

EXETER CITY COUNCIL

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY 8 NOVEMBER 2011

PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE GARDEN WASTE SERVICE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report brings forward proposals for consideration to improve the efficiency and environmental impact of the garden waste collection service.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Garden waste is banned from the residual waste (black) bins as this waste is sent to landfill and can be a significant fraction of the waste stream, and the biodegradable portion of the waste causes polluting gases. Householders have various options for dealing with the waste from their gardens including home composting, taking it to the Household Waste Recycling Centres or joining the Exeter City Council Garden Waste Collection Service. This is a chargeable service that offers garden waste collection in the following ways:

- 240 or 140 litre wheeled bin with an annual charge of £35;
- compostable brown bio-bags sold ad-hoc from over 20 different retailers throughout the city at £1.00 per bag (this has since changed to 2 outlets).

- 2.2 Both options are available across the whole city and collections are made fortnightly in refuse collection vehicles (RCVs) by two crews with a driver and 1 or 2 loaders. 2175 tonnes of garden waste were collected in 2010/11

- 2.3 Wheeled bin customers are registered with ECC, paying an annual fee from the date they join the scheme. Crews have lists of their addresses, which makes for efficient collections. Conversely, householders using the bio-bags are unregistered - addresses are not recorded at the point of sale, and any householder city-wide can present a bag for collection on the relevant collection day.

3. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES IDENTIFIED WITH THE PRESENT SYSTEM

- 3.1 The garden bin service works well, with around 7,000 customers. Residents have a large container (wheelie bin) in which to put their garden waste, and may supplement this with additional bins or bags if they have larger gardens. The brown bins are easily seen by the crews when presented for collection, and we receive relatively few 'missed bin' complaints.

- 3.2 The bag system operates differently as bags could be purchased from around 20 outlets city wide in quantities to suit the customer (minimum 1 bag). Householders receive a door step service at a minimum cost to them of £1 per collection, and they can use this service throughout the garden waste collection months.

- 3.3 There are a number of weaknesses with the current operational arrangements. The prime weakness is that as customers using bio-bags are not registered, collection crews have to visit every household on every street in the city each fortnight to see if a bag has been left out for collection. Although the majority of bag purchases are in

rolls of 10, householders can purchase a minimum of one bag (£1) and for this they receive a fortnightly service that they may only use once a year. This need to visit every street is a significant waste of resources and has a negative impact on our carbon footprint. During the recent survey of bio-bag users the crews visited approximately 400 streets each fortnight where there were no customers, (See Appendix I).

- 3.4 The running costs of the two vehicles currently used in the service were in excess of £60,000 in the year to 31 July 2011, after allowing for periods when they were used by other services. At this stage, we do not have sufficient data to make an accurate assessment of the potential savings, both financial and environmental, which could arise from streamlining the service but we would expect these to be significant.
- 3.5 Garden waste collections are not currently aligned with refuse and recycling collection days; we know from customer feedback that householders prefer to only have to remember one day each fortnight, and would prefer alignment of collections where practicable.

4. PROPOSALS FOR IMPROVEMENTS TO EFFICIENCY OF SERVICE

- 4.1 To address the weaknesses identified with the current service the following changes are proposed:

- limit outlets for the purchase of bio-bags to the Civic Centre and Oakwood House and register name and address of customers at time of purchase to enable crews to target registered addresses only and avoid wasted street visits;
- Offer different bag sales of – 5, 10, or 20 bags. Stop sales of fewer than 5 bags per customer;
- where practicable, align the garden waste collection day with the refuse and recycling collection day;
- new in-cab technology (Project Streetwise) has been introduced to the Garden Waste Collection Vehicles; this will allow the crews to have detailed daily up to date lists of all properties registered as wheeled bin or bio-bag customers and ensure maximum efficiency is achieved in the use of the crew's time and mileage driven;
- the efficiencies achieved by registering all garden waste customers, and the introduction of the in-cab technology, means that the service potentially could be re-organised and managed by one vehicle with a driver and 2 loaders instead of the current system which uses two vehicles and 5 operatives, giving rise to substantial financial savings (Appendix III). An outline of how the collection routes may be managed by one crew are in Appendix II;
- promote the smaller 140 litre wheeled bin at a reduced cost, (presently the same as the 240 litre bin);
- consider providing a re-usable and robust sack/container for storing presented bio-bags which would protect the bags from damage, and more clearly identify the bags to the collection crew. These may be ordered by phone/on-line and delivered along with a supply of bio-bags.

5. IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS

- 5.1 Garden waste is collected each fortnight by two crews covering every road in the city. To estimate the number of existing bio-bag users a survey was undertaken and both crews recorded the number of householders with bio-bags during a 2-week collection

cycle. This survey was repeated twice – giving a total of three collection weeks' records:

The survey shows:

- the maximum number of bio-bag customers was approximately 300 over a collection week and the minimum was 47;
- in the first two recorded survey weeks there were 1076 customers using bio-bags. Of these 144 used the service both weeks, (the third week of records did not allow this analysis because individual addresses were not recorded);
- retailers of the garden bags report that bags are sold in varying quantities with rolls of 10 being commonly bought, but records are not kept.

5.2 The detailed results of this survey are in Appendix IV.

5.3 Changes to the scheme need to be introduced as the growing season draws to a close in Autumn 2011 to be in place from Spring 2012. These changes entail:

- informing retailers selling bio-bags that the scheme is ending (September 2011)
- removing un-sold bags from the retailers October 2011. The withdrawal of bags at this stage would ensure that householders do not stock-up for next year as unregistered users;
- providing leaflets for retailers detailing the two remaining outlets where bags would still be available (Civic and Oakwood House) and that registration would be required;
- enclosing information leaflet about the changes to the scheme with 2012 refuse/recycling collection calendar sent out to every property in Exeter during January 2012, and use the ECC website and the Exeter Citizen to inform residents of changes;
- arranging to refund householders who have previously purchased bio-bags but do not want to register and join the new scheme (1/3/2012 deadline for refunds at Civic and Oakwood House).

5.4 With the agreement of the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Leisure and the chair of Scrutiny Committee Community, the first of the actions has been taken already. Once all customers are registered and the new garden waste season commences we will review rounds and make changes to collection crews (March/April 2012).

6. RISKS IDENTIFIED BY CHANGING THE SERVICE

Service users

6.1 The changes to the service maintain the option of using bio-bags as these are known to be useful for those in terraced houses with no storage for wheeled bins as well as those with small gardens.

6.2 The present system of ad-hoc purchase of any quantity of bio-bags benefits householders who produce a very small amount of garden waste. Within this group there may be those who cannot afford to sign up for the recommended minimum purchase of 5 bags, but they could share a roll with neighbours providing the bags were presented at the registered address.

Operational issues

- 6.3 Re-organisation of the rounds cannot begin until all customers are registered which would be by the start of the new garden waste collection year in March 2012. There is a risk that unexpected numbers of new bio-bag customers may join the scheme and overwhelm the capability of one crew, but numbers for the wheeled bins have remained fairly static over the last few years – between 6000 and 7000. Crew re-organisation is based on a predicted 50% increase in customers entering the scheme via the bio-bag options. Vehicle and crew numbers can be finalised once all customers are registered. Staff can be redeployed within the service so there would be no staffing issues.

Other methods for disposal of garden waste

- 6.4 Home composting remains the most environmentally beneficial option. Exeter City Council would continue to offer cost-price home composters to support this choice, or could potentially use savings made in changing the service to subsidise the cost of compost bins.
- 6.5 With the opening of the new Household Waste and Recycling Centre at Pinbrook Trading Estate, residents now have the choice taking their waste there or to Exton Road Recycling Centre at no cost.

7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The potential to manage the garden waste scheme with one vehicle and crew is estimated to make an annual saving of around £57,500. However, it is not clear at this stage whether these full benefits would be realised. Any potential increase in revenue could be used to subsidise this service, used to encourage improved recycling and waste minimisation rates, or used to support other service areas.

8. SUMMARY

- 8.1 There are significant financial gains to be made by changing the service operation so that all garden waste customers are registered to allow for increased efficiency of collection avoid non-productive street visits, and rationalise the resources used.
- 8.2 There is the capacity to use part of the savings generated to subsidise compost bin sales to below cost price, introduce a reduced charge for smaller capacity wheeled bins, promote other initiatives to minimise waste and promote more recycling, or support other council service areas.
- 8.3 The new in-cab technology allows for maximum efficiency in the service as daily updated lists of customers are available to the crew. An added bonus is that there should be less 'missed bag' collections resulting in return journeys, as bio-bag users will now be registered along with the bin customers.
- 8.4 Service users will be affected by the reduction in the number of outlets for purchase of bio-bags, the new minimum requirement to purchase 5 bags, and the requirement to register. However, all the current advantages of using bio-bags will be retained, and customers will be able to have bags posted to them for a small charge.
- 8.5 The prevention of unnecessary journeys by the crew each day will greatly reduce ECC's carbon footprint as well as reducing vehicle running costs.

9. RECOMMENDED

That Scrutiny Committee Community supports the proposed changes to the garden waste service.

HEAD OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

S:PA/LP/ Committee/1111SCC1
20.10.11

COMMUNITY & ENVIRONMENT DIRECTORATE

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)
Background papers used in compiling this report: