

From: Simon Jones, Corporate Director of Growth, Environment and Transport
To: Susan Carey, Cabinet Member for Environment
Subject: Booking to visit a Kent County Council Household Waste Recycling Centre
Key decision: 21/00123
Electoral Division: Countywide

Summary: After a period of temporary closure during the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic from 24 March 2020, Kent County Council (KCC) re-opened the Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) on 15 May 2020 and used a booking system to safely manage access.

Whilst the booking system was introduced to help manage demand at the HWRCs in response to social distancing and revised workplace rules, it has provided operational benefit and received positive customer feedback.

As a result, a public consultation was undertaken to gain views from the public and stakeholders on the future use of a booking system to access the KCC HWRCs.

Overall, more respondents felt positively about the future use of a booking system. Of those that felt negatively, the main reason was wanting to be able to visit an HWRC on the day. This concept has been trialled and is now operating at Folkestone and Maidstone HWRCs and, should the booking system remain in place, will be extended to all HWRCs.

This report sets out the findings of the consultation and makes a recommendation regarding the future use of a booking system.

Recommendation(s):

As Cabinet Member for Environment, I agree:

for the Waste Management service to operate permanently a booking system for customers to access Kent County Council's Household Waste Recycling Centres and,

for the Corporate Director for Growth, Environment and Transport to keep progress of the booking system under review and to inherit the main delegations via the Officer Scheme of Delegation to make any further operational changes to the booking system to maximise customer service.

The Record of Decision is shown at Appendix A

1. Introduction

1.1 This paper presents the findings from the recent Kent County Council (KCC) consultation 'Booking to visit a Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC)'.

1.2 KCC Waste Management operates in a two-tier system. KCC is the statutory Waste Disposal Authority (WDA), responsible for the receipt at Waste Transfer Stations (WTSs) and onward processing / disposal of household waste which is collected by

the District and Borough councils as the Waste Collection Authorities (WCAs). KCC also has the statutory responsibility to provide an HWRC service to residents.

- 1.3 KCC operates 18 HWRCs across the County for the use of Kent's 1.6 million residents to bring their household waste for recycling and final disposal.
- 1.4 In March 2020, when the country entered the first lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, KCC temporarily closed its 18 HWRCs and concentrated resources on the Waste Transfer Stations to ensure the kerbside waste collections from the district/borough councils were prioritised and also provide assistance to the district/borough councils in collection at a time when staffing levels were reduced.
- 1.5 KCC re-opened all the HWRCs on 15 May 2020 accepting all types of waste using a booking system to manage the numbers of visitors to each site and ensure social distancing for both customers and staff. The booking system was also initially used to fairly ration limited capacity with limits on bookings per household that were lifted and finally removed in line with increased capacity.
- 1.6 Whilst the booking system was developed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, it has provided additional benefits, as described in detail in section 3.
- 1.7 Periodic survey feedback also showed that a most customers found booking convenient and useful, whilst others preferred to just 'turn up and go'. As a result, public consultation was undertaken to gain more in-depth views from the public and stakeholders on the future use of a booking system to access the HWRCs.

2. How the Booking System Works

- 2.1 The booking system is available on the [KCC website](#)¹ where customers can book visits at any of the 18 HWRCs. For customers that do not have internet access and / or an email address, bookings can be made by calling KCC's Contact Centre.
- 2.2 As Covid-19 restrictions have changed and in response to customer feedback, improvements have been made to the booking system since it's been in operation. The booking system now offers:
 - More than 64,000 slots per week
 - The ability to make a booking(s) online or via the telephone
 - Unlimited bookings
 - Next day booking – book by midnight for a slot the following day (availability permitting)
 - On the day booking – originally trialled and now in operation at Maidstone and Folkestone HWRCs, to be extended across all 18 HWRCs should the booking system remain
 - Bookings can be made a month in advance
 - Bookings can be amended / cancelled, freeing up slots for other customers
 - Emailed confirmation and reminder of booking
 - Customers can view and choose available slots before entering vehicle details

1 <https://www.kent.gov.uk/environment-waste-and-planning/rubbish-and-recycling/household-waste-recycling-centres/visiting-a-hwrc-during-coronavirus>

