

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

7 JANUARY 2014

**FINAL REPORT OF THE
ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL -
HOUSEHOLD WASTE
MANAGEMENT**

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To present the Environment Scrutiny Panel's findings, conclusions and recommendations following its investigation of the topic of household waste management arrangements in Middlesbrough.
2. The scrutiny panel sought to examine this issue following the recent introduction of revised waste collection and recycling arrangements.

FURTHER INFORMATION

3. This topic was investigated as a short topic over the course of one Environment Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 11 November 2013. A further panel meeting was held on 2 December 2013 to consider a draft final report. A Scrutiny Support Officer from Legal and Democratic Services co-ordinated and arranged the submission of written and oral evidence and arranged witnesses for the investigation. Meetings administration, including preparation of agenda and minutes, was undertaken by a Governance Officer from Legal and Democratic Services.
4. A record of discussions at panel meetings, including agenda, minutes and reports, is available from the Council's Eagenda committee management system, which can be accessed via the Council's website at www.middlesbrough.gov.uk.
5. This report has been compiled on the basis of information submitted to the scrutiny panel by officers from the Council's Neighbourhoods and Communities Department.
6. The membership of the scrutiny panel was as follows:

Councillors Kerr (Chair), Clark (Vice-Chair), Brady, Cole, Davison, C Hobson, McPartland, Saunders and P Sharrocks.

THE SCRUTINY PANEL'S FINDINGS

7. The scrutiny panel's findings are set out below and relate to:

- Background information.
- Additional Government funding.
- Changes to Middlesbrough's refuse and recycling collection arrangements.
- Impact of the revised arrangements.
- Processing of recycled materials.
- Further information.

Background Information

8. The amount of rubbish that we all create has increased over time because:

- Increasing wealth means that people are buying more products and ultimately producing more waste.
- Increasing populations mean that there are more people to create waste.
- While new packaging and technological products are being developed, much of these contain materials that are not biodegradable.
- Lifestyle changes, such as eating more fast food, have led to more packaging waste, much of which is not biodegradable.

9. Refuse collection is regarded by the public as one of local government's most important services - and can often be highlighted as being considered by Council Tax payers as the main service that they receive for their money. In this context, changes to methods and types of collections nationally have generated numerous media articles and, in some cases, headlines highlighting perceived risks to public health and perceived reductions in service provision. Any changes to refuse collection arrangements can therefore be contentious and highly political.

10. The issue of recycling is closely linked to waste production. Quite simply, an increase in the amount of waste that is recycled means a reduction in the amount that is sent to landfill or, as is the case with Middlesbrough's waste, incinerated at the local Energy from Waste Plant.

11. Globally, waste reduction and increased recycling are important to the natural environment and the economy as:

- Harmful chemicals and greenhouse gases are released from rubbish in landfill sites. Recycling helps to reduce the pollution caused by waste.

- Habitat destruction and global warming are some of the effects caused by deforestation. Recycling reduces the need for raw materials so that the rainforests can be preserved.
- Huge amounts of energy are used when making products from raw materials. Recycling requires much less energy and therefore helps to preserve natural resources.
- Making products from raw materials costs much more than if they were made from recycled products.
- Recycling reduces the need for raw materials; it also uses less energy, therefore preserving natural resources for the future.

Additional Government Funding

12. The scrutiny panel was informed that the Government's Department for Communities and Local Government's preferred option is for local authorities to maintain weekly refuse collection services. However, a large number of local authorities nationally do now operate alternate weekly collections of refuse and recycling, where waste is collected in one week and recycling in the following week. In order to encourage authorities to revert back to, or continue to provide, a weekly refuse collection service, the Government established a £250 million fund in February 2012. Local authorities that wanted to introduce, retain or reinstate a weekly collection service were eligible to submit funding bids. In order to be eligible to receive funding, authorities were required to satisfy the following criteria:

- A weekly refuse collection would need to be provided to residents for at least five years.
- The service provided would need to represent good value for money.
- Environmental benefits would need to result.

