

Recycling and Waste Management in Wrexham

Wrexham County Borough Council

January 2026

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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We assessed the Council's arrangements for recycling and waste management, to understand if they are delivering against national recycling targets and providing value for money to residents.

Why this is important

- 2 The Council's Plan 2023-2028 sets out six priority areas. The first priority area is 'Delivering Efficient Streetscene Services and Decarbonising Our Environment' which includes an outcome of 'All households in Wrexham are supported to be actively engaged in working towards zero waste.' The Council also declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency in September 2019.
- 3 Alongside this, the Welsh Government's waste strategy – Towards Zero Waste – sets out its high-level policies and targets for waste management in Wales. This includes statutory annual recycling targets for the Council to reach. To achieve these local and national ambitions, the Council has committed to managing waste and recycling, and supporting residents to work towards zero waste.
- 4 The Council's annual recycling performance has declined in three of the last four reported years. From a figure of 69.6% in 2019-20 (the fifth-highest rate for all councils in Wales), the Council's recycling rate dropped to 63.8% in 2023-24 (the fourth-lowest rate for all councils in Wales).

- 5 The Welsh Government statutory recycling target rose from 64% up to 2023-24 to 70% from 2024-25 onwards. In the future, the Council faces the reputational and financial risk of being fined by the Welsh Government if it continues not to meet this target. The Council also has corporate objectives around sustainability and decarbonisation that are linked to its ability to improve its recycling performance.

What we have found

- 6 The Council faces challenges in parts of its waste and recycling services. It does not fully understand why recycling rates have declined in recent years and faces barriers in identifying if the service is providing value for money compared to other councils.
- 7 The Council has a communications plan in place and regularly engages with residents on temporary changes to collection dates successfully. However, residents continue to fill residual waste bins with recyclable material, and the service currently lacks an adopted strategic approach to improving its recycling performance.

