



WIN case study September 2010:



Countywide review results in harmonised garden waste subscriptions across Northumberland

In 2008, as part of the preparations for Northumberland becoming a single unitary authority, the County Council reviewed garden waste collections across all six WCA districts of Northumberland, focussing on service standards, recycling performance, levels of charging and operational arrangements. Following this exercise, a county-wide, harmonised, opt-in subscription based service was introduced. The new service replaced a variety of differently priced district level arrangements, which had previously ranged from free-of-charge to £35/yr. Collections were suspended during winter months and a policy for the standardisation of collection receptacles was adopted. See Table 1 below for a brief summary of the outcomes.

Table 1. Summary of outcomes

	Pre change 2008/09	Post change 20010/11	Notes
Overall county composting rate	12.2%	11.9%	0.3% reduction
Overall recycling rate	26.2%	26.9%	0.7% increase
No. customers for garden waste service	25, 500	15, 947	38% reduction
Kerbside compost tonnage	9, 113 tonnes	7, 453 tonnes	18.2% reduction
HWRC compost tonnage	10, 270 tonnes	10, 811 tonnes	5.0% increase
Total compost collected	19, 383 tonnes	18, 264 tonnes	6.1% reduction
Subscriptions / annum	Range FOC - £35	£20	-
Income generated	£170 k	£270 k	£100 k increase
Overall costs	£400 k	£400 k	-
Net cost	£230 k	£130 k	£100 k decrease

Background

A varied service...

The county's existing garden waste collection arrangements varied widely with policies, practices, participation and levels of coverage differing between all six WCAs. All collected materials were delivered to Northumberland CC under the PFI Contract for processing into a high quality compost/soil improver.

Significant scope for improvement...

In 2008/09, composting rates ranged from 1% in Berwick-upon-Tweed Borough to 11% in Castle Morpeth BC. The overall county composting rate including Household Waste Recovery Centre (HWRC) composting was at 12.2% in 2008/09. When compared with England's top performing authorities who achieved rates of 27%, Northumberland's performance was positioned firmly in the bottom quartile of authorities.



Compositional analysis..

Analysis suggested that, in the summer months, the county's residual household waste contained around 13% garden waste. There was clearly scope for significant improvement, both for reducing waste arisings and for boosting the county's recycling performance.

Kerbside garden waste collections held the key to improvement

The county considered a number of options to improve performance but none seemed to offer the scope for improvement that was required:-

- **HWRCs were already performing well** - garden waste composted via HWRCs in 2007/8 accounted for 62% of the composting activity in the county.
- **Promotion of home composting** continued via the WRAP composter mail order scheme. Between 2003 & 2009 more than 23, 000 units were purchased across the county. However, green waste diverted for disposal via home composters was not counted towards national performance indicators and therefore any increase here would not help to increase the county's recycling rates.
- **Separated kitchen waste** was not being collected by any of the districts at the time of the review, mainly due to the lack of local treatment & processing facilities.

The Review

Three main objectives were identified:-

- To assist in increasing recycling performance.
- To comply with the Council's contractual obligations under the PFI Contract to increase the proportion of garden waste collected for composting.
- To reduce the amount of garden waste being disposed of by households in the residual waste stream.

An assessment of the collection arrangements...



The varying collection arrangements were reviewed across the six district areas. The following table below summarises collections as they were at this time. All services operated fortnightly but varied in that some operated all year round and others suspended the service during winter months.



Table 2 - Collection arrangements across county prior to harmonisation

Area	Receptacle	Subscription/ Charge
Tynedale	Wheeled bin	Free of charge (FOC)
Blyth Valley	Wheeled bin	£18 one off charge
Castle Morpeth, Alnwick & Berwick	Wheeled bin	Annual subscription of £30, £25 & £15.50 respectively
Wansbeck	Bio-degradable Sacks	£1 for 10 sack roll

Weighing up the options...

