# London urged to stop 'burning soup' and scale up food‑waste collections



Food waste should not be treated as ordinary black-bag rubbish. Much of what Londoners put in their general waste is incinerated, and because typical food waste is overwhelmingly water — often 60–80% by weight — burning it is inefficient and environmentally perverse: as one commentator put it, it is a bit like burning soup. Turning those scraps instead into compost or digesting them for biogas keeps nutrients in the soil, cuts CO₂ emissions and closes loops that incineration destroys. According to recent reporting in the Evening Standard, composting at home is ideal where space allows; otherwise residents should take advantage of kerbside collections. (This approach is backed by technical data showing high moisture content in food waste, which lowers its heating value and makes thermal recovery an inferior option for organics.) [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/10-things-londoners-can-do-at-home-to-be-greener-b1243236.html), [[5]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9778180/), [[4]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10562262/)

Composting and anaerobic digestion offer different but complementary routes to extract value from organics. Home composting and community schemes produce nutrient‑rich soil that benefits gardens and allotments; larger‑scale anaerobic digestion converts wet biomass into methane‑rich biogas and a nutrient‑dense digestate that can be used on land. Government guidance highlights that digesting one tonne of food waste rather than sending it to landfill can save roughly 0.5–1 tonne of CO₂ equivalent, and that biogas can be used for heat, upgraded to biomethane for the gas grid, or employed as a transport fuel. These are practical pathways to recover energy and close nutrient loops across the city. [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/10-things-londoners-can-do-at-home-to-be-greener-b1243236.html), [[6]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/anaerobic-digestion-realising-the-potential--2), [[7]](https://www.rhs.org.uk/garden-inspiration/get-gardening/recycling-food-composting)

Practical access to separate food collections is improving across London. A July 2024 Q&A on London.gov states that 26 of the capital’s 33 boroughs now provide kerbside food waste collections, with some councils combining food and garden waste services. The same guidance lists Barnet, Barking and Dagenham, Havering, Newham and Redbridge as not yet operating dedicated services, and notes planned roll‑outs in Hammersmith & Fulham and Kensington & Chelsea. All boroughs must also comply with the national Simpler Recycling rules by April 2026, which is expected to accelerate standardised organic collections. [[2]](https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/questions-mayor/find-an-answer/disposable-food-bins)

The scale of the problem helps explain why these changes matter. London has become increasingly reliant on incineration — one London Assembly inquiry warned that more than two million tonnes of waste were being sent to energy‑from‑waste plants in a single year and urged that biodegradable and recyclable material be kept out of furnaces. Academic analysis of residual waste management corroborates that incineration with energy recovery is the dominant treatment for residual municipal waste in the capital, and flags contractual “lock‑ins” and limited transparency that steer materials towards combustion rather than reuse or recovery. Those reports argue energy‑from‑waste should be a last resort, not the default destination for organics. [[3]](https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/assembly/londons-burning-waste-problem), [[4]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10562262/)

There are technical reasons why food belongs in composters or digesters rather than the incinerator. Scientific reviews of food‑waste properties show household and commercial food wastes are typically high in moisture — many UK measurements cluster in the mid‑60s to mid‑70s percent range. High water content lowers calorific value and complicates thermal conversion, often making pretreatment necessary for any efficient energy recovery. In short, the material characteristics of food waste make biological processes such as composting or anaerobic digestion the better fit. [[5]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9778180/), [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/10-things-londoners-can-do-at-home-to-be-greener-b1243236.html)

Anaerobic digestion merits particular attention for urban waste planners. Government guidance outlines AD’s versatility — from on‑farm digesters to large municipal plants — and stresses its dual benefit of producing renewable energy and a useful soil‑improving digestate. Where collected and processed at scale, AD can substantially reduce greenhouse‑gas emissions compared with landfill or incineration and contributes to a circular‑economy approach to organic residues. Local authorities and utilities are increasingly viewing AD as a core part of their organics strategies. [[6]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/anaerobic-digestion-realising-the-potential--2)

For households wanting to act now, there are straightforward options. The Royal Horticultural Society advises that where gardens exist, a simple compost bin, wormery or bokashi system can convert kitchen scraps into valuable compost; for those on balconies or without outdoor space, small sealed bins, community composting projects and donating peelings to allotmenteers are practical alternatives. The RHS and local outreach groups also emphasise behaviour changes to reduce waste in the first place, and signpost schemes such as Love Food Hate Waste. Where kerbside food collections operate, residents should use them — they divert organics from black bins and deliver material that can be composted or digested rather than incinerated. [[7]](https://www.rhs.org.uk/garden-inspiration/get-gardening/recycling-food-composting), [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/10-things-londoners-can-do-at-home-to-be-greener-b1243236.html)

Policy and procurement will decide how fast London shifts away from burning recoverable waste. Researchers have urged greater transparency about the fate of residual waste, the removal of contractual barriers that lock councils into long‑term incinerator agreements, and stronger borough‑level collection services for food waste so valuable materials feed a circular economy rather than furnaces. With the majority of boroughs already offering separate food collections and statutory recycling rules coming into force, the window for change is now — but it will require coordinated action by councils, waste contractors and residents. [[4]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10562262/), [[3]](https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/assembly/londons-burning-waste-problem), [[2]](https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/questions-mayor/find-an-answer/disposable-food-bins)

