

## SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - COMMUNITY - SPECIAL

11 January 2011

### Present:

Councillor Kevin Mitchell (Chair)

Councillors Shiel, Branston, Mrs Danks, Hobden, Morris, Mottram, Newcombe, Newton, Robson, Wardle and Winterbottom

Chief Executive, Director Community and Environment, Head of Environmental Health Services and Member Services Officer

### Also present:

Councillor RM Hannaford - Portfolio Holder for Environment and Leisure

### 1 **Declaration of Interests**

A Member declared the following interest:-

<b>COUNCILLOR</b>	<b>MINUTE</b>
Councillor Newcombe	12 (Member of Devon County Council)

### 2 **Councillor Mrs Morrish**

The Chair reported that Councillor Mrs Morrish had been admitted to Hospital. He passed on his good wishes and those of the Committee to her and to Councillor David Morrish.

### 3 **Chair's Statement**

The Chair read out a statement setting out his reasons for calling a special meeting of this Scrutiny Committee. He explained that he had called the meeting to discuss, as a matter of urgent business, the concerns raised about the handling of the collection of rubbish during the recent snow disruption. He praised the work of the operatives on the ground and stated that he had called the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Leisure and the Head of Environmental Health Services to the meeting in order for the Committee to scrutinise the events, decisions, activity, communication and performance of officers and the Portfolio Holder during this period. He thanked them for attending.

### 4 **Questions from the Public under Standing Order No. 19**

With regard to Standing Order No. 19, the following question was read out by the Chair on behalf of Mr Roberts, a member of the public.

“Unfortunately management still seems to be unable to grasp the nub of the problem. It is not just about uncollected waste in bad weather but about management’s inability to plan, manage and communicate the situation. It has taken the local newspaper to recommend simple, yet productive measures, for future policy yet the Council Leader still centres his arguments on the bad weather, unfair criticism and bin men working hard.

The former is accepted and the latter has never been under question. The wider issues of this matter are that specific training in management, planning and good communication seems to be a must to restore credibility. Managers can no longer regard the serving of a long apprenticeship and having a comforting mastery of the issues as if they are a qualification but rather a disqualification.

What specifically is to be done in this respect please and when?"

The Head of Environmental Health Services responded that managers had fully grasped the nub of the problem and that his presentation would illustrate the logistics, constraints, contingency and action taken and lessons learnt for future action.

## 5 **Questions from Members of the Council under Standing Order No. 20**

In accordance with Standing Order No. 20, the following question was put by Councillor Taghdissian.

Does the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Leisure share the view of the Leader that the piles of rubbish left across the City was not and is not a problem?

The Portfolio Holder responded that the Leader had stated that the issues relating to rubbish were a problem but could not be considered as a **major** problem. He gave an example of what he believed could be considered as a major problem.

Councillor Taghdissian asked a supplementary question.

Why had the Portfolio Holder and the Leader not perceived the problem of bin bags piled high, litter strewn over the pavements and bin bags blocking alley ways as being a problem for the City and the City Council?

The Portfolio Holder reiterated that it had been acknowledged that there had been a problem though not a **major** problem and stated that the publicity engendered had exaggerated the situation.

He stated that there had been a particular problem in the Polsloe ward and that the difficulties experienced had been due, in part, to residents leaving rubbish out too early, failing to recycle some material and leaving out too much food waste. A day and a half after the rubbish had been cleared bins had again been deposited in the back alley ways.

## 6 **Domestic Waste Collection in Exeter**

Councillor Newcombe declared a personal interest as a Member of Devon County Council.

The Head of Environmental Health Services, at the beginning of his presentation, apologised for the disruption in the refuse collection service. His presentation, setting out the logistics of domestic refuse collection, the constraints of the operation, the particular problems that were and could be caused by the snow disruption over the Christmas period and lessons to be learnt for the future, is attached to these minutes.

