

**MINUTES OF A MEETING OF
THE EXECUTIVE
HELD ON 11 SEPTEMBER 2020 FROM 7.00 PM TO 8.05 PM**

Committee Members Present

Councillors: John Halsall (Chairman), John Kaiser, Parry Batth, UllaKarin Clark, Charlotte Haitham Taylor, Stuart Munro, Gregor Murray and Wayne Smith

Other Councillors Present

Prue Bray
Richard Dolinski
Paul Fishwick
Clive Jones
Sarah Kerr
Caroline Smith

14. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were submitted by Councillors Pauline Jorgensen and Charles Margetts.

Councillor Richard Dolinski, Deputy Executive Member for Health, Wellbeing and Adult Services, attended the meeting on behalf of Councillor Margetts. In accordance with legislation Councillor Margetts could take part in any discussions but was not entitled to vote.

15. DECLARATION OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received.

16. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited members of the public to submit questions to the appropriate Members.

16.1 Chris Johnson asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

The agenda states on page 10 that the life expectancy of the sacks is now three to five years, and not the 5.5 years as previously stated, or in fact the 13.3 years as indicated by the financial weighting in the options appraisal. As this solution is supposed to last until 2026, there is clearly going to be an increased need to replace these sacks during this time. Why has this not been fully realised in the modelling?

Answer

I am a little unsure about where the 13.3 year figure has arisen from as I do not think that this appears to feature in the options appraisal. I can confirm that the life expectancy of the bags is five years as per the manufacturers' experience. However, they can last beyond five years and this certainly reflects the Council's experience with the garden waste bags pre 2012, you might remember, in that it was found they lasted well over five years. It is therefore expected that this 'solution' will last well beyond 2026 if required.

16.2 Beth Rowland asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

Please will you tell me how you consulted with representatives from protected characteristic groups for completion of the Equality Impact Assessment on the proposed 'hessian' recycling bags and what was the input from those groups?

Answer

The Assessment you refer to, an Equality Impact Assessment, was undertaken if you look at Appendix 3 of the report. This demonstrated that all groups were carefully considered in assessing the impact of this minor change to the waste collection service; because we are only changing the receptacle we are not changing the policy and we are not changing anything else. Consultation with protected characteristic groups was not undertaken as the method of collection has not significantly changed and therefore it is not a substantial alteration to the existing service. However, testing has shown that the empty bags weigh less than the current boxes so will be easier to handle. The assisted collection service will continue as well as providing advice for residents who may have specific issues. I am therefore confident that these new containers are very convenient, practicable and in some ways easier to use for those who are elderly or have a disability.

Supplementary Question

I would like to ask a question about specific disabilities. I am affected by severe arthritis and my hands are quite disfigured and becoming more disfigured. I cannot open velcro things and so am not quite sure how people in my situation, I do have an assisted collection, would actually get stuff in the bag and be able to hold the lid open in the plastic bags while you put something in it? Could you answer that for my Parry please?

Supplementary Answer

Velcro is easy to open of that I am pretty certain. Are you experiencing difficulties with velcro? We can take it off line if you would like and discuss this personal problem off line if you like?

The Leader of Council stated:

Consistent with what we always do Beth we will try to discover if we have any residents who need help and if that help needs to change as a consequence of that change. We have always done so in the past and we shall continue to do so in the future.

16.3 Ian Shenton asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

How do you know that you'll be getting value for money when procuring the sacks as the procurement process is being handled by Veolia?

Answer

It is a very good question and the answer is very simply that the contract works on a number of key criteria including transparency and partnership working. Wokingham Borough Council would see all the prices which are paid and ensure we are getting best value on all the containers that we purchase through the contract. Our contractor Veolia, who we have been dealing with for some time, has significant procurement influence in the container markets to help the Council achieve best value and timescales for delivery.

However in this case, as this is a new container, Officers have been particularly diligent to ensure best value including testing other options through its own Procurement Team.

An additional advantage of utilising Veolia is that the management of risk lies with them so in the unlikely event of an issue it will be Veolia to be liable for and resolve rather than the Council doing it

The Leader of Council stated:

Given the urgency of, and the delay that we have in putting the order, therefore our procurement and expediting people are also shadowing Veolia and are trying to see what other sources exist for the same product. So we have got a very good idea of what the market price is.

