

Waste sorting labels in the Nordic-Baltic region and EU

Mazāk atkritumu – vairāk nākotnes
Liepāja, 18.09.2025

Brancheforeningen

Cirkulær



Association promoting the pictograms in the EU.

Members:

- ▶ ZAAO (Latvia)
- ▶ Circular Denmark (Denmark, Greenland & Faroe Islands)
- ▶ Avfall Sverige (Sweden)
- ▶ Samband (Iceland)
- ▶ Samfunnsbedriftene (Norway)
- ▶ KIVO (Finland)

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Association for public waste companies in Denmark.

- ▶ Danish municipal waste association
- ▶ 61 members – municipalities and municipal waste companies.
- ▶ Working for the transition to a circular economy, green energy and sustainable consumption.



FARLIGT AFFALD



TEKSTILAFFALD





BIOLOĢISKIE ATKRITUMI

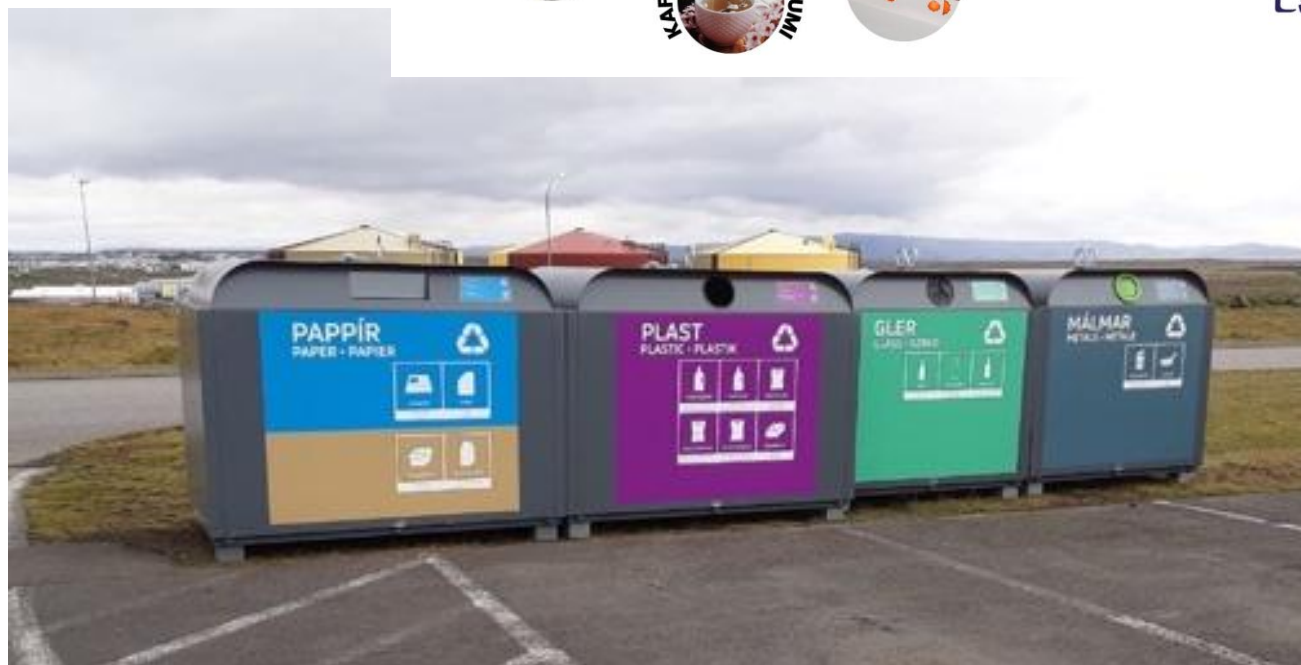


NEDRĪKST MEST

- sadzīves atkritumus
- šķidrumus
- akmeņus, smiltis
- mājdzīvnieku izkārnījumus un pakaišus
- koka izstrādājumus
- tekstilizstrādājumus
- pelnus un ogles
- plastmasas iepakojumus
- tūjas
- mežsaimniecības atkritumus
- lauksaimniecības atkritumus
- medikamentus
- bīstamos atkritumus

ŠĶIRO SAVUS ATKRITUMUS!
VĀIRĀK SKATĪT:
SKIROVIEGLI.LV

Liepājas **Ras**



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Timeline



2015

Pre-study: is it possible to harmonize labels – and are municipalities and producers interested?

- YES!

2016

- Development of 17 pictograms for house-hold collection services.
- Launched january 2017

