

From: Simon Jones: Corporate Director for Growth, Environment and Transport

To: Jamie Henderson, Cabinet Member for Environment, Coastal Regeneration, & Public Health

Subject: Kent Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy 2026 - 2031

Key decision 26/00008

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of report: Not applicable

Future Pathway of report: Cabinet member Decision

Electoral Division: All electoral divisions

Summary:

Kent County Council, in collaboration with the 12 district, borough and city councils through the Kent Resource Partnership (KRP), has developed the third Kent Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy 2026–2031.

This strategy sets out a clear delivery framework that responds to current national legislative reforms including Extended Producer Responsibility (2025), Simpler Recycling (2026), the Deposit Return Scheme (2027) and the Emissions Trading Scheme (2028) alongside local priorities such as delivering cost-effective services and supporting Kent’s transition to a circular economy.

Kent faces a critical juncture in waste management. Rising disposal costs, new national legislation and the upcoming Emissions Trading Scheme will significantly increase financial pressures on KCC as the waste disposal authority if action is not taken. Endorsing the Kent Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy 2026–2031 signals a clear commitment to a whole-system approach that focuses on reducing residual waste, increasing recycling and preparing services for local government reorganisation. This strategy and the associated action that it drives is essential to protect the Kent taxpayer and meet statutory obligations while simultaneously delivering environmental benefits.

Recommendation(s):

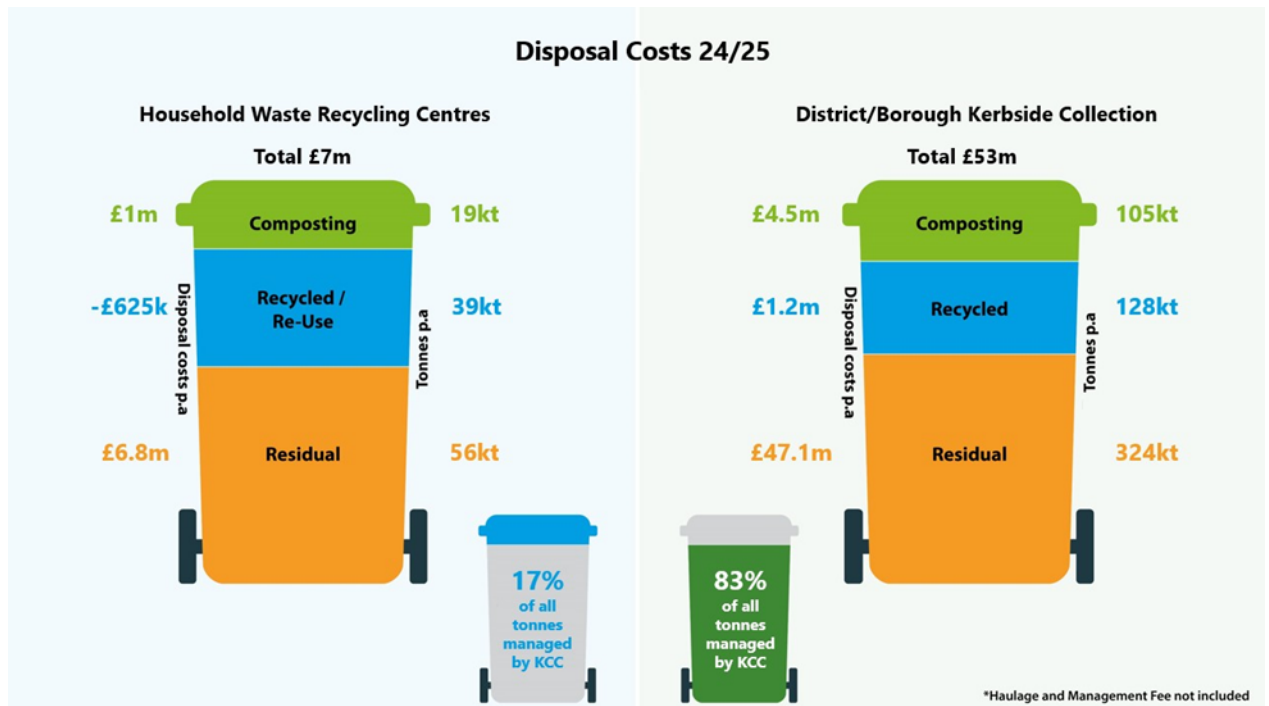
The Cabinet Member for Environment, Coastal Regeneration & Public Health is asked to the proposed decision as detailed in the attached Proposed Record of Decision document (Appendix A).

