

**CABINET
19 MARCH 2024**

PART 1 – PUBLIC DOCUMENT

TITLE OF REPORT: EXPANSION OF THE SOFT PLASTICS COLLECTION TRIAL

REPORT OF: SHARED SERVICE MANAGER – WASTE MANAGEMENT

EXECUTIVE MEMBER: CLLR AMY ALLEN, EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR RECYCLING AND WASTE

COUNCIL PRIORITY: SUSTAINABILITY

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report seeks authority for the expansion of kerbside collections of plastic film and wrapping (soft plastics). A small trial has been running under delegated authority, in Knebworth, since November 2023 providing approximately 2,000 households with fortnightly soft plastics collections. This has been successful and is providing useful data to Flexible Plastic Funds FlexCollect trial and the Shared Waste Service in advance of introducing collections more widely in 2025. An expansion to a further 7300 households is proposed across East and North Hertfordshire with the total number of households in North Herts anticipated to be 6,250.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. That the Cabinet agree to the expansion of the Flex Collect trial and kerbside collections of soft plastics.
- 2.2. That the Cabinet delegates to the Service Director Place any necessary change to the collection demographic and area for the trial.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 One of the key aims of the project is to give insight into the types and quantities of soft plastics available for collection. The current Knebworth collections partially mimic the 2025 services, however the expansion of the service seeks to gather data from a wider demographic.
- 3.2 North Herts residents' current participation in the trial has yielded good participation levels with high volumes of soft plastics being collected per household. The Shared Waste Service is also gathering information on collection issues and the effectiveness of communication methods. Expanding the project will give the Council an opportunity to further test operational implications of collections, quantities and types of plastic collected from different areas and exploring processing requirements. The expanded trial more closely mimics the new service roll out in 2025.

- 3.3 The expanded trial coincides with the Shared Waste Service undertaking market testing in advance of considering processing options for material from 2025. The additional trial data will inform our future Material Recovery Facility (MRF) contract procurement or extension needs for 2025 and provide data for the wider industry to better prepare for the anticipated mandated collection of soft plastics.

- 3.4 The expansion of the trial is fully funded until April 2025 by the Flexible Plastics Fund.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1. Making no changes to the current trial collection numbers. Keeping existing delivery and sorting arrangements means limited information to inform the new services and MRF contract information. There is the possibility that our participation in this high-profile project will end if we are unable to build on capacity data, and a loss of valuable information for 2025 new service arrangements, along with the loss of funding to gather this information.
- 4.2. There are no other reasonable alternative options. The main objective of expansion for the Council is to test options for the 2025 new service collection arrangements and MRF processing capability, which will also inform the future MRF contract at no cost to the council as the project is fully funded.

5. CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT MEMBERS AND EXTERNAL ORGANISATIONS

- 5.1 The expansion area has not been finalised but demographic compatibility is currently being explored for a number of different wards and the relevant Ward Members have been informed. The Executive Member for Recycling and Waste Management, Cllr Amy Allen and Deputy Executive Member for Recycling and Waste Management, Cllr Tom Tyson, have been consulted in conjunction with Cllr Tim Hoskin, East Herts Council Executive Member for Environmental Sustainability, as part of the Shared Waste Service.

