



## **New Waste Contract – Service Issues – FAQs**

**Wednesday 11 April 2024**

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

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The Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) new waste and recycling contract started on Monday 25 March with SUEZ which introduced some considerable changes which has led to some delays and issues with collections.

To help improve the situation the Council and SUEZ have put in place additional resources including bringing in staff from other areas, reviewing collections and reallocating work as needed and the waste crews will be working again this Saturday (13 April) as they have for the previous two weekends.

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### **Why did the contract change?**

The old waste and recycling contract that MBC had with Biffa had expired and the new contract was subject to retendering arrangements. After a legal process SUEZ Recycling & Recovery UK was the successful bidder, the decision to appoint them was made in December 2022 by the Mid Kent Partnership (Ashford, Maidstone and Swale Borough Councils).

### **Why did we have new vehicles?**

The old fleet of vehicles were in some cases ten years old, in waste management terms that is beyond their useful life, as a result they regularly broke down and caused service delays.

The new contractor designed the rounds around using a food pod and compaction type vehicle; these are industry standard and allow two streams of waste to be collected in one pass therefore reducing the number of vehicles used to make the collections across the borough.

Improvements in EURO engine standard and the use of electric powered lifts, ensure that the vehicles are quieter for use in residential areas, they produce less CO2, reducing the carbon footprint of the service.

## **What is the new technology?**

This is in two main parts:

Firstly, the vehicles; these are a different specification with side loading for the separate food waste and standard compaction equipment at the rear for the other waste streams (general and recycling).

This ensures that collected food is kept separate to allow for treatment. As it is transported in a pod, it is not compacted and so there is less chance of it leaking from the vehicle. The new vehicles are a standard design and once fully run in, will have similar carrying capacity to the old fleet.

Secondly, is the round monitoring system. This is carried out via a PDA unit similar in size to a mobile phone, the device provides each crew with round information for that day and allows them to record any issues, such as blocked access or a bin that has not been presented. It also highlights assisted collections to them as the round progresses.

That electronic system is monitored in real time at the office to track the progress of the round, this allows supervisors to react to problems and reallocate work during the day if it becomes necessary.

## **How did we notify residents?**

The new contract was announced via the Council's standard communication channels, including several press releases, the Spring Borough Insight magazine (two editions - 2023 and 2024 both delivered to 83k residential addresses in Maidstone), and regularly messaging on our social media feeds.

Specific service information was provided to every household in writing.

A letter was sent via Royal Mail in the period 8 March - 15 March to be delivered before 21 March. It confirmed the collection schedule, advised of the garden waste collection service and provided further information in the practical use of the recycling system.

## **Why have all the rounds been changed?**

The new rounds were introduced by SUEZ which is common practice at the start of a new contract. The old rounds were Biffa's design based on the requirements 10 years ago. Whilst SUEZ endeavoured to mirror the collection days where possible, the rounds and particularly the number of properties they can service is different. SUEZ also reintroduced rural and additional narrow access rounds to help with the growing problem of access issues.

Over the past 10 years, over 10k additional homes have been built, 6,000 tonnes of extra recycling is collected every year and garden waste subscriptions have increased unevenly across the borough. Therefore, the rounds needed rebalancing.

## **How did SUEZ design the new rounds?**

A huge amount of work was undertaken during the 12-month mobilisation period including both desktop based analysis and the physical assessment of every road in the borough. A road risk assessment was completed for every road.

SUEZ staff designed the rounds based on the property data provided and used specialist software to optimise the routes. The routes were then shared with drivers and loaders as well as the Biffa supervisors at the time. They were also shared with the Council and these were reviewed.

The routes are based on industry standards taking into account the vehicles, geography and waste/recycling tonnages.

SUEZ has designed dedicated refuse and recycling crews, which improves knowledge and enables a focus on contamination, so offers longer term benefits for the service. However, this also means the crews need to learn 10 areas rather than 5, which takes more time.

### **Why have some resident's collection days changed and others haven't?**

Where possible SUEZ matched the existing collection days for the refuse and recycling service. However, due to uneven property growth and the need to introduce additional narrow access collections, some properties have experienced a change of day or week for their collection.

