

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Environment Scrutiny Panel was held on Monday 9 October 2023.

PRESENT: Councillors J Ryles (Chair), D Branson (Vice-Chair), J Ewan, TA Grainge, I Morrish and S Platt

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillor Gavigan – Executive Member for Environment.

OFFICERS: G Field and J Dixon

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors J Banks, L Mason and M Nugent

23/11 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no Declarations of Interest made by Members at this point in the meeting.

23/12 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING OF THE ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL HELD ON 12 SEPTEMBER 2023**

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Environment Scrutiny Panel held on 12 September 2023 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

23/13 **WASTE MANAGEMENT - INTRODUCTION TO NEW SCRUTINY TOPIC/ SETTING THE SCENE**

G Field, Director of Environment and Community Services was in attendance at the meeting to provide an introduction to the Panel's new scrutiny topic of Waste Management.

The purpose of the presentation on Waste Services was to set the scene for the new scrutiny review and for the Panel to determine the next steps for the review in terms of evidence gathering.

The Panel heard that there were two key areas within Waste Management:-

- Waste collection
- Waste disposal

Waste was disposed of in various ways, according to type. Household residual waste was disposed of through the incinerator (Energy from Waste Plant) at Haverton Hill, however, the facility was coming to the end of its working life and this would have serious implications for the Council, not least budget implications and pressures.

Recycling waste was disposed of through a variety of outlets, depending upon the material to be recycled, and green waste was sent for composting.

In relation to fly-tipped waste, it was noted that sometimes different vehicles had to be sent to collect the waste so it was not always collected in one go. This was due to the different types of materials that could make up the waste having to be disposed of at different outlets, for example, mattresses had to be collected separately for recycling.

Residual waste was defined as being household waste that was leftover after everything else had been recycled.

In Middlesbrough, residual waste was collected on a weekly basis and this had been facilitated some years ago by moving to smaller wheeled bins and utilising full sized wheeled bins for co-mingled recycling waste. Very few local authorities in England now carried out weekly residual waste collections, with the majority operating on a fortnightly collection basis, and monthly collections in Wales.

Initially, the provision of smaller residual waste bins in Middlesbrough combined with the provision of a full-sized wheeled bin for recycling, had seen a jump in recycling rates from around 25% to 33%. This had now slightly reduced and plateaued at between 30 to 33%.

As previously mentioned, residual waste was disposed of at the Haverton Hill incinerator. The facility was originally built by Cleveland County Council but the contract would be ending in 2025/26. The Tees Valley local authorities were currently in a joint procurement exercise for a new facility to be built.

At present, Middlesbrough sent around 43.5 thousand tonnes of waste per year to be incinerated at the Haverton Hill plant, meaning Middlesbrough sent very little waste to landfill.

In terms of kerbside recycling, around 10 thousand tonnes per annum were collected in Middlesbrough which equated to a recycling rate of around 30 to 33%, although recycling rates from areas with communal bins in alleyways was generally not good.

Redcar and Cleveland Council currently had the best recycling rates of the North East Councils at approximately 38.7%, however, this had fallen from more than 40%. Stockton Council had the lowest rate of recycling amongst the North East Councils at approximately 24-25% and also operated weekly residual waste collections. Nationally, there appeared to be a correlation nationally between weekly bin collections and poorer recycling rates.

In addition, contamination rates were currently high in Middlesbrough, at around 40+%. Contaminated recycling waste had to be redirected to the incinerator.

Residual waste disposal costs were considerably higher than those for recycling waste disposal and this was set to rise, placing significant budgetary pressures on the Council's medium term financial plan.

Green waste (garden waste) was collected on a fortnightly basis from April to September, then once monthly in October and November. Around 6,800 tonnes of green waste per annum was collected and this had the lowest disposal cost.

In relation to national waste targets, the Panel was informed that the Government had set ambitious targets. By 2035 appropriate measures must be in place to ensure:-

- The preparation for reuse and recycling of municipal waste was increased to a minimum of 65% (by weight).
- The amount of municipal waste sent to landfill be reduced to 10%, or less, by weight, of the total amount generated.

Middlesbrough currently sent very little waste to landfill and already met this target easily.

Future issues on the horizon included compulsory food waste collections by 2026. Under the Environment Act, the Government was set to introduce legislation to require local authorities to collect food waste. Whilst it would not be compulsory for householders to use the food waste collection service, it would be compulsory for local authorities to operate the service.

The Government was also planning to introduce a national deposit return scheme, for plastic bottles and drinks cans, in 2025. This was likely to impact on the Council's waste stream in terms of potentially reducing the amount of cans and plastic.

The Panel was asked to consider the key question, from both an environmental and financial perspective, how could recycling rates in Middlesbrough be increased, whilst keeping costs to a minimum?

Panel Members were encouraged to undertake their own research into other local authorities that performed well in recycling and to explore potential alternative solutions.

During the course of discussion, the following issues were raised:-

- In response to a query regarding the disposal of mattresses and collection of fly-tipped

waste, it was confirmed that they were required to be transferred individually to the disposal site in a dedicated vehicle. Because of this, mattresses had to be collected separately to the rest of the fly-tipped waste which resulted in different elements of the waste being collected at different times.