Supplementary Question

Veolia will need to have been given a specification for the sacks to facilitate the procurement process which would have needed to include disposal plans. The disposal of this kind of sack concerns me as although they are technically recyclable it is not an easy process and only 1% of them are recycled in the UK. What has the Council requested in the specification with regards to disposal of these sacks and where could I view the whole specification document?

Supplementary Answer

We have been advised by our consultants that there are a number of authorities using these bags. They are perfectly recyclable and our specification was that we wanted to ensure that we recycle them once they have come to the end of their life and we have been assured that they are recyclable and they will be.

16.4 Mike Smith asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

I note from the agenda for this meeting that the purpose is to discuss and approve the expenditure of £288,000 on the purchase of close-able, waterproof recycling bags as a replacement of the currently used, open, hard plastic boxes. This is to mitigate against wet paper waste. I also note this purchase would result in a commitment to an additional £235,000 annual costs.

I have 4 years' experience of these types of weighted, waste segregated bags as currently used by Cornwall County Council where the County average for recycling is just 25.2% according to their website in January 2020. Currently many of these plastic sacks are tatty, they do blow around in relatively modest winds despite being weighted and the lid fastenings are not particularly functional in keeping water out.

I note from the Enclosure One document that the appraisal has been entirely desk based and includes a highly subjective and complex model. For example, the first (and most influential) criteria in the model is "Impact on recycling rates" with a weighting of 40% – You have scored the plastic sacks at 10 but only 6 for shower caps and lids – in my mind, there is no difference as all three do exactly the same in keeping the rain out. The rest of the model is equally open to criticism.

There is a comment in the main document that Monmouthshire Council has trialled them for a year on page 10. Actually it is less than 9 months and your report does not say it is

only on just 2,000 households - therefore the comments on page 11 of your report about replacement cycles compared with black boxes is entirely invalid and misleading. And they have not been implemented across that whole County.

Please can you explain how you justify to the residents of Wokingham, not doing any practical trials with the residents before spending over a quarter of a million pounds in capital with additional annual costs of £235,000 as the business case is not, to my mind, as a retired technical auditor, comprehensive, robust and compelling?

Answer

I note the comparison between Wokingham and Cornwall in regard to recycling rates. The collection arrangements in Cornwall are very different to our own and they have three different receptacles; while we only have one. They have three separate recycling materials as compared to our single receptacle. We aim to make recycling as easy as possible for our residents and this is likely the reason why our current recycling rate is double that of Cornwall. If I may add they are not made out of hessian they are polypropylene material and very recyclable. Hessian I think was bandied around some time ago as a generic name but they are not hessian they are polypropylene.

The Officers have used the Monmouthshire Council trial and there are 3,000 properties, not what you said, which if you give each house two bags that is 6,000 bags and it is a new product over 12 months to inform the recommendation to proceed with the recycling bags. Feedback from Monmouthshire residents was positive including that the waterproof bag was robust, reduces the impact on the environment and is convenient. In addition to these the Council has found that the paper and card material remains dry, and that is the whole point of employing these bags, and the collection crews find the system very, very, straightforward.

The bags have been assessed against other options of a shower cap and lids for the current boxes which has been informed by other Councils' findings and the consultant's considerable expert knowledge and experience. Officers have also fully tested the proposed bags to ensure that they are waterproof.

Therefore I am confident that the proposed bags have been fully considered against other options and are the best short-term solution to wet waste to both save the Council a large amount of money and to increase our recycling.

The consultant's report and the Council's own experience are clear that wet paper would cost Wokingham Borough Council £600k per annum in lost recycling income. This would affect our recycling rate by 6% per annum therefore undermining the climate change commitment to reach 70% recycling by 2030. Further, as I said, the Cornwall comparison is not really valid.

Supplementary Question

What will you do if this £288k worth of capital expenditure fails to realise the £13k per week your report says it is going to produce in initial income? It does not work.

Supplementary Answer

We have done a great deal of work on this Mr Smith and we have found that if we do not do anything we are going to keep losing £600k per year in lost recycling income and we are confident that having spent that money we will be saving something like just over £400k per year.

The Leader of Council stated:

It does not actually say that we are going to make £13k per week. We have a problem and the problem is that it is not of our own making. We launched food waste 18 months ago and that has been enormously successful and in the wake of that we bought a new fleet of vehicles so it was an expensive change but it has been a very, very, successful change. Thereafter we thought that our black bins, which everyone seems to be happy with, and blue bags, which everyone seems to be happy with in the short term, was going to be a medium term solution.

