

The “We want it once a week” campaign is not what you might think. It has a very respectable objective: to ensure that rubbish bins of the Suffolk towns of Sudbury and Hadleigh are emptied every week.

This is not what the local council is proposing. It wants to operate a “twin bin” system in which the dry recyclables wheelie bin is emptied on alternate weeks to the residual waste bin with the aim of producing a step change in the amount of waste diverted from landfill.

Although bi-weekly collections of residuals have been around for some time: it’s recommended in the Audit Commission’s 1997 report “Waste Matters”, it seems that in the past year it has gathered momentum.

Many local authorities are considering or experimenting with the option and some have faced just as much opposition from their local media as Babergh Council.

There’s the “What a waste” campaign in Southampton and “Operation Bluebottle” in Chichester. Its local paper has been filled with stories of fly infestations and “gigantic” rats encouraged by food left for a fortnight – or so it’s claimed.

Those local authorities considering fortnightly collections must be wondering are: “Is it a health hazard?” and “Is it worth the hassle?”

The experiences of authorities that have already gone down this route provide a mixed picture, although the number convinced of the benefits of fortnightly collections outnumber those which have tried and rejected the option.

Firstly none of the authorities interviewed for this piece considered it a health hazard. Nottinghamshire County Council, together with six of the districts in the county, began rolling out alternate week collections 18 months ago. The councils carried out a survey of any complaints of flies, smell, etc.

Malvin(CORRECT) Trigg, assistant director of the environment department at the county council, said: “We know the level of complaints that the districts are getting and they are just a handful. It’s usually down to poor housekeeping to be honest. You need to wrap the food up before put it in the bin.” And people seem to take the message on board once it’s been explained that the problem may even start in the kitchen with food left lying around or the bin left with the lid open.

Although some complaints are inevitable, predicting whether you are likely to encounter sustained opposition is tricky. Mr Trigg could only recall two articles in Nottingham Evening Post on the switch to fortnightly collections.

He said: “You have to educate people properly about why you are doing it and make it easy for them. It’s not unusual to have to leaflet two to three times. There have been Saturday roadshows and with some people you may have to go to their house, tip the bin out and go through it with them.”

Surprisingly Eastleigh did not face press opposition either, even though its local paper is the same one mounting the “What a waste!” campaign in Southampton.

It did have the advantage that alternate weekly collections using wheelie bins replaced an antiquated black sack service. This countered perceptions of a loss of service.

Also important were a slow roll-out to give officers a chance to resolve any problems quickly and a freephone help number. Recycling and development manager Martyn (CORRECT) Cole said: “We had extremely strong political will so it was ‘Yes, we will roll this out’, but it took two and a half years.”

Sue Reed, lead officer for waste management at Daventry, said: "The benefit we had was we introduced it as a trial. We were able to say, 'Give it a go'. It gave us the opportunity to persuade residents to stick with it and get used to it. That's where I think some areas are falling down." Along with a lack of kerbside recycling capacity, she said.

So taking it slowly and gently and educating residents and all staff seems to be the prescription for a smooth introduction. But individual residents, councillors and reporters can also play a major part in converting complaints into a full-blown local media campaign.

The next question: "Is it worth it?" Do fortnightly residual waste collections deliver the goods on recycling rates?

Gosport Borough Council waste recycling officer Angela West said: "From other local authorities' experiences, we were expecting once the entire borough was on anything from 25-27% upwards."

Gosport introduced alternate week collections in certain areas in March. Its recycling rates have leapt to 34-35% in trial areas and this does not include composting or recycling banks.

It's a key part of the regime of recycling chart-topper Daventry, currently at 44%. Eastleigh is at 27.9% for 2002/3.

However, some councils have tried fortnightly collections of residuals and swapped back. How many fall into this category is unknown. There's no national picture of who is doing what on collection regimes, but Sutton is one example from this category.

Malcolm Kendall, Sutton's waste and recycling manager, explained that the council had looked at Eastleigh's experience and then trialled the new set up with different types of properties and socio-economic profiles. He said: "The response was quite positive, but some residents had objections to waiting a fortnight for the residual waste collection in the spring and summer because of their fears of flies and smells."

There was also opposition in the local press and crucially an increase in residents dumping refuse in with the recyclables. Mr Kendall said: "In the end contamination levels were unreasonable."

So Sutton "listened to its residents" and switched back. Last year's audited figure was 19.3%.

Horsham experimented with two variants of alternate weekly collections. In one scheme the dry recyclables were collected on alternate weeks to the residual waste. In the second experiment, green waste alternated with residuals. That second test led to a 45% recycling rate and a 20% reduction in waste to landfill.

Environmental services director Keith Feltham said: "There was from a small number of people who didn't want their waste collected fortnightly. They were vociferous, but the reason that we didn't go for it was the imbalance of loads between green waste and refuse would have meant that we would have had to reschedule the refuse collection.

"Changing the day of the week for collections, the crews' rounds and going for a different collection seemed like a recipe for disaster and we were being asked by Defra (which had offered funds) to do it in a year."

So they reverted to a weekly residual collection, with even six-person households restricted to a 140-litre bin, combined with a fortnightly collection of green waste and non-corrugated card. The extra piece in the jigsaw is a dry

recyclables collection that alternates between cans and plastic one week and paper the next. Current recycling figures are over 40% with a 20% reduction to landfill. It is similar to the scheme in Daventry, except that Daventry has a fortnightly residual waste scheme.

Eastleigh, Daventry, Horsham and Sutton all refuse to take bins that have been contaminated. Horsham employs four inspectors who check for correct sorting. If contamination is spotted, the bin is left and the resident has to remove the contamination for it to be collected the following week.

One refuse crew always works Saturdays in Eastleigh so they will pick up left bins once the offending objects have been removed. Eastleigh allows its residents one mistake a year, then it's a £5 charge or a trip to the civic amenity site for the householder. It tends not to be fly-tipped - perhaps because there are too many envelopes with the offender's address on it mixed in with the waste!

Finally, a note of hope for those local authority officers who have encountered teething problems.

Mr Cole said: "For a period of time, there was quite a lot of letters flying backwards and forwards. Quite a lot were negative. Then after a while you started to see positive letters." And light at the end of the tunnel.