2.3 A significant number of other Local Authorities (LA) also introduced a booking system at their respective HWRCs in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst some have since removed their systems, the majority have kept them and there are others who are now looking to introduce one. KCC were the first LA to go out to consultation regarding keeping a booking system. A recent survey undertaken in November 2021 by LARAC (Local Authority Recycling Advisory Committee) on behalf of Defra resulted in the following findings:

- 63 respondents introduced a booking system after March 2020 (55%)
- 11 respondents were looking at potentially introducing a booking system in the future
- 57 (of the 63 respondents with a booking system) said their booking system is still place
- Regarding plans for the future use of a booking system;
 - 26 respondents (52%) will retain their system indefinitely
 - 4 will retain their system until some point in 2022
 - 9 were unsure
 - 1 was in the process of removing their system
 - 1 will remove their system by a certain date
 - 9 answered 'other'

3. Advantages and disadvantages of the booking system

3.1 Feedback from customers, HWRC operating contractors, stakeholders and KCC waste officers obtained prior to consultation, identified a number of benefits of having a booking system to access the HWRCs, as well as some disadvantages, many of which were echoed in the consultation findings (Section 5).

3.1.1 Environmental advantages

- Reduced contamination rates (see section 5.8 for details)
- Increased recycling rates, as staff have more time to help customers dispose of waste in the correct containers / areas (see section 5.8 for details)
- Customers are making fewer journeys but with more waste, benefiting the environment (see section 5.8 for details)
- Reduced traffic queueing into the HWRCs, improving Air Quality Management

3.1.2 Customer and operational advantages

- Communications with customers are improved, for example, informing directly of any potential service issues / emergency closures, avoiding unnecessary journeys and ability to survey customers on levels of satisfaction/service improvements.
- Managed throughput of visits, allowing staff more time to help customers, rather than managing traffic queues
- Reduced queuing on high-speed roads such as the A2, A256 and A25
- Reduced queuing and disruption particularly at the Centres where there have been complaints from Kent Police, bus operators, local residents and customers queuing to access the service
- Certainty that customers will be able to access the HWRCs, reducing wasted car journeys and spending less time at the Centre

- HWRC maintenance can be planned in line with customer demand, rather than disrupting the service at times that customers are accessing the Centre
- Reduced risk of incidents and near misses at previously congested Centres, for both customers, HWRC staff and haulage contractors
- People are “thinking more” about whether to dispose of waste, or whether to reuse or sell items in the first instance

3.1.3 Feedback regarding disadvantages of the booking system received prior to consultation and again echoed in the consultation findings (section 5) include:

- customers cannot make spontaneous decisions about visiting a Centre without using the booking system – although they can now book for the next day at all HWRCs and within one hour at those Centres operating ‘on the day’ booking
- customers with larger volumes of household waste may have to estimate how many trips are needed rather than making multiple spontaneous visits
- in the early days of the booking system, customers were limited by the frequency and availability of slots. Changes have been made which has resolved this issue
- there have been added call volumes regarding the waste management service to the Contact Centre, which can lead to a longer wait to get through to an advisor to make a booking via the telephone

4 Consultation Response

4.1 A six-week public consultation seeking views on the future use of a booking system ran from 19 August to 30 September 2021. Various communication methods were utilised to ensure a broad range of target audiences were engaged, including users and non-users of the service.

4.2 In total 10,705 responses were received as follows:

- 10,585 online questionnaire responses completed
- 8 word / pdf questionnaire responses completed and emailed to KCC
- 42 hard copy / paper questionnaire responses completed and sent to KCC
- 52 comments received by email / letter
- 18 comments received via voicemail

4.3 Most responses were from Kent residents (98%). 14 responses were received from a District or Parish council, 1 response by a ‘business owner or representative’ and one from ‘a Charity, Voluntary or Community Sector organisation (VCS).