However, the Chinese in their infinite wisdom decided that they would stop being the recycling centre of the world and therefore the market changed and the recyclers, or the secondary recyclers, got more picky and all of a sudden last winter started rejecting our, and our partners', batches. That caused us, Wokingham Borough Council, a cost of approximately £600k per year. The available solutions to that problem are not obvious and none of the solutions are perfect. Clearly the most immediate solution was to buy lids for our boxes but the people who collect the rubbish said this would be a nightmare because we will be chasing lids all over the streets and particularly on windy and wet days. It would not work for us and would actually take longer. So we then went through a consulting exercise through a third party, who presumably is an expert, to supplement our expertise of our Officers which is considerable. On balance they have recommended this solution.

You and everybody else can criticise line 3 of page 40 of the report until the cows come home but we recognise that it is a compromise and we recognise that we have taken the best advice from our Officers, who strongly recommend it, and a third party. We have to in our current constrained circumstances do something about £600k going down the drain. We do not have unlimited financial resources. Covid has hit our profit and loss and balance sheet very hard and it had to and we are in a recovery situation.

So we just have to do something and anybody who is impeding us doing it is actually working against the public interest and I ask all the Lib Dems, like yourself Mike because you and Caroline get two bites of the cherry because you are married, to support us on this and recognise that there is no perfect solution for the predicament that we are in currently and that is why we have taken so much advice.

17. MEMBER QUESTION TIME

In accordance with the agreed procedure the Chairman invited Members to submit questions to the appropriate Members

17.1 Gary Cowan had asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question but as he was unable to attend the meeting the following written response was provided:**Question**

Can you confirm that the Council's preferred option is a container, dimensions 40 x 40 x 60 cm with 350g rubber weights for stability?

Answer

Yes that is correct, the bags can hold approximately 65 litres of recycling which is bigger than the existing recycling 55 litre boxes. Testing showed that three kilogrammes per bag can be accommodated which is more weight than what we are currently collecting in the

boxes and the Monmouthshire case study has demonstrated that the weighted bag is stable so not to blow away.

17.2 Sarah Kerr asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

It has been highlighted that there are serious flaws in the options appraisal that could materially change the outcome of the report. Why is this same options appraisal still being used when it's clearly flawed?

Answer

Your question is not specific, nor does it cite an example either. However, based on your question at Overview and Scrutiny on 26 August I think I can maybe wrongly deduce that this is around the 'write-off' and the lifespan of the respective containers. Given that the Scrutiny Committee supported the recommendations of the report, I am a little bit unclear how you can make this assertion.

I can confirm that the life expectancy of the bags is five years as per the manufacturers testing and delivery experience. They anticipate a lifespan more than this, but this depends on how you look after them as well, but have identified a prudent timeframe. They can last for many years and this certainly reflects Wokingham's experience with the garden waste bags pre 2012 that lasted well beyond the five years and it is expected that this solution will also last beyond 2026 if required. But if you can be a bit more specific with your question I can ask the Officers to produce a written response to you if that helps?

Supplementary Question

I have a further question but will just provide a couple of examples which I provided at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. So one of the things actually relates to the question Mr Johnson asked earlier. It actually states in the report that the replacement rates for sacks, when working out the financial side of things, is 7.5% which equates to 13.3 years. So the finances of this and the weighting on that was based on these sacks having that kind of replacement rate. Clearly it is not right and that could have a material effect on the outcome.

Another example is the capacity of sacks is modelled on 90 litres when we are actually taking 60 litres and given that there is no limit to the number of boxes or sacks that people are allowed actually why is capacity even part of the weighting anyway when people can have as much capacity as they want. So that is just two examples but I can provide you with more and I can provide those in writing.

The other question I wanted to ask, that comes out of this, is that the problem of wet waste has been known about for about a year now by this Council, since last autumn. So it is a year to find a solution and lids, as we said earlier, were identified early on as a possible solution and they were going to be trialled in two wards at the beginning of 2020. At the call-in we were told that the trial did not happen in case the solution did not work. But that is the whole point of a trial to find out if a solution does or does not work and there are a lot of assumptions in this business case that need to be tested as many of them are quite off the wall, particularly with residents and how they are going to react to it. Doing a trial would have been an obvious step to take for any fiscally responsible organisation so the question that comes out of it is why given that you have had a year has the proposed solution not been trialled in Wokingham Borough?

