

CUSTOMER FOCUS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

31 MARCH 2022

Food Waste Collection: a Timeline of Plans and Decision-making

1. Timeline, original plans and how we got to where we are now.

- 1.1. In October 2019 the Executive Committee and Council approved a new kerbside recycling service, which would consist of a weekly collection of dry recycling and food waste and a three-weekly collection of residual waste.
- 1.2. This would see the introduction of a 'kerbside-sort' system similar to those used by neighbouring authorities, where residents sort their recycling into several containers for dry materials and a separate caddy for their food.
- 1.3. Swapping from a comingled recycling collection method to kerbside-sort would necessitate the procurement of 20 new multi-compartment, single-pass vehicles.
- 1.4. These vehicles had an 18-month delivery time, and a lack of space at Exton Road dictated that delivery would need to be timed to coincide with the removal of the Council's current waste collection vehicles.
- 1.5. Choosing this option, where the majority of materials were to be pre-sorted at the kerbside, meant that the Council's Materials Reclamation Facility (MRF) would effectively become a transfer shed with a small amount of machinery to separate cans and plastics. The building would be used for bulking up materials for onward transport to re-processors.
- 1.6. The loss of hand-sorting would result in a loss of income, but also reduced operating costs: the Council would need to retain only supervisory and driving staff, with the remaining MRF staff placed at risk. These staff would be offered alternative employment on the collection rounds, but this would nonetheless present obvious HR implications and could potentially result in redundancies as a worst-case scenario.

2. Impact: The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic

- 2.1. The outbreak of COVID-19 in February 2020 occurred as Council officers were entering the final stages of planning the introduction of the announced kerbside-sort recycling service. This was only four months after the final decision to proceed.
- 2.2. The country locked down, and it became crucial for us to focus every effort on delivering the current waste and recycling service to Exeter's residents with minimal disruption. This effectively suspended our development of the new service.
- 2.3. Our waste collection crews carried on in uncertain times when not much was known about the transmission of the disease. Throughout the initial lockdown, when everyone was working from home, and through two subsequent periods of

lockdown, they continued to ensure that the people of Exeter got their bins collected.

2.4. Our MRF staff continued sorting the city's recycling every day.

2.5. We didn't drop a single recycling or residual waste collection round.

2.6. The public responded with an outpouring of gratitude: the walls of the depot were covered in messages of thanks.

3. Impact: Shifts in shopping and waste habits

3.1. The past two years, and not only during lockdown, have seen a fundamental shift in people's shopping habits towards online shopping and home-delivery, resulting in the production by households of significantly greater volumes of packaging waste, especially cardboard.

3.2. The importance of being able to maximise cardboard recycling, in particular, became national news as it emerged that medical supply packaging and transportation relied on the production of quality recycled fibre products. The exponential rise in home delivery meant there would be less coming from the private retail sector, and the trend was not anticipated to reverse even if it slowed down once shops reopened.

3.3. As was well-publicised during lockdown, many authorities struggled to cope with the massive quantities of cardboard being placed out for collection due to the lack of capacity in their kerbside-sorting vehicles. Exeter, however, utilising the potential of its compacting vehicles and co-mingled collection method, was able to accommodate the extra volumes of recycling with relative ease.

4. Impact: Vehicle testing and planning review

4.1. Planned testing of the specialist kerbside-sort vehicles in streets that our current vehicles struggled to access revealed that there were many streets in Exeter these new vehicles simply couldn't access. The vehicles were larger than our current vehicles with wider turning circles; moreover they required loading from the side rather than from the rear, making loading especially difficult in streets with parked cars.

4.2. We would need to use bespoke vehicles to access these streets, adding to the already expanded fleet. With an anticipated increase in the number of people working from home even after lockdown, and the associated increase in the number of parked cars in Exeter's streets, we were faced with a rising number of road-access problems.

4.3. It was known already that sorting the recycling at the kerbside would have meant each vehicle visiting fewer properties each day, which would have seen more vehicles on the road and moving more slowly. Additional access delays risked further traffic disruption.

4.4. In the light of this and everything the pandemic had impacted – which inevitably included the Council’s finances – we used the next months to review plans for the introduction of additional waste streams.

5. Impact: The HGV/LGV driver crisis

5.1. In January 2021, Britain left the EU. Coupled with the effects of the pandemic, the impacts of this have been multiple within the waste industry at large and on local authority waste and recycling services specifically.

5.2. The well-publicised national shortage of qualified drivers, has resulted in a lack of sickness cover availability to us through agencies, which has seen our Waste Operations Supervisors stepping in to drive vehicles to ensure collection rounds haven’t been missed.

5.3. Only the dedication of existing staff and their willingness to go above and beyond their duties has enabled the Council to deliver this key service during a time of unprecedented pressure from multiple directions.

5.4. This, at a time when we were (and still are) struggling to retain our current drivers, rendered impossible the introduction of a new recycling service that would require more vehicles and therefore more drivers than are required by our current service.

5.5. Simply put, had we moved forward with our original plans then we would not have been able to deliver a regular recycling service to every household in the city, since we would not have been able to hire people to drive the vehicles.

5.6. Had we ordered the vehicles before this crisis hit, we would nevertheless have been unable to employ the additional drivers until they were required to drive the vehicles – which, with an 18-month lead time, would in any case have been delivered to us during the driver shortage.

6. Decision to retain our current service model with added food waste collection

6.1. We reached the unavoidable conclusion that retaining our current service model was necessary to protect our ability to deliver an efficient, undisrupted waste and recycling service to Exeter’s residents.

6.2. Exeter’s recycling scheme is currently compliant with the requirement in the Waste (England and Wales) Regulations 2011 for separate recycling collections. There are currently no statutory recycling rate targets applicable to Exeter.

6.3. However, our current recycling service is not compliant with the requirements expected to be in place from 2023, which indicates that kerbside collection of food waste and glass will be mandatory. DEFRA has stated that any new mandatory burdens on councils will be fully funded.

6.4. The Council commissioned a comparison report by APSE Solutions, entitled ‘Exeter Comingled and Kerbside Recycling Services Comparison’ (appendix 2), to assist in its decision-making process. The report detailed the pros and cons of comingled verses kerbside sort collections and actually scored comingled collections the highest.

- 6.5. Given that guidance from government was to remain forthcoming, having been delayed by the pandemic, the report suggested that a weekly food waste collection should be introduced now, but that the Council should wait until more details emerged on what other materials would need to be collected from the kerbside and how this was expected to be funded before committing fully to a collection regime that may then have to be modified to suit changing statutory legislation.
- 6.6. The decision to retain our current service allowed us the option of purchasing individual food waste vehicles in line with the availability of drivers and rolling out a service that would preserve future flexibility, while maintaining an undisrupted waste and dry recycling collection service through the retention of our current fleet.
- 6.7. Officers made plans to roll out a food waste collection service in a trial area of the city.
- 6.8. While the Council had made public its intentions at a Council meeting on 21st July to roll out a trial service, before we could commit to dates we needed to secure a driver that could deliver Phase One of the service. By early November, prior to the announcement of the rollout date and despite the well-publicised national supply-chain issues resulting from the driver shortage crisis, public demand for food waste collections in Exeter had manifested in the form of small local demonstrations by environmental groups.
- 6.9. Before announcing the dates, we had continued to state publically – on social media and through correspondence and conversation – that the Council was committed to introducing the service and that we were in the advanced planning stages of doing so.
- 6.10. Advertising our specific plans without a firm idea of when they could be implemented would have meant inviting many questions from residents across the city while we were still without a driver to deliver the service. This would have risked overwhelming our small support team.
- 6.11. In November 2021, following the procurement of a food waste collection vehicle and food waste caddies, we wrote to 1300 Alphington properties to inform householders that we would be collecting food waste from their properties on Thursdays.
- 6.12. Delivering the first phase of the rollout at this time was in line with the anticipated timescale we offered before the pandemic for the new service rollout.

