

County Council – 17 December 2021

Item 13(a) – Notice of Motion by Cllr McGregor

Food Waste Collection – Briefing Note

The latest West Sussex household waste composition analysis undertaken in October 2021 shows that, on average by weight, food waste makes up 40% of the contents of residents' non-recyclable bins. Studies elsewhere in the UK in 2020 concluded that food wasted by households declined during lockdown periods. The latest West Sussex analysis shows levels in line with the previous pre-Covid study in 2018.

12.3% of the total black bag waste analysed from random (and unattributable to any particular household) samples comprised 'non-edible' food waste – things like vegetable peelings, teabags, eggshells and bones. The remaining 27.7% comprised food that was potentially edible prior to disposal.

The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) calculated in 2020 that the cost of wasted food to a household is over £700 per annum for an average family with children. The environmental impact of food waste is also significant, not just due to the cost of disposal but also given the amount of carbon and water used in production and transport.

More than a third of collection authorities already collect food waste at kerbside and studies have shown that the implementation of a separate food waste collection can result in a drop of as much as 24% of overall food waste.

Food waste collected separately can be processed effectively through anaerobic digestion – a process that uses naturally occurring bacteria to break down the food waste to methane, compositionally similar to natural gas. This can be used in a number of ways as a renewable fuel: combusted to generate electricity, injected into the gas grid, or through emerging technology used to generate hydrogen. The solid fraction left, known as 'digestate' is suitable to be applied to agricultural land to improve organic content and as a source of nutrients.

The waste reduction effect of separate food waste collection, combined with the removal of the separately collected food from the residual 'black bag' stream reduces the total weight – and cost, of material for disposal.

In 2018 the Government announced that it intended to consult on placing a duty on local authorities to collect plastic, glass, metal, paper and card, garden and food waste from all households. This proposal was well supported, including by the West Sussex Waste Partnership, in the initial consultation exercise in 2019. The duty is now set out in the Environment Act 2021 but without an 'implement by' date.

Adding food waste collection – even with a reduced frequency of residual waste collection – is an added cost to collection authorities. There will be additional costs to the County Council to make arrangements to process food waste separately, but it is likely that some savings will also accrue as a combination of the measures and impacts described above. A report is being prepared on the options and implications for the County Council to process food waste for member consideration. This will be brought to the Communities, Highways and Environment Scrutiny Committee, in the New Year.

The Government recognised that the duty would place new burdens on councils and indicated it would provide resources to support implementation. The Government's Net Zero Strategy published in October 2021 committed £295m of capital to this but no further detail has been provided on the scope, extent and allocation of support. The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has stated that further details will be forthcoming in early 2022 and it is hoped that the details will include timeframes for the duty to be exercised by councils not already collecting food waste.

The County Council, in anticipating the duty, offered support to district and borough councils wishing to trial a new model of waste collection including separate food waste. Arun District Council commenced a 1-2-3 trial in April 2021 under a joint project team with the County Council and Mid Sussex District Council has this month approved a similar trial to commence in 2022. The objective has not so much been to prove the viability of food waste collections as these are well established and observable in many parts of the UK. The main aim is to evaluate the impact of a combination of weekly food waste and separate collection of absorbent hygiene products with a three weekly residual collection system. The recycling service stays at a fortnightly frequency. Results and participation rates in Arun have been very encouraging. A survey carried out in November 2021 indicated more than three quarters of residents in the trial area were satisfied with the new collection scheme. A full report is due to be received by Arun members in January 2022.

How the scheme would perform at a district-wide level cannot be extrapolated from the results of a limited trial. However, from a base of circa 42%, the indicative recycling rate is likely to exceed the 55% government target for 2025 and may exceed 60%.

Partners are agreed that the approach to full rollout of food waste collection must be co-ordinated to ensure that there is sufficient processing capacity provided by the County Council. However, the County Council needs to have a reasonable degree of certainty about when separate food waste will start arriving in order to avoid extra costs that would occur during transition to the new system.

Understandably, districts and boroughs are cautious about setting a date without clarity around the financial support to be made available by the Government.

Introduction of food waste collection offers an opportunity for councils in West Sussex to work together to further improve the efficiency and effectiveness of household waste management in the county and improve climate change outcomes. Clarification of timeframes and resources from the Government is needed to plan for the rollout of the new duty.

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