

Councils, recycling centres and charity retail:

**part of the Charity Retail
Association's big FOI project**

**A report for charity retailers
April 2018**

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Executive Summary

In recent years, a series of factors have combined to create a trend whereby local councils have an ever-greater influence over the support offered to charity shops. To understand exactly how they are using this influence the Charity Retail Association undertook a large-scale project in 2017.

This involved sending Freedom of Information requests to all 405 local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales.

In particular, the requests sought clarification on council policies relating to behaviour at council waste sites the generation of stock at recycling banks.

We analysed the information received against three council characteristics; the council type; the location of the authority, and; political control of the council. As a result, we were able to identify trends and examples of where these factors influenced the behaviour of a council at its household recycling centres.

The most immediate conclusion that leapt out from this work was the extent to which charity shops operate under a postcode lottery when it comes to charity support. Councils across the country interpret regulations around waste disposal in very different ways. This leads to situations where charity shops from the same chain, delivering exactly the same services and performing in exactly the same way will operate under a completely different waste disposal scheme because they are located on different sides of a borough boundary.

Our more specific findings are summarised below.

- In positive news for the charity retail sector, a significant majority of councils told us that they do accept charity shop household waste (the small percentage of donations which cannot be sold on) at their household recycling sites, and that 68 per cent of these would not charge for doing so.
- However, many charities note that staff overseeing access to such sites are not always aware of this policy and will sometimes block access against council policy.
- The unitary authorities in Wales and London are those least likely to offer these services and to offer them for free, but councils located in the North of England, and even more so in Scotland, tend to be the most generous.
- When it comes to political control, councils run by Independents have the strongest record of allowing charity shops to dispose of this kind of waste, but councils of this kind are few and far between.
- Despite mutual benefits, very few councils (24 per cent), choose to run a partnership with a local charity retailer at their premises. This is a key reason why we must do even more to sell the positive benefits of charity retail to politicians and policy makers.
- Whilst some councils have generated income for themselves by collecting and selling second hand clothes, furniture and electrical goods – a move which can put them in direct competition with charity retail – this is not yet typical.
- Most councils do hold textile recycling banks which charity retailers hire for stock generation, but those that do almost never charge.

This report can be used by our members to identify trends in the behaviour of councils towards charity shops. However, it cannot make fool-proof predictions as to how an individual council will act in any given circumstance.

The report will also be used by the Charity Retail Association to deliver more targeted lobbying and public affairs campaigns related to local government.

1. Introduction

a) The project

This report presents the findings of a large-scale investigation carried out by the Charity Retail Association in 2017, which involved requesting information from every local authority in Great Britain, through the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act.

The idea of surveying councils, to find out more about how they interact with the charity shops in their areas, emerged in response to a number of factors.

Firstly - following the Localism Act of 2011, the creation of Metro Mayors, and the promise of further financial independence for local government through the retention of business rates - there is a clear trend towards councils gaining more power and influence over their local economies.

It is therefore very important for our members to have a clear picture of how these new powers are being used and what trends are emerging across the country.

Secondly, we have received feedback from many members that the support offered to charity shops by local councils is far less certain – particularly in this era of austerity – than it once was.

Case study

Our member Animals in Distress enjoyed an excellent relationship with Torbay Council for many years. The council did not charge them to dispose of the small percentage of donations they received which could not be sold or recycled. However, in 2010 a new disposal price of £22/tonne was introduced, and, in 2015 the price was increased again to £145/tonne – the full commercial rate.

This is having a crippling effect on Animals in Distress's retail fundraising efforts. They are currently being charged in the region of £1,300/month to dispose of unsaleable items that have been left at their shops – this equates to around £15,000 per year.

This money could be better spent to:

- Fund another Animal Welfare Assistant
- Care for 20 animals and find them a new home
- Provide veterinary care for 375 animals while they are at the Rescue Centre

As a result of case studies like this one, we came to the conclusion that it would be helpful for our members to have further information on just how common charging regimes like this are across the country.

Thirdly, we know that charity retailers, like any other form of business, value intelligence and information when making decisions. The data in this report, if used sensibly, could help charity retailers to make predictions about what types of council are most likely to offer them support, for example through free waste disposal. Therefore, this study could begin to offer a competitive advantage for Charity Retail Association members.

b) Our sample

The decision was taken at an early stage that the project should cover all councils in Great Britain (i.e. England, Scotland and Wales).

This is because the rules and regulations around waste disposal are roughly the same in each of these jurisdictions.

In England and Wales, the Controlled Waste (England and Wales) Regulations 2012 set out which items waste collection authorities must collect, and which items waste disposal authorities must accept for disposal.

The provisions describe how waste produced by a charity shop selling donated goods which have originated from domestic property (i.e. from private donors) should be counted as household waste, not commercial.

Therefore, charity shops in England and Wales have long been able to dispose of the small amount of donated items they are unable to sell or rag, for free at their local household recycling centres.

Similarly, in Scotland, the Controlled Waste Regulations 1992 serve much the same purpose. These regulations ensure that waste 'from premises occupied by a charity and wholly or mainly used for charitable purposes' and premises which are exempt from paying business rates should be counted as household waste.

These regulations do not specifically mention disposal charges for different categories of waste, however, as in England and Wales this category of household waste has not usually incurred charges.

As these systems are so similar, comparisons across England, Wales and Scotland are very possible. Therefore, our target list of councils to contact was as follows:

- The 32 unitary authorities in Scotland
- The 22 unitary authorities in Wales
- The 351 local authorities in England, which includes unitary authorities, county councils, district councils and metropolitan districts

This is a total of 405 different local authorities across Great Britain. FOI requests were sent to all 405 in 2017. Only four of these authorities were unable or unwilling to provide the information despite many chase ups and much cajoling.

However, this does leave us with a very good sample size of 401 councils, or 99 per cent of local authorities in Great Britain.

c) Caveats

Members reading this report should be aware of the limits of the project before drawing strong conclusions from the findings we present.

Firstly, when we asked 405 councils what their policy towards waste charging was, we got hundreds of different responses. In order to be able to draw inferences from the information we had to categorise the responses to many of our questions. For example, if one council told us they would allow a charity to dispose of 1 tonne of waste each year before incurring a charge, and another told us that shops could dispose of 2 tonnes of waste each quarter, these would both be categorised as councils which offer free rubbish dumping "up to a set limit." We would therefore always advise our members to check the exact rules a council imposes on charity shops in its area before opening any new shops.

Secondly, whilst we have responses from almost all the local authorities in Great Britain, some of the sample sizes are still too small to make real conclusions. For example, across the country as a whole, the number of councils run by the SNP is extremely small, particularly when compared with the many hundreds of councils run by the Conservatives or Labour. It is therefore far more difficult to make an assumption about what a theoretical incoming SNP council administration would do about charity waste disposal, than it would be for a theoretical incoming Conservative or Labour council administration. These small sample issues are highlighted in the rest of the report.

Thirdly, things change! Councils in a particular English region may behave in certain predictable ways at the moment, but in five years time this could change drastically in the light of new legislation or new trends in the waste recycling market. Therefore, we would again emphasise that it is advisable to always talk to a council directly before making any decisions about your retail chain.

Despite these caveats, we are confident that this report will represent a great starting point for charity retailers looking for a better understanding of how key factors influence a council's policies towards its local charity shops. We believe it can be another valuable tool for charity retailers when they begin to think about where in the country to expand.

We hope you enjoy reading further.

2. Waste sites

a) Accepting charity waste

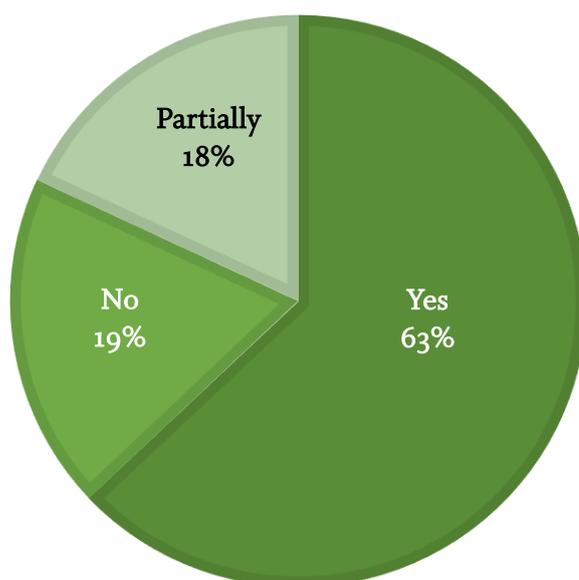
As outlined above, it is our expectation that charity shops should be able to dispose of their left-over household waste at a local household recycling centre. However, we have frequently heard anecdotes from members that this is not always the case.

