

Cheltenham Borough Council
Cabinet member working group 28 March 2013
Lessons learnt from service disruption to waste and recycling

Executive summary

The cabinet member working group reviewed the recent experience of service disruption following the snow and ice and considered what lessons were to be learnt from this, what the current policy arrangements are and what more the council could do in future to ensure that disruption is limited during severe weather.

The working group noted that the cabinet member sustainability, the director of commissioning and the managing director of Ubico apologised that services had been disrupted and that they each acknowledged that lessons should be learnt. This was the first major disruption to the service since alternate weekly collections had been introduced and the council's move to a commissioner/provider split, together with the call centre moving away from the depot and this had led to a number of issues which had not necessarily occurred in previous episodes of bad weather.

The overview and scrutiny task group had already looked at the decision making process and the working group endorsed their findings and agreed that clear channels of communication was key along with preparedness and good organisation and clarity of messages during the catch up phase.

In order to ensure that messages were clear and the council had robust continuity plans in place the following was agreed:

- The severe weather policy should be clearly publicised on the website and communicated to members, parish councils and other stakeholders.
- Communications should be clear, simple and regularly updated and delivered directly to residents via the radio, parish councils, ward councillors, residents' networks as well as using the internet and social media sites.
- Daily meetings should take place to reassess the situation and ensure that there is flexibility and collections take place wherever safe to do so.

1. Background

- 1.1 On 18 January snow fell and temperatures dropped to below freezing over several days and waste and recycling services were disrupted. It was acknowledged by everyone that the suspension during this period was justified but what caused reputation issues for the council was the suspension for the full week. The overview and scrutiny committee (via their task group) considered this at their meeting on 18 February and it has been acknowledged in hindsight that the decision on the Wednesday to suspend services for the full week was inappropriate to the circumstances and that this must not happen in future.
- 1.2 The cabinet member working group which meets quarterly and has a good understanding of the waste and recycling services met in February and March to identify lessons learnt and consider what arrangements should be put in place to ensure that there are robust service continuity plans in place for the delivery of waste and recycling services to the residents of Cheltenham. The working group comprises Councillors Roger Whyborn, Jacky Fletcher, Nigel Britter, Diggory Seacome, Pat Thornton and Suzanne Williams. These meetings are supported by the director of commissioning, the strategic client officer, the managing director of Ubico and the waste and recycling manager from Ubico. Three of the members on the working group were also on the overview and scrutiny task group, and fourth member is on the O&S committee and were therefore able to ensure that the views of the O&S committee were fed into the lessons learnt review.
- 1.3 In advance of their meetings the working group had a copy of the papers which were considered by the overview and scrutiny task group as well as a copy of a review report which the Somerset Waste Partnership had prepared when they had problems relating to snow and ice. The working group also had a list of issues and questions which had been fed back as lessons learnt along with the summary of issues raised by public (via customer services/customer complaints) and communications team. The working group were therefore well briefed on the issues and it enabled them to start considering the issues.
- 1.4 It was agreed that the lessons learnt and recommendations for improvement should be broken down across different stages of a winter service disruption. The first being the way in which the council plans for and communicates service disruption while there is snow and ice on the ground across the whole town, the second being the way in which the council plans for and communicates service disruption when there is a partial thaw and some roads are clear and finally how the council should plan for and communicate service catch up. The working group in dealing with these three issues considered the resources available, the criteria for evaluating which areas are safe to collect and the methodology for catching up. They also considered the adequacy of communications in each of the stages.
- 1.5 The working group also agreed to look at arrangements for a more severe weather event given the impact of climate change and felt that it was important to consider what arrangements could be put in place if there was snow and ice on the ground for several weeks. Although this paper is written primarily around snow and ice events, many of the principles within it would apply to other events such as flooding or the disposal facility being inaccessible for some reason.
- 1.6 The working group recognised that most snow events will occur along the following lines:

Phase 1 – Snow fall prevents crews getting to work and/or deployment of vehicles. This phase is usually short lived. Generally there are few complaints or queries as people understand there has been disruption or were not scheduled a collection on the day in question.

Phase 2 – This phase can often be the same day as phase 1 or the next working day. Some collections resume, from gritted highways. Other areas are not readily accessible. This means that there are more vehicles available than are required to each accessible round. Queries and complaints begin to come in.