### **Are any further changes planned?**

It is expected that with every cycle, the routes will need refining and some properties will be identified as incorrectly allocated to a particular round. For example, they should receive a narrow access collection but have been incorrectly allocated to a 26 tonne frontline vehicle, or that they were allocated a small vehicle but there are too many properties for this vehicle to service and a larger vehicle would be more appropriate.

As these properties are identified, they are being allocated onto the correct round and the resident will be contacted if this involves a change to their collection day or week. This is likely to be minimal.

## **COLLECTION DISRUPTION**

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### **Why are so many problems occurring?**

Experiencing problems whilst the contract and collections settle in is not unexpected and occurred 10 years ago, as well as across all contract changes locally and nationwide.

However, the problems occurring are not acceptable and both the Council and SUEZ are working to resolve them as quickly as possible.

There are several key reasons for the issues.

Firstly, the routes have changed and the crews need to learn where they are going. The previous contractor operated 14 rounds that collected refuse one week and recycling the next across a very similar area. However, this resulted in issues with cross contamination on vehicles and limits the resilience within the crews. SUEZ has designed dedicated refuse and recycling crews, which improves knowledge and enables a focus on contamination, so offers longer term benefits for the service. However, this also means the crews need to learn 10 areas rather than 5, which takes more time.

In addition to this the crews are getting used to the new vehicles, the side pods and the payloads. The new technology, whilst offering huge benefits to the service and our visibility of collections, it arguably puts an additional requirement on the crews and some require more support to use them effectively during the bedding in period.

SUEZ provided two training weekends for the transferring staff, which had high levels of attendance and were well received. As with any change, some staff are not completely happy with the altered way of working. The SUEZ management team has identified these problems and are addressing any issues the staff may have to resolve the situation as quickly as possible. SUEZ is committed to building the relationship with staff and demonstrating their commitment to staff welfare, fair pay, and a supportive culture.

### **How long can we expect the disruption to continue for?**

With any new contract, there is an anticipated period for the service to settle. This is usually three months, after which point the performance mechanism would be applied and so all service standards should be met by that stage.

The contract is operating on fortnightly cycles of work, meaning work is repeated every two weeks. It is expected that over the course of six cycles (12 weeks) the service will settle, daily collections will be completed and focus can be put onto dealing with any missed collections or underlying service failures.

### **My collections haven't changed, but my bin is now not being collected - why?**

Whilst some collections have not changed, the collection rounds have changed. The crews are learning their new routes which has resulted in the work taking more time to carry out with some of the rounds not being completed. The crews are also learning about specific collection points such as where bins are presented at the back of properties, and where properties are located off of main routes.

The teams are monitoring the collections and identifying areas that are being missed. Catch-up rounds are assisting with the completion of this work, but individual bins are more challenging as these take a lot of resource and regrettably achieve very little in terms of quantity of bins collected.

### **Is there a problem with the vehicles?**

During the procurement process, the side pod vehicles were identified by both bidders as the favoured vehicle. These vehicles offer a single-pass collection, meaning the vehicle collects food waste and refuse or recycling at the same time and were the most cost-effective solution. The vehicles also provide a greater payload, to reduce the number of trips to the disposal facility in Allington.

We have also introduced several smaller vehicles across the borough and the crews are learning the capacity of these. They are designed for narrow lanes and restricted access points, but do not have the payload for emptying a large quantity of bins.

All the vehicles introduced in this contract are commonly used for these collections across the country. The crews are getting used to new ways of working and during this period it is likely collections will be slower, the vehicle will not achieve its full capacity and mistakes may be made, such as bins being missed.

## **Why are the rounds not completing?**

There are two main reasons for this – the collection crews are working more slowly for the reasons already mentioned and there is a compound effect of catching up non completed areas.

This is being addressed through the provision of additional collection crews to catch up work and ensure the frontline teams are focused on each days work. We are monitoring the situation every day and SUEZ has additional supervisory staff to review crew productivity and understand where and why the specific failures are occurring.

## **Why are bins being missed?**

There are several reasons why bins are not collected.

Firstly, the round does not complete it's day's work. These bins are not considered missed because they have yet to be attempted. SUEZ will reallocate this work onto a catch-up crew and this information will be available for residents to access through the Council's website: [www.maidstone.gov.uk](http://www.maidstone.gov.uk)

When a resident tries to report a missed collection when the crew has actually not attempted collection yet, the system will advise the resident of when the work has been rescheduled and will not allow a missed collection to be reported. This reduces confusion as to whether the missed collection reported is actually a delayed collection or a subsequent missed collection. In week one, an officer visited many addresses where missed collections had been reported and found that the bins were already empty as the delayed collection had already been completed. The system prevents this confusion by only allowing missed collections to be reported where the collection has been recorded as completed.

