

**Assemblages, Utterances and Performativity: Consumers' Experience of Sustainable Disposal of Food Waste.**

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# Assemblages, Utterances and Performativity: Consumers' Experience of Sustainable Disposal of Food Waste

## Abstract

### Purpose

Household food waste is a major issue in the UK. Numerous city councils in the UK are piloting household food waste recycling schemes to help mitigate the environmental impact of food waste. By utilising a performativity lens, we explored how residents in a food waste pilot scheme (dis) engaged with the messages and bins provided by a council. This revealed how consumers (un) performed the act of food waste sorting, recycling, disposal, and engagement with the food waste scheme and built an appreciation of the importance of the consumers' place on their food waste journey.

### Design/methodology/approach

This paper drew on the lived experience of 49 residents that participated in a food waste trial in a Northern Council in the UK. We undertook in-depth interviewing of household participants with food waste responsibilities, spending time with participants in-situ, observing, and photographing food waste bins, and undertook informal conversations with participants. We focused on consumer attitudes and motivations towards food behaviours, food waste and recycling, engagement, or the lack of, with food waste recycling.

### Findings

This study illustrates the performativity of food waste recycling at home goes beyond simply 'acting' on a recycling message. Our findings suggest for food waste messages to be performative, a range of assemblages come together. Second, we explore agency, or lack of, and conclude that for performativity to be successful, it requires continuous support, action and repetition. We unpack hindrances to performativity, including neoliberal governance,

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3 market conditions and lack of agency in relation to food waste. Finally, we reveal how the  
4  
5 meaning of food waste has been changed by participation in a food recycling scheme  
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7  
8 changing the social reality of food waste.  
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### 10 **Research limitations/implications**

11  
12 Future research could take a multi stakeholder approach to explore the performativity of  
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14 household food waste and examine how consumers break previous, entrenched habits,  
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16 forming new practices in relation to food waste.  
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### 18 **Practical implications**

19  
20 Our study offers implications for policy makers by offering understanding on what  
21  
22 performativity of food waste recycling scheme means for consumers. We suggest offering  
23  
24 simple guidance for people, continuous support and communication focusing on the outcome  
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26 of the scheme which help enhance engagement and greater consideration for socio-  
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28 economically challenged consumers.  
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### 32 **Originality/value**

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34 The novelty to our paper lies in the context and approach. We study the underexplored  
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36 context of the recycling stage of food waste and post purchase consumer activity. A  
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38 performativity lens moves beyond the static conceptualisation of recycling as a given  
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40 sustainability act and draws our attention to the ways it is produced and reproduced.  
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46  
47 **Keywords:** Assemblage, Butler, Food Waste, Neoliberal Governance, Performativity,  
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## Assemblages, Utterances and Performativity: Consumers' Experience of Sustainable Disposal of Food Waste

### 1.0 Introduction

Food waste continues to be one of the most challenging factors affecting the sustainability agenda. The reduction of food waste is considered to be hugely significant for improving global food security and environmental sustainability (Porpino, 2016; West *et al.*, 2014). According to the United Nations, around 17% of total global food production is wasted and 11% of that is household food waste (United Nations, 2023). In developed countries households are major contributors to food waste with the WRAP report (2018/2020) claiming that 70% of UK food waste comes from households.

The problems of food waste in society have often been conceived as being principally a matter of individual and private consumer resolution - to be addressed by consumers taking responsibility for wastefulness in their homes (Candeal *et al.*, 2023). Research on household food waste has typically focused on the consumption stage, specifically the provision of cooking and managing leftovers, leaving out the disposal stage of the consumption cycle (Stancu *et al.*, 2016). The responsabilization of consumers, has led scholars to explore psychological, socio-demographic, anthropological and socio-cultural drivers of food waste within the household (Principato *et al.*, 2021) thus helping to develop an understanding of individual consumers' food waste attitudes and behaviours. The extant literature has led to policies and marketing communication interventions which aim to educate and change the behaviour of consumers (Reisch *et al.*, 2021; Zhang *et al.*, 2023). However, at the household level, food waste is a complex phenomenon of practices and meaning around food consumption and results from a range of interactions between economic factors, well established routines, and social norms (Piras *et al.*, 2021). The lack of understanding of this

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3 relational complexity has led to a limited understanding of the phenomenon, with limited  
4 focus on the process (for example, over focus on the consumption stage) and creates a blind  
5 spot, making it difficult to see how the contours and environmental cost of daily life evolves  
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10 (Shove, 2010).

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13 Food waste causes a significant environmental impact not only at the production,  
14 delivery, and consumption stage but also at the disposal stage through the emission of  
15 greenhouse gases by solid/wet waste disposal. The disposal stage of household food waste is  
16 a developing field of research and has received scant attention in marketing literature. Higher  
17 up on the waste management hierarchy, “recycling is a valuable mechanism which enables  
18 collection and separation of materials from waste and subsequent processing to produce  
19 marketable products” (Davies *et al.*, 2002, p.31) thereby changing the reality of products  
20 from waste to a resource (Varotto and Spagnolli, 2017). Recycling also offers consumers  
21 another mechanism to enact their environmental responsibility. The success of recycling is  
22 mainly attributed to consumers as they primarily take personal responsibility to separate their  
23 waste at home and engage with the recycling mechanisms (Dai *et al.*, 2015; Varotto and  
24 Spagnolli, 2017). However, the recycling process requires several facilities, demand for  
25 products, commercial possibilities, collection infrastructure and appropriate legislation and  
26 enforcement thereby making other stakeholders like governments, and waste management  
27 organisations responsible. Therefore, food waste is framed in the multistakeholder domain  
28 (Mesiranta *et al.*, 2022) and has been positioned as a hybrid responsibility  
29 (Aschemann-Witzel *et al.*, 2023). However, the extant research on recycling still focusses on  
30 the ‘the recycler’ by exploring the drivers and interventions to enhance engagement (Geiger  
31 *et al.*, 2019; Li *et al.*, 2021; Varotto and Spagnolli, 2017) or as ‘a moral act’ (Culiberg and  
32 Bajde, 2013; Smallbone, 2005). This individualistic focus creates the ideal of ‘a good citizen’  
33 (Coskuner-Balli, 2020) and expects individuals to act on the ‘recycling message’ by  
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3 marketizing the surrounding facilities (policies, training, material infrastructure etc) to  
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5 empower individuals to take the responsibility (Cherrier and Ture, 2023; Shove, 2010). It  
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7 deems responsibility of success or failure of a scheme to the individual, and not necessary  
8  
9 acknowledging the issues individuals may face (such as lack of time, abilities, limited or no  
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11 agency or super imposing responsibilities) and also detaches individual's actions from their  
12  
13 material and social context (Cherrier and Ture, 2023). The extant literature fails to take into  
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15 consideration the complexities of recycling emanating from the social and political  
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17 interactions between the micro (individual), meso (household) and macro (external to  
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19 household) levels (Roodhuyzen *et al.*, 2017; Boulet *et al.*, 2020). An overfocus on the  
20  
21 individual perspective suggests that recycling is a static entity. The focus has been on either  
22  
23 the individual recycler and their attitude and behaviour or on the surrounding system.  
24  
25 Whereas attention could be directed towards the interaction between the recycler, recycling  
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27 object and the recycling facilities and other assemblages for example, government policy,  
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29 information and community. The static approach does not fully explore the evolutionary  
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31 nature and complexity of food waste recycling i.e. how the idea of recycling acquires  
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33 meaning or can be acted upon in a context of mobilizing ideas, events and actors (Latour,  
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35 1986). An overfocus on the static approach to food waste recycling obscures the complexity  
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37 of the practices and the processes through which the concept is filled with meaning—the  
38  
39 underlying mechanisms of how the meaning here is acquired across time and acted on in  
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41 accordance with the respective interpretations are black-boxed (Chia, 1995; Hallin *et al.*,  
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43 2021).  
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52 In this paper we explore the recycling stage of food waste, which is a post purchase  
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54 consumer activity, which incorporates consumers' individual but also their social goals,  
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56 ideas, and ideologies (Culiberg and Bajde, 2013). We also showcase, consumers' cultural and  
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58 political attitude towards food waste policy. Secondly, we move beyond the static  
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3 conceptualisation of recycling as a sustainability act and adopt a performativity approach.