13. On the basis that the funding would be used to promote and improve recycling in Middlesbrough, as well as to continue weekly collections of refuse, the Council made a bid for funding of £3.6m from the Government scheme. This bid was approved and the funding received is being used to introduce improved refuse and recycling collections in Middlesbrough.

Changes to Middlesbrough's Refuse and Recycling Collection Arrangements

14. The scrutiny panel was informed that, as a result of receipt of the Government funding outlined above, since the summer of 2013 the Council has almost completed a roll out of revised refuse and recycling collection arrangements across the borough. The panel was reminded that, for the vast majority of Middlesbrough residents, the Council's old kerbside recycling scheme involved:

- A black box for recyclables such as glass and cans.
- A blue bag for paper and cardboard.

- A green bag for garden waste ('green waste').
 - A clear bag for plastics.
 - A (green) wheelie bin for remaining refuse.
15. The new collection scheme has reduced the number of recycling containers used and makes it easier for residents to recycle, as less sorting is required by householders. Containing all waste in bins makes collections easier cleaner and safer for both residents and collection crews. Also, the new bins that are being used are easier to move and empty, will reduce litter and mess and will save money.
16. The new scheme involves the use of three bins:
- A blue-lidded wheelie bin - This is for glass; cartons; newspapers plus other paper and cardboard; cartons; food tins and drink cans; and household plastic packaging.
 - A green bin (ie the old 240 litre wheelie bin) - This is for green garden waste.
 - A black bin - This is for any remaining refuse and is smaller in size than the old wheelie bins, at 140 litre capacity.
17. A leaflet informing residents of the new arrangements has been delivered to households along with the new bins. Frequency of refuse and recycling collections have not changed - residents still receive a weekly refuse collection service, with recycling and green waste collections in alternate weeks. It was explained that the smaller size of the new refuse bins was to encourage people to recycle more and put less into their refuse - officers indicated that people can have a tendency to fill whatever receptacles they are given.
18. The scrutiny panel was advised that, in some areas of terraced properties in Middlesbrough (eg Linthorpe, Gresham and North Ormesby), the collection of bins from back alleys is difficult due to the lack of vehicular access to the streets concerned. In such areas, residents were not previously provided with wheelie bins for refuse but, instead, have used a system of black plastic sacks. In these areas, residents will be offered the option of new refuse and recycling bins or retaining the use of plastic sacks for refuse and recycling. Council's Department of Neighbourhoods and Communities is, however, keen to promote and encourage increased recycling so will offer a flexible approach to householders and extend the new collection arrangements as far as possible. Wheelie bins and recycling bins will therefore be provided in terraced areas if residents are able to accommodate them, for example by storing them in front gardens to facilitate easier collection.
19. Other issues associated with the roll out of the new arrangements are highlighted in the following section of the report.

Impact of the Revised Refuse and Recycling Collection Arrangements

20. The scrutiny panel was advised that the new refuse and recycling collection arrangements have generally been well received across the Borough. The effects of the new scheme to date were highlighted to Members:
- A black bin - This is for any remaining refuse and is smaller in size than the old wheelie bins, at 140 litre capacity.
 - There has been a significant change in behaviour across the Borough, resulting in a dramatic increase in recycling levels.
 - Areas where there was previously little or no involvement in the recycling scheme now take part.
 - Although waste tonnages are not yet confirmed, evidence suggests that the amount of waste collected has significantly reduced while recycling tonnages have increased. Some areas have produced a four-fold increase in recycling and the authority's maximum recycling collection has increased from around 70 tonnes to approximately 200 tonnes in the best collection week to date.
 - Current recycling rates are yet to be confirmed. However, it is likely that the overall rate for Middlesbrough will show a significant increase from previous levels of approximately 23%. The scrutiny panel was advised that in 2005, the Council's recycling rate was around 11% and that the UK target is 50% by 2020.
 - Evidence to date suggests that, although exact tonnages are yet to be measured, increased recycling levels are resulting in less waste being collected. This means that the Council will reduce the costs of waste disposal via a reduction in the 'gate fee' which is charged for use of the Haverton Hill Energy from Waste Plant.
21. The scrutiny panel was informed that the new operations have highlighted an issue concerning lack of storage space, or suitable storage space, for the required three bins at some properties. As has been outlined earlier in this report, the new collection arrangements are being operated as flexibly as possible, with plastic bags being used for recyclables in some areas. In addition, discussions are ongoing with local social housing providers to discuss the provision of bespoke solutions for areas where problems have been identified. It was explained that communal recycling bins may be provided in some areas.
22. During the discussions at the scrutiny panel meeting, Members also raised the following points:
- a) Evidence suggests that, in a number of areas, the new collection arrangements are working so well that residents have little refuse for weekly collection. On the other hand, recycling bins are being very well used. For this reason, it was suggested that the Council could possibly explore the possibility of collecting refuse fortnightly and recycling weekly. In response, officers advised that the funding that has been received from the Government for the new arrangements is conditional on the authority retaining a weekly refuse collection service.