2017

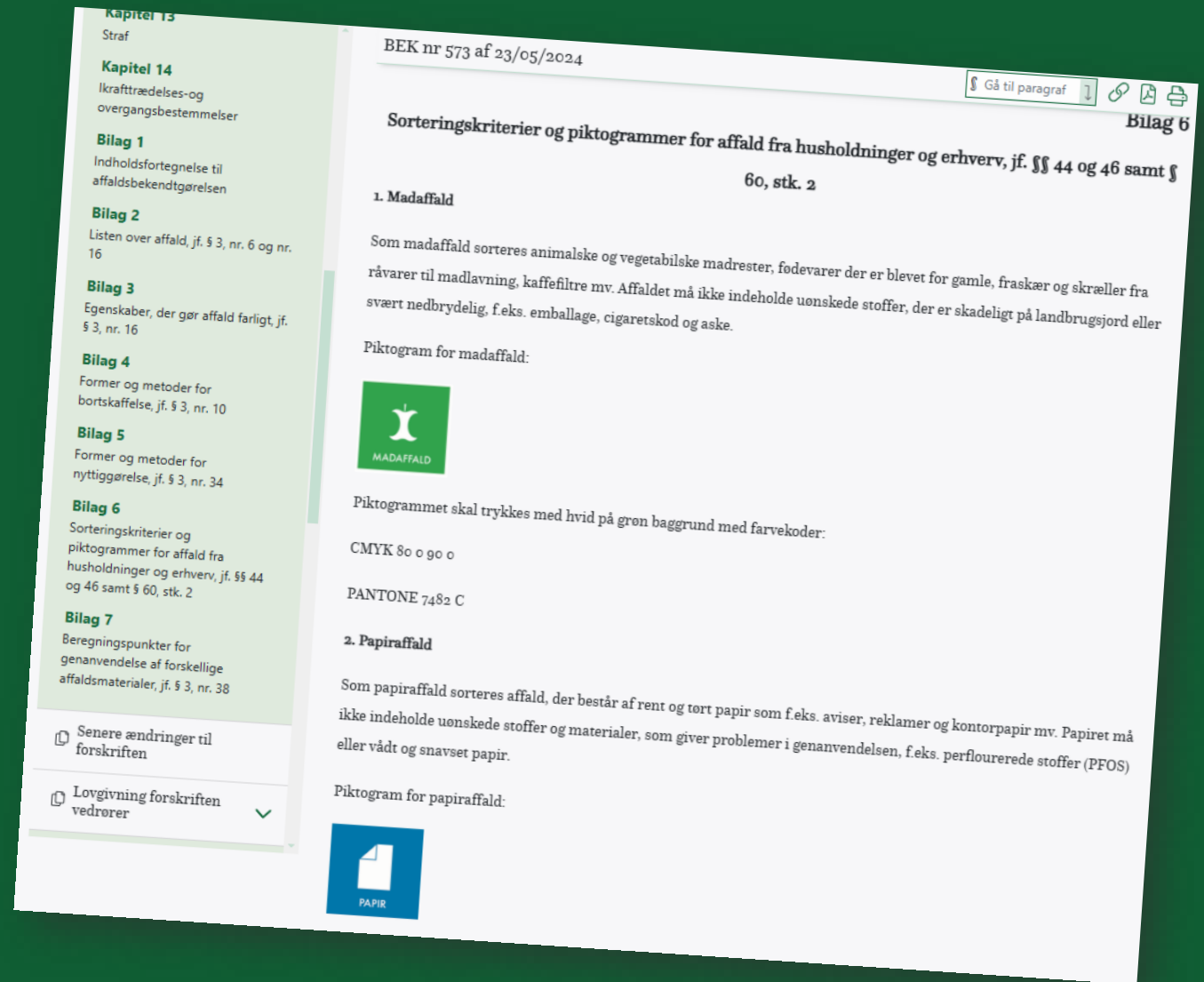
- Development of 50+ pictograms for waste collected at recycling centers.
- First packaging on pictograms.

2018 - now

- Continual design of additional pictograms.
- Nordic-Baltic collaboration
- Promoting pictograms in EU

Mandatory on bins

- ▶ Mandatory to use pictograms on bins for 10 specific waste fractions
- ▶ Applicable for both bins for household collection and commercial waste similar to household waste
- ▶ Link to statutory order on waste: <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lt/2024/573#ida0e48cab-e4d6-4a26-916b-7ccb9708923d>



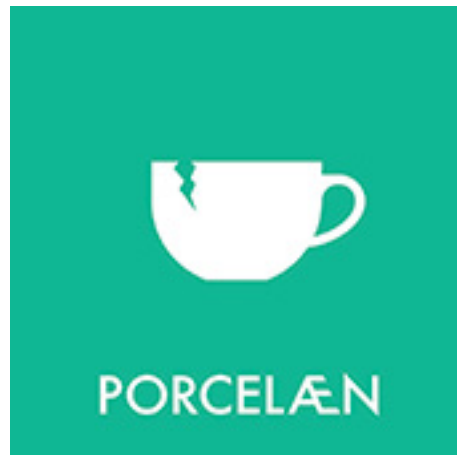
*Adjustment of glass color to
increase contrast*



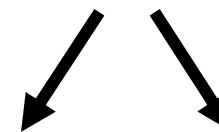
Illegal from 2025



Color change



Illegal from 2021



*Revised
pictograms for
wall insulation
materials, 2025.*



Lorem ipsum

Consectetu: 400g

Odio dignissim: Qui blandit praesent
luptatum zzril delenit (E 407)

Dolor sit 100g:

Euugait.....1240/267 kgep
Adipiscing.....22 g
Diam.....13 g
Nonummy.....9,0 g
Nibh.....0,4 g
Euismod.....19 g
Tincidunt.....0,6 g

Dolore magna: Aliquam erat
volutpat, ut wisi enim ad minim.



Sorted as

EXERCI
CONSEQUAT
ULLAMCOR TATION
ADIPISCING



Primary choice if possible



Secondary choice

- ▶ Promoting guidelines for producers and lobbying industry associations and large producers.

