

Swale Borough Council Councillor Waste & Street Cleansing Scrutiny Review survey – Summary of responses received

A survey was circulated to all 47 Councillors and 19 responses were received. Below is a summary of those responses.

Question 1 - Before the contract started are you aware if residents in your ward felt they had enough information about the changes?

Of the responses received 7 stated that residents in their ward felt they had received enough information before the contract started.

Responses are summarised below:

- A lot of people said they didn't receive a letter or the information was incorrect;
- other steps could have been taken to get the information out such as video recordings that could have been shared online for each area;
- there was an overwhelming assumption it would be a smooth transition;
- more social media engagement would have been beneficial;
- it is not possible to reach everyone;
- the initial information was sufficient;
- bin stickers would have been helpful; and
- ward councillors should have been given the opportunity to sense check the rounds in advance.

Question 2 - Once the contract started are you aware if residents in your ward felt they had enough information about any disruption to collections?

Of the responses received 14 felt residents in their ward did not have enough information about any disruption to collections.

Responses are summarised below:

- Not kept informed of missed collections or plans to address them;
- many people reported issues via the website and no feedback was received;
- emails from residents and councillors were not always answered;
- issues also with the telephone system meant a lot of residents simply gave up trying to report;
- very little was communicated by the council, administration or collectors;
- few people, even councillors were getting prompt, or even any feedback when they submitted complaints;
- one day, everyone was told to bring their bins in. The next day, they were told to leave their bins out in case a truck happened to pass by;
- residents felt information about disruptions was lacking detail and timeliness;
- the SBC website look-up tool displayed the wrong information; and
- residents resorted to asking ward councillors for information.

Question 3 - To what extent was your ward affected by missed collections?

A summary of the ways in which wards were affected are below:

- residents' faith in the Council has changed;
- some people didn't have their bins emptied for 14 weeks;

- parked cars were used as an excuse for non-collection;
- people took their rubbish to the tip but some were turned away as waste was not being accepted;
- some people paid private companies to remove their waste;
- pavements were blocked by uncollected bins causing difficulties for pedestrians with pushchairs and wheelchair users;
- rural areas were particularly impacted;
- dog waste bins were overflowing;
- narrow roads caused some collections not to be completed;
- communal bin stores and food waste collections were a particular problem; and
- sack collection only areas had rubbish stacking up due to missed collections.

Question 4a - What was your experience of reporting missed collections – on your own behalf?:

Councillors experiences of reporting missed collections are summarised below:

- On one occasion I was told my bin had not been on the pavement - when it had been;
- the most frustrating aspect was sending in report after report for the same locations with no response at all, or no resolution;
- no confirmation of receipt of complaint received initially, or notification about any resolution;
- reporting via the website overall worked well; and
- four councillors responded to say they had a very good experience of reporting and receiving a response.

Question 4a - What was your experience of reporting missed collections – on behalf of residents?:

- Too much false information and failed promises of recollections often for months, which just added to residents frustrations;
- emails not always responded to but when they were, the response was helpful;
- in the early months only about a half of complaints lodged were responded to.
- some responses to complaints were vague;
- frustrating not to have the information to pass onto residents;
- information provided was sometimes incorrect;
- officers responded quickly with information about a resolution;
- the same issues repeated week after week despite reporting;
- residents were thankful for our help. Elderly residents have said they couldn't get through on phone line;
- not enough feedback due to lack of staff, the council should have had lots of temporary or seconded contractor monitoring officer or assistant contract monitoring officers;
- there wasn't and still isn't enough officers on the ground physically monitoring elements of the contract;
- street bins are still an issue; and
- only a couple of times did I have to escalate the issue.

Question 5 - What feedback have you received from residents in your ward about reporting missed collections?

Responses are summarised below:

- residents have reported spending ages on the phone waiting to speak to someone;
- reports of the website not working;
- feedback was overwhelmingly negative;
- there was gratitude when problems were resolved;
- there was understanding and patience;
- tailored responses to emails were not received;
- frustration when there were no responses to reporting;
- residents found it hard to understand why there was a problem when the previous contractor had successfully completed collections;
- some residents found the reporting procedure was too complicated;
- some residents found the reporting procedure easy;
- SBC staff were kind and helpful; and
- the Council's reputation has been undermined.

Question 6 - Was there anything specific about your ward that you observed which may have contributed to missed collections such as access problems?