Responding to a Member's request for clarification, the Portfolio Holder for Environment and Leisure stated that he had accepted that there were problems on 17 and 18 December and that he had apologised in the press at that stage of the disruption. He had then been in regular contact with officers from that date and over

the Christmas period through emails and telephone calls. The Head of Environmental Health Services reported that he personally had not discussed the problems with the Portfolio Holder until 3 January, but that other senior managers, including the Director Community and Environment, had been in constant contact with the Portfolio Holder.

Councillor Mrs Henson attended the meeting and spoke on this item having given notice under Standing Order No. 44.

She stated that Exeter had come under the national spotlight for the wrong reasons during this period and that the responses of both the Leader and Portfolio Holder had been complacent and unacceptable. She referred to the exceptional amount of rubbish left in the Polsloe, St James, Newtown and St David's areas of the City and to the spillage of rubbish on many of the pavements. She felt it wrong to blame residents for leaving out rubbish at the wrong times. Many were students, the majority of whom having left their bags out for collection prior to leaving for home over the holiday period. She stated that rubbish left in back alleys was also a problem in the summer and that the overall problem of refuse should be addressed in areas of multiple occupation.

She queried when meetings had been held between the Portfolio Holder and officers and asked why the Portfolio Holder had not made any comments until the end of December/beginning of January. She stated that she had been advised by Devon County Council officers that there were no difficulties in respect of extra tipping. She compared the situation with other countries, many of which did not seem to suffer from similar problems during periods of disruption from heavy snow.

The Portfolio Holder responded to the issues raised:

- do not accept the criticisms levelled at the Leader and himself. However, accepted that lessons can be learned.
- residents were not advised to take their rubbish to the tip.
- incorrect to state that no statement had been made until the end of December. Problems had been acknowledged from 17 and 18 December with coverage in the Express and Echo and on the Council web site. He advised that the paper had not requested a picture of himself although had criticised him for not being available for a photo.
- the national coverage in the media had been misleading. For example, the Sun had been critical in its editorial but the Portfolio Holder's bin had been collected in accordance with the schedule and not collected early as stated in that paper.
- it had not been possible for the tip to be opened beyond normal opening hours because of planning and other conditions, but discussions would be held with the County Council to investigate possible changes to the licence opening hours during severe weather.
- due regard was given to health and safety and it had been too dangerous, both to the public and staff, for the lorries to be driven on many roads.
- the MP, through his personal assistant, had been regularly updated.

The Head of Environmental Health Services responded to the issues raised:

- safety of the public and workers could not be jeopardised.
- countries with regular snow conditions, such as Germany, Canada and the Scandinavian countries, regularly encounter such heavy snowfalls and are prepared, so the extra costs can be justified. In Germany, snow tyres are a legal requirement for all vehicles including private cars, during the winter, but the public

would not accept a similar regime in this country. Fitting snow tyres on refuse vehicles would cost up to £60,000 for the whole fleet and that cost would be hard to justify for an infrequent need.

- chains on tyres help vehicles in snowy conditions but will rip up tarmac on cleared roads when fitted to 26 tonne trucks.
- alternate weekly collections have been undertaken since 1990 with the residual 16,000 properties brought into the regime in 2010. Changes like this normally take three to four months to bed down. Some 4,500 properties remain on weekly collections.
- although most refuse can be sensibly stored in back yards or gardens, the problem in the Polsloe area, in particular, will be reviewed. Many properties in Polsloe have sufficiently sized gardens for refuse bags to be kept rather than deposited in alleyways. Meetings will be held with the University to consider improvements to collections from properties occupied by students, building upon the successful work already carried out at the end of last Summer Term.

Councillor Taghdissian attended the meeting and spoke on this item having given notice under Standing Order No. 44.

He welcomed the report and apology given by the Head of Environmental Health Services and accepted that the safety of the public and Council workers was paramount. The highlighting of Exeter as a crisis area during the adverse weather conditions, in some cases as front page coverage, was very regrettable. He believed that failure had been at a political level in changing the cleansing policies. He confirmed that he had been contacted on New Years Eve and given an interview on New Year's Day.