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5 Performativity is a post structural theory which both recognises the subjectivity of  
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7 participants within the world, and also the complexity of that world, complete with the  
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9 interplay of discursive norms that are developed through historical, cultural, and power  
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11 relations (Mason *et al.*, 2015; Scaraboto, 2015; Tadajewski, 2010). The concept of  
12  
13 performativity is helpful in this study as it involves the basic understanding that reality is  
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15 made up of constantly changing relationships between assemblages (for example, between  
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17 the message, the household, the local community, and the impact of (non) engagement in our  
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19 context) (Chia, 1995). Meanings are not defined in a permanent state as they undergo  
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21 constant change and negotiations (Hallin *et al.*, 2021). Performativity has the quality of: (1)  
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23 being consequential (depending on an existing ideological, material, social, and technological  
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25 state); (2) combining discourse and action; and (3) producing effects tied to what it describes  
26  
27 (having a transformational power) (Scaraboto, 2015, p.156). A performativity approach  
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29 highlights how recycling is not universally embraced rather it unpacks it from the black box  
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31 and draws our attention to the ways it is produced and reproduced (MacKenzie and Millo,  
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33 2003). Our main research aim is to ‘explore the performativity of the recycling of food waste  
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35 at the household level and answer what (un) performing this act means for the consumers’.  
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37 To answer this question, we investigated a newly implemented household food waste  
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39 collection trial scheme implemented by a local council in North of England (UK). The  
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41 scheme was trialled following the Environmental Act of 2021 and we drew on the lived  
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43 experience of 49 residents who participated in the food waste trial.  
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52 By exploring the performativity of food waste recycling and disposal within a  
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54 household context, we aim to contribute to marketing theory through an exploration of the  
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56 wider understanding of socio-cultural and political aspects of public engagement with policy,  
57  
58 and the social and cultural construction of food waste recycling at home. We reveal the role  
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of performativity to help change entrenched habits and to foster more environmentally friendly responses and behaviours towards food waste recycling. Whilst performativity has an important role in prompting and changing food waste formations and habits, the process of giving consumers responsibility for their food waste disposal, can be considered as a form of neoliberal consumer governance (Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria, 2021; Cherrier and Ture, 2023) and goes beyond the performativity of a message to engage and act. We reveal instances where consumers feel equipped to help reduce food waste when given the resources to cooperate. Nonetheless, despite the performativity of the message, and associated assemblages around acting to reduce food waste, neoliberal governance's mobilisation of consumers to engage and perform is not always acted upon and consumer agency and engagement is fraught with marketplace tensions.

The structure of the paper is as follows, in the literature review section, we introduce the theoretical angle of performativity and sustainability. We follow with the methods section which explains and justifies the qualitative methodology adopted to answer the questions and introduces the context. The findings of the analysis are then described and discussed while the conclusions section summarises the theoretical and practical contribution of the research.

## **2.0 Theoretical Underpinnings**

### *2.1 Performativity*

The term performativity can be traced back to Austin's (1962) idea of performative utterances, and the notion that speech acts can do more than simply describe an existing reality, they also carry an effect that they describe. A well cited example is a statement by a minister at a wedding ceremony, declaring, "I now pronounce you husband and wife". Butler (1993) argued that a performative speech act such as an idea, a message, or a value, produces action through repetition of a message, but before repetition can develop, the speech act must

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3 be persuasive. If action is not forthcoming, the message may therefore be considered to be  
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5 ineffective. An important aspect for marketing discourse is that the message must interact  
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7 with discursive norms. The message may seek to reinforce or challenge discursive norms  
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9 through, for example, building understanding, educating, manipulating, or stimulating the  
10  
11 consumer to act (Tadajewski, 2010). Performativity does not just explain social reality; it also  
12  
13 impacts and creates reality. Butler (2010) describes performativity as perlocutionary,  
14  
15 interventions that set in motion activities that could bring about phenomena and alter an  
16  
17 ongoing situation. Perlocutionary performativity is fundamental as it seek to understand  
18  
19 phenomena as open ended (Garud and Gehman, 2019). Thereby, Garud and Gehman (2019)  
20  
21 suggest performativity is not a destination, but an ongoing journey where an idea (a theory or  
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23 model) becomes enacted and can therefore create its effects, as opposed to that idea of it  
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25 being a more or less accurate representation of reality already in existence (Finch *et al.*,  
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Agencement is key to performativity (Callon, 2007) and the words, ideas, theories, or  
models alone do not achieve performativity. Consideration should be given to the contexts,  
situations and arrangements or assemblages that enable the performative nature of an  
utterance (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). Agencement is a composite consisting of  
heterogenous elements/actors human, non-human, technical and so on (i.e. assemblages),  
which adjust to one another and come to effect actions collectively (Caliskan and Callon,  
2010). It suggests the distributed nature of agency (Hawkins, 2013; Muniesa *et al.*, 2007) and  
Callon (2007) suggests, the meaning and efficacy of a statement are inextricably linked to  
these meticulously built assemblages that bolster the construction of the reality to which  
those words allude. Callon's (2007, p.13), "agencements" highlights assemblages' agentic  
role—that is, their "capacity of acting in different ways depending on their configuration."  
Performativity will be able to shape reality when it is supported by the agencement and

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3 echoes a prior action, for example, through repetition and citation of a prior set of practices  
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5 (Butler, 1993). However, performativity is not in evidence when the actors do not have  
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7 agency and are doomed to endlessly repeat themselves (Jackson, 2004). As Butler (1993)  
8  
9 suggests, “compulsion to repeat is not necessarily the compulsion to repeat in the same way  
10  
11 or to stay fully within the traumatic orbit of that repetition” (p. 124). It assumes that an entity  
12  
13 is ‘in-the-making’, indicating that those involved are acquiring agency and encountering  
14  
15 uncertainty as they plan actions (Finch *et al.*, 2015). Discussing Callon’s perspective on  
16  
17 agency’, Cochoy *et al.* (2016) perceive agency as a process, which predicates action, i.e.  
18  
19 setting up, arranging or combining a set of given elements in an agencement (Cochoy, 2014)  
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21 while realising that the arrangements change as per time and factors beyond actors’ control so  
22  
23 adjustments must be made (Garud and Tharchen, 2016). Performativity expects that theories  
24  
25 and practices will be constituted, de-constituted and reconstituted as per the relationality  
26  
27 between social and material elements and temporality – the relationship between past, present  
28  
29 and future (Garud and Tharchen, 2016; Garud and Gehman, 2019). The intention of actors,  
30  
31 serendipity and unanticipated events influenced by the agencements sway these outcomes  
32  
33 (Garud and Gehman, 2019). In the following section, we discuss the limitations of the neo  
34  
35 liberal conceptualisation of sustainability and position sustainability in the context of  
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37 performativity thus helping to build a discourse around the performativity of food waste  
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39 recycling schemes.  
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## 48 *2.2 Sustainability and Performativity*

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50 A performative explanation of sustainability refers to the notion of ‘sustainability as  
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52 practiced’ (Interzari, 2015) and Intezari (2015) suggests, the applying of wisdom of  
53  
54 sustainability in practice. Hallin and colleagues (2021) argue that defining “sustainability” as  
55  
56 “a codified and stable ‘what’” (p.1949) reduces this important construct to a list that in itself  
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58 does not lead to the achieving of that list. Instead, the focus needs to be on the “how,” that is,  
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3 the actual doing of sustainability (DuPuis and Ball, 2013, p.64). From this perspective, the  
4 meaning of “sustainability” emerges across time through the power of association whereby  
5 humans, ideas, and events are mobilized and associated with the concept in nonverbal action  
6 (Callon, 2007; Latour, 1987) as well as in discourse and through language-in-use (Hajer and  
7 Versteeg, 2005). This results in ‘sustainability’ being filled with meaning as it is performed  
8 in both talk and action (MacKenzie and Millo, 2003). To define something performatively, is  
9 to study how a concept acquires meaning across time and how it emerges as people speak  
10 about it or perform in accordance with their interpretation of it (Latour, 1987). Performativity  
11 also tends to see a relationship between the physical objects and things as the units of analysis  
12 (Chia, 1995, p.582). Emphasising the ‘relational perspective’, Heiskanen (2005) suggest that  
13 more attention should be paid to the context as the realities do not lie in the individual  
14 elements but relations between these elements and the things that hold these elements  
15 together (Law and Hassard, 1999).

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Contrary to this relational perspective, many sustainable interventions place responsibility with the consumer for tackling societal problems, including poverty, climate change, food inequality and wastage issues (Giesler and Veresiu 2014, 2018; Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021; Shove, 2010). Veresiu and Giesler (2018, p.255) suggest this speaks to a neoliberal ideology, that “encourage [s] all citizens to become active and responsible consumer subjects...obliged to help solve pressing social issues through their everyday consumption choices”. The underlying assumption is that consumers are morally inclined subjects who want to act responsibly to support and help institutions, organisations and governments reach their aspirations and goals (Bardhi and Eckhardt 2017). Simultaneously the consumer subject is supposed to possess the wherewithal (economic, social and cultural resources) to be able to act in a morally responsible manner (Giesler and Veresiu, 2014). This framing of a responsible consumer speaks to the notion of neoliberal governance, whereby

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3 responsibility is transferred from state or corporate entities to individual consumers (Cherrier  
4 and Ture, 2023; Gonzalez-Arcos *et al.*, 2021). Hence, consumers become persuaded by  
5 increased personal freedom, possibilities of self-realization and improving quality of life for  
6 themselves and others (Pyysiainen *et al.*, 2017). The often-unspoken caveat being that  
7 consumers may feel as though they should have some kind of agency to take responsibility  
8 for societal issues, be that embracing frugal food consumption habits to reduce food waste or  
9 being able to achieve family buy-in for a household food waste scheme. Ultimately not all  
10 consumers feel like they have choices or sufficient control (Lambert, 2019) and this is  
11 especially pertinent for socially and economically challenged consumers who, maybe living  
12 more precariously (Jones *et al.*, 2023).

