

Bulky Waste Re-use Partners in Lancaster

A service level agreement between Lancaster City Council and Furniture Matters has improved the local bulky waste collection service, prioritising re-use and recycling, and resulting in an outstanding re-use rate of 50% in 2011.

Introduction

In 2006 Lancaster City Council entered into a service level agreement (SLA) with Furniture Matters, a social enterprise organisation and charity, to provide waste collection service to the council's 58,000 households.

The partnership's objective was to provide a service that prioritised the re-use of bulky items together with excellent customer service standards.

All bulky waste items collected are taken to a dedicated sort-it centre, where they are separated into four categories: for re-use, re-use following repair, recycling or waste. The charity operates a large-scale repair workshop for bulky goods and provides a range of accredited training to volunteers and trainees. Re-usable items are either sold through their showroom and retail premises in Morecambe and Lancaster, or passed directly to local disadvantaged people via an established referral scheme. This scheme has 100 local community, voluntary and statutory agencies signed up as partners.

Achievements include a 67% combined re-use/recycling rate (50% re-use) for 2011.

Key facts

- Before 2006 householders waited up to 28 days for collection of bulky items. Now over 70% of collections are made within three working days. The agreed service standard is five working days.
- Collecting from inside properties and offering out-of-hours and Saturday collection times has been key to the service's success.
- Collection charges are £18 per 3 items and £3 per additional item (subsidies for those on qualifying benefits are funded by the council).
- Collections are organised using a bespoke database system linked from the council to the charity.
- Re-use and recycling rates have steadily increased to 67% in 2011.
- The bulky waste service has provided wider benefits, including volunteering opportunities and work experience.
- Re-usable items are sold on at low cost to local disadvantaged people via an established referral scheme and also through dedicated retail showrooms in Morecambe and Lancaster.
- Five new jobs have been created through the charity's involvement in the delivery of the service and one job has been safeguarded. The existing council administrator working on the in-house bulky waste service before 2006 was seconded to the charity.

The approach

Background – Lancaster City Council

Until 2006 Lancaster City Council delivered its bulky waste service in-house, offering a free service to 15,000 householders, with no appointment scheme, very little re-use, and recycling covering refrigeration items only. The remainder went to landfill.

In 1999 the charity began promoting the refurbishment and repair of household appliances and furniture through workshops held at its base in Morecambe. Its work became known to the council, which began informally passing bulky items with re-use potential to the charity.

In late 2004 Future Matters approached the council to explore the idea of taking over the entire council's bulky waste service. Meetings took place at the outset, involving not only the council's waste department, but also their communications and customer service teams to advise on the development of a marketing strategy. This review also looked at how the system worked in rural as well as the more densely populated areas.

In 2005, following a review of access to council services, a new customer service and call centre was established, focusing primarily on environmental services. Calls relating to bulky waste collections formed 70% of all calls. With the council's background knowledge and the new call centre in place, combined with the existing activities and experience of the charity, all the components were in place to develop a change in the service delivery.

The council's vision was to improve the bulky waste collection service, through an innovative partnership that would also increase recycling/re-use, reduce landfill and benefit local disadvantaged groups. The name given to this project was 'Bulky Matters'.

The council's objectives were to:

- improve the existing service by working with a third sector partner;
- provide an innovative and customer-focused service;
- provide an environmentally, financially and operationally sustainable service;
- re-use/recycle at least 40% of items collected;
- provide training opportunities for local people; and
- provide a source of electrical items and furniture for local people on low incomes.

Key to the development of the service was the involvement of communications staff at the council. Staff with IT knowledge worked with the customer service call centre and the charity to design the telephone and software information and referral system.

An SLA including terms of payment was in place by 2006, based upon the principles of partnership between the council and the charity. It involved the call centre, council staff (including the secondment of the council's administrator to the charity) and the charity itself.

The council's housing department refers local disadvantaged people, giving them access to low cost furniture and other household appliances.

The approach

Background – Furniture Matters

Furniture Matters has been successfully operating its own household re-use collections since 1999. It was set up to collect unwanted domestic furniture and electrical items for re-use by local disadvantaged people. Items are cleaned, repaired and tested for safety before being sold on for re-use at low cost. The charity has experience of training and supporting people in the repair and refurbishment of donated furniture and electrical items, and has established workshops in Morecambe.

It has always had a good working relationship with the council, and has worked particularly well not only with the waste team but also with the council's communication and IT staff.

The charity approached the council in 2004 with the idea of forming a more official working relationship. In the following two years discussions took place, resulting in the Bulky Matters project and the development of a formal SLA.

Over the past five years, the charity has worked with the council's communication team to produce joint publicity materials and press releases, and both parties are working closely with the customer services team taking householder telephone calls.

The approach

The charity and the council work together to deliver the service. Some key features of the approach are outlined below.