We therefore asked councils if they would accept this kind of waste. As Figure One, below, demonstrates, the vast majority of councils either fully or partially accept this waste (this 'partial' option encompasses all the councils who said they would accept the waste, but with certain caveats, for example only at certain sites or only on certain days) which is positive news. However, it is concerning that nearly one fifth of councils say they would not accept this waste.

It is important to note that not every council is a waste disposal authority. In two-tier authority areas the district or borough council will often be a waste collection authority only and pass on their waste to the appropriate county councils. A similar situation also exists in London where since the abolition of the Greater London Council in 1986 boroughs in different regions of London have shared waste disposal authorities, for example the West London Waste Alliance.

Therefore, only those councils who run a waste disposal operation, and could accept charity shop waste if they chose to, are included in the tables below. This equates to roughly half of our total sample size.

Figure One: councils accepting charity shop waste



We wanted to understand what factors might have an influence on whether or not a council accepts this kind of waste. There are three key council characteristics we were able to study in this report – the type of council, the place where a council is located, and the political control of that council.

Figure Two, demonstrates the impact the first of these characteristics has on whether a council accepts charity shop household waste. In this chart, the longer the darker green line on the left, the more likely a council in this category will accept the waste.

Figure Two: councils accepting charity shop waste - by local authority type

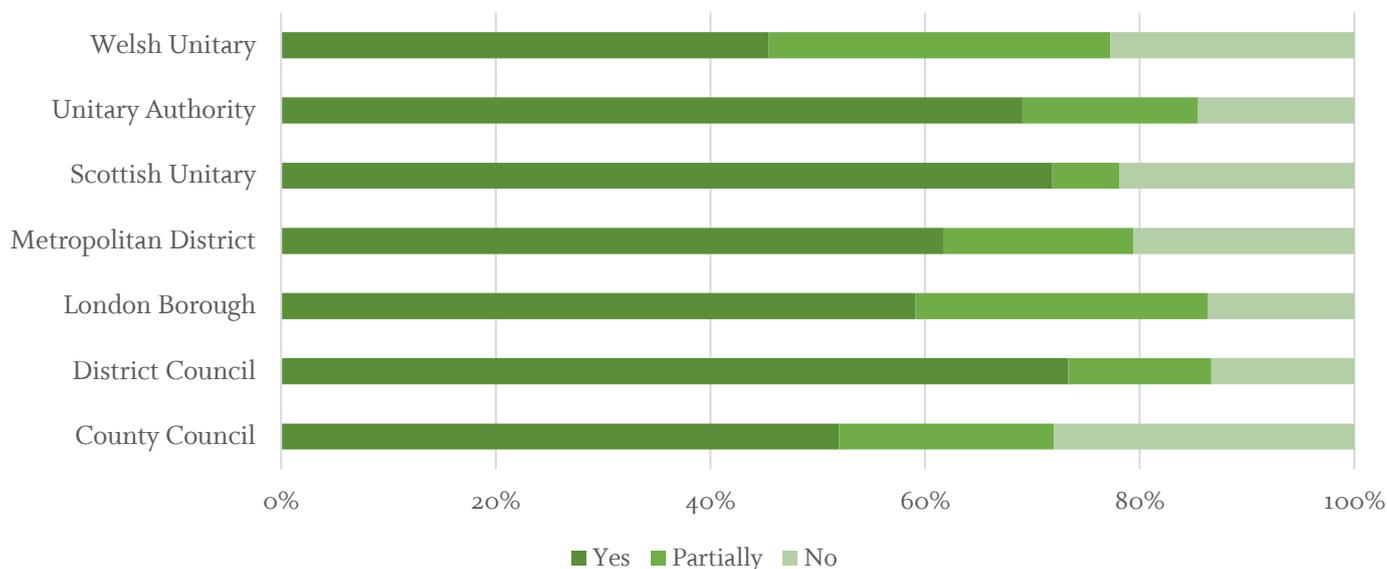
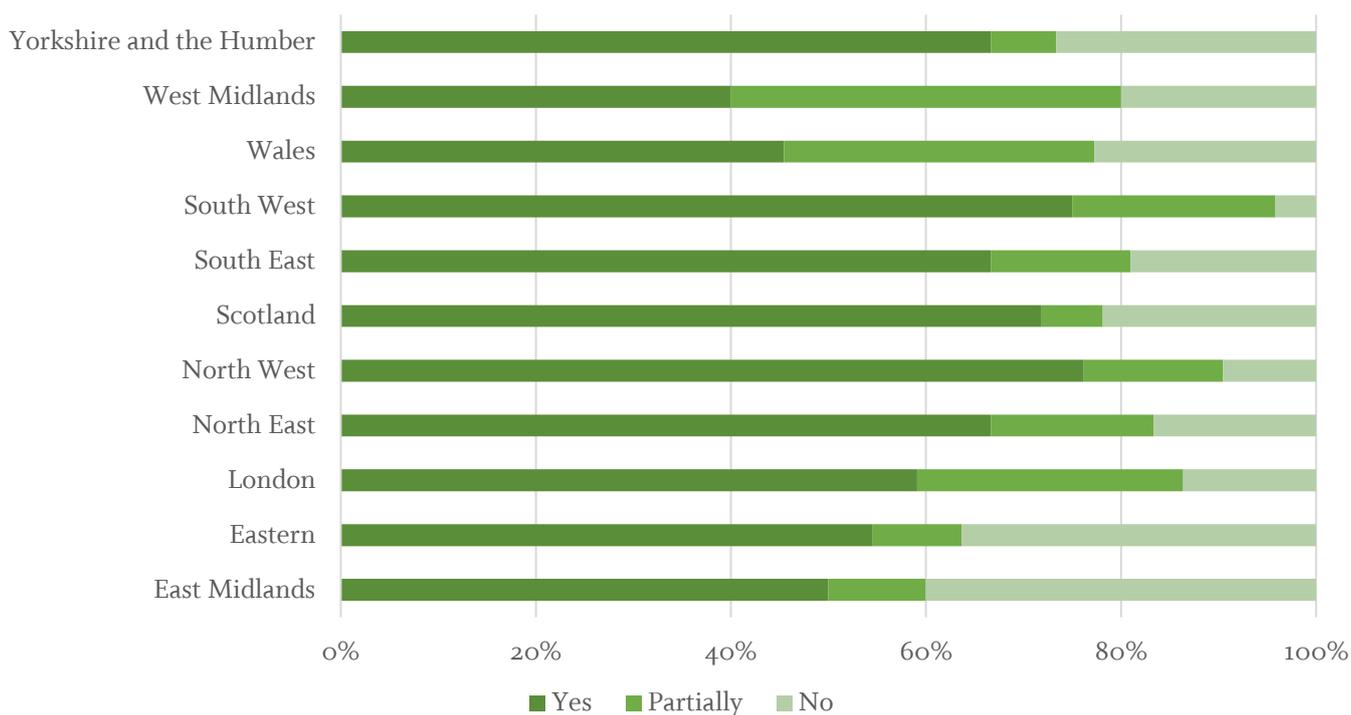


Figure Two has revealed that there are differences between different types of council. Welsh unitary authorities (46 per cent) and county councils (54 per cent) are the least likely to accept this waste in its entirety. By contrast, 73 per cent of district councils and 72 per cent of Scottish unitaries accept all of this kind of waste making them the friendliest type of council in this regard.

However, it is important to note that these responses represent just those district councils which run waste disposal operations, which is not a large number, and, that the overall percentage of district councils which do not accept any waste is higher than that for Scottish unitaries once the ‘partial’ category is taken into account.

Moving on, Figure Three, demonstrates the impact that location has on council policy.

Figure Three: councils accepting charity shop waste - by location



Given that Welsh unitaries were the least likely to accept our members' waste it is no surprise that Wales as a location is again significantly behind.

Perhaps even more concerning are the figures for the West Midlands, where just 40 per cent of local authorities told us they would accept this kind of waste in its entirety.

