



TOPIC AREA — WASTE & RESOURCES

Consistent Bins, Inconsistent Guidance?

A Pilot Review of Food Waste Acceptance Guidance Across Hertfordshire
Local Authorities in England

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This pilot study reviewed publicly available food waste guidance from all ten local authorities in Hertfordshire, England.

The review found broad alignment for traditional food waste streams, including food scraps, meat, dairy products, tea bags and coffee grounds. However, variation increased once materials moved beyond traditional food waste categories. Differences were observed for items such as food-soiled paper and cooking oils, while compostable packaging emerged as the least consistently addressed category.

Overall, food waste guidance appeared broadly aligned at a category level, with variation increasing as materials became more specialised, product-specific or operationally dependent.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Separate food waste collections are becoming a standard requirement under England's Simpler Recycling reforms. As these services expand, published guidance plays a critical role in helping residents understand what belongs in a food waste caddy.

Using Hertfordshire, England, as a pilot study area, this study explores how food waste guidance is communicated in practice, identifying areas of consistency, ambiguity and variation across local authorities.

CORE FINDING

Desktop review of published guidance from all ten Hertfordshire local authorities identified a clear pattern. Traditional food waste streams are communicated with a high degree of consistency, while variation becomes increasingly apparent once materials move beyond traditional food waste. This variation is reflected not only in acceptance outcomes, but also in the level of detail, terminology and procedural guidance provided for more specialised materials and products.

OBSERVATION 1

Broad Alignment Exists for Traditional Food Waste Streams

Across all ten Hertfordshire local authorities, traditional food waste was communicated with a high degree of consistency. Food scraps, meat, fish, dairy products, bones, tea bags and coffee grounds were universally or near-universally accepted within published guidance. Although councils differed in terminology and the level of detail provided, these differences rarely altered the practical disposal outcome. This suggests that published guidance remains broadly consistent for materials that are widely recognised as food waste.

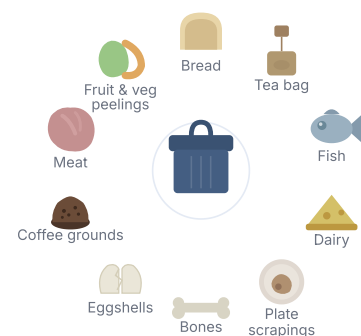


Fig. 1 — Traditional food waste streams consistently accepted across Hertfordshire.

OBSERVATION 2

Variation Beyond Traditional Food Waste Streams

Greater variation emerged once materials extended beyond traditional food waste. Items such as food-soiled paper, cooking oil and houseplants were communicated less consistently, with authorities differing in whether these materials were explicitly accepted, rejected or not addressed within published guidance. Used kitchen roll illustrates this pattern particularly well. While Watford explicitly accepts used kitchen roll in food waste collections, neighbouring authorities either reject it or make no reference to it in their published guidance, highlighting how communication becomes less consistent for non-traditional materials.

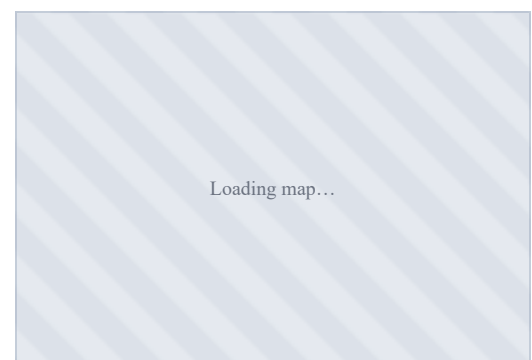


Fig. 2 — Published guidance for used kitchen roll across Hertfordshire local authorities.

CORE FINDING

OBSERVATION 3

Variation in Procedural Guidance for Food Caddy Liners

Food caddy liners illustrate that similar acceptance outcomes do not necessarily result in similar guidance. All ten Hertfordshire local authorities support the use of liners for food waste collections, yet the associated instructions vary considerably. Some authorities require certified compostable liners displaying the Seedling logo (or EN13432 standard), while others permit newspaper, soft plastic bags or no liner at all. Although these approaches lead to the same acceptance outcome, they represent noticeably different operational guidance for residents.