7. Benefits of retaining comingled collections and adding food waste

There are several key benefits to retaining a co-mingled system while adding additional food waste collections and planning for greater future MRF capacity:

- 7.1. It is predicted to reduce the carbon footprint of the service to a greater extent than the kerbside sort system approved previously.
- 7.2. We will be better able to meet government strategy regarding recyclable materials.

- 7.3. We will be able to expand our commercial waste and recycling client base.
- 7.4. We can retain control over the quality of the recycling we sell, flexibility to meet market demand and the potential to maximise income generation. We can continue separating plastics and other materials into individual streams, which means we can achieve higher prices to the benefit of public services in Exeter.
- 7.5. We can continue to work with our partners in providing and further seeking solutions for problem materials such as marine plastics and black plastic packaging.
- 7.6. With home deliveries having increased dramatically – a trend that is not reversing as shops have reopened – we will be well-placed to cope with the rise in volume of packaging waste and in particular cardboard placed out for collection by households.
- 7.7. We will be able to retain our current fleet while adding a smaller number of additional vehicles just for food (and potentially other services) as and when drivers become available.
- 7.8. We will be able to visit more properties with each vehicle daily, meaning fewer vehicles on the road moving less slowly and resulting in less potential traffic disruption.
- 7.9. Our vehicles will be better able to access narrower streets and streets with parked cars.
- 7.10. The decision to retain our current type of vehicle will enable us in future to lower emissions through the electrification of the waste fleet. It is easier to source electric dustcarts than the specialist vehicles we had originally planned to use.

8. How the first phase of the food waste service is performing

- 8.1. The first phase has proven to be a success with feedback from the residents involved being extremely positive regarding the frequency of the service and its ease of use.
- 8.2. Resident participation is currently at 84% from 1227 properties.
- 8.3. The vehicle collects approximately 2400 kg of food waste each Thursday and delivers it to the Suez facility at Greendale Business Park, East Devon, where it is sent on to the Andigestion plant in Holsworthy along with the other East Devon food waste for anaerobic digestion, which turns it into soil-improver while generating electricity and natural gas. Under the terms of our current operating licence we cannot tip at Exton Road. Where we currently tip has limited capacity and is one of the barriers to expansion of the service. Work is ongoing on short- and long-term solutions to our tipping facilities that will enable the service to be expanded.

- 8.4. The first phase is allowing us to trial different numbers of drivers and loaders to measure the impacts on productivity. This will help us in the final roll out, potentially decreasing the number of vehicles required.
- 8.5. So far, due to the ongoing global problems with vehicle availability, we have only been able to source one vehicle (a second-hand model). Having no spare vehicle puts the service at risk should we have mechanical failures.

9. Our next steps and challenges

- 9.1. Any future rollout of the service will need to be gradual. It depends on the availability of drivers, vehicles and tipping facilities, and on the announcement of legislation and government funding.
- 9.2. The most significant obstacle to expansion is the availability of vehicles. Due to the ongoing semi-conductor shortage and the impacts of the global pandemic, vehicles are in extremely short supply and we are working with our national leasing company to look at all avenues available to us. We expect to have one more vehicle by mid-May and that will allow the next phased expansion of the service to go ahead. The current predictions are that there may be further build slots available towards the end of the year.
- 9.3. The availability of HGV/LGV drivers is also a concern. The national shortage is well publicised, but an added challenge is the ability for any local authority to compete with the private sector. Wage increases for HGV/LGV drivers in the private sector are currently topping 15% in some cases. Private sector drivers also have longer working hours and so the disparity is amplified when you compare total wages. We are working with our HR team to try and address this disparity, but we do not have deep pockets.
- 9.4. There are a number of challenging constraints around our licence to operate at Exton Road. The introduction of food waste changes our licence considerably and the construction of dedicated food waste bays and alteration of our drainage systems will be a requirement for a large-scale roll out. We are working with the Environment Agency, who licence our MRF, to develop short- and longer-term solutions that will allow further areas to be added to the scheme.
- 9.5. A large area of uncertainty is the potential for changing legislation. The government has still not reported back on the three major waste strategies, which ended in June/July 2021. These are the consultations on 'Introducing a Deposit Return Scheme', 'Extended Producer Responsibility for Packaging across the UK' and 'Consistency in Household and Business Recycling in England'. Two of these strategies have the potential to change the materials we collect and how we collect them. We are working on the indicative direction of travel but changes may occur that will affect vehicle specifications and required resources. Both consultations are considerably delayed.

