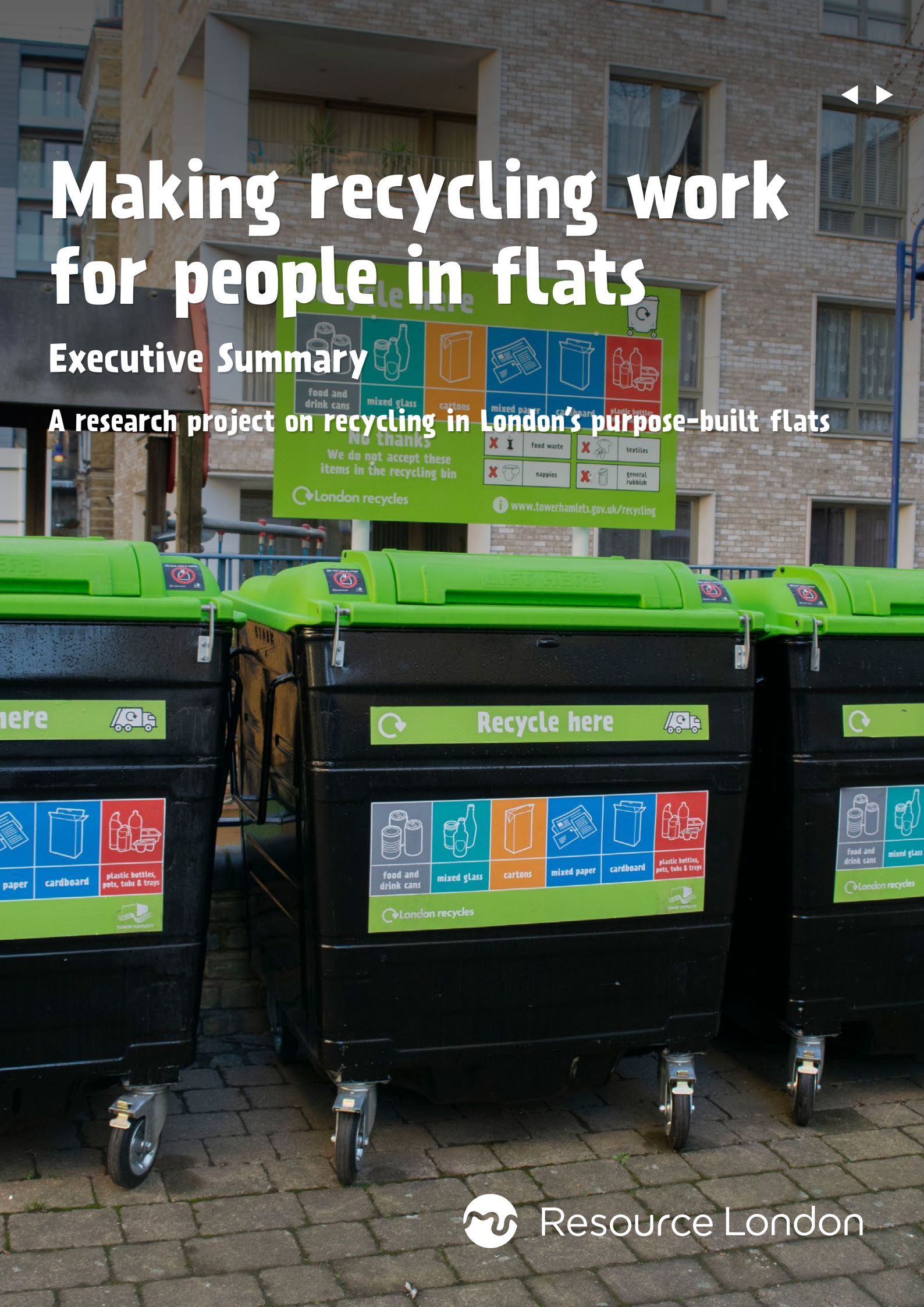
Making recycling work for people in flats

Executive Summary

A research project on recycling in London's purpose-built flats



Resource London

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Resource London

Resource London was established in 2015 as a jointly funded partnership between London Waste and Recycling Board (LWARB) and the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) to maximise the resources of both organisations for the benefit of London.

The aim of the programme is that by 2020 London will have more harmonised, consistent and efficient waste and recycling services that will:

- reduce the city's waste footprint and reinvigorate recycling to make a significant contribution towards the Mayor's ambition for London to achieve 65% recycling by 2030; and
- make a significant contribution towards England achieving its 50% household waste recycling target by 2020.

In 2017-18 Resource London established a new three-year, £1million flats initiative to reinvigorate London's household recycling efforts for residents living in purpose-built flats, specifically targeting housing estates and large blocks of social housing.

More information about Resource London can be found on our website.

Executive summary

People who live in flats recycle much less than those who live in houses, though there is a lack of substantive evidence about exactly why this is or how it might be improved.

Increasing recycling rates is a priority for London to help combat global climate change. The Mayor has set a target of 50% of local authority collected waste to be recycled by 2025 and an aspirational target of 50% household waste by 2030. The national target is to achieve 50% household waste recycled by 2020.

