

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Environment Scrutiny Panel was held on 20 May 2024.

PRESENT: Councillors: Ryles (Chair), Ewan, Grainge, Morrish and S Platt.

OFFICERS: K Bargewell, J Dixon and G Field.

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillor Gavigan – Executive Member for Environment

PRESENT AS OBSERVERS: A Glover – Communications Team, Middlesbrough Council
N Corrigan – Local Democracy Reporter, Teesside Live

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were submitted on behalf of Councillors Banks and Branson.

**** DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

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

CHANGES TO BIN COLLECTIONS

G Field, Director of Environment and Community Services, had been invited to the meeting to address a number of issues raised by Panel Members on behalf of residents and in relation to media articles regarding the roll-out of the new garden waste bins. The issues raised included the procurement process in relation to the new bins and communication with residents regarding transformation plans and how this would be dealt with going forward.

The Director advised that it had been just 40 working days since the commencement of the new garden waste bin roll-out. To date, the following had been achieved:-

- Movement of 45,518 bins in Middlesbrough.
- A total of 19,897 new garden waste bins had been delivered.
- A total of 25,621 old green 'diamond' waste bins had been collected.
- 41% garden waste subscriptions reached – double the estimated figure.
- Income target had reached £790,000.

The following queries were raised:-

- It was queried whether the 19,897 new bins issued and the 25,621 old garden waste bins that had been collected was the final total. It was clarified that residents with an old green waste bin had been given the option to keep it if they so wished and many had kept them for composting, etc. In addition there was a further two weeks remaining for residents to subscribe to the new green waste collection service. In addition, the income target to be achieved for the paid collection service of £790,000 had been achieved and was now more than £800,000. The assumption at the start was that £406,000 would be achieved.
- A Member asked, in terms of value for money, whether the cost of the purchase and roll-out of the new bins would be covered by the income achieved. The Director advised that the bins had been purchased from the capital budget and that during the budget-setting process for the current year, an assumption was made that an income of £406,000 would be achieved for this financial year. To date, a further £400,000 had been achieved (£806,000 so far). Should residents who had signed up to the paid for service renew their subscription next year, a similar figure would be achieved for next year and this would begin to narrow the budget gap.
- It was acknowledged that subscribing to the service had been a challenge, however, it would be much simpler next year for those wishing to re-subscribe as it was planned to provide an auto-

renewal facility for existing subscribers.

- A query was raised in relation to whether money originally allocated for traffic lights had been used as part of the budget spent on the new bins. It was clarified that the money for the purchase of the bins had been from the capital budget and that the capital funding allocated to traffic lights had subsequently been funded from an additional capital fund allocated to the Council through the TVCA. This had allowed the Council to use the money originally set aside for traffic lights for the purchase of the bins and avoided additional capital borrowing.
- It was queried whether the income from the green waste charges would be ringfenced to waste services. It was confirmed that this would not be the case and that any income would be received into the overall revenue account.

Members were advised that the timeframe for the roll-out of the bins was as follows:-

March 2024

- Approval for bin roll-out given by Full Council on 8 March 2024.
- Members briefing sessions held.
- Training for hub staff in order to assist residents.
- Work with IT to launch system for ordering bins, stickers, etc.

April 2024

- Deliveries of new garden waste bins commenced first week in April.
- Communication advising residents of arrangements to look out for soon in relation to collection of old green waste bins. Unfortunately, this included an example of the leaflet residents could expect to receive with a picture of the bin and 'Monday' across it. Many residents had assumed this meant that their old bin would be collected the following Monday and led to a lot of confusion regarding collections. Lessons had been learnt from this going forward.
- At least four Member briefing sessions were held at various times, both in person and on-line, to keep Members up to date.
- The new garden waste subscription service commenced.
- Collection of old garden waste bins (green, 'Diamond') began.
- On-line bin collection calendars were launched. There had been an issue with the software not pulling through around 15% of addresses. This had been a national issue with the software company which had now been resolved. However, the issues did not come to light until 14 May.

May 2024

- As mentioned, due to an IT glitch outside of the Council's control, around 1,300 orders for bins were not fulfilled on time, however, they were delivered by 12 May.
- Due to demand for the garden waste subscription service far exceeding initial assumptions, an additional 12,000 garden waste bins were ordered.
- As a result of the excess demand and queries, the Council's Contact Centre became overwhelmed, therefore, a small, secondary contact centre was established at Resolution House to deal specifically with bin orders and queries.

During discussion the following issues were raised:-

- It was queried why the glitch in the ordering system had not been identified sooner. The director explained that the IT system used for ordering the bins had only been operating for a period of 40 days and that the error had been picked up midway through this period when residents began querying why their bins had not been delivered. There was then a process of catching up to fulfil the backlog of deliveries plus the scheduled deliveries.