- ▶ *Guide for using pictograms can be found here:*

<https://www.affaldspiktogrammer.dk/emballage>

DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR PACKAGING

UNIFIED NORDIC PICTOGRAM SYSTEM FOR RECYCLING



Samfundet i Norden
avertatstaga

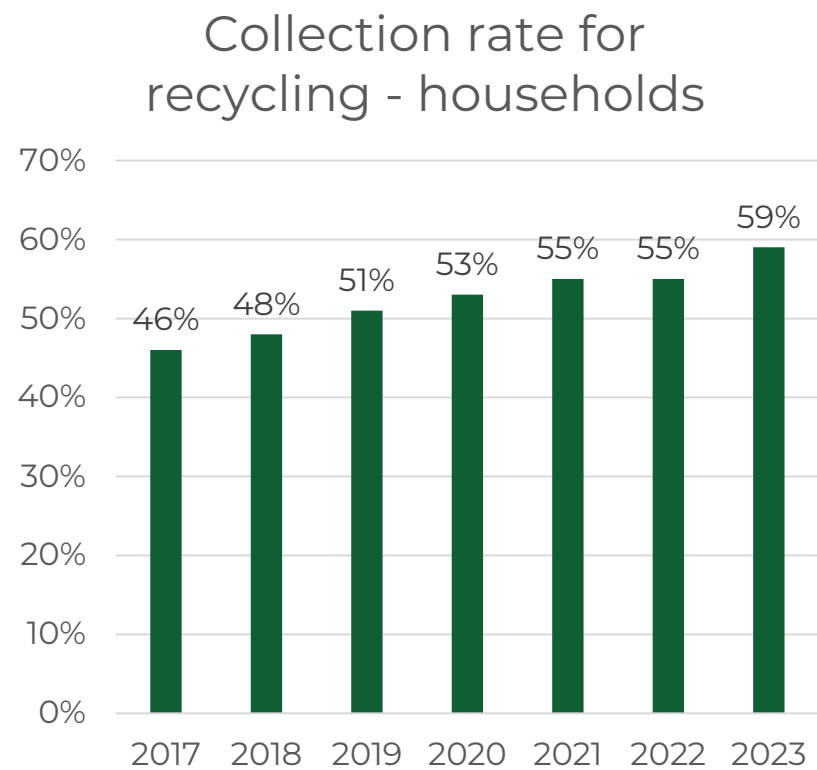
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KIVO
KORTEN KORTEN

Does the pictograms work?

Impact and effect

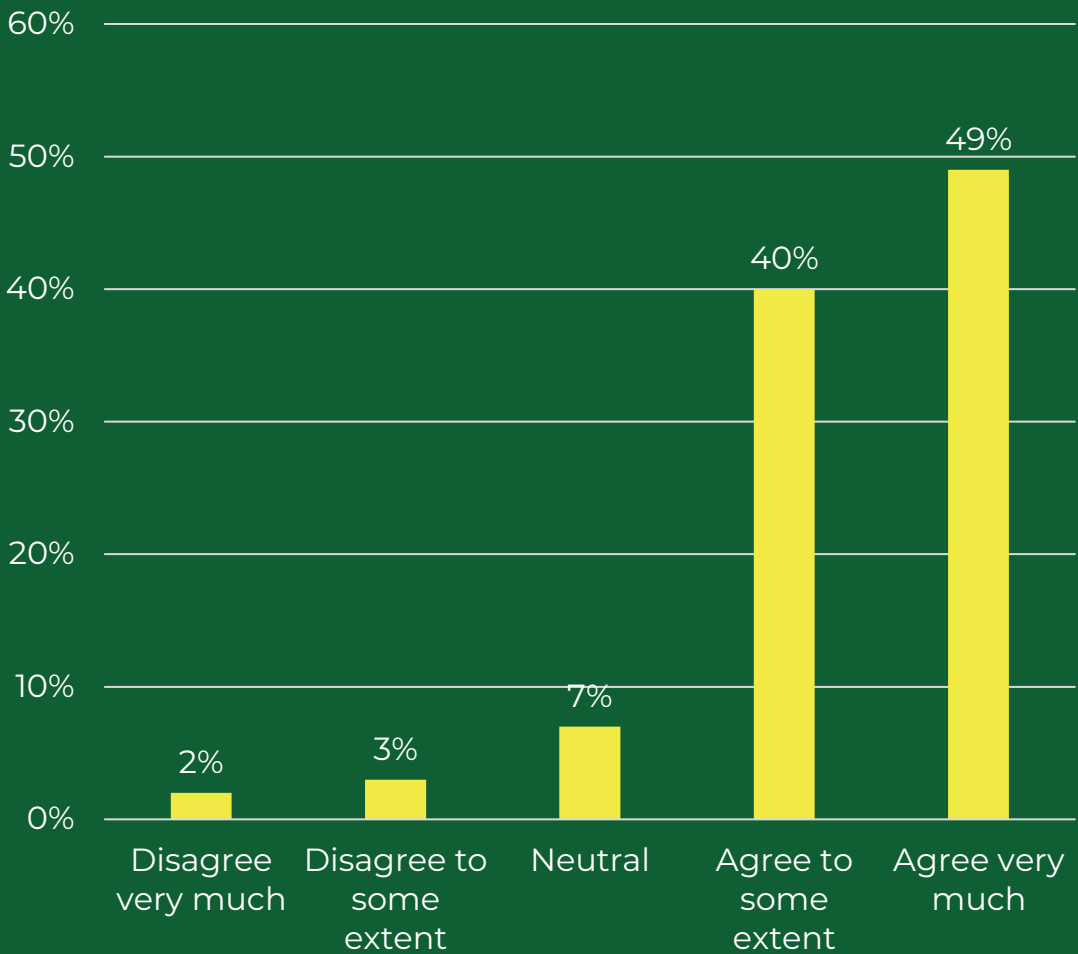
Sorting is up in Denmark



Source: Danish Environmental Protection Agency, Waste statistics 2022.