9.6. We are expanding our food waste service as fast as these constraints will allow, but there are a number of very significant uncertainties that are out of our control at present.

10. Other related projects

10.1. While the enhanced service change is a major project in its own right, there are a number of other large projects that will directly affect the Exton Road site and our service delivery. They are:

- The depot amalgamation project, which aims to bring the Public and Green Spaces Team and the Waste and Recycling teams together on one site. This will include the updating of many operational facilities and offer improved safety and wellbeing for staff.
- The Solar Array and Battery storage project, which will provide high-capacity electric vehicle charging at Exton Road for the new Electric Refuse Vehicles when they arrive.
- The modernisation of the MRF based on medium-term modular retro fit engineering solutions to improve throughput, increasing efficiency and offering enhanced processing ability to take on additional commercial work.

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Appendix 1: Frequently Ask Questions

1. Why did the plans change from kerb side sort to retaining comingled and adding food waste?

1.1 Access to roads

There are many streets in Exeter that kerbside-sorting vehicles simply wouldn't be able to access. The vehicles are larger than our current vehicles and require loading from the side. Our current vehicles are slimmer and are loaded from the rear. Using these new vehicles would have meant adding bespoke vehicles to the already expanded fleet, just so that we could access streets we currently access with a compacting vehicle.

1.2 Driver availability

Kerbside sorting vehicles can visit fewer properties than our current compacting vehicles, so we would have needed more of them on the road – in turn requiring more drivers when there are almost none available due to the national HGV driver shortage.

This would have left us now unable to deliver our recycling service across the city. Having replaced our existing recycling vehicles, we wouldn't have had enough drivers to drive all the new vehicles required to visit every property.

Adding additional services to our current service means we can procure new vehicles as and when drivers become available.

1.3 The effect of the pandemic on people's waste production

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a fundamental shift in waste habits, which is not anticipated to reverse.

The exponential rise in home delivery highlighted a need for us to continue to be able to collect large quantities of cardboard and extra recycling from people's homes – only possible with our current vehicles.

There was, and continues to be, less cardboard coming from the private retail sector. It is vital that cardboard is recycled: the nation faced a shortfall during lockdown, which had the potential to disrupt the medical supply chain.

Many authorities have struggled to adapt to this. Exeter has not, for one reason: we collect the recycling 'comingled' and sort it in our own Materials Reclamation Facility. Simply put, we can fit more recycling (including cardboard) in our vehicles and can sort it more effectively.

2. How does this affect recycling income?

Sorting our recycling in our own MRF, rather than using our MRF merely as a transfer station, allows us to retain control over the quality of the recycling we sell. We can continue separating plastics and other materials into individual streams, which means we can achieve higher prices to the benefit of public services in Exeter.

3. Which is the best method from an environmental perspective?

Retaining an MRF facility means we can continue to work with our partners in providing and further seeking solutions for problem materials such as marine plastics and black plastic packaging.

The proposed improvements to our waste and recycling service are anticipated to reduce the city's carbon footprint to a greater extent than the system proposed before the pandemic.

By having fewer waste collection vehicles on the road, completing their collection more quickly than kerbside-sorting vehicles, there will be less disruption on Exeter's already busy roads.

4. Why are we rolling the service out gradually?

Because of supply chain issues with regards to the availability of vehicles and drivers.

The country is facing an HGV driver shortage at the moment, and we need more HGV drivers to drive the new vehicles (when they become available) in addition to the drivers we employ already to drive our refuse and recycling trucks.

Had we stuck with the original plan to use specialist vehicles to collect all recycling plus food waste, we would have required more HGV drivers right now to collect even dry recycling and rubbish from people's homes.

