

HUNTON PARISH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 13TH JUNE 2024 AT 6:00PM AT HUNTON VILLAGE HALL

PRESENT: Cllr D Heaton in the Chair, Cllrs A Trought and J Goddard, and Mrs S Goodwin, Clerk

IN ATTENDANCE: Jennifer Stevens and John Edwards from Maidstone Borough Council, two members of the public, County Cllr S Webb and Borough Cllr C Russell. All were in attendance until Item 5.

OPEN SESSION:

A Barn Hill resident commented on the issues with the waste collection service. After being on holiday for two weeks and leaving the bins out, nothing was collected at all. This week, there were collections on Monday and Tuesday, but only part of the food waste was collected (four of six bags). If the collection days keep changing there will always be problems. The other issue is that there used to be three people on the trucks, now there are only two. The driver does not help with the loading, leaving only one person to load. It is understood that quite a lot of the personnel used to work for Biffa; suggest they are put back on their old routes. The resident asked whether SUEZ are happy to have been awarded the contract and whether the fuel costs are what they budgeted for as they must be doing far more mileage due to their inefficiency.

A West Street resident stated that 'Find your bin day' on the website shows that recycling and food waste collection is every other Monday and general waste, and food waste collection is every other Tuesday. The recycling was collected this Monday, but the general waste/food waste has not been collected so presumably it will not be collected until the following Tuesday. It was reported, but the website reports that it has been collected when it has not. Cllr Heaton noted that Barn Hill was not collected last week, a resident reported it, but the website stated the collection had been made. Either the operatives are stating they have collected, when they have not, or the information on the website is out of date.

County Cllr Webb would have expected Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) to have completed a risk assessment for the transfer from one contractor to another. If the new contractor has to work out the routes, why does MBC not hold their own set of routes in their own administration so there is an easy transition? Cllr Webb also asked whether SUEZ are fully staffed and if there is a full contingent on the trucks.

Cllr Heaton commented on behalf of a Lughorse Lane parishioner who left his bins out; the lorry went straight past, turned round, and came back again. The resident asked why his rubbish was not collected and was told they were collecting from Yalding that day. In the past, all the bins would have been collected in ME18, but the resident's bins were not emptied as his property is slightly on the wrong side of the boundary.

Cllr Trought asked why there had been a radical change to the routes. Whole parts of Hunton have been left for weeks; Jennings have not had a collection of garden waste for six weeks.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received and accepted from Cllrs M Summersgill and I Simmons.

2. FILMING, RECORDING AND PHOTOGRAPHING

The members of the public did not wish to film, record or photograph the meeting.

3. COUNCILLOR DECLARATIONS

3.1 Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

3.2 Dispensations

There were no requests for dispensations.

4. ISSUES WITH THE NEW WASTE COLLECTION SERVICE

Cllr Heaton welcomed Jennifer Stevens (Head of Environment & Public Realm at Maidstone Borough Council) and John Edwards (Public Realm Operations Manager at Maidstone Borough Council) to the meeting, who answered the questions raised, both in the Open Session and under this item.

Jennifer Stevens introduced herself and explained her background, working at both MBC and also having previously worked for a contractor, SITA. This is the second waste contract she has tendered at MBC; the last contract change was also extremely challenging and she knows it has been the same with contract changes in East Kent, Canterbury, Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge & Malling. Two years of planning went into the contract change with one year of planning only with SUEZ, the new contractor. Biffa were involved for three stages of the procurement process but did not submit a bid at the final stage. Regarding the waste collection vehicles, throughout those stages, Biffa and SUEZ proposed using the same vehicles. The vehicles that Biffa have used for the last ten years with split bodies are not intended for the collection of food waste. There have been many difficulties with these vehicles, resulting in Biffa having to replace vehicles they had not intended to and making large losses on the contract, so they were not willing to take any further risk going forward and did not submit a bid.

Why did the specification or the tender not include separate vehicles for refuse and food?

It is extremely expensive. It is not viable to have separate food vehicles; it would have meant an extra nine vehicles with an additional nine crews. The cost of the contract has already increased by a third on the previous contract; the separate food waste vehicles are not affordable.