Survey in Copenhagen

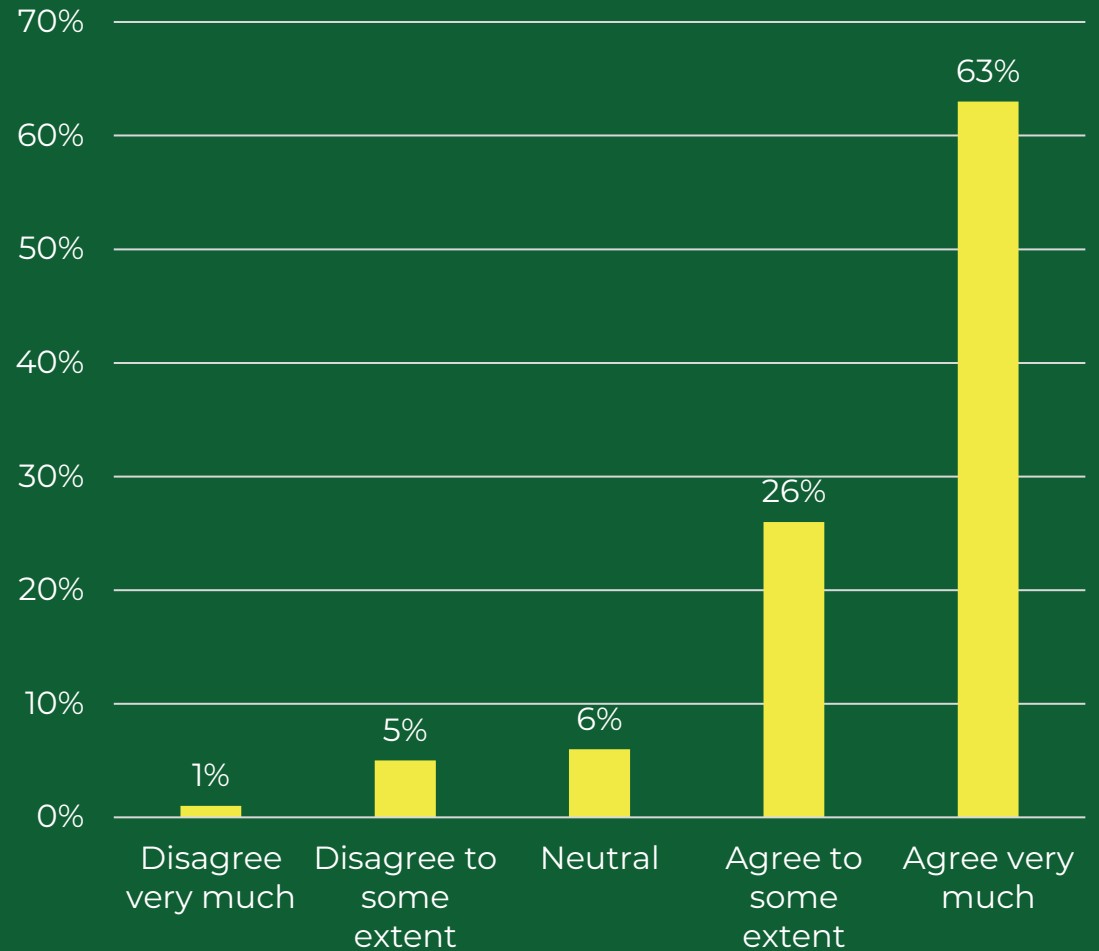
The pictograms on waste bins make it easier to sort correctly.