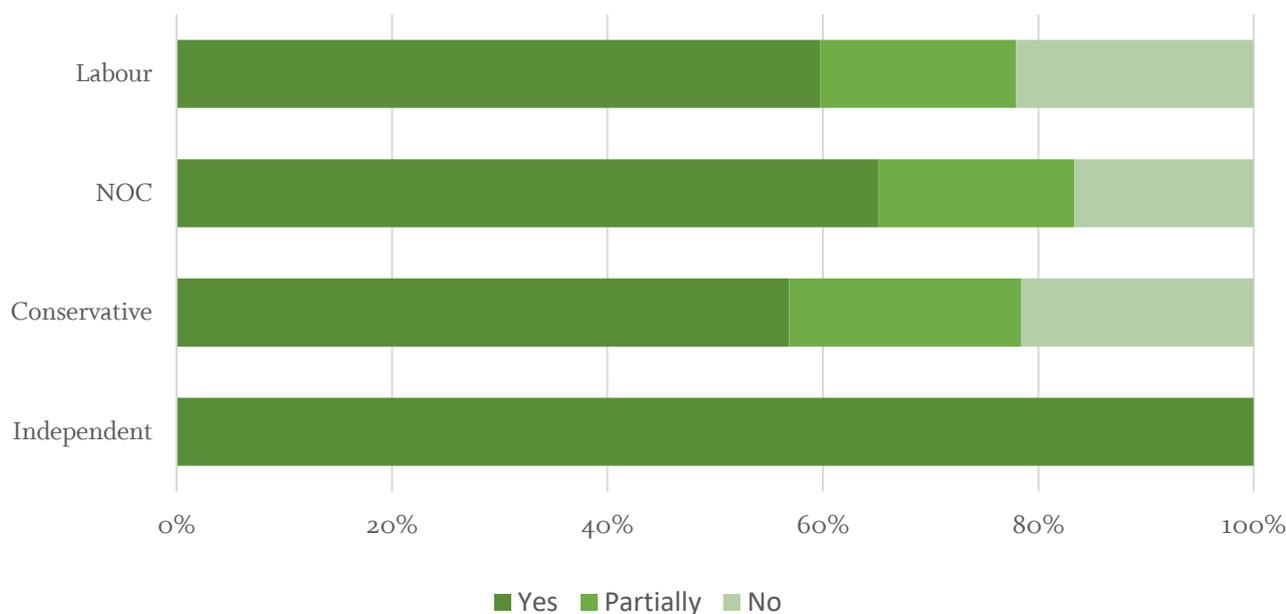
Fortunately, the other regions on the west side of our island are much more generous. 76 per cent of councils in the North West, and 75 per cent of councils in the South West told us they would accept the waste – the two highest figures.

Finally, Figure Four shows the impact that political control – the party which has a majority on the council and therefore decides its policies – has on whether or not a council will accept this waste.

Councils where the Scottish National Party has an overall majority have been excluded from this table, and all of the following tables which examine the impact of political control. This is because at the time of the survey there were far too few examples of SNP-run councils from which to draw statistical conclusions.

Likewise, Liberal Democrat-run councils have been removed from this table as the number of councils they run, which are also waste disposal authorities, is very small (just two).

Figure Four: councils accepting charity shop waste - by political control



There are limited conclusions we can draw from this table. Conservative-run councils are the least likely to accept the kind of waste we would like them too, but the difference between their figures and those for Labour-run councils or councils with no overall control is not enormous.

Furthermore, whilst it seems very encouraging that a full 100 per cent of Independent-run councils accept charity shop waste, charity retailers should not rush to open a swathe of new stores in these areas just yet, as there are only six Independent councils across Great Britain, and in our sample.

b) Charging for charity waste

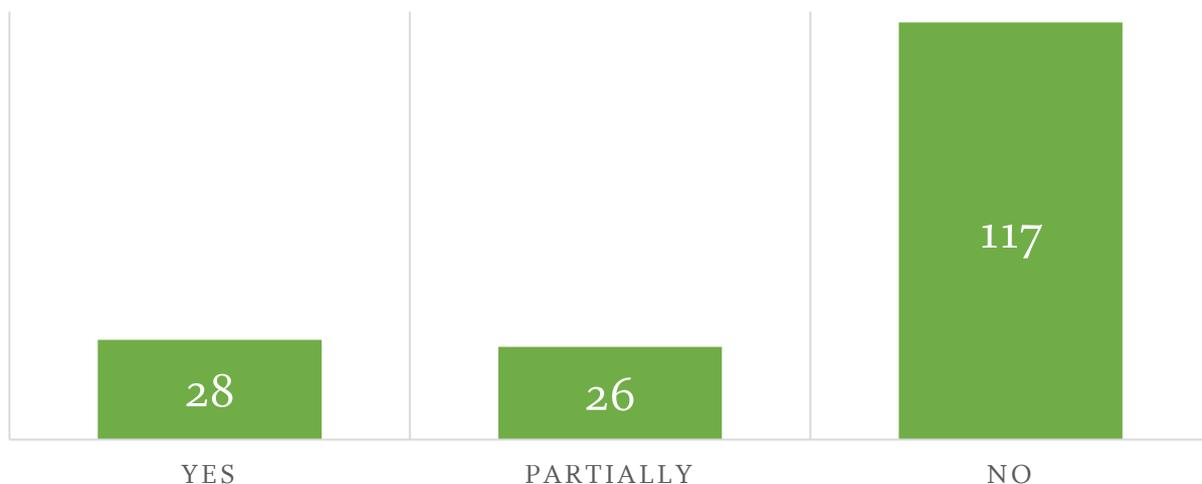
It is a positive that a clear majority of councils we spoke to said they would accept charity retail's domestic waste.

However, this is only part of the story. As noted in the introduction, many councils levy charges for this service, a service which we would hope would always be free, given the huge contribution our sector makes to keeping waste above ground. Last year alone, 232,000 tonnes of textiles were diverted away from landfill by the UK's charity shops, saving local authorities around £27m in Landfill Tax.

Our research has found that charging is done in a great number of ways. But first, we need to understand the extent of the problem. Figure Five shows how many eligible councils – namely those which are waste disposal authorities and who told us that they would accept charity shop waste – levy charges for this service.

It is positive that the majority of the councils in question said there would be no charge at all.

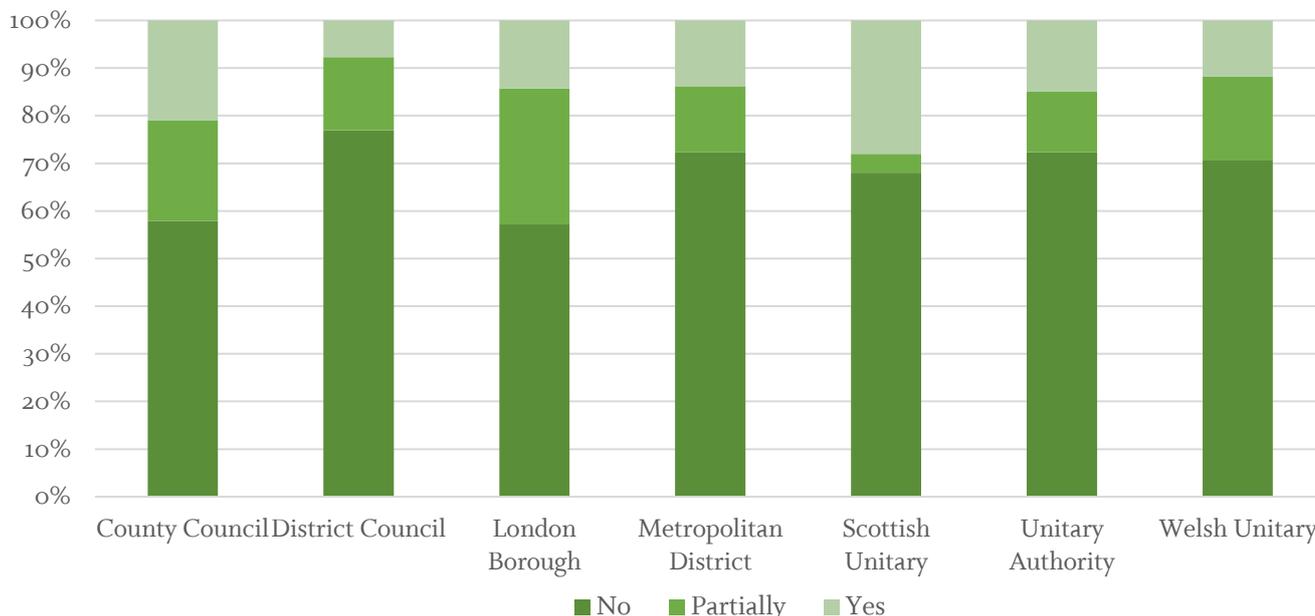
Figure Five: eligible councils accepting household waste - do they levy a charge?



