

Bin petition considered 'too political' in run up to general election

A petition calling on East Lothian Council to return household bin collections to every two weeks was considered 'too political' to be discussed in the run up to the general election.

Thousands of people have signed the petition which was launched as the council prepared to introduce a reduced three weekly collection across the county and it was due to be discussed at its petitions committee last week.

However it has been revealed the meeting was cancelled and the item rescheduled to be considered in September after officials ruled it was likely to break strict purdah guidelines.

Purdah is the pre-election period after it has been called when local authorities and other public bodies are required to remain neutral.

A council spokesperson said the change to bin collections had been a decision taken by the council's Labour administration and it was felt councillors would have been unable to 'fully engage' in the debate without making political comments.

The originator of the petition shared an email she said she received from the council over the decision which said "this

budget choice being debated would risk political comments being made as part of the discussion which, during the pre-election period East Lothian Council is not allowed to facilitate”.

The petition calling for the return to fortnightly collections has received more than 2,700 signatures and a Facebook page set up for residents against the change has more than 1,600 members.

The social media page has been swamped with stories from locals who are struggling to cope with the longer wait for household waste to be collected.

Many say they are now having to make regular trips to the local dumps while others claim neighbours are putting bags in other people’s bins creating tension in streets.

Some have also resorted to paying private firms to empty their bins as they say they cannot wait for the council’s three weekly collections.

East Lothian residents have six different waste receptacles made up of a green household bin, brown garden waste bin, blue box for paper and car, green/black box for glass, a grey food caddy and a white weighted bag for plastic, tins and cartons.

Following this year’s budget decision it was agreed to introduce a new annual fee for collection of garden waste which had been taken away for free once a month, and is now collected fortnightly for a charge of £35 a year and reduce the fortnightly free household waste collection to every three weeks.

Recycling bags and boxes are collected weekly along with food waste.

East Lothian Council said the petition over the changed household waste collection was now due to be heard at the

petitions committee in September.

Their spokesperson said: "There is clear guidance that councils and other bodies must follow by law in the pre-election period.

"We are required to balance our responsibilities to proceed with council business against the requirement to remain politically neutral, preventing any type of communication or activity that could affect, or be seen to affect, public support for a political party.

"The petition relates to a result of the administration's budget decisions. Petition committee members may not be able to fully engage in debate due to the restrictions around statements which are, or could be considered, in breach of the requirement for neutrality during the pre-election period.

"Therefore the decision was made to delay this committee meeting until post-election period so members, and petitioners, can express themselves without such restrictions."

By Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter