

Benefits of Consistency in Household Recycling Collections in Somerset



Summary

Somerset Waste Partnership (SWP) is a two tier partnership, established in 2007 to manage waste services on behalf of its six partners. The SWP combines waste service functions under a single joint committee of Councillors and is responsible for the management of kerbside collections, recycling centres and disposal sites, awarding a single county-wide collection contract.

Although there was a history of working together, and a consistency of service was starting to develop over time, implementing a single contract has meant that a cost effective comprehensive recycling collection service is available to all households. SWP has achieved consistency in: materials collected, containment, frequency of collection, service rules and communications to householders.

Benefits are extensive, including efficiency savings of over £1.5M per annum, increased recycling rates, high levels of satisfaction, increased resources, and good quality materials.

It is considered that the significant benefits of consistent services across a jointly served area make it worthwhile to make the effort to agree a joint approach to service delivery. Solutions are sought that benefit all partners, but also accommodate local distinctness where necessary without negating the benefits of joint working.

Key facts

- Efficiency savings of over **£1.5m per annum** through reduced collection costs and infrastructure rationalisation.
- A further **£225,000 in savings** from the creation of a single client unit plus an estimated **£942,000** avoided future costs.
- **Increased recycling rate** to 52.85% (2015/16).
- High level of **material quality** reported.
- **89% resident satisfaction** in recycling service (2015).

Background

Somerset Waste Partnership (SWP) is a two tier partnership, established in its current form in 2007. It is responsible for managing waste services on behalf of Somerset County Council as the Waste Disposal Authority, and its five constituent Waste Collection Authorities of Mendip District Council, Sedgemoor District Council, South Somerset District Council, West Somerset District Council, and Taunton Deane Borough Council.

SWP has delegated authority to deliver household waste and recycling services throughout Somerset to 250,000 properties, including management of kerbside collections, recycling centres, treatment and disposal contracts. The SWP has in effect created a 'virtual joint waste authority', awarding a single county-wide collections contract.

The authorities have a long history of working together. The partnership was originally formed in 1992 when the six authorities identified the benefits of sharing resources and planning collectively. This relationship was strengthened in 1997 with the agreement of a Memorandum of Understanding. During 2000-02, it was developed further when a joint best value review was undertaken which entailed a detailed examination of approaches to improve collection and disposal services. A joint procurement of kerbside recycling services followed, with each district awarding their own contract but procuring together and working to a common set of specifications.

Relationships strengthened

In October 2007 this co-operation was taken a step further when Somerset became the first county-wide area to combine waste service functions under a single joint committee of Councillors from all Somerset local authorities.

The motivation for closer working stemmed from a key finding of the best value review in 2002, and the subsequent joint municipal waste management strategy (JMWMS), which identified the need to address the inefficiencies, potential conflicts and difficulties in collection service organisation created by working

within waste collection authority (WCA) administrative boundaries and between WCA and waste disposal authority (WDA) responsibilities.

Delivering a harmonised service under a single partnership contract focused on:

- Improving performance across the partnership as a whole;
- Achieving a more efficient service by maximising opportunities for optimisation in terms of designing rounds and depot locations without constraints of district boundaries;
- Meeting growing customer expectations in relation to the kerbside service available and the range of material collected;
- Addressing adverse market conditions in relation to waste collection procurements; and,
- Meeting regulation requirements.

Working better together

In 2004, the opportunity to procure a Somerset-wide collection contract for all recycling and refuse collections was identified and a business case was developed that identified potential savings of £750k to £1.5M per year.

In 2007 this opportunity was realised when SWP procured a single contact to provide a fully integrated waste collection and recycling service for the whole county with the aim, at the time, of achieving:

- 50% recycling rate across Somerset by 2010 and 65%+ by 2020;
- Increased diversion of organics and other material from landfill;
- Improved waste minimisation;
- High levels of customer satisfaction; and
- High levels of efficiency/productivity to deliver best value cost per household.

Consistency

The standard service that is currently provided across all districts is:

- Green box for paper, glass bottles and jars and foil, collected weekly;
- Black box for food and drink cans, aerosols, plastic bottles and cardboard, collected weekly;
- Kitchen caddy and external bin for food waste, collected weekly;
- Black 180l wheeled bin for residual waste, collected fortnightly; and,
- Green 240l wheeled bin or brown compostable paper sack for garden waste. This is a subscription service, and collection is fortnightly.

Textiles and shoes can also be collected alongside the dry recycle boxes.

Different service arrangements are in place for flats (which represent less than 5% of Somerset households), however the partnership are aiming for a consistent service to be provided to all householders across Somerset, regardless of property type. At the time of writing, flats are provided with collections for paper, glass and cans, and there are plans in place in 2016 to add further materials, so a recycling service is provided for glass, mixed paper and card and mixed cans and plastic bottles. Following previous trials, separate food waste collections are also being considered.

Residents with no space for residual bins can use their own refuse sacks. There is also some flexibility in the size of bin provided; with smaller 140 litre refuse bins offered and additional capacity on application for larger households or those with special medical needs.

There are a few areas where weekly refuse collections are still provided because of lack of storage space and difficulties in providing the full recycling service, but these issues have gradually been overcome and virtually all households have now moved to the standard service.

How consistency was achieved

The history of working together provided a solid foundation for the SWP to build upon and meant that over time districts had adopted a similar approach to kerbside recycling collection. In 2004, SWP secured Defra funding to introduce integrated organic waste collections. As a result, three districts introduced weekly recycling and new food waste collections and switched refuse to fortnightly (with standard 180l bins). The districts introduced fortnightly chargeable garden waste collections at same time. This proved to be a great success with recycling rates doubling, residual waste yields halving and a total reduction in collection arisings of about 15%. Compositional analysis has shown that this reduction in collection arisings was primarily as a consequence of reducing quantities of food waste and an increase in home composting.

