

# Waste & Street Cleansing Scrutiny Review

Member Panel conclusions and recommendations



January 2025

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## Foreword by Chair of the Waste & Street Cleansing Scrutiny Review Member Working Panel:

The start of the new waste and street cleansing contract with Suez Recycling and Recovery UK saw a significant period of disruption to the service for the residents of Swale.

Whilst the changes being introduced at the start of the Suez contract meant that some disruption was expected, the scale and duration were far greater than anyone had anticipated.

With any project of this scale, it is important to look at what went wrong, what went well, and to make sure lessons are learned to help inform future changes.

In this case, the Environment & Climate Change Committee believed it was particularly important that this should be carried out promptly and thoroughly in the form of a scrutiny review.

Between August and November 2024, myself and fellow councillors from all the political groups on Swale Borough Council carried out a number of workshops with those involved.

We have interviewed council officers and Suez representatives, and have gone through vast amounts of documents and data to examine the different aspects of the project. The scope of this work ranged from the early stages of preparing the initial tender, right up to the mobilisation and the subsequent response to the disruption.

This report presents the findings of the Member Panel and sets out the conclusions reached and recommendations made. It also aims to help provide an honest explanation of the causes of the disruption for residents who have patiently endured this period of poor service.

I, and the Member Panel, are grateful to the more than 2,100 people who took the time to complete the public survey, which has fed into this review and our recommendations.

I must also thank all the members of the panel for their hard work and commitment in carrying out this review. This process has been a good example of how councillors can put aside political differences to work constructively and effectively together for the benefit of the whole borough.

Finally, I would like to thank the staff at Swale Borough Council (SBC) and Suez for their work and commitment to resolve the problems and bring the service to a more acceptable standard.

Everyone wants the waste service to succeed, and I hope this report will help to ensure that any future changes deliver the service local people deserve.

### **CLlr Rich Lehmann**

Chair of Environment & Climate Change Committee

### **Members of Waste & Street Cleansing Scrutiny Review Member Panel**

CLlr Rich Lehmann, CLlr Chris Palmer,  
CLlr Hannah Perkin, CLlr Julien Speed,  
CLlr Dolley Wooster



## Resources and staff

### Summary of conclusions and recommendations:

**Recruitment and vacancies at Suez** – As with any major operational service, there are periods where vacancies occur and this is particularly the case when a major transfer happens. It became clear at the start of the new contract that a number of roles within the Swale depot needed recruitment action. This has taken time to resolve. There were conversations with previous contractor and Suez before the contract start about the Contract Manager role as this was vacant for at least 6 months before the end of the previous contract. Suez wanted to put in an experienced person from the start, but found it hard to recruit. The post has now been filled and there is now an experienced Contract Manager in place. Suez admitted there had not been consistency up until that point but believed it was important to get the right person.

Suez found that the Swale depot was more difficult to recruit to in the early stages. This wasn't as much of a problem at Ashford and Maidstone. Suez were in the Sunday Times top 20 best companies to work for and feedback from other Councils who have worked with them confirmed that people liked working for Suez.

**Reliance on overtime** – the TUPE process (Transfer of undertakings – Protection of Employment) - protects existing employees when a commissioned service changes operator. It ensures terms and conditions (including pay) are maintained. The TUPE terms and conditions clause for this contract state a 39-hour week for drivers with an expectation to do overtime to complete the service. This is a culture that Suez stated they would like to change. They are making progress with expectations and changing how they recruit staff and will be undertaking a consultation with a view to drivers moving to a 42-hour week contract.

**Working hours on Fridays** - The TUPED contract allows for an hour less on Fridays at Swale. Resources have been designed to be sufficient across the week regardless of the Friday finish time, but routes may have needed amending earlier to take this into account.

**Suez staff holidays** - there was some crossover with holidays that were approved by the previous contractor and holidays previously booked by new employees, which were honoured. This was an issue during the transition, but there is a new process for booking leave at Suez so this should not be an ongoing problem.

**Staff sickness** – Suez stated that staff sickness has been higher than anticipated but a system has been put in place to manage this (Bradford Factor). There is a pool of back-up labour to call on (2 drivers, 4 loaders) plus agency staff if necessary. Swale has the highest sickness rate across the partnership.

**Recommendation 1 - TUPE information should be provided earlier in the tender process (as far as permitted by legislation) in future projects.**

**Training and induction** - Access to staff prior to contract start was a challenge, however, all members of staff, including the supervisory team, attended the weekend induction sessions which were held over two weekends. It covered areas such as health and safety, vehicles hardware and software, depots, reporting of information and new ways of working. New ways of working will not always be popular and will take time to embed.

