

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

25 July 2024

Present: Councillor A Grimston (Chair)
Councillor J Dhindsa (Vice-Chair) (in the Chair for item 23)
Councillors S Ahmed, K Clarke-Taylor, G Duduta, P Hill, A Khan,
C Newstead and R Short

Also present: Councillor Kennedy Rodrigues
Councillor Tim Williams
Darren Harding (Veolia)

Officers: Associate Director of Planning, Infrastructure and Economy
Associate Director of Environment and Community (virtual)
Senior Democratic Services Officer
Contract Manager Waste Recycling and Market (LA)
Contract Manager Waste Recycling and Market (RY)

21 **Apologies for Absence/Committee Membership**

There were two changes of membership for this meeting; Councillor Clarke-Taylor replaced Councillor Kloss and Councillor Ahmed replaced Councillor Osborn.

Councillor Bell, a signatory to the call-in, also sent his apologies.

22 **Disclosure of interests (if any)**

There were no disclosures of interest.

23 **Call-in**

The Cabinet decision taken on 8 July 2024, minute reference 16, regarding the fortnightly recycling proposal and supporting policies, had been called in by Councillors Khan, Bell and Ezeifedi. The reason for the call-in had been included in the agenda. The committee had received a copy of the report and appendices to Cabinet, the minutes from Cabinet's meeting, the completed call-in request and the call-in procedures.

The Associate Director of Planning, Infrastructure and Economy was asked to introduce the item. He explained that when a key decision was made, the decision could not be implemented until the call-in period had expired or the call-in process was complete. This item was to review the decision and the reasons for call-in within agenda packs.

The committee would hear from all parties and ask questions and at the end had to decide to ratify the decision or to refer it back to Cabinet.

Councillor Khan was invited to present the reasons for calling in Cabinet's decision.

Councillor Khan explained that, firstly, he felt that there had been a lack of adequate consultation with residents to enable the policy to be implemented correctly. This lack of engagement meant the council had insufficient feedback to determine its impact, particularly on larger families and those living in higher density areas. Secondly, the decision had been taken to save money but there had been no comprehensive review of alternative cost-saving measures which would have a lower impact on a wider range of residents and would be less disruptive. Finally, there had been no detailed analysis of the impact on other services. The policy could result in an increase in litter, improperly stored waste, and addressing these would undermine any savings and have detrimental environmental implications.

The committee were invited to ask Councillor Khan any questions.

Councillor Khan was asked where he would find the necessary savings. He referred to Labour's alternative budget which contained measures including efficiency savings, digitalisation of the council's magazine and removal of the Political Assistant post which would provide annual savings of £138K.

The committee noted the equalities impact assessment that had been provided and asked what further information was needed to assess the impact. Councillor Khan advised that he wanted to focus on certain areas where residents already struggled to store the number of bins required and he noted the impact on pedestrians. Larger families had higher outputs and he also expressed concern about litter and fly-tipping.

It was noted that the government was bringing in service changes required by 2026, the committee asked about the risk of incurring further costs in the service. Councillor Khan stated that Watford was performing well in recycling and this would be a retrograde step.

Members discussed the nature of fly-tipped waste and whether it constituted recyclables or other waste, such as from construction. Councillor Khan's concern was that more waste would be left out and the council would incur the cost of removal; a more proactive approach would be needed.

It was noted that some people fly-tipped their waste already and would not change their behaviour based on this policy. Other councillors felt that fly-tipping would be more likely when bins filled up more quickly. The committee noted that 70% of recycling bins were less than 50% full at collection, members questioned where the additional waste would come from. Councillor Khan responded that there needed to be better education around recycling, he anticipated that problems would increase.

Councillors considered bin capacity and the need to maximise this through ensuring the recyclable materials were flattened. Councillor Khan advised that this was part of his call-in around consulting residents on behaviours and impacts.

Discussing the merits of a trial period to enable residents to feed back, Councillor Khan responded that a smaller scale pilot could provide valuable information.

The portfolio holders were invited to ask questions of Councillor Khan.

Councillor Williams asked for more information about the alternative budget savings that had been highlighted. Councillor Khan provided details of the savings in Labour's alternative budget including the digitisation of the council magazine which could save £80K in 3 years, a redesign of the communications department could save £55K per year, the removal of the Political Assistant post would save £57K annually, therefore in total these would save £138K per year; this was more than the saving to move to fortnightly recycling.

Councillor Rodrigues asked about the impact of these proposals on digitally isolated residents. He also asked about the impact of not proceeding with this policy for other services that were prioritised in Labour's budget, including street cleansing. Councillor Khan noted that many council services were already digitised and strategies were in place to ensure inclusion. He felt that the magazine was party political and did not include details of Labour councillors' work. The headroom in his proposals still enabled the provision of additional street cleansing resource. The Vice Chair noted that some communities did not speak English to access the magazine.

