

Environment Services and Climate Change Committee Meeting	
Meeting Date	17 th March 2026
Report Title	Kent Joint Waste Management Strategy 2026 - 2031
EMT Lead	Emma Wiggins (Director of Regeneration and Neighbourhoods)
Head of Service	Martyn Cassell (Head of Environment & Leisure)
Lead Officer	Alister Andrews (Environment Services Manager)
Classification	Open
Recommendations	1. To endorse the Kent Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy 2026 - 2031

1 Purpose of Report and Executive Summary

- 1.1 Kent County Council, in collaboration with the 12 district, borough and city councils through the Kent Resource Partnership (KRP), has developed the third Kent Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy 2026–2031.
- 1.2 This strategy sets out a clear delivery framework that responds to current national legislative reforms including Extended Producer Responsibility (2025), Simpler Recycling (2026), the Deposit Return Scheme (2027) and the Emissions Trading Scheme (2028) alongside local priorities such as delivering cost-effective services and supporting environmental improvements.
- 1.3 Kent faces a critical juncture in waste management. Rising collection and disposal costs, new national legislation and the upcoming Emissions Trading Scheme will significantly increase financial pressures on local authorities across Kent. Endorsing the Kent Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy 2026–2031 signals a clear commitment to a whole-system approach (looking at collection and disposal collectively) that focuses on reducing residual waste, increasing recycling and preparing services for local government reorganisation. This strategy and the associated action that it drives is essential to protect the Kent taxpayer and meet statutory obligations while simultaneously delivering environmental benefits.

2 Background, Context and Proposals

- 2.1 The Waste and Emissions Trading Act 2003 required councils in two-tier areas to produce joint waste management strategies. The first joint waste strategy was adopted by all 13 councils in 2007. An interim revision was completed in 2018 with an end date of 2020/21.

- 2.2 Although revision was planned, ongoing operational challenges following the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with several years of uncertainty over planned Government waste reforms delayed the revision and this is now overdue.
- 2.3 The proposed strategy provides clarity of direction for the Kent Resource Partnership over the next five years, a clear mandate for continued and renewed partnership action, going beyond just compliance with legislation, to achieve greater efficiency and effective management of household waste and prepare waste services for local government reorganisation.
- 2.4 A similar report to this one is going to all 12 lower tier authorities and KCC's committee in March 2026, with a recommendation to endorse the shared county-wide strategy.
- 2.5 The key principles of the county-wide strategy match the objectives that Swale Councillors set when we approved our recent waste and street cleansing contract.
- 2.6 2025 saw the establishment of the new Kent and Medway Environment Members Board, bringing together environmental, climate change and waste services under a single governance structure for the first time. Swale is represented at this meeting by the Chair of the Environmental Services and Climate Change Committee. Joint opportunities include greater resource efficiency, reducing carbon emissions and preventing environmental pollution (littering and flytipping).
- 2.7 Appointing a new strategic lead for the Kent Resource Partnership in January 2025, enabled the partnership to revisit its purpose and direction and complete the refresh of the joint strategy. A series of workshops and stakeholder engagement sessions were held late spring/summer to inform the development of the strategy. The Members Board were also shared the draft strategy at their first meeting.
- 2.8 Key aims of the refreshed strategy:
1. **Operational Excellence** – Efficient, sustainable waste collection and disposal.
 2. **Circular Economy Pathway** – Retain material value, create green jobs, and reduce carbon emissions.
 3. **Behaviour Change** – Evidence-led campaigns to reduce waste and contamination.
 4. **Transition to Unitary System** – Align governance and services for efficiency.
- 2.9 District, city and borough councils are the Waste Collection Authorities in Kent and are responsible for collecting household waste from the kerbside and delivering it to KCC for disposal. 83% of the household waste disposed of in Kent is collected by the Waste Collection Authorities at the kerbside.
- 2.10 Kent County Council is the household Waste Disposal Authority for Kent and has responsibility for disposing of the waste collected by the borough and district

authorities and for running 19 household waste recycling centres across Kent for householders to dispose of their waste material.

