



Research Report:

An Exploration of Recycling In Multi-Unit Dwellings

Background

A *Better Practice Guide for Waste Management in Multi Unit Dwellings* was reviewed in 2006. This review stressed the need to find positive ways to get residents in multi unit dwellings (MUDs) engaged in recycling, and to use the facilities available to them. Councils have also emphasised that information on the attitudes and recycling behaviour of MUD residents is critical in helping them develop and implement effective waste recycling programs in multi-unit dwellings.

Based on this feedback, in 2007 the Department of Environment and Climate Change (NSW) Sustainability Programs Division commissioned Woolcott Research Pty Ltd to undertake social research to assess the attitudes and behaviour of MUD residents in relation to recycling and resource recovery.

Aim and Scope of the Study

The study aimed to obtain a detailed understanding of recycling behaviour and the links between a person's knowledge, their skills and infrastructure. It provided greater understanding of the issues surrounding recycling among MUD occupants; information that can be used to effectively plan strategies and tools. The study looked at:

- ☒ The MUD environment and level of interaction residents have with their building and neighbours.
- ☒ Recycling propensity and behaviour.
- ☒ Awareness and knowledge of 'correct' recycling behaviour.
- ☒ Attitudes and perception relating to recycling and the environment.
- ☒ The perceived importance of recycling within the context of other 'environmental' issues.
- ☒ The need for information.
- ☒ Reactions to hypothetical solution tools.

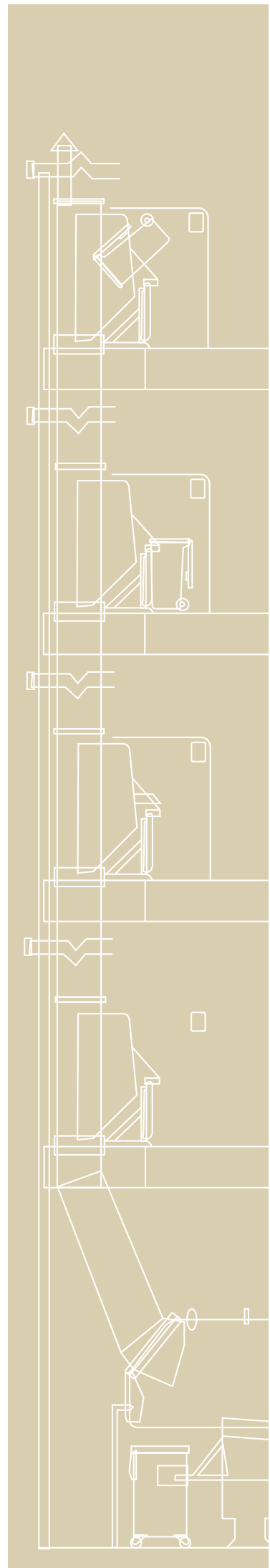
Research Design

This study involved both qualitative and quantitative research.

The initial qualitative phase consisted of 10 in-depth interviews with MUD residents and was conducted to scope the questionnaire design. The interviews were split to ensure coverage of different MUD types. The determining factors were:

- ☒ location
- ☒ ownership status
- ☒ MUD size
- ☒ age of resident.

The quantitative research comprised 680 telephone interviews, including 40 with Department of Housing residents. Interviewees were selected from local government areas that had 15% or more MUD developments. They were segmented into owners, renters and Department of Housing residents.





A final qualitative exploration was conducted through a series of 6 group discussions (see Table 1) and 10 in-depth interviews with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) residents. These group discussions ran for 1.5 hours.

Table 1. Group Discussions

Location	
Sydney	1 x group of renters < 30 years that did not recycle everything 1 x group of renters who claimed to recycle everything
Parramatta	1 x group of owners who did not recycle everything 1 x group of Department of Housing residents
Tweed Heads	1 x group of owners who claimed to recycle everything 1 x group of renters who did not recycle everything
Total groups	6

Key Findings

'Discussions revealed recycling behaviour was more closely aligned to an individual's commitment to the issue rather than any external environmental factor.'