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26 Neoliberal governance seeks to provide “positive enabling systems conditions”  
27 (Pellizzoni, 2011, p.797) to engage consumers and to act, and Cherrier and Ture (2023)  
28 suggest this includes employing self-management and assessment techniques of one’s own  
29 behaviour, albeit this may be illusionary, and a degree of societal surveillance can occur –  
30 others are assessing your food waste behaviour and actions (positively and negatively) for  
31 example. As such, neoliberal governance may frame food waste as a result of individual  
32 choices and personal responsibility. Community engagement with food waste schemes can  
33 unintentionally reinforce neoliberal ideologies by promoting the importance of consuming  
34 more carefully thus highlighting the importance of food planning, and suggesting consumers  
35 can become ‘entrepreneurial actors’ and can collaborate with other market actors (retailers  
36 and councils for example) to monitor and manage food waste (Cherrier and Ture, 2023;  
37 Remy *et al.*, 2023). However, Remy and colleagues (2023) suggest neoliberal ideologies and  
38 governance maintain an illusion of virtuous consumption and behaviour, and Shove (2010)  
39 recommends a shift away from the emphasis on individual choice and behaviours and  
40 advocates for more explicit attention on the fabric of consumer society that remains largely  
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3 unchanged. Shove (2010) and Remy et al. (2023) suggest that emphasizing individual  
4 responsibility for some of societal issues overlooks the infrastructure that instils and promotes  
5 consumers desires and habits.  
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10 Echoing Shove's (2010) concerns and taking a performativity perspective, Heiskanen  
11 (2005) suggests that it is important to study how a sustainable consumer is constructed in a  
12 relational perspective i.e. what situations and context, and the interactions thereby are  
13 performed which create/change the social reality of a sustainable consumer. This creates an  
14 enacting consumer, whereby the context plays an important role in bringing these consumers  
15 to life (Cova and Cova, 2012; Fuentes, 2014), and this enactment is negotiated and impacts  
16 reality itself (Dobbe and Cederberg, 2023). Consumers' 'sustainable performativity',  
17 constitutes the changing reality by accepting, forming networks (collective responsibility),  
18 negotiating, rejecting, counter conducting, resisting, or showing indifference (Cherrier *et al.*,  
19 2011; Cherrier and Ture, 2023; Dobbe and Cederberg, 2023). Thereby impacting the nature  
20 of reality and impacting the positioning and repositioning of the assemblage around them in  
21 both the expected manner or as counter-performative (MacKenzie, 2007) by producing an  
22 effect that either mis or back-fires (Butler, 2010; Callon 2007).  
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40 A performative perspective of sustainability has been used to explore meanings of  
41 'sustainability' (Hallin *et al.*, 2021) and has focused on interactions between an object/market  
42 device (Third party Certification), constructing realities (Konefal and Hatanaka, 2011), co-  
43 constructing sustainability by coffee farmers (Onyas *et al.*, 2018), the interaction of  
44 technology and eco behaviour (Normak and Tholander, 2014). These examples reveal how  
45 sustainability emerges both in and through discourse and language-in-use (de Burgh-  
46 Woodman and King, 2012), and finally how objects and humans entangled in daily practices  
47 perform sustainability in several ways (Corvellec, 2016; Finch *et al.*, 2015).  
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In this paper, we take the performative perspective on sustainability to understand household food waste recycling as a process of relationship and interaction between the policy, devices (information pamphlet, green bin) and actors (people) and how the ‘meaning’ emerges because of these “agencements” and how it re/creates the reality. We aim to understand the recycling transition not through the lens of how it may be desired or enacted politically (through a recycling policy), but how it is actually formed through everyday lived practices.

### 3.0 Research Context

In August 2022, a city council in the north of England launched a 12-week pilot household food waste collection scheme to residents located in four districts in the region. Each of the four districts selected by the council for participation in the pilot food waste scheme differed significantly in terms of social-economic demographics and profiles. Two of the food waste trial districts were affluent. In contrast, the other two trial neighbourhood districts were considered to be socially and economically deprived (OECD, 2021). In total, 8,200 households received food waste bins, refuse liners, and instructions (leaflet) on how to use the food waste caddies. The instructions included suggestions on what constituted accepted food waste for recycling and details of the bin collection process. Butler (1997) draws a distinction between illocutionary performatives, which pronounce a reality, and perlocutionary performatives which in suitable conditions certain things should happen. The inverse can also be true in the perlocutionary form, and certain conditions might hamper or prevent things happening (Callon, 2007) and we are conscious that the leaflet informing residents about the food waste scheme and its mechanics was delivered to residents during a cost-of-living crisis, including a period of excessive food inflation. There is a risk that the leaflet will draw attention to a problem that for the more economically deprived consumers is not fully realised. Socio-economically disadvantaged consumers are more likely to be diligent

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3 in their food preparation and planning, thus ensuring they have a minimum amount of food  
4 waste. The leaflet, which includes an image of vegetables, bread, eggshells, and the remnants  
5 of a chicken in a food waste bin may serve as a reminder of possible disparities between more  
6 economically deprived lifestyles, and middle-class consumers and the communications could  
7 misfire. The pilot scheme aimed to help the council learn the extent of how many households  
8 would recycle their food waste, and to estimate the scale of food waste likely to be collected  
9 in the area in the future. The pilot was designed to address the prominent levels of food waste  
10 collected across the city, with 33 per cent of residual waste bins containing food waste  
11 (gov.uk, 2022). The council estimate that food waste collection will reduce carbon dioxide  
12 emissions from discarded food, contributing to the council's overall objective to become net-  
13 zero by 2030.

#### 28 29 **4.0 Methods**

30  
31 This research draws on data from a wider study on sustainability and food waste. The study is  
32 grounded in phenomenology which emphasises an exploration of the nature of a  
33 phenomenon. We seek to the understand the lived experience (Thompson, *et al.*, 1989) of  
34 household members with regard to their food preparation, habits, knowledge, and  
35 engagement with food waste. Participants were asked to consider particular experiences in  
36 relation to preparing, cooking, and eating, and crucially to consider their food waste and use  
37 of the food waste system. Reflecting and thinking about food waste experiences (positive or  
38 negative) can have an impact not only directly on our future experiences, but is important for  
39 how people view their current life, and can be considered as a relevant proxy for well-being  
40 (Mugel *et al.*, 2019)

41  
42 Drawing on interpretivist data from 49 households as part of the pilot food waste  
43 collection project, we specifically explored the adoption and usage of the food waste bins and  
44 the disposal of food waste in the home, and its intersection with wider social fields. A



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3 sampling call included leaflet advertisements targeting households in the food waste pilot  
4  
5 scheme, door knocking, postings in various local Facebook groups, local radio and press  
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7 promotion raising awareness of the study and calling for participants. Participants were  
8  
9 recruited from all 4 trial districts of the pilot food waste scheme, using a combination of  
10  
11 purposive and snowball sampling.  
12  
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14  
15 Data collection involved visiting the 49 households, and spending time with  
16  
17 participants in-situ, and observing their food waste practices. The research team observed that  
18  
19 the majority of the food waste bins were placed in a convenient location in the kitchen.  
20  
21 Participants in flats had limited space and often placed the food waste bin on their kitchen  
22  
23 windowsills, close to the food preparation area, or occasionally in a cupboard, again close to  
24  
25 the food preparation area. Household participants with more space, often placed the food  
26  
27 waste bin on the floor, next to their main disposal bin. Participants would either recite what  
28  
29 was acceptable to dispose in the food waste caddy or refer to the leaflet and given that the  
30  
31 trial had been in operation for a few weeks, participants were generally accustomed to using  
32  
33 the caddies (or not). These everyday practices led the researchers to tentatively consider  
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35 performativity.  
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41 During our visits to participants' homes, informal conversations of up to 30 minutes  
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43 about their food and consumption choices occurred, and we were often shown kitchens, food  
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45 cupboards, and food waste bins in action. Being invited into participants' houses and  
46  
47 engaging in these conversations helped the research team to build rapport and trust with the  
48  
49 participants and we were occasionally offered a cup of tea before the interview started.  
50  
51 Participants were extremely open about sharing something quite personal – details about their  
52  
53 food and meal choices and showing us their food preparation and disposal. Members of the  
54  
55 research team photographed the participants' food waste bins (sometimes empty, partially  
56  
57 full, or brimming with food waste) and the area in the household where the food waste bin.  
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3 Photographs were stored on the researchers' smart phones. Photographing the food waste  
4 bins offered an opportunity of getting closer to participants food waste engagement (Hein *et*  
5 *al.*, 2011; Hurworth, 2004) and zooming in on specific details about meal preparation, and  
6 food waste disposal. The photographs, often taken during or before an interview, were  
7 frequently shown to the participant in the interview and involved auto-driving techniques  
8 (Heisley and Levy, 1991), whereby participants were presented with the stimuli  
9 (photographs) and then asked to "tell me about this experience". The profiles of the  
10 participants are presented in *Table 1*.

