

Somerset Council
Scrutiny Committee Climate and Place
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Update on Flexible Plastics Collection Trial

Lead Officer: Mike Cowdell

Author: Mike Cowdell

Contact Details: Michael.cowdell@somerset.gov.uk

Executive Lead Member: Dixie Darch

1. Summary

- 1.1. The externally funded Flexible plastics trial was delivered to 3600 properties around Frome during May 2023. The trial included communications, engagement with residents and provided participants with a blue transparent bags to present flexible plastics alongside the existing recycling service.

The trial yielded impressive results, with participation rates at 65% and very low contamination rates underlying the commitment of Somerset Residents to sustainable waste practices and the quality of communications, engagement and service delivery.

The Council has in principal agreement to extend the trial to 20,000 properties in the East of the County from spring/summer 2024.

- 1.2. The delivery of trial relates to provide a Greener, More Sustainable Somerset, by removing a previously uncollected waste fraction from rubbish and developing a UK outlet to recycle the material into new raw materials.

2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations

- 2.1. That the content of the report is noted by members

3. Background

- 3.1. The government has indicated that households and businesses will need to be able to collect and recycle flexible plastics by March 2027. The national FlexCollect pilot aims to help establish the best way of collecting such material from the kerbside, while stimulating the development of the UK's reprocessing infrastructure.
- 3.2. A three-year national trial had been operated by SUEZ, who coincidentally provide Somerset's kerbside collections. The trial started in in April 2022 and the first pilot phase involved Cheltenham Borough Council, South Gloucester Council and Maldon

District Council. Somerset is one of several authorities involved in the two-year second phase.

The trial is Funded by DEFRA, UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and the [Future of Plastics Fund](#) (a fund contributed to by manufacturers). The costs of the trial are being met by the national project. The only costs to Somerset Council has been time and resource.

- 3.3. The trial commenced in Somerset on the 22nd May 2023 and involves around 3,600 homes in the North East and North of Frome. These were selected by demographic requirements from the national pilot and depot capacity.

Collection of the plastic bags and wrapping start for the participating homes in the week beginning Monday 22 May, as part of the usual weekly recycling collections.

Residents were asked to put the new materials into a plastic bag provided by crews. The bag should then be placed between two recycling containers to stop it being blown away.

- 3.4. All trial households were written to twice before the trial commenced, the first communication was warm up literature and the 2nd detailed instructions, including Figure 1 below, that detailed new materials being collected, as well as a supply of Blue Bags to present the material for collection in. Drop in sessions were held for local residents to answer any questions or queries that they had around the new service.

Further “nudge” communication was provided one month after commencement to ensure that trial participants were fully on board and

Figure 1: Participant Instructions

What will I be able to recycle?

	All plastic bags carrier bags salad/fruit/vegetable bags frozen food bags bread bags cereal bags flower bags		Cheese, fish, and meat wrapping
			Outer layer bags and wrapping multipack toilet & kitchen roll magazine & newspaper wrapping
	Confectionery wrappers chocolate sweets biscuits cakes ice cream & chewing gum wrappers		Plastic film & sleeves removeable film lids plastic sleeves for bottles and jars
	Foil lined packaging crisp/snack packets coffee bags		Fruit & vegetable net bags
			Bubble wrap & cling film

Please DO NOT use your collection bag for:

Items other than plastic bags and wrapping

- ✗ Pouches, sachets and packets – microwaveable food, baby/pet food, cosmetics, detergent and cleaning
- ✗ Blister packs, pills, and tablets packaging
- ✗ Compostable or biodegradable bags and wrapping
- ✗ Crisp tubes
- ✗ Disposable gloves or masks
- ✗ Foam or polystyrene
- ✗ Plastic bottles, pots, tubs, or trays
- ✗ Plastic straws or cutlery

All items should be **clean and free of food.**

- 3.5. The trial involved the weekly collection of Flexible plastics alongside the existing kerbside recycling collection scheme (figure 2) across six recycling rounds. The blue bags containing the material were separated at the Transfer Station and sent for reprocessing (Sterling Polymers, Hartlepool)

Figure 2 – Blue Recycling Bag alongside Somerset Council Waste Receptacles



Figure 3 – Recycling Collection in Action



- 3.6. The trial continues and to date has garnered impressive participation and successes the key performance factors achieved so far across the 3600 properties are:
- On average each household presents **0.54 bags per household per week**, with each bag weighing around 225g (the material is very light)
 - Each collection cycle around 1800 bags are produced, **with 65% of residents regularly engaging with the service**
 - Just under 500kg of recycling material is captured each cycle from participating residences.
 - Service user compliance with the trial has been very positive, with a very small percentage of bags being rejected from processes (**1 in 400 bags are rejected**)
- 3.7. The trial has been popular in Somerset with participation rates exceeding project objectives, this been achieved through concise and clear communications developed in partnership with Wrap, positive and ongoing communications with residents by Suez and Waste Services staff. The restrictions placed on refuse bin capacity through three weekly collections also make this an attractive service to residents as well as allowing them to further participate in recycling as much as they can.

The low levels of contamination demonstrate the effectiveness of the communication and engagement with residents, showing that that clear and concise information produced worked well and was readily understood. Downstream reporting indicates that 84% of all material collected through the trial was Target material.

There have been no issues incorporating this material into the existing waste collection infrastructure, providing a cost effective mechanism to introduce a new stream of waste recycling materials into our collection regime. The extraction of the bags from the general plastic and cans stream has occurred on a picking line within the Transfer Station, however modifications to the picking line would be required if the trial was extended.

- 3.8.** Following the success of the trial Future Recycling Limited have agreed, in principle, to extend and fully fund the trial to 20,000 properties from next spring and bridge the funding gap until New Burdens funding can be supplied from Government to extend the flexible collections across Somerset that is timetabled to take place in 2027. An externally funded modification to the picking line has been agreed to facilitate the extension of the trial.

As the modification is relatively expensive, this restricts the expansion of the trial to areas service by Evercreech Depot, i.e. the former Mendip and South Somerset Districts. The expansion of the trial is due to commence late spring/summer 24. The key output of the trial expansion is to test the learning achieved so far on a much greater scale prior to the implementation out of a county wide service as required by Consistency Legislation

4. Consultations undertaken

- 4.1.** No Consultations have been taken in the production of this report

5. Implications

- 5.1.** That the outcomes of the trial have been fully met and will enable an externally funded expansion of the trial area to 20,000 properties from Spring/Summer 2024

6. Background papers

- 6.1.** There are no background papers