



# Joint Working between Local Authorities in delivering Waste Services

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## Introduction

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Urban Mines has carried out a number of projects working for Defra, as part of the WIP LASU programme, directly for Local Authorities and for other funding authorities, in promoting and facilitating joint working between local authorities (WCAs, WDAs and Unitaries) in delivering joint waste strategies, joint procurement strategies, and closer working in delivering waste collection and disposal services.

This paper will not look at the detail of possible structures, financial or legal issues in joint working

between local authorities, but more at the barriers to joint working at a managerial and practical level, and ways that barriers and fears can be overcome and strong working relationships between local authorities established. Conclusions are based upon direct work and interviews with Chief Executives, Members and Waste Officers at a number of local authorities, and workshops run by Urban Mines with local authorities representing a district or sub-region.

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## Background & Policy

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Joint working between waste collection authorities, waste disposal authorities, and neighbouring unitaries can present a number of advantages, not the least in potentially delivering Gershon efficiency savings through joint procurement, joint contracting and/or joint management structures. To this end, Joint Working is supported strongly by Government in a number of functional areas including in provision of waste management services.

In the ODPM publication "Delivering Efficiency in Local Government – Information for Leaders and Chief Executives" (November 2004), the need for joint working between local authorities in delivering waste

services, is highlighted as follows: *"Increased joint working between local authorities at the strategic and operational level would help to increase efficiency and realise economies of scale. Our goal is to promote these kinds of approaches, including joint procurement where this has local backing."*

In the Further Guidance for Local Authorities published in January 2005, this thinking is explained in more detail: *"The split of collection and disposal functions across two-tiers of local authority is not necessarily the best way to manage waste sustainably, and not all local authorities are necessarily the right size for optimum sustainable*

waste management.” (4.6.16) “One of our top priorities is to provide greater incentives for authorities to consider joint procurement – either of a single collection contract across districts, or of an integrated collection and disposal contract. We also wish to see more examples of collection authorities working together to deliver operational efficiencies.” (4.6.17) “Government is strongly encouraging county-district and Joint Waste Disposal Authority areas to consider joint investment to meet common goals.” (4.6.19)

In December 2004 DEFRA published a series of consultations on waste management strategies. The need for partnerships between neighbouring authorities was highlighted and goes into detail on partnerships between authorities and gives reasons why they are important:

*“PARTNERSHIP ARRANGEMENTS - To develop an effective strategy, partnerships between WCAs and WDA, or Unitary Authorities and neighbouring authorities, are desirable. It may be helpful to give greater substance to these partnerships through*

*appropriate agreements. An example of such an agreement would be a Memorandum of Understanding.”*

*“Partnerships are important for the following reasons:*

- *To ensure strategies have support from all whom they affect;*
- *To ensure WDA strategies reflect WCA aspirations / potentials;*
- *To minimise duplication of effort in data collection and to ensure accurate data collection;*
- *To optimise costs across the whole waste management system (rather than the costs of sub-elements which can be distorted by the nature of financial transfers);*
- *To maximise likelihood of delivery; and*
- *To minimise potential for conflict in discussions regarding financing”*

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## Barriers to improved performance

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In our experience, there is generally a willingness at Waste Officer and other levels in neighbouring authorities, to work together, and many already meet regularly to share operational detail and best practise. However, delivery of waste services at a local level carries a high significance, as there is no other Council service that reaches so many households and Council Tax payers. Interviews carried out by Urban Mines with Chief Executives, Members and Waste Officers at a number of local authorities have revealed a significant number of perceived barriers to, and fear of, joint working. These therefore need to be addressed at practical and political levels, including:

- Governance and Local Democracy – local members like to have the power to intervene if one of their constituents has problems with the local waste service and joint structures can appear more remote.

- Local Pride, Tradition and Personalities – “own Council comes first”
- Localised Targets – Government BVPI recycling and landfill allowance targets are set locally for individual authorities rather than for regions or sub-regions, resulting in local focus
- Localised Responsibilities – will Joint Working take responsibilities and kudos from the local management team?
- Localised Management – how would a joint working arrangement report to local managerial and political structure?
- Local Procurement Specifications – different authorities can have different preferences and purchase specifications hindering Joint Procurement.

- Local Structures – many waste services are combined structurally with other departments in the Local Authority, which can hinder separating waste services out to take part in regional or sub-regional waste joint working.
- Local Budgets – again encourage local focus
- Local Waste Strategies – individual waste strategies may differ significantly, hindering the development of a joint strategy
- Local Party Politics – may effect direction and aspirations of the local waste services

- Local v Regional Teams – would joint working and resultant efficiencies lead to job losses?
- Contract Renewal Dates – different authority contracts run out at different times, so how can they jointly contract?
- Dominance of the Larger Authorities – in sub-regional partnerships
- Trust – do neighbouring authorities trust each other enough?