Resource London set up this two-year project in partnership with housing association Peabody and six inner London boroughs[1] to better understand the barriers to recycling for people who live in purpose-built flats and discover what practical measures could be taken by housing providers, building managers and service providers to help overcome them.

The results provide rich insight into factors that influence levels of recycling in purpose-built flats and how to effect changes. They offer a valuable, practical resource that will help those who commission, manage and deliver waste and recycling services to better understand what deters people in flats from recycling, and to make improvements.

This project is the first of its kind to include in-depth research with residents as well as those operating and managing services. It is also the first to include comprehensive measurement of the amount and composition of recycling and residual waste.

Detailed inventories carried out at 132 estates of purpose-built flats in London revealed that there was a general lack of consistency in the quality of waste services provided. In the main, services had evolved for the benefit of operators rather than for the residents who use them. In-depth ethnographic research with residents highlighted the complexity of the issues faced by residents and clearly showed that good intentions to recycle are not enough: effective recycling is only achieved when residents want to recycle, know how to recycle and find it easy to do so.

In the project a series of changes was made to the recycling arrangements on 12 selected estates of purpose-built flats[2] in London to see how they might influence recycling behaviour and increase the amount recycled. These 'interventions' were based on the research and designed in consultation with those responsible for managing and delivering waste and recycling and housing services. They included a common Flats Recycling Package applied to all 12 estates to standardise the look and feel of the bin areas, and five behavioural interventions introduced on 10 of the estates in various combinations.

The results showed that overall capture and recycling rates were substantially increased over the course of the project, mainly thanks to the improvements made in bringing all 12 estates up to the standard of the Flats Recycling Package.

Table 1: Flats Recycling Package

Flats Recycling Package
• Clean and well-maintained bins and bin areas
• Adequate collections to prevent overflows and appropriate recycling capacity (minimum 60l/hh/wk)
• Appropriate apertures on recycling bins big enough to accept plastic bags of recycling and with locked reverse lids
• Collection of the six main recyclable materials[3]
• Clear and visible signage on and above the bins
• Convenient location of recycling bins for residents
• Recycling leaflet sent to residents once a year
• Posters highlighting recycling messages displayed in a central location (where possible)
• Residents informed of what they should do with bulky waste items

Over the course of the project the overall capture rate increased by 22%, the recycling rate increased by 26% and the contamination rate decreased by 24%. However, it is important to note that these increases were from a very low base. At the end of the project the capture and recycling rates were still low (46% and 13% respectively) and contamination remained high at 24%.

There was wide variation in the levels of improvements from one estate to another. Those estates that had a poorer quality service before the changes showed the greatest improvement.

Results of the five behavioural interventions were less conclusive, but the research did offer some insights. For instance, feedback from residents indicated that the provision of plastic bags for in-home storage of recycling were effective at influencing recycling behaviour and in some cases additional small recycling bins placed near estate entrances were also effective.

1 London boroughs of Camden, Hackney, Islington, Lambeth, Tower Hamlets and Westminster

2 Case study estates were selected to be comparable to each other. The cases included in this study are not representative of purpose built flats in London, a London borough or Peabody estates.

3 Paper, card, glass, food and drink cans, plastic bottles, and mixed rigid plastics (tubs, pots and trays)

The project showed that purpose-built flats with higher numbers of renters and people aged between 15 and 34 have lower capture rates.

Notably, this project highlights the scale of the challenge represented by the London and national recycling targets. Despite the improvements achieved, rates at the end of the trial were still not as good as the average kerbside collections for low-rise properties in London. Assuming that all purpose-built flats in London have similar performance to the 12 in the project, with current collection and recycling systems, purpose-built flats would need to achieve a near 100% capture rate of the six key recyclable materials as well as food in order to achieve recycling targets.[4] This seems unlikely given the complexity of the issues and behavioural inconsistencies of people living in purpose-built flats revealed by this project.

Whilst this project has proven valuable in understanding how to increase recycling performance in purpose-built flats, there are clearly limitations to the research and methodology used. The findings of the project have highlighted a number of areas for further investigation, including gaining a better understanding of the recycling performance of a representative sample of flats, and the effect of age and tenure type and other societal factors on recycling performance.

The recyling target set by the Mayor of London in the London Environmental Strategy to recycle 50% of local authority collected waste by 2025 is ambitious. In order to achieve it, capture rates will need to be significantly improved, new systems introduced to broaden the range of household waste materials that can be recycled and new policies to reduce non recycable waste. This will be challenging with current resourcing and existing legislation.

Key recommendations:

- Housing providers, building managers and service providers can improve recycling capture rates in purpose-built flats by working together to put in place and maintain the standards defined in the Flats Recycling Package on every estate.
- The Resource London Flats Recycling Package toolkit offers practical advice and guidance to help housing providers, building managers and services providers to implement the Flats Recycling Package in purpose-built flats. The toolkit will be available in March 2020.

4 The combined average maximum recycling rates for the 12 flats are 32% dry recyclables only and 60% dry recyclables and food.

Contacts and further help

Please contact Resource London for more information:

Project enquiries

gemma.scott@lwarb.gov.uk

07732 681850

Communications enquiries

violetta.lynch@lwarb.gov.uk

07732 681820

For general information visit: **www.resourcelondon.org**

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