

# Recycling in Denbighshire

## **Introduction**

Denbighshire County Council oversees a number of incredibly important statutory duties, including education and social services, but many residents still point to refuse collection as the most recognisable and valued service the council provides them with.

Recently, there has been much coverage of proposals to modify kerbside waste and recycling services in Denbighshire. This coverage has mostly focussed on plans for the county to mirror neighbouring Conwy and become the second local authority in the UK to reduce the frequency of black bin collections from once a fortnight to once a month. Whilst the concept of monthly collections is unpopular, it is the changes to the kerbside recycling scheme that particularly prompt me to set out my views. I do not believe the public is as yet generally aware of these proposed changes. The council ran a "Recycle More, Waste Less Survey 2018" regarding its intentions but regrettably it made no mention of what would be the most significant change, and the issue that will be of greatest concern to residents – namely the loss of their blue wheelie bin.

## **The Current Situation**

When I was elected as a Denbighshire County Councillor in 2004, one of my key concerns was the existing kerbside recycling service. At the time, residents were expected to use a blue box for paper, cans and glass and a dumpy bag for plastics. These containers not only had a limited capacity but would regularly blow down the street and spill their contents. Often, this litter was not then adequately cleared up.

I was therefore extremely supportive of the rolling introduction across the county of the x2 wheelie bin system between 2006 and 2012, comprising of a 240l blue bin for co-mingled recyclates and a 180l black bin for residual waste (collected alternate weeks), a 140l green bin for garden waste (collected fortnightly) and an orange caddy for food waste (collected weekly). This system remains in operation today, alongside textiles collections by Co-Options social enterprise - although awareness of these is poor. The system was deliberately designed to make recycling easy. Anecdotally, the existing waste collection system is rated highly and I believe its introduction was one of the best decisions the council ever made. Council officers from elsewhere have since visited the county in order to replicate it.

Upon the introduction of the x2 service, officers and members were proven right in their belief that by providing a large volume wheelie bin and by avoiding the need for kerbside sorting, recycling rates in Denbighshire would respond accordingly. Indeed, they shot up to well above the average for both Wales and the UK. The method of collection meant that levels of street litter declined markedly, and when civic amenity sites were reduced in number, the impact of this was offset by the fact that large cardboard boxes, for example, could be easily disposed of in the blue bin.

Despite all this success, the council has come under repeated pressure from the Welsh Government to move away from the current system to their preferred "kerbside sorting" model. This appears to be driven by theory and ideology with respect to recycling methods as opposed to practicality. Quite rightly in my view, the council has until now resisted this pressure.

Denbighshire currently recycles 64.2% of its waste. This percentage has failed to rise for the last four years but remains higher than the Welsh average, despite other councils having made considerable strides in recent years. There is presently a target for local authorities in Wales to meet a recycling rate of 70% by 2025. Denbighshire's existing blue bin (non-food recyclables) "capture rate" is 85-90% - an extremely good performance which surpasses that of virtually any other kerbside recycling scheme. The county's black bin (residual waste) collections are currently understood to be processed by energy from waste plants.

Denbighshire's recycling rates could undoubtedly be higher if it were to reintroduce free kerbside green waste collection, which was made chargeable in 2015. There must also be scope to capture more than the 50% of food waste which is currently being placed in the orange caddy. It seems clear that national efforts to tackle plastic waste in particular, combined with relatively minor tweaks and educational efforts locally, could quite easily allow the county to meet the targets it is likely to be set in the foreseeable future. It is however worth highlighting that these specific targets are based around the avoidance of European Union fines, which in theory we will shortly no longer be subject to. This is important because pursuing set targets may disregard the fact that attempting to recycle certain plastics, for example, might not always be the most environmentally friendly option.

### **The Threat of Changes**

It now appears that the county is set to bow to pressure from the Welsh Government and, with the assistance of their grant funding scheme, replace the much-cherished blue bin for co-mingled waste with "trolley boxes". These would require residents to sort different recyclates into separate containers. The trolley boxes would be emptied weekly and introduced alongside reduced frequency but slightly increased volume residual waste collections of up to 240l.