Once again, we looked at how our three council characteristics – type, location and political control – influence this policy.

In Figure Six, which looks at the impact of council type, the smaller the dark-green block the worse for charity retailers. This indicates that fewer councils of this type levy no charge at all.

Figure Six: do councils charge for accepting waste? - by council type



It is clear that county councils and the London boroughs are those council types which will cause most concern. These are the only categories where fewer than 60 per cent of local authorities said they would levy no charge for this type of waste.

Figure Seven performs a similar analysis by location. Unsurprisingly, London is one of the locations least likely to offer a free service to local charity shops. The West Midlands is also once again an area of concern as a full 42 per cent of councils here told us that they would levy a full or partial charge on charities wishing to dispose of this kind of waste.

There is a much better story from the North East where none of the councils who accept this kind of waste told us they would levy a full charge to charity shops.

Figure Seven: do councils charge for accepting waste? - by location

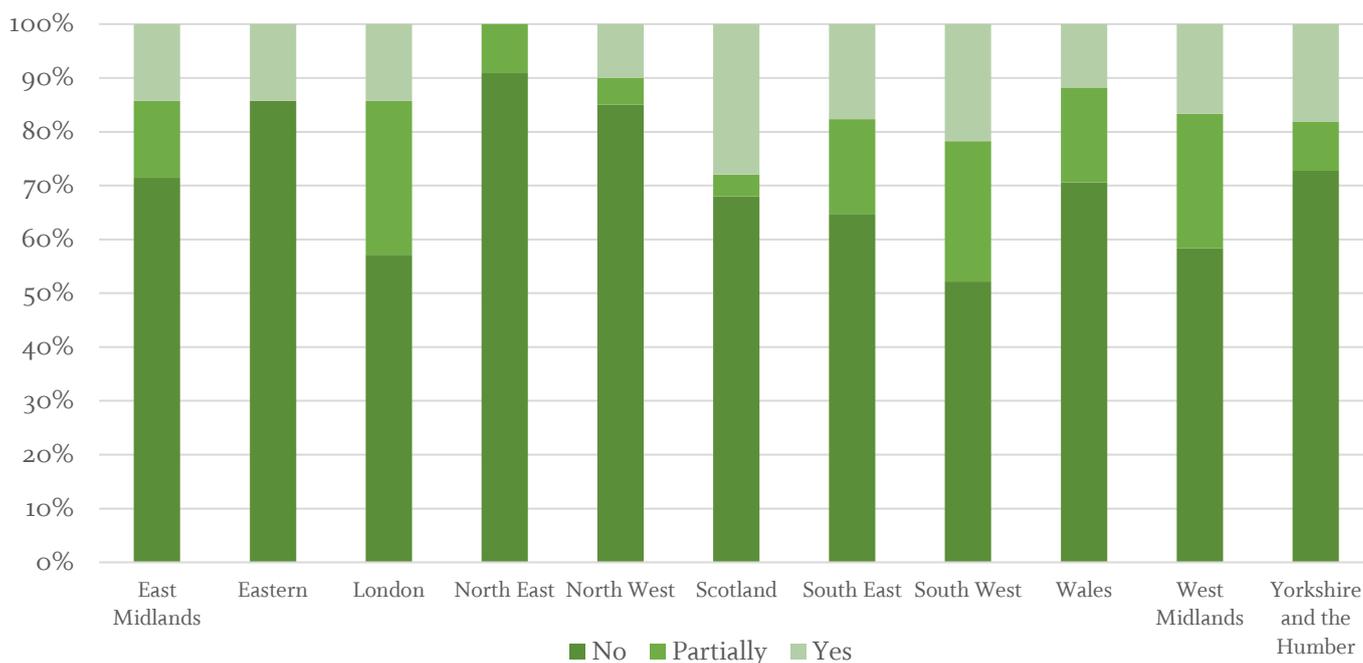
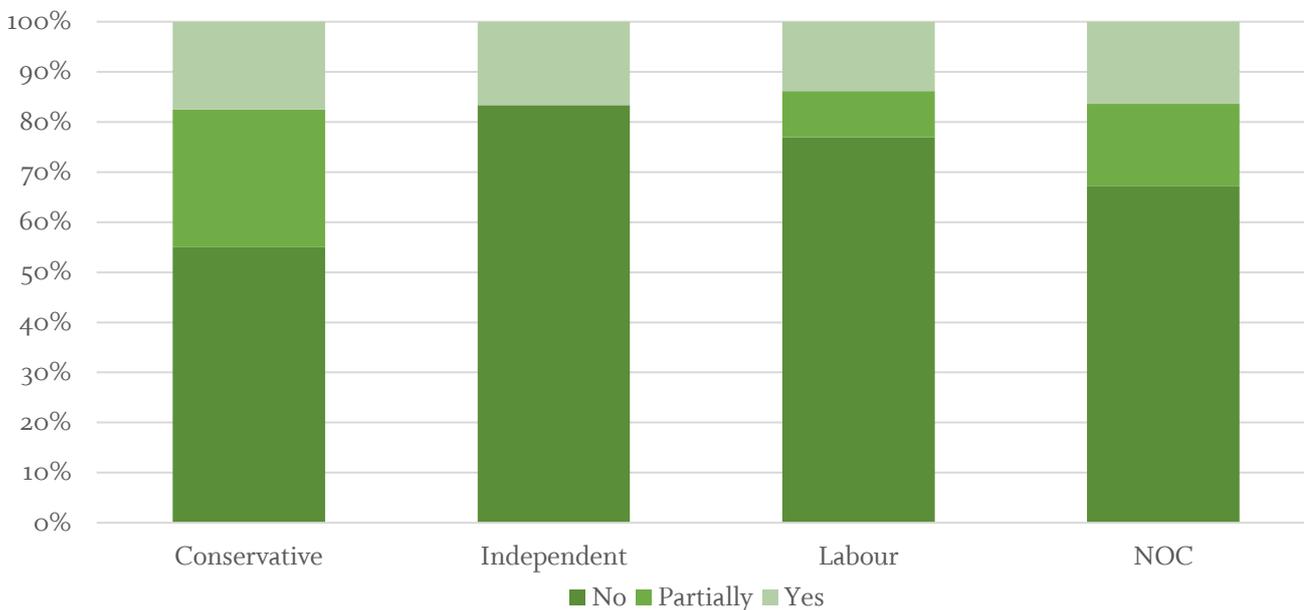


Figure Eight displays the impact of political control on these policies, with certain councils excluded in the same manner as Figure Four.