Suez advised that their staff could request further training if they feel it is necessary. Supervisors have been enabled to deliver training and there is a training matrix on the depot wall for all staff to see what they are trained in and what their future training needs are.

The training weekends went very well and have now become a benchmark for Suez. Some staff are resistant to the changes in technology, but this is being worked on. The Member Panel felt that the training model was not designed for different learning styles and providing a variety of learning methods could have been beneficial.

Better sharing of information between outgoing and incoming contractors needs to be a focus for future projects.



There was some confusion about the use of Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), which is a device to help staff record work. There should have been clarification that if there were bins put out which were not on their PDA list, they should collect and call their supervisor. Suez said that during training the message was pushed hard to only collect what was on the PDA but there needed to be better collaboration with crews and supervisors during the disruption.

During the scrutiny review the Member Panel questioned if a phased approach could have been used to start staff on the old contractor routes and then change the routes at a later date. Suez stated that they wouldn't normally do a phased implementation of new rounds and for Swale the change of location of the food disposal site was an influencing factor.

Also, the different configuration of the new vehicles forced the need to change routes. Using the old fleet initially was considered as an option but as the vehicles were not owned by the Council, it was not possible. Furthermore, decisions were being made at a time of lots of changes to legislation and local circumstances such as disposal sites and property growth, so it was considered to be best to implement the new routes at the start.

**Recommendation 2 - Training for contracted staff prior to the new service is essential to ensure a smooth transition. Where possible use a phased approach for training to minimise service disruption.**

**Pay negotiations** - The annual pay negotiation coincided with the start of the new contract. This was resolved by both Suez and SBC contributing to the awarded pay increase, however, future tender projects need to factor in that negotiations with unions should take place earlier.

**Redeployment of staff** - staff were taken off routes they were familiar with as Suez use a different 'clockwise' model so that most crews focus on a particular area of Swale each day rather than being spread out. This meant not all crew members had local knowledge on all days.

**CCTV in vehicles** - CCTV was installed on the vehicles prior to contract start but access to the software to view it was not immediately available. Additionally, Suez stated that their staff were not trained to use CCTV at the start of the contract. Contractually, the CCTV is for Suez and SBC officers to check to clear up any misunderstandings and data belongs to Suez. With regard to levels of abuse towards Suez and SBC staff, although the vehicles have CCTV they do not pick up audio. Personal safety of both SBC and contract staff must be a priority.

**Recommendation 3 - Where relevant, the council should request that the contractor considers the use of personal safety cameras for their operatives if they are not explicitly mentioned in a bid, and also that CCTV on vehicles should be operational from day one of the next contract.**

**Vehicles** - all bidders were asked to put forward their solutions based on tonnage, type of borough, number of different collection types, location of disposal sites etc. The member working group discussed the options at the time. Twenty-three vehicles were ordered and perceived to provide the greatest flexibility with future waste legislation changes.

SBC purchased the vehicles as per the contractor specification and they have a lifespan of approximately 8-years. The new vehicles have reduced emissions, for example the bin lifts are now electric powered instead of diesel and they use a lot less fuel. They have improved technology that allow real time information to be passed from the drivers into Suez's IT system. That means supervisors and SBC officers, as the client, can see that information much more in real-time.

The vehicles have improved food pods which have resolved previous problems with corrosion and potential contamination. However, Suez advised the food pods and narrow vehicles have caused more problems than expected. Some of the problems have been caused by longer familiarisation than anticipated which has led to some damage. Some repairs have been necessary due to mechanical and technology breakdowns.

The chassis etc were standard but the compartments were built to the tender specification. They are similar to ones used around the country. Hire vehicles do not offer the specification we use currently, so that is why some vehicles may look slightly different and why some food collections are missed and should be returned for at a later date.

The new vehicles all have to have an MOT every year. It can take a week to service/MOT a vehicle and Suez try to stagger these throughout the year as they were purchased at the same time and do not want them all being due for inspection/work at the same time. These are complicated vehicles with many moving parts and are heavily used so will always be prone to maintenance requirements. Also, new vehicles often need returning under manufacturer warranties for certain issues. Vehicle issues are reducing.

**Food transfer bins** - There has been an increase in food waste collections and requests for food caddies. To start with the food transfer bins used were either blue or green bins which has caused concern with residents as they believed the food waste is going into the general waste. The use of different coloured bins should have been in the contract. It is not contractually covered but Suez have resolved this issue by using black bins with tape round them the majority of the time.