- The council's customer service centre takes the customer bookings, passing the information to the charity via a computer link.
- The charity's extensive database system is linked to the local land and property gazetteer, and the waste collection vehicles are routed zonally by postcode to reduce excessive travel and fuel usage. The system books items into the vehicles by their volumetric size to maximise efficiency and offers residents multiple days and time slots for collection. Slots include two evening collections per week, Saturday collections and time slots within three-hour morning and afternoon periods.
- The use of the database system has helped maintain the tonnage collected but significantly reduced the number of collection journeys.
- The number of collections has halved under the new partnership and despite now charging, the tonnage collected has remained the same – customers are offered appointment times and the facility for items to be collected from inside the house.
- Residual waste is delivered to Lancashire County Council, the waste disposal authority, at no cost to Lancaster City Council or the charity.
- Items are collected by a 7.5 tonne box vehicle, which has compartments to sort both re-usable and recyclable dry materials and wet waste, thereby reducing cross contamination in the vehicle. The vehicle takes all items due for collection, including cathode ray tubes and refrigerators. This negates the need for having two vehicles attending one collection.
- All collected items are bar-coded, and the database system tracks the item from collection through warehousing and repairs to final sale. This allows a detailed audit chain of statistical information, including details of the individuals assisted, items re-used, parts re-used, items recycled, tonnages, people receiving qualifications who have worked with the items from the bulky waste stream, the collection numbers by postcode, zone, and by month.
- The items are taken back to a Sort-it Centre, where they are separated by charity staff into one of four categories: direct re-use, repair, recycling and waste. Basic recycling is carried out immediately with items stored by category. Items requiring further processing, such as refrigerators, are bulked up on site before collection by the WEEE Producer Compliance Scheme sub-contractor. The charity facility is an Approved Authorised Treatment Facility (AATF) and a WEEE Designated Collection Facility (DCF).
- The charity operates large-scale repair workshops for furniture, domestic appliances, IT and bicycles. It provides a range of accredited training to volunteers and trainees, including furniture restoration and repair, PC build, cycle maintenance and repair and domestic appliance repair, all with the aim of supporting maximum re-use and recycling.
- Since the Bulky Matters project was instigated, there has been no significant change in local fly tipping rates. However, the council maintains active measures to manage fly tipping. It does not necessarily expect to see any direct relationship between the method of bulky waste management, including any change to charging levels, and rates of fly tipping.

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Critical success factors and key learning points

From Lancaster City Council's perspective

- **The professionalism of the charity.** The council is delighted to be working with the charity. It believes the success of the project is due to the charity's professional approach, its business focus, and the subsequent confidence of all concerned in the charity's ability to deliver an effective service. This in turn provides confidence that it is a sustainable organisation. It is this high regard for the organisation and its staff that gave council members and officers the confidence to develop the working arrangement. If a social enterprise wants to work with a local authority, it needs to emphasise its business skills alongside its social aspirations.
- **The need for communication.** It is essential to make sure all parties are aware of the service and its objectives, keeping householders and council members up-to-date with regular and detailed communication. Also the council would recommend investment in communication with the partner, whether through staff time or software development. The council also recommends that 'you can never communicate enough' on how you are performing, on resolving issues and sharing learning experiences.

From Furniture Matters' perspective

- **Invest in developing trust between all parties.** This is particularly the case with the householder as client. It is important to turn up for a collection when you have specified that you will (not even half an hour beyond the time slot), as you will be judged upon your reputation and word will spread to other potential users.
- **Staff training is critical.** To ensure that they know how to correctly lift and carry goods safely without causing damage to a householder's property. Staff should all be Criminal Records Bureau checked, trustworthy and professional in their approach.
- **The value of technology.** Use technology to the full alongside a close working relationship. This allows 70% of bookings to be made for collection within three days - all computerised with no room for errors.
- **Provide flexibility on your collections.** Collect from inside properties where possible, and provide out-of-hours and Saturday collections.
- **This flexibility protects local amenity.** Offering collections from inside a property and within three days helps to protect the visual aesthetics of the local environment and can contribute to reducing fly tipping, even with charging. The charity is now using its experience in Lancaster to work with Blackpool Council and Wyre Council, which it believes has resulted in a reduction of fly tipping in the area.

Achievements

- In 2011 re-use and recycling rates increased to 67% combined.
- From introduction of the service to date, the service has achieved over 99% customer satisfaction rates.
- The bulky waste service provides employment opportunities, training and volunteering support to unemployed local people, supporting access to accredited training and qualifications.
- Low paid local people have had the benefit of access to low-cost, safe, electrical and furniture items.
- According to a DEFRA (2009) national study looking at the 'Benefits of third sector involvement in waste management', a case study review of the work of Furniture Matters in the delivery of the bulky waste service in Lancaster demonstrated a social return in investment (SROI) of £5.89 added value per £1 of public money invested. This was the highest amount shown within all the case studies in that report.
- In October 2009 Blackpool Council joined the partnership, followed in 2011 by Wyre Borough Council. The charity now undertakes bulky waste collections in Lancaster, Blackpool and across Wyre.

Contacts

Lancaster City Council

Mark Davies, head of environmental services

T 01524 582 401

E mdavies@lancaster.gov.uk

Furniture Matters

Alison Page, chief executive

T 01524 428 010

E alison@furniturematters.org.uk

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0808 100 2040

www.wrap.org.uk
E-mail: info@wrap.org.uk



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