



Three Weekly Residual Waste Collection Service – Myth or reality?

This briefing is provided to all APSE member authorities but will be of particular interest to the environment, waste collection and recycling sector on a UK wide basis.

Key Issues:

- This APSE briefing outlines the main issues and benefits around the argument for adopting a three weekly residual waste collection service.
- The briefing also addresses the concerns about some of the real and perceived problems associated with adopting a three weekly waste collection service
- APSE shares the view that the current slow-down in recycling rates will require additional actions in relation to meeting national recycling target by 2020, and reducing the opportunity to dispose of residual waste by limiting collections is an attractive option to many authorities, as not only does it drive people to have to use their recycling bins more, but reduced collection frequencies can deliver significant savings.

1. Introduction

Based on current levels of recycling rate growth, it is likely that England will miss its recycling target of 50% by 2020 unless changes are made, Scotland has set itself even higher targets in terms of recycling. The recycling, reuse and composting rate in England reached 44.8% in the 12 months to December 2014 there is also concerns that waste arisings are starting to increase as the economy begins to recover. Together these facts would be a worry, but there is also concern that because there are estimated to be over 400 different recycling schemes operated by local authorities' and private companies across England, people are often confused about what can and cannot be recycled and that people have to learn them afresh every time they move as schemes are different or certain services not available.

National actions need to be taken which highlight how important recycling is to the country as a whole in creating jobs in the reprocessing sector, reducing the reliance on virgin materials, protecting the environment and avoiding substantial EU fines.

Therefore there is a need to develop more consistency in the collection infrastructure as the current system can cause confusion and thus lead to poorer quality recyclates being collected with unacceptable levels of contamination. Some suggestions would include:-

- Where possible increase the number of local authorities collecting more materials e.g. food waste collection in Wales is mandatory in England it is voluntary.
- Establish better communications with householders so they understand what they can and can't recycle.
- Provide confidence that the materials householders put out for recycling are being used and not simply thrown away.

It is acknowledged that all these improvements are needed at a time when local authorities' budgets are being cut year on year, but some hold a view that if recycling services are provided in the right way then improved recycling capture rates will offset the costs for the improvements needed.

Balanced against these infrastructure improvement is the growing belief that the only way to increase recycling rates is to force residents to separate materials more effectively rather than simply putting them in residual waste bins. As such many local authorities are now looking at removing this opportunity by collecting residual waste less frequently, and three weekly residual waste collections are seen by many as the answer.

2. Considerations

Before moving to a three weekly residual bin collection service there are a number of considerations which need to be made:

- Increasing your education and communication campaign for recycling as this may be more cost effective than introducing a three-weekly collection. If this does not result in increased recycling rates then this could be used as justification to introduce a three weekly collection.
- Introduce food waste collections, if you have not already done so, as these can be linked to garden waste collections at little extra cost.
- Consider reducing the size of the residual waste bin to 140 litres or less, as a lack of space will promote greater use of the recycling bins provided.
- Discuss with elected members and officers the likely response the council will receive from local residents affected by the change and the local media, and have a good communications strategy ready for implementation prior to the three weekly service being implemented.
- Ensure consideration has been given to the amount of disturbance the new service will cause to established collection days, obviously this needs to be kept to a minimum if residents are to support the scheme.

If the decision is taken to introduce a three-weekly residual collection service, ensure there has been a widespread consultation and any concerns, such as increased fly-tipping, flies and the likes, are satisfactorily addressed. A major concern for residents is that if a residual bin is missed, then it will mean 6 weeks waste will have built up before the next collection.

Therefore assurances need to be given by the local authority that alternative arrangements will be put in place to address this situation should it occur.

In addition to announcing the intention to introduce the three weekly residual collection it is advisable to highlight the benefits such a scheme will bring to residents and the local authority. These include:

- The promotion of greater levels of recycling thus avoiding increased landfill costs to the council and ultimately residents.
- Helping to reduce environmental impact of waste in landfill – climate change, leachate into water courses, loss of resources such as paper, plastics, metals etc.
- Allowing residents to recycle their food waste if a food waste collection service is introduced as part of the changes.
- Creating jobs in the reprocessing industries which may be operating locally.
- Helping the UK avoid financial penalties from the EU for failing to meet recycling targets – the cost of which would ultimately be borne by residents.