**Impact of the disruption on SBC staff** - the roll-out placed stress on those involved at the forefront of the service, in particular contracts monitoring and customer services staff. They worked a lot of additional hours. As the scale of the disruption became apparent, the business continuity plan was implemented on 26 April 2024 to allocate roles to others outside the key departments. Regular weekly meetings took place to discuss business continuity. Senior managers took the lead on issues such as staff welfare, communications and data.

**Demands on the SBC call centre** - there are multiple members of staff in the Customer Services Centre, but they are not all full time. Generally 4 or 5 are working at one time. The demand on the call centre during this period was unprecedented. This is considered in more detail under the Communications section of this report.

**Recommendation 4 - For future project implementation where there will be a change to a service, ensure there is adequate staff resource in place to deal with potentially high levels of incoming queries.**

**SBC staff resource** – during the peak of the period of disruption, members offered to provide assistance to take the pressure off staff. Senior management took the view that there was a distinction between officer and member responsibilities. Around this time the Local Government Association Peer Review had observed the lines were blurred between officer and member responsibilities. There was acknowledgement that different skills could have been utilised earlier in the project planning/mobilisation phase.

**Recommendation 5 - Ensure the appropriate skills are in place at contract implementation.**

**Feedback from the surveys relating to this theme include (see Appendix IV and VI for full feedback):**

#### Public survey:

- Several respondents reported that their bins had been damaged by the bin lorries or during collection;
- some residents said that the bin lorries had damaged their fences/property;
- some residents reported encountering rude or unhelpful staff when trying to resolve issues; and
- some respondents felt that their complaints about street cleaning issues were not addressed adequately by the council.

#### Member survey:

- The design and capacity of the vehicles were questioned along with their suitability for different routes;
- vehicles appear to break down or need repair often;
- the food pods seem to break often;
- some Members stated they would like to thank SBC staff for their efforts;
- issues with Suez staff logging rounds as complete when they weren't;
- the abuse aimed at staff has been unacceptable;

- there were reports of bins being damaged;
- SBC underestimated the number of staff needed at the start of contract;
- Concerns were expressed about the TUPE and induction process; and
- More contract monitoring needs to take place.

## Data and rounds

### Summary of conclusions and recommendations:

#### Provision of data before start of contract -

SBC were expecting to receive the round data from Suez in September 2023, but actually received the final data on 13 February 2024. This resulted in a short turnaround for data verification and creation of letters to be sent to residents. There were lots of new considerations such as changing government legislation, a second tipping site for food and growth in new developments which all needed to be taken into account at this stage.

Suez's IT management system CORE is a powerful tool and the Member Panel received a demonstration of the software at one of the workshops. When asked if all of CORE's functionality was up and running from day one, Suez said it was not ready for the level of failure, so they were not able to share the data with SBC. There were so many data changes that it was not possible to extract data. The system was set up for a successful service, not a failing one.

Suez said there have been delays in dealing with some complaints due to some process issues. For example, if a resident reports a missed bin, CORE updates automatically. However, if Suez are aware of a missed bin, then CORE has to be updated manually. There have been delays for complaints being resolved when they are emailed to Suez, this was due to the Suez staff focusing mainly on stabilisation service delivery.

Route assumptions were made on collection rates based on urban/rural, narrow/standard, traffic speeds, bin weights and distance from the disposal site. There was an assumption of an 80% put-out rate for recycling bins in Swale which meant there were fewer recycling rounds to start with. This was resolved fairly early into

the disruption period. Suez have reported there are a number of residents with more than one recycling bin which impacted collection rates. Suez asked for the numbers at the planning stage, but SBC did not hold this data.

One of the biggest perceived problems that came out of the public survey was the inefficiency of the rounds, in particular the routes and vehicles used. SBC had limited access to the data under the old contract which was recognised and has been changed under this contract. Officers gave some advice on rounds, but it was mainly the responsibility of the contractor to design the rounds. Not all data/intelligence was captured in a system previously. Some crews were familiar with properties and knew where to find bins etc. As this sort of information was not recorded on a system, when crews changed, they didn't have the knowledge of the areas.

There were reports of access problems in some areas due to parked vehicles blocking access, road closures and difficulties accessing communal bins. This was exacerbated by a large backlog of waste which had not been collected by the start of the new contract.

**Recommendation 6 – Ensure data is provided earlier, with agreed timescales, in the tender process and carry out checks to ensure it is correct.**

**Housing growth** – the figures were prepared in accordance with the SBC Planning Team and came from the Local Plan. A reconciliation process is taking place with Suez. Officers believe the projected figures are about right with what was stated at tender and what is on the ground now. Suez have said they will regularly review the routes. Capacity has been added to routes to take into account things like increased tonnage and traffic delays. The Contract and Resources Team are consultees on planning applications but this can be strengthened.