- It was clarified that at the start of May there were 14,000 bins in stock, based on the estimate that there would be a 20% take up rate (around 9,300 bins). This figure was based on take up at other Councils and would have allowed for any additional requests to be met for second bins/late take up, etc. The current take up rate stood at 41% (just over 20,000 bins, including second bins). This was double the assumption at the start of the project. The total income reached was £790,800 but would exceed £800,000 this year.
- In response to a query as to which other Councils were looked at in terms of take up, the Panel heard that a comparison with Hartlepool and Darlington's take up for year one was considered. Initial take up rates in Middlesbrough had far exceeded expectations and it was acknowledged that this had been a huge task within such a short timeframe. Due to the budget setting process requiring approval in March, and given the Council's current financial position, it had been essential to ensure that deadlines for this year's green waste collection service were not missed as the figures assumed had been written into the budget. This had been an additional pressure as grass cutting was seasonal meaning that the subscription and collection service needed to be in place by April. The fact that demand and income would exceed predictions was a good thing, particularly as there had been some scepticism as to whether the initial take up assumptions would be achieved. It was also highlighted that there had been the additional challenge of collecting the old 'diamond' garden waste bins which had to be collected by a separate crew and dismantled at the roadside so that the component parts - bins, wheels and axels – could be recycled. More than 25,000 of those had been collected and removed so far in a nine-week programme which was currently ahead of schedule.
- Reference was made to many people, particularly older people, who did not have access to, or were able to use, the internet and therefore could not find out when their old bins were being collected as they did not receive leaflets letting them know the date of collection. The Director advised that 85% of bins that needed to be collected had been but there would be some residents who had decided to keep their old bins.
- A Member asked whether the Council would receive any income from recycling the old diamond waste bins. The Director advised that it was anticipated that around £40,000 would be received from recycling the bins assuming that all the ones known about were collected in. Once the nine-week collection programme had ended (in approximately two weeks' time) there would be a better idea of that income figure.
- A Panel Member commented that some residents had complained that despite subscribing to the green waste collection service and being issued with a new bin, they still had not had their bins emptied. The Director stated that this had occurred due to the backlog of new bins being distributed and old bins being collected. The service ran fortnightly from April to November, therefore, residents would be provided with two complimentary additional collections starting in March next year.
- In relation to the procurement processes followed in relation to the purchase of the bins, the Panel was informed that it was not true that it would have been cheaper to purchase the bins from a firm within the UK. It was common for local authorities to use procurement organisations that could source bulk purchasing and shorten the procurement selection process. A procurement exercise was undertaken which specified the particular requirements of the bins the Council wished to purchase, for example, a better-quality robust bin, microchipped, etched with the Council's recycling information. Schaffer was the Company that was able to deliver on all of the requirements and was selected on that basis and became the successful bidder. At the end of this process the Council must issue a Notice and this was overlooked in error but was subsequently rectified.
- In response to a question, it was explained that each bin was microchipped and the chip-readers, usually costing £1,000 each, were supplied as part of the process free of charge. In summary the correct processes were followed. A UK Company had challenged the Council stating that it could have supplied the bins cheaper, however, they did not meet the criteria specified.

- A Member queried why the bin stickers were needed if the bins were micro-chipped and it was explained that the stickers allowed the collection crews to see at a glance whether residents had paid for the collection service so it was essential for residents to place the stickers on their bins. If they had still not received their sticker for their bin they should contact the Customer Centre, 01642 726001. The micro-chips were embedded in the bins, which was a fairly standard practice, and allowed crews to identify bins where stickers had been removed – acting as more of a back up for owners.

Fortnightly Collections

The Panel heard that the next major programme of bin roll outs was in relation to fortnightly collections which were due to commence in July.

A total of 30,000, 240 litre black bins had been purchased to be provided, upon request, to residents meeting the eligibility criteria for larger capacity residual waste bins once fortnightly collections commenced.

The figure was based on an assumption of half of Middlesbrough's households requesting a larger bin. To date, 11,937 larger capacity bins had been requested but it was expected that there would be further requests following further communications. There had also been 494 requests for additional 140 litre (small) black bins.

All bins being issued contained an embedded microchip assigned to the individual's address and this information was stored centrally within the Service.

It was anticipated that the delivery of the larger capacity bins would commence during the first week of June. Residents who had requested a larger bin would be sent a yellow bin transfer sticker, containing their address and a reference number. The sticker should be placed on the lid of the smaller bin and crews would empty the bin and take it away at the same time they delivered the new larger bin.