There is general disappointment that it has taken so long to sort out the issues arising from the new contract. The cut-off for allowable mistakes is 24th June – is that when SUEZ need to be 100% correct with collections otherwise, they will receive penalties?

There is an allowance for error. There are 45 different performance criteria and for each there is an allowance. For bin collection it is about the quantity of missed bins across Maidstone, Ashford and Swale.

Was a risk assessment carried out for the change of contractor? If a new contractor has to work out new routes, why are the details of the routes not held by MBC to ease the transition? Having spoken to the operatives, they are the same drivers on the same routes.

It is on the risk register as a major contract change. The routes were Biffa's routes which they designed ten years ago. 10,000 properties have been built since then. Biffa may have done a good job in Hunton, but it was not the same elsewhere. Recycling has increased and garden waste subscriptions have increased substantially, so those routes are no longer efficient. The vehicles have also been reconfigured and have greater payloads. If Biffa had been awarded the contract, they would have had to change the routes too.

Would it not have made sense for SUEZ to use Biffa's routes to start with and then improve them?

The rounds have not changed substantially.

Are the vehicles different?

Completely different – food waste cannot be collected using compaction, so the new vehicles have a pod at the front and a compaction area at the back. The biggest challenge has been for the crews to understand the new vehicles. All the staff transferred from Biffa.

The staff collecting from Hunton may be from Biffa but are from a different round. Why?

Due to the way the rounds have been configured. The staff were only available to SUEZ on the Sunday before the Monday when the contract began, as they were previously Biffa staff. The staff attended training weekends in their own time, but Biffa were not open to those staff being involved in the transition.

Why not start as it was with Biffa and then modify?

Due to totally different vehicles and the numbers of vehicles. One of the challenges written into the tender specification was narrow access. Residents (not necessarily Hunton) were unhappy under Biffa as some roads were not getting the bins collected due to vehicles parked on roads. There was only one narrow access vehicle under Biffa; SUEZ have four. This is why the changes have had to be made. SUEZ have 14 refuse recycling standard vehicles, 4 narrow access vehicles (smaller vehicles) and 3 communal rounds. A lot of variables have changed, so a service has been built which will be more reliable.

What is the capacity of the standard vehicles?

They are narrower and longer. The capacity in the back can take a couple of extra tonnes.

Hunton is a simple village with no increase in houses. It worked before – what has gone wrong?

Part of Hunton was put on to one of the communal rounds, but this is being changed. SUEZ are introducing two extra rounds as of next week, with the aim of putting the entirety of Hunton on to one of those rounds to make sure it is dealt with by a driver with two loaders, ideally staff who know the area.

There are staffing issues. A whole crew was suspended before SUEZ took over.

Were there just two weekends for the staff to be trained? Did Biffa not allow the training?

They did the two training weekends which were mainly focused on health and safety aspects, in the own time of the staff. The staff work long hours and overtime and were working on Saturdays for Biffa, which

limited the time available with the crews while Biffa was the employer. All the staff attended the training. It would have been beneficial for SUEZ to have met the crews when they were planning the rounds to learn about the intricacies of the collections, particularly the narrow access. What has happened, is that part of Hunton is on the communal round, it is not working well, so it will change to one of the new rounds SUEZ is introducing as of Monday.

Are the staff contracts the same with SUEZ as with Biffa?

Yes, they were transferred by TUPE.

Are the SUEZ fuel costs what they budgeted for?

MBC does not receive that information, so do not know if the fuel costs are what SUEZ budgeted for. The four supervisors who moved from Biffa to SUEZ are constantly looking at the rounds. When the routing is being done, they want staff involvement, but much is done by computers. There are 150,000 collections every week, so is a lot to go through and put right. There are intricacies the crews knew with Biffa which were never documented; with the SUEZ system it can be documented. It would have been good to have every crew perfectly matched, but it was not possible. Quite a few drivers were lost during the HGV crisis as they could earn more money elsewhere. The staff have been given pay rises to retain good staff. SUEZ are taking HR action against staff who are purposely missing bins.

Hopefully from Monday Hunton will have a new round. On the SUEZ website it shows different collections on different days.