**Recommendation 7 – The Contract and Resources team are consulted in the early stages of a planning application to ensure that estate design takes account of the ease and consistency of bin collections and that the accessibility of communal bin stores is assessed.**

**Recommendation 8 – An annual review should be requested to ensure rounds do not become unmanageable over time due to new housing development.**

**Rounds** - there was a reliance on overtime previously to complete rounds. This was due to housing development that took place over time and no major changes were made to rounds to accommodate this. During the tender process, government legislation changes were taking place and SBC had to make adjustments to the tender. SBC's brief to tenderers was to come up with the most flexible service to take legislation change into account.

There was one less recycling round than refuse round so it was not possible to mirror week 1 and week 2. The build-up of the Suez recycling collection service was made by analysing the tonnage provided as well as making an assumption of participation (80%) as Suez didn't have this data at tender or mobilisation stage. Wasteflows / waste arising and tonnages are always the first indicator used to calculate resources. A further recycling round was added after the initial period of disruption which meant routes could be mirrored and there is now a better spread of rounds. Another factor is the KCC decision to take food waste to Ridham Dock (five miles away) rather than taking all waste to the one disposal site, the impact of which couldn't be truly estimated before the start.

There were conversations with crews about the suitability of rounds, but they weren't driven in totality. The expectation that the routes would be pre-driven was not in the contract but there is a line in the tender document saying they would undertake route risk assessments, which officers from all three councils in the partnership were under the impression they would be pre-driven.

Suez said they didn't have anyone with local knowledge to sense check the rounds and initially the data was not available. They said that a lesson they have learnt for future new contracts is to employ someone to drive the routes. A risk route assessment was carried out by Suez which followed the national HSE guidance and industry standards. This looked at health and safety issues such as schools, speed limits, traffic lights, and care homes etc, instead

of sense checking routes. The information from the risk assessment checking was fed into the CORE system.

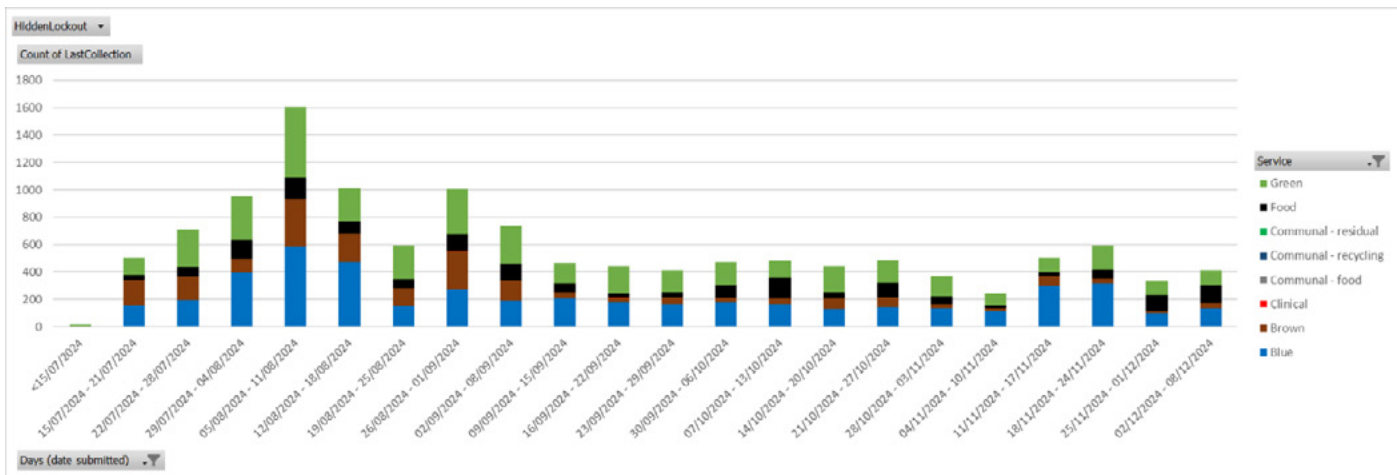
If the data had been provided earlier, then it could have been better checked by officers and gone to members for sense checking. However, it was part of the contract that the winning bidder would design the routes. Suez had difficulties accessing information/data from previous contractor. Suez have said that at the end of their contract they will have clean data to hand over.

Catch-up rounds are something that Suez do not want to be in the position of needing to use, instead they aim to just have missed bin rounds. Suez said that their catch-up rounds in the early weeks could have been structured better logistically and geographically.