He asserted that this Committee meeting should have been called earlier and that the Council Leader's statement to the media that there was not a major problem only provided additional ammunition for criticising the Council. He believed that the statement of the Portfolio Holder that he had not been contacted by the Express and Echo was an attempt to shift the blame away from his failure to be more proactive. He believed that blaming residents for placing bags out or not adequately undertaking recycling was not acceptable as bins had been put out in good faith in anticipation of collection.

The problems experienced had not been exclusive to his ward of Polsloe but also apparent in St James, St David's, Heavitree, Newtown and other wards. He stated that he had always opposed the change from a weekly to a fortnightly collection and he hoped that lessons would be learned for the future.

The Portfolio Holder responded to the issues raised:

- do not accept that Councillors and officers had been complacent or slow to respond - meetings had been held with the University, Devon County Council and Viridor.
- the media coverage of bags of rubbish left in back alleys had given a very misleading impression as such difficulties were confined to limited areas of the City. These problem areas will be examined further and options such as more rigorous enforcement or reverting to a weekly collection will be examined. A review of the changes is scheduled to take place after six months.
- meetings will continue with University representatives to discuss collections in student areas.

The Head of Environmental Health Services confirmed that every effort was being made to respond to complaints and to ensure the media are properly briefed. He confirmed the long standing problems in the Polsloe area and stated that there was no link between the disruption over the Christmas period and the change to a fortnightly collection in this area.

Councillor Mrs Thompsen attended the meeting and spoke on this item having given notice under Standing Order No. 44.

She stated that, when a Member of this Committee, she had voted against the change to a fortnightly collection. She believed that collection of refuse was a fundamental right which Exeter citizens should expect. Comments received from Pinhoe residents indicated that wheelie bins were preferred to black bags. She highlighted King Street as one of the areas where bags had been broken by scavenging birds and asked how similar problems could be prevented in respect of yellow bags which contained clinical waste.

She was concerned that the problems could recur and asked if the working hours in respect of the new regime could undergo a comparison exercise with the previous refuse collection arrangements. She referred to delays to traffic and disruption during school hours caused by the refuse lorries. Harrington Lane and Station Road in Pinhoe were very busy and the school in Harrington Lane already has ongoing challenges to ensure child safety in relation to traffic. She felt that these problems were representative of most areas within the City.

The Head of Environmental Health Services responded to the issues raised:

- extreme weather conditions had made it impossible to continue to reach all households to collect their waste and that also affected the clinical waste collection.
- he explained the background necessitating a changed regime and advised that the new schedules of rounds were set out in an 18 month calendar, sent to all 51,000 homes. He also stated that changes in the collection regime could not be communicated overnight to 51,000 households.
- there is no “one size fits all” operation, some households have a weekly collection of grey waste, some have a sack collection, others a bin collection.
- considerable savings had been made as a result of the change over and reintroducing weekly collections would cost some £1.5 million per annum.
- an advantage of bins over bags was that because the householder could be identified and abuses of the system detected people took more care of storing and presenting their rubbish. In King Street, traders have included trade waste in domestic collections and landlords have failed to provide keys to access flats.
- the clinical waste service had also been affected but recovered quicker. The yellow sharps boxes are collected at three quarters full, so had spare capacity which meant that a missed collection could be coped with.
- the rounds are planned to take account of busy road conditions, school hours and the tip closing times.
- the Christmas period always witnessed a spike in the collection with average tonnage increasing from 70 tonnes to 190 tonnes per week, which meant that normal progress along the collection routes could take longer and sometimes coincide with school closing times.

Councillor Shiel thanked the Head of Environmental Health Services for the full and informative response. He felt that the wrong tone had been provided during contact with the media and that greater contrition should have been shown. He felt that such an apparent lack of contrition had exacerbated public anger and that there should have been an acceptance that a crisis was being faced. He moved a motion of no confidence in the Portfolio Holder.

