

Minutes

of an extraordinary meeting of the Council



held on Tuesday 21 September 2021 at 7.00 pm on
First floor, 135 Eastern Avenue, Milton Park,
Milton, OX14 4SB

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Councillors: Margaret Crick (Chair), Jerry Avery, Matthew Barber, Paul Barrow, Ron Batstone, Eric Batts, Nathan Boyd, Cheryl Briggs, Andy Cooke, Eric de la Harpe, Neil Fawcett, Andy Foulsham, Hayleigh Gascoigne, David Grant, Jenny Hannaby, Simon Howell, Alison Jenner, Diana Lugova, Ben Mabbett, Sarah Medley, Patrick O'Leary, Helen Pighills, Mike Pighills, Judy Roberts, Emily Smith, Max Thompson, Elaine Ware and Catherine Webber

Officers: Steven Corrigan and Mark Stone

Remote attendance:

Councillors: Andrew Crawford, Debby Hallett, Bob Johnston, Val Shaw, Bethia Thomas and Richard Webber

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

28 Apologies for absence

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor Shelley.

29 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.

30 Urgent business and chair's announcements

None.

31 Public participation

The Chair advised that eight 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.

Sally Povolotsky, County Councillor for Hendreds & Harwell Division, addressed Council. She expressed the view that the suspension of the garden waste service illustrated an issue in respect of the resilience and strategic planning of outsourced council contractors exasperated by a lack of HGV drivers, “track and trace pings” and rising Covid cases. In her view the scale of the upset amongst residents who subscribe to the service was the lack of clear communication. She welcomed the reinstatement of the service.

Les Buck congratulated both the council and Biffa for delivering the waste disposal service during the Covid pandemic. He expressed concern in respect of the lack of effective communication from the council regarding the suspension of the garden waste service and the time taken to arrive at the measures set out in the report. He was grateful that a four weekly cycle would commence soon.

John Lloyd regretted the lack of foresight and planning and the lack of notice provided to subscribers of the suspension of the service. Whilst welcoming the measures set out in the report these needed to be followed through with a swift return to the fortnightly service.

Jim Halliday thanked the council and Biffa for the delivery of the service during the pandemic. He referenced the shortage of HGV drivers and the particularly demanding nature of those delivering the waste service. He thanked the council for providing the discretionary garden waste service and looked forward to the resumption of the service in due course.

Paul Mayhew-Archer referred to the issues set out in the report, Brexit and the pandemic, for the shortage of HGV drivers, the issues of outsourcing contracts and the council’s lack of a Customer Relationship Management system.

Chris Carrigan thanked officers for the report before Council. He acknowledged the issues set out in the report. However, he expressed concern regarding the poor communication with residents and the misinformation that arose because of this. The council should have an operating Customer Relationship Management system.

James Greenman thanked officers for the report which provided a summary of the situation to date and clarified what actions were being taken to address the issue. He questioned the lack of a direct communication process with subscribers of the garden waste service.

Lucy Edwards expressed the view that the shortage of HGV drivers had been well documented and as such Biffa should have had a plan in place to respond to the issue. She asked what scrutiny had taken place in respect of Biffa’s performance. There had been poor communication via social media and the council’s website which are not accessible to all residents. She asked what plans the council had to address communication going forward.

Councillor Smith, Leader of the council, thanked the public speakers for taking time to address Council and for their useful feedback. She also thanked those members of the public who had contacted the council during the summer raising concerns and offering support and ideas. On behalf of the council, she apologised for the disruption to the Garden Waste service over the summer recognising and empathising that the communication with customers in respect of the temporary suspension of the service was not ideal. This experience had led to some immediate improvements and longer-term planning.

Councillor Smith responded to some of the questions raised by members of the public.

Periodically, the Joint Scrutiny Committee formally reviewed the performance of Biffa with ongoing contract management by officers and the Cabinet member. Councillor Smith stated that alternate rotation of the waste collection and garden waste service presented issues. Firstly, only approximately 40% of residents subscribed to the garden waste service whilst

the refuse collection service is provided to all residents. In addition, guidance from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs set out the priority levels and the collection of waste was the highest priority. In respect of the communication, she 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 brought back inhouse in April 2021 but a process for communicating with customers was not in place prior to the suspension of the garden waste service. The suspension of the service triggered an immediate impact. Without reliable email contacts the options to relay the message were to write to all customers with details of the suspension or use social media, the council's website 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. This option was not considered to be a good use of public funds. The decision was therefore taken to communicate details of the suspension immediately via social media, the council's website and local radio. She confirmed the resumption of the garden waste service, initially on a four-weekly cycle with an option to leave additional waste, would commence in the week commencing 27 September. All customers would be contacted via email or letter explaining the details for the collection of the bins and additional waste and setting out arrangements for the extension of their subscription by three months in recognition of the reduced service received over the summer. Lessons had been learnt in respect of the need to improve communication with customers. Cabinet would be considering an IT Strategy report to improve systems for the future.

She concluded by thanking officers and the Cabinet member for working to resolve the issues.

32 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 Catherine Webber, Cabinet member for climate emergency and environment, addressed Council. She advised that the Garden Waste service was used by around 44 per cent of residents who, in accordance with the terms and conditions were entitled to a minimum of 20 collections over the 12-month period at a cost of £51.50 per bin per annum.

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 Business Continuity Plan (BCP). On that day they were 20 per cent down, 9 short, on the number of drivers needed. The BCP, agreed with the contractor, enables parties to identify the actions required to maintain critical services following disruptive incidents and is designed to protect the critical kerbside collections (food waste, recycling, and residual (rubbish) waste) received by all households in the district.

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 2 August, in order to protect the collection of the critical services, officers had no

alternative but to agree to the temporary suspension of the garden waste service for a period of 4 to 6 weeks.

She explained that the cause of the suspension was caused by the national shortage of HGV drivers which impacted Biffa's ability to recruit and retain drivers. Due to the sudden suspension of the service, it was not possible to communicate with customers in advance. With the council only holding 30% of garden waste customers email addresses the decision was taken to communicate the suspension via social media and local media. She referred to the communication activity set out in appendix 1 to the report and concluded by referring to the interim arrangements and the extension of subscriptions advised by Councillor Smith (see minute 31).

Councillor Catherine Webber moved, and Councillor Smith 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 and the impact of the pandemic in restricting the training and testing of new drivers. Many local authorities had faced disruption to their waste collection services. The lack of a Customer Relationship Management system (CRM), related to previous decisions related to the corporate services' contract, had restricted the ability of the council to communicate with subscribers of the service, particularly when the council only held 30% of the email details of subscribers at the time of the suspension. Whilst it was regrettable that the service was suspended, it was necessary to protect the critical waste services. They welcomed the efforts taken to communicate details of the suspension as quickly as possible. A number of councillors questioned the need for the Extraordinary meeting of Council when the issue had been considered by the Joint Scrutiny Committee and did not impact the majority of council residents.

However, other councillors criticised the handling of the suspension of the service and the communication plan. The issue illustrated a lack of preparedness and an inability to address the problems of the council's contractors. Biffa's staffing issues had been foreseen and an action plan agreed to address these in 2018 – was this implemented? The potential for disruption was identified in July and therefore mitigating measures should have been put in place. 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.

RESOLVED: to note the report of the Head of Housing and Environment to Council at its meeting on 21 September 2021 and the current position with the Garden Waste service.

The meeting closed at 8.45pm