Suez said in the early days crews started the round in the same place each week which resulted in the same roads at the end of the round being missed each week. SBC officers requested that rounds which regularly failed to complete were started at different points each time. This suggestion was not consistently implemented across all crews by Suez, although in hindsight they agreed it would have been beneficial to the service. However, this isn't an issue now as rounds are being completed in the majority of cases.

Two re-routes were carried out in September and December 2024 to overcome the problems with missed bins. Each re-route saw a marked improvement in completion rates and made it easier for catch ups to be undertaken. The December reroute was necessary to adjust for smaller imbalances in the revised September routes. The table below shows changes in missed bin reports week- by-week since July 2024:





**Communal bins** - Under the new contract all vehicles are capable of collecting communal bins. The data that was handed over by SBC at tender, stated there were 194 communal locations but there are actually 329. This was because a large number were picked up by standard rounds rather than the specific communal round in the old contract. SBC also didn't have a breakdown of the number of communal bins at many of the properties. This has since been rectified and we are in a much better position with data. A route plan is being finalised to ensure that all are collected effectively. At the moment refuse for communal bins is collected weekly and recycling every other week. Flats tend to recycle less than houses, this could be due to issues such as lack of space to store general waste and recycling separately. A project officer will be looking at possible ways to overcome this.

**Street cleansing** - a review of litter bins was undertaken by the contracts team to suggest some for removal. This was not completed by the start of the tender and the data provided to Suez was incorrect. Suez will review their collections using the up-to-date data. A project has been undertaken to give each bin a reference number which will make routes and rationalisation easier in future.

All streets are zoned 1-4 as per national guidance and there is a schedule for cleansing on CORE. Suez agreed they haven't used CORE as well as they should have for street cleansing, but the IT system will be fully utilised over time and give improved street cleansing information. There was no online management of street cleansing in the previous service so this will be an improvement when it arrives.

Suez admitted they haven't been monitoring street cleansing as much as waste collections, but this is now improving.

Streets were not in a good condition at the start of the contract, so SBC funded an additional crew. A lot of work has taken place to rectify some of the problem areas, such as alleyways, which will make it easier to maintain them in the future.

**Vulnerable users** - a review of 'assisted' and 'clinical collections' was carried out prior to the tender, writing to all vulnerable users asking if they still required assisted and/or clinical collections, this showed there was a reduced demand. Officers confirmed that an Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) was not carried out at the tender preparation stage and this was documented in the Council committee reports. The reason for this was that, as there was no change to the service delivery model, it was not required. In hindsight the scale of day changes (known late in the process) should have triggered an EqIA as in some cases the disruption resulted in non-collection which may have impacted some vulnerable users. Panel Members suggested allocating vulnerable users to Contract Monitoring Officers to monitor and flag up potential problems.

**Recommendation 9 – Reassess if Equality Impact Assessments (EqIA) should be carried out at key points during tender preparation. If there are any significant changes to a contract or when unexpected problems arise, this should trigger the completion of an EqIA.**

**Recommendation 10 – Link Contract Monitoring Officers (CMOs) to vulnerable properties better in times of disruption so that potential problems are identified quickly.**

**Feedback from the surveys relating to this theme include (see Appendix IV and VI for full feedback):**

#### **Public survey:**

- Frequent missed collections was the most common complaint, with many residents reporting that their bins were not collected for weeks at a time;
- respondents noted that collection days were often changed without notice, leading to confusion and missed pickups;
- some residents complained about overflowing bins and litter scattered around their neighbourhoods;
- some residents expressed concerns about the potential health hazards associated with uncollected waste, such as pests and odours;
- many respondents reported that their streets were rarely cleaned or not cleaned at all;
- some respondents felt that the focus was on cleaning town centres, while residential areas were neglected;
- respondents complained about overgrown weeds, hedges, and bushes obstructing sidewalks and roads; and
- litter and fly-tipping were common issues, especially in rural areas and near overflowing bins.

#### **Member survey:**

- Some people didn't have their bins emptied for 14 weeks;
- parked cars were used as an excuse for non-collection;
- some people paid private companies to remove their waste;
- pavements were blocked by uncollected bins causing difficulties for pedestrians with pushchairs and wheelchair users;
- rural areas were particularly impacted;
- dog waste bins were overflowing;
- narrow roads caused some collections not to be completed;
- communal bin stores and food waste collections were a particular problem;
- sack collection only areas had rubbish stacking up due to missed collections;
- residents have asked to bring back Biffa;
- assisted collections were not honoured for some time;
- assisted collections often missed or not recorded on the Suez system;
- problems with incontinence products not being collected; and
- problems with assisted initially due to out of date data being passed from Biffa to Suez, but resolved by re-registering.

