

Flex Collect – Soft plastics collection pilot

Lead Officer: Mickey Green

Author: Mickey Green

Contact Details: [mickey.green@somersetwaste.gov.uk](mailto:mickey.green@somersetwaste.gov.uk)

Executive Member: Cllr Sarah Dyke

Division and Local Member: n/a

## **1. Summary**

- 1.1.** This report summarises SWP’s role in a funded national pilot testing the collection of flexible plastics from the kerbside, informing how we might seek to roll this out around the whole County in due course. Flexible plastics are a particularly difficult material to recycle, being low quality and made of many different plastic types. The national FlexCollect plastic recycling pilots is a great opportunity to take part in, learn from and help us achieve our aim of adding these materials to the kerbside collections in the future.

## **2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations**

- 2.1.** It is recommended that the Scrutiny Committee endorses the proposed approach to the flexible plastics collection pilot.

## **3. Background**

- 3.1.** Between October 2020 and July 2022, SWP introduced the Recycle More collections to more than 260,000 households, adding new materials to weekly 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.

This was the biggest changes to recycling in the county for more than a decade and the successful roll-out was achieved despite the challenges of Covid.

It has had a fundamental impact on domestic waste collections in the county, though it should be noted that 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. However, the indications are that Recycle More has reduced refuse/rubbish by around 20%.

The picture for recycling is more complicated. The 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 – our current recycling rate is around 57%, much higher than it has ever been.

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.

After the roll out of Recycle More, one of the key materials left in the residual waste is flexible plastics. This comprises roughly 8% by weight of residual waste (SWP composition analysis, 2018), but it is a lightweight material that takes up a lot of volume in the bin. A further composition and participation analysis will be undertaken in Spring 2023 which will give us up to date data on what is left in our rubbish bins. Residents are very keen to be able to recycle this material. Nationally, flexible plastic packaging represents nearly a quarter of all UK consumer plastic packaging but only 6% is currently recycled

- 3.2.** Flexible plastics are a challenging material to collect and recycle. They are comprised of many different types of plastic and in many cases multi-layered materials (e.g., food pouches made up of laminated layers of metal and plastic). Altogether, flexible plastics are lightweight, high volume, low value, difficult to sort and recycle. There are few reprocessors who accept them, and it is difficult to recycle them into closed-loop applications (i.e., into the same material again). Poor quality unsorted plastic films have been found dumped overseas. For these reasons, SWP has not wanted to collect plastic films until such time as we could be sure that the whole system changes to create viable markets for them and they would actually be recycled.

SWP with WRAP conducted a small trial of collecting flexible plastics in 2015, covering 1400 households. The trial itself was successful, though participation levels were low. The quality of material collected met the specification of the reprocessing plant, but there was some contamination of non-target material, and the reprocessing plant went into administration shortly after the trial ended. We can see that the design of the new pilots reflects learning from these and other campaigns, with a much more detailed communications plan, and clear guidance for households on what is and isn't collected. The FlexCollect pilots will also be accepting a wider range of materials than the original trial.

- 3.3.** Government, through the collection and packaging reforms (Consistency in collections and Extended Producer Responsibility) has indicated that households and businesses will be able to recycle flexible plastics by March 2027. As a result of this guidance, WRAP (the Waste and Resources Action Programme) has been working with manufacturers, reprocessors, supermarkets and other parties, to stimulate demand for the material, and encourage investment in reprocessing facilities. The supermarket flexible plastic collection points that have recently started being introduced are the first phase of this work.

- 3.4.** The Flex Collect project builds on previous work done by the Flexible Plastic Fund. Funded by DEFRA, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the FPF, the trial will be project managed by SUEZ and run for three years, starting in April 2022. The first phase of the project was the 'Pioneer' phase, with Cheltenham Borough Council, South Gloucester Council and Maldon District Council taking part in this phase. SWP are in the 'industrialisation' phase, and joining the pilot from April 2023, for 2 years. Five other local authorities are expected to join in this phase.