1. Introduction

1.1 The proposed strategy provides clarity of direction for the Kent Resource Partnership over the next five years, a clear jointly adopted mandate for continued and renewed partnership action, going beyond just compliance with legislation, to achieve greater efficiency and effective management of

household waste and prepare waste services for local government reorganisation.

- 1.2 Kent County Council is the household Waste Disposal Authority for Kent and has responsibility for disposing of the waste collected by the borough and district authorities and for running 19 household waste recycling centres across Kent for householders to dispose of their waste material.
- 1.3 District, city and borough councils are the Waste Collection Authorities in Kent and are responsible for collecting household waste from the kerbside and delivering it to KCC for disposal.
- 1.4 83% of the household waste disposed of in Kent is collected by the Waste Collection Authorities at the kerbside. This means that KCC has limited direct control over both the quantity and quality of most of the recyclables entering the system.
- 1.5 In 2024/25 KCC spent £53m disposing of the waste collected from the kerbside by the Waste Collection Authorities.



- 1.6 Of the £53m spent, almost £48m was on the processing of residual waste – waste that cannot be recycled, composted or reused. This includes waste contaminated with non recyclable materials or waste that has been incorrectly separated prior to collection making it unsuitable for recycling or composting.
- 1.7 Diverting just 10% of residual waste to recycling could save over £6m per year.
- 1.8 The 2025 waste composition analysis suggests that 52% of residual waste could be recyclable.
- 1.9 There are a number of factors that contribute to the levels of recycling that are achieved including:

- Waste collection authority service design – how often recycling is collected, what services are offered and what waste separation requirements there are
- Contamination levels – the presence of back sacks, food, textiles or other non-recyclables in the waste presented for recycling
- Resident behaviour – correct separation and presentation of waste require resident engagement and motivation
- Housing types – flats and areas with a large percentage of rented properties often have lower participation rates and higher contamination rates
- Legislative requirements – UK legislation currently specifies that Waste Collection Authorities must collect two types of recyclable materials (paper/card and glass) separately from the rest of the household waste, but critically not how much of this waste they must collect

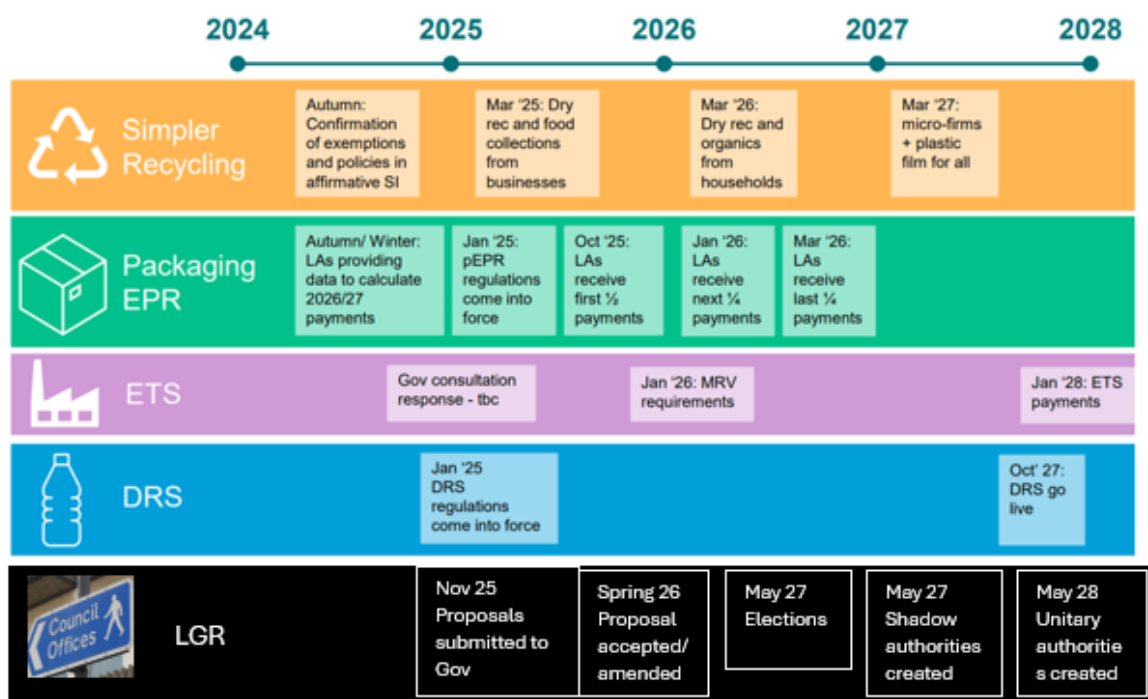
1.10 Kent’s overall recycling rate has hovered around 41–44% for the past decade, showing very little upward movement since about 2014–15. Before COVID, the rate was already plateauing near 42%, and despite fluctuations in landfill and energy recovery, recycling performance from kerbside collections has remained largely static since then.