An **extension of the free-of-charge (FOC)** service would have undoubtedly increased participation and recycling performance, however, this would have resulted in a lost income of £170k/annum plus the vast costs associated with such an expansion which were estimated to be between £1.5 and £2 Million.

The alternative approach was to **cease the FOC service and to harmonise subscriptions** across the county at a mid-range value of £20/bin/annum or £1.50 for 10 bio-degradable sacks. The following potential benefits of this approach were noted at the time:-

- A lower charge or no increase in charge for households in 2 out of the 6 WCA areas.
- Less likelihood of drop out and subsequent loss of income from those households already paying for the service
- Costs associated with extension of service would be proportional to uptake of scheme.

Considering the risks...

- **Dissatisfaction of residents** – Charging was likely to be unpopular, particularly in areas where the service had previously been FOC or less than £20/yr. Also, approximately 1,100 households in Blyth Valley had only purchased their garden waste bins during 2008. It was recommended that these residents should continue to receive a free service for 2009 only, with a charge being applied thereafter, so that they would receive the service for at least one full season in respect of their initial payment.
- A **slower pace of improvement** in recycling/composting performance could occur due to new charges, particular if large numbers of households currently receiving a FOC service dropped out of the service.
- **Negative press & publicity.**
- If small numbers in outlying, rural areas wished to continue with the new service, it could become **less economically and environmentally viable** due to long distances travelled and low tonnages collected.
- **Fly tipping** rates could increase.
- More garden waste could be disposed of in the **residual waste stream.**

Paul Jones, Head of Waste Management at Northumberland CC said...

“Given the financial restraints and the need to ensure financial stability for any expansion of the garden waste service, it was decided that a harmonisation of charges was the best way forwards”



Maximising the benefits and minimising risks

A number of issues associated with maximising participation and service efficiency and achieving best value for money were also considered as part of the ongoing review. These are outlined in points 1 to 5 below.

1. Suspension of service over winter months

County records for garden waste tonnages collected during the winter period showed that only around 300 tonnes of waste was being collected per winter, contributing just 0.12% to the overall recycling rate.

Winter collection arrangements varied between districts at the time of the review and following the recommendations, it was suggested that a standardised approach should be adopted which would mean the suspension of collections from December through to end of February each year.

It was anticipated that this policy would offer the following benefits:

- Best value for money
- Flexibility in seasonal staffing arrangements
- Reduce the potential for financial, environmental and service inefficiencies associated with collection of small tonnages during the winter months

2. Setting subscriptions at the right level

When considering the charging policy for 2009, Northumberland considered a number of factors before setting subscriptions at £20, including:-

- A likely reduction in households wishing to participate in the new service.
- Revenue saving of £65, 000 from anticipated reduction in demand for service.
- Additional income from new charges in 2009 - likely to be £75, 000.
- Reduction in overall household waste recycling rate (estimated at 0.6%)



For the 2010 season, a recommendation was put forward by Northumberland CC to increase subscriptions from £20 in 2009 to £25 for 2010, in order to generate an additional income of £60, 000 / annum. The following points were highlighted at the time:-

- The collection costs incurred in providing the service during 2009 were not fully recovered by the level of charges levied.



- A £25 charge would be compatible with the objectives of promoting waste minimisation and would not undermine or provide a disincentive to composting garden waste at home (which remains the best environmental option).
- Subscriptions for Northumberland's garden waste service were not considered especially high when compared to other local authorities who levied subscription charges ranging up to £50/year.

After consideration, the charging level remained at £20 for 2010. At the time it was noted that further increases in charges may have had an adverse impact on user numbers and overall recycling performance which could make achieving recycling targets more difficult. This could in turn, result in financial implications for performance reward funding.

3. Targeting resources – for future expansion it was considered sensible to target resources in the main and secondary settlements, especially those areas with a high density of large gardens.

4. Enforcement policy – The approach of banning garden wastes from the domestic residual bin is not supported by Northumberland as it is considered to be heavy handed and does not engender public support for recycling activity. In Northumberland the adoption of a twin bin alternate weekly collection system for recyclables and general household waste, along with a 'no side waste' collection policy, means that for most residents there is little spare capacity within their general household bin for the disposal of excess garden waste anyway.