Councillor Hobden, seconding the motion, stated that the response to the weather conditions had been inadequate and had brought discredit to the City. She referred to public in her ward who had complained about the general condition of the City rather than specific wards and who had referred to the evidence of uncollected rubbish apparent when walking into the City Centre. As a previous Portfolio Holder with another authority, she felt that the response of the Portfolio Holder had been insufficient and she asked him if he could provide figures in respect of the phone calls and emails etc. he had made in relation to the problems. She felt that other authorities, facing similar situations, had responded better.

The Head of Environmental Health Services explained that other authorities had responded in different ways partly due to access to tipping facilities which had better opening times than the tip in Exeter which the Council had been directed to use by the County Council and partly because the snow had not been so heavy. The Director Community and Environment advised that she and other officers had actively and frequently been in touch with both the Leader and the Portfolio Holder during the holiday period. In response to another Member, the Head of Environmental Health Services had confirmed that the extent of email correspondence with the Portfolio Holder had been significant.

Responding to the Chair, the Portfolio Holder advised that the first meeting he had held with officers to discuss the situation had been on 23 December 2010 although he had been in telephone and other contact since the 17<sup>th</sup> when the weather first caused problems.

Another Member, who had been abroad over the Christmas period, stated that he had kept abreast of matters through purchasing English newspapers and via the internet and felt that the responses had been unacceptable. He called for the resignation of both the Leader and the Portfolio Holder. He predicted that the problems would occur again. He compared the collection regime with that in France where a twice weekly collection was undertaken. He did not feel that the cost of reverting to a weekly collection in Exeter should be regarded as prohibitive as he had calculated that a Council tax increase of £2 a month would be sufficient to meet the extra cost. He also did not accept the argument that recycling rates would decrease with a weekly collection.

The Head of Environmental Health Services reiterated the costs associated with returning to a weekly collection and stated that research had shown a 22% increase in recycling associated with a fortnightly collection. The Portfolio Holder pointed out that a £2 a month increase in Council Tax would equate to an increase of nearly 20%.

A Member thanked the Head of Environmental Health Services for his presentation. He felt that the coverage in the media did not accurately reflect the overall picture in Exeter and that the areas highlighted had suffered from long term problems of refuse being poorly presented. He himself had not received complaints from residents in his Newtown ward other than questions regarding the timing of road gritting. He suggested that a representative of the County Council should also have been invited

to the meeting to discuss joint policies for meeting future emergencies since they were responsible for road gritting, which had only been carried out on the major routes. He also defended and supported the work of the Portfolio Holder during this period.

Another Member also strongly supported the Portfolio Holder, stating that she had received very few complaints from the residents of the Priory ward. She also stated that Polsloe was one of the areas where the new system of alternate weekly collections had been introduced and that the reported problems were therefore not surprising.

Another Member commented that, in speaking to the public, there had generally been an acceptance that, under extreme weather conditions, a disruption to the service was inevitable. However, many had been dissatisfied by the image of the Council that had been generated through the media coverage. It would be important to learn from this particular element.

The Portfolio Holder referred to the background to the policy decision to change to a new system and remarked that, since the new regime had been rolled out, the Council had coped well. He agreed that lessons should be learned and that the suggestions received from the public in respect of improved communications, such as use of text facilities, would be examined. Although the cleansing service had maintained a high (98% satisfaction rate) over the years, he accepted that there was always room for improvement.

**RECOMMENDED** to Council that this Special Meeting of the Scrutiny Committee-Community, having discussed the disruption to the refuse collection service experienced across the City over the Christmas period, finds the performance of the Portfolio Holder fell short of what was required in that:

- he did not make an appropriate response to the crisis;
- he failed to communicate properly with residents; and
- he brought by his failure, Exeter and the City Council into serious disrepute in the national media.

and accordingly this Committee expresses a vote of no confidence in the Portfolio Holder and calls for his immediate replacement.

