

Budget setting: February 2024

Recycling Centres

Q: Why are you considering the closure of recycling sites?

It is estimated that around a third of local authorities are considering recycling site closures to balance their budgets. In Somerset we know the closure of any site would have an impact on our residents and communities. We will be doing our best to make savings while limiting those impacts as much as possible. None of the savings options being considered are things we want to be doing. All are very difficult and unpalatable. But we are in a financial emergency and savings have to be made across the board, including in our Waste Services. If we cannot set a balanced budget, Government commissioners will be sent in and will do it for us - without the local knowledge or interest in minimising the impact.

Q: Why not allow people to pay to use recycling sites?

The law states that local authorities must help residents dispose of their waste in a responsible way – and for free. So, this isn't allowed, legally. We did this previously on a number of sites to avoid closure, but this option now removed by Government, through statute in 2020.

Q: Could Biffa (or another contractor) offer a service directly to communities, without council involvement?

In theory, yes. But this is something they would need to make work for them. Recycling sites are complex businesses and expensive to run. Any contractor would be looking to recoup its costs.

Q: Is there a legal maximum distance that people can be expected to travel to access a recycling centre?

We are not aware of any legal maximum distances. However, there are equalities and access responsibilities local authorities must take into account when making changes to some service provisions.

Q: Will there be a risk of extra fly-tipping if you close recycling centres?

Fly-tipping is an environmental crime. Everyone has a responsibility to dispose of all their rubbish legally and properly. If site closures are approved they would be well advertised and alternatives publicised, along with the penalties of fly-tipping. However, we know through experience that fly-tipping tends to be conducted by rogue traders - often working out of their own area, trying to avoid the disposal costs that they would have to pay if they used a tip - and not by local householders who value their local environment.

Q: How have you identified the recycling centres earmarked for possible closure?

This was based on initial calculations of costs to the council per visit and per tonne of waste, and what we could potentially save, allowing us to deliver the most amount of savings whilst having an impact on the fewest people. The sites at risk could change, depending on the outcome of commercial negotiations with our contractor. We understand that any site closures will have an impact on the surrounding community, but we have to make savings and help the council balance its budget.

Q: Why name sites before a proposals have been finalised?

We named Castle Cary, Cheddar, Crewkerne, Dulverton and Williton to be transparent and avoid speculation. We know there is a lot of interest and concern, and wanted to be open and honest about the work so far.

Q: When would consultation happen?

If a decision is taken to move this option forward there would be further consultation, and we would look to start that process as soon as possible. At this stage we don't have any details, but were it to happen, consultation would include the public, key stakeholders, partners, plus engagement with city, town and parish councils, as we seek to understand the impacts.

Q: When could a decision be taken to close recycling sites – what's the timeline?

No recycling sites will close overnight following the budget-setting meeting of Full Council (due to place on 20 February). We don't have the dates yet, but if the savings option is progressed there will be further consultation, with opportunities for people to share their views. The result of any consultations would need to be considered, and a further decision would need to be taken by the Executive Committee.