For individual Londoners, the message is simple and immediate: reduce what you waste, compost what you can, and use your borough’s food‑waste collection if you have one. Doing so helps cut emissions, recovers nutrients for soil, and supports the broader shift away from incineration towards solutions that fit the biological nature of food waste. The tools exist; the challenge is to use them. [[6]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/anaerobic-digestion-realising-the-potential--2), [[7]](https://www.rhs.org.uk/garden-inspiration/get-gardening/recycling-food-composting), [[2]](https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/questions-mayor/find-an-answer/disposable-food-bins)

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## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/10-things-londoners-can-do-at-home-to-be-greener-b1243236.html), [[5]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9778180/), [[4]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10562262/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/10-things-londoners-can-do-at-home-to-be-greener-b1243236.html), [[6]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/anaerobic-digestion-realising-the-potential--2), [[7]](https://www.rhs.org.uk/garden-inspiration/get-gardening/recycling-food-composting)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/questions-mayor/find-an-answer/disposable-food-bins)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/assembly/londons-burning-waste-problem), [[4]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10562262/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[5]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9778180/), [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/10-things-londoners-can-do-at-home-to-be-greener-b1243236.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[6]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/anaerobic-digestion-realising-the-potential--2)
* Paragraph 7 – [[7]](https://www.rhs.org.uk/garden-inspiration/get-gardening/recycling-food-composting), [[1]](https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/10-things-londoners-can-do-at-home-to-be-greener-b1243236.html)
* Paragraph 8 – [[4]](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10562262/), [[3]](https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/assembly/londons-burning-waste-problem), [[2]](https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/questions-mayor/find-an-answer/disposable-food-bins)
* Paragraph 9 – [[6]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/anaerobic-digestion-realising-the-potential--2), [[7]](https://www.rhs.org.uk/garden-inspiration/get-gardening/recycling-food-composting), [[2]](https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/questions-mayor/find-an-answer/disposable-food-bins)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.standard.co.uk/lifestyle/10-things-londoners-can-do-at-home-to-be-greener-b1243236.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.london.gov.uk/who-we-are/what-london-assembly-does/questions-mayor/find-an-answer/disposable-food-bins> - This London.gov Q&A (July 2024) details which boroughs offer dedicated food waste collections. It reports that 26 of London’s 33 boroughs now provide kerbside food collections, with some councils co-collecting food and garden waste. It explains the Mayor’s Environment Strategy expects boroughs to offer separate food waste services and notes contractual constraints delaying roll-outs in a few areas; Barnet, Barking and Dagenham, Havering, Newham and Redbridge were listed as not yet providing services. Plans for Hammersmith & Fulham and Kensington & Chelsea roll-outs are described, and all boroughs are required to comply with national Simpler Recycling rules by April 2026.
3. <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/assembly/londons-burning-waste-problem> - This London Assembly report (2018) examines London’s growing reliance on incineration and energy‑from‑waste plants. It states that over two million tonnes of waste were sent to incinerators in a year, more than doubling in a decade, and warns recyclable and organic materials are being burnt rather than recycled or digested. The committee urges reducing incineration of biodegradable waste and cautions that energy from waste should be a last resort. The report highlights that incineration destroys materials that could feed a circular economy, and calls for stronger borough-level collection of food waste and actions to keep recoverable resources out of furnaces.
4. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10562262/> - This peer‑reviewed study analyses residual waste management across London and finds incineration with energy recovery is the dominant treatment for residual municipal waste. Using 2019‑era data, it reports that of roughly five million tonnes of residual waste, about 1.44 million tonnes were incinerated with energy recovery, making incineration the most prevalent recovery option. The paper highlights limited transparency in waste fate, contractual lock‑ins that steer boroughs to incineration, and the loss of recyclable and valuable materials when sent to energy recovery. It calls for improved reporting and policy to shift management up the waste hierarchy towards reuse and recycling urgently.
5. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9778180/> - This technical review compiles studies on food waste properties and shows household and commercial food wastes are typically high in moisture, commonly in the range of 60–80% water by weight depending on type and source. Tables include UK measurements (for example Hackney, Eastleigh and Luton samples near mid‑70s percent moisture). The paper explains high water content lowers heating value and complicates thermal conversion, and it surveys pretreatment options such as drying, hydrothermal processing and anaerobic digestion. The review highlights variability by cuisine and waste stream and stresses that moisture is a key parameter when choosing waste treatment technologies for planners.
6. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/anaerobic-digestion-realising-the-potential--2> - This GOV.UK guidance explains anaerobic digestion as a process where micro‑organisms break down wet biomass, including food waste, to produce methane‑rich biogas and nutrient‑rich digestate. It states biogas can be burnt for heat and power, upgraded to biomethane for the gas grid or used as transport fuel, and that digesting one tonne of food waste rather than sending it to landfill can save between 0.5 and 1 tonne of CO₂ equivalent. The page describes AD at scales from small on‑farm units to large municipal plants and presents it as a route to recover energy and close nutrient loops in London.
7. <https://www.rhs.org.uk/garden-inspiration/get-gardening/recycling-food-composting> - This Royal Horticultural Society guidance explains practical ways households can recycle food and garden waste, encouraging home composting where space permits and offering alternatives for those without gardens. It describes wormeries, bokashi and small compost bins suitable for balconies or patios, and suggests donating scraps to allotmenteers or community gardens. The RHS recommends simple behaviour changes to reduce food waste and signposts Love Food Hate Waste and local reuse networks. It emphasises that kerbside collections, community composting and shared schemes provide options if home composting is impractical, helping divert organics from black bins and benefit soil.