



Belfast
City Council

**Pre-loved toys appeal at Household Waste Recycling Centres
(December 2022)**

Evaluation and Lessons Learned

Final 06-03-23

1.0 Background

In October 2022, officers from the Resources & Fleet Service met with an elected member of Council to explore the idea of launching a pre-loved toys scheme at the Council's Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs). The member had previously raised this as a Members Motion aimed at easing the financial burden on families at Christmas and reducing waste to landfill.

Officers discussed the scheme with their counterparts in neighbouring Councils which had operated similar initiatives, in order to confirm the value of such schemes, establish good practice and fast-track the project, especially given the tight timescales involved.

This was an obvious example of a circular economy project by reusing items to benefit the local community. The circular economy model creates a more sustainable pattern of consumption, production and waste. This has obvious environmental benefits while delivering social and/ or economic benefits at the same time.

The scheme was operated in 2022 as a pilot with a view to assessing its value and learning lessons for any potential future schemes.

2.0 Outline of scheme

The Council operated the initiative at its 4 HWRCs from Wed 9 Nov – Sun 11 Dec 2022.

It was operated in conjunction with 3 local charities to facilitate distribution of toys across the city:

- East Belfast Mission (EBM) – East & West Belfast (lead partner)
- Vincent's (retail arm of St Vincent de Paul) – North Belfast
- Save the Children – South Belfast

East Belfast Mission acted as the lead partner, collecting items from all sites and distributing them to the other partners. During the course of the scheme EBM reached out to Barnardos to provide additional distribution capacity.

The scheme was publicised via social media, press release and using signage at the HWRCs. The signage is shown in Appendix 1.

Members of the public deposited toys into supermarket style delivery cages (see Appendix 2). When the cages were filled, site management contacted East Belfast Mission to collect the toys.

East Belfast Mission delivered some of toys to other partners (according to their capacity) but they took the majority to a separate facility for their own sorting and distribution.

Checking, sorting and preparing the toys involved volunteers from a range of local businesses and organisations.

A 'Questions & Answers' document was developed for the Customer Hub and on-site staff to respond to any queries from members of the public. This is included at Appendix 3.

A number of photographs are included in Appendix 4.

3.0 Detailed discussion of operation

3.1 Overall approach

This approach worked well in principle, garnering an overwhelming response. One of the main challenges was the short timescale for effective planning and preparation of the initiative.

During the review of lessons learned, one respondent highlighted that some social media users asked whether items could be picked up from homes; another option might be to use other facilities (e.g. Community Centres or churches) as collection points. Both are seemingly reasonable suggestions, but the

pilot scheme encountered significant logistical challenges collecting from just 4 sites, and the legislation as it stands presents barriers to the Council operating reuse schemes at unlicensed premises; these barriers could be addressed through close management but that requires extra resource. Given the scale of the response to the pilot scheme, there seems to be no compelling need to radically change the approach.

3.2 Site operations

The Council accepted a range of pre-loved toys at its four recycling centres from Wed 9 November to Sunday 11 December (approx. 5 weeks).

The donated toys were stored in supermarket cages (Appendix 2) which were housed in the existing re-use containers which are used for other reusable items (namely furniture and bicycles).

However, due to the overwhelming response, the cages and the re-use containers filled up very quickly. There was not enough capacity (space or collections) to cope with the volume of toys on top of the normal reusable items.

Quality control was difficult; this included policing the condition of items and the type of items (the Council's Environmental Health Service advised that soft toys and electricals should not be accepted, on hygiene and safety grounds respectively). Site staff removed as many unsuitable items as they could, but a proportion slipped through. However, there were no obvious gaps identified in the messaging in relation to this and it seems more likely that the public either ignored some of the messages or did not take in the detail.

On the other hand, the start and end dates for the scheme were missing from the signage on site and this led to continuing donations after the scheme had closed.

Some items were found to have parts missing on arrival at the EBM sorting area; it wasn't clear whether the parts were already missing when donated or whether they were lost subsequently.

HWRC management suggested that:

- 1) More frequent collections would be required (every 2-3 days). *NOTE: This may have a cost implication.*
- 2) The cages were not entirely suitable for the different types and sizes of items and required double handling at collection. At least one site started using large 'builders bags' instead; full and empty bags could be swapped at collection.
- 3) Different storage boxes/ methods might be needed for items with small parts.
- 4) Scheme start and end dates should be included on the site signage.

