

Somerset Waste Board meeting
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Report for information

Recycle More Lessons Learned

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Summary:	The Recycle More service was introduced to 260,000 plus residential properties between October 2020 and July 2022. This was achieved despite the considerable challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The lessons learned from this large scale service change are captured in this report and may assist future projects of this kind.
Recommendations:	That the Somerset Waste Board notes the lessons learned.
Reasons for recommendations:	Recycle More is the most significant element of our Business Plan, given the environmental and financial benefits it delivers to all partners. The lessons learned through its introduction should inform future work and service change.
Links to Priorities and Impact on Annual Business Plan:	Action 3.1 of the Business Plan 2021-27 concerns the implementation of Recycle More. All partners have declared climate emergencies and the environmental benefit from Recycle More has an important part to play in responding to environmental concerns.
Financial, Legal and HR Implications:	Recycle More has achieved break even earlier than anticipated, see Financial outturn and use of balances 21/22 report. Additional temporary staff were employed to support the roll-out.
Equalities Implications:	An impact assessment on Recycle More was maintained and updated as the project progressed.
Risk Assessment:	The residential element of Recycle More is now 'business as usual'. Recycle More expanded collections were rolled-out to schools in October 2022 and are bedding in. Risks to the ongoing delivery of these services include a very challenging labour market (notably the underlying national driver shortage) and potential Covid-related absence which add to service fragility.

1. Background

1. Background to Recycle More

On 29 March 2019 the Somerset Waste Board chose SUEZ Recycling and Recovery UK as the preferred bidder for Somerset's waste collection contract. The Recycle More service was introduced to more than 260,000 houses over four phases. This started in Mendip in October 2020 and concluded in Sedgemoor and West Somerset in June/July 2022. Being the biggest change to recycling in Somerset for more than a decade, this was a major operational and behaviour change project.

Recycle More added the following materials to weekly kerbside recycling collections:

- Plastic pots, tubs and trays.
- Food and beverage cartons (e.g. Tetra Paks).
- Small household electricals (e.g. a kettle or toaster).
- Household batteries.

A new container – a 60litre weighted 'Bright Blue Bag' – was delivered to all households to provide extra capacity. Refuse collections moved from fortnightly to once every three weeks for mainline domestic properties. Neither schools nor communal properties saw changes to their rubbish collection frequency.

2. Impacts of Recycle More on refuse/rubbish and recycling

As mentioned in previous reports, isolating the impact of the new service on waste tonnages has been greatly complicated by the pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions. The phased nature of the roll-out adds another layer of complexity. The longer the service is in place, the clearer the long-term trends will be.

However, the indications are that Recycle More has reduced refuse/rubbish by around 20%.

The picture for recycling is more complicated. Increases in plastic and other materials are to some extent offset by reductions in paper and textiles. However, the net result is a notable increase in recycling at the same time as the reduction in refuse/residual waste. The arrival of Recycle More correlates with increases in the weights of many recycled materials. In the case of plastic, significantly increased weights.

Most importantly, average total arisings have fallen by around 500 tonnes per week - around 15% - as the decrease in refuse outstrips the increase in total recycling. This reduction in overall waste is a win-win: less waste is being generated and a greater proportion of what is generated is going to recycling.

3. Lessons learned

The introduction of Recycle More has been a significant achievement, particularly given the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. SWP approached this as a behaviour change project – recognising that to deliver the benefits we needed the public to change their behaviour as a result of the service change. This change in emphasis is considered to have been critical to enabling us to realise the benefits, and will be an approach we continue to take forward where appropriate.

It has helped Somerset’s recycling rate climb to 57.3% - its highest rate on record. Given the scale of the change and the potential sensitivities of three weekly refuse collections, the vast majority of residents appear to have been well-informed and enthused about the new service. The combination of a ‘carrot’ (more recycling) and a ‘stick’ (less frequent residual waste collection) was crucial in enabling us to realise the benefits, and where possible this will inform planning for future major changes.

A survey of Mendip residents, carried out five months after launch, reenforce this.

- 96% said Recycle More has made it easier to recycle.
- 84% agreed the new service is an improvement on the previous service.
- 91% said they know what can be recycled.
- 94% said they know how to separate the materials.
- 86% said they remember their recycling day easily.
- 84% said they found the information leaflets helpful.

It should be noted that SWP’s introduction of Recycle More won the “Environmental Services” award at the Local Government Chronicle Awards 2022.

However, there are always improvements to be made and lessoned to be learned.

Lesson learned	Notes	Actions
Communications		
Early and sustained engagement with stakeholders, notably elected members, is worth the time and resource required to do it.	There seemed to be good awareness prior to launch and little negative feedback. ‘Test-driving’ of the bright blue bags by community leaders was very useful as we saw a greater degree of nervousness about the bag than we anticipated.	Ensure that resources are available to replicate this approach for future change.
Direct mailing still has place (this aligns with the findings of the WRAP Recycling Tracker survey).	Two direct mailings were sent to all residents. There is a significant and growing role for digital communications. However, changing a universal service affects people across the digital divide and direct mailing remains an effective way to reach everyone. In the customer survey 84% found the information leaflets helpful.	Ensure that direct mailing is considered as part of the communications approach for future changes of this kind, subject to costs.
Phased service change is helpful for comms.	This allowed communications and related materials to be refined at each stage to take account of	We should always consider phasing when introducing this scale of change, subject to