No, this is where an error was made, the collections must be on the same day. Garden waste is different. There will be a specific collection day. Residents will be contacted to let them know when the collections will be – all on Mondays or all Tuesdays.

Is there anything in the cabs to help the crews manage their time?

Yes, there is so much technology, but it is only as good as the data input. If a missed bin is reported, Jennifer Stevens will check the vehicle tracker to see if the vehicle has been there. All the roads are blue at the start of the day on the map. As the bins are collected, the roads (not individual properties) are ticked off by the crews and they turn green. All the vehicles also have cameras on them which Jennifer has full access to, both live and recorded, so the camera can be checked to see what has been collected.

Have you ever challenged the driver if a complaint has been made?

Yes, which then results in HR discussions.

JS has produced an A3 sheet with scenarios for collection. There are four scenarios:

1. Bin collected – recorded as collected on the website.
2. The crew record an exception for a valid reason eg contaminated bin – recorded as not collected due to the issue. The resident cannot record a missed collection.
3. Areas not collected as the crews did not complete them on the day because the crew did not get to them. SUEZ automatically transfer on to the next day – the website will show that the bins will be collected the following day.
4. Bin is missed by the crew but recorded as completed on the website – residents can report a missed bin

If a missed bin is reported, do you check on the camera that the bin has been missed or do you need everyone in the whole road to report it?

Missed bins are looked at on an individual basis. Ideally everyone should report their own bins.

If the crew goes back for one bin, do they need to check the whole road? How do you police it?

They should check any bins that have been left out, as they would not have been collected. Supervisors are out and about checking. As the bigger problems are solved, there will be refinements.

What is the timescale for evening the problems out?

It will never be perfect. At the start, the focus was on completion rates rather than missed bins. The aim is for 100% completion but expect 98-99%, due to access issues, roadworks, etc. It is improving. In the contract, the performance mechanism kicks in after three months (24th June), so the contractor would expect penalties.

Which day will Hunton collections be on?

SUEZ will let Jennifer know, but likely to be Monday or Tuesday. A letter will be sent to everyone.

Will the collections be refuse/food collection one week and recycling/food collection the following week?

Yes. Two-week cycle with food every week.

A resident has said that additional garden refuse left near the garden waste bin is not collected, whereas Biffa used to collect it

Garden waste has been a struggle. Sacks are an issue as they get caught up. If the garden waste is in a cardboard box, it can be tipped in to the truck and the crews will generally collect it.

Cllr Heaton thanked the MBC officers for attending the meeting.

Jennifer invited the Parish Council to contact her if there are any further issues.

5. PLANNING

5.1 Planning Applications

5.1.1 Land Adjacent To Thatched Cottage, East Street - 24/501766/FULL

Erection of a single storey storage barn (Part Retrospective).

Parish Council recommendation: Wish to see the application refused but do not request the application is reported to the Planning Committee. The reason for recommending refusal is that no information has been provided to state what the store will be used for and therefore there is no justification for the store being on agricultural land when there is room for it to be located on the applicant's residential land. The Parish Council also queries the statement on the application form, under Biodiversity Net Gain, that the general Biodiversity Gain Condition would not apply if planning permission is granted due to an exemption because the building has already been completed. Surely it cannot be the case that the Biodiversity Gain Condition does not apply when a building has been completed before planning permission has been sought/granted, otherwise anyone who builds without planning permission would not need to consider Biodiversity Net Gain?

5.1.2 The White House, Heath Road, West Farleigh - 24/502071/FULL

Section 73 Application for Minor Material Amendment to approved plans condition 2 (to allow changes to materials); variation of condition 9 (to amend plinth material of lodges to be ragstone); and removal of condition 3 (Section 257 of Town and Country Planning act 1990 to divert bridleway) pursuant to 23/504904/FULL (Demolition of public house, petanque facilities and pistes, removal of lawful residential mobile home, creation of 2(no) petanque pistes, and erection of associated clubhouse with cafe. Erection of 1(no) detached 4-bedroom dwelling, car barn, and 4(no) 2-bedroom holiday lodges. Amendments to existing access with associated landscaping, infrastructure, parking, and minor public right of way diversion).

Parish Council recommendation: Do not wish to comment.

There being no further matters to discuss the meeting closed at 7:34pm.