Phase 3 – Thaw begins, scheduled collections resume, but there are limited resources that can be used to help catch up those collections that were missed. At this stage it is hard to determine when and where

catch up will take place and it is difficult to plan in advance so specific information about catch up cannot be given out. This phase causes the highest level of complaints as it would be unwise to make promises which cannot be guaranteed. This phase can last many days depending on how long phase 2 lasted.

Phase 4 – The backlog has been substantially cleared and remaining areas can be targeted more effectively. Only at this point can a reasonable level of detail be given about when backlogged collections will take place. Complaint numbers drop considerably but those that are received are often very angry and frustrated, particularly if they have waited a long time for a collection and/or previous estimates of collection time have not been met. Directing resources to deal with isolated complaints is inefficient and can result in further delays to others.

2. Lessons learnt improvements

- 2.1** It was noted that if a collection is missed and there are inadequate catch up arrangements in place then the alternate weekly collection method can mean that someone may wait for a full month before their residual waste or recycling is collected which can cause frustration and lead to a backlog and overflowing bins. It was recognised however that kitchen waste is collected on a weekly basis and should be the priority for any catch up collections because of the health implications. It was agreed that the council should require Ubico to maintain services wherever it is safe to do so even if this is a very limited collection service.
- 2.2** It was acknowledged that the decision to suspend a service is usually taken first thing in the morning and the situation can change during the day. On any given day when the service has been suspended the road conditions should be reassessed by Ubico supervisors during the day to ascertain whether partial collections can be instigated (as far as possible) if this can be done safely from gritted roads or where assessed as safe by the collection vehicle driver.
- 2.3** There should be daily service continuity meetings (either face to face or via conference call) between the cabinet member, director of commissioning, strategic client officer (from the Gloucestershire Joint Waste Management Unit - JWMU), customer services manager, an officer from communications team and the managing director (or representative) from Ubico to assess the situation and agree what action needs to be taken or key messages need to be given out.
- 2.4** As part of service continuity arrangements named deputies should be identified. In most circumstance there is usually warning for adverse weather and where officers will be unavailable on the next working day then arrangements need to be made to ensure that appropriate officers will be available to participate in service continuity meetings
- 2.5** Such service continuity meetings will enable all parties to be heard, so that the practicalities, risks and consequences of each decision are understood before taking it. However principally under the contract agreement with Ubico decisions are the responsibility of the "The Director of Commissioning in consultation with the Cabinet member", but it is important to achieve an action plan, which can be 'bought into' by all, but especially the service provider (Ubico) and which can and will be communicated very clearly and in a timely way. An important caveat is that Ubico cannot be expected to undertake collections where it believes it would endanger its employees or members of the public, nor to produce resources which are in practice unobtainable, or beyond what the Council will finance. Although the council has delegated responsibility for contract management to the JWMU acting on behalf of the Gloucestershire Joint Waste Committee, members are clear that these service continuity decisions are firmly in the area of local decisions being taken locally, though the Strategic Client officer's role in co-ordination, resource management and communication is an important key.
- 2.6** The resulting communications will normally go through the Cheltenham Borough Council Communications team, under the name of the Director of Commissioning, who will need to use discretion in balancing the desirability for consensus about the communication against the need for urgency, where key individuals (Cabinet Member, Ubico director, Strategic Client officer)

cannot be reached in a timely fashion. All such communications should be checked before release for clarity and absence of jargon, and also copied to the JWMU.

