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South Australia saw an immediate jump in return rates when it lifted its deposit rate.

INSIDE

Inside NSW's container return machine

By Inside Waste

New South Wales now operates the largest container deposit scheme in the country, and one of the most sophisticated outside Europe. Since launching in December 2017, the scheme has seen over 15.5 billion used beverage containers returned through the network. Currently, 67 per cent of eligible beverage containers supplied into NSW are redeemed through the scheme (via return points or kerbside collections), across an estimated 3.8 billion eligible drink containers placed on the market each year.

A key partner in the delivery of the scheme is TOMRA Cleanaway, the joint venture appointed as network operator. In this role, the company is responsible for return points, counting, verification and material flows. James Dorney, chief executive of TOMRA Cleanaway says as well as being a recycling program, the scheme is a complex and integrated network designed around convenience, incentives, automation and accountability. Every container returned through its return point network is scanned, counted and reported, producing a daily data set that lands on government and stakeholder desks each morning. That design choice, he said, explains both the scale of the volumes being handled and why the scheme continues to grow.

Built for scale and verification

The NSW scheme is built on near total automation. Reverse vending machines, over-the-counter (OTC) return points and bulk container automated depots all feed into a single audit and verification process, with every eligible container scanned individually.

"The only glass that comes into the facility here at Eastern Creek is from the over-the-counter network," Dorney said.

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Sustainability rebates as behaviour change infrastructure: insights from council study

By Justin Bonsey

Council sustainability rebates have become one of local government's most practical tools for helping households and businesses take tangible action – from repairing rather than replacing, to upgrading hot water and heating/cooling appliances, through to improving energy and water performance, and adopting lower-emissions technologies. They are visible, often popular, and sit where climate action, resource recovery and community expectations intersect.

Until recently, the sector lacked a shared national evidence base on how these programs are designed and delivered, what councils are measuring, and where the strongest opportunities lie to improve outcomes and efficiency. Without that common picture, many teams have had to build programs largely on their own, drawing on peer conversations and ad-hoc examples rather than comparable data.

A first-of-its-kind national study

To help fill that gap, rebate delivery platform Rebately commissioned Tidal Circular to conduct Australia's first national study focused specifically on council sustainability rebates. The work combined survey responses from 67 councils across Australia with practical design principles and a six-pillar framework for better practice and was independently reviewed by Monash University's BehaviourWorks Australia.

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Sustainability rebates as behaviour change infrastructure: insights from council study

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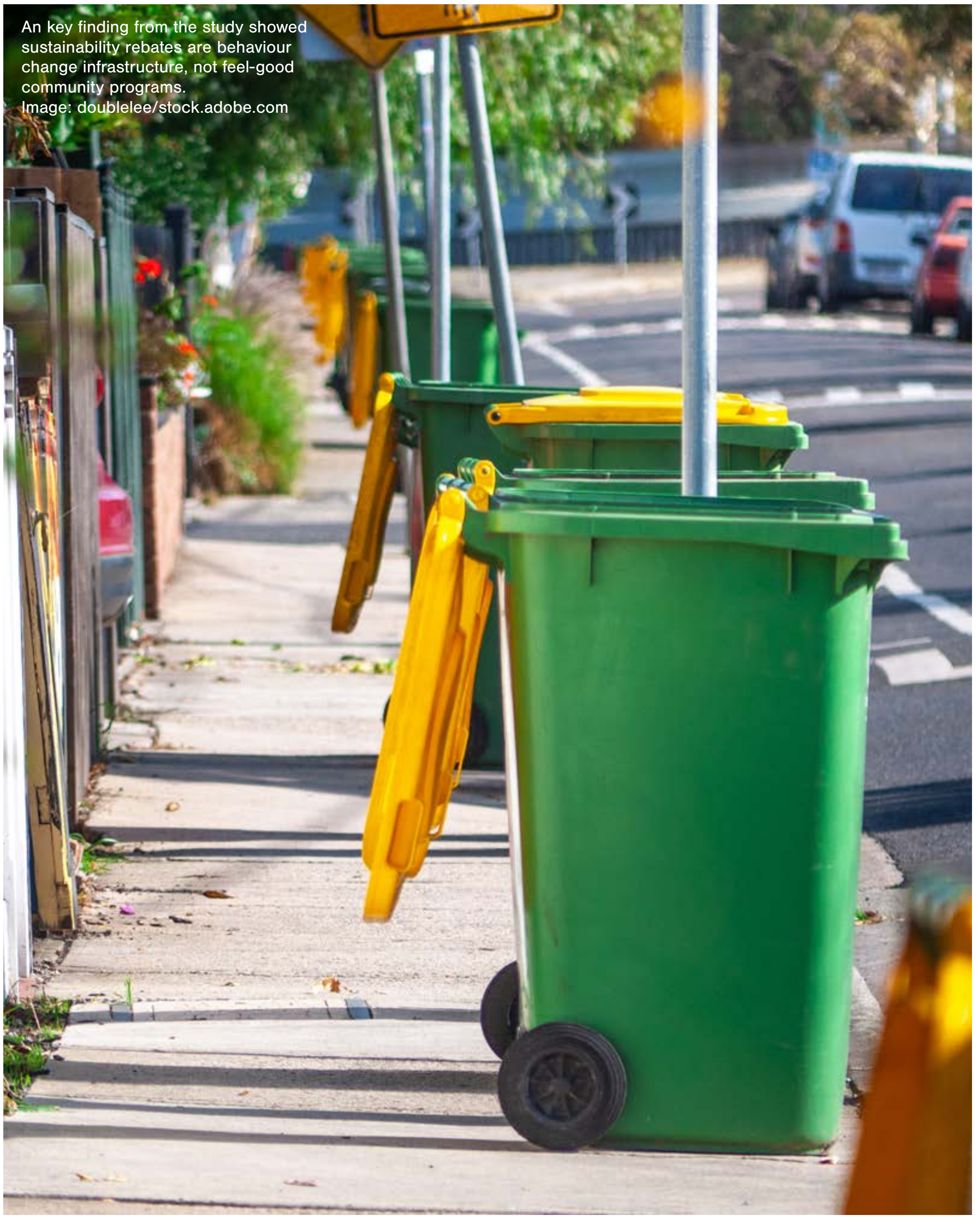
THE AIM IS TO GIVE COUNCILS A PRACTICAL GUIDE to designing, delivering and reporting on rebates in ways that are effective, defensible and workable for small teams. The report is written for people at the coalface – waste and sustainability officers, energy and climate leads, customer service, finance and program managers – as well as executives who need a solid basis for investment decisions.


