

Submission of Birmingham Friends of the Earth to the Green Waste Scrutiny Inquiry by the Connectivity and Sustainability Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Key question; How can the current green waste collection scheme be improved, and what alternatives could be offered to householders?

Terminology;

BFOE takes Green Waste in this inquiry to refer to Garden Waste. This is very different from Kitchen Waste i.e. food, and similar biodegradable material, since the City Council has a public health duty to collect the latter. In some local authority areas the two are collected together. Birmingham should have a distinct strategy for collecting Kitchen Waste from households that separates it from other wastes, so that they are not contaminated.

General environmental principles

1. Garden waste should be viewed as a resource, not a cost or a problem. It can be processed at small scale, using low cost techniques.
2. Garden waste should be transported as little as possible, since it mainly consists of air and water, and will break down anyway if left in situ. Garden waste does not attract rats or constitute a health hazard if handled appropriately in the garden. Many gardeners do compost and use all their waste on site.
3. Garden waste should in general not be burned, but very dry woody material can be burned, for example in a garden brazier. Wood can be fuel. Wood ash can be added to compost.
4. Garden waste should be returned to the soil as compost, as that retains the fertility and locks carbon in the soil. It should not be removed from the city or burned in an incinerator. Ideally, the waste is composted where it will be used. Birmingham should aim to be a Compost City, with composting as the basis of a future waste system.
5. Garden waste is one kind of waste that people can deal with themselves, so the council has to collect less, progressing the waste reduction target, and giving financial savings, in both collection and disposal.

What improvements can be made to the current collection of green waste?

BFOE questions the environmental and financial costs of driving collection vehicles to every address in the city, every fortnight, to see if any garden waste has been put out for collection, then moving this to a central depot, then moving again to an out of town composting site. In terms of a waste hierarchy, this is an approach that should be minimised. Instead of 'taking away' people's garden waste the council should be enabling them to deal with it themselves, as far as possible.

The principle of charging for green waste collections is justified, since the whole city should not be subsidising the least environmentally-friendly approach to handling garden waste. A charge incentivises people to compost their own waste, or find someone who wants it.

Residents driving in their cars to the few council sites that currently accept it is also a bad option, in terms of unnecessary movement. It wastes time and fuel and blocks up the roads.

What are the alternatives for disposing of green waste?

Garden waste should not be “disposed of”, but utilised for compost production. The disposal site for garden waste is the soil. We must feed the soil to feed ourselves. This is what the soil community of organisms will do it, given favourable conditions. Soil needs to appear on the council’s map of Birmingham.

What are the options for collecting and treating green waste locally?

1. Home Composting

The best place to compost is in the home garden, i.e. the waste stream does not leave the premises. To do this, householders may need help, as follows;

- Supply of subsidised, or free, or freely-delivered compost bins. The council can negotiate bulk purchase and pass the saving to householders. Ideally they allow hot composting that kills all seeds, roots and pathogens.
- The Green Cone, which also accepts food waste, thus removing this from the black bin residual waste
- Waste especially woody waste composts faster when shredded. The council could bulk buy garden shredders and pass to the public or have mobile shredders that move around shredding garden waste
- Gardeners may need advice and to see composting in action. The council could give small grants to community gardens to mount demonstration sites; in community gardens, allotments, local parks. We understand that 100,000 people visit Cannon Hill Park on a good day. Networks that could host demos can be found through the Birmingham Open Spaces Forum, National Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, private garden centres
- Compost Doctors or Master Composters are those who have received some training and are willing to pass on knowledge to others. Such schemes could be supported in Birmingham.
- Leaflets and publicity to explain the new system, included in information to householders about the roll out of wheelie bins, and the expanded range of plastics now accepted for recycling.

2. Community Composting Sites

Home composting is the first objective, but some gardeners cannot compost themselves, or have hard-to-compost waste that requires shredding. A network of ‘bring sites’ is implied, for such wastes, where car drivers to drop it off as part of another journey. The more centres there are the less likely that special journeys will be made, i.e. it will be part of existing movement patterns.

We propose that every Ward be asked to identify a site for community composting. We understand that the previous Run a Muck community composting service failed mainly due to lack of provision of sites by the council.

Community composting is likely to be affordable only if existing composting sites are used, e.g. the Parks department system for composting park waste – can private gardens contribute? Hospital and university campuses? Housing associations?

On the edge of the city, farmers might accept garden waste to add to their own manure/composting. There may be suitable garden centres and nurseries on the edge of the city. A grant might be offered to allow for modifications to premises or equipment.

Wood waste is a slightly different problem. Wood can have value as logs or woodchip for fuel. Birmingham needs a Wood Strategy that includes the parks, street trees and commercial tree surgeons. We suspect such infrastructure is coming into existence and that private home owners could be linked into it. Biomass is part of the future energy strategy of the country and is incentivised by the Renewable Heat Incentive payments. In some places there are Wood Stations for example Croydon http://www.citysuburban.co.uk/recycling_centre.htm and

Greater Manchester <http://www.treestation.co.uk/>

What technologies are involved and how would they need to be managed?

Composting

1. Reduce the volume – by shredding
2. Use a continuous flow of material not a batch process
3. Maintain moisture and temperature to prevent smells
4. Speed up decomposition – by mixing ingredients and holding heat to produce ‘hot composting’ that destroys seeds, roots, pathogens

Ideally the process is managed by the persons who will benefit, i.e. will use the compost or sell it.

At the local bring or demo sites several types of composting equipment that could be demonstrated to show that there are many ways that green waste can be dealt with. Also to show the range of materials that can go into composting and time scales to complete the process.

Food waste can also be dealt with along with garden waste by some methods of composting. There would therefore be benefits from demonstrating and teaching people about this at the same time, so that the council could also start to address the food waste issue as a step towards improving the overall waste issue.

Examples;

- Bokashi bin,
- In vessel hot composter,
- Green Cone
- Wormery