- It was queried which local authorities performed best on recycling. Members were advised that the better performing authorities were generally located in the south west of England. South Oxfordshire had a recycling rate of 62.7% and in the north east Gateshead, Newcastle and Northumberland all performed well.
- It was noted that South Oxfordshire was considered to be quite an affluent area and it was queried whether there was any evidence to suggest a correlation between recycling rates in poorer areas. Members were informed that whilst there should be no reason to stop anyone from recycling, as it was more a matter of choice, some wards in Middlesbrough considered to be more deprived did have lower recycling rates. Choosing not to recycle appeared to be an embedded attitude towards recycling and this mindset needed to change.
- Some people might say that they did not recycle as they were unsure as to what items could be recycled, however, it was particularly easy in Middlesbrough as all materials – paper, plastic, cardboard, tin and glass – were placed in a single bin for collection. All the Council asked was that items were clean and free of food residue when placed in the bin for recycling.
- Reference was made to the high levels of contaminated recycling in Middlesbrough and it was highlighted that previously, the Council had taken a strict stance on this by putting stickers on bins and not emptying them due to contamination and it was queried whether this had a positive impact. The Panel was advised that this had to be stepped down during covid and that some enforcement legislation had also changed. Fines could no longer be issued to people who continued to put the wrong items in the wrong bins, however, the Council could refuse to collect waste that was not in the correct receptacle.
- A Panel Member made reference to underground bin systems in Spain whereby bins were located underground for residents to deposit their refuse and recycling. It was queried whether there would be any merit in exploring such a system in Middlesbrough to provide a better recycling experience for users and encourage recycling. It was noted that there were similar underground waste collection schemes in the UK, such as Peterborough, Liverpool and West Cambridgeshire. The Panel heard that whilst such systems could be beneficial, they were expensive. Middlesbrough had such a simple and accessible refuse and recycling system with kerbside collection that this was probably the most beneficial and easiest ways for residents to recycle. The Council had previously operated recycling 'bring sites' however, these effectively became large rubbish dumps that were costly to maintain.
- Reference was made to the possibility of providing targeted 'skip drives' or rubbish amnesties but this would have financial implications for the Council.
- In response to a query, it was clarified that the recycling rate in Middlesbrough of 30-33% was the rate of recycling after contaminated waste had been removed.
- A Panel Member asked how likely it would be for Middlesbrough to achieve the Government's 65% target by 2035, based on current projections. The Director responded that it would be difficult should the Environment Bill not be implemented, however, it should be achievable if the Government went ahead with plans for compulsory food waste collections, packaging reduction by producers, etc.
- It was queried what percentage of homes in Middlesbrough had alleyways and used the clear plastic bag recycling collection system. The Panel was advised that there were approximately 15,000 homes on back alley collections.
- A Panel Member stated that of the terraced houses that had communal bins, they were allowed to put out a clear plastic bag of recycling waste for collection, however, the bags were available from a limited number of places and that it was sometimes inconvenient for residents to collect them from the places where they were available during working hours.

It was, therefore, queried whether residents could use their own opaque bags, available from supermarkets, for collections. The Director responded that the clear bags should be used so that operatives could fully see the contents of the bags.

- A Member referred to the Council's website, where information could be found on what could and could not be recycled and stated that previously this had been in a printable 'poster' format, however this was no longer the case. It was suggested that this should be made available again so that people could be provided with the A4 size poster to place in a prominent position to remind residents of the items they could recycle. This was particularly useful for HMOs and other communal areas.
- In response to a question regarding refuse collection vehicles, the Panel was informed that there was an ongoing vehicle replacement programme. Existing fleet vehicles were around 10 years old, however, some new vehicles were due to arrive soon as part of the replacement programme. There were currently around 22 refuse vehicles in total. The arrival of a back alley collection vehicle was imminent. This was a smaller vehicle which could fit into the alleyways. The lead time on delivery of such vehicles from the point of order was generally more than a year.
- Reference was made to the high recycling rates achieved in Oxford and it was stated that this was likely to include food waste. Based on Middlesbrough's current recycling system, if it was utilised correctly, figures in the mid to high 40% should be achievable.
- Reference was made to fly-tipping and bulky waste collections. A Member highlighted that it was sometimes difficult to tell whether waste had been fly-tipped or was awaiting collection through the bulky waste service. The Director advised that items for bulky waste collections should be presented on the morning of the day of collection and not before.
- It was queried whether the issue of fly-tipping in Middlesbrough had worsened. The Panel heard that enforcement activity, in general, had increased, with crime and anti-social behaviour beginning to decline. In terms of fly-tipping, environmental enforcement had increased which had resulted in perpetrators being handed custodial sentences and vans used to fly-tip being seized.
- In relation to the prevention of fly-tipping, the Chair provided details of a project currently operating in North Ormesby where she had worked with NORAC group (North Ormesby Residents Against Crime), Police and the Council to place small cameras in alleyways where fly-tipping had been identified as a problem. The cameras had been funded by NORAC and residents themselves and had had a positive impact so far on reducing fly-tipping. It was highlighted that the correct processes and procedures had been followed, with the Council and Police, in order to install the cameras appropriately ensuring no laws were breached.

The Chair thanked the Director for his attendance and the information provided.

AGREED that the information provided be noted and considered in the context of the Panel's current investigation into Waste Management.

23/14

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD - UPDATE

The Chair provided a verbal update in relation to the business conducted at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 20 September 2023, namely: -

- Update from the Mayor, Chris Cooke.
- Middlesbrough Ward Boundary Review – The Head of Legal Services provided the first draft of the Council's submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission.
- Scrutiny Work Programmes 2023/24
- Executive Forward Work Programme
- Scrutiny Panels' Chairs' Updates.

Date of Next meeting of OSB – Wednesday, 15th November, 4.30pm.

DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING - 13 NOVEMBER 2024, 10.00AM

The next meeting of the Environment Scrutiny Panel was scheduled to take place on Monday, 13 November at 10.00am.