The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 8.10 pm

Chair

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## **Special Scrutiny Community, Tuesday 11/01/01 Disruption to the Refuse Collection Service**

### **Introduction**

First of all I would like to apologise for the disruption in the refuse collection service caused by the extreme weather conditions; residents properly have a high expectation of this important and high profile service, and those of you that know me, my managers and Cleansing staff know that we have a 'can-do' attitude, that public attitude surveys rate the service highly and that we are certainly not a 'couldn't care less service'.

There has been a lot of heat generated over the disruption to the service, but not much light, so I welcome this opportunity today to shed some light.

### **Domestic Refuse Collection – the logistics**

This is a huge logistical operation, which involves over 51,000 homes, and every residential street being visited each week, to collect their refuse. Because we collect from 4500 homes, 3 times a fortnight, this averages over 53,000 home visits per week.

In order to make all these 53,000 visits each week, we have 10 specialised refuse collection vehicles, 10 skilled drivers, 25 Operatives and 2 Supervisors working Monday to Friday. Each day the crews work in a specific zone of the City, and visit around 11,000 homes.

Usually the crews have to take their loads to tip, twice a day, but with the extra waste generated in the festive period this may increase to 3 – 4 times a day.

We have 2 spare RCVs to cover for break-downs and other contingencies, a small pool of drivers and Operatives, and we also rely upon agency staff, many of whom have worked with us before.

For every day of disruption, the 11,000 households missed will need an extra 10 RCVs, 10 drivers, 25 Operatives and 2 Supervisors to collect, over and above the next day's scheduled collection.

In the week before Christmas, 5 days of scheduled collections were disrupted, which would have needed 50 RCVs, 50 skilled drivers, 125 Operatives and 10 Supervisors to recover the situation in one day.

### **Refuse collection – the constraints**

The Council is a waste collection authority, and its role is to collect household waste from homes, which is presented for collection in the right place, at the right time and in the right receptacle. Devon County Council (DCC) is the waste disposal authority, and it is responsible for disposing of the waste collected and the cost of such. DCC stipulates where we must take the collected waste, which, following the closure of the Exeter Waste Transfer Station last February, is Greendale near Woodbury.

Even if DCC permitted the Council to take waste to another site, it has to be remembered that the travel time to a site such as Heathfield, Newton Abbott, is a 2 hour return journey, which in itself would seriously compromise the collection schedule for that crew. That would mean 4 - 8 hours spent travelling to and from site on a normal collection day.

Waste transfer stations are sensitive sites, and nearby residents do not like the noise and disruption caused by lorry movements and operations – for those reasons, they often have strict controls on their hours of operation. In the case of Greendale, the planning conditions state that the site cannot operate on Sundays or Bank Holidays, and can only operate to 5pm on working days and 1pm on Saturdays.

Because the site closes at 5pm, the cut-off time for our collection crews is 4pm to 4:15pm dependent upon where the crews are. It is illegal to store waste in the RCV overnight (as well as being a potential fire hazard).

In normal circumstances, refuse collections take place Monday-Friday and programmed catch-up days; staff are contracted on that basis. Work outside of those contractual days has to be negotiated with the Trades Union, and staff work on a voluntary basis and are paid overtime for so doing. To suggest that staff who work in an arduous, unpleasant and risky occupation can be instructed at short notice by Management to work on a weekend or bank holiday, shows little understanding of industrial relations.

### **Health and Safety**

The refuse collection industry is second only to the building industry for fatalities and injuries, in fact as an occupation, fatalities are 10 times higher than average and injuries 4 times higher than average. As the officer responsible for corporate health and safety I can advise that this is borne out by the accidents reports that I receive, with Cleansing Services being the service with most reported accidents.

For this reason it is important that staff are properly trained, and properly equipped with protective clothing before they are allowed on the streets to work. It would be foolhardy to take on large numbers of new staff (whether internal or external) without giving them proper training and equipment.