- b) There have been problems in some areas of the Borough in respect of the use of communal recycling containers in back alleys. Problems have included lockable lids being forced and the containers then being used to dispose of household waste, junk jobs etc. Officers advised that this issue has been recognised and steps will be taken to address the problems that have been identified. This will include targeting hotspot areas through the use of enforcement staff. It was also indicated that feedback from Members and the public to identify problem areas would be welcomed.
- c) As some households are easily filling recycling bins, it was questioned whether additional bins can be provided. It was explained in response that up to four additional bins can be provided for recycling/green waste, with the first and second bins being provided free of charge. In addition, residents can also take additional recyclable materials to the Council's 'bring sites.'
- d) Reference was made to the start and finish dates for green waste collections, when it was queried whether these could both start and finish later. The panel was advised that the timescale concerned has been reduced due to budget reductions and that the period covered is thought to reflect the consensus view. However, the position will continue to be monitored. In addition, green waste disposal facilities are available at Newham Grange Leisure Farm and the Haverton Hill Municipal Waste Site.
- e) The scrutiny panel queried whether the authority does or could make compost, produced from its green waste collections, available. In response it was explained that free compost, for public use, used to be available via the SITA facility. However, this is no longer the case.
- f) Reference was made to side waste and the position queried in respect of current policy. It was explained that side waste is no longer collected. All waste must be containerised with a closed lid and no additional bags on top of the bins or at the side. Collection crews will label bins to explain why side waste has not been collected.
- g) It was highlighted that some residents have indicated that they did not receive the information booklet outlining the new arrangements. In response it was indicated that the booklet should have been delivered to all households and it is understood that this was the case. However, any problems in this regard should be reported to officers.
- h) Members considered that greater publicity of the scheme - to highlight its success to date and to ensure full awareness of its operation and of all materials that can be collected - would be beneficial.
- i) The position was queried in respect of the recent European Union (EU) Directive on recycling. It was explained that the EU has indicated that, by 2015, refuse/recycling collections for every home must comply with the European Waste Framework Directive. This requires that households sort metal, paper, plastic and glass into separate waste bins. However, co-mingled collections can be operated/continued where this can be justified. Officers consider that this is the case in Middlesbrough where co-mingled collections have resulted in a large increase in recycling levels.

23. In addition to the above points, the scrutiny panel also queried the position in respect of the Council's Waste Disposal Contract, which is due for renewal in 2020. The current contract also includes neighbouring Teesside authorities. It was explained that various options, which will include a continuation of the existing arrangement involving SITA's Energy from Waste Plant, will be explored. Discussions have already commenced in this regard.

Processing of Recycled Materials

24. The scrutiny panel was informed that Middlesbrough's new recycling arrangements are known as a 'co-mingled' system of collections. This means that all recyclables are put into one bin by residents. In comparison to the old system - of collection crews sorting recyclables at the roadside and placing them in different compartments in the collection vehicle - this method has significantly reduced collection times by Council crews.

25. Following collection, the materials are then sorted by the Council's contractor, who is based in Hartlepool. The contractor uses a mix of mechanical and manual methods to sort and separate the materials collected for processing. Indications from the contractor are that, to date, the scheme is working well with low contamination rates of around 3% for materials collected.

