

**REPORT TO THE SOUTH TYNE AND WEAR WASTE MANAGEMENT
PARTNERSHIP JOINT EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

12 JUNE 2020

REPORT OF: Colin Huntington, Project Director, South Tyne and Wear Waste Management Partnership

SUBJECT: Coronavirus Pandemic - STWWMP Service Delivery

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To provide the Joint Executive Committee with an overview of household waste service delivery and associated challenges in response to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 On 16 March 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson advised that in response to the rapidly developing coronavirus pandemic, everyone in the UK should avoid 'non-essential' travel and contact with others, and to work from home wherever possible.
- 2.2 Government subsequently announced on 18 March 2020 that all schools in would close from the afternoon of Friday 20 March, except for those looking after the children of key workers and vulnerable children.
- 2.3 To further contain the spread of the virus, a UK-wide 'partial' lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020 which instructed the public that they must stay at home, except for certain very limited purposes, i.e. shopping for basic necessities; for 'one form of exercise a day'; for any medical need; and to travel to and from work when 'absolutely necessary'.
- 2.4 Therefore, the STWWMP partner authorities needed to urgently consider how to ensure that the statutory waste services could continue to be provided households across the partnership area, whilst protecting the health and safety of both the staff delivering the services and local residents themselves.

3. STWWMP SERVICE DELIVERY

3.1 Since the beginning of the national lockdown and the subsequent ongoing restrictions on all aspects of daily life, each of the partner authorities have faced numerous challenges in ensuring that as many as possible of the range of waste services that are usually available can continue to be delivered to residents.

Impact on Frontline Service Delivery

3.2 In recent months, there have been increased pressures on staff and resources. This has required the partner authorities to plan for the potential impact of staff unavailability, which could still yet be a significant concern if a 'second wave' of the virus becomes prevalent.

3.3 However, despite such challenging times, the team effort and professionalism demonstrated by the partner authorities - fully supported by the different external waste contractors and advice and guidance from other organisations across the waste sector - has meant that all residents across Gateshead, South Tyneside, and Sunderland have continued to receive their key waste collection services. This has enabled the statutory kerbside services, such as household residual and recycling collections, to be maintained without interruption. This continues to be achieved whilst ensuring that the health and safety of all staff and members of the public is of paramount importance and the highest priority in the ongoing service delivery.

Contractors' Response

3.4 During the initial stages of the lockdown the majority of residents were required to stay at home, so the amount of waste that households presented for collection increased. Since Easter, analysis indicates an average increase in recycling tonnages presented by households is 24% in Gateshead, 30% in South Tyneside, and 28% in Sunderland. Despite this, the support received from contractors ensured that all waste transfer stations and facilities, both material recovery facilities, and the energy-from-waste facility continued to accept waste and operate as close to as normal as possible, with no impact on service delivery.

Staff Safety

3.5 Home working for staff support services has been implemented wherever possible and support provided to other vulnerable staff who, in accordance with the latest government and NHS advice, have been advised to be stringent in following social distancing guidelines or self-isolation requirements.

3.6 However, as 'key workers', many waste services staff cannot work from home and the partner authorities rely on them to maintain critical service provision to residents. Consequently, all partner authorities and contractors have been able to swiftly implement appropriate alternative measures to protect their health and safety across all services, sites, and locations. This includes:

- The development of new coronavirus-related risk assessments to provide guidance to all staff and managers and ensure that the partner authorities comply with their duty to provide a safe and healthy

workplace/working conditions for staff who remain working in their regular place of work during the pandemic.

- The widespread use of additional support vehicles on collection rounds to ensure staff can ensure that social distancing is maintained when travelling during collection routes.
- The provision of additional signage, traffic management arrangements, and resources on sites, as appropriate.
- Minimising attendance in workplaces, supported by revised shift rotas and restrictions to site/office access, especially arrangements for communal areas such as kitchens.
- Additional staff training to allow for flexibility within the delivery of services, which in some cases enabled the redeployment of staff into another areas of work or to support critical services where required.

Temporary Suspension of Services

3.7 Unfortunately, to ensure that the key services highlighted above could continue to be delivered, difficult decisions had to be taken and some household waste services were temporarily suspended. This included the household garden waste kerbside collection services, which were withdrawn before any collections from the households subscribing to the 2020 could commence.

