

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL AUDIT AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTE of Meeting of the AUDIT AND
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE held via Microsoft
Teams on Thursday, 3 June 2021 at 10.00
am

Present:- Councillors S. Bell (Chairman), H. Anderson, J.A. Fullarton, J. Greenwell,
N. Richards, E. Robson H. Scott and S. Scott.

Apologies:- Councillor E. Thornton-Nicol

In Attendance:- Service Director Assets & Infrastructure, Clerk to the Council, Democratic
Services Officer (F. Walling).

SCRUTINY BUSINESS

1. **MINUTE.**

There had been circulated copies of the Minute of the Meeting held on 10 May 2021.

DECISION

APPROVED for signature by the Chairman.

2. **RECYCLING AND WASTE POLICY UPDATE**

2.1 There had been circulated copies of report by the Service Director, Assets & Infrastructure providing an update on the effectiveness of the Council's Recycling and Waste Policies. The report was presented by Mr Ross Sharp-Dent, the Council's Waste Manager, who gave a summary of the comprehensive report and accompanying appendices. In his introduction, Mr Sharp-Dent explained that over the last two decades there had been a significant change in the way we view and manage waste. We were moving away from a throwaway society, where materials were discarded, towards more sustainable practices where materials were re-used or recycled. In Scotland this change had largely been driven by National Waste Policy targets and legislative measures, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report. In response to the various drivers, Scottish Borders Council had delivered a number of significant service changes as set out in Appendix 2 to the report. The report itself summarised the Council's current service provision. Statutory kerbside collection services were delivered to around 59,000 households, with recycling material and general waste being collected from all households and food waste from approximately 25,000 households. The Council also provided a non-statutory trade waste service on a commercial basis; a bulky uplift Service (non-statutory); 7 Community Recycling Centres (statutory); 74 Recycling Points (only the provision of glass banks being statutory); and Waste Transfer Stations (statutory). Historically the Council had managed the disposal of waste itself at various landfills. However, as the Council had increased the quantity of materials that it recycled it had put in arrangements with third party providers to treat its waste. The report highlighted the significant impact on waste services as a result of the COVID19 pandemic, although the full impact was not yet fully understood. Initial analysis indicated a 40% increase in glass, 12% increase in general waste and increased contamination of kerbside recycling, the increases likely to be due to people staying in their homes. Ultimately the pandemic increased collection and disposal costs and reduced trade waste income.

2.2 The report went on to provide details of the Council's performance compared with other Councils. Scottish Borders Council achieved the single biggest recycling increase of any local authority in Scotland between 2018 and 2019, ensuring we were now recycling more than the national average (44.9%). Scottish Borders Council was the highest performing Council in terms of recycling performance, when compared to local authorities with similar

rural characteristics. It was clear from the data presented that there were a lot positives to be taken from the Performance of the Councils Waste Service. This included: increasing recycling rates; reducing landfill rates; reducing carbon emissions; low numbers of missed collections; high satisfaction levels; and relatively low service provision costs. However there were areas that required improvement including the large quantity of potentially recyclable material that remained in the general waste bin i.e 70%; the increasing levels of contamination in kerbside recycling i.e. 25%; and the long term viability of the bulky uplift service. The report summarised the next steps as the Council strived to deliver a waste service that was fit for purpose and was both financially and environmentally sustainable in the long term. Service reviews would be undertaken over the coming months and years to improve performance and respond to national policy/regulation. It would be of particular importance to investigate the options to increase participation in Council services and incentivise residents to 'play their part'. Areas to consider would include: further education and awareness campaigns; a Council Recycling Policy or Charter to define respective roles and responsibilities of Council and Householders; and a robust kerbside collection contamination policy. Also to be given consideration would be the reduction of the capacity of residual waste bins and the wider roll out of the food waste collection service. It was important to recognise that significant further action was required if the Council was to achieve the Scottish Government's aspirational municipal recycling target of 70% by 2025.