Those residents that had purchased an additional small 140 litre bin would be issued with a red authorised additional bin sticker which should be placed on the second bin allowing staff to clearly identify those who had purchased an additional bin.

A Panel Member noted that the example sticker stated 'valid from 2024 to 2026' and queried why it had an end date of 31 March 2026. The Director confirmed that there were no plans to charge again for the bins in 2026 and that it would simply provide an opportunity for the Service to reassess that resident's requirements, for example, someone may be receiving an assisted bin collection so it would be a case of refreshing those checks and ensuring nothing had changed.

In summary, more than 45,000 bin movements had taken place to date in 40 working days. The green waste subscription service had been significantly more popular than expected. The Director acknowledged that there had been some mistakes along the way, however, the Service would learn from those. The Director wished to thank all of the staff involved for their hard work throughout the complex roll-out programmes and in rectifying the issues that had occurred. The Director also expressed gratitude to the people of Middlesbrough for their patience and their commitment in signing up to the garden waste service which would ultimately be a positive step towards helping the environment.

In response to a question regarding gated alleyways, the Director confirmed that they would remain on weekly collections. New and additional bins had been ordered for the alleys and in addition the Council would commence reissuing of plastic sacks to residents in those areas. This would be rolled out by the end of the summer. It was highlighted that bins would have drainage holes and meshing to stop vermin getting in.

A Panel Member highlighted that, in the ward they represented, businesses using domestic bins for

their waste was a major issue. It meant that residents did not have full capacity for putting their refuse into the bins and that this attracted rats. It was noted that there had been some success in North Ormesby with the use of cameras in alleyways to stop this happening and to stop flytipping. It was also queried whether the Fixed Penalty fine for flytipping had been increased.

The Director advised that it was crucial to stop food sources for rats as this was what attracted them. It was hoped that this could be achieved by increasing the amount of bins in the alleyways, however, it was ultimately up to residents to ensure that sources of food were containerised and not left out. It was also confirmed that the Fixed Penalty for flytipping had been increased to up to £800.

It was queried how the Service would deal with any green bins that still had not been collected, possibly due to residents not being able to access information on-line and/or not receiving an information leaflet. The Director stated that further consideration would need to be given to this and how it would be communicated to residents.

In response to a question, reassurance was given that residents who had ordered larger capacity black refuse bins (and met the eligibility criteria) would receive them prior to the commencement of fortnightly refuse collections and delivery of the larger bins would commence the first week in June.

A Member noted that just under 12,000 larger bins had been requested to date and queried whether this figure was lower than anticipated and how requests were verified. The Director responded that the figure was lower than expected but anticipated an increase in requests closer to the start of fortnightly collections. In terms of verification, each resident applying for a larger capacity bin must provide their name and address and random checks were made to ensure they met the eligibility criteria.

A Panel Member asked the Head of Marketing and Communications and the Environment Services Manager what they would do differently in terms of the communication plan and operationally relating to the roll out of the new bins. The Head of Service responded that there had probably been an over-reliance on digital communications as some people did not have access to the internet. The paper leaflet which was delivered to residents did contain all of the information required, but did not pass the 'glance test'. At a glance, people had looked at the graphic which depicted a wheeled bin with the word 'Monday' and assumed that their old bins were being collected on the following Monday.

The Environment Services Manager added that operationally, the number of requests received had far exceeded expectations and that additional resources should have been placed in the Contact Centre in order to deal with the levels of requests and queries received. This would remain in place for the next six months. Members of the public could telephone the usual contact centre telephone number and press option 1 for queries relating to bins. It was acknowledged that the project had been a steep learning curve and that, as previously mentioned, additional resources had now been added to the contact centre. In terms of communications, the intention had been to try and explain a very complicated project in clear, simple terms and lessons had been learnt for future communications.

A Member made reference to the bulky collection service (junk jobs) and the information currently provided on the Council's website which referred to long waiting times for collections and it was queried whether there was any way in which to speed up the collection process as there were concerns that long waiting times might cause people to dump their rubbish. The Director responded that bulky waste collections were moving to a fully chargeable service and that this would reduce the timescale for collections. It was also highlighted that this was not a statutory function of the Council and that it was the responsibility of the individual to dispose of their waste by the correct method. For example, if they did not want to wait for the Council's collection service, they could use the Household Waste Recycling Centre or a properly licensed waste removal contractor.

A Panel Member highlighted that access to a bin calendar was only available on-line following

setting up an account and it was queried whether there were any plans to change this. The Director advised that this issue was currently being examined so that access to bin calendars could be gained from the main website by typing in the address without needing to set up an account.

The Chair commented that the meeting had been very useful and thanked the officers for their attendance.

AGREED that the information provided be noted.