1.11 To mitigate the budget pressures of rising disposal costs and achieve more efficient and effective waste management that both reduces residual waste and drives up recycling requires a whole system approach. Only by working in partnership with the 12 district, borough and city councils, will we be able to reduce kerbside waste and divert more to recycling, composting and reuse. The Kent joint municipal waste management strategy (strapline to be added) is at the heart of this partnership.

2. Background and drivers for change

2.1

Figure 1 : National picture |



KCC faces escalating costs to meet its statutory duty to dispose of household waste. From January 2028, Energy from Waste facilities will fall under the UK Emissions Trading Scheme, adding an estimated £16 million annually to disposal costs if residual waste tonnages remain unchanged. Simpler Recycling (2026), the Deposit Return Scheme (2027) will reshape collection systems and funding models. The Kent Joint Municipal Waste Strategy positions Kent to mitigate these risks in the most efficient way and to maximise leverage from new funding streams such as Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR).

- 2.1.1 The Kent Resource Partnership has a long history (approx. 20 years) of collaboration and successful waste initiatives, including lobbying for legislative change. Membership of the KRP includes KCC as the waste disposal authority and the 12 district, borough and city councils (excluding Medway). Each partner authority provides a financial contribution to a single projects budget that enables countywide action, avoids duplication of project resources and focuses on whole system operational efficiencies.
- 2.1.2 The Waste and Emissions Trading Act 2003 required councils in two-tier areas to produce joint waste management strategies. The first joint waste strategy was adopted by all 13 councils in 2007. An interim revision was completed in 2018 with an end date of 2020/21.
- 2.1.3 Although revision was planned, ongoing operational challenges following the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with several years of uncertainty over planned Government waste reforms delayed the revision and this is now overdue.
- 2.1.4 More recently, the emerging plans to deliver Local Government Reorganisation makes it more critical to ensure clarity of focus for waste management services in the next five years. Continuing to drive forwards efficiencies and consistency in waste management systems and services across collection and disposal will create the conditions for a successful transition to new authority structures.
- 2.1.5 Until 2018-19, Kent had been delivering small year-on-year improvements, reducing residual waste per household and increasing recycling rates, with an excellent record of reducing landfilled waste to a very low level.
- 2.1.6 Since the pandemic and in line with the national average, performance has declined. However, Kent's performance has declined more sharply than similar authorities in the south east, whose performance has seen a recovery towards pre-pandemic levels. This reduced performance has a direct impact on the cost of waste disposal, with lower recycling rates meaning more of Kent's waste is disposed of by incineration (energy from waste). Gate fees for recycling and composting waste are almost five times lower than for incineration (energy from waste) per tonne.
- 2.1.7 From 2028, new legislation will bring waste sent to energy from waste facilities under the Emissions Trading Scheme, introducing a carbon tax on fossil-based materials. Early estimates suggest this could add millions of pounds to KCCs annual disposal costs. However, the exact scope and tax levels remain uncertain, so the full financial impact is not yet known.

2.2 A refreshed approach

- 2.2.1 2025 marked the start of a four-year period of legislative change in the waste sector requiring changes to frontline service offers and bringing forward new financial mechanisms. In response, Kent Resource Partnership has refreshed its remit to address the immediate and future challenges and opportunities for household waste management.
- 2.2.2 2025 also saw the establishment of the Kent and Medway Environment Members Board, bringing together environmental and waste services under a single governance structure for the first time. Joint opportunities include greater resource efficiency, reducing carbon emissions and preventing environmental pollution.
- 2.2.3 Appointing a new strategic lead for the Kent Resource Partnership in January 2025, enabled the partnership to revisit its purpose and direction and complete the refresh of the joint strategy. A series of workshops and stakeholder engagement sessions were held late spring/summer to inform the development of the strategy. (See Appendix B)
- 2.2.4 Key aims of the refreshed strategy:
1. Operational Excellence – Efficient, sustainable waste collection and disposal.
 2. Circular Economy Pathway – Retain material value, create green jobs, and reduce carbon emissions.
 3. Behaviour Change – Evidence-led campaigns to reduce waste and contamination.
 4. Transition to Unitary System – Align governance and services for efficiency.

