



Case Study: Fairfield MUD recycling program

Increasing recycling and reducing contamination in multi-unit dwellings

Introduction

In 2015, Fairfield City Council received NSW EPA funding to target low recycling and high contamination rates in multi-unit dwellings (MUDs). This program included bin audits, relationship building with strata managers, community education programs and targeted materials for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.

Background

As Western Sydney becomes more urbanised, higher density multi-unit dwellings (MUDs) are becoming more commonplace.

MUDs present a number of challenges for the provision of local waste services, not least because they produce large amounts of waste in a small footprint.

As a more affordable form of housing, MUDs tend to have a higher proportion of rental tenants and higher resident turnover than other types of dwellings. This is problematic from a waste education perspective as short-term tenancy makes it difficult to maintain high levels of waste literacy.

In the case of high migration areas such as Fairfield City Council, this phenomenon is accentuated by large numbers of international migrants who may not be familiar with local waste practices.

Fairfield City Council provides a mix of weekly and fortnightly co-mingled recycling service to all MUDs across the LGA, however recycling

rates and contamination of recycling bins in these dwellings has historically been high.

In the worst cases, bins are overflowing when presented at the kerbside, kerbside illegal dumping is prevalent, and bin bays are not maintained in a clean state.

Waste education in multi-unit dwellings is challenging due to the frequency of rental turnover, this is exacerbated in high migration areas where tenants are unfamiliar with local waste practices.

The program

In March 2015, Fairfield City Council appointed a dedicated education officer to work directly with MUDs with the aim of decreasing waste generation, increasing recycling rates, and reducing recycling contamination by 10 per cent.



While specific data on MUDs was unavailable prior to the project commencing, it was generally known that MUD recycling contamination rates were high, particularly in suburbs with large culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities such as Cabramatta and Fairfield.

Therefore the MUDs project strategy has been designed and delivered in five stages, taking into account Fairfield City's multiculturalism.



An untidy MUD bin bay in Fairfield LGA before the MUD recycling program.

Stage 1 – Waste audit and data collection:

In order to establish the extent of recycling contamination and waste generation in MUDs across Fairfield City, Council commissioned an audit of about 650 MUDs across the LGA.

This audit compiled a list of MUDs in the LGA, and conducted visual inspections to determine contamination rates, levels of waste production, contamination hotspots, garbage and recycling bin capacity ratios, bin condition, and bin bay infrastructure.

Council also collected data from real estate agents, strata managers and body corporates, as these entities would become key partners in the effort to improve recycling and contamination rates.

This initial investigation gave Council a solid baseline to work with. It also gave insight into

the local resident population, and the relationship between bin infrastructure and contamination rates.

Stage 2 – Waste education:

Once a baseline had been established, Council set to work developing a waste and recycling education program for both residents and the local property sector (strata managers, cleaners, body corporates and real estate agents).

Community education included the development of a range of educational materials such as a local waste and recycling guide, bin bay signage and bin stickers. Council staff also sought out face-to-face conversations with residents through door knocking.

Due to Fairfield City's high linguistic diversity, all materials were image-based for ease of understanding. Translated waste and recycling guides were also developed for key languages spoken across the Fairfield LGA, including Vietnamese, Chinese, Assyrian and Arabic.

For real estate agents and strata managers, Council hosted a conference to discuss some of the infrastructure and amenity issues found in local buildings, and seek feedback on ways to inform new residents about Council's services for MUDs and illegal dumping.

This conference provided a starting point for ongoing relationships between Fairfield City Council officers and local property professionals.

Stage 3 – Recycling bin roll-out:

The next stage was ensuring the right infrastructure was in place to help residents recycle correctly.

The program's initial audit found that ageing and inconsistent bin infrastructure was confusing even well-intentioned residents.



In November 2015, Council installed 2,135 new recycling bins in MUDS across the LGA. This involved working with strata managers and body corporates, to replace mismatched bins, provide additional recycling capacity where required, and ensure new bins were fitted with clear recycling stickers and instructional signage.

It is hoped that consistent looking bins (yellow lids, green bodies) will allow residents to be confident recyclers even if they move to another building in Fairfield City.

Stage 4 – Sort Your Waste campaign:

With the knowledge, relationships and infrastructure in place to enable better recycling, Council launched the *Sort Your Waste* campaign in order to monitor and provide feedback on residents’ recycling progress.

Council conducted three rounds of bin inspections per MUD, with colour-coded tags issued for varying levels of contamination. The tags were designed to be visible to anyone entering the bin bay, and included feedback on why a particular tag was issued.

