

CLEANER PUBLIC PLACE RECYCLING

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Social enterprise Wastebusters is helping residents and tourists recycle effectively, as part of the Queenstown Lakes District waste services initiative

I'm about to blow the lid off one of recycling's dirty little secrets. Mixed recycling bins in public places are dirty, very dirty. So dirty in fact, that an audit released this week found that 89% of the mixed recycling bins from our district's 4-way public place bins failed the quality standard to be accepted into the recycling sorting facility in Frankton. 100% of the mixed recycling bins from the 2-way public place bins (the bins with one recycling bin and one rubbish bin) failed the standard.

To be super clear, this audit was only for the public place bins, not the kerbside recycling bins which we all have at home. The recycling which goes into public place mixed recycling bins is quite different to recycling in kerbside bins, because:

- Public place recycling bins are located near cafes and take-away outlets, so they tend to be full of dirty take-away food and drink packaging
- In town, people have no way to clean off food and sticky liquids before recycling
- The bins are commonly used by visitors, who are often confused about what should go in them

As a habitual public place recycling bin snooper (much to the dismay of my teenage children), I was stoked to be one of the sorters for the audit. It was gooey, greasy, sticky and fascinating! The bins were full of plastic cups covered in smoothie remains and smeared with chocolate, brown paper take-away bags stuffed full of old chips, sauce and dirty napkins and filthy cardboard and plastic take-away containers.



Aluminium cans are not normally contaminated by food or liquid, and can be recycled many times without loss of quality.

Some of these materials are technically recyclable, but they were nearly all in a dirty and contaminated state, meaning no reprocessor would take them as a raw material. The audit found in total 38-42% by weight of materials in the public place mixed recycling bins were non-recyclable, either because they were the wrong material or were in a non-recyclable state.

But here's the good news! The audit also found that the glass from the separate glass recycling bin in the 4-way public place bin stations was sweet. Most of those public place 4-way bins are located down near the lake, you've probably noticed them because they're big and colourful (yellow, blue and red). The single stream, blue glass recycling bins had really low rates of contamination (less than 1% by weight), which means the glass can be collected, processed and sent off to O-I in Auckland for recycling back into new glass bottles.



The audit found public place mixed recycling bins were full of dirty take-away packaging and non-recyclable materials

So now we have the data, what to do? The easiest option would be to keep quiet and do nothing, or to blame the users of the bins. Instead, QLDC have chosen a bold plan to address the flaws in the system, which I believe is a first for New Zealand. Their plan is to remove all the mixed recycling bins from public places in our district, and to roll out new single stream public place recycling bins for aluminium cans. Glass recycling will stay as is in the 4-way public bins.

Over the next month, you'll see these changes happening. The yellow bins in the 4-way public place bins will be restickered as aluminium cans only. The mixed recycling bins in the 2-way public place bins (the bins with one recycling bin and one rubbish bin) will be restickered as rubbish bins. More public place 4-way bins are on their way for summer, especially for some of our smaller communities which don't have any yet.

Wastebusters has advocated for transparent, high quality recycling for two decades now, so we really support these moves by QLDC. The audit showed that aluminium cans made up the highest number of clean, recyclable materials in the public place recycling bins, more than twice as many as clean glass bottles. Using recycled aluminium to make new cans requires just 5% of the energy and produces just 5% of the CO2 emissions of using raw materials. Collecting aluminium cans in a single stream bin will be a huge step forward for public place recycling in our district, as they are way too valuable to send to landfill.

For the same reasons, Wastebusters also supports QLDC's shift in kerbside recycling of plastics from 1 Dec, to accept only high value plastics which can be recycled onshore:

- 1 clear bottles only
- 2 bottles and containers
- 5 bottles and containers

Change isn't easy, but it's way past time for recycling systems around the globe to be more transparent and effective. Our council is showing leadership to improve our district's recycling systems and make recycling more transparent. Supporting these moves will encourage them to make more bold choices in the future.