Responses are summarised below:

- Suez reported difficulties with access but it was not an issue for the previous contractor;
- properties missed as crews had no knowledge of them or where bins were normally placed;
- Hilda Road a particular problem for a range of reasons;
- communal bins a problem in Queenborough, Halfway and Sheerness;
- properties missed as they were listed by name, not street address;
- the system kept saying there was a road closure when there wasn't;
- assisted collections were also badly affected. Disabled residents went for weeks seeing their bins missed while others nearby were collected;
- issues caused by not enough or wrong data;
- there appeared to be an over-supply of small vehicles which resulted in collections not being completed;
- Lamas Drive, vehicles parked so collection vehicles could not get through;
- There are too many random addresses on narrow roads;
- Cryalls Lane at the London Road end, access problems due to parked cars;
- Road works caused access problems;
- The previous contractor did not provide key codes for communal bins;

Question 7 - Do you feel you have received enough information/data throughout the period of disruption to assist with resident queries? If not, what additional information would have been useful?

Responses are summarised below:

- Didn't feel the information provided could be trusted;
- councillors were told not to re-use the daily update but this limited what information could be passed onto residents;
- it would have been useful to have answers to residents' questions about why there were never enough lorries to replace broken down ones or those in for a service or MOT, and why there were never enough staff or managers to replace those that were off sick;

- councillors should have been provided with the details of each route, which were only listed as numbers in the beginning;
- the waste update was a shambles. The numbers were quickly meaningless, showing routes as being 100% when they clearly weren't;
- there was no information as to which properties were supposed to be collected when;
- daily updates did not give area-specific information;
- wards that have Friday rounds had no daily update until the following Monday or Tuesday;
- there was no separate data for food waste;
- communication with councillors around how new service would work didn't adequately explain how long expected new service would bed-in, and also told that new zones would make collections more efficient but since heard of real geographical mismatches which really shouldn't have happened;
- the daily bulletins were helpful, but in my view did not contain enough detail;
- the daily updates sometimes contained inaccurate or conflicting information;
- other systems such as live updates on the website;
- a ticket tracking system would have allowed councillors to follow the progress of issues raised; and
- five councillors felt they had received enough data/information.

Question 8 - Did you find the information/data provided easy to interpret?

Responses are summarised below:

- The bit about 70%, 95% or 100% collections was misleading because it did not reflect the geography;
- the information provided was easy to interpret, just not detailed enough to be effective, or outright wrong;
- in the beginning no, but once I became familiar with the language being used and how the statistics were being applied, the information/data provided became easier to understand; and
- seven councillors felt the information/data provided was easy to interpret.

Question 9 - Apart from reporting missed collections on behalf of residents, are there any other actions you have had to take resulting from the new waste contract?

Responses are summarised below:

- Reporting of speeding and dangerous driving of Suez vehicle;
- resolving ongoing problems of broken bins;
- chasing up about garden waste bins not being delivered;
- calling KCC as there were reports of the Sheerness tip being full;
- councillors paying over £1,000 out of own pockets to clear waste not collected for over six weeks;
- visiting locations to provide Suez with full address and What3words;
- set up local WhatsApp groups to keep residents informed;
- visiting locations to monitor if bins had been collected;
- managing a large volume of phone calls, emails and Facebook interactions;
- acting as intermediary between residents and council officers;
- requesting extension to garden waste bin subscription due to non-collections;
- chased non-delivery of new bins;

- reporting that food caddies were being thrown back onto the street and damaged;
- request a CMO escort a crew to locate communal bins;
- had to arrange for housing associations to undertake bulk clearances of bin areas for fire safety reasons;
- reporting increased flytipping and littering;
- attending many meetings with officers, Suez, residents and parishes; and
- two councillors said they didn't have to undertake any additional actions.

Question 10 - Can you comment on whether the round changes, which started on 16 September, have resulted in improvements in your ward?

Responses received summarised below (at time of the member consultation):

- nine councillors reported no or little improvement;
- six councillors reported an improvement; and
- two reported a mixed result.

Question 11 - Are you aware of any issues experienced in your ward by vulnerable residents?

Responses are summarised below:

- Issues with bins being left in the wrong place which caused difficulties for residents with mobility problems;
- difficulties experienced clearing up mess created by missed collections and bags being ripped open by foxes;
- a child was injured by a sharp object sticking out of a black bag uncollected from the street;
- complaints about wheelchair users not being able to use pavements due to uncollected waste;
- assisted collections were not honoured for some time;
- assisted collections often missed or not recorded on the Suez system;
- councillors putting bins out for elderly residents;
- problems with incontinence products not being collected;
- problems with assisted initially due to out of date data being passed from the previous contractor to Suez, but resolved by re-registering;
- some problems with arranging collection of yellow bio-waste bins;
- communal bins in older people's homes not collected regularly;
- missed clinical waste; and
- one councillor said there had been no problems in their ward.