The project was essentially exploratory in nature and attempted to uncover what would enhance recycling procedures among MUD residents. The key findings were:

1. The MUD Environment

There was no strong evidence in this instance that the level of maintenance of MUD buildings and the local environment impacted on recycling behaviour. Discussions revealed recycling behaviour was more closely aligned to an individual's commitment to the issue rather than any external environmental factor. This was exemplified by individuals living in well-maintained buildings who were not committed to recycling. Nor were those who had a strong connection to their local area necessarily more likely to recycle.

However, residents from the Tweed area believed visitors were less likely to recycle correctly, which could have negative impacts on local resident's recycling behaviour because they think 'what's the point?'

2. Recycling Facilities

Although the research was fundamentally about the social aspects of recycling behaviour, insufficient or poor recycling facilities were highlighted as being a definite barrier to positive recycling behaviour. While a segment of MUD residents is clearly committed to recycling and make every effort to do the right thing, there are others without any emotional connection to the issue. Removing barriers is critical to get the currently less-committed people to 'do the right thing'. These people are unlikely to go out of their way to do so but will make some effort to recycle as long as there are not too many barriers.

3. The Prominence of Recycling as an Issue

Recycling has become a routine activity for many. The research showed that while it was once an important issue, it is not seen that way now.

Other environmental issues (such as water conservation and climate change) seem to have gained prominence recently and are continually reinforced through the media and by other means. Recycling however, is not something people tend to connect to emotionally.

At a more rational level, people did indicate recycling was important but the issue lacked 'urgency' and there was no strong desire to act immediately. Rather than being a subconscious routine, a more emotional connection to recycling needs to be established – especially for people who find it 'inconvenient'. Should such an emotional attachment be achieved, more people will make the extra effort to ensure they recycle correctly.

4. The Need for Information

Both the qualitative and quantitative research showed further education of MUD residents is necessary. Many respondents were unable to identify where or how they learnt to recycle, exactly what to do and why. Information appears to vary greatly, in both its type and availability, for people in different local government areas. It may come directly from the council or it may just be a bin sticker with no other information available. It was also concluded that councils may be attempting to deliver information but residents were not receptive to it.

In some cases, there is further potential for councils to take the lead as educators and set an example by making recycling facilities widely available in public areas, to reinforce correct recycling behaviour in the home.

Although recycling has become routine for many people, this does not necessarily translate to recycling effectively to maximise resource recovery. Because of this, people can be under the illusion they do not actually need more information.

However, the research showed that if the prominence of recycling was raised and people were made aware of their misconceptions, they would be more receptive to further information.

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Key Recommendations

Enhancing facilities is one way of encouraging people to recycle and consequently increase the potential for resource recovery. The following suggestions were given:

☒ **Collection facilities within units:**

Provide divided tidy bins to use in a kitchen or laundry area.

☒ **Building recycling systems:**

Research participants revealed a diverse range of recycling systems currently in use. Some clearly required far more effort from residents than others. Recycling systems should be as easy as possible to use, along with regular access, to overcome the 'effort' barriers identified.