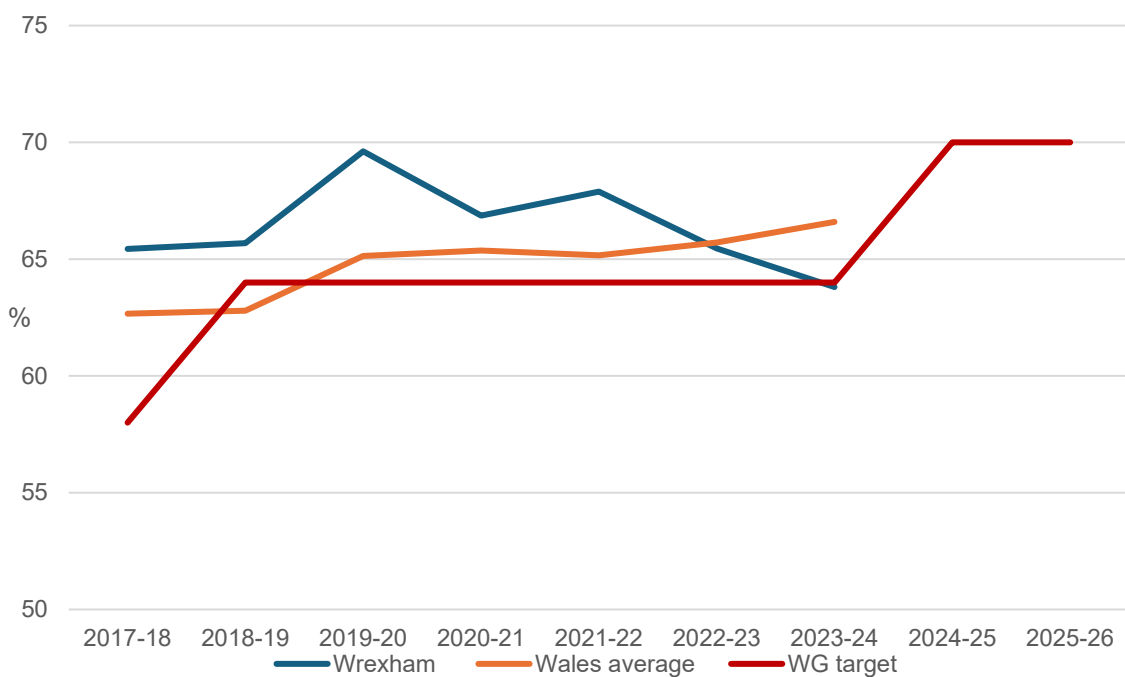
What we recommend

- 8 We have made two recommendations, looking at developing a strategic approach and improving the Council's understanding of value for money from the service.

Key facts and figures

- In the last reported year, 2023-24, the Council missed the Welsh Government statutory target by 0.2 percentage points.¹ However, performance has declined in three of the last four reported years and the Welsh Government target increased to 70% for 2024-25.

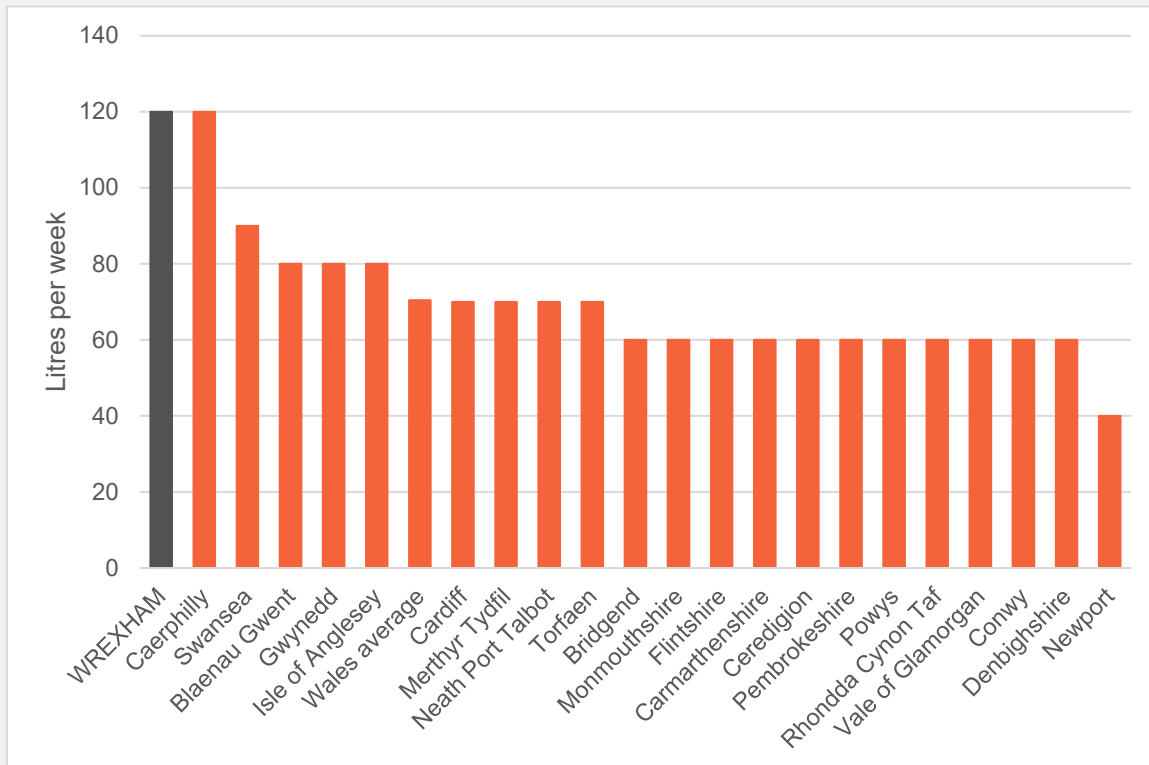
Exhibit 1: annual reuse/recycling/composting rates by Council



¹ [Data from StatsWales and Welsh Government](#)