- 2.7** As soon as it is evident that services will be disrupted the radio stations should be contacted with the information along with the specifics as to which collection areas are affected. The members felt that the emails which had been sent to them along with FAQs etc were useful and that this should continue but sent to other stakeholders and that an email contact list of residents groups, parish councils and other contacts should be set up in advance so that in the event of a service disruption they can be sent the information easily for cascading within their communities and networks. Further communications can be achieved through CBH and other registered housing providers. The working group recognised the value of social media as this was a dynamic communication channel but felt that websites had limited use and should be updated and used but not seen as the key communication channel during the first few hours of a service disruption. It has also been agreed that press releases issued in such situations should be reviewed by non technical officers to ensure that the messages are clear and do not contain jargon. It was recognised that the radio stations are at their most helpful and proactive during phases one and two of a snow event, but less so when moving to phases three and four as outlined in 1.6 above.
- 2.8** The working group were aware that during the recent service disruption the customer services team took a significant increase in telephone call and consideration was given to having a message on the telephone line during such situations which would enable callers to get an answer to their query without waiting in a queue. It was also recognised that the overnight recorded message system might be enhanced if a range of clear messages could be provided, rather than a single message. The council does still have the waste line 264244 which was operational when the call centre was in the depot and consideration should be given to using this for a more detailed recorded message. A systems thinking team is currently examining how best to optimise communications and consideration will be given as to how such message facilities can be deployed to ensure effective communications for the public.
- 2.9** Prior to the establishment of Ubico complex queries or complaints from members and indeed the public would have been referred to an operational or customer services manager. During the service disruption members of the public were referred to the customer relations team, which is appropriate in some circumstances as there have been complaints but may not be that helpful if they are more complex enquiries. It is agreed that such calls in the first instance should be referred to a manager who is part of the daily service continuity meeting and have a good understanding of the issues, and that Director of Commissioning can be a point of contact for CBC members and act as an officer of last resort for the public to speak to, should they be unhappy with the responses they have received.
- 2.10** The working group recognised that the process of banking hours is fundamental as it enables the council to restore catch up collections without resorting to overtime payments. It was noted that the employees in Ubico will work flexibly to ensure that services are maintained or restored as soon as practicable. However it was agreed that there are practical aspects of undertaking catch up collections on the back of a normal scheduled round; there is a statutory limit on the hours that drivers can drive their vehicles and the waste disposal facility's opening hours both act as limiting factors. There is also a limited capacity to the vehicles which means that the crews may have to go to the tip at least twice during the day which reduces the collection time available.
- 2.11** It was agreed that where collections are missed then the principle of using the Saturdays to catch up will be the approach adopted and the service continuity meeting would agree, given the specific circumstances at the time, how this additional day would be used to undertake the catch up.
- 2.12** Once there is a general thaw and it is safe to collect, the catch up priorities should be agreed and clear messages should be given to those who have missed their collections as to how long they may have to wait. It was recognised that each situation is likely to be different depending on whether partial collections have been made so it will be inevitable that there will be complaints.

Responding in an unplanned way to complaints is not appropriate although there should be some flexibility to priority areas where there may be a build up with black bags or residents have difficulty storing their residual waste. Whilst no-one should attempt to pre-plan the catch up process, there would be certain expected priorities which would be followed for collection of waste. In terms of location they would be

- 1) where collections can be safely made
- 2) getting black bags off the streets
- 3) known 'hotspot locations' for waste collection
- 4) which householders have waited longest.

and for which products are of highest collection priority it would be 1) Food 2) Refuse 3) Dry Recyclate 4) Garden Waste, though in practice the availability of resources will limit the ability to prioritise to this list. It is recognised as important that the 'catch-up' plans may change due to unexpected circumstances, so choice of message needs to be carefully considered. For example we should only be telling people to take their bins back when we are 100% sure that there is no prospect of them being collected. We may well have elements of phase 2 and phase 3 simultaneously - and until we are in a 'de-facto' situation where there is general thaw nearly everywhere, we may well be able to make collections in a limited range of locations.

- 2.13** If there has been disruption for more than one day then garden waste services should be suspended until the service has caught up. It is recognised that this is a paid for service but the working group felt that during a service disruption due to snow and ice it is unlikely that many residents will have garden waste and the priority should be to collect food waste and residual waste. The council should also invoke a suspension of the no side waste policy and allow the collection of black bags for residual waste or additional containers for recycling.
- 2.14** The access to the civic amenity site and to bring sites should be cleared wherever possible and safe to do so. If it is evident that the service disruption will last several days then the council should consider emergency provisions and allow vans to access the recycling site if they are presenting domestic waste. Messages should be communicated to the effect that anyone found presenting trade waste during such a period would be prosecuted. Ubico are currently considering the implications of this approach and whether they would prefer a measure of general relaxation. The working groups view was that a general relaxation is fraught with greater difficulties such as enforcement and would need to be considered within the wider waste and recycling context.
- 2.15** It was agreed that the council and Ubico should identify a number of designated places where a supervised refuse vehicle could be placed. These facilities would be invoked in the most serious of severe weather arrangements i.e. where waste and recycling has not been collected for several days and it is unlikely that we would be in a position to collect waste in the near future. The decision to invoke such arrangements whilst refuse and recycling services were suspended would be taken following an assessment of the potential additional costs and an assessment of the health and safety risks for residents using such a facility. The decision to open or close such facilities would be taken at the daily service continuity meetings.
- 2.16** The working group considered service level expectations during and after a period of service disruption. Investigation of the recent events is pointing to the working assumption that, given alternate weekly collections, the challenges for recovery becomes significantly greater after several days of service suspension. If the Saturday is used to catch up and crews use their banked hours to work additional hours beyond their normal shift subject to the limitations set out in 2.10 above, then all things being equal a service provider can catch up without missing collections in an incident lasting up to three days (TBD) of stoppage. However if the service is disrupted for a longer period of time emergency measures may well have been instigated as outlined above but the council would need to consider what messages it gave out to the public with regards to the catch up.

