

## UNISON response to the Welsh Assembly Government - Consultation on the Draft Municipal Sector Plan - Part 1

UNISON welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Welsh Assembly Governments (WAG) Draft Municipal Sector Plan – Part 1. This response is drafted by UNISON's strategic health and safety unit and focuses solely on health and safety concerns stemming from the proposals.

UNISON is Britain's largest public sector trade union with more than 1.3 million members. Our members work in the public services, for private contractors providing public services, and in the essential utilities. They include staff working full or part-time within local authorities. UNISON represents workers within the waste and recycling sector and sits on the tripartite forum, WISH, the Waste Industry Safety and Health Forum.

### **Kerbside Sorting**

It is noted that there is a preference expressed within the various documents forming this consultation, for municipal recycling to be sorted at the kerbside. The usual alternative is to collect the materials together as a bulk (co-mingled) which is sorted at a later stage. It is also suggested within the documents that the WAG may seek to encourage kerbside sorting via financial instruments or later even prescribe how services are carried out.

UNISON fears that encouraging kerbside sorting and the subsequent use of collection boxes will increase the health and safety risks to collection operatives. This in turn may hinder the attainment of some of the objectives under "Towards Zero Waste". These include collecting recyclables without endangering human health, and in a safe, sustainable manner, with safe and healthy working environments for employees.

It is also specified that to meet the new targets within "Towards Zero Waste", local authorities will need to expand their collection services so that all households and communities have access to recycling services with a reasonable level of choice. The examples given include a kerbside sort collection service, but there is no mention of wheelie bins. This would appear to be in conflict with the statements that "services need to be tailored for geographical and demographic circumstances" and that local authorities must examine and adopt best practice on all aspects of collection.

UNISON appreciates that there is a balance to be struck between reaching environmental targets and health and safety risks, but this balance is best achieved by allowing local authorities to assess the local circumstances. This may mean that on occasion, a local authority may judge that wheelie bins are the preferred collection method.

### **Manual Handling and other hazards**

Since the introduction of recycling within Britain, many local authorities have moved away from boxes and kerbside sorting to wheelie bins as a better system because of the lower manual handling risk. This would have followed an assessment of their local environment and hazards, and a review of their past experience.

WAG proposes to carry out further research to consolidate its current evidence and to produce further evidence about the financial, social, and environmental implications of different collections methods. It is stated that this will include an evaluation of sustainable development comparing kerbside sort and co-mingled services, including a cradle to the grave assessment of cost. As has been recognised, “an increase in waste segregation at homes might result in changes to occupational health risk” including road traffic accidents.

The proposed research must also consider the health and safety impact of kerbside sorting upon the operatives who will be doing this job. Kerbside sorting introduces greater manual handling with its inherent risks, and may increase slip and trip risks due to restricted vision. Whilst recognising that risks from road traffic accidents may increase, the consultation also states that “there is currently no available evidence to indicate a significant risk from well managed collection activities”. However, it is surely preferable where possible, to design out any risks by adopting a system which is risk free or lower risk, in preference to adopting a system with greater risk hoping that this can be managed out.

If kerbside sorting increases health and safety risks to the operatives, this will have a financial impact on them including time off work following injury possibly with reduced or loss of pay, and loss of their job where the injury is sufficiently serious. Employers costs will include sick pay and the wider costs of sickness absence, retraining and staff turnover. Financial costs to the state will include benefits and health care. A social impact will also follow if the main breadwinner loses pay or their job.

### **Regulations and current research**

The Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992 require the employer to “so far as reasonably practicable, avoid the need for his employees to undertake any manual handling... which involve a risk of their being injured”. “Where it is not reasonably practicable... a suitable and sufficient” risk assessment with appropriate steps to reduce the risks is required. In the guidance to these regulations reference is made to mechanical assistance such as a trolley or a truck which it states, reduce the level of manual handling, reduce the effort required, and use bodily forces more efficiently, thereby reducing injury.

Research by HSL, the Health and Safety Laboratory must also be taken into account. HSL/2006/25, Manual Handling in Kerbside Collection and Sorting of Recyclables, (Pinder 2) found that carrying a box restricted visibility and is likely to increase the risk of tripping and slipping due to the range of floor surfaces that crew members have to negotiate. Amongst its recommendations, Pinder 2 states that since previous research suggests that wheelie bins reduce the risk of manual handling injuries, where possible it is therefore more appropriate to use wheeled bins. This research supports the findings within the earlier study, Manual Handling in Refuse Collection, HSL/2002/21, commonly known as Pinder 1.

More recent research of relevance is the HSL Research Report, RR609 – Collecting, Transfer, Treatment, and Processing Household Waste and Recyclables, 2008. This research had two objectives. One was to provide a tool to assess and compare the occupational health and safety risks of different management systems for the collection of waste and recyclables. The other was to provide stakeholders with guidance and information to inform their selection of collection and processing systems, thereby ensuring the occupational health and safety of workers, so far as reasonably practicable, whilst meeting environmental targets. This resulted in the Risk Comparator Tool which allows a waste and recycling operator to consider all the relevant local factors when choosing the appropriate collection method.

If WAG moves towards using funding to encourage local authorities to use kerbside sorting, possibly later enforcing this preference by making it a legal prescription, this will be done without a risk assessment of the merits of alternative methods as relevant to different localities.

### **Equality of Access**

Pinder 2 also found that only 20% of the British female adult population would find it acceptable to lift a box of the average weight observed by the study (as compared to 90% of men). A preference or prescription for boxes would thus be unfavourable to the employment of women within this sector, and would increase the risk of harm to them.

Since a stated aim is to provide work for those with health issues, boxes may also hinder the employment of those with certain health issues. The greater manual handling forces required as compared with a wheelie bin may reduce the number of individuals who are capable of undertaking the job. A physical injury or even disability is perhaps more likely to prevent someone from carrying a heavy box of recyclables than it is from moving a wheelie bin of recyclables.

### **In Summary**

The founding principles behind UK health and safety legislation is one of risk assessment. This requires an assessment of the hazards, risks, and available methods of prevention and control applied to the circumstance and locality of the task or event. If WAG financially penalises local authorities or prescribes in law against wheelie bins, then local authorities will be compromised when it comes to managing the collection activates in a safe and healthy manner for they will no-longer have access to the full spectrum or indeed possibly the most appropriate method of prevention or control. UNISON believes that local authorities as employers should not be hampered in their role of risk assessing hazards at work.

In view of the manual handling regulations, the Pinder research, and the Risk Comparator Tool, UNISON also believes that WAG must conduct the further research proposed before it makes any final decision in favour of kerbside collection. This research must also consider the potential effect that prescribing boxes and kerbside sorting might have with regard to equality of access and potential or current workers who are women, who have a disability, or who suffer some form of ill health.

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