3.8 Throughout the suspension of the service(s), the contractors indicated that they would be able to mobilise immediately when the individual partner authorities recommenced kerbside collections from subscribers. All partner authorities have now been able to reintroduce the garden waste services and collections are now taking place within the existing fortnightly collection schedule. Prior to its recommencement, communications activities were undertaken to remind subscribers not to present additional bagged waste at the side of their bins if they were full and, for the safety of everyone, that all residents must comply with social distancing requirements and not to approach collection crews.

3.9 Due to the government's lockdown guidance on essential travel requirements, the four household waste and recycling centres (HWRCs) closed during the initial weeks of the pandemic. Following updated government advice and discussions between the partner authorities and the HWRC management contractor (SUEZ), all STWWMP HWRCs have now reopened. However, residents have been advised that visits to HWRCs should still only be undertaken if it is essential and that journeys are only allowed under the current lockdown restrictions if the waste materials cannot be stored at home without causing risk of injury or harm to health.

Alternative Service Delivery Models

3.10 Therefore, for the foreseeable future, HWRCs will continue to operate within the strict social distancing measures that were introduced to enable them to reopen in a safe manner by restricting the number of vehicles accessing sites at any one time. In some cases, the HWRCs have temporarily introduced longer opening hours (8am-8pm) to help to manage demand.

3.11 Current HWRC restrictions also include limitations to the types of materials that can be disposed and only bagged household waste, garden waste, cardboard, wood, and bulky waste such as old furniture will be accepted (although this was recently extended to enable the disposal of some waste electrical and electronic

equipment, including small domestic appliances such as toasters, kettles, and vacuum cleaners, televisions, and small fridges).

- 3.12 The number of vehicles that are able to access sites must, therefore, be carefully managed to prevent excessive queues that may impact on the highway and flow of traffic elsewhere. At the current time, access to sites is also restricted to cars only, and no vans, vehicles towing trailers, pick-ups, or commercial vehicles of any type are allowed on site. The existing permit system for such vehicles remains suspended until further notice. However, the partner authorities remain in regular discussions with SUEZ regarding the potential extension of site access in the near future to additional vehicles, such as car-derived vans and pick-ups.
- 3.13 In Gateshead and South Tyneside, site access is also managed by a new, simple, car number plate system which has been introduced to restrict opportunities to access sites based on car registration details, i.e. vehicles with 'even' and 'odd' years of manufacture identified on number plates access sites on alternate days. However, in Sunderland, HWRC site access is determined by a new, easy-to-access booking system where residents must register in advance before attending Beach Street to dispose of their waste. Both new systems are operating effectively, and all residents using STWWMP HWRCs may also be asked for proof of their address.

4. THE NATIONAL PICTURE

Local Authority Service Delivery

- 4.1 The challenges that the partner authorities have faced during the pandemic are not uncommon and most other local authorities around the country have also had to focus on maintaining statutory waste services. As with STWWMP, there has also been an impact on other waste services such as kerbside garden waste collections and HWRCs.
- 4.2 Since the lockdown began, a waste services survey has been jointly issued by the Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport (ADEPT)/ Local Authority Recycling Advisory Committee (LARAC)/ National Association of Waste Disposal Officers (NAWDO)/ Local Government Association (LGA) on a weekly basis. STWWMP has submitted a response each week highlighting the service delivery position across the partner authorities. By the end of May 2020, the survey results highlighted:

| Service | Operating normally | Minor disruption | Moderate disruption | Severe disruption | Service not available |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Residual collections | 91% | 8% | 1% | 0% | 0% |
| Recycling collections | 81% | 17% | 1% | 0% | 0% |
| Garden Waste collections | 72% | 14% | 7% | 3% | 4% |

- 4.3 The results above show that now that the pandemic has passed its peak, the significant majority of other local authorities have been able to recommence at least some element of waste services that may have previously been suspended.
- 4.4 Services such as residual waste collections have remained consistent over recent weeks/months, whilst improvements seen in some areas in recent weeks have enabled four out of five local authorities to now report recycling collections that are operating as normal.
- 4.5 Almost three quarters of garden waste collections services are now operating again – a figure that has doubled since the end of March.

