Ceredigion and UK Recycling

Introduction

Environmental sustainability is commonly mentioned in discussions. Waste management and recycling are considered critical issues that must be addressed locally and nationally.

This review states common waste management and recycling concerns, on an Aberystwyth and UK-wide scale. Current available data on waste management is explored and the challenges of recycling are discussed. This review aims to provide a background on current affairs and explain why more work is needed to create a sustainable future for all.

Ceredigion and the UK average

Ceredigion has a brilliant recycling rate. In the financial year 2022-2023, households in Ceredigion recycled 70% of their waste, a significant increase compared to England's average of 43.4% in the same financial year [1][2]. In a 2017 study, Wales was ranked the third-best recycling country in the world [3].

The county council avoided 11 thousand tonnes of C02 by recycling waste types including food, garden, glass, metals, and plastic [1]. Overall, The UK saves more than 18 million tonnes of CO_2 being released into the atmosphere yearly by recycling waste – the equivalent of taking 5 million cars off the road [4].

Although these statistics are promising (and are likely to improve in the future), the issue of recycling and waste management is complex. Not all materials placed in recycling will be recycled. Contamination of recycling streams, insufficient infrastructure, and changes in the market or economy all affect recycling programs.

Where does recyclable waste go?

One major current recycling issue is the export of recyclable waste to other countries. It is common for wealthy countries such as the UK to send recyclable waste to other countries to meet recycling targets and reduce landfills in their own country [5].

The UK sends more than 60% of its plastics to other countries, passing the problem of plastic waste onto many countries that cannot sustainably dispose of the UK's amount of waste [6]. In some countries, this leads to social, economic, and environmental issues such as food chain contamination and water degradation [6]. Before China banned the import of solid waste to the country, imports of plastic waste reached almost 9 million tonnes, with 70% of the imports being buried or mismanaged [7].

The graph below highlights countries that Welsh recycling was exported to in 2023 (*figure 1*). It is important to note that sometimes Welsh authorities will sell recycling to Welsh companies, who will then export the recycling to other countries. Because of this, it is extremely difficult to find the end destination for all recyclable waste, and this graph should be interpreted with caution **[8]**.
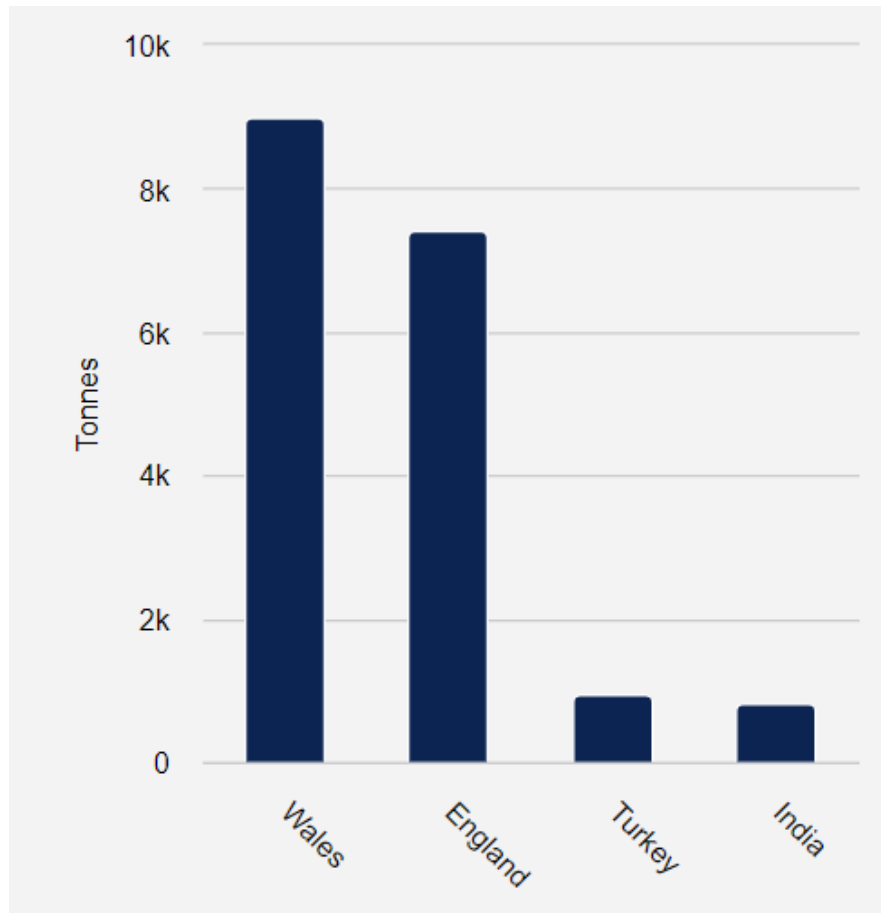

Figure 1: A bar chart that highlights which countries receive Welsh recycling. This graph can be found at: About My Recycling Wales | My Recycling Wales

Contamination of recycling streams

Contamination of recycling streams means materials are sorted into the incorrect recycling container or not thoroughly cleaned before they are added to the waste stream **[9]**. This leads to more health and safety issues for recycling workers and increased costs for poorer quality recyclable materials **[9]**. In recent years, there have been incremental improvements in the contamination of recycling streams across Wales **[10]**. On average, 5.3 items are being incorrectly disposed of per Welsh citizen, which is a decrease from an

average of 5.7 items per Welsh citizen in 2021 **[10]**. Although the decrease in incorrectly disposed items is a good thing, the statistic highlights that there is still work to be done.

A 2021 article found that 5 out of 22 Welsh local authorities, including Ceredigion, did not fully separate their recycling **[3]**. One reason the 5 councils do not fully separate their recycling is that mixed recycling has higher rates of compliance, proven by the 70% recycling rate in Ceredigion, however, better quality materials and reduced contamination are found with separate recycling **[1]**.

As of 6th April 2024, all businesses, charities and organisations across Wales must sort their waste for recycling **[11]**. Food, paper and card, glass, metal plastic and cartons, unsold textiles, and unsold small waste electrical and electronic equipment will have to be sorted separately **[11]**.

Seagulls

One specific waste management issue in Aberystwyth is seagulls destroying bags of rubbish and recycling and spreading the rubbish around the street. When rubbish and recycling are left on the street for collection, seagulls tear the bags open searching for food, and discard rubbish and recycling around the area.

There are many consequences to seagulls dispersing rubbish around Aberystwyth. As rubbish is left on the streets, rats are attracted to these areas and occasionally enter homes, causing health concerns for residents. The view of rubbish scattered along the streets of Aberystwyth can also negatively affect tourism and local businesses, as it makes the streets look significantly less presentable.

In an attempt to address this issue, Ceredigion council trialled seagull-proof bags on Cambrian Street and parts of Alexandra Road **[12]**. The seagull-proof bags are made of a much stronger material which the seagulls struggle to tear into **[13]**. Although this scheme does make it more difficult for seagulls to open rubbish, the seagull-proof bags are only provided on certain streets and therefore do not currently protect most of Aberystwyth.

Conclusion

Although Ceredigion has an extremely high recycling rate, challenges in contamination and seagull-induced waste damage persist. To address these issues, more research is needed to better understand the end destination of recycled materials and the environmental impacts of the recycling process. Additionally, greater efforts are required to raise awareness about correct waste management practices and provide resources for waste sorting. Finally, to address the seagull issue, proactive measures such as advocating for increased investment from local authorities in developing and implementing effective

deterrent strategies are needed. By implementing these strategies, Aberystwyth can improve its waste management efforts and contribute to a more sustainable environment for all.

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