26. Recyclable materials are then processed in various locations, according to market demands - for example steel and glass tend to be recycled in the UK, whereas China is a big recycler of plastics for packaging use and glass may be processed in Sweden.

CONCLUSIONS

27. Having considered the submitted information, the Environment Scrutiny Panel reached the following conclusions:

1. After reaching recycling levels of around only 20% (in comparison to the best performing authorities, where levels are over 40%) action was needed in Middlesbrough to cut down on waste and encourage increased recycling. In this context, the Council's recently-introduced new waste collection and recycling arrangements are welcomed, particularly as initial indications are that waste is being reduced and recycling levels will be significantly improved through increased levels of participation.
2. Government funding for the new waste collection arrangements means that a weekly refuse collection service must be continued for five years. However, the future position will need to be closely monitored - particularly if a position is reached where waste collected is significantly reduced in comparison to recycling tonnages.
3. A flexible approach to recycling collections has been implemented to encourage participation. This involves a variety of collection methods. There is a need to ensure that the public is fully aware of this approach - for example the possibility of opting in to use of a recycling and/or green waste bin in areas where plastic sacks are used for collections.

4. Recycling participation rates and tonnages collected might be further improved by publicising the success of the scheme - for example through the Council's website. There is also a need to ensure that, to maximise collections, information currently shown on the website, for example showing items that can be recycled, is kept up to date.
5. Action is needed in some areas of terraced properties in the Borough, where communal recycling containers have been misused or vandalised. Feedback from Elected Members and the public would be useful to highlight all problem areas and ensure that these are addressed.
6. Although free compost, produced from green waste collections, used to be available for public collection from the SITA facility at Haverton Hill, this is no longer the case.
7. Introduction of the new waste and collection arrangements across the whole of the Borough (involving issuing the required new bins and making sure that all households are aware of the revised schemes) has been a major task that should not be underestimated. The scrutiny panel recognises and appreciates the work that has gone in to making the transition to the new scheme as smooth as possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

28. Following the submitted evidence, and based on the conclusions above, the scrutiny panel's recommendations for consideration by the Overview and Scrutiny board and the Executive are as follows:

1. That refuse and recycling arrangements are reviewed in future to ensure that collection schemes continue to be operated at maximum efficiency - in particular to examine the possibility of moving to weekly collections of recycling and fortnightly collections of refuse.
2. That, in order to further encourage recycling across the Borough, the information contained on the Council's website in respect of waste and recycling arrangements is reviewed/updated as necessary to ensure that:
 - a) The Recycling Directory, that lists all items that can be recycled, is kept accurate and up to date.
 - b) Information, updated at regular intervals, is included on tonnages of recycling and green waste collected; and information on how recycled materials are dealt with/processed.
3. That the Council's website is also updated to advise that the Council's waste/recycling collection schemes are operated as flexibly as possible and that, in areas where plastic sacks are used for refuse and recycling collections, wheelie bins can be provided on request.

4. That all Elected Members are contacted in writing and invited to submit feedback on operation of the new waste and recycling collection arrangements. This should be with a view to identifying any problems associated with the new arrangements - such as areas where further publicity for the collection schemes might be required; highlighting areas of misuse of communal recycling bins; and identifying areas where enforcement action could assist in addressing problems.
5. That, subject to it being possible to do so at minimal cost, the re-introduction of free, local, public compost collections is examined and considered.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

29. The Panel is grateful to the following people, who presented evidence during the course of this investigation:

- K Sherwood - Waste Disposal and Contracts Manager, Department of Neighbourhoods and Communities, Middlesbrough Council.
- P Shaw - Recycling Officer, Department of Neighbourhoods and Communities, Middlesbrough Council.

BACKGROUND AND REFERENCE MATERIAL

30. The following sources were consulted or referred to in preparing this report:

- Report to and minutes of the Environment Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 11 November 2013.

COUNCILLOR BOB KERR

CHAIR OF ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL

November 2013

Contact Officer:

Alan Crawford

Scrutiny Support Officer

Legal & Democratic Services

Tel 01642 729707

e-mail: alan_crawford@middlesbrough.gov.uk