

Report on: Waste collection discussion forum

Background

The council's current waste collection contract is about to run out. The refuse vehicles are in need of repair/replacement. The council has a commitment through the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and a Government requirement to drive down waste and increase recycling.

A discussion forum on the future of waste collection in Herefordshire was launched through the local press on 22 May 2008. People were asked through an advertisement in the Hereford Times for their views on the Council's proposal to keep weekly black bag collection of refuse alongside a fortnightly collection of mixed recyclables in a wheeled bin.

Respondents could contact the council via the 'Have your say' consultation pages on the website, or through the front office 'Info by phone' route, or directly to the waste services manager via email/telephone.

In the second week of the discussion period a different advertisement was employed focusing on the council's need to increase its recycling rate from 30% to 40%, but again encouraging people to take part in the interactive 'Online Discussion Forum' or calling an advisor in Info by Phone.

More media coverage then led to a third advertisement being used, and an extension of the discussion period up to 10 July.

There were approximately 500 inputs into the discussion.

Overview of responses

There was never an intention to make this a quantitative survey; it was an opportunity for people to express their views about council proposals before the council draws up the specification for a new waste collection contract.

'Online Discussion Forum'/website responses

There were several comments that people are happy with the current system so why change.

For those who commented on the suggestion of keeping a weekly collection of residual refuse, the majority were in favour. Some, who said they did not produce much refuse would be happy with alternate weekly collection, but for many fortnightly collection they believed would encourage vermin and create smells.

The use of black bags for weekly collection had rather mixed responses, many being concerned about the bags adding to the material going to landfill and therefore desiring that the bags be made from biodegradable material. Other issues included the problem with animals tearing open the bags once they have been presented for collection, and for some the litter problem when the empty bags are blown about. Some would like bulk delivery of bags.

The use of wheelie bins for mixed recyclables also received a mixed response, those 'against' citing: loss in value of 'contaminated' recycled materials; storage and access problems; unsightliness if wheelie bins have to be stored at the front of properties;

potential vandalism; cost; difficulties that may be encountered by older, disabled and vulnerable people.

Responses also indicated the Ross-on Wye 'blue-box' scheme is held in very great esteem and that it is hoped that alternative employment is found for EnviroAbility employees.

There were several suggestions for 'rigid containers' for glass recycling, rather than wheelie bins.

The majority of those not currently on a kerbside collection round would be glad to be included in the new scheme, although some are content to use household waste/bring sites.

For those who considered wheelie bins as a means of collecting residual waste, fears were expressed about bins being 'chipped', possibly leading to differing council tax demands for those producing too much waste or not recycling enough.

Other concerns expressed focussed on green waste disposal and the cost of green bags that then go to landfill, and improvement of household waste sites.

Info by phone

As with the on-line discussion the majority of people think collecting residual waste weekly is the right thing to do. Most would also prefer to keep the black bag system as opposed to a wheeled bin, but comments again centred on using biodegradable bags if possible.

About half the telephone respondents would be happy to have a fortnightly collection of mixed recyclables, with fewer people wanting a wheelie bin for this purpose.

Opposition to wheeled bins centred around access, unsightliness, and older/disabled people not being able to physically handle the bins or move them to kerbside.

Where other comments were noted people expressed pleasure with the current scheme, especially 'blue-box' recycling.

Contact with the waste services manager

In addition to the Online Discussion Forum and telephone messages, Richard Wood received messages via emails direct to him and ethelpline. There were 37 in total.

There was a clear majority in favour of a weekly collection, a majority in favour of keeping with the existing black sack collections and also a majority against the introduction of wheeled bins. Interestingly, the main objections to wheeled bins were difficulty of access, long drives and difficulties for the elderly whilst one of the respondents had experience of wheeled bins in Torbay and commented that it worked well even though it was hilly, residents were elderly and they were in favour of wheeled bins.

The way forward

It should be noted that approximately 500 people contributed to this discussion and there are ~80,000 households in Herefordshire.

Respondents were also limited to those who read the Hereford Times or the Hereford Journal and have access to the internet or a telephone.

Respondents were not offered a range of choices for waste collection but were asked to comment on proposals put forward by the council.

Whilst the results of this discussion are interesting, it should be recognised that often people do not have an opinion until actually faced by the reality of a situation. Once the council has decided on the specification for the new waste collection contract, and change is imminent, there may be much greater interest and concern around specific issues.

What the discussion has highlighted is the need for a public relations programme and continuous communications around the future of waste, in order for people to have fears allayed and customers to know the council does listen to them.

The 'frequently asked questions' should be publicised widely and modified over time as new significant questions arise.