Figure Eight: do councils charge for accepting waste? - by political control

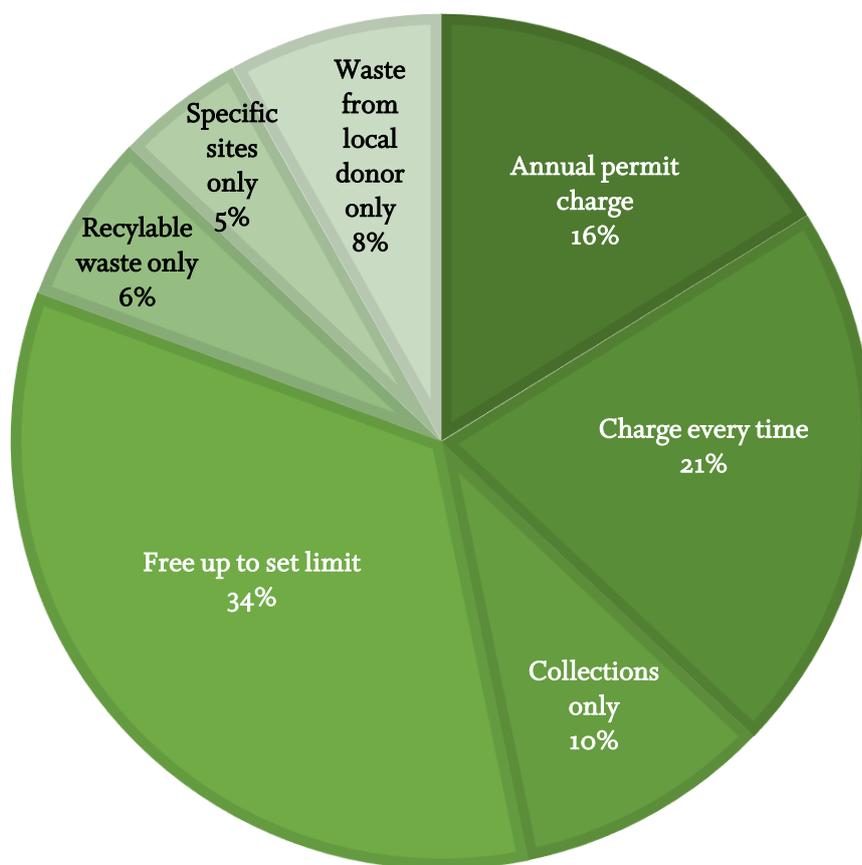


The results of this analysis are very similar to those we observed when we looked at how political control influences whether councils accept charity waste at all.

The few Independent-run councils that there are seem to be most generous to charity retailers. Councils run by Labour, or in no overall control, have similar, slightly less generous, policies. Finally, Conservative-run councils are overall the least generous to charity shops in this regard.

Amongst those councils who told us that they do charge for disposal of charity shop waste there were a range of difference mechanisms used. It was possible to break down these distinct charging regimes into a series of broad categories. These are summarised in Figure Nine, below.

Figure Nine: charging schemes operated by councils



The most popular charging regime, enacted by around one third of councils in this sample, is to allow charity shops to dispose of their waste for free until they hit a set limit, usually measured in tonnes. Following this, about one fifth of councils charge the charity shop every time they visit the household recycling site. An annual permit charge is the next most popular option. After this there are four other categories of charging scheme commonly enacted by councils.

Our members will all have their own opinions on which of these charging regimes is fairest or most beneficial to them. Some may prefer to operate in an area with permit charges, but others, who do not make as many drop offs, will prefer having a set limit, under which they can dispose of their household waste for free.

To give an indication of what kind of charging regime a newly opened charity shop is most likely to find in their area, Figures Ten and 11 show the most popular charging regime in each council category and location.

Figure Ten: most popular charging regime – by council type

County council	Annual permit charge	33%
District council	Free up to set limit	66%
London borough	Free up to set limit	60%
Metropolitan district	Free up to set limit	50%
Scottish unitary	Charge every time	56%
Unitary authority	Free up to set limit	43%
Welsh unitary	Annual permit Recyclable waste only	22% each

Figure 11: most popular charging regime – by location

East Midlands	Annual permit charge Collections only	50% each
Eastern	Charge every time	100%
London	Free up to set limit	60%
North East	Free up to set limit Certain sights only	50% each
North West	Annual permit charge Collections only Free up to set limit	33% each
Scotland	Charge every time	56%
South East	Charge every time	43%
South West	Free up to set limit	64%
Wales	Annual permit charge Recyclable waste only Waste from local donor only	22% each
West Midlands	Free up to set limit	60%
Yorkshire and The Humber	Charge every time	67%

Charity members reading this should remember that the percentages in these two tables represent those authorities in each category/location which are waste disposal authorities who accept waste and choose to charge in some way. Therefore, some of these sample sizes will be much smaller than usual.

As already discussed, amongst many council categories/locations the option of not charging at all will be the one most frequently adopted.

We have also examined how political control influences the charging regime adopted. Again, the very few Liberal Democrat or SNP councils have been excluded. This time we also do not present findings for Independent-run councils as we are only aware of one such council operating any kind of charging regime.

Figures 12, 13 and 14 therefore present the types of charging scheme operated by councils run by the Conservatives (a sample of 19 Conservative councils which are waste disposal authorities who accept waste and choose to charge in some way), Labour (a sample of 21) or which are in no overall control (a sample of 19).

Members will once again have their own preferences of which charging regime they will find most beneficial.