Waste Disposal Services

- 4.6 The weekly survey also includes an analysis of waste disposal services and their availability for local authorities. At the end of May, the analysis shows:

| Service | Operating normally | Minor disruption | Moderate disruption | Severe disruption | Service not available |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| Energy-from-Waste | 94% | 5% | 1% | 0% | 0% |
| Materials Recovery Facility | 78% | 17% | 4% | 1% | 0% |
| Waste Transfer Stations | 90% | 9% | 1% | 0% | 0% |
| Household Waste and Recycling Centres | 15% | 38% | 41% | 3% | 3% |
| Open Windrow Composting | 89% | 8% | 1% | 1% | 1% |

- 4.7 Alongside local authority residual waste collection services, the energy-from-waste (EfW) availability has remained consistent during pandemic, as have waste transfer stations for the different waste streams.
- 4.8 Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs) have seen greater levels of disruption in comparison to residual waste treatment options such as EfW, but almost four in five MRFs are now reporting to be operating as normal.
- 4.9 Similarly, 79% of Household Waste and Recycling Centres (HWRCs) are now reporting minor or moderate levels of disruption to services (92% of which have identified operational capacity of 30-40%), with only 3% remaining closed. In mid-April, 92% of HWRCs across the country were closed.

Staffing Levels

- 4.10 By mid-May, 15% of survey respondents were experiencing 'no impact' on operational staffing levels. 78% of local authorities reported a 'less than 20% reduction on staffing levels, a similar level to the two weeks prior. 6% reported

a 20-40 reduction, which is less than a fifth of the absence levels that were reported in the last week of March.

- 4.11 The same survey also identified the greatest reported causes for disruption to collection services, which continues to be staff absence due to self-isolation (highlighted by 45% of local authorities, although this has fallen in recent weeks). The effects of social distancing is the next greatest reported cause for service disruption, identified by 41% of respondents, followed by absence due to sickness (32%).

Waste Arisings

- 4.12 Finally, the survey also considers changes in the levels of waste across the three main waste streams that are collected at the kerbside since the lockdown began:

| Service | +100% increase | 50-100% increase | 20-50% increase | 0-20% increase | No impact | 0-20% decrease | 20-50% decrease | 50+100% decrease |
|--------------|----------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Residual | 2% | 3% | 28% | 58% | 8% | 0% | 1% | 0% |
| Recycling | 0% | 9% | 34% | 49% | 7% | 0% | 1% | 0% |
| Garden Waste | 8% | 18% | 26% | 34% | 9% | 5% | 0% | 0% |

5. NEXT STEPS

- 5.1 As the pandemic continues, across STWWMP, waste service operatives continue to receive positive feedback and thanks from all sectors of society, whether this is thank you posters in windows or on notices and cards left on bins. It would appear that residents are recognising that alongside social care staff, shop workers, NHS staff, and many other key workers, local authority waste services are essential to the functioning of society, whether this is in a period of crisis or not.
- 5.2 However, the recovery phase of the pandemic will mean the partner authorities will encounter many further challenges that will need to be considered to ensure that waste services can continue to be delivered, whilst protecting the health and safety of all staff and the public at all times.
- 5.3 As more waste services continue to expand and become closer to 'normal' service delivery, further interim risk assessments will be required to be developed through close working between the three partner authorities and relevant service contractors. This will also enable contract management roles such as site inspections to be reintroduced and routinely delivered.
- 5.4 As highlighted above, across the country there is now a very low rate of HWRC unavailability, and all four HWRC's are now open across the partnership area. However, it is likely that there could be a long period of alternative service delivery before any HWRCs are back to full working order. Furthermore, further

consideration will need to be given to agree how the service(s) can be safely enhanced to provide opportunities for residents to dispose additional waste streams and when it will be appropriate to allow larger vehicles, such as vans and pick-ups, to access HWRCs again.

- 5.5 The partner authorities will also be subject to a steep learning curve on the implications of the new 'track and trace' procedures and how this could impact on increased staff absences and, therefore, the continued delivery of waste services.
- 5.6 In addition, all local authorities have incurred significant additional financial costs to ensure services across all areas of their activities can be delivered safely within the current situation. The ongoing lockdown restrictions will prevent the partner authorities from returning to pre-pandemic service arrangements and associated service delivery costs.
- 5.7 However, the longer some form of restrictions remain in place, the additional financial pressures could begin to impact on the services that the partner authorities are able to provide. The local government sector and their support organisations remain in dialogue with government regarding the additional costs required to support all aspects of local authority services during the pandemic. Within the waste services sector, feedback from support organisations such as LARAC suggests that their discussions with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) have indicated that the department is keen to identify evidence of extra costs that local authority waste services are incurring. STWWMP will therefore continue to engage with relevant waste sector organisations and surveys and ensure that the service delivery challenges and associated additional costs will be highlighted as appropriate.

6. **RECOMMENDATION**

- 6.1 The Joint Executive Committee is requested to:
- (i) Note the contents of this report; and
 - (ii) Agree to receive further updates on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the delivery of waste services, as appropriate.

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