Monthly residual waste collections may be sufficient for many most of the time but would constitute an inferior service with reduced flexibility for the householder. The prospect of special arrangements for those regularly disposing of nappies and other such waste would imply bureaucracy which is currently unnecessary. In addition, emerging evidence from Conwy suggests that monthly collections are proving insufficient for more than anticipated. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that Denbighshire could, if it wished, easily introduce monthly black bin collections at any point, without being tied into an "all or nothing" Welsh Government grant offer requiring the scrapping of the blue bin.

The proposed changes are due to take place by 2021. While the need to meet recycling targets has been linked to the plans, the main underlying reason for the change in approach from the council's perspective is financial: less frequent black bin collections would in themselves save money but would also in theory force residents to recycle more, while separated recyclates would command a wider market and a greater value.

Unfortunately, many of the assumptions being made by the council are not in the public domain. What is undeniable is that the value of recyclates has dropped. The media has highlighted the presence of mountains of unwanted collected plastic and China's resistance to taking any more of our plastic waste. This goes some way to explaining the reduced value of our recyclable waste. It means that the very favourable contracts the council was once able to secure for the sale of co-mingled recyclates are no longer available, resulting in a likely extra

cost to the council of several hundred thousand pounds per annum. In addition, I understand that the Welsh Government is implementing progressive cuts to the Revenue Support Grant as it applies to waste collection, which will impact on our local county council.

Taking all the above into account, it may well be that the council's intention to introduce a new system to save £500-750k per annum does have some merit, but I am far from convinced there has been sufficient scrutiny of accurate whole-life financial modelling and other implications of what is being proposed.

### **Important Future Considerations**

The county council's cabinet last discussed these changes on 18th December 2018. Coincidentally, the UK Government's Resources and Waste Strategy was unveiled on the same day. Waste is in theory a matter devolved to the Welsh Assembly but in practice, the kind of provisions within this strategy for England would largely affect Wales also. The strategy proposes that businesses and manufacturers should take more responsibility for their packaging waste and pay for the full cost of its recycling or disposal; that there should be a consistent set of recyclable materials for collection; and that a preferably UK-wide deposit return scheme for bottles, cans and disposable cups should be introduced. The result of all this will be a change in the make-up of the waste we all produce, which may well mean that the council's assumptions regarding volumes of collected materials (e.g. valuable aluminium) will not stand the test of time.

The deal the council agreed some years ago with UPM Shotton for the management of its co-mingled waste was very competitive, and likely to have been a loss-leader for the company. It has saved the council considerable sums of money. The technology at UPM is state-of-the-art and separates materials with ease which can then be recycled in the usual way. This contrasts with some other co-mingled processing plants which produce mixed material of lower value. The existing contract sets out maximum levels of permitted contamination within the waste that Denbighshire provides. My understanding is that the county has always easily fallen below these levels and that the reject rate has been within the order of just 7.5%. Reject waste is incinerated by UPM at no extra cost to the authority. It would seem that Denbighshire's existing recycling rate is being underestimated within WG's officially published statistics – their assumptions are based on a reject rate of nearly double the actual.

A renewed contract for co-mingled waste will inevitably be less competitive than the county's last contract but have quotes from other companies been sought and compared and has UPM been given the opportunity to improve its offer?

Has the potential role of the new "Energy from Waste" plant currently being constructed in Deeside been properly considered? Many deem it most environmentally responsible to process some plastics in this way. Various councils have already stopped collecting plastics for recycling and are now advising residents to dispose of these in their residual waste bins for incineration. If this becomes necessary in Denbighshire, the existing system has the flexibility to accommodate such a change. The proposed new system would not be so flexible, and costs for changes (e.g. more regular black bin collections) would need to be met by the council itself.

### **Welsh Government's £7.9m**

The capital cost of changing all the county's equipment over to suit the proposed new system has previously been estimated at £7.9m and WG have indicated they will meet this cost. In this respect, the council's policy appears to be being influenced by promises of money for change vs the threat of meeting additional costs if the status quo is retained - in the same way that the council is currently facing much pressure to implement Assembly Government policy on gypsy and traveller sites in return for "time-limited" funding. In reality, this £7.9m is all taxpayers' money and needs to be spent wisely.