Supplementary Answer

We wanted to get the best possible advice and our Officers, very experienced Officers, were set about finding a solution and we interviewed about four consultants and one was appointed who was very experienced. They have extensive experience in recommending this particular bag to other authorities so the trial was in many ways their vast experience. When we compared the bags with the boxes with the lids and the shower caps this option was very, very, cost effective and very effective in keeping our waste dry and that was the whole objective. So trialling using other authorities that were actually using the bags so it was prudent to actually look for that very expert advice and we did and here we are. We had to go through a number of hoops to actually appoint the consultant, then they were appointed, then we issued them with a very thorough business case and they have come up with this best solution. Here we are now to actually approve tonight, hopefully, the purchase of these bags and the funding which was already earmarked on 30 July.

If you do want to give me a detailed question by all means do so and I will make sure that you get a written answer.

17.3 Clive Jones asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

In the options report it states that only one additional vehicle and crew is needed when the plastic hessian sack option is followed and that if the other two options were followed then two vehicles and crews would be needed. Where is the evidence for this? There is no supporting evidence in the options report.

Answer

In parallel with the work undertaken by the consultants Officers conducted further research with the collection contractor Veolia. This centred on the time taken to empty and return the three options included in the report. These discussions highlighted that it would take approximately three seconds extra for the bags to be emptied. As is, the boxes take on average about six seconds per property to empty and return. It was modelled that the bags would take nine seconds which would mean an additional 40 hours of work per week to cover which equates to an additional vehicle and a crew. The same modelling was applied to the lids and shower caps and this showed that the additional time would exceed the 40 hours and therefore would require two extra vehicles.

Now I refer to the financial section of the report. The cost of one additional vehicle, crew, maintenance etc. is costed at about £235k. Overall, the implementation of this proposed system will avoid a budget impact of £403k per annum and this accounts for the additional vehicle. If we did nothing, and this has been discussed before, then the impact on the budget would equate to £600k per annum due to the wet waste issue.

Supplementary Question

My question was where is the evidence for this shouldn't it be before you? I know that you have said that the modelling has been done by Veolia and our Officers but shouldn't this be in the pack that you are looking at tonight and would you agree that if the extra three seconds is wrong and it is an extra five or six seconds then the extra cost to the Council would be another £235k?

Supplementary Answer

I think that the amount of work that the Officers have put in with Veolia trying to work out the actual time it would take to empty a box and to empty a bag has been thoroughly tested and I am pretty confident that it will not take more than nine seconds.

17.4 Paul Fishwick asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

Looking at Table 1 (pages 23 and 24) in the Wet Waste Options Appraisal (Appendix 1), could you tell me how these authorities collect paper and card, when they introduced this system and what impact it has had on recycling rates?

Answer provided by the Leader of Council

I am afraid that we are going to have to give you a written answer as the question came in very late. It is such a detailed question that Officers have not been able to research those questions.

17.5 Prue Bray asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

Monmouth County Council in their trial of plastic hessian sacks are separating the collection of paper card etc. and cans, plastic bottles, yoghurt pots etc. into different coloured sacks. Stopping co-mingling like this considerably reduces the chances of contamination. Given that one of the problems which the Council has had is the inability to separate plastic from wet paper in co-mingled recycling, it is surprising that there does not appear to be any consideration of stopping co-mingling in the options considered in Wokingham. Why was this not looked at?

Answer

The Council has collected recycling co-mingled since 2008 and as such when the collection service was retendered it was asked to be continued to be collected in this way to ensure that recycling is as easy as possible for our residents to encourage them to take part. The Council's bespoke split bodied vehicles collecting blue bags and mixed dry recycling in the same vehicle at the same time can still be used as with the bags and adopting a non-comingled method of collection would require a new fleet of vehicles at considerable cost to the Council.

In addition, by utilising the bags the paper material will remain dry and therefore there will not be a contamination issue due to wet paper. Therefore, there is no need to collect the respective materials separately.

Given the possible implications of the Government's Waste and Resources Strategy, comingling of recycling is something that will have to be looked at ahead of the next collection contract retendering in 2026.

Supplementary Question

So you are using Monmouth as a case study in this report but among the questions that remain unanswered about Monmouth are whether the sacks made any difference to their recycling rates and how long it takes for the bin men to collect the sacks? One question that has been answered is that Monmouth have been conducting a trial, and are going to

go on conducting a trial, for another year whilst you have decided not to conduct a trial. How can you justify using Monmouth to support your decision when either you do not know the answers to the questions which are relevant or have decided to ignore them?

