

A new set of challenges

Vivien Holland, associate director, public services advisory at Grant Thornton UK LLP, assess the current impact of Covid-19 on local authority environmental services.

COVID-19 has presented local authorities with a new set of challenges for the delivery of environmental services. Managing resource, safety of staff, changes to the volume and composition of waste collected, has put pressure on costs and tested service flexibility.

But, according to a recent ADEPT survey, local authorities have coped admirably and key services including residual, recycling and clinical waste collections have continued to operate as normal in many places:

- 83% of waste collection authorities have reported a normal service with none reporting serious disruptions;
- Around 26% of authorities reported some degree of disruption to recycling services, but only 1% suspending this service.
- 63% of authorities providing separate food waste collection have continued to do so.

Maintaining this level of service has had a knock on effect on other areas such as garden and bulky waste collection, street sweeping and litter collection services, all of which have experienced greater levels of disruption – no garden and bring banks services in 3% of instances and no bulky waste collection for 6%.

Working with communities

Whilst local authorities have been working hard to deliver services, they have also found opportunities to work with the local community to achieve positive outcomes.

This has been most common for those local authorities that are involved in the delivery of services on an arm's length basis.

This could be through a wholly or jointly owned company, which enable greater freedoms to operate commercially whilst retaining the public service ethos.

Oxford Direct Services, the company that delivers environmental services for its owner Oxford City Council, has taken the opportunity to show its customers that it is able to adapt and work in tandem with other front line services to positive effect – for example, fast-tracking delivery of PPE and cleaning materials for front-line public sector workers through stronger supply chain logistics.

It recognises that being a local business and part of the community has allowed it to connect with the residents and businesses that it serves, enabling it to respond to their needs during this challenging time, whilst generating revenue to flow back to the public purse.

Health and safety

Health and Safety has, not surprisingly, been of even greater importance than usual. At Oxford, a few additional precautions are being taken such as: providing two person crews, adapting service routes to ensure the safety of higher numbers of pedestrians and cyclists, and fitting hand washing facilities to collection vehicles.

Norse Group, based in Norwich, in partnership with several local authorities, has also found that running environmental services through public-to-public partnerships has delivered the flexibility needed in handling the impact of Covid19, ensuring that services can continue running with social distancing in place and dealing with more staff absences than usual.

Where changes have had to be made to ensure continuity of service, these have been swiftly put in place through mutual agreement with the joint venture company, without the need for time-consuming contract changes with a third party.

The overall picture is a positive one, with services working hard to minimise disruption for the public during these unprecedented times.

However, working in public partnerships appears to have enabled greater flexibility to respond to the challenges across the sector. We may see more of this in the coming months and years.