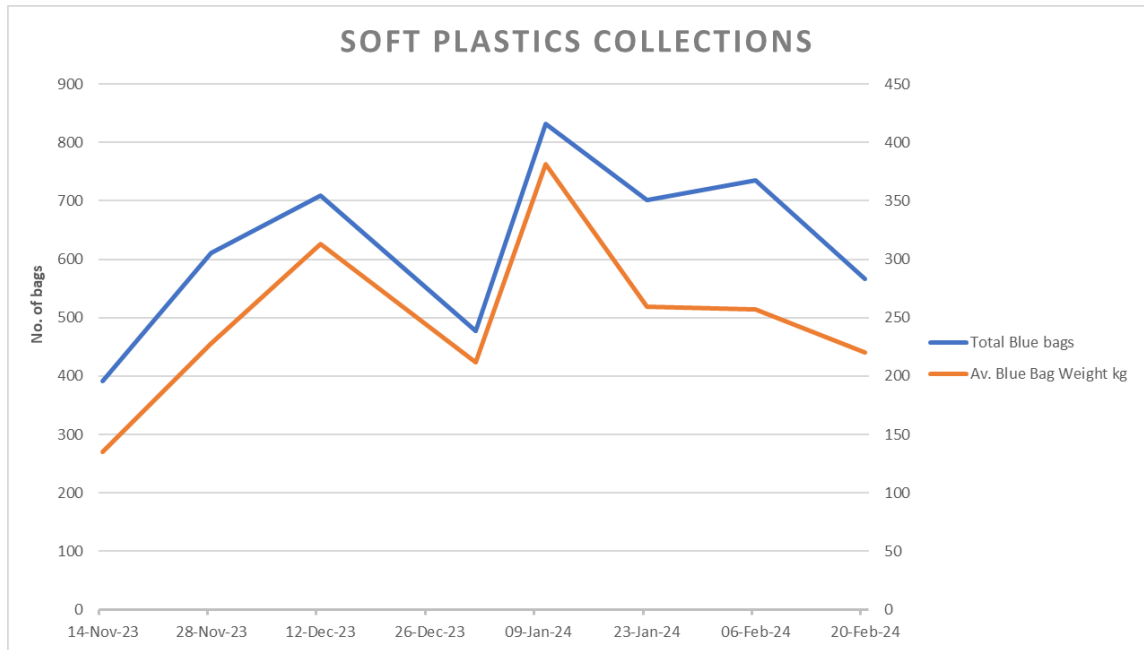
6. FORWARD PLAN

- 6.1 This was notified to the forward plan on 16 February 2024.

7. BACKGROUND

- 7.1. The Flexible Plastics Fund (Future Recycling Ltd) is operating FlexCollect as a nationwide project to trial the collection of flexible soft plastics from households. This service is not currently offered to households as a kerbside collection in North Hertfordshire but has been operating as a small trial in Knebworth since late 2023.
- 7.2. The project is fully funded by the Flexible Plastics Fund to cover all operating costs during the trial's operation and consequently the expansion of this trial is an opportunity to explore further the implications of collecting this material more widely from 2025.

- 7.3. The trial is in partnership with a number of entities (Flexible Plastic Fund, Defra / UKRI's Smart Sustainable Plastic Packaging Challenge (SSPP), our existing collection contractor Urbaser, and MRF contractor Pearce Recycling, with a wider project team which includes WRAP, SUEZ, RECOUP, and Ecosurety working towards the success of this high-profile project across the UK. An interim report has been produced by the partners and is available in Appendix 1.
- 7.4. North and East Herts have been chosen as one of only seven participating Councils in the trial and the Shared Waste Service are keen to expand the trial to further areas to improve the data capture.
- 7.5. The current small-scale trial in Knebworth are using blue collection bags placed out on top of paper boxes for collection. The collected bags are then direct delivered, where they are handpicked from the paper at our Materials Recovery Facility (MRF) for onward processing. Data from our existing trial is contained in the graph below shows the total weight collected each cycle and further data is available in Appendix 2.



- 7.6. The proposed expansion will explore the option of having the collection bags placed in the recycling wheeled bin for collection. The material will be returned to the depot along with all other mixed dry recycling and be collected by our MRF contractor as usual, with the picking/removal of blue bags being done at the MRF. We are keen to test this operating model on a wider scale to consider the practicalities for future collections.
- 7.7. This more closely replicates what may happen for the 2025 services and will provide valuable insight to better understand the operational implications of the collections and processing requirements. Longer term it may be possible to collect the soft plastics loose inside the mixed recycling bin and the trial provides the industry with information on how the material moves through sorting machinery and the types of material that are collected from different demographics.

- 7.8. The timing of the expansion will also support the Shared Waste Service in their market testing in relation to decisions regarding the processing procurement necessary for our new collection services in 2025.

8. RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

- 8.1. North Herts is one of only seven collection authorities to be participating in the National FlexCollect trial. This is an important project; it is fully funded and has gathered national industry interest and publicity and was the only project mentioned in a recent Defra report on environmental producer responsibility and the future changes to recycling collections.
- 8.2. The project is supported by data gathering and interpretation, composition analysis, MRF handling approach methodology and end market research to give a wide picture for the industry on the challenges of introducing soft plastic collections across the country for 2027.
- 8.3. The Knebworth trial properties offered a distinct conurbation of standard housing types, where the collections can be undertaken by existing crews on established rounds. The initial pilot collected soft plastics from on top of paper boxes with the completed collection loads being delivered directly to the MRF processor in St Albans. This made the operations efficient and cost neutral for our contractor.
- 8.4. Whilst valuable, this approach does not wholly mimic the new services methodology due in 2025, and the Shared Waste Service wish to expand with more households where participation and operational methodology can be adapted to mimic potential operational practice for the new services 2025.
- 8.5. Both our collection contractor and receiving MRF have been enthusiastic about the trial. Collections data and processing approaches have been tested and to date no issues have been encountered from either party. The Project funder has also been pleased with collections to date, in particular the weight of bags being collected.
- 8.6. The first collection took place on 14th November. A total of 391 bags of soft plastics were collected during the first collection. The following collection netted 611 collections. Allowing for Christmas interruptions, which residents may have been confused about the operational dates for the trial or less diligent in separating out waste, the number of bags each week has been good with an average of 628 bags being presented each collection. This has been a good participation rate for early collections, and we are keen to see the impact that further communications have on this.
- 8.7. The average weight of North Herts soft plastics collection bags is double the weight of other project participant areas, showing how keen residents are to participate and the diligence which they are taking to separate out the material for collection. The average weight of collections each week from the trial is 251kg with each bag on average weighing 0.4kg.

- 8.8. Observations on the ground during collections has revealed less contamination of our mixed dry recycling materials than usual in the dry recycling wheelie bins, this is a very positive observation in advance of the 2025 service changes.
- 8.9. Communication from residents has been positive, with the collections well received, and orders for additional bags have started coming in, in the initial trial area demonstrating that residents are keen to continue their participation in the service.
- 8.10. Scaling up the trial will better replicate the 2025 services and provide valuable insight to better understand the operational implications of the collections and processing requirements and inform our future MRF contract procurement or extension needs for 2025. Additionally, the inclusion of the data in this high-profile project will assist the wider industry to better prepare for the anticipated mandated collection of soft plastics.
- 8.11. Options regarding the expansion area are currently being tested for demographic compatibility for the trial and operational efficiency. It has been necessary to meet a specific demographic make up in order for the trial to be representative and also to ensure available processing capacity at the MRF.
- 8.12. Ward areas being considered include Royston, Baldock, Arbury, Hitchwood Offa & Hoo, but will not cover the whole towns where these are on different collection weeks for recycling and will be finalised in the coming weeks. Communications are targeted to individual households and we do not anticipate this being a problem