3. Case Studies

Bury Council - Greater Manchester

Faced with increasing financial budget cuts and growing recycling targets (both local authority and waste treatment contractors), Bury Council had to review the costs of delivering its service and its ability to meet recycling targets. As part of the review costs of residual waste disposal were considered and it was identified Bury Council was paying £28,000 a day to dispose of this waste, amounting to £10.2 million each year. It was realised that a great deal of the residual waste was in fact recyclable, and increasing the recycling rate by 10% would deliver savings of around £1 million per year.

Consideration was given to introducing 140 litre residual waste bins, which would be emptied fortnightly rather than adopting a three weekly collection. However, it was felt the cost of buying these bins (c. £1.1 million) was prohibitive. It was assumed that it would have the same impact on recycling performance as moving to 3 weekly collections of the existing 240 litre bins. Therefore, a three weekly residual collection service was preferred. This comprises of:

- Residual waste bin collection every three weeks
- Co-mingled and paper collections every three weeks
- Biodegradable waste collected every two weeks

It was predicted that this new service would return a collected waste bin recycling rate of 60% by 2016 and deliver savings of c. £860,000 per annum. The service was also introduced with no increases in operational costs, staff or vehicles. Equally there were no job losses and the new service provides maximum flexibility for the future.

Before the service was introduced, new rounds had to be developed causing minimum disruption to residents. Collection crews underwent training and customer engagement courses. 'Frequently Asked Questions' were developed and published for staff and

customers alike. Additional staff resources were placed in the Council's contact centre to deal with initial queries from the public. In addition, officers were made available to carry out visits to residents who had concerns. To ease some of these concerns, those residents who had an existing 140 litre residual waste bin could upsize their existing residual waste bins to take account of the reduced frequency of collections. Residents could also request additional recycling bins to take account of the reduced residual waste collections.

The start of the service was preceded by a comprehensive communications campaign which raised public awareness about the forthcoming changes. This approach proved critical as when the service was finally introduced it received local and national TV and press coverage.

Once the scheme was 'live', additional resources were assigned to ensure the service ran smoothly. Special dispensations were allowed, such as returning to collect any missed bins – justified or not for the first four months. Waste Regulatory Officers were assigned to collection crews to help with any queries and extra promotional activities were used in areas where participation rates were low.

The scheme has now been operating for over twelve months and has seen considerable successes. Less than 5% of residual bins have been presented with lids up and very little side waste has been encountered.

Street cleansing tonnages have reduced, which was an added benefit, as there was a worry fly-tipping of domestic waste may have been a consequence of reduced collection frequencies.

Recycling rates have increased by almost 10% across green waste, paper and dry recyclables and residual waste collected has fallen by almost 17%. This has seen a recycling rate of 59.69% being achieved in July 2015.

The Borough Council is anticipating savings of £860,000 in avoidable disposal costs.

Other examples

Bury's success has encouraged other nearby local authorities to implement or think about implementing a similar 3 weekly collection service for residual waste. **Rochdale Borough Council** in October 2015 rolled out its new three-weekly household collection service for residual waste and dry recyclables, which it estimates will save £1 million each year and drive up recycling rates. The service, will also see a new weekly food waste collection introduced to help drive recycling rates still higher.

Salford City Council is poised to join neighbouring Bury and Rochdale in rolling out the reduced-frequency residual waste service, as it responds to mounting financial pressure from central government. Three-weekly collections could begin in the metropolitan borough from July 2016.

The council's waste costs are projected to rise from £17.6 million to almost £18 million in 2016/17 – before jumping to £19.7 million in 2017/18.

At present, Salford operates a four-bin system for residents, with residual waste, paper and commingled recyclables collected on a fortnightly basis, and mixed organic waste collected weekly. Salford's waste disposal costs will increase significantly over the next three years, if the city council does not increase recycling and reduce residual waste. Other Greater Manchester districts are now reviewing their service and consider the next step change to avoid cost and where possible reduce costs.

Three weekly collections are not only occurring in England, in Wales where the Welsh Government has set mandatory recycling targets local authorities such as **Gwynedd** and **Powys** have also introduced three weekly collections.