Bearing in mind the existing x2 equipment has many years of lifespan remaining, how can it be environmentally sound or good value for the taxpayer to retire this early in favour of a new system with a capital cost of £7.9m? Even based on the council's projected savings, it would take over a decade for the taxpayer to recoup cost of new capital expenditure.

### **Is £7.9m enough, and would the new system cost more in the future than is being recognised?**

- It has emerged that the plans could involve spending a significant sum on Conwy County Borough Council's recycling facilities at Gofer Waste Station in Abergele, which would receive waste from Denbighshire. Arguably much of this work needs to take place whether or not DCC requires their use. Alternatively, Denbighshire would need to construct its own facilities. In either of these circumstances, would there be sufficient funding remaining for DCC to finance its own operations? Also, would it be sensible in cost and environmental terms to transport waste from Denbighshire to Abergele?
- The new system is more complicated than the existing.
  - It would require more staff and more bin wagons for the varying roles required.
  - The bin wagons themselves would be more expensive and more prone to breakdown, so more spares would be required.
  - The rural rounds would require bespoke smaller vehicles, which, if available, would be costly.
  - The increased fleet size would not be accommodated by existing depot capacity, meaning a need for one or more new depots.
  - In the past, Welsh Government assumptions in their theoretical modelling have always been over-optimistic, indicating vehicle manning rates lower than necessary and a greater number of bins emptied per day than is possible in somewhere semi-rural like Denbighshire.
- Bin wagons have an average lifespan of seven years. Any money from Welsh Government will be for the initial purchase – longer term, costs will need to be met by the council and these will be greater than for the existing system. Bin wagons easily cost more than £150,000 each.
- Attrition rates on the new bin system would be greater as the trolley box system is not as robust as wheelie bins.
- Can the prompt switchover to a new system that is being assumed be achieved when the x2 rollout was over several years and itself faced initial challenges? Does the county council today have the necessary historical knowledge and detailed awareness of bin rounds to avoid the otherwise high risk and cost of service failure? What is the agenda of third parties which may offer advice?

### **Experience from Elsewhere**

The trolley boxes proposed as part of the new scheme are already in use in Conwy and have been criticised by many householders as being too small. They are generally less flexible for residents, who may have a glut of cardboard or other materials from week to week. The sorting required by residents also involves greater effort. Common sense would suggest that, for some, the quantity of recyclates collected would reduce as the new scheme would simply make recycling more difficult. Conwy's experiences with respect to recycling rates are not directly comparable as co-mingled collections have not been previously in place in that county borough.

How certain can DCC be that a switch in systems would increase recycling rates and not the opposite? What assessment has been made of the risk of the increased burning of rubbish or fly tipping by those for whom trolley boxes and/or four weekly residual waste collections prove insufficient?

Conwy residents complain that the trolley boxes are prone to falling over in the wind and breaking into pieces. If introduced in Denbighshire they would, as they regularly do elsewhere, spill their contents across residential streets in poor weather conditions and with the additional assistance of vermin (including seagulls) and antisocial behaviour, result in a poorer streetscape and potential additional roadsweeping costs.

Finally, researchers at the University of Greenwich have recently called for refuse boxes to be banned in favour of wheelie bins, having discovered that the former result in a higher rate of musculoskeletal injuries among binmen.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, a popular and successful kerbside waste scheme is being threatened by a scheme which is unlikely to be properly costed; is bad value for the taxpayer; would mean greater hassle for residents and may reduce levels of recycling; and would almost certainly result in dirtier streets. It is clear that retaining the existing system will currently cost more than in the past but it is not at all clear that the proposed changes would be less costly, as both the initial and ongoing capital and revenue funding requirements are unlikely to have been fully scoped. To put faith in over-optimistic theoretical modelling which indicates relatively small savings, while at the same time so many potentially costly unknowns exist, means exposing the council to excessive risk and is unlikely to be justified when it will result in a worse service for householders.

Bearing in mind the importance of waste collections to most residents, and the popularity of the existing system, it is highly likely that a majority would, if necessary, judge a modest increase in spend on the service worthwhile if it mean this can be retained.

I would encourage the council to re-evaluate its plans. Thank you.

James Davies – October 2019

mail@jamesdavies.org.uk