5 Consultation findings, conclusions, and future considerations

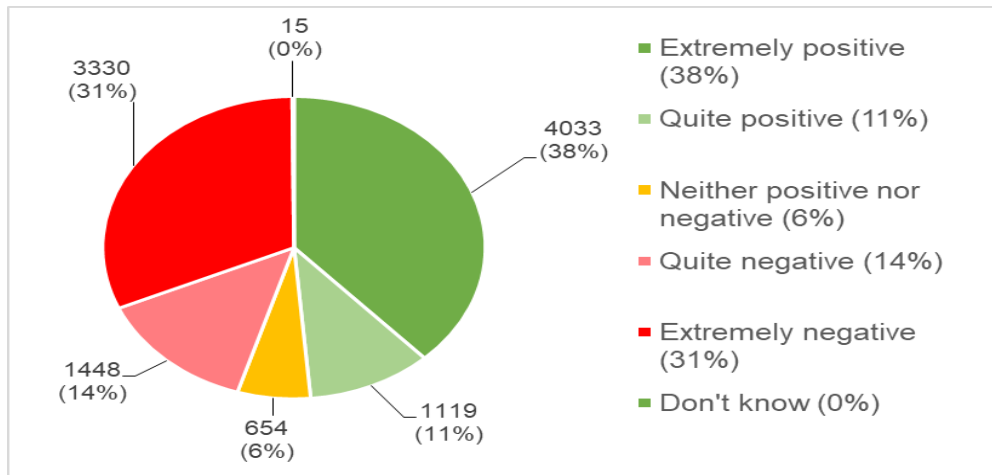
5.1 KCC Waste Management officers have undertaken detailed analysis of all results and the full consultation analysis report is attached as Appendix B. A summary of key findings / themes is provided in this paper. As the booking system has evolved, the service has already made some changes reflecting some of the comments and suggestions received from the consultation. These changes are set out in section 5.4 to 5.9 below. Appendix C provides the Waste Management Service response to the consultation.

5.2 The consultation analysis report aims to identify where strength of feeling may be particularly intense, while recognising that interpreting consultation is not simply a

matter of counting responses. It's about understanding the impact our proposed decision may have on customers and using this insight, along with other evidence, to enable a well-informed decision to be made.

5.3 View on future use of the booking system

5.3.1 Respondents were asked 'How positive or negative would you feel about using a booking system to access the HWRCs in the future?' 49% (5,152) felt positively 45% (4,778) felt negatively and 6% (654) felt neither positive nor negative. A greater number of people felt *extremely* positive (38%, 4,033 respondents) opposed to *extremely* negative (31%, 3,330 respondents) about the system.



5.3.2 There is a significant difference in views between respondents who have previously used the booking system and those who have not. Whilst 5,035 (52%) of those that have used the booking system are positive about using the system in the future, this drops to just 10% (96 respondents) for those that have not used the system.

5.3.3 There is also significant variation in views when analysed by which HWRC respondents normally visit. The most positive views are from customers using Maidstone, Margate, Pepperhill, Sittingbourne, Swanley and Folkestone HWRCs. These are some of the biggest HWRCs in the network, which often, pre-Covid-19 (and therefore before the booking system), experienced queuing.

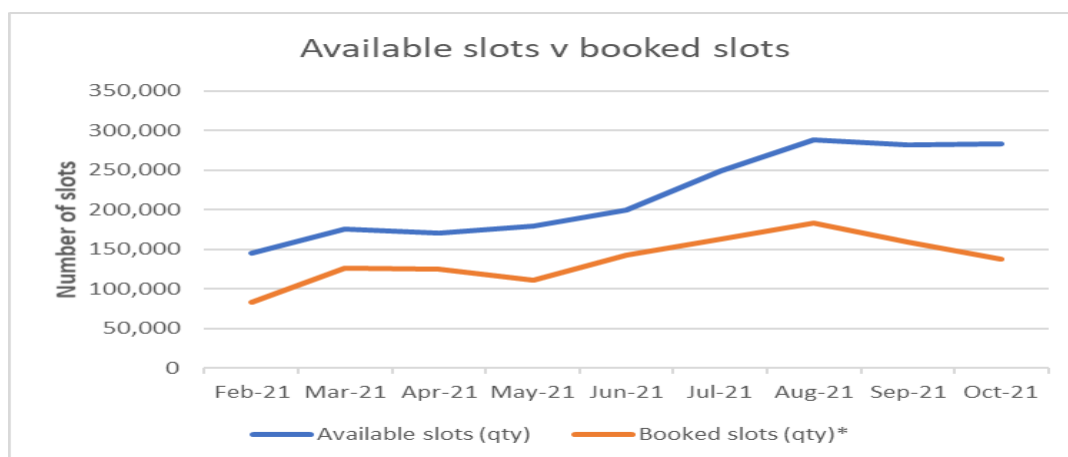
5.3.4 Older age groups (with the exception of the 85+ cohort) are more likely to be positive about the booking system.