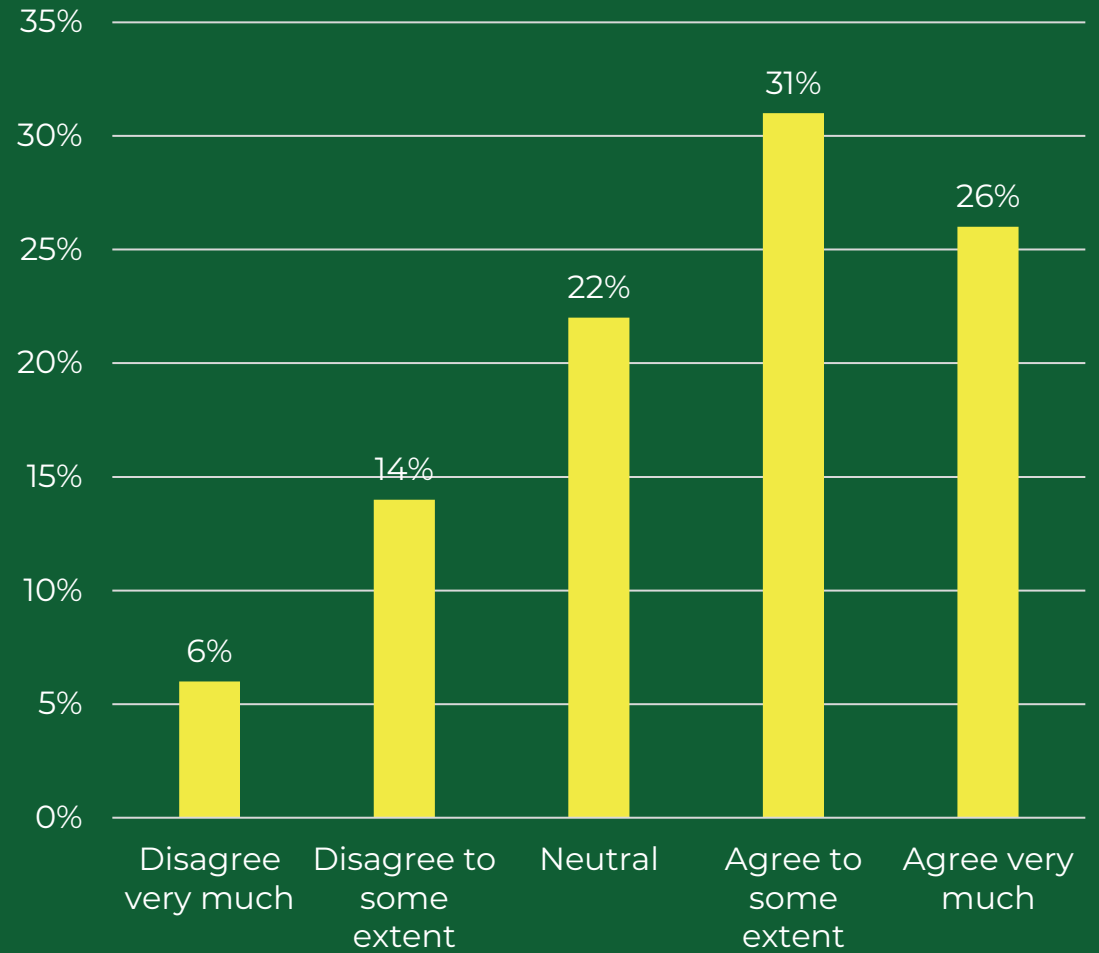
Source: Municipality of Copenhagen: Citizens survey, waste – 2022. 1509 participants.

Survey in Copenhagen

*Pictograms on
packaging makes it
easier for me to sort
waste correctly.*



Survey in Copenhagen
*Pictograms on
packaging have helped
me sort packaging, I
otherwise would not have
sorted.*



Results from behavioural test in Copenhagen

21 apartment buildings in Copenhagen in a 17 week study

Three test groups and one control group - one test group received new waste signs with Nordic pictograms (pictogram, color, name).

- ▶ Residual waste dropped with 15,7 % due to increased sorting.
- ▶ Residents saying they actively used pictograms as waste sorting guide increased from 4% to 26%
- ▶ When in doubt in how to dispose waste, more residents checked with the pictogram signs – up with 22 %-points.
- ▶ Residents liked the uniformity in design and appearance, making it more pleasant to sort waste
- ▶ The number of residents who believed that almost all their neighbours sort their waste increased from 11% to 26%.



Test in Göteborg, Sweden



Tested in 2 months in different housing companies in Göteborg.

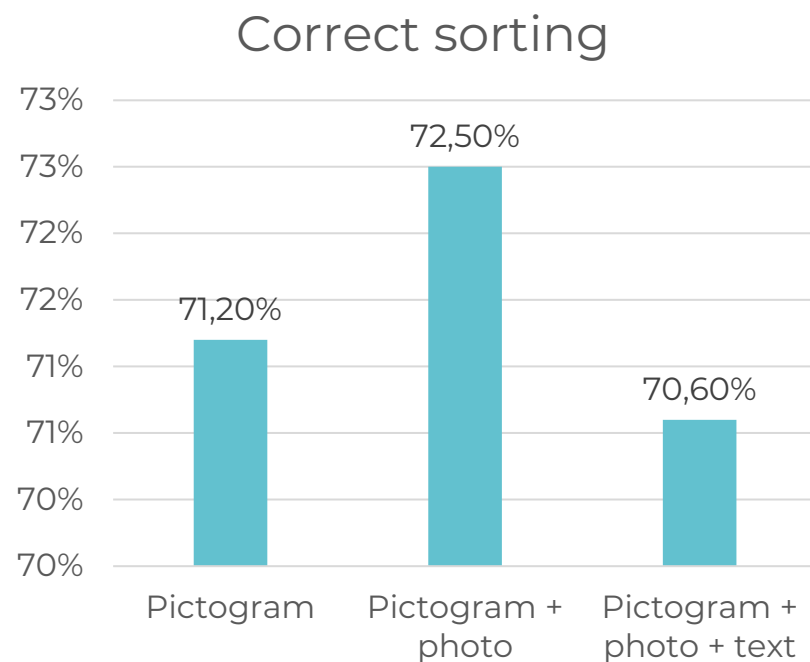
Three different setups:

1. No change
2. New signs with waste pictograms
3. Nudging elements added

▶ When waste pictograms were added, it resulted in 11,4 % less residual waste on average.

▶ Nudging elements increased sorting, but not as much compared to just implementing the pictograms.

How much information is needed?



1.602 participants. Source: BRO and Danish Ministry for Environment.



Pictogram alone

Pictograms tested: plastic, metal, cardboard, paper, glass, food waste and residual waste.



Pictogram and photo



Pictogram, photo, and additional text

Participants spent on average 60 seconds longer deciding where to dispose of the waste item

Alt spiseligt: madrester, fraskær fra madvarer, fødevarer, der er for gamle mv. Herudover teposer, kaffefiltre, afskårne blomster og køkkenrulle.