- In 2025, Wrexham had the equal-highest residual waste capacity per household of any council in Wales, at 120 litres per week.²

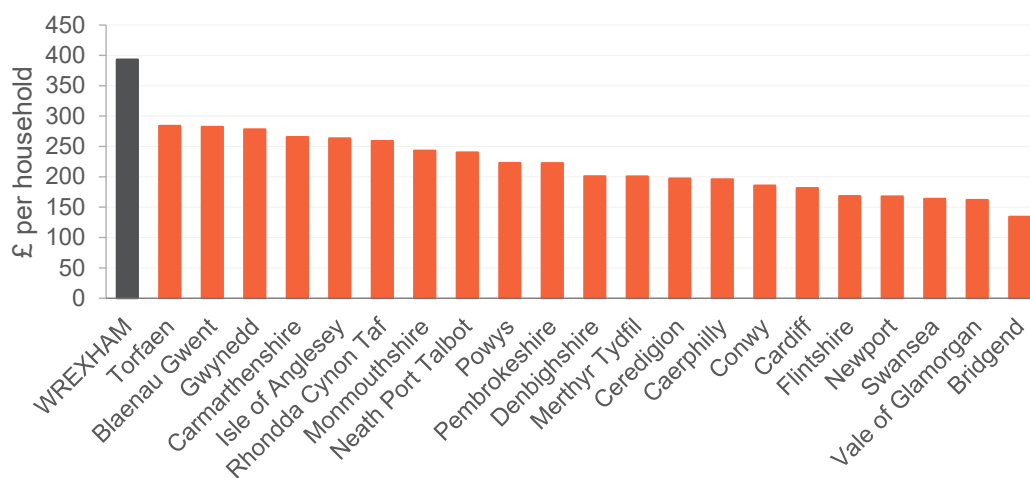
Exhibit 2: Residual waste capacity per household in Wales, by Council



² Data from WRAP Cymru, June 2025

- In 2023-24, Wrexham's total net expenditure on household waste services was £393 per household. This figure was the highest in Wales and £109 per household higher than the next highest figure.³

Exhibit 3: Total net expenditure per household, on household waste services 2023-24



³ This figure includes costs related to a Private Finance Initiative (PFI). See **paragraph 20** for further information.

Our findings

The Council does not fully understand the reasons for fluctuations in its recycling rate

- 9 The Council monitors how its recycling service is performing. It reports on the different collection streams and carries out kerbside surveys. The Council also monitors recycling rates at its three Household Waste Recycling Centres. The data is reported internally and to the Welsh Government. The Council is aware that recycling rates declined after 2016-17, and the Welsh Government has issued a warning letter. Failure to meet statutory targets as set by the Welsh Government opens the Council to financial exposure. The Council has acknowledged potential Welsh Government fines at £200 per tonne for missing statutory targets, which could see the Council being fined £753,948 in 2024-25.
- 10 The Council does not have a solid evidence base to support its suggested explanations for the drops in recycling rates between 2016-17 and 2023-24, which include changes in resident habits, seasonal effects and strike action. For example, when charges for green waste were introduced, it was thought this might be a factor, but the data shows green waste recycling has since returned to earlier levels. Since the Council's understanding is mainly based on anecdotal evidence and staff opinions that sometimes differ, it may struggle to take the most effective actions to improve recycling rates and may have difficulty meeting statutory targets.
- 11 The Council regularly compares its recycling performance to other Welsh councils using national data. The Council knows how it ranks both locally and nationally, but it does not use this information when considering changes to the service. Benchmarking can help the Council identify good practice to help it achieve its objectives. For example, independent WRAP modelling indicates the Council could lift recycling and cut costs by changing the residual service, in line with approaches used elsewhere in Wales.

- 12 Other councils in a similar position to Wrexham (declining service performance, not meeting Welsh Government targets, at risk of financial penalties) have improved performance and implemented service change through a variety of approaches, such as changing collection frequency, implementing enforcement measures and increasing food waste capacity.