## Contracts and project management

### Summary of conclusions and recommendations:

**Member working groups** - The early Member Waste Working Group in 2020 was made up of Administration Members only. After the Borough Election in May 2023, there was a large turnover of councillors and the membership of the working group changed and included opposition Members. The Member Panel discussed the effectiveness of working groups holding and disseminating information.

**Recommendation 11 – Member working group meetings during tender and mobilisation were useful, however needed more regular updates to the parent committee. Request that the Constitutional Working Group agree a model set of Terms of Reference (TOR) as a guide, so that at the implementation of each new working group, full and clear TOR can be set.**

**Project management** - The consultant who was appointed at the beginning of the project carried out a review of the current service, looked at the pros and cons of different operating models and the financial projections. This culminated in the Cabinet decision to stay with the current service. They were retained for 3 years to give support and external oversight throughout the project.

All three authorities had equal responsibility for the contract, but Maidstone was listed as the lead authority. It is a legal requirement that only one authority leads but this is just a formality. In practice, all authorities carry equal weight. Each authority took a role in the tender project: Ashford led on procurement; Swale led on legal and Maidstone on finance.

**Tender process** – councillors reported a question they were frequently asked by residents was why did the other bidders pull out of the tender process? At the tender release stage, there were a lot of other authorities that had their waste contracts up for tender, so there was competition from bigger contracts. Once bidders submitted a selection questionnaire, they could view the detailed tender. It was at that point they decided whether or not they

were interested in proceeding. Additionally, some companies were not bidding at that time, as it was a period of uncertainty with imminent changes in government legislation due to be announced. Two companies did go through the majority of the tender stages though.

There was no minimum number of bidders required to proceed with the tender award process, providing there was one bidder that met all of the specific evaluation criteria. The Suez bid not only met the required criteria, but exceeded it.

**Officer resourcing** - At contract mobilisation, officers assessed they had enough resource, but in hindsight that wasn't the case. The level of disruption impacted the contracts team and call centre. The problems with the website reporting form for missed bins turned out to be a worst-case scenario. Neither officers nor members looked at worst-case scenarios early enough. The Member Panel felt that the streamlining of staff in recent years had reduced the officer resource too much. At the time senior management didn't think more staff were needed based on the information they had available to them, as it was felt that any issues could be dealt with by the officer team in place. Once the problems became apparent, the Chief Executive confirmed that the resource would be made available to do what was necessary to resolve the issues and additional resource was recruited.

**Recommendation 12 – Adequate officer resourcing should be put in place at the outset so that SBC are prepared for any worst-case scenario situation.**

**Scrutiny** - If it becomes apparent that a service is going to change significantly, the responsible Service Committee should call it in for scrutiny, even if it is late in the project. The mechanism for Service Committees to scrutinise should be clarified. Updates should regularly go to the responsible Service Committee as well as the member working group.

**Recommendation 13 – If it becomes apparent that a service is going to change significantly, the responsible Service Committee should consider calling it in for scrutiny, even if it is late in the day. To assist with this, the mechanism for Service Committees to scrutinise should be clarified and a recommendation should be made to the Member Development Working Group to provide ongoing training for Members on scrutiny as a governance mechanism in the committee system..**

**Contract management** – As with any contract, performance needs to be monitored against the output specification and what is submitted as part of the tender. The Contract Monitoring Team are responsible for overseeing this contract. This includes analysing data, investigating issues/complaints and utilising the contract solutions. The Mid Kent Waste Partnership Officer (jointly employed by Ashford, Maidstone and Swale as part of the new service) analyses and checks data and report content. A range of regular reports are required from Suez through the contract. Complaints are also a good measure of accuracy. These methods should provide effective monitoring of Suez reporting.

The Mid Kent Waste Partnership Officer is developing a process so that it will not be necessary to wait for the monthly or annual reports. Performance dashboards will provide real-time access to performance data. The Corporate Key Performance Indicators (KPI) currently have three performance indicators for waste which follow the old national way of reporting. There will be a number of other ways

to present more detailed information, which can go to the Member working group quarterly.

**Holding the contractor to account** – a key part of the contract is the performance criteria and performance mechanism. It was designed by the consultant based on industry norms and uses points and financial deductions if problems are not rectified within certain timescales. It is a lot clearer on reporting and data requirements. As an industry norm there is an exemption period of 3 months from the start of the contract. There are thresholds at different levels and there is a termination threshold should it be needed.

**Rectification Plan** – for issues such as the bin delivery backlog plan, there is a clause in the contract that makes Suez consider resolving an issue via a rectification plan. Once in place it is not set in stone, it is an ongoing discussion with Suez and discretion can be used if progress is made. If SBC feel Suez are not doing what they should, SBC can escalate and consider mitigation at higher levels in the contract.