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22 In total, 49 interviews were undertaken over the twelve weeks of the food waste pilot  
23 scheme and interviews ranged from 35 minutes to one hour and 25 minutes. Interviews were  
24 recorded and then later transcribed verbatim. The interviews were undertaken with a  
25 household participant who deemed themselves most responsible for overseeing and engaging  
26 with the food waste bins and typically this person was primarily responsible for food  
27 shopping, preparation of meals, and usually responsible for putting the food waste bin out for  
28 collection on a weekly basis. The interview took the participants on a journey of 'how food is  
29 performed in their house' and centred around food behaviour in the household including,  
30 provisioning, cooking, cleaning, managing food leftovers, shared responsibilities in the  
31 households, then leading to the specific context of food waste management practices, usage  
32 of food waste bins and collection service and how it is 'performed' in the house  
33 (Lincoln,1995). Notes were taken during the interviews and memos were constructed after  
34 each interview identifying emergent themes. All participant names were changed to ensure  
35 confidentiality and informed consent was given. Institutional ethical approval was gained for  
36 the study. The data (interviews and photographs) was analysed using an inductive approach  
37 which involved the identification of emergent themes through a back-and-forth process  
38 between data and extant literature (Spiggle, 1994). In the tradition of previous interpretive  
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3 studies that have approached food waste, recycling, and sustainability (Cherrier and Ture  
4  
5 2023; Gonzalez-Arcos *et al.*, 2021; Narvanen *et al.*, 2022), no preconceived hypothetical  
6  
7 framework was used to guide or constrain our analyses. Instead, categories emerged  
8  
9 inductively through open and axial coding, and these were developed into three themes with  
10  
11 explanatory concepts from the literature as we discovered them. It was through this emergent  
12  
13 design that led us to writings on performativity and the project's analytical focus became  
14  
15 crystallized, as our principal theoretical lens. Our three themes were further developed and  
16  
17 refined with secondary theoretical materials which helped to label, abstract and integrate of a  
18  
19 number of occurrences (Spiggle, 1994). The results are presented in detail in the following  
20  
21 sections. As a research team, we applied Hogg and Maclaran's (2008) analytical framework  
22  
23 (authenticity, plausibility, and criticality) to guide our data analysis. All the team members  
24  
25 read the transcripts individually, made notes and aimed to obtain a view of individual  
26  
27 participants' experience (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). Following on from that, they then  
28  
29 proceeded to compile their thoughts, memos, and codes to all 49 interviews, gaining a holistic  
30  
31 overview of all participants narratives. The analysis focused on understanding how food and  
32  
33 food recycling is (un)performed in the households, participants' experience with the  
34  
35 assemblages and the surrounding critical incidences. The authors then shared the notes and  
36  
37 compared their interpretation and analysis with the other members discussing the fit with the  
38  
39 theoretical themes. This led to shared understanding of the emerging themes and assisted in  
40  
41 ensuring the authenticity and trustworthiness of the interpretation and theory building (Hogg  
42  
43 and Maclaran, 2008).  
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54 *Insert Table 1 here.*

## 58 **5.0 Findings**

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3 We analyse the data by taking a performative approach which emphasises how meanings of  
4 the household food waste recycling scheme emerge as participants (un) perform it. We take a  
5 relational perspective and aim to understand the agentic role of human (participants and  
6 neighbours) and non-human (pamphlet, bin, infrastructure, food waste) by uncovering how  
7 they relate, arrange, interact and affect each other during this process to create meaning and  
8 potentially alter one's lived reality. We first visit the performativity of the message, as  
9 utterance (message from the council) was the beginning of the scheme. We discuss how  
10 performativity is not simply achieved by the leaflet about the food waste scheme. Our  
11 findings suggest that for food waste messages to be performative, a range of assemblages  
12 come together. Second, we explore agency or lack of and conclude that agency of human  
13 actors is not just an essential characteristic but is contextual and situated in the relational  
14 arrangements of assemblages and affected by the temporality i.e. relationship between past,  
15 present and future. For performativities to be successful, it requires continuous support,  
16 action and repetition and we unpack hindrances to performativity, including market  
17 conditions and lack of consumer agency in relation to food waste. Finally, our third theme  
18 reveals how the meaning of food waste has been altered and challenged by participation in a  
19 food waste scheme, thus changing the social reality of food waste.

### 5.1 Message: Utterance and Agencement in Performativity

46 A central tenant of performativity is the doings, sayings and messages that can give rise to,  
47 and have certain effects, tied to what it describes (Mason *et al.*, 2015; Scaraboto, 2015). In  
48 this theme we are particularly interested in the leaflet (the message) that introduced and  
49 outlined how the food waste scheme would work, the participants responsibilities, and the  
50 accompanying technical agencements (caddies, biodegradable bags, details of the collection  
51 service). The leaflets arrived in the trial population's letterboxes some weeks before the food  
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3 waste trial started, and it encouraged residents to take part in the voluntary scheme. Virginia,  
4  
5 spoke about how the leaflet and message educated her about the food waste trial scheme:  
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10 *“First time I saw it (the leaflet) it taught me how to do it, and I really, really love it.*  
11 *Because before that we put everything in the black bin. Especially during summer,*  
12 *it’s really horrible with the food waste smell, something like that is really horrible. I*  
13 *really enjoy it and try it. But it still needs time to practise... the leaflet, I still keep it*  
14 *and read it, it’s really good. So, I keep it over here. The information is so good.”*  
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21 *(Virginia)*  
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26 Our participant, Virginia describes how the leaflet (message) from the council on the use of  
27 food waste bins was effective in informing and educating her about the food waste scheme,  
28 thus producing a cause and effect – invoking engagement (Butler, 1993; Visconti, 2016) and  
29 it enticed her to take part in the scheme. The leaflet itself suggests that consumers can choose  
30 to act more responsibly if they elect to engage and use the food waste bin. Shove (2010,  
31 p.1275) describes how organisations and institutions coalesce the consumer to be involved in  
32 sustainable practices or adopt ‘pro-environmental behaviours’ and suggests that dropping  
33 solutions into people’s daily lives. For example, a leaflet explaining your potential role with  
34 supporting food waste disposal, can potentially lead to changes in outlook and behaviour and  
35 speaks to the notion of neoliberal governance. Scaraboto (2015, p.157) suggests that  
36  
37 “performativities need to be continuously supported to remain effective” and having the  
38 leaflet to-hand allowed Virginia to re-visit it, and the leaflet acts as an aide-memoir for what  
39 can be deposited in the recycling bins. Another participant, Susanah, explains her initial  
40 resistance towards the food waste scheme and the usefulness of the leaflet simplified her role  
41 in acting:  
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6 *I thought 'Oh what's all this... Oh I've got to read a leaflet', honestly, but then I*  
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8 *thought you know what, what is this actually? And what happened was I didn't do*  
9  
10 *anything and then I saw a neighbour had put their bin out and I thought there was*  
11  
12 *that thing that came through and I haven't done anything. I remembered the leaflet.*  
13  
14 *I'm thinking I've got to take something else on board, but then maybe I got the*  
15  
16 *message it was a food waste bin and we were supposed to start doing this thing, and*  
17  
18 *then I saw a neighbour opposite had put one out, and I thought oh shame on me, I*  
19  
20 *should have been ready for this, so then I read the leaflet and I thought actually it's*  
21  
22 *quite simple. We read it out, you know, to introduce it to the house, and we had a bit*  
23  
24 *of a joke about it, and I said, 'We've been beaten by the neighbours, but I'm*  
25  
26 *determined to get it out this week'. I was really on board with it. When I read the*  
27  
28 *leaflet, I thought this is great, we can put everything in there and it's better than a*  
29  
30 *compost bin in a way (Susanah)*  
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38 Susanah initially discarded the leaflet, however engagement with food waste bins by a close  
39 neighbour prompted Susanah to revisit the leaflet. Here we see that performativity is not  
40 solely achieved by the leaflet or the message alone, utterances (the message) need to be  
41 contextualised in arrangements or assemblages (Hawkins, 2013; Scaraboto, 2015).  
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45 Assemblage captures the coming together of diverse elements such as discourses, institutional  
46 forms, people and devices (Wilshusen, 2019). The message (leaflet) to engage with and use  
47 the food waste bins, is most effective when Susanah sees her neighbour putting out the food  
48 waste bin in readiness for collection. Other actors (i.e. neighbours') engagement with the  
49 food waste bins, reshapes, and modifies Susanah's behaviour, including reading the leaflet  
50 aloud to family members to ensure the household participates.  
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3 The leaflet from the council states, “All you will need to do is empty any food waste  
4 you have, such as plate scrapings, peelings and tea bags into the new food recycling caddy  
5 and then put it out for collection in your new food waste recycling bin”. Performativity is  
6 effective when it “echoes a prior action” (Butler, 1993: 19) and the potential success of the  
7 food waste scheme can be linked to the idea that consumers are presumably accustomed to  
8 scrapping plate food waste into a bin, and the leaflet is keen to espouse this is simply about  
9 now adopting the food recycling caddy for food waste. However, when a performativity is  
10 considered to be effective, it can also produce effects that hinder or undermine the  
11 performativity (Callon, 2007). The leaflet states food waste will be “collected every week”,  
12 and the scheme encourages consumers to “recycle more of your waste” and it is “easy and  
13 convenient” (See Figure 1). However, more socio-economically deprived consumers may not  
14 necessarily have sufficient food waste to dispose of in the recycling receptacle and the idea of  
15 putting out a waste bin on a weekly basis, does not compute when small quantities of waste  
16 reside in the bin. The leaflet insists recycling is easy and convenient, and the imagery and  
17 message speaks to a consumer that appears to have control over their lives. It requires a level  
18 of effort to ensure waste is disposed of in the correct bin, and socio-economically challenged  
19 consumers are more likely to be too time constrained to participate (Carolan, 2021) especially  
20 compared to middle-class participants that are more mobile, time rich and inclined to try new  
21 experiences and embrace learning opportunities (Weinberger *et al.*, 2017).  
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49 Insert Figure 1 here