### **Recycling**

Great emphasis is now placed on separating recyclable waste from the landfill waste stream, and rightly so. Not only it is environmentally sound, but it is economically sound. The evidence from councils is that the alternate weekly collection system produces a substantial improvement in recycling, and ensures that resources are spent on local services rather than landfill tax.

In Exeter, we have our own Materials Reclamation Facility (MRF) which is used to sort the recyclates for resale. In order to ensure we have a steady daily supply to the MRF to process, we split the collections in each zone, with half of the zone having grey waste collected and half recyclates. To do otherwise would mean that we would have no recyclates to process one week, and have insufficient capacity to process the recyclates collected the following week (half of which would then go to landfill).

### **Snow Disruption**

The snowfall on Friday the 17<sup>th</sup> December caused some disruption, with some residential roads being unsafe to travel down until later in the afternoon, but this meant that a number of homes did not receive a collection that day.

The Operations Manager sought to arrange extra crews to work overtime on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup>, but was unable to encourage enough volunteers to work on the last weekend before Christmas.

The very heavy snow that fell on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> severely disrupted all roads in the region, and affected workers' journeys into work for many organisations, including

Cleansing Services. The extreme weather conditions persisted all week and over the Christmas period, and it was not until the afternoon of Tuesday the 28<sup>th</sup> December, that the thaw properly set in and residential roads off the main roads became safe.

For a refuse collection service, streets that are affected by snow and ice present 2 distinct problems. Each RCV weighs 26 tonnes and has to be negotiated around narrow residential streets that are often lined with cars – poorly parked cars often cause problems in normal conditions. If control of a 26 tonne vehicle was lost on an icy residential street, it would not only take out the cars parked by the road-side, it would also crush any pedestrian on the pavement, and probably the garden wall of any house.

For the Operatives, who have to walk many miles on each collection day, traversing icy pavements would not be a safe option, and working in the road behind a RCV and being more exposed to other traffic driving in unsafe conditions would not be a safe option. We had a number of injuries to Operatives, including a suspected broken ankle and a fractured wrist on the first day of snow.

Assessments were made of the safety of the roads in each collection zone every day of the week before Christmas. By Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> December, limited collections were able to be carried out along a number of main roads where it was safe to do so, but in reality this was a small proportion of the waste that would normally be collected.

The snow made street conditions unsafe up until the afternoon of Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> December, when the thaw set in.

### **Scheduled collections**

Refuse collection is a more complex operation than delivery – it relies upon every householder due a collection to place their waste in the right spot at the right time on right day and in the right receptacle. Any deviation from this can cause problems for collection – nearly all of us have at some time, forgotten to put out our waste for collection, and have had to wait until the next scheduled collection.

Bank holidays present a specific problem, because the sites we are directed to take our waste are not permitted to operate on a bank holiday. Therefore we have to change residents' normal collection day to accommodate this, and catch up on subsequent Saturdays. We set the schedules well in advance, and publish these; in September 2010 we posted a tailored calendar to each of the 51,000+ households advising them of their scheduled collection dates over the next 18 months. With Christmas and New Year's Day falling on weekends, this meant that there were 3 Bank Holidays to accommodate.

Even though we posted calendars to every resident, published an advert in the Express and Echo, and had collection days presented on our website, we know from past experience that many residents will not act on this information but instead will stick to their normal collection day. So, we know that it is very difficult to change peoples' collection days, even with plenty of advanced warning.

We know from last year's experience when the roads were affected in February by snow, and the collection service was disrupted, that deviating from the scheduled collections causes a huge amount of confusion amongst residents, generates a huge number of queries, and essentially does more harm than good. Last year we sought to focus on grey waste collections following disruptions to the service, but found that

the majority of people stuck to their scheduled collection, and it took 6 weeks to recover the schedule.

Due to the fact that we are dealing with over 51,000 households, to alter the collection arrangements for one day's worth (e.g. to decide at short notice to collect on a Bank Holiday), would necessarily need all the 11,000 householders in one zone to be contacted effectively in order for them to affect a change in their normal arrangements for presenting waste – it is disingenuous to suggest that this can be effectively done. For the same reason, it is not practicable to effectively communicate to 5,500 householders overnight to request them to present their grey bin rather than their green bin on their scheduled collection day.

