

Benefits of Consistency in Household Recycling Collections in County Durham



Summary

Durham County Council (DCC) was established as a unitary authority in 2009. It is now the 6th largest authority in England covering 226,000 hectares, with 237,500 properties and has a population of 515,348. As a unitary authority, control of all waste collection and disposal arrangements now rests with DCC.

Following the establishment of the single authority a wide range of efficiency measures were put in place to take advantage of the removal of operational boundaries allied to the previous two tier arrangement. One such measure was the introduction of a consistent waste and recycling collection service.

Following a phased roll out all households were provided with an alternate weekly collection of residual waste and a two stream dry recycle collection. Benefits have included:

- An increase in recycling;
- High levels of satisfaction amongst residents; and
- Cost savings associated with route optimisation, vehicle and staffing reductions, and rationalisation of depots.

Key Facts

- Cost savings of £950k per annum through the introduction of a consistent approach to waste and recycling services.
- Savings of £1.5M through efficiencies following formation of a single authority.
- Increased recycling rate to 42.6% in 2014/15.
- Maintained high levels of resident satisfaction.

Background

Durham County Council (DCC) was established as a unitary authority in 2009. Prior to the amalgamation there was a two tier arrangement in place, consisting of Durham County Council and the seven districts: Chester-Le-Street; Derwentside; Durham City; Easington; Sedgefield; Teesdale and Wear Valley.

As a unitary authority, control of all waste collection and disposal arrangements now rests with DCC. Previously the seven districts were responsible for developing their own collection services and although there were some similarities between the schemes, differences existed in terms of the frequency of collection, the collection receptacles in use, the range of material collected at the kerbside, the vehicles used for collection and the staffing of those vehicles.

In the first instance, with the removal of local authority boundaries, the priorities were to rationalise services within the existing collection framework, such as sharing facilities, reducing the need for spare vehicles etc. This was then followed by the implementation of a more consistent approach to collections across the newly unified authority.

Specific drivers for this were to achieve:

- A 'One Council' approach;
- Value for money in delivering services;
- Effective engagement with all communities across the unified authority;
- Satisfaction in customer needs and expectations; and,
- Improvements in performance in relation to recycling rate.

Working together

What they did

Although the move towards a single consistent collection service was gradual, in the time immediately following the establishment of a single authority a wide range of efficiency measures were put in place to take advantage of the removal of operational boundaries allied to the previous two tier arrangement. It should be noted that the recycling collection service was brought in house at the same time and this facilitated the delivery of a number of efficiency measures in the short term. For example, previously each waste collection authority (WCA) had their own spare vehicles; this need was immediately reduced as resources could be shared across the single unified authority. Sharing of facilities also meant that one depot could be immediately closed. The garden waste collection service, which previously had only been available in some districts, was extended, and this was offered initially free of charge; a charge was subsequently introduced in March 2015. Extensions were also made to the dry recycling service, with plastic bottles, pots and tubs included in all kerbside collections.

In 2011 further work was done to improve the service and maximise efficiencies. This included some route optimisation which led to round reductions with the associated reduction in vehicles, fuel-use and crew. In addition, it was agreed to move to a four-day week across the authority, previously adopted by four of the seven previous districts. Common collection policies were also developed for use across the single authority.

It was always the intention that a single consistent collection service would be put in place. The approach taken by the previous authority of Derwentside had achieved high levels of recycling performance, and so was used as the model for the service. Following a phased roll out, which started in February 2012 and was completed in June 2012, all households were moved to an alternate week collection of residual waste and dry recycle collected in two streams.

The waste collection service is divided into 3 operational areas - north, east and south and all households are now issued as standard with the following, collected fortnightly:

- 1 grey wheeled bin for residual waste (140l, 180l or 240l).
- 1 grey with a blue lid wheeled bin for mixed recycle including: plastic bottles, pots and tub, mixed paper, card, food and drink cans, aerosols, cartons (240l issued as standard).
- 1 green recycling box for mixed glass bottles and jars (40l as standard).
- 1 grey with a brown lid wheeled bin for garden waste on a subscription only basis. Charges are currently £20 per year for a seasonal fortnightly collection.

How they went about it

In the move towards a consistent service, public consultation played a significant role. To ensure stakeholder engagement in the process a survey was carried out at the end of 2010, targeting local residents, Parish Councils, Area Action Partnerships and Citizens Panel. In addition, a number of waste awareness roadshows were carried out, to maximise the reach of the consultation process. A response rate of 66% was achieved for the survey and high levels of satisfaction in the service were reported by residents (92% and 90% for refuse and recycling respectively).

A benchmarking exercise of existing collection policy was undertaken and good practice was identified for comparative purposes. Gaps in policy were considered and the appropriateness of the existing policy (i.e. whether it was fit for purpose for the changes being proposed) was also a consideration. A clear policy document was developed in September 2011 and a revised Refuse and Recycling Policy was issued in October 2015.

Challenges & how they were overcome

One of the biggest challenges was accurately predicting the financial impact that standardising the service would have on the savings required as part of the council's Medium Term Financial Plan. Shortfalls were identified at various stages and recalculations were carried out. It was accepted that adjustments would need to continually be made and re-evaluations undertaken, as costs of implementation became clearer, particularly in terms of containers, communications and personnel issues.

Prior to the roll-out, decisions had to be made regarding those former districts with 180l residual waste bins; whether they would be automatically replaced by 240l bins and the consequences this would have on predicted financial savings associated with the standardised service. In the end decisions were made on an area by area basis and for one former district it was decided bin replacements would be made on a request only basis.

In operational terms around 4,000 residential properties were identified that could not be readily accommodated into the main alternate weekly collection rounds. Solutions to maximise recycling have been put in place including providing communal refuse and recycling containers and alternative mixes of bags and boxes.

Benefits

What was achieved

Removing the local authority geographical boundaries that had previously existed between the seven original waste collection authorities, led to initial savings associated with: reducing the need for spare vehicles; closure of one depot; staff reductions and further vehicle reductions due to a move to split body recycling

vehicles; and-securing improved prices for recyclate as a result of economies of scale. Combined these generated savings of £816,000 within the 2010/11 waste budget.

Route optimisation, leading to round reductions, reduced fuel use, vehicles and staffing numbers, plus the adoption of a four day working week resulted in additional savings of £654,875 in 2011/12.

Finally, standardising the collection service to a single consistent scheme, removing a further 8 vehicles and their crews, has generated savings of approximately £956,000 per annum.

Benefits have also been realised though the joint sale of recyclate, and increase in range of recyclate now available.

Recycling rates have increased and were at 44.3% in 2011/12 (an increase of 15% compared to pre-amalgamation); there has been a slight drop to current levels of 42.6% in 2014/15, largely as a result of changes to the residual waste contract and a drop in tonnage of material sent for recycling and recovery through pre-processing of residual.

Satisfaction levels amongst residents in relation to the waste and recycling service were previously high and these have been maintained.

In terms of the greatest achievement that has been realised, the actual process that has been followed in bringing together a former two tier arrangement with seven waste collection authorities, in a fully inclusive manner, has to be commended. Financial savings have been realised and continue to be realised and challenges from adopting a consistent service continue to be addressed and improvements made.

“Harmonising the refuse and recycling service has not only provided a consistent approach for our residents but also offered savings and efficiencies to be made for the Council”

**Alan Patrickson, Head of Projects & Business Services,
Durham County Council.**

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