Gwynedd claims that the change from fortnightly waste collections will help to increase participation in its dry and food waste recycling schemes as it strives to meet Welsh government recycling targets, which will result in financial penalties if missed.

The Welsh government expects the council at present to recycle or compost a minimum of 52% of all the refuse it collects from homes, which will be increased to 58% by March 2016. The local authority hopes to make savings of around £350,000 per year in reduced service costs by implementing the new timetable. Residents will continue to receive weekly recycling and food waste collections while garden waste will be collected fortnightly once the new timetable has been completed.

Gwynedd's recycling rate for 2012/13 stood at 51.2%, falling short of the 52% overall target which was in place across the country. The Welsh Government took the decision not to fine individual councils over their failure to meet the target because the overall target was met. The minimum target is set to climb to 58% by March 2016.

In **Powys** the measure has been approved in order to help Powys generate service savings of over £480,000 per year. It is also considered the reduction in refuse collection frequency could help boost Powys' recycling rate to help meet the Welsh Government's 64% target by 2020. In 2014/15, the council recycled 52.1% of its waste.

Welsh Government analysis of the composition of residual bins in Powys also found 32.81% of material within wheeled bins and purple sacks used by residents can be recycled.

Similarly, in Scotland, local authorities are beginning to introduce three weekly residual collections

Falkirk Council in Scotland moved to a less frequent service, providing a three-weekly service to households in the borough.

Falkirk claims that during the first phase of the scheme, the average amount of waste discarded by households reduced by 2kgs per week and saw an increase in food waste collected by 29% as well as a 6% increase in the amount of 'dry' recyclable material collected. It is estimated that if replicated across the borough, the council could save a total of £385,000 per year.

Larger blue recycling bins are available free of charge to help residents recycle more. However, residents seeking a larger green residual waste bin will be asked to complete a waste diary to demonstrate that they are actively participating in all of the kerbside recycling schemes, although special provisions will be made if there is a medical requirement

Under the Zero Waste Scotland regulations, the council must recycle 60% of household waste by 2020 and 70% of all wastes by 2025. The council must also send no more than 5% of material to landfill.

4. APSE Comment

By moving to a three weekly refuse collection system services are being designed to ensure that even more of our waste is recycled and local authorities deliver required savings. There are now growing examples across the UK of local authorities delivering successfully three weekly residual waste collections, and many more are on the verge of introducing such services or seriously considering the possibility of them.

However, services are facing the twin pressures of finding significant financial savings as part of their council's overall budget strategy, whilst meeting increasingly challenging recycling targets set by governments and the EU, with severe financial penalties if they fail.

Whilst the efforts of local councils in addressing these twin pressures are to be applauded, it is now becoming increasingly clear from waste data that the overall volume of waste being produced has begun to increase, which will inflict added pressure on local authorities to achieve recycling targets. Whilst recycling rates can be improved, as demonstrated by case Studies such as Bury Council, now is the time for more strident measures to address excess waste production in areas such as packaging on consumer goods. Although improvements have been made, further work needs to be done in this area, for if waste production is increasing, then local authorities will need increased support from the business sector to reduce the unnecessary cosmetic packaging which some goods still contain.

The recent announcement of 30% savings being required from The Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) will see considerable cuts passed down to local authorities and those organisations which support them e.g. WRAP. This is at a time when recycling rates have begun to slow down significantly and the achievement of 2020 targets looking less likely by the month.

APSE believes we are now at a tipping point where there is a real risk that services are no longer sustainable. Waste and recycling services are under increasing pressure to recycle more, avoid landfill and balance their departmental budgets. We may now start to see the sector improvements seriously slowing down, especially in areas which may need further investment to take recycling and waste reduction to the next level. Some authorities are already looking at the feasibility of four weekly residual collections.

APSE intends to include new data lines in its [performance networks](#) system to monitor the number of local authorities moving onto a three-weekly or other alternative frequencies of residual waste collection reflecting the changes that member authorities are now implementing.

APSE hopes that before local authorities go down the path of adopting three weekly collections this briefing note will help them to plan, implement and successfully manage these services so that whilst pursuing financial savings and recycling targets, importantly, quality of service to the customer is maintained.

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