From our experience last year, we had decided that in the event of the service being disrupted, we would stick to the schedule, and use additional resources to supplement the scheduled rounds and fire-fight any hot-spots.

### **Our contingency**

When we first became aware of the severe weather threatening refuse collections we made a press release advising people what to do if we couldn't collect their waste. This asked them to bring their waste back in and present it at the next scheduled collection. We advised people to recycle and compost as much as possible, to protect stored bags of rubbish from cats, etc. and said that we would collect the extra side waste generated. This was publicised in the local media and also published on the website. The majority of residents recognised that we could not reach them in the extreme weather, followed this advice and coped with the situation.

In the 14 days from Monday 20<sup>th</sup> December to Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> January, we had only 3 days in which we could collect waste. From the first day on Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> we put extra resources into the collections by switching our 2 garden waste vehicles and crews and cancelling the ad hoc garden waste collections booked. From 4<sup>th</sup> January we were able to add an extra RCV (superfluous following the recent reorganisation of rounds due for re-sale), and switched two caged vehicles and crews from their normal duties to help clear bagged waste. We used our pool of operatives and called in agency staff to make up the extra crews.

During these two weeks, our 2 spare RCVs were fully utilised in covering for breakdowns, which occur not infrequently, and normally affect the vehicle or the loading mechanism. We attempted to hire additional RCVs, but there were none available until Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup>, and the one RCV that was available in Bristol broke down. We are currently using the spare vehicles to supplement the collections, until a breakdown occurs.

The crews have been working longer hours to deal with the usual spike in the amount of waste produced over Christmas, the extra missed waste, and the Saturday catch-up days. All missed collections will have been completed today (Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup>).

### **Festive Period Closure**

It has been claimed in the local media that the Council effectively closed down over Christmas, ignoring the situation that was developing until Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> January – this is not true. During the festive period, staff of Cleansing Services were working every day except Christmas Day. The Operations Manager was in contact with the Supervisors each day dealing with the all Cleansing issues – there were other challenges to contend with, such as 11 public toilets with burst/frozen pipes, and power cuts affecting our IT and telephone systems.

Personally, I was one of 3 duty Heads of Service on the week after Christmas and was also in contact with my staff in Cleansing and the Control Room over this and other issues, as well as responding to a press enquiry from the Express and Echo on refuse collections.

### **Web-site problems**

Local media has claimed that the Council's web-site failed and residents were unable to access information for a significant period of time. This is not so - the form which provided waste collection information appears to have experienced some intermittent problems on the 25-26th Dec. The form failed on the 29th Dec (this was not reported) however it was spotted by those on call who then reloaded the system at approximately 23.30. On further checking the system it failed again on the 30th and was reloaded again at 15.30 when a fix was applied. Since the fix was applied the system has experienced a few minor problems, however an automated reload recovers the system straight away.

There was a power cut at Exton Road on Tuesday 28th which was reported by the Supervisor. After attempts to resolve the issue remotely a visit to site was needed. The result was a loss of the data connection between Exton Road and the Civic Centre which meant staff could not access any central IT systems. The connection was re-established late morning Weds 29th.

### **Adverse Publicity**

The photograph that appeared on the front page of the Daily Telegraph on Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> heralded a media frenzy with Exeter firmly in the spotlight. We faced an onslaught from many armchair critics, and although some of the criticism was justified, much of it was not.

The picture of the back lane in Polsloe full of rubbish, is one that we have seen variants of every year for many years, sometimes with a glum Mike Trim stood in front, and sometimes with a ward councillor too. We have a particular problem with back lane collections of bagged waste, particularly in Polsloe. The main reason for this is that many residents do not follow our requests about when waste should be presented, but instead place their waste in the back lane at any time; others then follow suit.