The crew may also miss collections accidentally. This can happen when the crew overlook a bin because they think they have already emptied it or it's obscured from view. These should be reported online or via the contact centre and in normal circumstances will be cleared within two working days. Regrettably at the current time we do not have the available resource to clear all missed collections. All resources are focused on clearing the scheduled collections and catching up on whole areas that remain uncollected.

Missed collections can also occur whilst the crews are getting used to the new routes as they may not realise there are properties down farm tracks or small lanes that require collection. We are identifying roads which have also been wrongly allocated to the 26 tonne RCVs but require smaller vehicles as this can also result in collections being missed.

## **What should a resident do if their bin is missed?**

If the resident's bin is accidentally missed by the crew but the remainder of the road has been cleared unfortunately it is unlikely that we will be able to return before the next collection day. (Additional recycling can be presented in cardboard boxes.)

## **What is the Council doing about improving the service?**

The Council is working closely with SUEZ to identify areas where the service is repeatedly failing and adjusting collections to ensure that these issues are resolved. We are also utilising our own resources (staff and vehicles) to provide additional rounds to support with collections and deal with any long running issues.

This also includes supporting with additional rounds at the weekend.

The Council is also collating all information about missed collections and ensuring these are provided to the catch-up teams.

### **Why are you not prioritising waste and recycling over garden waste?**

Reducing or suspending garden waste rounds will only be considered if the core service continues to catch up. At this time of year we recognise that garden waste is a key service for residents and therefore the decision to redeploy this resource to support the refuse and recycling services will not be taken easily.

The service will be reviewed at the end of the second cycle.

### **Why have I seen vehicles parked up and collections not being completed?**

All drivers must comply with Drivers Hours Regulations and as such must take a 45-minute break within their working day. Therefore, the crews will time their breaks to coincide with rest areas such as local shops or toilets. During this time the driver cannot move the vehicle and must take a break.

All vehicles are tracked through their on-board computer and supervisors are monitoring their work closely to ensure they remain productive. This means any reports of vehicles not working can quickly be substantiated through the on-board telemetry.

## **COMMUNICATIONS**

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### **How were residents told about the changes?**

In early March 2024, a letter was sent to all households in the borough advising of the changes to their refuse and recycling collection. This explained the changes and advised residents of the day and week for each of the services, including garden waste.

Residents also received the Borough Insight Magazine (delivered to 83k residential addresses), in March which contained an eight page dedicated pull out section with more details about the waste and recycling services as well as wider environmental issues.

Information has been promoted through social media, press releases and the Council's website: [www.maidstone.gov.uk](http://www.maidstone.gov.uk)

### **How can residents find out their collection day?**

The Council's website has a "Find my Bin Day" search which will display information about every property's collections, including the dates for their last and next collection. An example is shown below:



#### **General waste on Thursdays**

Black bin for waste which can't be recycled

Frequency Every 14 days

Next collection 18/04/2024

Last collection 04/04/2024



#### **Food waste on Thursdays**

Black bin with orange lid for food waste

Frequency Every 7 days

Next collection 11/04/2024

Last collection 04/04/2024



#### **Recycling on Thursdays**

Green or black box for glass, plastics, cans, paper, cardboard

Frequency Every 14 days

Next collection 11/04/2024

Last collection 29/03/2024



#### **Garden Waste on Fridays**

Brown bin for grass cuttings, flowers, hedge trimmings, branches

Frequency Every 14 days

Next collection 19/04/2024

Last collection 10/04/2024

### **Why can't a missed bin be reported for a property?**

There are several reasons a missed collection can not be reported.

Firstly, if a round has not completed, the work will be rescheduled and therefore we cannot accept a missed collection report. This prevents confusion as to whether the report relates to an uncompleted collection or one that is subsequently missed.

The MBC website also has a status page which enables residents to check when their collections are due including any that are rescheduled .

Missed collections can also not be reported if an issue is recorded for the property, such as the bin is contaminated or was not presented.

Missed collections must also be reported within 48 hours of the scheduled or rescheduled collections.