Recycling bins with no contamination were given a green tag. Residents living in the MUD were also given a certificate of appreciation from Council to thank them for their efforts.

Recycling bins with some contamination were given an orange tag, along with a list of the main contaminants found in their bin. The aim of this list was to alert residents to items that they may not be aware were non-recyclable. Recycling bins with high levels of contamination did not only receive an orange tag, but were noted as ‘contamination hotspots’ by Council. These MUDs were then targeted with further educational materials, door knocking and face to face engagement by Fairfield City Council officers.

Over the course of the three inspections, MUDs which had received three green tags, or had shown significant improvements, were given a long term poster identifying them as Fairfield Recycling Ambassadors.

Residents living in MUDs with consistently high contamination levels were issued with warning letters and a waste and recycling guide from Council. A long-term warning sticker with a list of common contaminants was also placed on communal recycling bins for ongoing reference.

During the tagging stage of the *Sort Your Waste* campaign, a waste consultancy was engaged to help Fairfield City’s waste contamination management officer complete the inspection and tagging of MUDs in a shorter time frame.



Sort Your Waste bin bay signage (English).



Green and orange Sort Your Waste bin tags.



Example of translated educational materials.

Stage 5 – MUDs kerbside audit:

As part of the MUDs recycling program, Fairfield City Council engaged a waste consultancy to run kerbside audits to measure the change in MUDs' recycling, waste generation, contamination rates, and to check the overall progress of the program.

The data collected provided Council with a better understanding of waste issues including correlations between bin sizes, bin bay structure, type of contaminants, bin locations and a MUD's proximity to CBD areas.



Tagged and sign-posted recycling bins during the Sort Your Waste campaign.



Outcomes

Fairfield City Council's MUDs program is ongoing, however Council has seen a significant improvement in recycling and contamination rates over the last two years.

In the two years since the project started, there has been a five to 10 per cent reduction in recycling contamination across MUDs in Fairfield City.

While this is a good result, the high turnover of residents living in MUDs means the program must be continued in order to maintain and improve recycling rates.

Following the initial *Sort Your Waste* campaign, Fairfield officers continue to educate residents on correct waste practices via on-site bin inspections, door knocking, school visits, and through community groups across the LGA.

Working with Fairfield City planners and strata managers to improve bin bay layout, size and usability is also an ongoing process that requires ongoing investment in relationship building and management, but has so far proven worthwhile.

Learnings from the project

Fairfield City Council has the following tips for other councils wishing to improve MUD recycling rates in their LGA:

Build relationships with strata managers and real estate agents

Real estate agents and strata managers are key allies in improving waste outcomes in MUDs. They can provide a wealth of information on who is moving into an area, the rate of resident turnover, and the day to day problems faced by residents of a particular building.

They can also facilitate access to sites, engage cleaning staff, and are the primary point of contact for upgrades to on-site waste infrastructure.

Be ready to assist strata managers and real estate agents with information for new residents, or assistance with other council-related issues and questions they may have.

Present where and when residents are available

In the early stages of the program, Council ran a barbecue for residents to raise issues of waste and recycling, however attendance was low.

On-site bin inspections, door knocking, meeting with community groups, and presenting to schools was much more effective for reaching residents – particularly those who would not otherwise be interested in learning about waste services.

Keep it simple, keep it visual

Image-based materials in partnership with translated text is key, particularly in areas with high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity. Waste guides and bin stickers showing pictures of waste items makes it easy for people of all backgrounds to get it right.

Face to face contact is worth its weight in gold

Engaging with the community directly demonstrates that Council is approachable, friendly and there to help. Face-to-face engagement is particularly effective for breaking down cultural barriers and building trust with CALD communities.

Keep interactions as positive as possible.

It is important that Council is not perceived to be criticising or blaming residents for doing the wrong thing. A positive approach – even where



contamination rates are high – will ensure that Council is perceived as a helpful guide.

Be prepared for a long-term, ongoing process.

Behaviour change programs are never short-term fixes, however in the case of MUDs, the need for consistent, ongoing work is increased by higher frequency of rental turnover. This phenomenon is increased in high migration communities where residents tend to be more transient.

Work with council planners to ensure new MUDs are designed well.

Prevention is always better than a cure. Developing a relationship with Council planners and sharing insights on how residents use bin bays and other waste infrastructure will make it easier for them to ensure waste infrastructure is well designed. This in turn will make it easier for future residents to dispose of waste correctly.



Fairfield City Council

For more information, contact:

Loredana Guisa
Waste Contamination Management Officer
Fairfield City Council

PO Box 21 FAIRIFIELD NSW 1860
Tel: 0427 096 778
Fax: 02 9609 3257

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