Despite a concentrated effort with the area in November, with individual letters and approaches on the doorstep, the initial improvement took a backward step over Christmas. However, the picture was not typical of the rest of Exeter, and senior officers did not find huge accumulations marring the streets of Exeter when they checked over the New Year weekend.

This picture shows that despite collecting from this back lane on Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> and Saturday 8<sup>th</sup>, within 2 days more waste is piling up in the lane.

We were criticised by local media last Thursday for not launching a charm offensive to counter this adverse publicity - that may well be the case because throughout this episode we have been seeking to focus on the operational side of things, to be straight with people and have not been attempting to spin our way out.

### **Questions that have been asked**

**Working bank holidays and Sundays** – the site is not permitted to open on these days. In the past we have asked informally, and have been told by DCC that this is

most unlikely. DCC have advised that even to consider a temporary relaxation would need formal applications to it as the Planning Authority, and the Environment Agency; it also advises that the operator Viridor would have difficulty in meeting the Working Time Directive for its specialist drivers. Currently the waste disposal authority (DCC) is not 'geared-up' to seek these relaxations at short notice.

In addition, we would need to negotiate with the Trades Unions to try to arrange our staff to work outside of their contractual hours, and whilst many do volunteer, it would be most unlikely that we could negotiate for a full complement of staff to come in at short notice.

Finally, there are great difficulties in ensuring that a specific portion of the 51,000 households in the city would effectively receive a message and act on it to present their waste out of their scheduled collection.

We did not make formal requests to DCC for Greendale to be open on the Sundays and bank holidays over Christmas for these reasons.

**Working extra hours** – the crews have already agreed to work extra hours and extra days to catch up. Some crews were working 11 hour days during the week after Christmas. However, because the transfer station is only permitted to open to 5pm, collections have to cease at around 4pm to 4:15pm.

**Getting in more RCVs and crews** – the scale of the operation means that for every day missed, 10 RCVs, 10 drivers, 25 Operatives and 2 Supervisors are needed to catch up. For the 5 days missed, this amount is multiplied. These resources are not available at short notice – it took 6 weeks to hire in 6 RCVs and drivers when we were required to tip at Newton Abbott for a short period last year. RCVs are expensive specialised vehicles and hire companies do not have lorry parks full of spare RCVs. When we attempted to hire some RCV's last week, we were unable to get even one.

**Switching collections to grey waste only** – people stubbornly stick to their scheduled collections, and trying to change that at short notice causes confusion and more harm than good. We tried this last year and it didn't work well – one cannot expect to ensure that thousands of households at a time can be effectively contacted to change their scheduled collection en mass.

### **Lessons to be learnt**

- With the Waste Disposal Authority we will be discussing expediting arrangements for short-term relaxation of site conditions, and exploring the prospect of widening opening times in general.
- We will be reviewing our current capacity to provide extra resources to refuse collection in times of disruption, and how best those resources should be targeted.
- We will seek to improve our capacity to effectively deal with spikes in customer calls in such situations.
- We will seek to improve our use of our web-site to ensure that people seeking information are assured that the information is timely and accurate.

- We will examine other communication methods such as text messaging to provide alerts to householders.
- We will work closely with the University and Guild to build upon the successful work already carried to the presentation and collection of waste from student households, particularly at end of term.
- We will review the refuse collection arrangements for back lane sack collections, and look at the relative effectiveness of the engineering, education and enforcement solutions to deal with the chronic problem of waste being presented at the wrong time and left in the lanes.

### **Conclusion**

In the week before Christmas and over the festive period we faced a perfect storm of extreme weather conditions, impassable and dangerous streets, extra holidays and the normal spike in the amount of waste produced. The extreme weather could not have happened at a worse time.

We have sought to recover the situation as effectively as possible in as short a period as practicable and which is allowed by the constraints we work under. We realise that we inconvenienced and disappointed many residents and we will work hard to mitigate many of the problems we faced, in order to reduce the disruption should there be similar extreme weather events in future.

**Robert Norley**  
**Head of Environmental Health Services**

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