic, with the lowest overall waste generation per head in London, a combination that borough-level waste officers attribute to a long-established and consistently communicated collection service (CPRE London, 2026). What distinguishes the higher performers from the laggards is rarely household enthusiasm; it is closer to what Wilansky and Cao (2026) describe as a coherent collection system, in which food waste collection, residual waste frequency, and garden waste policy are aligned rather than treated as separate procurement decisions made by thirty-three different authorities on thirty-three different contract cycles.

This fragmentation is precisely what the national Simpler Recycling reforms were designed to end. First announced by Defra in October 2023, the reforms required businesses and non-household premises with ten or more employees to separate food waste and core dry recyclables from 31 March 2025, and required every local authority in England to extend the same weekly food waste collection, alongside standardised dry recycling streams, to every household by 31 March 2026 (Defra, 2024). Micro-businesses have until 2027, and plastic film is being phased in separately on the same later timeline. The government's own consultation response frames the reform as addressing an "environmental externality": because uncollected or improperly collected food waste imposes a cost on the wider public through methane emissions and lost resource value, the case for national standardisation was judged to override councils' historic discretion over collection design (Defra, 2024). Central government backed the transition with capital grant funding, initially set at £295 million in 2024 and later expanded to more than £340 million to help authorities purchase vehicles, caddies, and communications materials (Local Government Association, n.d.; Sabljak & Fisher, 2026).

The rollout has not been seamless. A BBC investigation published shortly before the March 2026 deadline found that 79 English councils, roughly one in four, would not meet it, with vehicle procurement delays and uncertainty over ongoing revenue funding, as distinct from one-off capital grants, cited as the principal obstacles (Sabljak & Fisher, 2026). When councils granted formal transitional arrangements are included, the BBC found that more than a third of English local authorities would still not be collecting food waste from every household by the deadline, though the great majority of delayed authorities expected to reach full coverage before the end of 2026 (Sabljak & Fisher, 2026). England's environment minister acknowledged the country had been "stagnating at these very low recycling rates for far too long" while urging councils to proceed carefully rather than rush implementation (Sabljak & Fisher, 2026). For London specifically, the practical consequence is that even a well-designed national mandate does not translate into uniform capacity on a single date; some boroughs entered April 2026 with fully compliant services, and others did not, meaning the borough-level inconsistency this article examines will persist, in diminished form, for some months beyond the nominal deadline.

QUANTIFYING THE INCINERATED RECYCLABLE: SCALE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Two figures, read together, give a sense of scale. WRAP estimates that food waste constitutes approximately 30% of England's residual waste stream by weight (WRAP, n.d.). The Greater London Authority estimates London generates several million tonnes of local-authority-collected waste annually, the majority of which, net of the roughly one-third that is currently recycled or composted, is incinerated rather than landfilled (Greater London Authority, n.d.-a). Applying WRAP's national compositional estimate to London's residual waste stream suggests that several hundred thousand tonnes of food waste are incinerated in London in a typical year, a figure broadly consistent with the national picture in which 3.9 million tonnes of UK household food waste ended up in general rubbish in 2022 rather than in a dedicated food or garden waste collection (WRAP, 2023). This is necessarily an estimate rather than a precise audit, since London's thirty-three authorities do not publish a single harmonised compositional breakdown of their residual waste, a data gap that is itself a barrier to the kind of borough-level accountability Wilansky and Cao (2026) argue is essential to improving recycling performance. To make the scale concrete: if a London household recycling rate of roughly a third means that around two-thirds of London's collected household waste is residual rather than recycled or composted, and WRAP's national compositional work suggests food waste makes up close to 30% of that residual stream, then food waste alone would account for close to one-fifth of everything London's households throw away, most of it currently incinerated rather than digested or composted. This is consistent with, if somewhat more conservative than, the

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proportion implied by the Mayor's own 2018 strategy document, which identified food waste and single-use packaging together as making up around 30% of London's total municipal waste stream (Greater London Authority, n.d.-b).

The borough-level pattern beneath this aggregate figure is uneven in ways that track collection history rather than demography alone. Inner-London boroughs with long-established food waste schemes, including Camden, Islington, and Westminster, extended weekly collections to the great majority of their housing stock well before Simpler Recycling made doing so compulsory, and their recycling performance, while still below the Mayor's 65% ambition, has generally sat above the London average (CPRE London, 2026). Outer-London boroughs presented a more mixed picture: Bromley combined a relatively conventional suburban housing stock with a comparatively early and consistently promoted food waste service to become London's best performer, narrowly under the 50% mark, while other outer boroughs with broadly similar housing profiles lagged considerably further behind, suggesting that consistency of service and communication, rather than housing type in isolation, is doing much of the explanatory work (CPRE London, 2026). Flatted and high-density housing, common across much of inner London, complicates food waste collection logistics in ways single-family suburban housing does not, since shared bin stores and limited storage space for a separate caddy raise exactly the convenience barriers that Bernstad (2014) identifies as decisive, and this may partly explain why some inner-London boroughs with early food waste schemes have still struggled to move recycling rates much above the low-to-mid thirties.