Bliver til biogas og gødning (afgasset biomasse og kompost).

Report about impact and effects

Read more about the different studies and the results in the report.

Can be found on:

<https://cirkulaer.dk/udgivelser/effekter-ved-piktogrammer-affaldssortering>



EU

Harmonised waste sorting labels in EU

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EU harmonised symbols

Deadline for harmonized symbols on receptacles:
1st January 2028.

The Commission will have to adopt an
implementing act on waste sorting: **August 2026.**

Adoption through [*comitology committee*](#):

- Discussed in committee with representatives from all member states. Possibly a voting.
- Unclear if a larger public consultation will take place.
- In Denmark, usually public consultation on the Danish governments opinion - but very short deadlines (few days).



Glass	Compostable	Wood and cork	Plastic	Fibre-based composite	Textile	Residual	Metal	Cardboard and paper	Ceramic	Hazardous
 UNCOLOURED GLASS	 HOME COMPOSTABLE	 WOOD	 RIGID PLASTIC	 BEVERAGE CARTON	 TEXTILE	 RESIDUAL	 METAL	 CARDBOARD	 CERAMIC	 HAZARDOUS
 COLOURED GLASS	 INDUSTRIALLY COMPOSTABLE in the EU	 CORK	 FLEXIBLE PLASTIC	 MIXED CANISTER				 PAPER		
 GREEN GLASS	 INDUSTRIALLY COMPOSTABLE in some MS			 OTHER COMPOSITE						
 BROWN GLASS										

***DRAFT technical
proposal from Joint
Research Center to the
Commission (DG ENV).***

Meta-labels (for receptacles only)	 GLASS	 PLASTIC		 CARDBOARD AND PAPER
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What have we done?

- Letter to commissioner Roswall
- Contact with director-general of DG ENV Florika Fink-Hooijer (new director-general since then)
- VKU (Germany) supports the nordic-balt system
- Thorough feedback to JRC
- Dialogue with national industry associations, EPAs and government officials

Feed back on prototype #2 from Sweden

In total, representatives from 61 municipalities have replied with feedback on the prototype. The feedback is from a branch organization for the packaging industry in Sweden, representing 90% of the industry.

Summary feedback from municipalities

General Preference:

The majority of interviewees prefer Prototype #1 over Prototype #2, citing clearer symbols, and a more modern and user-friendly design.

Key Issues with Prototype #2:

Poor readability: Black text on a colorful background is difficult to read. Poor readability: Black text on a colorful background is difficult to read.

WSL Prototype 2 Nordic-Baltic scheme

WSL Prototype 2	Nordic-Baltic scheme	Consequence
 FIBRE-BASED COMPOSITE	 SMALL ELECTRONICS	We will also have to change the colour of our pictograms for electronic waste (WEEE).
 PLASTIC	 KLINISK RISIKOAFFÄLD	We are concerned with the similar colour for biohazardous waste

VKU
VERBAND KOMMUNALER
UNTERNEHMEN e.V.



Abb. 1: Übersicht einiger „nordischer Piktogramme“ (Jahrbuch Umweltmanagement, S. 8, 2020).

VKU spricht sich für Piktogramme aus

Die entsprechende einheitliche Kennzeichnung wird eine umfassende Aufgabe und Herausforderung für die kommunalen Abfallwirtschaftsunternehmen werden. Derzeit gibt es weder für ganz Deutschland noch innerhalb der einzelnen Bundesländer Vorgaben zu einer einheitlichen Symbolik oder Farbgebung für die Abfallsammlung. Angestrebt ist die aktuelle Vorgabe zunächst nur für Verpackung, also Fraktionen wie beispielsweise Kunststoffe, Holz, Aluminium, Glas, Papier und Karton. Es ist jedoch nicht auszuschließen, dass es zukünftig auch für weitere Fraktionen ähnliche Vorgaben zu EU-einheitlichen Symbolen geben könnte.

Der VKU unterstützt eine Kennzeichnung, die zu einer Vereinfachung der korrekten Getrennsammlung von Verpackungen durch die Bürger führt, vor allem wenn die Etiketten barrierefrei und damit selbst-erklärend sind. Außerdem muss der Aufwand für das Anbringen und Anpassen der Etiketten auf den Sammeltonnen so gering wie möglich gehalten werden und darf nicht dazu führen, dass der gesamte Bestand an Sammelbehältern ersetzt oder farblich angepasst werden müsste. Die Nutzung von Piktogrammen würde diese Anforderungen erfüllen.

Unterstützung für das „Nordische Piktogrammsystem“

Das „Nordische Piktogrammsystem“ wurde erstmals 2016 in Dänemark entwickelt und seitdem ebenfalls in Schweden (2020), Island (2020) und Norwegen (2020) eingeführt. Finnland und Litauen bereiten derzeit die Einführung vor oder prüfen die Übernahme des Systems.

Das System umfasst 90 Piktogramme zur Mülltrennung: Die Nutzung ist kostenlos und für jeden zugänglich. Sie können als schwarz-weiß-Piktogramme oder in den Farben des Systems und der Kategorie der Fraktionen verwendet werden, was Flexibilität und Einheitlichkeit anzeigt.