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 The Executive member for Recycling and Waste Management has overall responsibility for leadership, strategic planning and development, partnership working and decision making. In the exercise of their functions within the service area.
- 9.2 TOR 14.6.17 (o) of the Council Constitution, states that each Cabinet Executive Member is responsible for; *“approving use of specific grants and/or funding from non-governmental sources, and any annual delivery plans and agreements in relation to such funding.”* 14.6.17 (q) states that they are responsible for; *“the continuous improvement of the Council’s services through a programme of work.”*
- 9.3 The trial is expanding from one ward to three wards and as a consequence the decision to expand is now a ‘key’ decision.
- 9.4 Following the decision taken by Cabinet on 25 October 2022, item 4 ‘Future Service Design of Waste, Recycling and Street Cleansing Services, resolution 12, this trial is a precursor to the introduction of kerbside soft plastics collections in 2025. By participating in the trial, data and information can inform new service 2025 roll out and soft test methodologies. The trial has full cost recovery and no risk. The operational elements of the decision fall to the Service Director and to the extent this is a follow-on decision of Cabinet from 25 October 2022, this falls to the Executive Member for Waste and Recycling.
- 9.5 A Collaboration Agreement is already in place between the Council and Future Recycling Ltd and no changes are required to this agreement.
- 9.6 There are no other legal implications arising from the report.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. The financial implications of the trial expansion are nil. The full cost of the trial is funded by DEFRA UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) SSPP, and the Flexible Plastic Fund (FPF), costs will be managed directly with Future Recycling UK. Internal resource costs are low, as data gathering, sampling and project oversight are all conducted by the project sponsor.
- 10.2 There are no specific capital implications.
- 10.3 Following the announcement from Defra that soft plastics collections would be required for all households by 2027. Defra has confirmed there will be no further time extension to the trial and funding will cease in April 2025. The funding agreement in place to April 2025 covers all costs of the soft plastics collections as proposed.
- 10.4 This will mean a potential gap of 4 months before the start of the new service to all households around August 2025. It is anticipated that the Council would wish to not have a break in service and therefore the processing needs will be considered alongside the decisions regarding the next stage of the Materials Processing Contract.
- 10.5 Final collection methodology for 2025 is not yet clear but should a continuation of sack collections be required for the trial area, prior to the introduction of the new services, there is limited financial risk arising from the cost of collection bags during this time. It is hoped that stocks of bags from trial supplies will be available, and only a small number of collection bags may need to be purchased, bag costs are currently £53 per 1000. There are no other resource or operational cost implications during this period.

11. RISK IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1. The project is designed to provide data and information on participation rates, capture rates, tonnage information and processing capabilities, all of which provide valuable insights ahead of 2025 service changes. Expanding the existing trial focusses on streamlining the collection from the recycling wheeled bin, which better represents the new recycling services 2025 collection arrangements.
- 11.2. The risk of not expanding the participation numbers means going into 2025 with no soft testing of collection from wheeled bins to iron out possible operational issues.
- 11.3. Not expanding would also be a loss of opportunities to test new contract MRF capabilities for handling of the soft plastics materials.
- 11.4. Any risk that may arise in unforeseen operational challenges would already exist in existing collection operations (weather, strikes, covid).
- 11.5. There is a small risk associated with increased MRF processing contract costs in 2025 due to processing soft plastics from April 2025 rather than from August 2025 but these risks exist based on the new services and soft plastics tonnages would be from a small proportion of the households. It is not possible to identify this risk while the market is still determining the processing requirements since the government announcement. There are some potential advantages of being an 'early adopter' of soft plastics with MRF contract bidders having clarity over our material types, quantities and composition.

12. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 12.1. All operational services are available to the trial area participants and will continue to receive standard services as usual. If any resident is designated as an assisted collection property, the trial materials will be collected under assisted collection contractual requirements, so all services provision remains the same.
- 12.2. There are no equalities implications.

13. SOCIAL VALUE IMPLICATIONS

- 13.1. The Social Value Act and “go local” requirements do not apply to this report.

14. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1. There are no known negative impacts.
- 14.2. The positive impacts of the trial have been increased awareness around plastics recycling, in particular single use items which are predominantly soft plastics. There is a greater understanding of potential advantages of collection, handling, and end markets for a difficult but often requested material for recycling. These are single use plastics and the recycling of them will decrease litter and reduce resource use as recycling these soft plastics saves materials going for residual waste disposal. All these things prime us and markets for effective soft plastics collection and recycling / recovery ahead of 2025.
- 14.3. All material collected as part of the trial are being diverted from the residual waste stream and therefore reducing material being sent to landfill/Energy from Waste. Material processing is part of the wider trial and the end destinations will vary whilst processing options are being tested, all material is being process tested in the UK.

15. HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 15.1. The project is being managed within existing resources with any additional resources funded by the project. We do not anticipate any impacts on existing resources; the initial set up resource requirements are considered manageable within the existing team resources.

16. APPENDICES

- 16.1. Appendix 1 – FlexCollect Interim Report
- 16.2. Appendix 2 – FlexCollect initial trial data

17. CONTACT OFFICERS

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18. BACKGROUND PAPERS

18.1 *Record of Decision – FlexCollect Trial 19 October 2023*