	feedback and experience. E.g. leaflet content reviewed and improved, community collection points for bags introduced for phase 2 onwards.	operational and cost implications.
Collection day calendars are important.	This was clear from feedback once initial Recycle More calendars expired, especially with the introduction of three weekly rubbish collections. In the resident survey only 60% said it was easy to remember rubbish collection days.	We are in the process of distributing Service Guides to all residents and these will contain a collection day calendar.
Facebook can be an effective channel for communicating a change of this kind.	The investment in good quality digital content, and time spent engaging/responding to comments helped deliver information and address concerns.	There will continue to be a separate 'waste' Facebook presence post vesting day.
Facebook Q&As may not be the best platform to engage in subject-specific online conversations.	Engagement levels in the Q&As started well but tailed off throughout roll-out.	Investigate alternative platforms for hosting this kind of online conversation.
The level of perceived potential difficulties did not materialise.	Most pre-launch concerns focussed on possible capacity issues and the suitability of the Bright Blue Bag. In the vast majority of cases these have not translated into issues after roll-out.	'Give it a go' is a valid message for comparable service change.
Continued work is needed to clarify the plastics we do and do not collect at the kerb.	This has been one of the most common subjects of post roll-out queries. It is a complicated area and a difficult to communicate succinctly.	Continue to reiterate the 'plastic bottles, pots and tubs' messaging. This will be addressed to some extent in the Service Guide and we will look for new and engaging ways to give clarity.
Resource management		
It is important to plan ahead and be able respond quickly to the additional demands that change of this kind can place on staff.	We restructured SWP to bring in additional communications and data/operations/customer expertise. We forecast the likely demand on Customer Service teams, SWP and SUEZ staff. This helped ensure temporary staff were in place. When the national driver shortage prolonged disruption during the South Somerset and Sedgemoor roll-outs, garden waste suspension queries were rapidly outsourced to relieve the pressures.	Make sure this kind of contingency planning and flexibility is in place before undertaking change of this scale. Continue to recognise the value of appropriate level of communications and customer/data capability and resource.
Operations		
Strategic decision making must be quick to respond to unexpected factors (e.g. direct and indirect impacts of Covid-19).	A successful roll-out needed strategic decisions to be taken at short notice e.g. the decoupling of communal properties for the phase 1 and 4 roll-outs. These decisions were taken based	Ensure that clear and agile decision making processes are in place before undertaking change of this scale.

	on professional judgement and swiftly ratified through partnership senior management.	
Container demand can be hard to manage and forecast.	Although container demand forecasts were relatively accurate, they were exceeded at times in phases 2 and 4. This put significant pressure on deliveries and led to delays for some residents.	Ensure that the Recycle More experience informs future forecasting and that there are systems in place to increase delivery capacity if needed.
The challenge of new rounds should not be underestimated.	Missed collections rates on the new service were higher than anticipated and crew unfamiliarity with new routes was a key cause. Improved route maps provided to crews from phase 2 onwards. However, pressures on the service (national driver shortage, Covid) meant missed collection rates were still too high. Productivity assumptions were also over optimistic. Support rounds needed to provide assistance and when this support was withdrawn it led to a second wave of service instability (particularly in phase 4).	Ensure that the Recycle More experience informs future resource planning and that there are systems in place to increase support for collections if needed.
Support staff were needed for longer than expected.	As support staff were withdrawn from the snagging processes corrections to routing and communications became slower, particularly for properties only accessible by narrow access refuse vehicles.	Ensure this support is available for longer when embarking on change of this scale.
The collection contractor (SUEZ) have not realised the productivity benefits it expected.	Commercial pressures on our contractor remain and whilst our contract protects us from this, the risk of a commercially unsustainable contract is one we need to work with our contractor to address.	Continue to engage with our contractor at a senior level and consider requests which come from them which help to improve their productivity whilst not undermining our wider priorities.
Communal collections		
Improvements are needed in the data held on communal collections.	Communal properties require a different kind of collection vehicle and off-cycle refuse collections. They were isolated from the rest of the service for planning and communications purposes. The work to capture information about communal properties and the individual requirements of specific sites was challenging. There were instances where properties did not initially receive a waste collection or received an unsuitable service.	Carry out further work to understand communal housing locations, ensuring data is comprehensive and site specific issues captured – ahead of any food waste collection roll-out.
Training and systems		
The triaging requests for extra capacity work well.	Forms were produced to triage resident requests and this allowed	Ensure this approach is replicated in future change

	early officer intervention.	work.
Iterative customer service training worked well.	Staff in later phases learned from the experiences of earlier phases.	Ensure this approach is replicated in future change work.
The Recycle More chatbot had limited success.	A chatbot was piloted on the Recycle More web page. This aimed to help reduce Customer Service contact and improve the digital customer experience. The levels of use did not justify the efforts required to deliver the chatbot function.	Do not replicate in future change work - unless better iterations of the technology are available.
Project delivery		
Working arrangements with SUEZ were efficient and effective.	SWP and Suez met regularly throughout. Meeting frequency varied with proximity to service changes and key milestones. This helped successfully manage the complex array of tasks and risks, allowed stakeholders to be updated milestones achieved. The only slippage was the communal phase that was supposed to be incorporated into Phase 4 (SDC) and the Schools Phase that was moved out of a Covid window.	Ensure this approach is replicated in future change work.

12. Background papers

All previous board papers on Recycle More are available on the SWP or SCC websites. A report on Recycle More is taken to each board meeting.