- 2.3 Members thanked Mr Sharp-Dent for the comprehensive update. They also asked for their appreciation to be passed to his team, who they said should be commended for keeping the kerbside collection service in operation throughout the pandemic. They recognised the challenge of delivering these essential services and commented that the staff involved and other staff who had been redeployed in order to maintain service provision were the 'forgotten' frontline workers during the crisis. In terms of the detail of the report, Mr Sharp-Dent was asked a specific question about the criteria for allowing householders to present their waste for collection in sacks rather than in bins. Members commented that in certain streets in Borders' towns, for example Magdala Terrace in Galashiels, householders were unable to take bins into their properties and that this resulted in a permanent unsightly conglomeration of bins which very often also caused obstruction to pavements. Mr Sharp-Dent explained that there was no set criteria but that the preference was to provide bins in order to minimise manual handling. However he accepted that some housing stock was not designed for bins and recognised the challenges in some areas. He offered to set up a meeting with the Galashiels Councillors to discuss the situation in Magdala Terrace. In response to a question about Covid19 restrictions and at what stage in the relaxation of restrictions CRC staff would again be able to assist customers and the additional manning required for kerbside collections would be reduced, Mr Sharp-Dent could not give an exact stage, explaining that the approach was risk-based and, as with other authorities, was based on Waste Industry Safety and Health Forum guidance. With regard to dealing with "missed collection" enquiries, Mr Sharp-Dent advised that, based on recent feedback from Members about contact with advisors, the response has been amended to give a less ambiguous message. It was noted however that the total number of missed collections in 2020 represented the equivalent of 0.07% collections being missed.
- 2.4 With reference to the Council's decision in 2015 to close the landfill site at Easter Langlee, Galashiels and enter into a new residual waste contract, Members agreed that, notwithstanding the fact that this decision had been made to ensure compliance with the ban on biodegradable waste going to landfill from 2025, it would be useful to be provided with the comparative costs of dealing with waste before and after closure of the landfill site. Discussion continued on the challenge faced by the service in that, unlike in the past, its continuing effectiveness was dependent on the behaviour of service users in terms of increasing recycling and reducing contamination. In response to a question about methods of communication and interaction with the public, Mr Sharp-Dent explained that the current emphasis was on encouraging people to more effectively use the existing service - as there was significant scope for improvement – for example in one Borders

town the recycling rate was 17% compared with another where it was at 60%. The Council was looking at ways of improving effectiveness and clarity of the “contamination hangers” which were placed on bins to explain why the bins had not been lifted and there was also pressure to reduce the capacity of general waste bins. Although there was a limitation on what a single local authority could do, the Council was working closely with Zero Waste Scotland on ways of raising public awareness about which bin a particular material should be placed. Scottish Government had recently announced a £70 million fund to improve local authority collection infrastructure. In recognition that the main contaminant was food waste, Scottish Borders Council could explore expanding the food waste collection service with additional funding, which would tie into long term aims of the policy drivers within Scotland. Members commented that communication should be by education and encouragement rather than through penalties and that Local Authorities were in a position to reach a large proportion of households by effective communication through schools and the care at home service.

- 2.5 The Chairman thanked Mr Sharp-Dent and his team for the update and Members discussed their recommendations. Councillor Anderson, seconded by Councillor Greenwell, asked to receive a report in 3 months to give an update on progress on communications with the public to encourage a reduction in contamination of waste. Councillor Harry Scott, seconded by Councillor Richards, asked for comparative costs for the Council to be provided for processing waste before and after landfill was closed in the Borders. Both recommendations were agreed and Members’ thanks to staff was noted.

DECISION

AGREED:

- (a) **that thanks were due to all staff in Waste Services for their diligent attendance to duties, particularly over the period of the pandemic;**
- (b) **that the Service Director Assets & Infrastructure provide a report to the Audit & Scrutiny Committee, in 3 months, to provide an update on progress on communications with the public to encourage a reduction in contamination of waste; and**
- (c) **that comparative costs for the Council be provided for processing waste before and after landfill was closed in the Borders.**

3. URGENT BUSINESS

Under Section 50B(4)(b) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, the Chairman was of the opinion that the item dealt with in the following paragraph should be considered at the meeting as a matter of urgency, in view of the need to keep Members informed.

Scrutiny Work Programme

The Clerk to the Council agreed to the Chairman’s request for an update of the list and timescale of Scrutiny items to be provided at the next meeting of the Audit & Scrutiny Committee. The Chairman also referred to a question raised at a previous meeting about the definition of a Community School. Miss Wilkinson agreed to arrange for this question to be addressed and the information provided.

DECISION

NOTED

The meeting concluded at 11.25 a.m.