The refreshed strategy will be supported by an annual delivery plan that will outline the key actions that will take place in order to deliver and measure improvement and success.

- 2.2.5 In addition, the receipt of packaging Extended Producer Responsibility funding created an opportunity for KCC to direct some officer resource to develop and deliver a programme of resident engagement and behaviour change projects based on new evidence and data collected. The objective was to capture recyclable waste that is being lost to incineration (energy from waste providing opportunities to reduce disposal costs).
- 2.2.6 A behaviour change ‘nudge’ intervention designed by the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) Behaviour Change unit, had been piloted in late 2024 and had achieved early success in two districts by engaging more residents to separate and recycle their food waste rather than dispose of it in their residual waste. This success discussed and shared through the KRP, encouraged other collection authorities to engage, and by the autumn of 2025 food waste capture had consistently increased by over 20% across six districts. By 31st March 2026, all ten Districts that offer a separate food waste recycling service will have delivered this intervention. Food waste that is collected and disposed of separately costs KCC £11 per tonne compared to the c£120 per tonne cost of disposal of residual waste and therefore the savings to KCC through this successful project have been substantial. Due to this the project is expected to pay back on the investment in under one year and demonstrates

what is achievable through coordinated partnership working.

- 2.2.7 This project success confirmed that behaviour change should be one of the key aims of the refreshed joint strategy, recognising that residents play an important role and enable waste collection services to be more successful in delivering improved recycling performance and reducing residual waste.
- 2.2.8 Expertise was sought to develop a behaviour change approach in more detail, to both inform and complement the Kent Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy. KCC contracted the Waste and Resource Action Programme (WRAP) Behaviour Change unit to carry out additional research and co-design a five-year behaviour change strategy. This complementary strategy is complete and will inform future KRP projects and activity.

3. Financial Implications

- 3.1 The cost of developing the strategy is limited to officer time spent engaging and consulting stakeholders and drafting the document along with minimal design costs ahead of publication.
- 3.2 Approving and adopting the Kent Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy is a strategic commitment only. This decision does not authorise immediate changes to KCC's service delivery. While the strategy will be implemented through the Kent Resource Partnership and overseen by the Kent & Medway Environment Members Board, any changes to KCC services, budgets, or contractual arrangements arising from delivery will remain subject to KCC's own governance processes.

4. Legal implications

- 4.1 This strategy and its delivery through the Kent Resource Partnership meets the statutory requirements of the Waste and Emissions Trading Act 2003, which requires joint waste management strategies to be agreed and delivered in two-tier authority areas.

5. Equalities implications

- 5.1 An Equality Impacts Screening Assessment has been completed, and no significant positive or negative equality impacts have been identified. This strategy does not require changes to delivered services.
- 5.2 All future projects, communications and resident engagement initiatives implemented to deliver this strategy will be assessed for equality impacts at the design stage by the lead officer and any changes to service delivery or contractual commitments that meet the key decision threshold will remain subject to KCC's own governance processes.

6. Other corporate implications

- 6.1 Successful delivery through the Kent Resource Partnership, is expected to reduce the tonnage of residual household waste received for disposal, which will enable Kent County Council to reduce disposal costs, including mitigating

the additional financial pressures of new legislation such as the Emissions Trading Scheme, expected in 2028. Savings delivered will contribute to meeting challenging future budgets or offsetting budget pressures from other services.

7. Governance

- 7.1 Delivery of the strategy will be carried out by the Kent Resource Partnership, reporting to the Kent and Medway Environment Members Board (and where required Kent Joint Chief Executives and/or Kent Leaders).
- 7.2 The Strategy will be published externally and communicated to the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.
- 7.3 Approving and adopting the Kent Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy is a strategic commitment only. This decision does not authorise immediate changes to KCC's service delivery. While the strategy will be implemented through the Kent Resource Partnership and overseen by the Kent & Medway Environment Members Board, any changes to KCC services, budgets, or contractual arrangements arising from delivery will remain subject to KCC's own governance processes,

8. Conclusions

- 8.1 Endorsing the strategy will make a clear commitment by Kent County Council to contribute positively and proactively to the Kent Resource Partnership, to deliver a whole system approach to managing household waste, reduce environmental impacts and deliver efficient and effective waste management services for Kent's residents.

9. Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet Member for Environment, Coastal Regeneration & Public Health is asked to the proposed decision as detailed in the attached Proposed Record of Decision document (Appendix A).

Background Documents

- 10.1 Kent Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy 2026 - 2031
- 10.2 Appendix B Stakeholder Engagement list
- 10.3 EqlA

11. Contact details

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