5.3.5 Respondents who stated they consider themselves to be disabled are less likely to be positive about the booking system (47% compared with 58% who do not consider themselves to be disabled). However, they are still more likely to be positive about the booking system than negative (290, 47% positive, 279, 45% negative).

5.3.6 Respondents who consider themselves to be a carer are slightly less likely to be positive about the future use of a booking system than those who are not carers (52% compared with 57%).

5.4 Booking slot availability and flexibility

- 5.4.1 When the booking system was first introduced in May 2020, the level of bookings available was significantly less than the offering now. The level of available bookings was constantly reviewed and refreshed as Centres were able to safely accommodate greater capacity, and as restrictions eased.
- 5.4.2 Although the consultation findings have suggested that some people (251 respondents) report they were not able to find a slot for the day / time they wanted, it is possible that they attempted to book before restrictions were lifted, and when Centres were often fully booked, especially at the weekends.
- 5.4.3 Booking data now shows that there is plenty of capacity for bookings across the HWRCs (see graph below), albeit some Centres are more popular than others, there is rarely a day when there are not slots available to book, even at the weekends. This is reflected in the sharp reduction in complaints received, with the service very rarely now receiving a complaint with regards to availability.

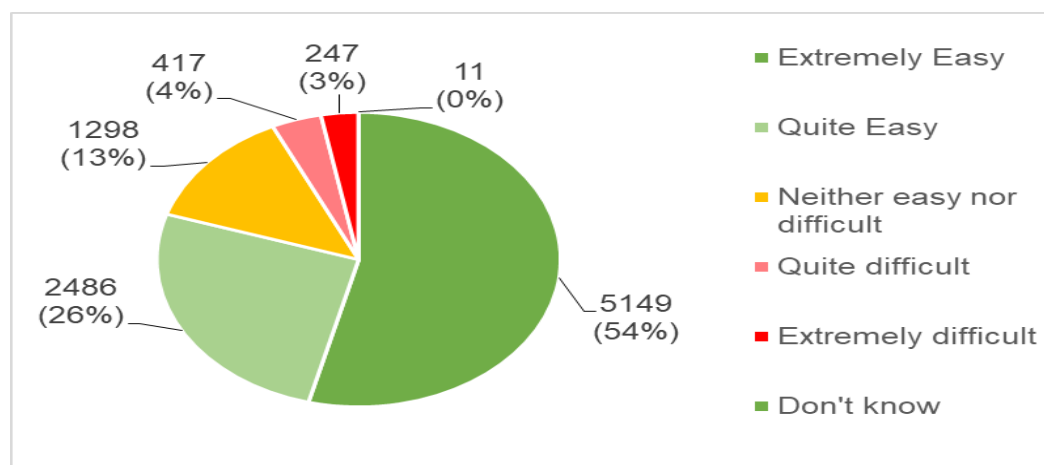


- 5.4.4 A misconception mentioned by 71 respondents was the ability to book multiple trips. At the start of the booking system, the number of available visits per household per month was one visit. Over time and to allow for the initial surge in demand for the service, this increased to two visits, then to four, and now unlimited visits whether on the same day, week, or month.
- 5.4.5 The length of a booking slot was also cited as being challenging by 64 respondents. Again, this has been modified over time. When the booking system was first introduced, each slot was 1.5 hours in length. Whilst this had benefits of providing customers with a longer window within which to arrive at the HWRC, it was found that most people were turning up at the beginning of the slots resulting in a 'bunching' effect. As a result, these slot times were changed to 30 minutes in order to keep a consistent flow of visits throughout the day as much as possible. This ensures that users can access and egress sites in a timelier manner.