COMMUNICATION MODEL	TYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS	LOCAL AUTHORITIES
Certification-led	Seedling logo (sometimes EN13432) required	Watford, East Herts, North Herts, Stevenage, Welwyn Hatfield
Flexible	Plastic bags accepted; certification not required	St Albans, Dacorum, Broxbourne
Mixed	Different official sources provide different guidance	Three Rivers
Alternative approach	Plastic bags accepted, newspaper rejected, loose food encouraged	Hertsmere

OBSERVATION 4

Compostable Packaging Remains Inconsistently Addressed

Unlike traditional food waste or food caddy liners, compostable packaging was rarely addressed as a clearly defined category within published guidance. Where guidance was provided, it typically related to individual products such as Vegware or compostable coffee pods, while many authorities made no reference to compostable packaging at all. Published council guidance also differed from disposal advice provided by some manufacturers, highlighting a disconnect between product-level guidance and local authority collection guidance.

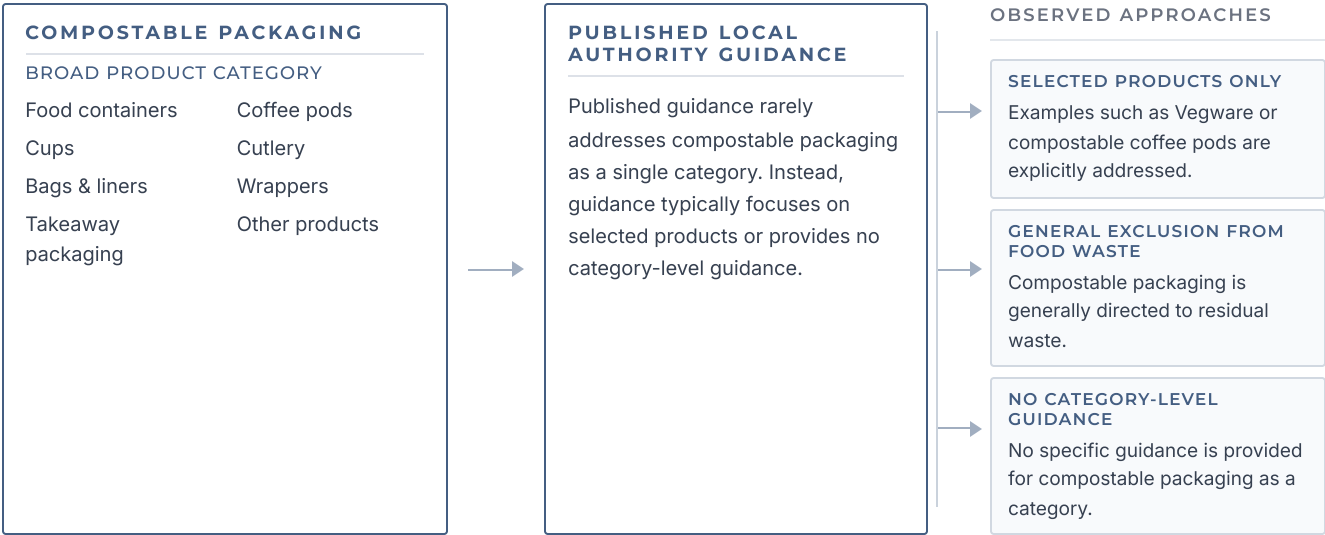


Fig. 3 — Conceptual illustration of how compostable packaging is reflected in published local authority guidance.

IN CLOSING

METHODOLOGY

This pilot study reviewed publicly available food waste guidance published by all ten Hertfordshire local authorities in England in June 2026. Information was extracted from council webpages, downloadable guidance and A-Z recycling resources, then standardised into a structured comparison matrix covering multiple food waste material categories.

The study focused on published resident guidance rather than operational waste treatment processes or contractual arrangements. Where multiple sources were available for the same authority, the most comprehensive and up-to-date guidance was used wherever possible.

CAVEATS

This study assesses published guidance only and does not verify operational collection practices, treatment technologies or contractor requirements. Differences identified may reflect variations in communication, terminology or the level of published detail rather than confirmed differences in collection policy. Findings should therefore be interpreted as observations of publicly available guidance at the time of review.

NEXT STEPS

This Hertfordshire review represents the first stage of an ongoing research initiative. Planned next steps include:

- Expand the review to additional local authorities and regions across England.
- Explore how variation evolves as the study scales nationally.
- Investigate the operational factors that may influence published food waste guidance.
- Examine how differences in published guidance affect resident understanding and disposal behaviour.
- Develop an interactive evidence base to support future research and practical application.



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