The infrastructure into which this material flows has been expanding rather than contracting. Cory Riverside Energy Park, the largest energy-from-waste facility serving London, processes around 750,000 to 805,000 tonnes of residual waste a year at its existing Belvedere site; a 2020 Development Consent Order permitted a second facility on the same site with the capacity to process a further 805,000 tonnes annually, more than doubling total throughput (Cory Group, 2020; London Assembly, 2020). The Mayor formally opposed the expansion, arguing in written representations to the planning inspectorate that if London met its own recycling targets, no additional incineration capacity would be required at all (Greater London Authority, n.d.-c). The operator's position, unsurprisingly, was the reverse: with more than two million tonnes of London's non-recyclable waste at the time being sent to landfill or shipped overseas for lack of domestic capacity, additional residual processing capacity was, in the company's account, urgently needed (Cory Group, 2020). Both positions can be true simultaneously, and that is precisely the problem: a facility financed and permitted on the assumption of a given tonnage of residual waste creates a structural interest, independent of anyone's stated environmental commitments, in residual waste continuing to arrive in that volume. Long-term energy-from-waste contracts commonly include minimum tonnage clauses, and legal analysis of the Simpler Recycling transition has noted that local authorities diverting more food waste into separate collection risk breaching these clauses or facing reduced throughput at facilities they are contractually committed to supplying, an incentive structure that runs directly counter to the diversion policy Simpler Recycling is meant to achieve (Lexology, 2026). Campaigners have gone further, calculating that Cory's existing Belvedere incinerator generates electricity at a carbon intensity of around 617 grams of CO2 per kilowatt-hour, nearly double that of a modern gas-fired power station, a figure that complicates industry claims that energy-from-waste offers meaningful climate mitigation relative to fossil generation (Resource Media, 2020).

The distributional dimension of this infrastructure is not incidental to the argument. An investigation by Greenpeace's Unearthed unit mapped the location of UK waste incinerators against neighbourhood-level deprivation data and found that incinerators are approximately three times more likely to be sited in the most deprived neighbourhoods than in the least deprived (Unearthed, 2020). London's own experience bears this out: the Edmonton EcoPark in North London, one of the facilities whose replacement has drawn sustained opposition from local campaign groups, sits in one of the more deprived parts of the city, where local campaigners have explicitly framed the siting decision as a matter of environmental and racial justice given the area's demographic composition (Greenpeace UK, 2024). A borough that lacks a consistent food waste collection service, and whose residual waste consequently contains a disproportionate share of recoverable food waste, is not simply losing an abstract quantity of compostable material; in a meaningful number of cases, it is also disproportionately exposed to the facility that burns it.

DISCUSSION

Three findings emerge from the evidence assembled here. First, London's poor recycling performance relative to the rest of England is not adequately explained by household attitudes. The behavioural literature is consistent in finding that convenience and infrastructure, not environmental concern, are the dominant predictors of food waste recycling participation (Bernstad, 2014; Allison et al., 2022), and London's own borough-level variation tracks service consistency rather than any plausible variation in environmental values across thirty-three adjacent local authorities. Second, Simpler Recycling addresses the most obvious symptom of this inconsistency,

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the absence of a universal food waste collection, but does so unevenly and on a timeline that a meaningful minority of authorities, including several serving London, have not met (Sabljak & Fisher, 2026). Third, and least discussed in policy debate, the infrastructure built to manage London's residual waste has its own momentum. Facilities financed against a projected tonnage, and contracts written around minimum throughput guarantees, generate an institutional interest in residual waste volumes that a genuinely successful diversion policy would erode (Lexology, 2026). This is not evidence of bad faith on the part of waste operators, who are responding rationally to the contracts they were offered; it is evidence that London's incineration capacity was planned on assumptions about recycling performance that the city has since failed to meet, and that the resulting infrastructure now sits somewhat awkwardly alongside a policy environment that assumes recycling rates will rise substantially.