5.5 Ease of use of the booking system

- 5.5.1 Results from the consultation show that most people find the booking system easy to use; 54% (5,149 respondents) found it extremely easy to make a booking and 26% (2,486) found it quite easy. 3% (247 respondents) found it extremely difficult and 4% (417) found it quite difficult. 13% (1,298) found it neither easy nor difficult to

make a booking. Contact Centre statistics, show that 97% of bookings (around 146,000 on an average month) are made online, with 3% (around 4,000 per month) via the telephone.



5.5.2 One of key themes to emerge was regarding difficulties for those without a computer / an email address or the confidence to do things online, such as booking a slot. The ability to book via the telephone has been in place since the start of the booking system to ensure that all customers are able to make a booking. Many respondents did not realise that a telephone booking system was in place. The number of respondents that booked via the telephone was small and therefore findings should be treated with caution, however, of those that had used the telephone system, 44% (22 respondents) found it easy to use, 26% (13 respondents) found it difficult, and the rest neither easy nor difficult. Comments suggest that the main reason some people find booking via the telephone difficult is due to the length of time to get through to a Contact Centre advisor.

5.5.3 Should the decision be taken to retain a booking system, the Waste Management service would work with the Contact Centre to improve the experience and reduce the need for people to telephone the Contact Centre about a booking or a general waste query. The service will also look at other ways to advertise the telephone number, rather than just online (e.g., in Parish Council newsletters and via information provided at the HWRCs), to reach those without the internet and therefore more likely to require the service.

5.5.4 There were some suggestions regarding the functionality of the booking system e.g., changes to vehicle registrations after booking, the ability to enter a postcode to find the nearest HWRC. Should the booking system be retained, the service will work with the booking system provider to improve the customer journey and streamline the booking process.

5.6 On the day booking

5.6.1 The most suggested recommended improvement to the booking system was to introduce the ability to book 'on the day'. This was cited by 61% (over 6,000) of respondents that answered the 'improvements question.' A trial of a fully automated 'on the day' system was undertaken and is now fully operational at Folkestone and Maidstone HWRCs and this can be readily applied to all HWRCs. On the day booking functionality also ensures that should a customer cancel their appointment the redundant slot immediately becomes available for another customer to use.

5.6.2 One of the key themes to emerge from the analysis of the equality and diversity question was the challenge, particularly for those with a disability, mental health condition or caring responsibilities, with not knowing whether they will be well enough or able to attend an appointment until the day. The ability to book (and amend) at short notice can help to alleviate these concerns.

5.7 Hybrid booking system

5.7.1 A suggestion by 86 respondents was to deploy a hybrid booking system, for example booking required only at weekends, at busy times, certain days or certain HWRCs. Whilst a hybrid system could offer limited control of demand and queuing, there are some reservations which must be considered.

5.7.2 Within the waste management industry, there is a shift by Government to ensure a more consistent service across both the collection and disposal of waste. The waste collection service provided by the District / Borough councils can often result in some confusion due to lack of consistency e.g., collection days, and what can and cannot be recycled. Consistency would be vital while booking to access the HWRCs. If a hybrid option were to be employed at the HWRCs, there is the potential for confusion for the customer. Needing to check which days and at which HWRCs you had to book. Some customers already visit multiple HWRCs, all of which could potentially lead to wasted car journeys and frustration at the HWRCs for both residents and employees.

5.7.3 Furthermore, a hybrid system could result in change of customer behaviour, choosing to go to an HWRC where booking would not be required, or a weekday when they would normally go at the weekend – this could lead to HWRCs which would ordinarily have no queues, or days which would ordinarily be quieter, becoming much busier with resultant queuing. A hybrid solution would compromise the opportunity for a well-managed service and negatively impact the customer experience.