- 2.17** Following a stoppage lasting more than this period of time, the catch-up operation is likely to stretch to a full fortnightly cycle, with a result that even with prioritisation of collecting where we can, collecting black bags, known hotspots and those who have waited longest, the effective catch-up for a lot of people is 4 weeks after the previous missed refuse or recycling collection. It is recognised that this will impact on residents but it is important to be honest about what can and cannot be achieved so that expectations are managed. In the unlikely event that the town was faced with severe snow and ice for a long period of time stretching over several weeks then the council would need to consider what emergency measures over and above listed in this report could be instigated.
- 2.18** One of the major complaints during the bad weather was from households who have children in nappies. Some of the measure outlined above will go towards mitigating the impact and as more households are encouraged to recycle then this might assist. The council also has a policy to allow those with two or more children under two in nappies to have a larger bin and it may be that some residents are not aware of this policy.
- 2.19** The Gloucestershire Waste Partnership (GWP) recognises the need for inclement weather event experiences and plans to be shared. This report should go forward with that purpose in mind, with the aim if possible to harmonise inclement weather event process within the Gloucestershire Joint Waste Committee at least, if not within the whole GWP. If such harmonisation is planned then any changes to our own procedures would be discussed with the cabinet member working group ahead of adoption and communicated to members and residents alike.

3. Alternative options considered

- 3.1** The working group considered whether vehicles could be fitted with winter tyres or snow chains, and on hearing the evidence from the managing director of Ubico and indeed on the findings from the Somerset Waste Partnership it was agreed that these measures are not feasible. The rationale was on cost of acquisition, time to fit and remove such measures, fuel efficiency and also impact on the road surface.
- 3.2** The working group looked at the potential to buy in additional resources for catch up but recognised that the cost would be prohibitive but more importantly it would be unlikely that there would be the availability of vehicles and trained and competent loaders and drivers and therefore this was not a solution which should be built into a winter action plan.
- 3.3** The working group considered whether the information on the radio and website could be more specific about which roads will be collected. They noted that the radio stations will list school closures. However it was acknowledged that this was probably impractical due to the volume of roads or the potential for roads to be split depending on collection rounds. The group therefore agreed that the announcements should at least refer to areas e.g. Charlton Kings, St Pauls.
- 3.4** Consideration was given if services have been suspended for several days as to whether, once the conditions start to improve, the service should recommence with the next scheduled collection and then catch up with those that have been missed, or to start with the missed collections first. This also related to whether the collection cycle could be moved back a whole week. After discussions it was agreed that the appropriate response is to commence with the scheduled collections as any other option will increase the number of complaints and almost certainly lead to a lack of clarity as to what was happening ie those that were expecting a refuse collection would now be receiving a recycling collection and vice versa.
- 3.5** There was a discussion as to rather than suspend the garden waste service it would be appropriate to collect this waste with the residual waste. However it was felt that this was an inappropriate message to send to residents when we are keen to encourage recycling and residents would be understanding as to the need to prioritise the catch up.

4. Consultation and feedback

- 4.1** Officers involved in delivering the recommendations have been involved in the review. A copy of the report has also been sent to the interim head of the Gloucestershire Joint Waste Management Unit (GJWMU) and he is keen to ensure that the GJWC talks about service resilience and identifies good practice across the partner councils.

5. Performance management –monitoring and review

- 5.1** The director of commissioning and interim head of the GJWMU will be accountable for ensuring that these recommendations are taken forward. The regular liaison meetings between CBC/GJWMU and Ubico will ensure that the recommendations are progressed and monitored.