- 2.11 In 2024/25 KCC spent £53m disposing of the waste collected from the kerbside by the Waste Collection Authorities.
- 2.12 Of the £53m spent, almost £48m was on the processing of residual waste – waste that cannot be recycled, composted or reused. This includes waste contaminated with non-recyclable materials or waste that has been incorrectly separated making it unsuitable for recycling or composting.
- 2.13 Recycling waste is significantly more cost-effective than disposing of residual waste. On average recycling costs around c.£30 per tonne, whereas the cost of disposing of residual waste through Energy from Waste (EfW) facilities is c.£148 per tonne – nearly five times higher. Diverting just 10% of residual waste to recycling could save over £6m per year.
- 2.14 The 2025 waste composition analysis across Kent suggests that 52% of residual waste could actually be recycled.
- 2.15 Whilst 100% resident engagement and compliance in recycling is unrealistic, the government's target is 65% recycling of household waste by 2035, meaning Kent would need to move from its current 41.7% to at least 60–65% over the next decade. Working proactively through the Kent Resource Partnership enables us to maximise what is achievable and in turn mitigate the impact of future legislative change.
- 2.16 This table shows Swale BC's recycling rates over recent years.

Year	Recycling rate
2021/22	41.7%
2022/23	40.1%
2023/24	37.1%
2024/25	35.3% (TBC)

- 2.17 Kent's overall recycling rate has hovered around 41–44% for the past decade, showing very little upward movement since about 2014–15. Before COVID, the rate was already plateauing near 42%, and despite fluctuations in landfill and energy recovery, recycling performance has remained largely static since then.
- 2.18 To mitigate the budget pressures and achieve more efficient and effective waste management that both reduces residual waste and drives up recycling requires a whole system approach. Only by working in partnership will we be able to reduce kerbside waste and divert more to recycling, composting and reuse.
- 2.19 Through the Kent Resource Partnership, in readiness for compliance with government legislation changes, external consultants have reviewed whole model

costs (collection and disposal) for all local authorities. There were no immediate financial benefits identified in Swale by changing collection methodologies at this point in time. However, whole model savings would be best achieved through partnership working to reduce waste alongside behavioural change to reduce incineration and increase re-use and recycling.

- 2.20 2025 marked the start of a four-year period of legislative change in the waste sector requiring changes to frontline service offers and bringing forward new financial mechanisms. In response, Kent Resource Partnership has refreshed its remit to address the immediate and future challenges and opportunities for household waste management.
- 2.21 From January 2028, Energy from Waste facilities will fall under the UK Emissions Trading Scheme, adding an estimated £11–£17 million annually to disposal costs if residual waste tonnages remain unchanged. Simpler Recycling (2026), the Deposit Return Scheme (2027) will reshape collection systems and funding models. The Kent Joint Municipal Waste Strategy positions all authorities across Kent to mitigate these risks in the most efficient way and to maximise leverage from new funding streams such as Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR).
- 2.22 More recently, the emerging plans to deliver Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) makes it more critical to ensure clarity of focus for waste management services in the next five years. Continuing to drive forwards efficiencies and consistency in waste management systems and services across collection and disposal will create the conditions for a successful transition to new unitary authority structures.
- 2.23 New legislation for managing waste is introducing new financial mechanisms. The first of these changes is the Extended Producer Regulations for Packaging (pEPR) which uses the ‘polluter pays’ principle. Producers or importers of packaging placed on the UK market are charged and a proportion of this money is paid to local authorities (both tiers) to cover the costs of managing packaging waste recycling and or disposal. The first payments made to local authorities were in 2025-26. Future payments will be calculated based on an assessment of ‘efficient and effective’ management of packaging waste. Full details of the calculation method are still to be received by DEFRA.

3 Recommendations

- 3.1 To endorse the Kent Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy 2026 - 2031

4 Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

- 4.1 Option 1: Do Nothing and retain the current strategy (not recommended). The existing strategy is outdated and does not reflect current legislation, national targets, or emerging challenges such as carbon taxation and mandatory food waste collections. Retaining it would leave Swale without a clear roadmap for compliance and performance improvement.