Councillor Ezeifedi was invited to present her reasons for signing the call-in.

Councillor Ezeifedi was pleased to support the call-in as refuse collections were one of the council's key responsibilities and she was concerned about the lack of consultation. Other issues were subject to consultation and residents had not voted for this change. She supported the idea of a trial in West Watford and residents' voices needed to be heard.

The committee were invited to ask Councillor Ezeifedi any questions.

Councillor Ezeifedi was asked about the requirements to consult about certain issues. She felt that this was a significant decision and it would be valuable to understand whether residents would support this policy to address financial pressures and how it would be accommodated in residents' lives.

The committee asked what practical steps should be taken to consult residents. Councillor Ezeifedi advised that residents' feedback was collected in different ways, inviting representatives of communities, using digital and paper methods as well as focus groups. Responding to a question about the cost, she advised that it would be an investment to ensure the policy had the best outcomes to avoid more costs in the longer term.

There were no questions for the councillor from portfolio holders and they were invited to present the case for the decision.

Councillor Williams presented the case on behalf of the Cabinet. He thanked the committee for the invitation and noted it was a valuable part of the democratic process.

The decision had been taken to move from weekly to fortnightly recycling after much consideration and with a heavy heart. The council had suffered many years of sustained under-funding by government, and the sector was £6.2 billion short to be able to deliver services after the last budget setting round. Councils were closing facilities, redesigning services, restructuring and withdrawing grants but despite this some still were declaring effective bankruptcy. Full Council had last week passed a motion to address local government finance. The budget-setting process had been forensic and the Veolia contract had been studied line by line.

The policy would only affect low-rise properties and low-rise flats; it would not affect 1/3 properties in Watford. Eight of the ten district councils in Hertfordshire collected recycling fortnightly and nearly 80% nationwide also operated on this basis. He anticipated that many of the remaining councils would be making the same policy change. East Herts and North Herts, which were run by Labour and Green administrations, were moving recycling and residual waste collections to a 3 weekly basis due to financial pressures. The change would align Watford with 80% councils' collection regimes. Seven of the top ten recycling areas had fortnightly collections, including neighbouring St Albans which was also operated by Veolia. There was no correlation with recycling levels. Watford was in the top 20% of recycling councils and the ambition was to continue to improve.

The portfolio holders were aware that residents might have concerns and communications would support the change. He noted that 70% of bins were less than 50% full and these households should be able to accommodate the change. Those with a 140l bin could swap to 240l and households of four or more could request an additional bin. Households could leave out a clearly labelled sack and keen recyclers would be considered for an extra bin. These mitigations were more generous than in other areas.

Addressing the areas in the call-in, Councillor Williams first turned to resident engagement. Residents' concerns had been taken into account and recycling bins were monitored. He reiterated that 1/3 of households would be unaffected. Larger households had been considered and generous mitigations were in place. This was not a trail-blazing approach; the impact was known and tried and there had been extensive benchmarking. There were more concerns about the authorities moving to an untested 3-weekly pattern. The measure had been included in the budget and discussed at the People Panel. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 did not impose consultation and the move was in line with simpler recycling requirements coming forward in 2026. An

outreach officer would support residents with the change and the changes to the service in 2020 had also been successful.

Turning to the financial impetus for the decision; this was a driver as well as considering the sustainability impacts. Waste collection services had a high carbon footprint and reducing collection frequency would support an improvement. Budget proposals had been tested at the People Panel which was of the view that resources should be to focus on the most-valued services and waste was not highlighted. The Cabinet did not wish to pursue other options such as reducing street care and park budgets, given their greater impact.

In terms of the wider impact, there had been a detailed analysis of the service and risk and mitigations were in the report. Fortnightly recycling was widely delivered throughout the country, there was no link with recycling rates and Watford was second in Hertfordshire for recycling. There was no reason to anticipate an impact on recycling rates; space to recycle would remain and even be enhanced.

Recommendations were now coming forward from the 2018 government Resources and Waste Strategy which included extended producer responsibility and a deposit return scheme, both would reduce the waste in bins. Watford stood out as an urban council for recycling performance of over 50% where Harrow was 35% and Luton 29.5%. Mitigations would be in place and the policy would be supported by a communications campaign and an outreach officer. There would also be outreach around fly-tipping and there was no anticipated impact on street cleansing. The Veolia contract was robust and the litter pick and fly tip response times would remain the same. The decision would also support sustainability targets by reducing the impact of the Veolia fleet and our carbon emissions.

In conclusion, Councillor Williams advised that the decision had not been taken lightly with a good understanding of the impact and benchmarking. It was important that the scrutiny committee were open minded and informed to make a decision and for the benefit of Watford having regard to the financial situation.