Um die Anforderungen der Verpackungsverordnung zu erfüllen und eine verpflichtende EU-weite Symbolik einzuführen, spricht sich der VKU für das „nordische Piktogrammsystem“ (engl. „Nordic Pictogram System“) aus.

Es ist sinnvoll, ein bereits in anderen EU-Mitgliedsstaaten etabliertes System mit positiven Erfahrungswerten zu übernehmen und Praxiserfahrung zu nutzen statt ein neues System zu schaffen. Hierdurch kann der bürokratische Aufwand gering gehalten werden. Das gilt auch für Deutschlands Grenzregion zu Dänemark: Da Dänemark dieses System bereits nutzt, würde die Übernahme bereits erleichtert werden.

Die Nutzung dieses Systems ist auch mit den vielfältigen, in Deutschland bestehenden Farbsystemen der Sammelbehälter kompatibel und kann, auf verschiedenen farbigen Müllbehältern angebracht werden, was das System einfach anwendbar und übertragbar macht.



Abb. 2a: Prozesskette der Symbole auf Verpackungen und der Symbole auf den Mülltonnen (Jahrbuch Umweltmanagement, S. 8, 2020).

Ihre Ansprechpartner im VKU

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We strongly support harmonized EU labels for waste sorting

Dear Commissioner Jessica Roswall

In EUpicto - the joint association for the Nordic-Baltic waste sorting labels - we are very pleased with the ambition to harmonize labels for waste sorting across the European Union. We strongly support the work done already by the European Commission - especially by the DG Environment and the Joint Research Center's Policy Lab in Bruxelles and the circular economy experts in Seville.

Additionally, we are very pleased with the fact that the Nordic-Baltic system is seen by the JRC as worth basing their prototype on.

We recognize that many issues have been raised during the many consultations, workshops and surveys conducted by the JRC Policy Lab, especially concerning the colors for different waste fractions across Europe.

- Because of this, we suggest the EU labelling system should be black and white as a starting point, with colors optional for member states. In future revisions of the PFWR, mandatory and harmonized colors could be introduced.



This also reflects the need from industry for a flexible and versatile labeling scheme that can work across both member states, different packaging designs and printing possibilities.

However, colors are of course an important component when guiding citizens for better waste sorting. Nationally we always recommend both waste operators, municipalities and packaging producers to use the pictograms in color as much as possible.

We understand if the European Commission prefers to introduce harmonized colors as well and recognize that especially the color for plastic in the Nordic-Baltic system stands out compared with other labelling schemes in some EU member states.

Other stakeholders

Close the Glass Loop – joint circular economy initiative by glass packaging producers and user - supports **black-white symbols and no 'component' logos.**

Joint industry statement with over 70 supporting associations **against colors and text on packaging labels:**
<https://www.eurocommerce.eu/2025/07/joint-industry-statement-on-harmonised-waste-sorting-instructions-for-packaging/>

Brussels, July 2025

Joint Industry Statement on Harmonised Waste Sorting Instructions for Packaging

The undersigned organisations express their strong concern and opposition to the use of text and colour for waste sorting labels on packaging. This would reintroduce national barriers to the free movement of packaged goods in the Union, directly contradicting the recent Single Market Strategy¹ where the European Commission identified divergent packaging labels as one of the ten most disruptive barriers to the internal market.

The latest version of the draft Joint Research Centre's (JRC) guidelines on EU waste sorting labels continues to prioritise the use of full-colour labels with accompanying text when used on packaging. Although the draft offers some design options for a pictogram-based system, it simultaneously proposes restricting the use of colour- and text-free alternatives to cases justified by economic constraints, specific consumer readability needs, or to very small packaging.

This approach runs completely counter to the goals of the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR) and will significantly fragment the Union market. Under Article 12 of the PPWR, the European Commission is mandated to harmonise consumer sorting instructions, an essential step to ensuring a functioning Single Market, improving separate collection and recycling of packaging waste, and removing unnecessary burden for industry. Prioritising a labelling system with full colour and text - which will require translation in one or more national languages as established by Member States² - directly contravenes these objectives, reopening the door to divergent national requirements. As a consequence, a product would have to carry a label with up to 24 local terms, also contravening the objective of the labelling scheme to make sorting instructions clearer to consumers.

The direction proposed by the JRC also stands in direct contradiction to the Commission's ongoing efforts to safeguard the Single Market, as clearly outlined in the Single Market Strategy and reinforced in recent years through infringement procedures initiated against national sorting instructions systems³. The strategy clearly reaffirms the Commission's commitment to protecting the integrity of the Single Market, recognising the need to balance providing clear information to consumers while minimising market barriers and burdens on industry.

Different packaging labelling rules across Member States will result in operational inefficiencies, higher costs, and consumer confusion. More critically, it will jeopardise the environmental and economic goals of the PPWR and the Single Market Strategy.

We therefore urge the Commission to reconsider the current direction of the JRC guidelines and ensure that the future EU labelling system aligns with the goals of EU-wide harmonisation, large-scale recyclability, and protection of the Single Market.



Thank you!