An key finding from the study showed sustainability rebates are behaviour change infrastructure, not feel-good community programs.
Image: doublelee/stock.adobe.com

Rebates as behaviour change infrastructure

A core message from the study is that sustainability rebates are behaviour change infrastructure, not just feel-good community programs. A well-designed rebate helps residents and businesses move through decisions they might otherwise delay or abandon – seeing that "people like me" are taking part, finding a suitable product or service, trusting that it qualifies, and feeling confident enough to proceed.

This has two implications for councils. First, councils that do not yet offer sustainability rebates in key areas miss an opportunity to support their communities in concrete ways – from lower household running costs and improved comfort through to reduced energy and water use, as well as extending the life of appliances and equipment. In a context of rising living costs and ambitious emissions and waste targets, the opportunity cost of not having targeted rebates in the toolkit is growing.

Second, even for councils that already offer rebates, there is an upside in how they are delivered. The study shows that performance often improves more through simpler processes, smarter data and better communication than through simply increasing the dollar value on offer.

What the study found

The survey and case material drew on councils in seven states and territories across metropolitan, regional and rural areas, giving a representative picture of local government practice. Several themes stood out:

- Delivery experience is central to intent
  Households experience rebates as a series of steps: discovering the program, understanding eligibility, arranging a purchase or service, and submitting evidence. Clarity of information, form design, evidence requirements and turnaround times all influence whether people follow through, and a well-communicated, low-friction $300 rebate can achieve more impact than a poorly executed $500 one.
- Funding realities demand light models
  Most participating councils rely primarily on core operating budgets to run sustainability rebates, with external grants more often used to start or expand programs than to underpin long-term delivery. Rebate schemes therefore need to run reliably within ordinary resourcing, with evaluation built into normal operations rather than bolted on as a separate project.
- Integrity settings must be proportional
  Councils have a responsibility to protect public funds, but heavy-handed integrity settings can make programs harder to access and administer. The study encourages a proportional approach – matching checking effort to claim size, perceived risk and available capacity – including for emerging issues such as similar claims being submitted across multiple councils.
- Evaluation ambition is high, but methods vary
  Respondents showed strong interest in reporting outcomes beyond uptake and spend, including environmental and equity impacts, but approaches are uneven. Many teams monitor operational metrics but lack the shared datasets

The study focused on council sustainability rebates and combined survey responses from 67 councils across Australia.
Image: Nils Versemann/shutterstock.com

and methods needed for consistent impact reporting. The report proposes a minimum dataset that most councils can implement to enable a more robust, comparable analysis.

- Shared infrastructure and benchmarking unlock value
  Some of the biggest opportunities are collective: aligning on key data fields, using similar reporting categories, and sharing templates rather than rebuilding them from scratch. Even modest standardisation allows councils to benchmark with peers, understand where their program sits on a maturity curve, and target improvements where they will have most effect.

Where Rebately fits

Rebately, which commissioned the study, is a platform partially funded by the NSW EPA and co-designed with councils to deliver and manage sustainability rebates – from application intake and evidence handling through to algorithmic integrity checks and reporting. By standardising core elements of the process and data structure, it reduces administrative burden and makes it easier to track outcomes without extensive manual analysis.

For this project, Rebately's role was to make a consistent, cross-council view possible by standardising program and data signals and enabling analysis of claims data, while leaving interpretation of the evidence to Tidal Circular and independent reviewers. The findings underline that councils interested in common data structures and streamlined delivery now have practical options for putting those ideas into practice.

> "The work combined survey responses from 67 councils across Australia with practical design principles and a six-pillar framework for better practice and was independently reviewed"

From individual programs to shared learning

Councils are already doing a great deal with sustainability rebates, often with small teams and constrained resources. Case studies – including repair, appliance and energy upgrades – show that well-targeted programs can leverage substantial private investment (from $4.05 in community spending for every $1 rebated in the City of Canning through to $12.91 for every $1 invested by Randwick City Council), deliver measurable environmental benefits, and provide visible support to communities.

The opportunity now is to build on that foundation. This is done by making it easier to start or refine programs using shared templates and minimum datasets, aligning integrity approaches with risk so staff time is used where it adds most value, and by treating sustainability rebates as part of a broader infrastructure for sustained behaviour change, rather than isolated projects.

In a crowded policy landscape, sustainability rebates stand out as a tool that residents recognise, that link directly to tangible changes in homes and small businesses, and that can be tuned over time as evidence improves. This first national study suggests that, with a little more shared infrastructure and common language, councils can unlock even more impact and value for money from programs many are already running today. iw