Supplementary Answer

I think that the experts know better. Monmouth is a model example and we have that evidence to make that decision and I think it will work in Wokingham.

The Leader of Council stated:

I think I would add Prue that as you know we have a consultant engaged in trying to map our future in terms of recycling and waste collection. We are in the middle of a contract. We have just bought a series of vehicles which were designed for what we thought to be the existing case.

17.6 Caroline Smith asked the Executive Member for Environment and Leisure the following question:

Question

When reading the supporting documents into the rationale of buying the plastic sacks it states that they will result in a 6% improvement in recycling rates and an extra 1.5% as the bags are bigger. This is based on an assumption that people, having no room in their black boxes, are putting extra recycling into blue bags. Where is the evidence for this currently happening, which can be accurately determined as 1.5% not being recycled?

Answer

To clarify first of all, if nothing was done to mitigate the wet paper issue, then the loss of recycling I think is about 6% off the current recycling rate which would come down from 54% to 48%.

It is evident from the blue bag (that you mentioned) compositional analysis of what is thrown away that good recyclate is being disposed of and every item needs to be captured in order to meet our climate change and recycling objectives. The proposed bag will help divert material from disposal to recycling as it is bigger than the current box. Furthermore, there will be a comprehensive educational campaign to detail what can be recycled and to prevent good material from going to waste in the blue bags, which will assist with this diversion.

Additionally, tests of the proposed bags with the recyclables inside has shown the extra space allows for more material than presented in the current boxes. Due to this it has been calculated that an extra 1.5% of material will be collected which will help drive up our recycling rates even further which is great news, I am sure you will agree. We encourage all residents to recycle and each household will receive two bags and if required bigger households can opt for more bags.

Supplementary Question

You did not quite actually tell me where the evidence for this 1.5% of the stuff that was put into the blue bag was coming from?

Supplementary Answer

Looking at the blue bag the compositional analysis of the blue bags has shown that there is a lot of additional stuff that is going in the blue bags which should really be in the recycling boxes.

18. PROPOSAL TO MITIGATE AGAINST WET PAPER

The Executive considered a report setting out a proposal to roll out waterproof recycling bags, to replace the current open black recycling boxes, to mitigate against the problem of wet paper and card.

When introducing the report the Executive Member for the Environment reminded Members of the reasons why the report was being considered, which included the changes that had occurred in the global recycling markets which meant that wet paper products were no longer accepted for recycling. Because paper products were currently collected in an open box, and were therefore subject to becoming wet, much of the material collected since last winter had required to be disposed of at a greater cost. Not only was this costing approximately £600k per annum but had a negative impact on the Council's overall recycling rate of about 6%.

Councillor Batth reiterated that it was proposed to supply every household in the Borough with a reusable waterproof bag in which to store and present all recyclable materials, including paper and card.

Members were also reminded of the process that had been followed to get to this stage of the process which included approval of the funds to implement the solution on 30 July. This decision was subsequently called-in and considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee on 26 August. Following consideration of the matter the Committee supported the Executive's decision. Tonight consideration was being given to the procurement and use of the waterproof bags for subsequent implementation.

Councillor Dolinski mentioned that in the business case it stated that the unwanted black boxes would be collected however no costs were shown for the disposal of these boxes. He queried therefore what the financial implication was and how much had been factored into the projected savings or gain of £403k? Councillor Batth confirmed that it was estimated that the cost of collection and disposal of the black boxes would be approximately £28k and this had already been taken into account in this year's budget; which was why no mention had been made in the financial implications of the report. Councillor Batth advised that the intention was to recycle the boxes and turn them into benches which would include the names of some of those residents who had unfortunately passed away due to Covid-19.

The Leader of the Council advised that what was being proposed was an interim solution as the Council would be considering its long term waste and recycling strategy. To this end Councillor Halsall advised that he would be inviting Liberal Democrat members to get involved with this ambitious project which he expected to lead to radical changes to the current process.

RESOLVED that:

- 1) the sum of £288k for the purchase of the waterproof recycling bags be approved;
- 2) the support of the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee to the resolution made by the Executive at its meeting on 30 July 2020 be noted and;
- 3) the proposed change for the recycling container from open black box to a closable waterproof recycling bag by the end of January 2021 be approved.