Fly tipping figures for the county continued to show a downward trend during 2009 and the proportion of incidents relating to garden waste was consistent both before and after the changes were introduced. It was therefore concluded that new charging arrangements did not have a significant effect on incidences of flytipping.

5. Use of wheeled bins vs. bio-degradable sacks for collections

At the time of the review, the standard container for collections in five of the six districts was a 240 litre wheeled bin. Two of the councils offered bio-degradable sacks as an alternative to wheeled bins and one council based the service entirely on sacks. It was proposed by Northumberland that consideration be given to phasing out the use of biodegradable sacks during 2010 as the use of wheeled bins was considered more reliable, cost effective and environmentally sound.

Colour of wheeled bins across the district areas varied but was predominantly brown. To avoid confusion and potential contamination issues for crews and residents it was suggested that the colour of the bins be standardised to brown over time, through exchanging bins and by redistributing bins from residents who no longer wished to use the service.

Outlined in Table 3 on the following page are considerations which helped Northumberland to make a decision on containerisation.



Table 3 - Use of Wheeled Bins vs. bio-degradeable sacks for collection

Issue	Bio-degradeable sacks	Wheeled Bins
Health & Safety	Manual handling issues for collection staff.	Less manual handling / lifting required.
Service Efficiency & Operational Issues	<p>Increased potential for spillages and bags being lost or blown away.</p> <p>A less efficient way of delivering the service due to less certainty over collection points, volume of material for collection on any one day.</p> <p>Planning & scheduling rounds more difficult.</p>	<p>Less potential for spillages / litter.</p> <p>All collection points are known.</p> <p>Volume of waste requiring collection is relatively stable.</p> <p>Collection rounds can be scheduled effectively. More confidence that rounds can be completed on time.</p>
Cost	Cost of sacks had increased significantly to ensure that the sacks met new European Standards for biodegradability of plastic packaging. These higher costs had not yet been reflected in the price that the residents were paying.	Fixed one off costs for wheeled bin purchase. However, further potential for future costs of replacing lost or damaged bins depending on council's replacement policy.
End use issues	Potential difficulties at the composting facility including sacks not fully bio-degrading and a reduction in quality, value and range of markets for the end product - leaving the Council open to contractual claims under the Waste Private Finance Initiative Contract.	Better quality end product more likely.
Customer feedback	Customer feedback surveys in the areas that continued to use sacks revealed that 60% and later on 78% of respondents would prefer to continue to use bags. However, the surveys were not regarded as being statistically valid due to low numbers of respondents. The question as to whether residents would continue to have a preference for sacks if they were priced more accurately and at a comparable cost to using wheeled bins remained uncertain.	No area specific data is available, however possible customer issues may include:- Lack of space for storage of bins and confusion as to which colour bin to put what material in.



Managing the changes

Introduction of the new subscriptions – a phased approach..

In areas where residents were already charged an annual fee / purchased sacks, it was possible to introduce the new charges for the 2009 season from 1st April 2009 relatively easily.

In other areas where residents had either paid a one-off charge for the provision of a garden waste bin and expected a free collection service thereafter (Blyth), or had been issued with a bin and received the service free of charge (Tynedale) the new charges were more controversial.

Paul Jones, Head of Waste Management at Northumberland CC commented...

“Due to concerns over the capacity of the Council’s new Contact Centre to deal with large volumes of telephone calls about the garden waste service, it was decided to phase in the implementation of the charges in Blyth and then Tynedale. This meant that service users who did not wish to pay the new charges were able to continue receiving the service up to the end of June 2009, after which time only those residents who had paid the £20 charge continued to get their garden waste bin emptied”

Collection of unwanted wheeled bins...

As the bins remained the Council’s property in the Tynedale area, the Council offered to remove bins from those residents who no longer wished to continue with the service.