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51 In one of the socially and economically challenged areas where the food waste recycling trial  
52 was taking place, a resident in the area, Dean, discussed how he was reluctant to engage with  
53 the caddy bin, potentially suffering from choice overload (another bin and more effort  
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3 required) where fatigue or withdrawal can eschew. However, Dean is keen to espouse the  
4  
5 effect his neighbours had on encouraging him to participate in the food waste scheme:  
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10 *“I did moan about it, because I know a lot of people have got like the blue, the brown*  
11 *and the black bin and I thought what, another one. And then I got confused because I*  
12 *looked and there was another bin inside it, so I kept them both out there and my*  
13 *neighbour said no, you bring the little one in... My neighbours were doing it, I think*  
14 *that they got quite on it straight way and then I said ‘Oh I didn’t realise there was*  
15 *another bin there’ so I think some of that encouraged me, and I was seeing others*  
16 *putting their bin out, so that’s another thing. It felt like another effort, another thing*  
17 *you had to do, another chore. I said at first that I’m not going to be bothered, and I*  
18 *don’t get rid of much waste, then after a while I thought come on, let’s give it a go.”*  
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30 *(Dean)*  
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35 Susannah was enthusiastic to participate in the scheme after witnessing her neighbour’s  
36 engagement, and Dean complied with the food waste system after receiving support and  
37 encouragement from his neighbours. Normative and societal pressures, to be seen as a ‘good  
38 citizen’ is another component or assemblage that supports sustainable engagement as  
39 embodied social expectations prevail and reinforces a neoliberal view, that when given the  
40 information and resources to act, consumers should be able to do so (Carolan, 2021).  
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49 The leaflet (message) alone, encouraging consumers to engage with a food waste  
50 scheme, cannot be disassociated from assemblages, and this was evident in our discussion  
51 with Fiona:  
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3 *“I think the information we got from the council; I think that was easy to read, the*  
4 *picture infographics. Luckily, we’ve got the space to have everything [see Figure 2],*  
5 *so it doesn’t impact us trying to find a space.” (Fiona)*  
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11 Insert Figure 2 here.  
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15  
16 The leaflet about the food waste scheme requires people to take it up – utterance and  
17 endeavour to make it happen (Butler, 2010) and in the same interview, Fiona, describes how  
18 her engagement with the food waste scheme is contextualised within a number of  
19  
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22  
23 assemblages:  
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26  
27 *“I think the climate crisis is more what I’m looking at and going, well how can I do*  
28 *my little bit to help. That is trying to just reduce waste. I think it was around the*  
29 *pandemic when everybody was overbuying and then they were finding lots of people*  
30 *just wasting things. Again, I thought it was really bad and it’s just going to rot... I*  
31 *think it’s just watching programmes and reading about food waste. I think I got some*  
32 *books from Hugh Fearnley- Whittingstall and he’s got his leftover books. I like the*  
33 *way he writes. Because he writes his books about a specific ingredient, I find that*  
34 *easier to then use up stuff”. (Fiona)*  
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48 Fiona’s is connecting the climate crisis to individual consumption choices and neoliberal  
49 governance is enforced when people conceptualise individual choices and decisions at a more  
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local level with broader societal issues, and this can risk ignoring more global food flows or  
the political economy of food production for example (Warhowsky, 2019). The assemblages  
of climate change, excessive wastage during the Covid-19 pandemic, watching TV  
programmes and the influence of a celebrity food campaigner has influenced Fiona to comply

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3 with the food waste scheme. Arguably, it is this wider discourse around food waste that  
4  
5 produces the effects of consumers engaging with the food waste scheme, however, the  
6  
7 participants were in a system where they received information via the leaflet. This was also  
8  
9 evident when we interviewed participant, David:

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15 *I think I've thrown the leaflet. No, I don't think it was informative enough. I think that*  
16  
17 *it might have encouraged people a little bit more, just to do that extra thing. It's not*  
18  
19 *much scraping your plate into a biodegradable bag and putting it in a little green,*  
20  
21 *separate bin is there (...)* I think the most significant change that I can mention, what  
22  
23 *we've found- you touched on it when you said that things come together - these trials*  
24  
25 *and coming up with food waste collections, coupled together with soaring energy*  
26  
27 *costs, the prices in supermarkets, it's brought that general awareness into*  
28  
29 *everybody's household what you think it's important now. I really must make this*  
30  
31 *food go as far as possible and waste as least as possible (Dave).*  
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38 A number of participants, particularly in the two trial areas endured challenging socio-  
39  
40 economic issues and circumstances. Dave shared his lived experience of the cost-of-living  
41  
42 crisis and issues around food waste. The food waste bins do not necessarily address problems  
43  
44 of food waste directly, but can help shape reality (Hawkins, 2013), in that it brings into focus  
45  
46 other economic struggles that Dave and his family are facing. Engaging with the food waste  
47  
48 bins cannot be disassociated from other assemblages – namely, soaring energy costs, and  
49  
50 food inflation.  
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## 55 56 5.2 Performative (non) agency 57 58 59 60

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3 The performative self comes into being through behaviours and actions, which are typically  
4 considered to be repetitive, and consumers act in ways in accordance with their own cultural  
5 experiences (Butler, 1993). Performativity will be effective when consumers are supported  
6 and it echoes a prior action (Butler, 1993; Scaraboto, 2015). In this theme, we are interested  
7 in situations when performativity is compromised, and the resulting action is not always  
8 enabled or sufficient. Our data suggests situations exist with food waste recycling, where the  
9 consumer does not necessarily feel they have sufficient agency or are inhibited by external  
10 conditions to engage with the food waste trial. This sits in contrast with the notion that  
11 consumers are responsible for waste and can take action to reduce it, which aligns closely to  
12 the idea of neoliberal consumer governance (Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria 2021; Coskuner-Balli  
13 2020; Giesler and Veresiu 2014). Performativity has perlocutionary effects (Mason *et al.*,  
14 2015) which need to occur under the right conditions. Jo has always recycled, but she had to  
15 downsize and lives in a flat. Her food waste recycling attempts have been compromised:

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*“I sound really old fashioned but it’s like we had a pot man come around and we used  
to take our glass bottles back to the pot man. Like the milkman, he came, you  
recycled. We’ve been doing it for years and I always think that it’s this generation  
that’s the throwaway society. Not us, it’s not our generation. And we composted that  
has stuck with me, but obviously I’ve come to a flat and I think well I can’t do that, but  
I encourage others to recycle what they can, because I am aware of like I said, the  
landfill. Where is it all going to go, and we’re paying the price, aren’t we now.” (Jo)*

Jo’s ability to build on her previous actions (continue to recycle), a key determinant of  
performativity (Butler, 1993), is hampered by her current living circumstances. However, the  
food waste scheme itself had a performative effect, and Jo is keen to espouse the benefits of

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3 recycling to others. Her performativity has not been undermined, even if her ability to  
4  
5 directly act and recycle has.  
6