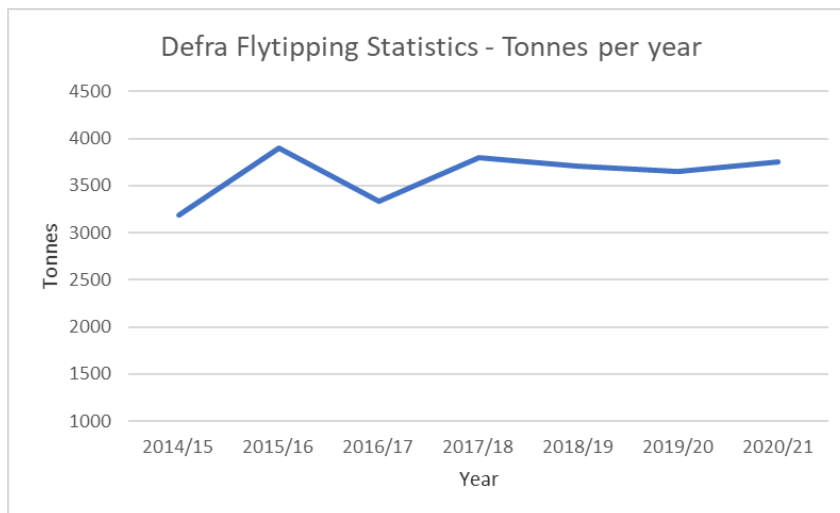
5.8 Environmental benefits and concerns

5.8.1 Data has found that the average load of waste taken to HWRCs per vehicle has increased since the booking system has been employed. Prior to the booking system, on average each vehicle would bring 44kg of waste to the HWRC. In recent months, this load has increased to around 60kg per vehicle. This means that people are coming to the HWRCs less often (which is evident from booking uptake data) but with more waste each visit. This results in fewer car journeys which provides wider environmental benefit. The managed approach to accessing the sites has seen less queueing and a reduction in associated engine idling which supports better air quality. Whilst reduced queues onto the local highway network improves both road safety and local journey times for residents, businesses, and bus operators.

5.8.2 HWRC operating contractors report that through greater customer assistance and interaction, as a result of the booking system, they are more able to ensure customers dispose of / recycle their waste in the appropriate area. This leads to reduced contamination, improved recycling levels and greater material segregation

which is evident from recycling rates which for 2021/22 is currently at just under 70% compared with 65% in 2019/20.

- 5.8.3 One of the misconceptions of the booking system evident in some responses received, was that it has / will lead to flytipping. It remains that there is no evidence to suggest that law abiding residents of Kent will undertake the criminal act of flytipping as a result of having to book to visit an HWRC. Indeed, the tonnage of flytipping brought to KCC for disposal by the District / Borough councils has remained broadly level since 2014/15.



5.9 Other operational / policy developments

- 5.9.1 The findings from the additional questions regarding opening hours and cross-border use of the KCC HWRCs will help to inform any future operational / policy developments made in these areas in the future. The booking system would enable any such change in policy to be managed.
- 5.9.2 Maintaining the booking system presents the opportunity to review other HWRC operational policies such as trailer size, pedestrian, and bicycle access, as the system allows demand and safety to be better managed across and within the sites.
- 5.9.3 There are further opportunities improve the use of other waste services and policies such as, the integration of the booking system alongside the vehicle voucher policy with an Automated Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) system, which will speed up the process for both customers and staff.

6 **Financial implications**

- 6.1 The contracted operators will be able to reduce operational overhead costs by £150k pa as the demand at the sites is better managed. These savings are included within the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP); this saving is wholly associated with this policy proposal.
- 6.2 By operating the booking system in 2020/21 there has been a change in public behaviour whereby communities seek to re-use items before planning a visit to HWRCs. There has been less cross border usage and more skip hire. HWRC operatives have had more time to assist customer and maximise levels of recycling.

The public has made more use of the districts' chargeable bulky collection services. This has reduced volumes of materials but with greater levels of recycling, a budget was set in the current year to deliver savings by the WDA of £1.3m, this is being delivered.

- 6.3 The cost of operating the current booking system is £21,000 per year including licence, software, set up and provider support. There was an additional cost of £25,000 to cover the increased calls to KCC's Contact Centre to answer Waste Management enquires during the pandemic and make bookings for customers unable to book online.
- 6.4 Should the decision be taken to retain the booking system, there will also be some modest costs associated with the roll-out of 'on the day' booking. These costs are limited to some additional connectivity requirements at specific HWRCs and additional tablet/mobile operational devices, and these will be funded using existing budgets.