**Carrying the learning forward** - The Member Panel asked what historic information, from when the previous contract was implemented, did Members and officers have access to when developing the new tender? The contract document, specification and key policies were available at the start and helped form the basis for the tender. Notes from tender meetings and learning was limited due to changes in staff and document retention policies. The Member Panel felt strongly that there should be a mechanism put in place to ensure learning is carried forward for future contract change.

**Recommendation 14 – As a matter of course when working on a new tender, learnings from scrutiny reviews and project evaluations from the previous contract, should be available to review.**



**Feedback from the surveys relating to this theme include (see Appendix IV and VI for full feedback):**

**Public survey:**

- Some respondents continued to express dissatisfaction with the overall performance of the waste collection service, citing missed collections, delays, and other issues;
- some respondents noted that despite initial improvements, at the time of the survey the service had deteriorated in recent months;
- respondents felt that the change in contractors had resulted in a significant decline in service quality;
- respondents urged the council and Suez to take steps to improve the overall quality of the waste collection service; and
- some respondents suggested that residents should be compensated for the inconvenience and financial losses caused by the poor service.

**Member survey:**

- The people of Swale deserve better than what has taken place with the waste collection and although there are signs of improvements, measures need to be put in place to prevent anything like this from taking place again;
- SBC need more staff monitoring on the ground and in the office to reply to member enquiries;
- concerns express as to what extent contract monitoring is being done. SBC needs to be standing over the contract and enforcing every clause;
- contract management has been bad across all three authorities;
- not enough feedback due to lack of staff, the council should have had lots of temporary or seconded contractor monitoring officers or assistant contract monitoring officers; and
- there wasn't and still isn't enough officers on the ground physically monitoring elements of the contract;

## Communications (internal and external)

### Summary of conclusions and recommendations:

**SBC communications plan** – the focus of the communications plan was to make sure that residents knew the change was coming, including the withdrawal of the electrical and textile collections. The expectation was that data would come through in good time so that residents could be advised of any changes to their collection dates before the implementation of the new contract. The communications plan focused on raising awareness of the change to the contract, and how it would affect people, through activities such as bin lorry naming, content in Inside Swale, updates through social media and news release, a new section on the website and letters being sent out to residents.

**Information provided to residents before the start of the contract** - the Member Panel considered whether enough communication about the upcoming changes had been provided to residents. The most important message to get across was when residents should be putting their bins out. As mentioned in earlier parts of this report the data was provided late and showed significantly more day changes than previously expected. This left a very short period of time for the service to verify the data so letters tailored to each property could then be produced and sent to residents. All the letters were sent out by 20 February 2024, more than a month before the start of the new contract. The public survey asked if residents received a letter before the contract change notifying them about changes to the service. 66.2% said they recalled receiving a letter, 14% could not remember and 19% said they did not receive a letter.

**Communication with residents after the start of the contract** – the Member Panel felt that as soon as the extent of the disruption was known, SBC ideally should have used parish councils, town councils, area committees, community groups and borough councillors to get information out as well as the other usual channels such as the website and social media. However, it became clear early on that the

information about rectifying missed collections was not reliable and sharing it regularly was causing further confusion and frustration. Officer resources also needed to be focussed on resolving the collections issues in the first place.

Some Members also suggested that a public apology from the Council Leader and Chief Executive should have gone out sooner along with information on how long it was likely that the period of disruption would last.

**Internal communication with councillors** – councillors were receiving many requests for information from residents and also requests to assist with resolving non-collection issues. This resulted in the SBC contracts team receiving duplicate reports of an issue and were being hit from every angle. Each complaint had to be investigated and responded to.

The Customer Service Centre (CSC) were in the same position, they had so many requests coming in at certain times they had to send out standard responses to emails and to stop the phone lines crashing, they had to limit the number of waiting calls. During the period of high complaint volumes, the contract reporting structure sometimes resulted in issues being missed as it was not always clear who would respond.

Members suggested a single generic email address be set up for councillor reporting but at the time were told that this would generate more work for officers, with the intention being to fix the automated reporting.

**Recommendation 15 – The process for councillors to report issues to officers should be made clear from the outset of a new contract to ensure that duplicate reports are not made to multiple officers.**

**The impact on the Customer Services Centre (CSC)** - the impact on staff in the CSC was huge, some experienced and valuable members of staff resigned and recruiting and training new staff takes time. The level of abuse staff received on the telephones was unacceptable. Before the contract start the CSC were asked if they needed extra staff, but the team felt they could cope with any queries, but in hindsight they should have had extra staff trained and in

place for ready for the contract start. When the CSC employed temporary staff after the start of the contract, training and retaining them was a challenge and some only stayed one day.