Waste and recycling strategies lack clarity and costings

- 13 The Council has previously been able to meet national recycling targets, but currently its strategies and plans lack clarity and detail. While there is a Council Plan (2023-2028) and a Decarbonisation Plan with an ambition to reach 70% recycling by 2025, these documents do not set out how this will be achieved. The Decarbonisation Plan, for example, has not been updated since 2021 and does not include specific actions or costs.
- 14 The Council is working on a new Waste Strategy with seven objectives. During our fieldwork, the Council did not have a fully costed action plan to support service change and improvement. If the strategy is not fully costed, it could lead to missed goals and opportunities for improvement.
- 15 The Council has taken steps to comply with new national rules on non-domestic waste, which began in April 2024. Evidence shows the Council complies with the regulations, which means business and public buildings are included in their service. This means the Council has mitigated the risk of receiving penalties for non-compliance and can build on these changes for further improvement.

The Council understands the importance of successful engagement

- 16 Engagement is active and the Council connects with households, businesses and young people to promote recycling and sustainability. However, there is only a small team working on engagement, and it is unclear how much resource will be put into engagement in the future.

- 17 Developing a strategic approach to engagement to support waste and recycling service changes could improve the Council's ability to positively impact recycling rates and overall service performance.

The Council faces barriers to benchmark the cost of its waste and recycling services

- 18 The Council's Private Finance Initiative (PFI) arrangement to fund its waste service makes it difficult to currently identify the cost-effectiveness of the service, and for the Council to compare its cost-effectiveness against that of other councils. The contract runs until 2038, and the Council reviews the cost and performance annually.
- 19 The Council monitors spending on waste services through normal financial processes. Evidence from the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) suggests that Wrexham's waste service is currently the most expensive in Wales. However, some of the cost data provided by the Council to the WLGA includes elements from its PFI agreement that are accounted for differently by others without such a contract. The Council has started the process of trying to develop comparable costs for its service that can be benchmarked with other councils.
- 20 The current draft of the waste strategy does not mention the cost of services or value for money. The annual budget for waste continues to rise, and costs per household keep increasing, while elements of service performance remain below the Welsh Government target. Costed plans and planned success measures improve the Council's ability to gain assurance it is delivering value for money.

Recommendations

R1 Strengthen evidence-based performance analysis and benchmarking

The Council currently relies on anecdotal evidence and staff opinions to explain fluctuations in its recycling performance, which limits its ability to take targeted and effective action. Although it monitors performance and compares itself to other councils, it does not have reliable benchmarking figures. Strengthening the evidence base will help the Council target its efforts where they are needed and better understand how to improve its recycling performance. The Council should do this by:

- 1.1** developing a robust framework to identify root causes of performance changes;
- 1.2** developing comparable figures to understand the cost of its service against other Councils in Wales; and
- 1.3** use this knowledge to inform the Council's service design process.

R2 Create a costed and integrated waste strategy

The Council's current plans lack clarity, costing, and integration, which risks activity being fragmented and less impactful than possible. The Council should develop a comprehensive waste and recycling strategy that includes:

- 2.1** actions to meet Council to meet corporate priorities and statutory targets;
- 2.2** detailed costings and an indication of the required resource for all activity; and
- 2.3** a timeline and performance indicators to track progress.

Appendices

1 About our work

Scope of the audit

This audit reviewed the Council's approach to the strategic and operational management of its waste and recycling service, focusing on understanding recycling performance, strategic planning and value for money

Audit questions and criteria

Questions

We looked at the Council's understanding of its service performance, if it has a clear strategy and plans to respond to national recycling targets, and how it assesses the value for money provided by the service.

Criteria

Our criteria included assessing the Council's awareness of the internal and external factors affecting its performance, the strategies and plans it has in place to support service development, its engagement with residents and partners, and how it monitors and reviews the cost of delivering the service.

Methods

We reviewed a range of documents provided by the Council and interviewed officers and Members involved in the service.

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