7  
8 We next turn to Janice, and the idea of perlocutionary effects and agency is pertinent.  
9  
10 For food waste schemes to be effective, performativity in the market requires the right  
11  
12 conditions, activities, and practices to be in place (Mason *et al.*, 2015). Janice is sceptical  
13  
14 about trying to engage consumers in a low-income trial area, and suggests food waste might  
15  
16 be minimal in low-income households, and the current cost-of-living crisis means that food  
17  
18 waste is not necessarily a major priority for some consumers:  
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24 *“I think that it’s interesting that this area was chosen. It’s not an affluent area, it is*  
25 *mainly an ex-council estate and what we used to have around here, not so much now*  
26 *because they’re all closed down, is a lot of what I would call cheap food shops that*  
27 *sell a lot of processed, pre-packaged foods. I can’t imagine there would be a lot of*  
28 *food waste from that. So, you’ve got people on fixed and low incomes, and we are*  
29 *quite lucky to be able to afford to cook and eat the way that we do... But yeah, and I*  
30 *don’t know if that’s a barrier to food waste, recycling, because they have not got any*  
31 *food waste to recycle (...) Recycling issues, hmmm. I imagine for your average family*  
32 *living on this estate, it’s not a priority (Janice)*  
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47 Janice suggests that potentially low participation rates and engagement with the food waste  
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49 scheme can be traced to the lack of food waste in low-income households. They are acutely  
50  
51 aware that they must prepare and consume food carefully as to avoid waste – a sense of  
52  
53 neoliberal governance (Cherrier and Ture, 2023) in that consumers should evaluate and  
54  
55 regulate their own actions. However, class dynamics are an important consideration for  
56  
57 engagement (or lack of) with food waste systems and Janice, who resides in a socio-  
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3 economically challenged area, is unable to hide her surprise that the scheme is underway in  
4  
5 her economically deprived neighbourhood. Weinberger and colleagues (2017) assert that  
6  
7 middle class consumers can act in relation to their imagined futures and thus would be more  
8  
9 likely to participate in a food waste scheme as they have concern for the future of the planet  
10  
11 and inter-generational equality. Whereas more working class and socio-economically  
12  
13 challenged consumers may become suffocated by uncertainty. Projecting ahead and trying to  
14  
15 imagine the future is problematic, and can actually be disconcerting (Weinberger et al.,  
16  
17 2017). Therefore, supporting a sustainable agenda might just seem too distant from their  
18  
19 everyday lives so less of an immediate concern.  
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23  
24 Susanah, resides in a more prosperous socio-economic area, nonetheless, she suggests  
25  
26 the demands and responsibilities of everyday life makes her feel ‘bombarded’ and  
27  
28 overwhelmed and as a result of busyness, consumers may struggle to engage with schemes to  
29  
30 help solve societal issues, such as food waste:  
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34  
35 *“I think that a lot of us do feel a bit bombarded. If you’ve got quite a busy schedule,*  
36  
37 *which a lot of people if you're working and you’ve got children or if you haven’t got*  
38  
39 *children, if you’ve just got a job holding down a job and a life it’s enough isn’t it, and*  
40  
41 *I think that we all feel a bit bombarded, so it does depend on—I had been half aware of*  
42  
43 *it and then I was jogged by the neighbour and I thought ‘if she can do it then I can do*  
44  
45 *it’ and this is a good thing, let’s sit down and read it. And then it turned out to be*  
46  
47 *much easier than I expected. (Susanah)*  
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54 Despite feeling overwhelmed, Susanah’s eventual engagement with the food waste bins  
55  
56 suggests she want to be a responsible consumer (Eckhardt and Dobscha, 2019) and became  
57  
58 motivated by the sight of her neighbour engaging with the food waste bins. This notion of  
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3 being “busy” and having competing roles and responsibilities as a barrier to engaging with  
4  
5 the food waste scheme was also suggested by participant, Nabeela:  
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10 *“Because nowadays we are so hurried. I was in Pakistan, and I was doing a job. I*  
11 *was also a teacher; I was teaching English over there. But when I came over here*  
12 *(UK), I realised, that people - we don’t have much time, we have to do lots of work. If*  
13 *I talk about myself, then I know that this is the food, if we have finished the food then I*  
14 *know where I have to put the food things in the bin. Even my husband, he knows that*  
15 *if I’m out of the city, then he knows actually where he has to put the food things. But*  
16 *most of the people they don’t want to bother with that. Why? They just say oh my*  
17 *god, it’s such a headache. Why we have to put this one over there, this one over*  
18 *there. Just put it into the one bag and just take the bag out and just throw it into that.*  
19 *Because maybe they have mental pressure, they don’t want to take the mental*  
20 *pressure. Or maybe they are so busy in their work like. Like most of the people said*  
21 *that when you are working, then you can’t think about other stuff. That’s why, that’s*  
22 *the reason they don’t want to bother like to use the food bags or food bin.” (Nabeela)*  
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42 As Nabeela suggests, consumers have overlapping (and sometimes conflicting)  
43 responsibilities that need to be negotiated in their everyday lives as superimposing  
44 responsibilities (e.g., working and managing a household while sorting waste) and there are  
45 tensions that being a responsible consumer brings (Cherrier and Ture, 2023). Our data also  
46 highlights how potential financial constraints (Phipps and Ozanne, 2017) can potentially  
47 prevent consumers from integrating responsibilities of food waste into their everyday lives,  
48 and participant, Jayne, illustrates this:  
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3 *“I know at first, they said it’s not going to cost you anything and they provide the*  
4 *bins, and they provide the compostable bags that go in them, but I think that a few*  
5 *people were saying that they ran out quite quickly. And obviously one of my main*  
6 *concerns as well as the smell and people were saying about going and buying bleach*  
7 *to go and clean them out, but again it’s all an extra cost to people that possibly can’t*  
8 *afford it.” (Jayne)*  
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19 The amount, or contribution that on a micro level, individual or collective, consumer  
20 households can make to the overall effect of reducing food waste is often contested and  
21 discussed by participants. Despite feeling empowered by the arrival of the food waste  
22 receptacle, consumers feel their agency only goes so far, and more is needed to be done by  
23 other market-place actors (Carrington *et al.*, 2016; Remy *et al.*, 2023), such as supermarkets.  
24 The supposed lack of sustainable focus work by them and other stakeholders on reducing  
25 food waste, hinders the enthusiasm for engaging and utilising the food waste bins. Jayne  
26 articulated this perspective in our interview with her:  
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40 *“Well as far as households go it’s a minor problem. I think that you need to look at*  
41 *more your supermarkets and things like that and what they do with their food waste*  
42 *and where that goes.” (Jayne)*  
43  
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49 Jayne suggests supermarkets need to assume more responsibility and be active and visible in  
50 the communication and action of food waste reduction as their transparency and involvement  
51 in food waste can act as catalyst for consumers to engage in household food waste initiatives.  
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### 58 *5.3 Performative Meaning Journey: From Garbage to Recyclable*

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3 Food goes through different physical changes throughout the consumption process that  
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5 distorts its use and appearance. For example, when food is bought from a shop as raw  
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7 material (vegetables, meat, grains etc) or ready to be consumed (fruits), it has the ability to  
8  
9 physically transform and change during the cooking process. A potential eventual outcome is  
10  
11 the conversion of food into waste after consumption. Waste is usually conceived as an  
12  
13 unwanted or unusable material, substance, or a by-product (Trudel and Argo, 2013). This  
14  
15 differs to 'garbage' which is a discarded or useless material that is often perceived to be  
16  
17 useless (Trudel and Argo, 2013). Trudel and Argo, (2013) suggest that consumers' decision  
18  
19 to determine whether a product is garbage and should be discarded in a bin depends on the  
20  
21 level of distortion in the product. If a food item is considered to be heavily distorted,  
22  
23 consumers perceive it less useful and dispose of it as garbage. Our findings suggest that the  
24  
25 introduction of a household food waste recycling scheme (arrival of green bins at homes) has  
26  
27 changed the 'meaning' of food after the consumption process from 'waste' or 'garbage' to  
28  
29 recyclable, whereby a food product has future use. Circular economy thinking supports the  
30  
31 consideration of food waste as a resource (Narvanen *et al.*, 2022). The performativity of food  
32  
33 waste recycling and the engagement with food waste bins, enables residents to consider the  
34  
35 different meanings of food waste. The sorting of food waste into the green food waste caddies  
36  
37 (recyclable) instead of the usual black bin, which is designated for unusable, discarded  
38  
39 waste/garbage has not only changed the meaning of food after consumption but also had  
40  
41 enhanced the circular value life cycle. One of the participants, Claire, spoke of her  
42  
43 enthusiasm in relation to her food waste being processed into a useable form of energy:  
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54 *"I am so glad that we have the food recycling bin now. I throw my food waste in the*  
55 *green bin knowing that it will then be recycled and used to create energy. It makes so*  
56 *much sense.'* (Claire)  
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5 Claire has an awareness that disposal of her food waste into her green bin, serves an  
6  
7 important function of creating sustainable energy and she is keen to engage and use the food  
8  
9 waste bin knowing this. Similarly, participant, June, also expressed her enthusiasm for  
10  
11 engaging in the food waste scheme, taking pride in her bins, cleaning them regularly (see  
12  
13 figure 4) and she espouses the environmental benefits of the scheme:  
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19 *“We had the big garden, and we composted food, so it’s always stayed with me, but*  
20  
21 *obviously being in a flat I couldn’t do that. So, I was pleased when this came along,*  
22  
23 *because I want to do my bit for the environment. I can’t do a lot, but I do appreciate*  
24  
25 *what this food waste is going to be used for. I think that it’s a fantastic idea, so I*  
26  
27 *thought yeah, I want to do it. With being in a flat it’s harder because they’re*  
28  
29 *communal bins [see figure 3 and 4] as well... it is just my part I can play to help the*  
30  
31 *environment because you look at landfill and you think it’s not good. So, if I can do*  
32  
33 *my bit.” (June)*  
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38 Insert Figure 3 here.  
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42 Insert Figure 4 here.  
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47 The current ecological crisis, accompanied with the arrival of the food waste bins has  
48  
49 prompted June to do ‘her bit’ for the environment, despite facing constraints from downsizing  
50  
51 and moving into a flat. Rather than being upset or feeling guilt or shame about having food  
52  
53 waste (Lehtokunnas *et al.*, 2022) there are positive feelings, or at least a sense of satisfaction  
54  
55 that a food waste system is in place, and this is preventing or reducing food waste going to  
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57 landfill sites. This sentiment of delight, and happiness of having a food waste system in place,  
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3 thus enabling a more sustainable disposal system of food waste, was articulated by  
4  
5 participant, Candice, who expressed her excitement at having food waste bins:  
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10 *“I was ecstatic, I thought... ‘oh my god they’re actually doing something instead of*  
11 *just burning it in a furnace’, which is still quite revolutionary, but we have kind of*  
12 *been on the backbone of us burning our waste for energy for like ever. I’m glad they*  
13 *are actually progressing in that area instead of just hiding behind it. I was really*  
14 *ecstatic. I was like ‘Ooh, they are doing something with it, so I approve, I very much*  
15 *approve’ ... They told us how much was collected, so they told us like 90 tonnes was*  
16 *collected over the trial period and saying that will be now used for biofuel.”*  
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26 *(Candice)*  
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31 We see in many of the participants’ accounts, negative emotions exist around having food  
32 waste, however, the introduction of a food waste system, particularly when the benefits of  
33 food waste disposal are communicated to consumers, ensures positive feelings emanate. The  
34 moral rule of food waste practices is often centred on ‘do not waste food’ which the majority  
35 of participants strive to achieve, we suggest that consumers factor in flexibility, for example  
36 circumstances that happen in their lives that produce some food waste, in one case, cooking  
37 for grandchildren with fussy appetites. Participants acknowledge that they do contribute  
38 towards food waste and thus the councils’ focus on making the disposal of food waste more  
39 palatable is welcome. The message that resonates with many participants is not about  
40 consuming less, but the benefits of food waste disposal, as suggested by Candice when she  
41 discussed tonnages of waste that will be converted into biofuel. This sentiment was shared by  
42 many participants and the second author recorded this in his field notes:  
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3       *“Maybe more important than recycling food waste at a household level is how the*  
4  
5       *scheme has educated and raised awareness of environmental concerns and the state*  
6  
7       *of the planet. The practical benefits of engaging in food waste disposal is effective*  
8  
9       *and should be communicated more robustly. Inform people that engaging in the*  
10  
11       *scheme will result in your litter bins being cleaner, or recycling will be converted to*  
12  
13       *biofuels to be subsequently used for cars and lorries in the city. This connects with*  
14  
15       *real peoples’ lives and they can envisage real benefits”.* (Fieldnotes, Author 2)  
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22       While there has been significant awareness of issues such as climate change with the  
23  
24       wider general public, there is still work to be done raising awareness about the importance of  
25  
26       reducing food waste. Several participants expressed irritation with friends’ perceived food  
27  
28       waste, and Nick explains that communicating the benefits (value proposition) of food waste  
29  
30       disposal is key to engaging consumers with food waste initiatives:  
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35       *“I am all for segregating all the waste. I’m presuming with the food waste that it’s*  
36  
37       *going to go to some use as in is it going to biodigesters? I think that it would be quite*  
38  
39       *useful for the public to understand what that means and so it’s more of an incentive*  
40  
41       *for them to separate the waste out. I’ve got several friends who don’t recycle and*  
42  
43       *think it’s a waste of time doing it, but I think the more people are educated as to what*  
44  
45       *actually happens with the waste and incentivise us more to separate the waste. They*  
46  
47       *could make a video and be on YouTube and they would get much more publicity out of*  
48  
49       *it. I mean everybody can just walk around with just a mobile phone, it doesn’t cost a*  
50  
51       *lot to do any of that, and it gets the message out I think a lot better, because it only*  
52  
53       *takes one TV documentary to say well, everybody is doing all this collection but a lot*  
54  
55       *of this waste is still going abroad, and then everybody will automatically think that*  
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3 *it's not worth doing. You need to counteract that with a five-minute video footage*  
4 *saying this is how it's collected, this is what's happening, and this is how much gas*  
5 *we're producing, which means that we don't have to dig as much and we are*  
6 *becoming more self-sufficient, especially with recent events. I think that would just go*  
7 *a long way to educating people and getting them on board with food waste.” (Nick)*  
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18 The discarding of food waste is a significant practice in becoming what is known as the  
19 ethical self (Hawkins, 2006) and careless behaviour around food waste and its disposal  
20 should be minimised and careful consideration and awareness should be given to the disposal  
21 of waste. Participant, Nick, illustrates the importance of highlighting and communicating the  
22 benefits of food waste disposal, and Nick expresses his frustration with friends who are not  
23 interested in transforming their practices into more sustainable ones. Nick is keen to  
24 emphasise the importance of the message to educate people and “getting them on board with  
25 food waste”. Nick suggests communicating the benefits of becoming energy self-sufficient  
26 and how waste can be used as a sustainable energy source, thus becoming less reliant on  
27 other countries. In communicating this, it can act as a powerful mechanism for transmitting  
28 anxiety to enact change (Evans *et al.*, 2017). However, shifting awareness towards food  
29 waste does not necessarily translate into changing behaviours (Dunn *et al.*, 2020).  
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## 47 **6.0 Discussion**