5. Why has it taken from when the plans were announced until now to begin rolling out this service?

The global pandemic hit as we were in the advanced stages of planning the new service.

It became suddenly crucial for us to focus every effort on delivering our current waste and recycling service with minimal disruption.

Officers used this time to review plans for the introduction of additional waste streams in the light of everything the pandemic had impacted – which inevitably included the Council's finances.

There are now well-publicised issues in the supply chain that have hindered us, especially the national shortage of HGV drivers.

6. Could we have hired more drivers sooner, anticipating the need?

No, because they would have had no vehicles to drive.

The kerbside sorting vehicles we had planned to use had an 18-month delivery time, so we could not have delivered the new service before the last quarter of 2021 even if the pandemic had not hit.

Now, having reassessed our plans, we have the option of purchasing individual food waste vehicles as and when drivers become available while maintaining an uninterrupted refuse and recycling service.

7. Why didn't we advertise the rollout previously, before public demonstration?

7.1. We did not know for sure when we would be able to deliver the rollout.

Even leaving aside the influence the pandemic has had on our services, the HGV driver crisis has made a swift rollout of a brand new service impossible. Before we could commit to dates, we needed to secure a driver that could deliver Phase One of the service.

7.2. We needed to manage expectations

We have faced many considerable challenges in getting the first stage of this service off the ground, knowing there is overwhelming public desire to see food waste collected separately in Exeter.

Maintaining our current recycling and rubbish service with minimal disruption has been our priority in recent months. We have managed this to the delay of just one garden waste collection. Other authorities in the region have not fared so well.

Our intention to run a food waste trial had been in the public domain since the Council meeting of 21st July 2021. Delivering the first phase of the rollout now is in line with the timescale we offered for the new service rollout before the pandemic.

7.3. We needed to protect our small support team

Advertising our specific plans without a firm idea of when they could be implemented would have risked inviting many questions from residents across the city while we were still without a driver to deliver the service, overwhelming our small support team.

While it's encouraging to see so many people enthusiastic for change and asking for the introduction of food waste collections in Exeter, we have maintained throughout that we are fully committed to delivering a food waste collection service across Exeter.

7.4. The service change was always intended to roll out when it did

As stated previously, the kerbside sorting vehicles had an 18-month delivery time.

Planning the logistics of the new service and providing the infrastructure has also taken time.

For example: the food containers themselves required ordering two to three months before delivery. These were ordered in July in preparation for the November rollout.

8. Why have we not yet planned in glass collections from home?

Our decision to move away from kerbside sort meant that glass collections would have to remain from glass banks for the time being.

The plan is to move eventually to include it in our kerbside collection, but in order to maintain the quality of the recycling products we put forward to market we have to keep glass separate from other recyclables. This requires specialist or adapted collection vehicles. Until the government announces the findings of the DRS consultation we will not know what volume of glass will be left in the recycling stream for local authorities to collect. This makes choosing new vehicles impossible, and they are also extremely expensive. Once the government makes some announcements we can progress with our proposals for this recycling stream.

In addition, because we have a large network of glass banks already that are well-used, and because food waste is a major contributor to the climate crisis, we have decided to focus on food waste for the time being.

9. When can we expect to roll out the food waste collection service to other parts of the city?

Any future rollout of the service will need to be gradual. It depends on the availability of drivers, vehicles, tipping facilities and on the announcement of legislation and government funding.

The most significant obstacle to expansion is the availability of vehicles. Due to the ongoing semi-conductor shortage and the impacts of the global pandemic, vehicles are in extremely short supply and we are working with our national leasing company to look at all avenues available to us. We expect to have one more vehicle by mid-May and that will allow the

next phased expansion of the service to go ahead. The current predictions are that there may be further build slots available towards the end of the year.

We appreciate there is overwhelming public desire to see food waste collected separately in Exeter. However, in the light of the many considerable challenges we have faced in getting the first stage of this service off the ground, we can only commit to our intention to see food waste collected across the city as soon as possible and not to specific dates.