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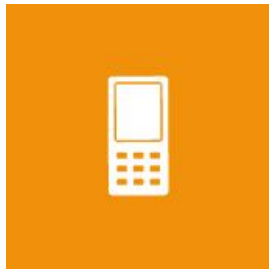
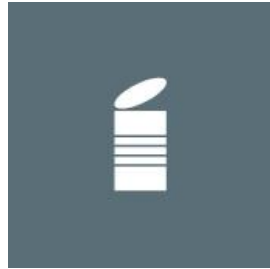
www.cirkulaer.dk

www.eupicto.com



Brancheforeningen

Cirkulær



*Colors from
first wave of
picotgrams.*



*Colors introduced
with second wave
of pictograms.*

[← Tilbage](#)

Madaffald



*Online sorting
guide with text
underneath
pictogram – for
screen readers.*



Madaffald



Ja tak:



Ved dit
hjem



Genbrugs-
station

Avocado

Avocadosten, avocadoskal



MADAFFALD

ikke
muligt



Bananskræller



MADAFFALD

ikke
muligt



Brød- og kagerester



MADAFFALD

ikke
muligt



Plast / Ikoner



Blød Plast / Ikoner



Hård Plast / Ikoner



Elektronik / Ikoner



Farligt Affald / Ikoner



Elpærer / Ikoner



Batterier / Ikoner



Example from mapping of systems and colors during development.

Copenhagen city color system (2010ish)

PAP Genanvendes i nye produkter. Pap er fx papkasser uden flammings- og belagspap, karton, emballage fra fx legetøj, flammings- og belagspap.	Pap skal være rent og foldet sammen inden det kommer i beholderen. Brugte pizzabakker skal altid i degnemodation.	
PAPIR Genanvendes i nye produkter. Papir er fx aviser og ugeblade, reklamer, kuverter inkl. rødekuveter, bøger inkl. telefonbøger, skrive- og tegnapapir.	Clips og tape må gerne sidde på.	
GLAS Høle flasker fyldes igen, resten smeltes om til nyt glas. Glas er fx vin- og spiritusflasker, glas fra fødevarer, drikkeglas, glødvasser og glaskar fra nævnte.	Glas fra fødevarer skal være fri for madrester og må gerne være med låg.	
RESTAFFALD Bliver til elektricitet og varme. Restaffald er fx mælke- og juicekartoner, pizzabakker og andet smasket pap og papir, bleer, hygiejneaffald etc.	flammings-, dyrestreelse og støvsugerposer.	
STORSKRALD/TRÆ Træ og metal bliver genanvendt, mens resten bliver til varme. Storskrald er fx madrester, gulvtæpper og byggeaffald fra "gør-det-selv-arbejde". Træ som fx møbler og paller skal stilles for sig.	Træ, sten og glas samt sandbæltedår, teglsten, mursten, teglsten, beton etc. skal på genbrugsstationen.	
ELEKTRONIK Det meste genanvendes - resten specialbeholdes. Elektronik er fx mobiltelefoner og oplysnings- og underholdningselektronik (legetøj, strygjern, mindre køkkenmaskiner som håndmikser, blenders etc., postbort, sko og slips med lys eller musik). Stort elektronisk affald leveres for sig.	madkasser og plastbeholdere til opbevaring af mad, legetøj, plastposer og indpakning af plast fra fødevarer, folie og bubbleplast etc. Plast fra fødevarer skal være fri for madrester.	
PLAST Genanvendes i nye produkter. Plast er fx flasker, beholdere og dunke fra flydende rengørings- og vaskeemidler, non-plastemballage og bakker fra fx frugt og grønt, tomme cd-hylstre.	madkasser og plastbeholdere til opbevaring af mad, legetøj, plastposer og indpakning af plast fra fødevarer, folie og bubbleplast etc. Plast fra fødevarer skal være fri for madrester.	
METAL Genanvendes i nye produkter. Metal er fx rene konservesdåser, tomme dåser uden pant, køkkengrej og fiskebæsk, værktøj, søm og skruer, æsker af metal, gryder og pander.	Metal fra fødevarer skal være fri for madrester. Stort metal leveres for sig.	
BIO Bliver til biogas og gødning. Bioaffald (organisk) er al madaffald (dø og råbenet), kød, fisk, ben, knogler, frugt, grøntsager, æg, æggeskal, nødder, ris, morgenmadsprodukter, kaffegrums, kaffefiltere, teblade, brugt køkkenolie og afkølede blomster. Brug kun bioposer og bind altid knude på.	ris, morgenmadsprodukter, kaffegrums, kaffefiltere, teblade, brugt køkkenolie og afkølede blomster. Brug kun bioposer og bind altid knude på.	
FARLIGT AFFALD Behandles under kontrollerede forhold. Farligt affald er fx kemikalier og gift, sprængstoffer, lysstofrør, maling, batterier, akkumulatorer og sprøjtekaner.	Produkter og tomme emballager markert med disse symboler er farligt affald.	

Greater Copenhagen area 2012

 PAP	 SMÅT ELEKTRONIK
 PAPIR	 PLAST
 GLAS	 METAL
 RESTAFFALD	 BIOAFFALD
 XL	 FARLIGT AFFALD

National system 2016

 PAP	 SMÅT ELEKTRONIK
 PAPIR	 PLAST
 GLAS	 METAL
 RESTAFFALD	 MADAFFALD
 STORSKRALD	 INDENDØRS TRÆ
 FARLIGT AFFALD	



*More visual
presence in the
nordic pictograms*





Why are plastics/packaging not yellow?

Yellow is in some countries for plastic and/or packaging waste. However, yellow is also globally the color used for indicating biohazardous, infectious and radioactive waste.

The intention is to have the pictogram system cover all waste fraction, and not just household/municipal waste fractions – so for example also waste from hospitals, medical centers and the life science industry. The yellow color is thus restricted for waste pictograms here.