#### **4. Approach to the pilot**

- 4.1.** The project will trial the collection of flexible plastic packaging and will seek to understand:
- The likely and actual volumes of flexible packaging arising from households, the impact of collecting these items on current waste and recycling streams, and the impact on the entire value chain
  - The cost, operational efficiencies and challenges associated with different types of collection methodologies, sorting processes, logistics, and reprocessing of flexible plastics
  - The success of varied communications approaches with regards to participation rates, compliance, and contamination

The process, challenges, and cost of reprocessing the materials once sorted, and the current and future end markets and infrastructure available and required

- 4.2.** Somerset has been chosen to represent a rural area with some levels of deprivation. The pilot area to be chosen needs to take this into account. Due to space constraints and capacity issues at the depots the pilot will need to be run from Evercreech Depot. For these reasons, initial thoughts are that the stage 1 pilot will take place in the Mendip area. Stage 2 areas will be determined at a later point (and is not contingent on the stage 1 area chosen).

The pilot will run in two parts:

- Stage 1: Small pilot of c.3,500 properties to run for 1 year. This will allow us to trial the collection system and learn lessons.
- Stage 2: The pilot will be extended to around 15-20,000 households – enough to take it to a wider range of properties and learn from that.

- 4.3.** The pilot is still in the design stage but key principles are:

- Flexible plastics that will be accepted are plastic bags and wrappers – e.g. bread bags, frozen food bags, salad bags, cheese wrappers and similar (e.g. cling film). It is expected that crisp packets and sweet wrappers will also be included.
- Pouches, sachets and packets, such as pet food pouches and baby food pouches, are not included as there is currently no viable outlet for these

materials with a thicker metal layer.

- Residents will receive clear guidance developed by WRAP on what can and can't be accepted. Households involved in the pilot will receive a teaser leaflet 4 weeks ahead of the start, a reminder leaflet 2 weeks ahead of the start and a 'nudge' leaflet around 6 weeks post-start date. We will seek to also host local drop-in sessions to respond to questions and demonstrate good practice.
- Households will be provided with a pack of blue translucent bags to collect their flexible plastics in. The bag should be tied and placed out for collection in either the green or black recycling container in which there is space.
- Flexible plastics must not be placed loose within the bright blue bag for cans and plastic bottles and pots, tubs and trays, as they need to be recycled separately.

#### **4.4. End destinations of materials.**

Whilst SWP requires that materials collected for recycling must be recycled within the UK as a preference, for these national trials, arrangements are being made with a number of reprocessors to take the material and report back.

The primary treatment solution will be recycling, where options include both mechanical and chemical recycling and seeking to avoid down-cycling (e.g. using the material to make benches). Secondary options would send materials to be used as Solid Recovered Fuel (SRF), which would be used only as a last resort. Reprocessing within the UK will be prioritised; however, it may be necessary to process some material in EU facilities, particularly where technology is not yet commercially available in the UK. Materials arising from the trials will not be sent outside the UK or EU for sorting/reprocessing.

### **5. Consultations undertaken**

- 5.1.** The ambition to accept flexible plastics at the kerbside has been part of SWP's Business Plan for a number of years (and as such has been consulted on with all partners – District Council and County Council). The approach to the pilot has been reviewed by the Joint Waste Scrutiny Panel and by the Somerset Waste Board, and it is being brought to this scrutiny committee given the timing of LGR.

### **6. Implications**

- 6.1. Financial:** The trial will be financed as an open book contract. It will be fully funded by the FPF, apart from SWP/Somerset Council staff time. Financing covers the fixed asset costs (bins, bags, boxes, weighing systems, cages, compactors and modifications to facilities), and costs associated with storage, logistics, treatment, testing, communications, and training. These costs will be discussed before the trial commences and expected costs will be approved in principle between the local authority, SUEZ, and the project steering committee. Additional costs which

arise after the trial has commenced will also need to be approved. Costs will be managed directly with Future Recycling Limited (FRL) on behalf of the Flexible Plastic Fund. The pilot will end in 2025, but at this stage, it is expected that EPR funding will be in place, which will enable those taking part to continue with the collections and to extend it across the whole County.

**Legal:** A project agreement will be signed between the local authority, the FPF, Suez, WRAP before commencement.

**HR:** There are no HR implications – it will be delivered by existing SWP/Somerset Council staff and this is reflected in our Business Plan (and hence allocating officer time).

## **7. Background papers**

**7.1.** n/a

**Note** For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author