The other two districts, whilst not part of the original scheme, also implemented fortnightly chargeable garden waste collection and added further materials to their kerbside recycling service, including glass. Efforts were made to ensure service arrangements were aligned, with a wide range of collection options evaluated, before a single common approach was agreed.

Following the development of a business case, agreement was made to procure a Somerset-wide collection contract with a start date planned for October 2007. A single client (Officer Team) was created and the joint waste board was established with an inter-authority agreement and shared funding formula.

During the preparation period, a harmonisation plan was developed and implemented to ensure service rules between districts were consistent where possible. This was important for the standardisation of the service.

It is worth noting that the opportunity to procure a Somerset-wide collection contract was partly linked to the end of several of the existing recycling and

refuse collection contracts in 2007. This opportunity also created time pressures as partners had to have replacement arrangements in place for a fixed date. The collection contract was initially for seven years with the option of two further extensions of seven years - potentially 21 years in all.

During 2009-11 all districts adopted a new common service package with weekly recycling of a consistent set of materials (paper, cardboard, glass bottles and jars, food and drink cans, plastic bottles, aerosols, and foil) plus food waste alongside fortnightly refuse and subscription based garden waste collection.

The common service package approach was important in bringing service delivery systems together with the full consent of all partner authorities. To facilitate the implementation of this there was a three-year period for all six authorities to move from the pre-Contract service (minimum level of service for all authorities) into the complete harmonisation of all aspects of the service.

Overcoming challenges

Procuring as a partnership can be a challenge when going to market. At the time there were no examples of other partnership contracts having been successful. However, the history of joint working meant the SWP could present an established waste partnership with a proven track record of working well together through robust partnership governance arrangements. In addition, any concerns from the bidders that a partnership contract would have extensive variations and combinations to take into account the preferences of the different authorities were quickly abated when SWP presented a high level of service standardisation across partner authorities that would enable a simpler bidding model.

Representatives from all six SWP authorities were involved in the evaluation at every stage, ensuring all partners were fully engaged in the process.

The potential challenges of going to market as a partnership were significantly outweighed by the advantages. No single authority in Somerset would have been able to resource the level of time and specialist knowledge required to conduct the procurement or offer a contract that would have been so attractive to the waste industry.

Another challenge to working in partnership and adopting a consistent approach across all authorities can be recognising and accepting that financial benefits may not be equitable across all partners. SWP found that adopting the viewpoint of the Council Tax payer (at district and county level) has been helpful and puts attention on finding the best overall system.

Benefits of the unified consistent service under a single contract are extensive. In terms of performance, recycling rates for the SWP have risen alongside service improvements to 52.85% in 2015/16.

In financial terms, the contract delivered annual revenue equivalent savings of around £1.51 million, derived from both a reduction in waste collection costs and the rationalisation of waste disposal infrastructure, including the designing out of two waste transfer stations. Collection rounds were planned for efficiency from depots and not to match district boundaries. This has meant collections could be optimised and vehicle numbers and associated crews reduced compared to operating as individual authorities.

A further saving of £225,000 came from establishing a single client team across all authorities, and it is also estimated that savings in the order of £942,000 have been realised as a consequence of avoided future costs through procuring a single contract rather than five separate contracts across the individual districts.

With WCA and WDA services planned together, cost shunting (without compensation) is not accepted between partners and the most efficient and cost effective solutions for the whole waste system are found.

Communication costs are lower as common materials and service arrangements are in place across the SWP and one website covers all six authorities.

Benefits have also extended to material quality, which is rated 'high', with most material supplied to UK reprocessors.

In terms of householder satisfaction, SWP has undertaken a customer survey every three years since 2009. This has included questions on service satisfaction, commitment to recycling and food waste reduction and other questions relevant to projects at the time. Satisfaction levels with the current kerbside recycling service are high, with 89% reported in 2015.

Another benefit of coming together as a partnership and working collectively has been the ability to build upon internal resources. SWP has employed specialist officers to plan and manage trials and work with others, such as WRAP. This has enabled trials to collect additional materials at the kerbside for recycling, including more plastics, cartons, small waste electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE) and batteries and to test a three-weekly refuse service, which will inform future decisions.

Looking to the future

SWP is currently planning a new collection service model to apply when the current fleet of recycling vehicles need replacing from 2017. In addition, the partnership is planning to replace landfill with a new energy recovery solution for residual waste. Decisions on both are expected later in 2016.

Further common service improvements continue to be jointly planned with approval from all authorities. For example, providing an enhanced recycling service, including food waste for schools, adding plastic bottles and cardboard

to communal recycling collections for flats and a campaign to boost food waste recycling by attaching 'no food waste' stickers to refuse bins.

Tips for success

One of the main lessons learnt is that the significant benefits of consistent services across a jointly served area make it worthwhile to make the effort to agree a partnership approach to service delivery. Sometimes this has involved some partners not being able to follow their first service choices, especially in the early days. Over time, with a single officer team and joint board, it has become easier for SWP to jointly identify and agree a consistent single approach. SWP has always sought solutions that benefit all partners, but has also accommodated some local distinctness where necessary without negating the benefits of joint working.

“Operating the same service across the whole county simplifies things for residents, elected members who represent them and the contractor who delivers the service. When communicating we don’t need to be concerned about newspaper circulation areas or the reach of local radio. If you live anywhere in Somerset the message is for you. And working with a single contractor to deliver a consistent service over the last eight years has saved Somerset Councils over £12m.”

Steve Read, Managing Director of SWP

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