☒ **The availability of recycling bins:**

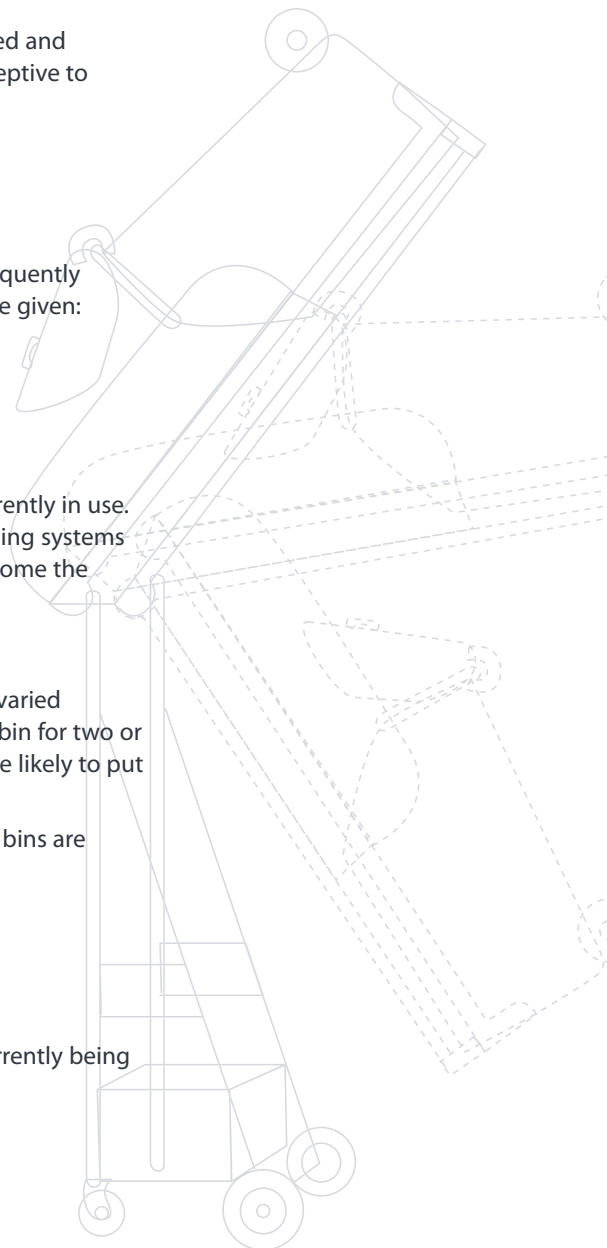
The capacity of recycling bins available to residents on a per-unit basis varied greatly. Some participants were sharing the equivalent of one 'wheelie' bin for two or three units, and possibly five. Once the bins fill up, residents are far more likely to put recyclables into residual waste bins.

A detailed audit of unit requirements would help determine how many bins are actually required to meet recycling needs.

Regarding education, the following matters need to be dealt with:

☒ **What can and cannot be recycled:**

There are clear misconceptions of what is recyclable, something not currently being communicated.





☒ **Why there is a need to recycle:**

This is not something that many people think about. Although they intrinsically know it is the right thing to do, they are not really sure why and what the tangible benefits of recycling are. The issue of recycling should be re-energised and re-branded to raise its importance.

☒ **Delivering information:**

Information should be targeted and delivered in a variety of ways. It needs to catch people's attention and eliminate confusion, especially if they already believe they are recycling correctly.

In addition to a promotional campaign, the following measures would also be effective:

- › putting stickers on bins.
- › displaying a variety of posters in bin areas or on communal notice boards.
- › councils taking a holistic approach that links recycling at home to recycling away-from-home.

Reactions to Ideas for Improved Behaviour

☒ **Numbering Recycling Bins with Specific Unit Numbers**

It was agreed this could add a degree of responsibility to people's behaviour but it may not be practical as it would require cooperation by everyone sharing a bin. Without this, it may lead to conflict.

☒ **The 'Champion' Concept**

There were mixed reactions to this idea. It was seen as a way of disseminating information, especially for new tenants however, it could be a thankless task with the role having high turnover rate (if at all). It was also thought that it could make residents uncomfortable if they preferred not to interact with their neighbours.

☒ **Rewarding Buildings with High Recycling Levels**

There were fairly mixed reactions to this idea. Many found it difficult to see how this would work in practice. Although there would be people that would respond to a financial incentive in return for compliance, it was mostly agreed that recycling should be done 'for the right reasons'.

☒ **Making Recycling Part of a Lease Agreement**

Overall, this idea was the one best received. Respondents agreed it would increase awareness of the issue, act as a reminder to do the right thing and target those less likely to be recycling 'correctly'. There was concern that including it in the lease could be used as an excuse to evict tenants; however, it would not be in terms of an enforceable condition, rather as a reminder of tenant obligations and responsibilities.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD)

The in-depth interviews revealed responses similar to the main research components: recycling was not currently a prominent issue in the participants' lives but, when prompted, most recognised its importance.

Newly arrived residents were attempting to adopt 'new behaviours' to comply with Australian recycling practices but were not familiar or comfortable with them. Many found them 'different', 'difficult', 'stressful', and 'confusing'.

Although only a cursory overview, all Culturally and Linguistically Diverse participants were fairly open to receiving additional information about correct recycling practices and materials. They all asked for:

- ☒ Information be given personally so there would be an opportunity to ask questions.
- ☒ Information in their language.

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