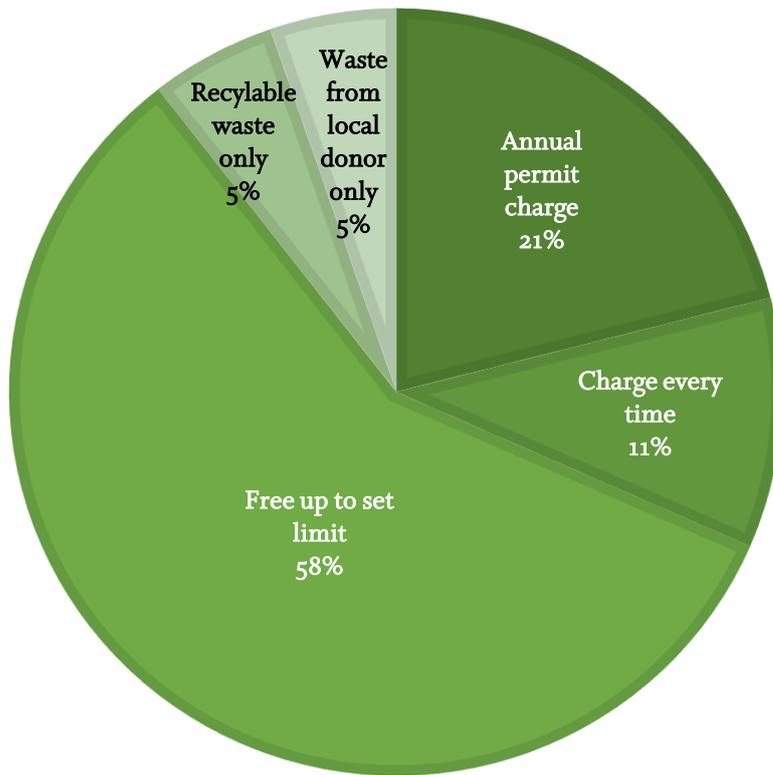


Figure 12:
charging schemes by
political control

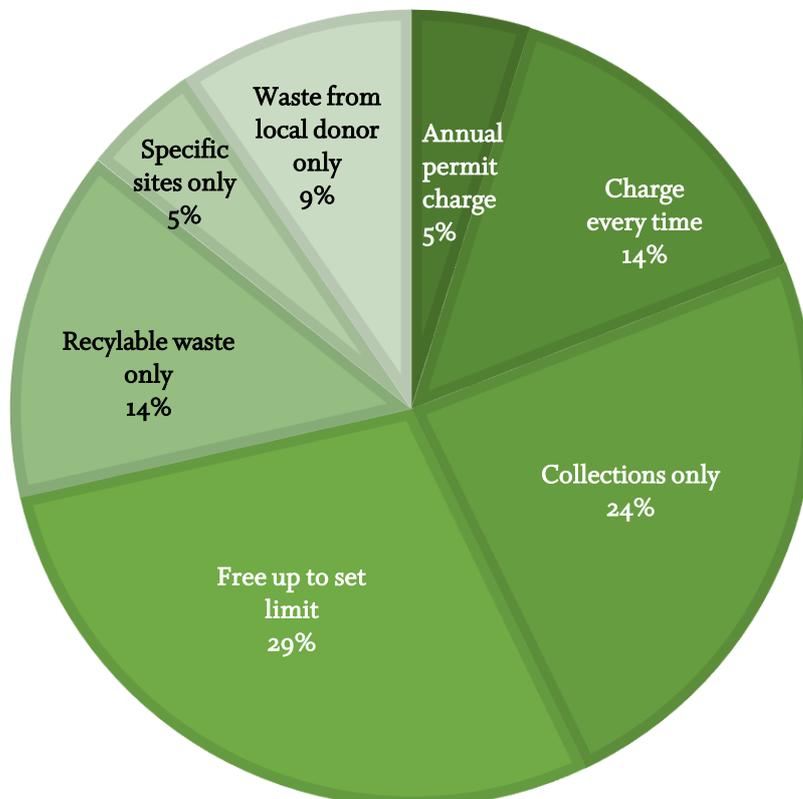


Figure 13:
charging schemes by
political control



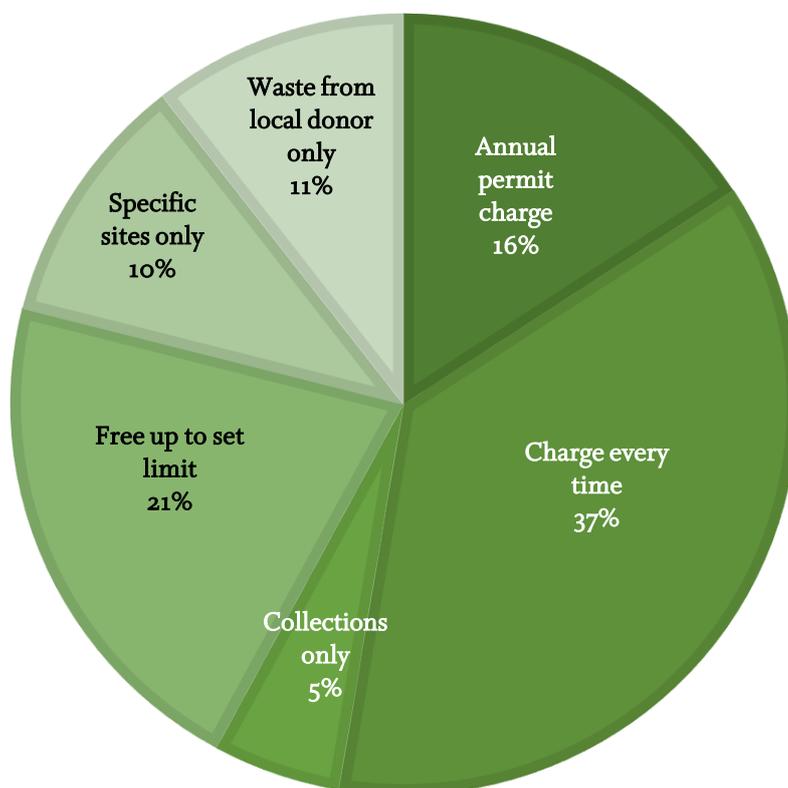


Figure 14:
charging schemes by
political control



c) Council-charity partnerships

We strongly encourage councils and charity shops to develop mutually beneficial partnerships.

Through our members we know of several examples where an arrangement between these two groups has led to an increase in recycling rates, more stock for local charity shops and a lower landfill tax bill for the council.

Case study

Some councils allow a charity to run a shop at a household recycling centre, so that they can prevent items from going into landfill and sell them back to local people instead.

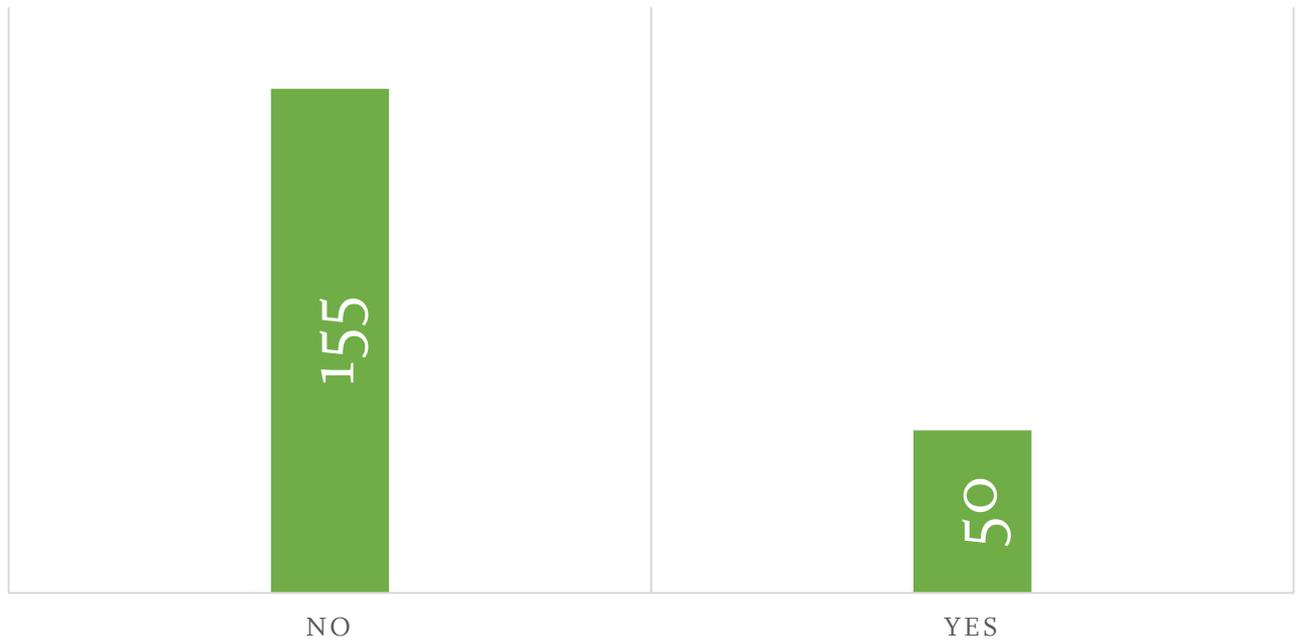
Hertfordshire County Council do just this. At their Harpenden site they host a Sue Ryder shop from which they take a share of the profits. Around 20 per cent of the profits are taken by the county council, with the rest going to Sue Ryder. They sell items which are left at the recycling centre and so this also reduces the amount going to landfill.

This is a successful operation, evidenced by the fact that it is now being extended to other sites in the county.

To find out how common this type of approach is, we asked the 205 councils in our survey who said they operated a household recycling centre if they have any kind of partnership with local charity shops on their site.

Figure 15 highlights these results and demonstrates that despite the obvious benefits very few councils run such a partnership.

Figure 15: charities which run waste sites - do they have any partnerships with local charities?



Once again, we conducted an analysis to look for patterns between this policy and the category or location that a council belongs to.

These are shown in Figures 16 and 17, below.