### 48 *6.1 Theoretical Contributions*

49 Consumer food waste is a prevalent issue in society, and our study reveals that well-designed  
50 interventions and messages promoting the use of food waste recycling schemes can be  
51 effective in raising awareness and catalysing action about one's own responsibilities and  
52 behaviours towards reducing food waste. For the majority of participants, engaging with a  
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3 food waste system was new and novel, and entrenched habits about food waste, or attitudes  
4 towards a food waste system were often enlightened and behaviour and engagement was  
5 changed by the arrival of the food waste bins. Nonetheless, engagement on a relatively small-  
6 scale trial may not be enough to illicit required levels of engagement for meaningful change  
7 to occur and we question the extent of the effectiveness of neoliberal governance, particularly  
8 how moralising the consumer may not necessarily be sufficient to bring about systemic  
9 changes in the consumption of food and subsequent food waste. Shove (2010) was  
10 questioning and advocating for moving beyond the configured, attitude, behaviour, and  
11 choice model that dominates neoliberal governance thinking over fifteen years ago. The idea  
12 that change is possible when individuals strive for and are motivated to make a difference is  
13 somewhat flawed. We suggest neoliberal governance initiatives such as food waste schemes  
14 operating at a micro and meso level are limited in mitigating against food waste and  
15 sustainability issues and need to be part of broader structural and cultural change. Absolving  
16 responsibility and sequestering consumers to be responsible for food waste misses a  
17 significant point. The fundamentals of consumption and the food choices that consumers  
18 make and how they are promoted and marketed to consumers' needs to be addressed, and it  
19 must also recognise issues of unequal access and marginalised consumers. An orientation to  
20 more public policy orientated marketing (Remy *et al.*, 2024) is suggested and this should  
21 significantly consider consumers who live with precarity and lower income levels. Neoliberal  
22 governance while not overtly spoken about by participants in our sample, was, nonetheless in  
23 the thoughts of many of them. They were cynical and believed that isolated individual efforts  
24 to reduce food waste may not be enough to sufficiently tackle climate issues and change. In  
25 some cases, this narrative was so persuasive that participants elected not to engage with the  
26 food waste system, or espoused frustration at these more minor interventions masking need  
27 for more urgent and pressing action.

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3 Through a performative lens, our data suggests that engagement with a food waste  
4 scheme and acting on the disposal of leftover food and food from the preparation of meals is  
5 couched in contextualised components or assemblages. Our research suggests that where  
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10 consumers elect not to participate with a food waste scheme, this decision is not taken in  
11  
12 isolation. More specifically, the decision is made in the context of a cost-of-living crisis. Our  
13  
14 research supports the suggestion that consumers who are financially challenged and facing  
15  
16 low living standards are less inclined to engage in a food waste recycling system  
17  
18 (Knickmeyer, 2020) and as our findings suggest, there are a multitude of reasons for this. A  
19  
20 discrepancy exists between what the council and government would like consumers to do  
21  
22 (recycle) and what more socio-economically challenged consumers actually end up doing. A  
23  
24 power imbalance exists between consumers and institutions (Carrington et al., 2016) whereby  
25  
26 working-class consumers have a greater sense of disappointment, even betrayal by  
27  
28 institutions (Weinberger et al., 2017). Many of our economically challenged participants  
29  
30 shared their frustrations about the local council who were orchestrating and overseeing the  
31  
32 food waste scheme, and they expressed concerns at the cost of the scheme. The council (in  
33  
34 many cases the participants' landlord) is requesting their tenants to take part in a community  
35  
36 food waste scheme. This can add to existing tensions with consumers facing an onslaught of  
37  
38 demands on what they should be doing, and this can become exhausting (Carrington et al.,  
39  
40 2016). Many participants spoke of a misalignment between their daily needs being unfulfilled  
41  
42 (rent challenges, council tax increases, precarious work and living standards) and then being  
43  
44 tasked with being a responsible consumer. To be clear, many of participants encountering  
45  
46 lower living standards want to act ethically and responsibly, but they must prioritise their  
47  
48 own self-interests, which is situated around striving for their family and keeping the  
49  
50 household running. Where there are low participation rates amongst socio-economically  
51  
52 deprived households and consumers in a sustainable scheme such as the one under focus in  
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3 this study, we caution against reinforcing derogatory assumptions and stereotypes about  
4  
5 working-class consumers. We concur with Carrington and colleagues (2016) that in the so-  
6  
7 called reality, “consumers consistently fail to be ethical”. We suggest this is more prominent  
8  
9 with lower income level consumers and the pendulum needs to swing towards analysing  
10  
11 “larger systemic conditions, apparatuses, and structures” (p.30) and move away from  
12  
13 personal responsabilization and neoliberal governance. We advocate Askegaard and Linnet’s  
14  
15 (2011, p.387) call to situate “acts of consumption ... in a world that reaches beyond the  
16  
17 subjectivity of the agent”. Moreover, the dynamic conditions of many consumers’ reality who  
18  
19 do their best to just keep afloat, can impact on efforts to be a moral and responsible  
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22  
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24  
25 consumer.

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27         Performativity, often conceived by delivering instructions (message via the leaflet) to  
28  
29 encourage action, alongside supplying physical food waste bins to households cannot be seen  
30  
31 as some kind of magic bullet. Indeed, small-scale changes such as tackling food waste at the  
32  
33 domestic level, mask larger scale interventions that are arguably needed to tackle global  
34  
35 issues (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2021; Jackson, 2009). Nonetheless, that is not to disparage the food  
36  
37 waste trial and individual household contributions to tackling food waste. We concur with  
38  
39 Porpino (2016) that individual, household food waste activities can be small scale, however,  
40  
41 they are meaningful in aggregation – when multiplied over daily use and multiple  
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44  
45  
46 households.

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48         Our research contributes to the literature on neoliberal governance that suggests its  
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50 ability to enact action may be overplayed (Cherrier and Ture, 2023). Consumer society needs  
51  
52 to be understood as a continual struggle for consumers (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2021) and  
53  
54 performativity helps us better understand that messages concerning the problems around food  
55  
56 waste and resources to co-collaborate on food waste reduction may not be enough to enact  
57  
58 engagement and cause significant change. Our work reveals a number of boundaries and  
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3 limitations that are imposed on consumers (Cherrier and Ture, 2023), most notably living  
4 with austerity and a cost-of-living crisis. Non-engagement with a food waste scheme maybe  
5 the result of having no, or very little food to waste as meals are carefully budgeted for and  
6 planned and financial constraints can potentially prevent consumers from integrating new  
7 actions and responsibilities (Phipps and Ozanne, 2017). However, there is a risk that when  
8 neoliberal governance is not functioning, due to wider macro-societal issues, consumers may  
9 disengage with a food waste scheme, even when waste is apparent in a household, and they  
10 suspend their responsibilities on a more long-term basis. Our research showcased the agentic  
11 nature of assemblages where the presence of the assemblage i.e. recycling scheme, leaflet,  
12 caddies, bin, help consumers to realise their responsibility towards food and the environment  
13 and enact as sustainable consumers. On the other hand, the performativity of food waste  
14 recycling appeared not to be a linear process. Participants went through cycles of  
15 engagement, where presence of assemblages facilitated the illocutionary performativity  
16 (Butler, 2010) helping them to enact the message, facilitating the change in social reality of  
17 the food from garbage to resource but at the same time it contested with the existing realities  
18 of the consumers, (juggling contradicting responsibilities, lack of agency to engage due to  
19 socio economic or infrastructural constraints).