The committee was invited to ask the portfolio holders questions.

Asked about the impact on fly-tipping evidenced in other areas, Darren Harding confirmed that in St Albans no excess waste or fly-tipping had been evidenced. Fly-tipping contents were reviewed and were typically a mixture of different materials including construction waste.

The committee asked Veolia to comment on the feasibility of a trial area. Darren Harding stated that it would be difficult to ensure that different demographics were included due to the different bin usage in different areas as well as the impact of seasonality. Fortnightly collections were tried and tested elsewhere.

Councillor Williams was asked whether the changes would lead to a capacity impact in the future when soft plastics were collected. He responded that soft plastics would be

collected from 2027 and extended producer responsibilities would create capacity. Officers added that it was anticipated that companies would move away from soft plastics and use alternative materials.

The Vice-Chair asked about the timelines of the proposals for fortnightly collections and what officers had been asked to consider. Councillor Williams advised that the budget process was constant, and various options were considered from late 2023. In-depth review of this policy began in early 2024 but it was not initially considered by the executive for decision until late May, before which savings could have been found elsewhere. No decision had been made at the time of the election; Cabinet had been due to make a decision in June but this was moved to July due to the general election. Councillor Rodrigues added that at the time of budget setting in January, a budgetary gap remained and savings were still being sought.

Councillor Khan advised that he had been informed by a Veolia operative on the local election day. He referred to the implementation costs of £310K; noting that it would take 3 years to offset the costs, he asked what was anticipated in years 4, 5 and 6 and whether the initiative was therefore worthwhile. Officers advised that under the extended producer responsibility legislation there was a requirement to be deemed efficient and effective. Maintaining the weekly approach risked payments under this scheme. The environmental considerations added weight to the decision as did the forthcoming schemes to increase bin capacity. The council wished to be in the best possible position for the 2028 contract renewal process. Councillor Williams added that bins had a 20-year lifecycle and so capital costs were considered over 20 years.

In response to a further question about future capital costs, officers confirmed that the council was in a strong position for the national changes. A route map to 2027 was in place and most aspects of the service were already compliant. The £310K capital projection cost was likely to go down and confirmation had been received that the food waste collections were also compliant.

The committee discussed the communications approach. There was a full communication plan with different communications methods which included engagement with community leaders. Leaflets would focus on the key messaging including how to increase bin capacity if required. The website would have a translation tool. Wider recycling messages around bin sharing between neighbours, reducing waste and refill shops would not be the focus of the leaflet to households but could be promoted through the website. The outreach officer would provide additional support as needed, including assessing space requirements.

Councillor Khan asked whether the leaflets would be explicit about the mitigations in place. He suggested a small print run for the leaflets in different languages might be beneficial in some areas. Officers confirmed that the mitigation measures would be set out clearly and that additional bins would not incur delivery costs. Most households were not expected to need additional bins but residents would be free to request one.

Clarifying his concerns about both the additional bins and that residents would not be able to request the bins they needed, Councillor Khan noted that this point was in relation to the clarity of the communications.

The committee was invited to discuss the decision.

Some members of the committee felt that while weekly would be preferable, they understood the financial impetus for the decision and would prefer that cost-savings were not made elsewhere such as in park maintenance.

Other members stated that they had listened carefully and understood that other councils took this approach and they were satisfied that it was the right decision. Transparency and consultation with residents and councillors was also important.

It was explained that the People Panel was a collection of residents who the council consulted, the last meeting had not taken place in time for the Cabinet meeting due to the general election.

Another councillor reflected on experiences on other committees and hearing the trends in local government finances and she understood the rationale.

Responding to a question about smart bins, Darren Harding explained that there were a variety of technologies which included chips and transparent bins but they incurred additional costs.

The Vice Chair commented that the previous Mayor had stated that she was proud of the weekly waste and recycling services.

Councillor Khan's view was that the net savings did not make the change worthwhile over 3 years given the wider impact. Council services should be safeguarded and the savings did not justify the change.

Councillor Rodrigues responded to this point noting that the bins had a lifecycle of 20 years and the savings would increase over time as there were more homes. He felt there was a strong financial case.

Councillor Khan moved that the decision be referred back to Cabinet because it did not make financial sense and that there were other ways to save £110K.

He added that the savings opportunities he had proposed were long-term, saved capital and would add to the Economic Impact Reserve.

On being put to the committee, the motion was lost.

Councillor Grimston moved to ratify the decision.

On being put to the committee, the motion was carried.

The committee asked that all their deliberations be shared with Cabinet as part of their response to the call-in and that it be noted that there had been a robust discussion.

The Vice Chair thanked the committee, the portfolio holders and Councillor Khan for their time and discussions.

Resolved –

that the decision is ratified.

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.05 pm
and finished at 9.15 pm