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## The Scope and Benefits of Joint Working

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Potential areas where neighbouring local authorities can work jointly include:

- Joint Procurement – of operational items such as bins or vehicles, or of services, such as collection or recycling
- Joint Collections – residual and recycle
- Joint Contracting – for provision of waste or recycling services
- Joint Disposal – through centralised facilities
- Joint Management – through a single waste management department
- Casual Labour - single contract
- Communication & Education – to increase participation rates
- Vehicles – Purchase and maintenance

Through Local Authorities working this way, a number of key benefits have been identified, including:

- Scale and Efficiencies – combining volumes, services and facilities can allow for a more effective

use of resources, allowing reduced costs and better value.

- Stronger Contracting – the combined volumes and finances can represent a more attractive offer to private contractors, and encourage more competition, and hence value, in resultant contracts
- Skill Set – combining management from individual authorities can widen the collective skill set and combine experience and best practise operated throughout the sub-region.
- Job Creation and Regeneration – using combined contracting power and volumes is more likely to attract infrastructure investment and new companies, in waste management, recycling and reprocessing, delivering investment and new jobs.
- Better Service – through combines best practise and stronger contracting
- Joint Responsibility for Tough Decisions – for instance for alternate weekly collections, or in the future potentially charging for collections.
- Stronger Face to Funders – both in terms of collective size but also matching funders “joint working” aspirations

- BVPI Advantages – in working together in achieving targets, and in best value reviews.

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## Encouraging closer Joint Working

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In working with local authorities in developing Joint Working, we have identified, through talking with key stakeholders, a number of areas that are important in developing the relationship, in meeting requirements of individual Councils, and in delivering a strong partnership capable of seizing the benefits of Joint Working:

- A Well Defined role for Members – although local waste officers may resist an operational role for members in the joint arrangement, Members do need to be involved and informed, and consulted in the development of Joint Strategy and Annual Delivery Plans.
- The need for a Champion – It is all too easy for officers involved in joint working, to be pulled by local rather than regional demands. The Joint Working Arrangement needs a strong “Champion” or Chairman to fight for the cause of joint working at senior level in all the authorities involved, motivate and lead the joint management team in delivering strategy and operational benefits, and being the strong face of the joint arrangement to private contractors
- The Role of Senior Managers – Senior managers in all of the authorities concerned in joint working need to be supportive and committed to joint working, and be seen to do so, and be directly involved in developing strategy and strategic decisions. Without this, the waste officers who are key to delivering the benefit of joint working, will not focus on joint issues unless they see their line managers doing the same.
- Joint Management – Effective Joint Working will depend upon how the joint arrangement is managed and the involvement of teams from the individual authorities. Do local officers come together in a Joint Management Group, or is a single management function developed taking direct responsibility for all the individual local waste management services?
  - Finances – an effective and equitable sharing of costs and benefits to the authorities working in the joint arrangement, needs working though as part of the initial working agreement
  - The need for a Joint Strategy and Delivery Plan – The Joint Strategy is key to effective joint working and clarity in what Joint Working is designed to achieve, but this needs backing up with an effective delivery plan, supported by annual plans to keep the Joint Team focussed and delivery driven
  - Longer Term Structures – the development of a single WDA to cover the whole region and take direct responsibility for collection and disposal in all the partnered authorities, needs considering to maximise benefits, as a joint venture or “virtual disposal authority” structure.
  - Project Working – Using waste managers from individual authorities to come together to deliver precise and well focussed projects tackling individual issues eg. procuring CA site management, disposal of fridges, etc, will ensure delivery of the benefits of joint working, give officers a sub-regional role and develop sub-regional, rather than local, thinking and solutions.
  - Jointly Manage all services – there may be a tendency to jointly deliver part of the sub-regional waste services, for instance in treatment of residual waste. However, including all services (including collection, recycling, CA site management) allows capturing the maximum benefit

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## Conclusion

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Effective Joint Working between neighbouring local authorities is clearly a pre-requisite to effective efficiency savings, strength in negotiating with contractors, and attracting infrastructure and investment. However, to local authorities accustomed to local responsibility and a political structure based upon local democracy, coupled with government targets applied locally, establishing effective joint working is not easy and can come up against a number of significant barriers. The key in our opinion is strong leadership and strong change management, with well defined objectives, a detailed delivery plan and a clearly defined role for local politicians.

The Government is a strong supporter of joint working between local authorities, on a district wide, county wide or sub-regional basis and it is clear, with a number of Government funded initiatives, such as the 4P's and the City Regions, that this is the direction local government structures will move in the next few years. It is therefore sensible for local authorities to move proactively to such joint ways of working, to seize the benefits in a fashion which gives them control of their own destiny, before likely to be required to do so by central government.

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## Tools

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DEFRA December 2004. Document D "Consultation on Draft Guidance on Municipal Waste Management Strategies."

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## Project Team

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