Are you aware of any issues experienced in your ward by residents who use communal bins?

Responses are summarised below:

- ongoing problems of communal bins being missed were reported in the following areas:
 - The Oasts and Blossom Grove
 - Queenborough, Halfway and Sheerness;
 - Sheppey Beach Villas – due to vehicles not being given permission by land owner use private roads;
 - Regis Gate Lodge and Double Day Lodge
 - Thistle Hill;
 - Whitehall Court, Bell Road;
 - Love Lane flats,

- Kingsmead Estate, Nove Avenue and Bensted Grove; and
- The Alms Houses.
- Two councillors said there had been no problems in their wards.

Question 13 - Do you have any comments or observations about the vehicles used in the new contract?

- Responses are summarised below:
- Believe they are not the correct size;
 - vehicles are often off the road for repair, damage, service or MOT;
 - they look nice but the names that were chosen by the public could be more visible;
 - the food collection system could have been better planned and the capacity more accurately calculated;
 - it took Suez a long time to realise the vehicles could not handle certain routes;
 - they seem to break down often;
 - why are they not fully electric?
 - there is a miss-match of vehicle size to route requirement;
 - smaller vehicles going down narrow routes take less waste;
 - was the previous 70/30 split vehicles better?
 - the waste transfer bins are still an inappropriate colour and give residents no confidence that Swale is actually going to recycle the food waste or the recycling; and
 - why do the food pods keep breaking?;

Question 14 - Do you have any comments or observations about either SBC or Suez staffing?

- Responses are summarised below:
- No issue with SBC team and would like to thank them for their efforts;
 - witnessed one Suez staff member running a vehicle on his own;
 - contract management has been bad across all three authorities;
 - staff have received horrific abuse but they were sending emails even at 10 pm;
 - administration response unacceptable, an apology only coming far into the contract;
 - Suez staff should have been paid the same from the start;
 - Suez staff logging rounds as complete and when challenged still staying bins were emptied and only backing down when photographic evidence proved;
 - there seems to have been an excessive number of bins being damaged;
 - SBC customer services understaffed;
 - why weren't Suez fully staffed from the beginning of the contract?
 - SBC need more staff monitoring on the ground and in the office to reply to member enquiries;
 - Suez staff with experience/knowledge of areas were moved to areas they were unfamiliar with;
 - crew have told residents that they aren't told to look at the PDA for assisted collections etc;
 - appreciation expressed for the hard work of SBC officers;
 - concerns about the TUPE process and how this didn't adequately prepare the workforce for the degree of change, meaning many who transferred over were resistant to new rounds and processes;

- SBC underestimated the number of staff required to deal with the substantial number of complaints raised;
- I would like to praise the Environmental team who in my opinion acted with complete professionalism and did all they could operating under extremely difficult circumstances;
- amount of Suez staff sickness was frustrating and left the contract understaffed; and
- I do wonder to what extent contract monitoring is being done. SBC needs to be standing over the contract and enforcing every clause.

Question 15 - What feedback have you received from residents in your ward about street cleansing since the new contract started?

Responses are summarised below:

- Residents complain about dirty streets, litter, rubbish bins overflowing and fly-tipping, however these have been issues for years;
- road sweepers are scheduled but residents report they haven't seen them;
- reports of wards not being cleaned;
- paths need clearing;
- bins need to be emptied more frequently;
- litter picking and fly-tipping clearing should happen quicker;
- the wait for bulk waste collections was a month;
- fly-tipping was being cleared quickly since the start of the contract;
- road sweeper not suitable as it has to go over the same area several times;
- residents were not aware about the removal of dog waste bins and that dog waste should go in general waste bins

Question 16 - Overall, how would you say the new waste contract has impacted on your role as a councillor?

Responses are summarised below:

- Hugely, the amount of time I have spent has made the role almost full time as well as the target for frustrations;
- it's helped let people know who their councillors are, and what other things they can help with;
- it has been all consuming since the new contract and the calls, email, instant message issues raised was intolerable at times plus some abuse early on;
- residents have threatened to dump their uncollected rubbish on my own doorstep. SBC has measures in place to deal with the mental health of council staff - but is oblivious to the pressures placed upon unpaid councillors;
- I was easily spending over 20hrs a week trying to resolve waste issues in my ward. It was the subject most residents stop me with, when out and about. I needed to do a weekly trawl of 5 facebook groups, messages, emails, face to face conversations before emailing cleansing;
- I believe the people of Swale deserve better than what has taken place with the waste collection and although there are signs of improvements, measures need to be put in place to prevent anything like this from taking place again; and
- I ensured my message was to report online where possible, but through the call centre if not.