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### South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils Bulky Waste Pilot 2014

Setting up a partnership to deliver a re-use service can take many forms, but even a relatively modest collection service, across two authorities, with a small number of potential re-use partners, can find success. The approach taken by South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse authorities in working with a local third sector re-use organisation, the Kathryn Turner Trust, was both adaptive and new to Oxfordshire.

Changes to the disposal arrangements for waste in Oxfordshire in 2014 meant that refuse was destined for a new energy recovery facility, while bulky waste needed to be collected separately. This prompted the councils to re-examine their bulky waste service and look at options for reducing this waste stream.

**Background**

The bulky waste collection service is part of a larger refuse, garden waste, recycling, food waste and street cleansing contract operated by Biffa Waste Services. Referral calls and online bookings for bulky waste collections are taken by the councils’ joint waste administrative team and the range of items collected are those that might be expected when moving house i.e. furniture and large electrical appliances. Garden waste (separately collected), fixtures, fittings, bathroom and kitchen units, doors, boilers and DIY waste are specifically excluded.

All bookings for bulky waste collections operate on a charged basis. There were a total of 4,000 collections in 2013, of which approximately one third were from Vale of White Horse and the rest from South Oxfordshire. In April 2014, for a standard bulky waste booking, residents were asked to put their items out for collection on an arranged weekend, when they were collected by Biffa. However, having items outside for an extended period, or in adverse weather conditions can affect quality and so the caller was also asked if they have tried donating to a third sector organisation. The caller was then offered several numbers for local charities.

The councils felt more could be done to capture re-useable items from the bulky waste collections so alternatives were explored through WRAP’s support.

**Project aims & objectives**

WRAP was contacted to provide expertise and explore options for an alternative service. Previous to the WRAP project, the councils and Biffa had made contact with a number of furniture re-use organisations (FROs) in the area. However, no working arrangement had been set up. WRAP appointed environmental consultants Resource Futures to undertake this task, alongside setting up a re-use forum for Oxfordshire.

The aim was to identify potential partners and, working alongside waste contractor Biffa, to set up a trial to increase the amount of bulky waste that is collected for re-use. The objectives were to:

* Find a suitable third sector partner willing to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or service level agreement with Biffa;
* Consider and agree operational requirements such as staff, vehicle, premises, resources; and,
* Advise the FRO to ensure it would be in a position to accept more goods and that it had an appropriate business plan in place.

**Project approach**

**Analysis and scenarios**

The project began with a full analysis of the bulky waste collection service, including the current contract requirements and booking logs. As the reuse bookings were kept in paper format, the details were inputted to a spreadsheet by the waste team to streamline the analysis. Following this analysis, two preferred options for collection were chosen. The intention was 1) to give people a first option of calling the charities directly to arrange a collection for free, and 2) only if they didn’t wish to do that, to continue with a charged booking with the council.

**New service outline**

The councils and Biffa estimated demand and agreed upon the level of service required in terms of the number of collections over a half-day (or full-day depending on area covered) per week. The Biffa contract for the bulky waste collection service is on a payment per collection basis. Therefore, with Biffa’s agreement, the income received from householders for booked re-use collections was put towards the new service.

**Engaging a subcontractor**

Resource Futures identified four local third sector organisations (TSOs) who were felt to be potentially capable of delivering the new service. Each was introduced to the idea of a joint working arrangement. Three of the four TSOs attended a meeting and all indicated interest in the potential for joint working.

Despite the initial interest, however, only one proposal was received – from The Kathryn Turner Trust (KTT) located in Abingdon. KTT is a registered charity, which started in 2010; their profits support Armed Forces charities, such as SSAFA and Help for Heroes. Meanwhile, work continued on agreeing solutions to eventualities such as van breakdown and staff sickness, and estimating how many re-use collections would be realistic for the geographic area.

**Trial begins (May 2014)**

KTT was engaged to undertake bulky re-use collections, defined as including at least two potentially re-usable items out of every three booked in a geographically defined area over one half-day per week. The arrangement was on a semi-formal basis for an initial duration of three months, meaning there was no formal service level agreement signed at this time although all the details were agreed.