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42 A performative position on food waste engagement helps us generate questions about  
43 how we help consumers become more aware and responsible for their food waste disposal  
44 and how is food waste is performed, for example, in times of austerity and a cost-of-living  
45 crisis that shows no immediacy in dissipating.

## 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 *6.2 Policy Implications*

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56 Our study provides implications to policy makers about the ongoing journey of sustainable  
57 performativity. Performativity of food waste recycling at home was constrained by competing  
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3 responsibilities and consumers' feeling a lack of agency due to wider assemblages,  
4 particularly austerity and the ongoing cost of living crisis. Participants demonstrated  
5 indifference most notably through lack of engagement with the service. Thereby policy  
6 makers should make the service more supportive and offer regular support to the participants  
7 and ensure they deploy ongoing, regular communication that provides clear and simple  
8 guidance on how to use the bin and the journey of food waste. Guidance in multiple  
9 languages to accommodate the ethnic and linguistic diversity in areas is recommended.  
10 Crucially, we would recommend that marketing communications (the leaflet) need to be  
11 tailored and differentiated for different socio-economic groups. An overemphasis on  
12 reproducing the neoliberal illusion that participating in sustainable initiatives has the potential  
13 and power to enact meaningful change (a more sustainable planet) (Carrington *et al.*, 2016;  
14 Remy *et al.*, 2023) should be curtailed. Policy makers should recognise that this messaging  
15 can feel overwhelming and unsalable, especially for some groups of consumers. Challenges,  
16 sacrifices and barriers that consumers face in wanting to act ethically should be drawn upon  
17 in marketing communications and advocates in the local community, who face similar  
18 challenges to their neighbours, for example, could be better utilised.

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40 Our research shows that the social reality of food changed from garbage to resource.  
41 This perlocutionary effect of the household food waste recycling scheme was well received  
42 by the participating households. Therefore, from a consumer (household) perspective, we  
43 recommend that to increase engagement with food waste schemes, councils use this effect to  
44 make the general public aware about how the collected food waste is going to be used, and  
45 how it turns into resource (fuel and fertilizer). Our research suggests that consumers are  
46 curious to know the effects of their sustainability performances at a more local level. Using  
47 the outcome of their efforts in the message to inform them could also convince more people  
48 to participate in such schemes.

### 6.3 Limitations and Future Research

Methodologically, we recognise that the data collection period started during the first few weeks of the 12-week trial, and it would have been useful to gain consumer perceptions and attitudes of the impending food waste trial, before it commenced. Equally, data could have been collected after the trial finished. We interviewed one, sometimes two family members who had self-appointed for food waste monitoring and it would have been useful to interview all members of a household to gauge different perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour towards the food waste scheme. Self-reported accounts, possibly through the use of food waste diaries could have been adopted to shine light on the type of waste that was being discarded and whether this changed as the twelve-week trial progressed.

This study highlights that tensions exist as consumers are given materials and resources to enact their food waste responsibilities. Recently Cherrier and Ture (2023) highlighted tensions around waste pathways such as availability and regularity of collection services for example, and we note strains exist during a time of crisis, associated with cost of living and being responsible for food waste. We urge researchers to deepen understanding between food waste and moments of dislocation or crisis in consumers lives. In a cost-of-living crisis, where waste is more closely monitored and regulated by consumers, we question whether consumers are as concerned about sustainability and if there any stigma attached from not enacting responsibility or engaging with a heavily promoted and localised scheme?

Butler (2010) articulated how repetition is the key to success of performativity. However, in our context performativity of household food waste recycling, is more about breaking the previous habit and forming a new one, for example a new habit of separating food waste at home and storing it in new green waste bins instead of the previous habit of using black bins for all non-recyclable waste. This area warrants more in-depth research into

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2  
3 the notion of repetition and habit in performativity, especially in context of sustainability  
4  
5 where it is required to break or change a previous repetition of thought and practice and  
6  
7 establish a new one.  
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10 Food waste recycling schemes are often designed, implemented, managed and  
11  
12 monitored at a local government level, and we recognise that a council affiliated with a  
13  
14 particular political party may have certain priorities and ideological perspectives on food  
15  
16 waste and its disposal. We also understand that recent national government cutbacks on funds  
17  
18 available to local authorities, may result in councils giving more credence to waste  
19  
20 management schemes from an economically viable perspective rather than seeking to achieve  
21  
22 national recycling targets. Li and Wang (2021) suggest waste recycling schemes are  
23  
24 successful when policy or decision-making tools are aligned with citizen or public behaviour,  
25  
26 however, one must recognise that a council's political affiliation may also impact on how a  
27  
28 food waste scheme is implemented and this could be a barrier or enabler to participation and  
29  
30 is a worthy area for further study. Our study focused on consumers, however, solutions to the  
31  
32 food waste issues in society requires multi stakeholder engagement (Mesiranta *et al.*, 2022).  
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34 Future research could take a multi stakeholder approach to explore the performativity of a  
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36 household food waste recycling scheme to study the interactions between government, waste  
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38 management companies, and consumers and the multiple levels of performativity in a  
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40 scheme.  
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## Appendix-

Table 1-Participant Information

No.	Name	Gender	Occupation	Members in the house	Type of residency
1	Tina	Female	Not working	Lives with husband and teenage son	House
2	Dean	Male	Works full time	Lives alone	House
3	Azrah	female	Housewife	Lives with husband and young children	House
4	Thorpe	Male	Works full time	Lives alone	House
5	Nabeela	Female	Housewife	Lives with husband	House
6	Abdul	Male	Not working	Lives with parents, sisters and wife and a child	House
7	David	Male	Retired	Lives with wife	House
8	May	Female	Housewife	Lives with husband	House
9	Susan	Female	Works full time	Lives with husband	House
10	Eric	Male	Retired	Lives with wife	House
11	Linda	Female	Retired	Lives with husband	House
12	Jill	Female	Retired	Lives with son and grand son	House
13	Candice	Female	Full time Student	Lives with mother who works full time	House
14	Caroline	Female	Works full time	Lives with 3 teenage children	House
15	Jayne	Female	Works full time	Lives with husband and 6-month-old baby	House
16	Denise	Female	Works full time	Lives with husband. Children and grandchildren visit often	House
17	Mag	Female	Works full time	Lives with partner and teenage son	House
18	Tony	Male	Retired	Lives with wife and 20-year-old daughter	House
19	June	Female	Works full time	Lives alone. Daughter and grandchild visit often	Flat
20	Andrea	Female	Retired	Lives with husband. Daughter and grandchild visits often	Flat
21	Ellis	Female	Retired	Lives alone	Flat
22	Beth	Female	Retired	Lives alone. Son and grandchildren visit often.	Flat
23	Michael	Male	Retired	Living alone	Flat
24	Mandy	female	Retired	Lives with husband. Children and	House

				grandchildren visiting often	
25	Jenny	Female	Retired	Lives with husband. Children and grandchildren visit often	House
26	Virginia	Female	Housewife	Lives with husband and two teenage daughters	House
27	Deborah	Female	Works full time	Lives with husband and adult son	House
28	Jean	Female	Works full time	Lives with husband	House
29	Milnes	Female	Retired	Lives with husband	House
30	Doreen	Female	Retired	Lives with husband. Children and grandchildren visit often	House
31	Joe	Female	Works full time	Lives with husband	House
32	Layla	Female	Works full time	Lives with partner and a son	House
33	Nick	Male	Works full time	Lives alone	House
34	Fiona	Female	Works full time	Lives with husband and her elderly mother	House
35	Susannah	Female	Works part time	Lives with husband and teenage daughter.	House
36	Julie	Female	Works full time	Lives with her adult son	House
37	Maha	Female	Works full time	Lives with partner	House
38	Mark	Male	Retired	Lives with wife	House
39	Dave	Male	Retired	Lives with wife, daughter and two grand children	House
40	Claire	Female	Retired	Lives with husband, daughter and two grand children	House
41	Elaine	Female	Retired	Lives with husband	House
42	Jane	Female	Retired but work part time in their family business	Lives with husband and one adult son	House
43	Iain	Male	Works full time	Lives with wife	House
44	Lisa	Female	Works full time	Lives with husband	House
45	Jasmin	Female	Works full time	Lives with husband and 2 teenage children	House
46	Sophie	Female	Works full time	Lives with husband and 2 children	House
47	Rosalind	Female	Works full time	Lives with husband and teenage daughter	House
48	Elizabeth	Female	Retired	Lives alone. Children and grandchildren visit often	House
49	Helen	Female	Works full time	Lives with husband and one teenage child	House

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3 Appendix- Figures  
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7 **Figures**  
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9 **Figure 1: Extract of Food Waste Leaflet**  
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28 **Figure 2: Photo of the food waste bin in Fiona's kitchen.**  
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**Figure 3: The communal bin area in the block of flats where June resides.**



**Figure 4: June and her clean waste caddy**



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