Figure 16: councils who have waste partnerships with charities - by council type

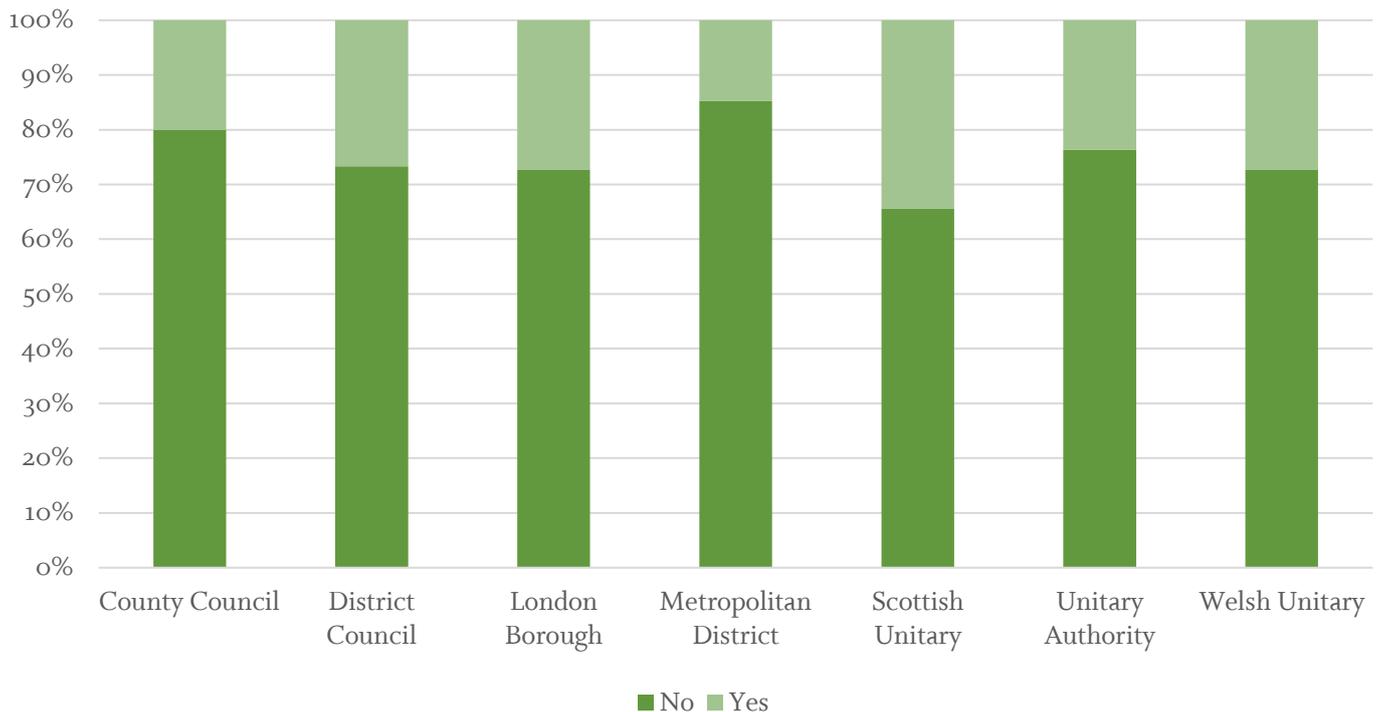
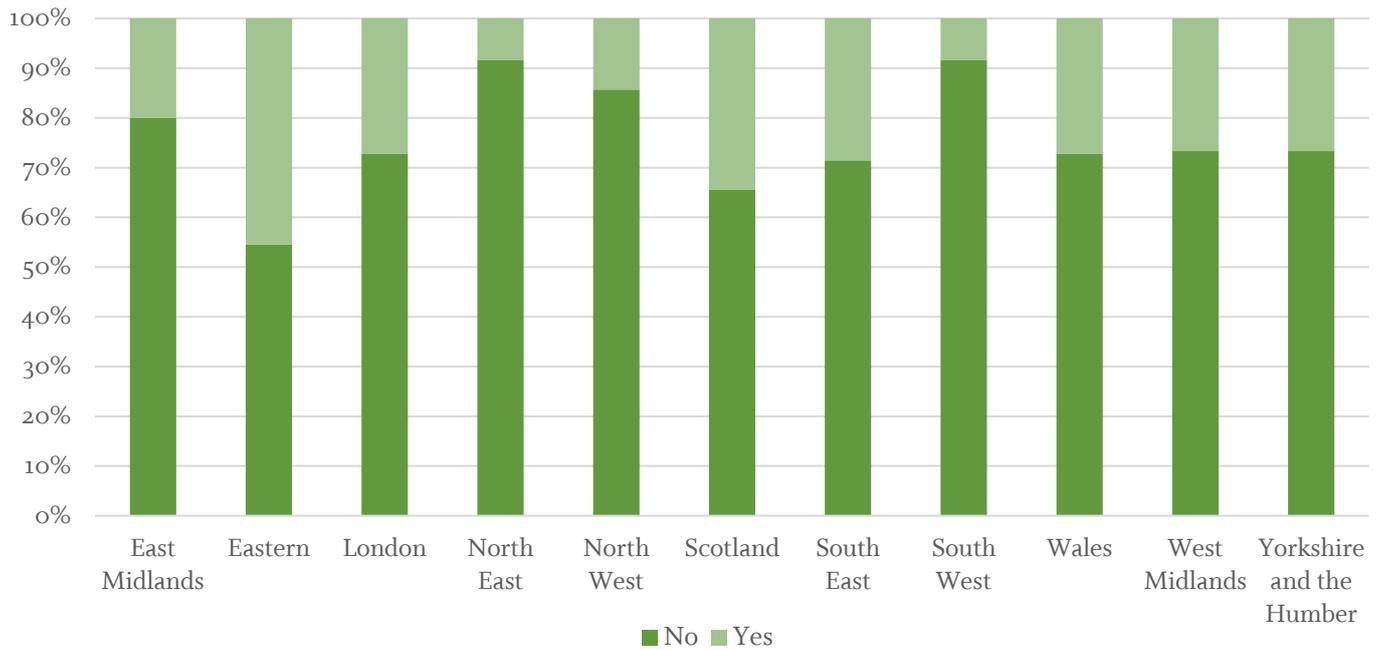


Figure 17: councils who have waste partnerships with charities - by location



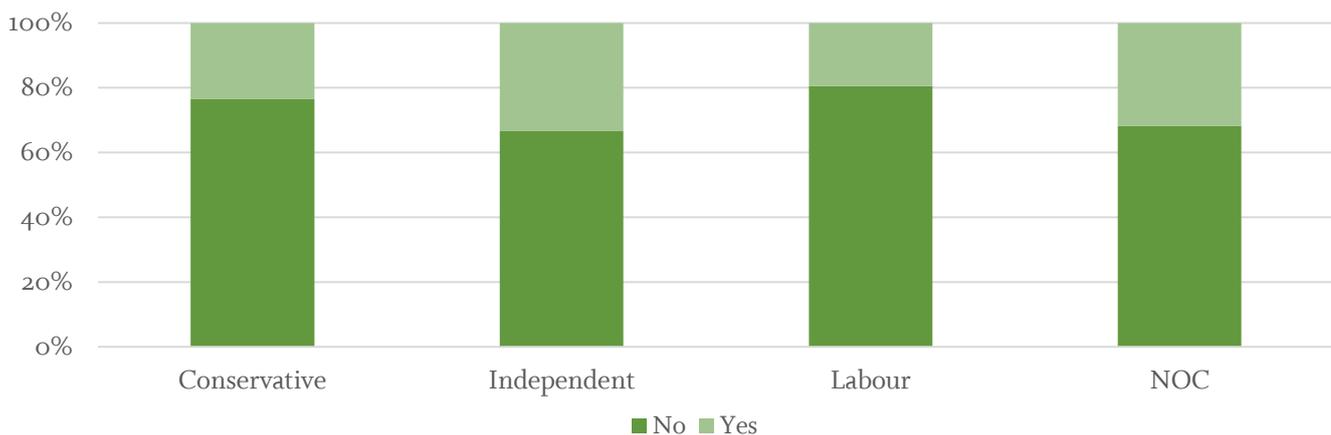
It is probably unsurprising that these analyses find that Scottish councils are amongst those most likely to set up a partnership with a local charity shop. Our analysis of the councils who accept – and do not charge – for waste consistently ranked councils north of the border as amongst the most helpful for our members. However, this was not the most fruitful location overall. Nearly half of councils in the East of England reported some kind of partnership, well above the national average of 24 per cent.

By contrast, metropolitan districts are an outlier amongst council types in being much more unlikely to set up a partnership than any other. The trend of councils in the West Midlands not being particularly helpful continues, but this time the South West and North West perform even worse.

Perhaps surprisingly, the North East, a location which had not been pinpointed as particularly unhelpful before, was the place charity shops were least likely to find a willing partner.

As seen previously, we also looked at how political control influences the picture. However, as you will see in Figure 18 there is not a huge difference between councils based on their politics, save for the fact that the small number of Independent councils are once again the most helpful.

Figure 18: councils who have waste partnerships with charities - by political control



d) Conclusions

The positive news for charity retailers is that most councils - wherever they are, however they are run and whoever runs them – do accept the small amount of household waste generated by charity shops and do not charge for this service.

This, at least, is the official position. The responses we have received as part of this project have predominantly come from a town hall or civic centre and reflect the official policy of the council as recorded on paper. We know from speaking to members that sometimes these policies are not necessarily carried out at the household recycling centres as those working on site are not fully aware of the policy and may turn away vans even if they come from charity shops.

Therefore, we would always suggest you contact your local council (probably the Cabinet Member for the Environment or the Head of Service) in the first instance if you come across problems on site. It may well be that the council's policy is to support charity retail but this is just not being implemented.

More negatively, county councils, Welsh unitaries and London boroughs seem to be least likely to offer support to their local charity retail sector. Councils in the North of England and Scotland are generally more supportive.

When it comes to political control, conclusions are harder to make. Independent-run councils seem to be overwhelmingly supportive, however they are very few in number and there is not much scope for charity retailers to make huge expansions in these areas.

Finally, it is clear that, in partnership with the sector, we must do more to enlighten councils as to the benefits of setting up formal partnerships with charity shops. At the moment there are far too few of these across Great Britain.

3. Stock generation

a) Other costs

As they are increasingly incentivised to generate their own income, many councils have sought to profit from undertaking activities traditionally carried out by charity shops. These may threaten charity shops by undermining their ability to generate stock, something vital to their ability to trade.