3.3 Charity/ community partners

Resources & Fleet had an existing arrangement whereby East Belfast Mission collected furniture and bicycles from the reuse containers to be resold in its shops in East and West Belfast. EBM agreed to act as lead partner for the reusable toys scheme. It was important to ensure that the scheme served the whole city and Community Provision assisted the Resources and Fleet Service to identify distribution partners for North and South Belfast.

EBM undertook to collect the toys from each HWRC and deliver them to the partner serving that area of Belfast (N/ S/ E/ W).

The partners were at liberty to resell the toys at affordable prices to the public or to gift them to households as they saw fit. The vast majority of items were gifted.

The one 'lead' partner approach worked well in principle.

The 'Volunteer Now' database was a good resource for recruiting volunteers to help with checking, sorting and preparing the items.

The quality of items distributed overall was good; the partners encountered no problems or complaints from customers or recipients.

The main issues encountered by the partners were in terms of the short timescale for planning and the overwhelming volume of donations:

- Some of the partners were simply not equipped to handle the volume of items available and, therefore, took much less than expected.
- This meant that EBM processed the vast majority of items themselves, checking, sorting and preparing them for distribution to families.
- There was not enough time to properly arrange sufficient staff/ volunteers or space for storage/ sorting.
- EBM were unable to service their 'business-as-usual' on top of the scheme.
- There were unforeseen costs to the partners in terms of collections, storage space, extra waste generated and buying sacks/ bags/ boxes for onward distribution to recipient families.

EBM conceded that their own approach to distribution was very tailored to specific families, which made it complex and time-consuming. They also noted that donations for the 12-17 year-old bracket were light.

EBM in particular rose to the challenge in order to successfully deliver the scheme, but made the following recommendations:

- 1) Start planning earlier.
- 2) Engage potential partners earlier.
- 3) Ensure that partners:
 - a. Are equipped (space, staff, flexibility) to deal with the volume of items and multiple deliveries
 - b. Have a named/ dedicated contact for delivery of the scheme
- 5) Consider hiring/ using a dedicated vehicle. *NOTE: This may have a cost implication.*
- 6) Hire a dedicated space. *NOTE: This may have a cost implication.*
- 7) Engage/ appeal for volunteers earlier.
- 8) Add books, boxed games and PS2-PS5 games to the item list to cover teens.
- 9) Extra commercial collections/ bring-back-to-HWRC option for waste generated in the sorting process.
- 10) Consider a different approach to distribution e.g. pop-up shop akin to MEA approach

3.4 Communications and publicity

The scheme was publicised via social media, press release and using signage at the HWRCs. The signage is shown in Appendix 1.

The communications provided the public with all of the key information that they needed about what they could donate and the start and end dates of the scheme.

The scheme attracted significant media attention (TV, radio, online) which no doubt contributed to its success and the volume of toys collected.

While the media attention was welcome and beneficial, it did create extra time demands on those involved, especially the lead partner.

HWRC management indicated that they did have to deal with a fair number of unsuitable items and some people were still arriving with donations after the closing date.

As noted above, the start and end dates for the scheme were missing from the signage on site, items donated for the 12-17 age range were light and there were some negative social media comments from members of the public who assumed that the Council was benefitting from the sale of the items.

There did not appear to be any other obvious gaps in the messaging but some of the messages did seem to be missed or ignored by the public.

In light of these observations:

- 1) We should plan for significant media interest and how this will be managed.
- 2) Certain messages could be emphasised at different periods of the campaign.
- 3) Messaging could be clearer about how the donations will be used and who will benefit.
- 4) Add books, boxed games and PS2-PS5 games to the item list to cover teens.
- 5) Scheme start and end dates should be included on the site signage.

3.5 Costs and funding

The costs to the Council for delivery of the pilot scheme were minimal but the lead partner did incur unexpected costs with respect to collections, storage, waste disposal and packaging materials, which would need to be considered in future schemes.

However, given the nature of the scheme, the recommendation is to:

- 1) Explore meeting the various costs through funding from beneficiary organisations, sponsorship and in-kind donations.

3.6 Results and metrics

Given the overwhelming volume of donations and the resulting pressure on all partners, capturing accurate metrics took second place to operational delivery of the scheme. Despite this, EBM, who processed the majority of the items themselves, were able to provide fairly detailed estimates on their own operations, but there was very limited information relating to the other partners.

The recommendation for future schemes is to:

- 1) Agree, at an early stage, simple metrics along with mechanisms for capturing data from all partners.