The comparison with Wales is instructive here, not because Wales and London are straightforwardly comparable in scale or governance, but because it demonstrates what sustained, consistent collection policy can achieve. Wales offers weekly food waste collection to 99% of households, a figure achieved through a single devolved government's collections blueprint applied uniformly rather than through thirty-three separate procurement decisions, and its household recycling rate has climbed from under 5% in the late 1990s to roughly two-thirds of household waste today (Allison et al., 2022; Southampton University, n.d.). London's history, by contrast, has been one of borough-by-borough experimentation, in which some authorities such as Camden, Islington, and Westminster established food waste schemes years ahead of the national mandate while others waited for a legal requirement to act at all (CPRE London, 2026). Simpler Recycling essentially imposes the Welsh logic of a single standard on a city that has never previously operated one, and the London-specific evidence so far, an initially flat recycling rate even as the deadline approached, suggests that a policy mandate alone, without accompanying investment in processing infrastructure, vehicle fleets, and enforcement capacity, may take considerably longer to shift outcomes than its architects intended.

It is also worth resisting a simple villain narrative around energy-from-waste operators. The peer-reviewed evidence on direct health impacts from modern, well-regulated UK incinerators is genuinely more equivocal than campaigning literature sometimes suggests, and dispersion modelling of ground-level pollutant concentrations around operating UK facilities has found very low exposure levels (Ashworth et al., 2013; Greater London Authority, 2020). The stronger case against continued reliance on incineration in London is not primarily a local air-quality case; it is a resource-value and climate-accounting case, since burning recoverable food waste destroys material that anaerobic digestion could instead convert into renewable gas and fertiliser, and a distributional case, since the boroughs and neighbourhoods that host incineration capacity are disproportionately deprived ones (Unearthed, 2020). Both of these concerns can be addressed by the same underlying policy lever: fewer tonnes of recoverable material reaching the incinerator gate in the first place.

This account has limitations that should temper how far its conclusions are pushed. The estimate of food waste tonnage incinerated in London offered above rests on applying a national compositional percentage to London-wide totals rather than on borough-specific sampling, and it will understate variation between, for example, a borough with a large student or single-person-household population and one dominated by family housing, since food waste generation and disposal behaviour both vary with household composition (Bulkeley & Gregson, 2009). The health evidence on incineration is also genuinely contested rather than settled in either direction: this article has deliberately avoided asserting a direct, well-evidenced causal link between London's incinerators and specific local health outcomes, because the peer-reviewed record, as Cole-Hunter et al. (2020) make clear, does not currently support such a claim with confidence, whatever campaigning literature sometimes implies. Finally, because Simpler Recycling's household rollout was only completed, unevenly, in the months immediately before this article was written, any assessment of its effect on London's recycling rate is necessarily provisional; the borough-level data needed to test whether the reform has actually closed the food waste gap will not be available in a full annual cycle for some time yet.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Several implications follow. Local and combined authorities in London should treat the Simpler Recycling deadline as a floor rather than a ceiling, given that the London-specific data on borough performance predates full national implementation and gives no reason for complacency once collections are nominally in place; a caddy delivered to every doorstep, per Bernstad (2014) and Allison et al. (2022), only changes behaviour if the accompanying service is reliable, well communicated, and paired with a corresponding reduction in the convenience of using the general waste bin instead. Second, the Greater London Authority and Defra should treat long-term energy-from-waste contracts, and the minimum tonnage clauses many of them contain, as a policy risk in their own right, since a contractual incentive to maintain incinerator throughput sits in direct tension with a

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diversion target, and renegotiation or phased reduction clauses should be considered as new contracts are procured (Lexology, 2026). Third, given the borough-level data gaps this article encountered in attempting to quantify London-specific food waste incineration, London's waste authorities would benefit from a harmonised, publicly reported compositional analysis of residual waste at borough level, extending the kind of national work WRAP already undertakes, so that progress against the food waste diversion target can be tracked with the same rigour currently applied to overall recycling rates. Finally, any future decision on additional energy-from-waste capacity in London should explicitly account for the environmental justice evidence on incinerator siting, given the demonstrated pattern of disproportionate location in deprived neighbourhoods (Unearthed, 2020).

CONCLUSION

London's incineration problem is, at its core, a food waste collection problem that has taken two decades of borough-level fragmentation to fully express. The behavioural and policy literature converges on a single conclusion: households recycle food waste when the service to do so is convenient, reliable, and consistently available, and London has, until very recently, offered that service unevenly across its thirty-three local authorities. Simpler Recycling addresses the most visible symptom of this inconsistency by making weekly food waste collection a statutory obligation, but its rollout has already revealed the limits of a policy mandate unaccompanied by guaranteed funding certainty, vehicle capacity, and a reckoning with the contractual architecture of London's energy-from-waste sector. Quantifying the precise tonnage of recoverable food waste currently incinerated in London remains difficult in the absence of harmonised borough-level data, but the scale implied by national compositional research, several hundred thousand tonnes annually by conservative estimate, is not a rounding error in London's climate and circular economy ambitions. Closing that gap will require more than a caddy on every doorstep; it will require London's waste infrastructure, financially and contractually, to be rebuilt around the assumption that recycling succeeds, rather than around the assumption that it will not.

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