**Recommendation 16 – For future major projects, ensure that scrutiny is carried out in the preparation and implementation phases to assess risk and in advance put precautionary additional resource in place in readiness for the unknown.**

**Daily member/officer meetings** – the intention was that political Group Leaders should meet daily with key officers to receive an update on the current situation. The expectation was that Group Leaders would then share that information with members of their Group. However, the councillor attendance of this meeting grew and the focus became parochial rather than strategic. There were incidents where the meetings became confrontational due to the frustration of councillors. Some officers were instructed by senior management to stop attending the daily meetings for their wellbeing. This resulted in the Chief Executive being the single point of contact for the informal administration.

**Recommendation 17 – Ensure the member/officer protocol covers working relationships in strategic meetings so that they are a safe space where officers and Members will have confidence there will not be a blame culture.**

**Recommendation 18 – Consider holding briefings twice a year for all councillors where information can be shared on what teams throughout the council are working on and have planned for the future to assist with improving member/officer working relationships.**

**Decision making** – under the Committee system, which has been SBC's governance system since May 2022, all councillors are now involved in taking major decisions through service committees and full council. This proved to be a challenge in the early days of the contract when decisions needed to be made and the Member Panel felt this is something that needed to be addressed should there be emergency situations in the future.

**Recommendation 19 – Clarity on decision making processes under the Committee system should be established so it is clear where decisions are made on operational solutions in any future emergency situation.**

**Updates for members** - The daily email update reports were an interim measure implemented to try and get information to councillors who were at the front end of queries. They were a guide at the point of writing, rather than complete accuracy. A round can show at 100% but still have a number of reasons why a bin(s) have not been collected e.g. locked out by crew for contamination/bin not out etc or where a crew (wrongly) believe they have collected all bins on a road. A member survey was carried out as part of this scrutiny review and some members felt that the lack of a Friday evening update made it difficult to answer resident queries over the weekend. The office is officially closed on Friday afternoons which is something members agreed as part of the 34-hour week contract for staff in lieu of no pay increase in 2023.

**Recommendation 20 – Regular member update meetings have been useful and should be implemented if there are similar ongoing incidents in the future.**

**Recommendation 21 - Annual contract updates to be presented at the Environment & Climate Change Committee moving forwards.**

**Recommendation 22 – A request for training on data interpretation to be referred to the Member Development Working Group. Any data provided for members should be clearly presented in an easily understandable format.**

**Social media** - Councillors have varying experience and skills with social media and as highlighted in the Member Survey, there was a grey area with what messaging councillors should be putting out. More support could have been given on social media. There is a mistrust of local authorities in general which needs to be built back up. Ideally, residents should feel they can trust the system to report problems rather than going to councillors.

### **Recommendation 23 -Ensure the project communications plan considers major service changes and how to respond in periods of disruption, with particular reference to the use of social media.**

**Website reporting forms** – The process behind the online reporting forms was agreed before the start of contract, and they were designed for normal, good service. Delays to getting access to real data in Suez system meant these could not be fully tested ‘end to end’ to identify any concerns with the processes. When the contract started, some people had difficulty reporting missed collections for a variety of reasons that had not been considered and the system reacted differently in the ‘live’ format. For example, if Suez logged a road as ‘still in progress’, it was not possible for residents to report a missed bin. However, the ‘round still in progress’ was sometimes incorrect and remained on the system as Suez were not updating the information. The form was designed not to receive missed collections more than two days old, as per the contract, so when the status was changed, people were unable to report, causing further frustration.

**Feedback from the surveys relating to this theme include (see Appendix IV and VI for full feedback):**

#### **Public survey:**

- Residents complained about the lack of timely responses from the council or Suez when reporting missed collections;
- residents stated they often received conflicting information from the council or Suez, leading to frustration and confusion; and
- many respondents felt that there was insufficient communication from the council or Suez regarding service disruptions or changes;

#### **Member survey:**

- There were reports of residents not receiving enough or incorrect information before the contract started;
- there were also reports of residents saying they had sufficient information;
- bin stickers would have been helpful;
- residents reported to councillors they were not kept informed about missed collections;
- problems were experience with online reporting of missed bins;
- there were cases of either delayed or no response to complaints;
- residents resorted to asking their ward councillor for assistance/information when they could not get help from the website;
- there were reports of the website working well and prompt responses to complaints/queries;
- the daily updates were useful but didn’t provide area-specific information to give to residents; and
- there were no Friday evening updates which would have helped with dealing with resident queries over the weekend.