3.0 Outcomes

East Belfast Mission processed the majority of the items themselves and provided the following feedback/estimates:

- 13 van loads of toys were collected from the HWRCs
- This translated to approximately 2,500 bags/boxes distributed by EBM (there was an unquantified but much lesser amount distributed through the other partners)
- About 90% of the stock collected was of acceptable quality
- Around 700 families were gifted toys
- The families were given at least one full bag of toys per child
- Likely over 2,000 children benefited
- EBM estimate that an average bag contained £40- 50 worth of toys (if new)
- Many of the gifted toys would have cost £50 or more (if new)

If each bag of toys weighed 3kg, the items distributed through EBM alone equate to approximately 7.5t of items reused and diverted from disposal.

While toys vary in their material construction, one study¹ showed that the carbon footprint for the lifecycle (from material extraction to eventual product disposal) of a typical plastic toy was 1.8kg CO₂ eq/ kg. On

¹ Robertson, Madeline R. and Klimas, Christie (2019) "A Playful Life Cycle Assessment of the Environmental Impact of Children's Toys," DePaul Discoveries: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 7. Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/depaul-disc/vol8/iss1/7>

that basis, and assuming that 50% of the toys donated were of plastic construction, this scheme has saved almost 7t CO2eq compared to buying new.

4.0 Evaluation

The scheme attracted significant positive media attention and was an overwhelming success in terms of the public response and the number of local families and children who were helped.

The initiative also connected multiple Belfast organisations in formal and informal (volunteering) roles to benefit the local community. It would have been impossible to deliver the scheme without this network of help.

However, the short notice for planning the scheme, and the huge volume of donations, meant that a number of aspects, including some unforeseen costs, were not properly planned for; this created significant stress and pressure on the Resources & Fleet Service and the various partners.

The scheme is undoubtedly worth operating on an annual basis, but planning must start earlier (August/September) and take into account the lessons learned from the pilot (2022) scheme.

Contact for further information

For more information about the scheme email: WasteManagement@BelfastCity.gov.uk

Appendix 1 – Signage artwork



Please donate quality used toys here.



We can accept pre-loved items for children of all ages, including:

- Bikes, trikes, scooters
- Ride on toys
- Go Karts
- Toy kitchens and work benches
- Doll houses
- Dolls and prams
- Jigsaws, puzzles, board games, books and DVDs
- Figures and figurines
- Lego

The items and their boxes or packaging must be clean, complete, working and in good condition.



We cannot accept:

- Soft toys (teddy bears etc.) (hygiene)
- Electric/ electronic (mains or battery-operated) (safety)

www.belfastcity.gov.uk/toyappeal



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Appendix 2 – Supermarket cages



Appendix 3 – Customer Q&A

Belfast City Council - Pre-loved toys scheme 2022

Customer Q&A – Version iv @ 08-11-22

1. What is happening?

The Council is operating a pre-loved toys scheme at its Household Recycling Centres for Christmas 2022. These toys will be used to help families in need in the community.

This is an example of the *circular economy* in action - keeping good quality items in use and reducing waste while meeting social need.

2. When does the campaign start and end?

Start date 9 Nov 22 / End date 11 December 22

3. Where can I bring my pre-loved toys?

You can bring your pre-loved toys to any of our 4 Household Recycling Centres – Alexandra, Blackstaff, Ormeau or Palmerston

4. What kind of toys can I drop off?

Pre-loved/ second-hand/ used toys, games, books, DVDs and other items suitable for children of all ages.

The items and their boxes or packaging must be clean, complete, working and in good condition.

Examples include:

- Bikes, trikes, scooters
- Ride on toys
- Go Karts
- Toy kitchens and work benches
- Doll houses
- Dolls and prams
- Jigsaws, puzzles and board games (must be complete)
- Figures and figurines
- Lego

5. Are there items I can't drop off?

- Soft toys (teddy bears etc.) are not acceptable (hygiene)
- Electric/ electronic (mains or battery-operated) devices are not acceptable (safety)
- The items and their boxes or packaging must be clean, complete, working and in good condition.

6. What will happen to the toys?

The toys will be used to help families in need across the city, through the charity organisations listed below.

Some will be gifted directly to families in need; some will be sold at affordable prices in charity shops:

- East Belfast Mission – Restore shops Newtownards Rd (east Belfast) & Park Centre (west Belfast)
- St Vincent de Paul – Vincent's shop Antrim Road (north Belfast)
- Save the Children – Botanic Avenue (south Belfast)

7. Where can I donate toys when the scheme has finished (ie after 11 Dec)?

You can always take good quality used toys direct to local charity shops including those listed above.

Appendix 4 – Photographs