- 4.2 Option 2: Minor refresh of existing strategy (not recommended). A light update would not adequately address significant changes in government policy, infrastructure needs and financial pressures. It risks being a superficial exercise that fails to provide strategic direction or stakeholder confidence.
- 4.3 Option 3: Full revision with strategic environmental assessment and public consultation (not recommended). This option would deliver maximum transparency through public engagement. However, it would likely require appointing external consultants and the increase in both time and costs to develop is not considered the right approach at this time, especially if we need to revise it further once we know the outcome and timeframes of LGR.

5 Consultation Undertaken or Proposed

- 5.1 This strategy was shaped through partnership workshops including Swale Borough Council officers.
- 5.2 Various stakeholders and groups received presentations, engaged in discussions or were invited to provide feedback on earlier drafts to shape the joint strategy. The Member's Board also discussed the draft strategy at their meeting.
- 5.3 The Strategy will be published externally and communicated to the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

6 Implications

Issue	Implications
Corporate Plan	The principles within the strategy reflect the Swale Council corporate priorities embedded within the themes of 'running the council' and creating a cleaner, more sustainable environment.
Financial, Resource and Property	As outlined within the report, Local Authorities within Kent are facing significant financial challenges. Legislative changes such as the Emission Trading Schemes and Simpler Recycling may further impact costs across the whole waste model. Swale Council is expecting to receive between £1.7M and £2.3M in 2025/26 from the Extended Packaging Producer Responsibility scheme to collect and recycle packaging. Future payments will be calculated based upon 'efficient and effective' schemes being in place. These schemes are best delivered in partnership where the greatest savings can be accomplished. This funding is already being used to increase recycling in Swale.

	The cost of developing the strategy is limited to officer time spent engaging and consulting stakeholders and drafting the document along with minimal design costs ahead of publication. Swale Borough Council contributes £15K pa towards the Kent Resource Partnership's operation costs and campaigns.
Legal, Statutory and Procurement	This strategy and its delivery through the Kent Resource Partnership meets the statutory requirements of the Waste and Emissions Trading Act 2003, which requires joint waste management strategies to be agreed and delivered in two-tier authority areas.
Crime and Disorder	The strategy and associated partnerships allow the sharing of intelligence and information regarding environmental crime. Knowledge and ideas are openly shared to target environmental offenders and generate campaigns and operations to reduce associated waste crime.
Environment and Climate/Ecological Emergency	Three of the main objectives within the strategy have direct environmental outcomes: 1. Operational Excellence – Efficient, sustainable waste collection and disposal. 2. Circular Economy Pathway – Retain material value, create green jobs, and reduce carbon emissions. 3. Behaviour Change – Evidence-led campaigns to reduce waste and contamination. The refreshed strategy embeds clearer communication and engagement plans, improving transparency and making recycling easier and more consistent for residents.
Health and Wellbeing	Reducing residual waste has obvious environmental benefits such as reduced emissions through incineration and recycling more materials through a circular economy. Food waste initiatives may also assist residents in saving money by reducing food waste.
Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults	None identified at this stage
Risk Management and Health and Safety	By working in partnership, sharing knowledge and ideas to enhance health and safety are encouraged. The main risks are financial ones due to future legislative changes, or strategic ones regarding waste collection and disposal infrastructure for residents of Kent. These are best resolved as a partnership with one overarching strategy.

Equality and Diversity	An Equality Impacts Screening Assessment has been completed by KCC and no significant positive or negative equality impacts have been identified. This strategy does not require changes to delivered services.
Privacy and Data Protection	None identified at this stage
Local Government Reorganisation	Delivery of the strategy will be carried out by the Kent Resource Partnership, reporting to the Kent and Medway Environment Members Board (and where required Kent Joint Chief Executives and/or Kent Leaders). The strategy considers a 'whole system' approach across both local authority tiers. Consequently, the strategy reflects the principles of Local Government Reorganisation. Identifying whole system challenges now will pave the way for LGR solutions.

7 Appendices

7.1 The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix I: Kent Joint Municipal Waste Management Strategy 2026 – 2031

8 Background Papers

None