**Operational changes**

During the trial, the councils’ waste administration team asked callers about the quality of all items. If callers have re-useable items and do not wish to phone a charity directly, the team followed a script agreed with KTT and book a re-use collection on behalf of the caller. These bookings were collated and sent to KTT, who then scheduled the collection and calls each householder back to arrange a day and time within the next fortnight (but usually within a few working days) for collection. All other bulky waste collections were still booked and scheduled with Biffa.

**Key challenges**

**Keeping changes to systems manageable**

As only a handful of collections per week were expected to be outsourced to KTT, the booking and reporting system had to be simple to avoid creating an unnecessary administrative burden for the parties involved. The only changes to the councils’ booking system were to ask a limited set of necessary questions on item quality and location, plus setting up a separate booking list for KTT. Information on the tracking and reporting system is below.

**A tracking system for the TSO**

KTT had not needed to track bulky waste items before. It does not apply for grants and re-use credits are not paid in Oxfordshire, so it had not had to calculate tonnages of items collected and re-used. All donations are now recorded on collection sheets and sales recorded in a sales book. As this was a small-scale trial to begin with, a simple labelling system was used to track all items, from council booked collections to end destination.

**Compatibility in computing technology**

Data could not be transferred from KTT’s software to the council provided data spreadsheet. However, because the trial was small it was manageable at this stage to complete returns on paper, and for council staff to then input the data to their system. If the number of bookings was substantially higher, this may need to be revisited and computer software systems upgraded to make them compatible. This particular challenge is common when engaging smaller TSOs and paper systems may still prove to be the best way forward.

**Project outcomes & outputs**

The trial continued, with some changes made to the original setup. As the number of collections per half day were not booking up as anticipated, the booking and financial arrangements with KTT were re-negotiated before the end of the first month. The restrictions on geographical area were removed and widened to cover both councils’ areas.

The new arrangement was for the council to pay KTT on a pay per collect basis. The councils’ waste administration team still took the bookings and payment but advised householders that KTT will call to agree a collection day and time.

In the first six months, almost all items collected were re-used. Out of a total of 1.6 tonnes collected, 1.4 tonnes of bulky items were diverted into re-use. Over half of all items re-used were bed bases (24% of items reused) or mattresses (28% of items re-used). This is unusual, since customers are often less willing to purchase these goods second hand. It is worth noting that in addition to the tonnage collected as part of the joint working project that KTT also collected more than in previous years through householders contacting them directly.

**Key learning points**

**Review often, and encourage flexibility**

Changes to the arrangement made within a month of starting minimised the councils’ exposure to the risk of paying KTT for bookings not taken up. Instead of paying KTT for a block of bookings on a set day per week, the council only paid for the collections they made – the same basis as its main contract with Biffa.

The new arrangement gave KTT control and flexibility over scheduling collections.

**Make sure all bookings are handled the same way**

Whether in person, online or on the phone, all booking systems should ideally follow the same procedure, including using a pre-agreed script and booking in re-use collections, for those who do not wish to phone KTT directly. As the number of re-use collections were lower than anticipated, further analysis discovered that over 50% of bulky waste collection requests are booked online using the web booking form, which did not have the reuse collection option.

**Make sure the booking team is confident in identifying re-usable items**

The councils’ waste administration team supervisor and the booking team visited the charity partner to observe the types and quality of items that the charity was accepting. This helped increase the team’s confidence to book the appropriate items in for re-use collections and inform residents what would happen to their items.

**Ending the trial**

The trial came to an end due to several factors, starting with the councils’ offices being subject to an arson and the councils having to put their business continuity plans in place.

Bookings were paused to cover the vital services. Once services and computer systems came back online, they had to be amended to consider the change in officer working and restraints at that time. This meant that the service needed to be restarted with online bookings only at first. Then as more capacity became available in the team, calls could start to be received.

A channel shift in bookings from phone to internet meant that the opportunity to identify items for reuse severely reduced in number. That reduction remained as residents changed their behaviours and decide to self-service. This change in behaviour meant the opportunities for identifying the items massively reduced and the trial came to a natural end.