7 Legal implications

- 7.1 KCC is the statutory Waste Disposal Authority (WDA) for the county. There has been a duty on the WDA to provide HWRCs since the Civic Amenity Act 1967. The duty is now embodied within section 51 of the Environmental Protection act 1990. There will be no legal implications if the booking system is retained, as the HWRC service will continue to operate, albeit with the requirement to book in advance.

8 Equalities implications

- 8.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) was completed prior to the booking system being introduced in May 2020 and again before the consultation to ensure consideration was given to the impact of the system and the approach to consultation. The initial assessments indicated that any impact on users could be reasonably mitigated. As part of the consultation approach, alternative formats of the questionnaire were available on request. Respondents were asked for any comments about the EqIA as part of the consultation questionnaire. The most common themes were:
 - Views that an EqIA is not applicable or required for this consultation
 - Challenges for those without computer / internet or confidence to use technology
 - Suggestions / challenges regarding disabilities, or health issues, older people, and those with caring responsibilities. For example, and as described in section 5.6.2, a key challenge identified in relation to a disability or mental health condition was not knowing until the day whether they'll feel well enough or remember their appointment time. In a similar vein, some comments from carers suggested that having to book is difficult to balance with caring responsibilities
 - Views regarding the operations at the HWRC. Whilst many praised HWRC staff for being helpful, a number suggested that additional help should be provided for those that needed it. There were also comments about accessibility and layout of some of the HWRCs causing challenges e.g., steps and kerbs.
- 8.2 The EqIA (found at the end of the Consultation Report – Appendix B) was reviewed after the consultation to enable KCC to respond to any new issues that arose during the consultation and to ensure no groups were disadvantaged. In the initial

screening, age, disability, and race were identified as being potentially impacted. The public consultation responses revealed some further low negative impacts to these protected characteristics and an additional impact for 'pregnancy and maternity' and 'carer's responsibilities. These further potential impacts identified can be mitigated and have been included within the 'action plan'.

9 Other corporate implications

9.1 The decision to continue to operate a booking system to access the HWRCs has no other impacts on other areas of the Council's work. Albeit this improved operation will contribute to the delivery of the Authority's environmental commitments.

10 Governance

10.1 If the decision is taken by the Cabinet Member for Environment to continue to operate a booking system, the Corporate Director for Growth, Environment and Transport will keep progress of the system under review. The Corporate Director will inherit the main delegations via the Officer Scheme of Delegation to make any further operational changes to the booking system to maximise customer service.

11 Conclusions

11.1 It is not considered that any new information has been presented in the consultation findings that would lead to a withdrawal of the booking system to access the HWRCs.

11.2 The Covid-19 pandemic remains a risk. Not only does the booking system enable demand to be managed in response to the pandemic, if restrictions change again in the future, but it also provides many further benefits to support its ongoing use.

11.3 Since it's been in operation, many changes and improvements have been made to the booking system in response to customer and contractor feedback. Further suggested improvements have been identified from the public consultation and from the HWRC contractors, which can be made, including 'on the day' booking. There are also significant opportunities for integration with other systems, to enable a more digitalised and well-managed service for customers.

12. Recommendation(s):

As Cabinet Member for Environment, I agree:

for the Waste Management service to operate permanently a booking system for customers to access Kent County Council's Household Waste Recycling Centres and,

for the Corporate Director for Growth, Environment and Transport to keep progress of the booking system under review and to inherit the main delegations via the Officer Scheme of Delegation to make any further operational changes to the booking system to maximise customer service.

The Record of Decision is shown at Appendix A.

13. Background Documents

13.1 Appendix A – Record of Decision (ROD)

13.2 Appendix B – Booking to visit a KCC Household Waste Recycling Centre Consultation Report (including the Equality Impact Assessment)

<https://democracy.kent.gov.uk/documents/s108619/BookingtovisitaKCCHWRCConsultationReport.pdf>

13.3 Appendix C – Waste Management Service view on the HWRC booking system and response to the consultation:

<https://democracy.kent.gov.uk/documents/s108620/WasteManagementServiceviewontheHWRCbookingsystemandresponsetotheconsultation.pdf>

14. Contact details

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