Almost 4, 000 brown wheeled bins have been collected by the Council in the Tynedale area and have been washed and placed into storage in depots around the county ready for reuse.



Dealing with complaints...

At the beginning of 2010, records held within the Waste Service indicated that a total of 108 complaints had been responded to, via email/letter regarding the garden waste service, this included complaints about the introduction of the charges, provision of bins/stickers and time taken for removal of unwanted bins.

No records had been kept of expressions of dissatisfaction or issues/enquiries that have been dealt with directly over the telephone by Waste Service or Contact Centre staff. Hence, whilst there had been a relatively low level of recorded complaints about the policy change/charges this did not provide an effective measure of the level of public dissatisfaction associated with this change. It is clear, however, that the new charging arrangements were controversial and unpopular in certain areas and adverse press coverage accompanied this.



Communications

Once the council had agreed the proposed changes as part of its revenue budget setting process, a press release was issued to the local media to advertise the changes and the rationale behind them. This was followed up with a further press release several weeks later to reiterate what changes were being made and to let residents know that they would be getting a letter through the door advising them what was happening, why this was necessary and what garden waste services were available to them. This included details of the home compost bin scheme, locations of HWRCs and how they could subscribe to the garden waste collection service for 2009.

Local councillors were also issued with a detailed briefing note so that they were kept fully aware of what was happening in their area and what services were available to local residents.

Getting large volumes of letters out in a short period of time meant that it was necessary to use the services of a specialist mailing company who printed and posted the letters on the council's behalf at a unit cost of £0.31 per letter.

Major impacts of the changes

Table 1 on page 1 of this document summarises the impacts of the changes. Key points to note are that:

Overall composting rates were not significantly affected as many of the residents that opted out of the collection service opted to take their garden waste to

the nearest HWRC. Note – there was a 38% reduction in customers for the kerbside garden waste collection service but only a 6.1% reduction in tonnage garden waste collected (combined collections from kerbside service and from HWRCs). The impact on the composting rate in 2009/10 was a slight decrease of -0.3%.

However, because the new charge was phased in over the first 3 months of the year the full impact of the charging policy on recycling performance won't be realised until 2010/11.

Looking to the future

Garden waste collection routes are currently being re-organised using **GPS tracking data and route optimisation** software in order to improve the efficiency of the service. Any 'non-cashable' efficiency gains will be re-invested by extending the coverage of the service to more communities.

Further marketing activity is also planned to increase levels of take-up in those areas where the service is already available.

Improvements to the payments processes are being made to encourage a greater proportion of residents to 'self serve' via the council's web page and to reduce the volume of cheque payments.

It is envisaged that the numbers of residents using the service will continue to grow.



Key components of the project that led to the successful delivery were:

- The detailed review of current service provision and options for the future supported by key facts and figures meant that councillors could make an informed decision on the best way forward.
- Robust project management arrangements were put in place to ensure the effective delivery of the changes and to mitigate the risks.
- Timely press releases and direct communications with residents to let them know 'what' was changing, 'why' and 'when' helped reduce the level of complaints and adverse coverage in the local media.
- Promotion of all of the garden waste services available to residents ensured they were aware of their options and could also make an informed choice.
- Collecting unwanted garden waste bins was logistically difficult and time consuming, but has enabled the expansion of the scheme at minimal additional cost by washing and reusing recovered bins.
- Coordination of the implementation of the new charging arrangements to ensure that it did not clash with other 'peak' demands on contact centre, cashiers and back office staff helped ensure customer care standards were maintained.
- Detailed briefings for contact centre staff on the rationale for the changes enabled them to deal with enquiries / expressions of dissatisfaction more effectively and reduced the numbers of calls being passed on to back office staff.
- Timely delivery of bins and effective back-office administration ensured that residents joining the service started to receive collections promptly – so they get the full value for money.

Links and Contacts

Paul Jones, Head of Waste Management at Northumberland CC
Paul.Jones01@northumberland.gov.uk
01670 534826

Waste Improvement Network
www.win.org.uk
win@southeastiep.gov.uk