

Minutes



Listening Learning Leading

OF AN EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE Council

Held on Friday 24 September 2021 at 2.00 pm
First floor, 135 Eastern Avenue, Milton Park, Milton, OX14 4SB

Present in the meeting room:

Councillors: Jo Robb (Chair), Anna Badcock, Robin Bennett, Sam Casey-Rerhaye, Sue Cooper, Peter Dragonetti, Maggie Filipova-Rivers, Stefan Gawrysiak, Elizabeth Gillespie, Victoria Haval, Alexandrine Kantor, Mocky Khan, Lynn Lloyd, Jane Murphy, Caroline Newton, Andrea Powell, Leigh Rawlins, David Rouane, Anne-Marie Simpson, Alan Thompson, Andrea Warren and Ian White

Officers: Steven Corrigan and Mark Stone

Remote attendance:

Councillors: Ken Arlett, Kate Gregory and Kellie Hinton

Officers: Patrick Arran, Harry Barrington-Mountford, Pat Connell, Steve Culliford, Simon Hewings, Suzanne Malcolm, and Susie Royse

Apologies: Councillors: Pieter-Paul Barker, David Bartholomew, Tim Bearder, David Bretherton, Lorraine Hillier, George Levy, Axel Macdonald, Sue Roberts, Ian Snowdon, David Turner and Celia Wilson

28 Declarations of disclosable pecuniary interest

None.

The Chair advised that it is likely that a number of councillors may subscribe to the garden waste service being considered this evening. The Monitoring Officer has advised that councillors who do subscribe to the garden waste service do not need to declare an interest in the item of business on the basis that this is not a disclosable pecuniary interest.

29 Urgent business and chairman's announcements

None.

30 Public participation

The Chair provided details of those members of the public had registered to address Council. Council agreed to extend the public speaking time to allow each member of the public who had registered to speak for three minutes to make their address.

Liz Bachelor addressed Council. She asked what plans the council had to address communication going forward.

Freddie van Mierlo, County Councillor for Chalgrove Division, addressed Council. He referenced the growing supply chain crisis and shortage of HGV drivers currently facing various sectors of the economy. In light of this, he expressed the view that it was unsurprising Biffa have found it difficult to collect Garden Waste and welcomed the prioritisation of general, food waste and recycling. He welcomed the resumption of the Garden Waste service.

Andy Smith addressed Council. Whilst disappointed that his Green Waste had not been collected, he expressed the view the issue was a consequence of a nationwide HGV driver shortage which was outside the control of the council.

Len Pannett addressed Council. He expressed the view that the problem had been caused by a national shortage of HGV drivers exacerbated by a retiring workforce, drivers leaving the sector due to tax changes, the impact of the pandemic in restricting the training and testing of new drivers and drivers returning home as a consequence of Brexit.

Andrew Jones addressed Council. He asked whether the suspension of the Garden Waste service was in accordance with the contract.

31 Garden Waste Service

Council considered the report of the Head of Housing and Environment on the temporary suspension of the garden waste service and the steps taken to restart the service in discussion with Biffa, the council's waste service contractor. The report set out the circumstances leading to the suspension, the national situation, communication with residents and the current situation.

Councillor David Rouane, Cabinet member for housing and the environment, addressed Council. He advised that the collection of garden waste service is provided by Biffa under the terms of a contract agreed in 2009 and extended in 2014 to cover the period 2017-2024.

The service is used by around 44 per cent of residents and, like the rest of the Biffa contract, has generally worked well. Any problems are worked out through the normal processes of contract management. The contract includes a provision for Biffa to activate a Business Continuity Plan (BCP). The BCP is a document agreed with the contractor to enable the parties to identify the actions needed to be taken to maintain critical services following disruptive incidents. It is designed to protect the critical kerbside collections received by all households (food waste, recycling, and residual (rubbish) waste) received by all households in the district and is rarely used.

Throughout the pandemic officers had worked closely with local and regional managers to ensure that the kerbside waste service was delivered. There were several times during this period when driver numbers were less than those needed, Biffa took the necessary actions including working longer hours and weekends to ensure services were delivered. However, on Monday 2 August, Biffa informed the council that the number of suitably qualified drivers they had available to work on that day was such that it was necessary to activate the BCP. On that day they were 20 per cent down and, in order to protect the

collection of the critical services, officers, in consultation with relevant Cabinet members, had no alternative but to agree to the temporary suspension of the garden waste service for a period of 4 to 6 weeks. He explained that the cause of the suspension was the national shortage of HGV drivers which impacted Biffa's ability to recruit and retain drivers.

In respect of the communication, he explained that whilst the garden waste service was provided by Biffa, the invoicing for the service was outsourced as part of the Five Councils Partnership Contract but did not include a system for communication with customers outside of invoicing. This service was recently brought back inhouse but a process for communicating with customers was not in place prior to the suspension of the garden waste service. Due to the sudden suspension of the service, it was not possible to communicate with customers in advance. With the council only holding 37% of garden waste customers email addresses the decision was taken to communicate the suspension via social media and local media. Writing to customers was estimated to cost around £30,000 and many of those letters would have taken a week to arrive with households. A decision was taken that this was not the best option for communicating the message quickly. Steps were taken to ensure that customers were informed via the website and social media, but mainly through traditional media including local newspapers, local radio and TV. Councillor Catherine Webber, Vale of White Horse District Council Cabinet member for Cabinet member for climate emergency and environment, spoke on behalf of both councils and gave several radio and TV interviews which were then replayed throughout the day.

He confirmed the resumption of the garden waste service, initially on a four-weekly cycle, would commence in the week commencing 27 September. All customers would be contacted explaining the details for the temporary arrangements, including the collection of additional waste, and setting out arrangements for the extension of their subscription by three months in recognition of the reduced service.

He acknowledged that mistakes had been made, particularly with the continued collection of direct debits during the suspension of the service, for which he apologised. He concluded by defending the action taken which had protected the critical kerbside collections.

Councillor Rouane moved, and Councillor Cooper seconded the recommendation to note the report and the current position with the garden waste service as set out in the report.

Councillors welcomed the interim arrangements to resume the Garden Waste collections on 27 September and the decision to extend subscriptions by three months.

A number of councillors supported the view that the suspension of the service was as a result of a shortage of HGV drivers caused by a number of factors including drivers returning home as a consequence of Brexit, the impact of the pandemic in restricting the training and testing of new drivers and an increase in demand for drivers across the economy following a shift towards home delivery. The lack of a Customer Relationship Management system (CRM), related to previous corporate decisions related to the 5Cs contract, had restricted the ability of the council to communicate with subscribers of the service. A number of councillors welcomed the continuation of the critical waste service collections.

Other councillors criticised the lack of preparedness, the handling of the suspension of the service, the lack of an effective communication plan, the time taken to implement interim

arrangements and the lack of mitigating measures. A number criticised the decision not to email subscribers whose contact details were held by the council and the decision not to write to all subscribers following the suspension rather than placing reliance on social media and media outlets. Others criticised the continued collection of direct debit payments, the issuing of invoices and reminders during the period of the suspension of the service.

Council noted that Cabinet would be considering an IT Strategy report to improve customer communication for the future.

RESOLVED: to note the report of the head of housing and environment to Council at its meeting on 24 September 2021 and the current position with the Garden Waste service.

The meeting closed at 3:40pm

Chair

Date