Case study

A couple of years ago, Brighton and Hove City Council stopped licencing charities to run clothing collection bins in the city and took direct control of them itself, keeping any profits made by selling on the donated items, and ring fencing these for certain council projects. This had a huge impact on our local charity members including Traid, whose business model is built around donation bins.

Case study

Central Bedfordshire Council has taken this approach one step further and started collected clothing and electrical items they deem to be re-saleable from the doorstep whilst making the usual refuse runs. They then generate profit from these collections.

In this way the council has set itself up as a direct competitor to charity shops in the area in a fight to get good quality donations of second hand goods. This has difficult repercussions for charity shops as it is a lot harder to persuade people to take their second hand goods into a charity store when they know the council will take it for free the next week from their doorstep.

Measuring these kinds of activities through the FOI system is not straightforward, but the limited information we were able to find makes up the final part of this report.

b) Clothing banks

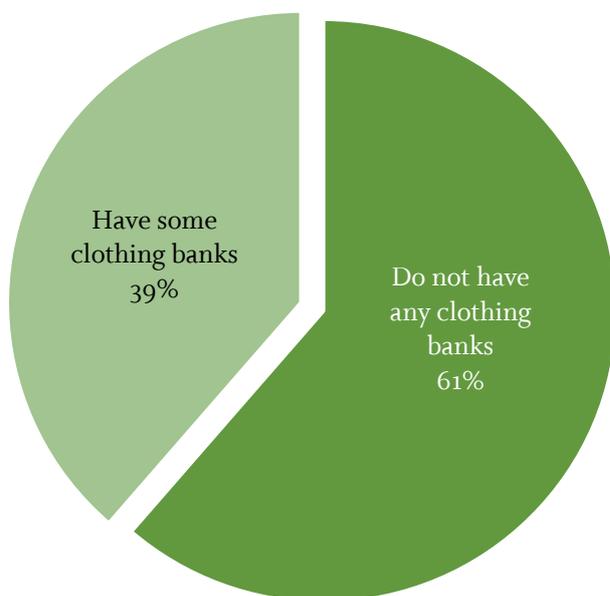
Our primary investigation was into the use of clothing banks by councils. Broadly speaking, there are three different models they could pursue.

- 1) The ideal scenario for a charity shop is probably that their local council hosts clothing banks, but let these out to charities in the area who have a retail operation at little or no cost, to help them generate stock.
- 2) Not quite as helpful, but not overtly unhelpful, would be a council who hosts no clothing banks meaning there is no competition to charity shops as the place for residents to take their second-hand goods.
- 3) Most unhelpful, would be a council who hosts clothing banks but does not make them available to any third sector organisations and then essentially runs its own textile re-use business. This could drive stock away from charity retailers.

Our research, as presented in Figure 19, below, indicates that the majority of councils fall into the middle ground category..

61 per cent of councils told us that they do not run any clothing banks in their areas at all.

Figure 19: how many councils run clothing banks?



Amongst two fifths of councils (155 councils out of our sample size of 401) who do operate some clothing banks, the average number they reported in their area was 24.

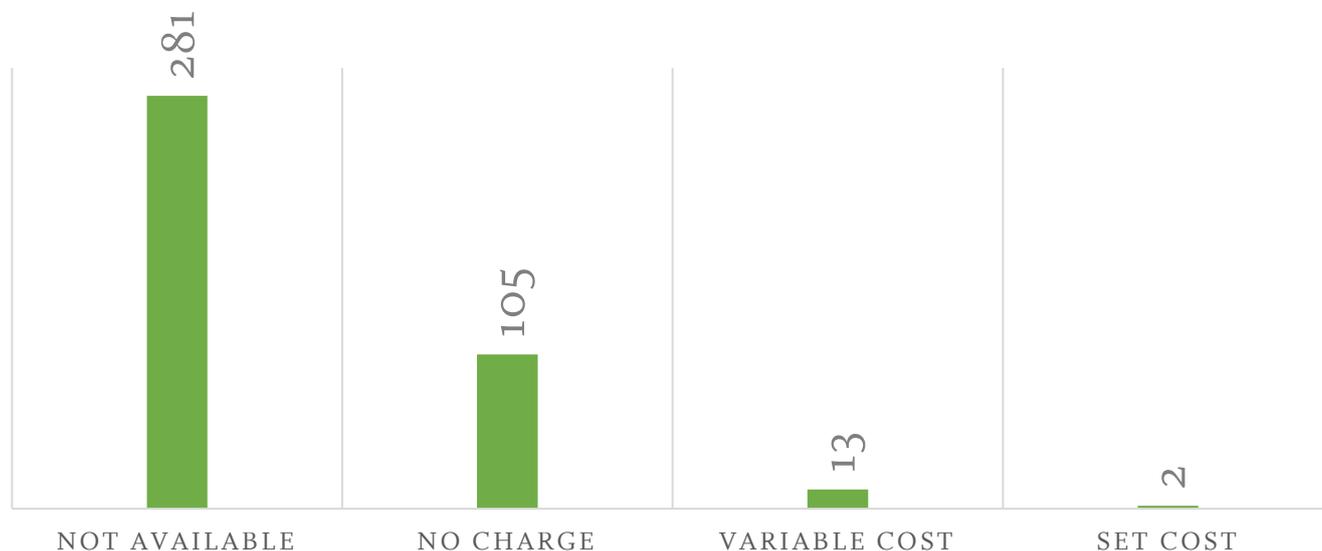
What they use these banks for seems to vary significantly across the country. 102 out of the 155 told us that they generated some kind of profit from their enterprise. This could be from licence fees or selling on the product collected.

The 53 councils who operate a clothing bank, but generated no profit from it at all, presumably allow charities or other organisations to use them free of charge.



Next, we asked the councils what would be the charging regime for a charity shop who wished to use a clothing bank in their area. This could be the cost of hiring or leasing an existing council bank, or acquiring a licence to open a new bank on council land. Therefore, we were able to gain answers from all 401 local authorities in our sample, whether they currently run clothing banks or not. Figure 20 presents the answers to this question.

Figure 20: council charging regimes for running recycling banks



These answers make clear that the vast majority of councils simply are not in the business of licensing or renting out collection bins to charity retailers. Around 70 per cent of councils told us that they would not make bins available to our members even if they requested them.

In fact, very few councils overall have a clear charging policy in place, with just 4 per cent telling us that they had specific prices, whether fixed or variable, for this kind of operation.

More positively, of those councils who do offer this opportunity to charity shops, a large majority say they would do so free of charge.

c) Conclusions

This analysis has highlighted some good and bad news for charity retailers. Whilst most councils do not run any kind of collection bin programme – making the example of Brighton and Hove, highlighted above, an egregious outlier – those who do will generally allow charities to use these for free.

If charity shops are not currently gaining access to these, this might be a case of “if you don’t ask, you don’t get”. We would encourage all of our members to lobby their local authorities for information and support and there is a good chance that they will get some free stock generation support as a result.

4. Next steps

a) For charity retailers

As we set out in the introduction, this report does not claim to be a fool proof guide to where charity retailers should expand next. However, we hope members will find it of some interest and use.

The following points offer some tips for charity retailers to consider before using this report in your work.

Do ...

- think about your priorities – is it more important to you to find a council who will give you a donation bin or who will take your waste for free?
- think about what charging regimes would work best with your business model – some charity shops could work well with a council who allows them free tipping up to a set limit, for others this would represent a huge additional cost
- always speak to your local council first – you can use this guide to identify the kinds of authorities that might be helpful and friendly but you will not know for sure until you see their official policies

Don't ...

- assume things will always stay the same – councils are frequently changing their policies and so the trends identified in this survey could change over time
- expect every charging regime in a category to be exactly the same – it was necessary to group individual policies into categories in order to draw conclusions but the policies in each category will not be identical
- base business decisions entirely on local authority factors – you might be better off in an area of high footfall, even if the local council charges for waste disposal

b) For us

We will also be using the information gathered in this report to inform our lobbying and public affairs work.

To overcome the postcode lotteries evident in waste disposal charges we will continue to lobby for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to give clearer guidance on free disposal of household waste to councils to ensure a more consistent policy of free waste disposal for charity retailers to dispose of unwanted stock.

In addition to these national campaigns, the information we have uncovered through this report will also allow us to target our campaigning work with local councils.

We will seek to meet those councils least likely to offer support to their charity shops and focus our efforts on those we need to do most to convince.