

COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

THURSDAY, 1 OCTOBER 2020

PRESENT: Councillors John Bowden (Chairman), Greg Jones (Vice-Chairman), Gurpreet Bhangra, Helen Price, Catherine Del Campo and Parish Councillor Margaret Lenton

Also in attendance: Councillors Baldwin, Brar, Coppinger, Davey, Hilton, Sharpe and Werner

Officers: Mark Beeley, Hilary Hall, Shilpa Manek, Duncan Sharkey and Ben Smith

WELCOME FROM THE CHAIRMAN

The Chairman welcomed all to the meeting and informed all attending of the order that the meeting would be conducted.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Parish Councillor Pat McDonald.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were declarations of interest received.

SERCO CONTRACT (WASTE COLLECTION) - OPERATIONS UPDATE

Ben Smith, Head of Commissioning, Infrastructure, introduced the report to the Panel. Ben Smith then handed over to Ronnie Coutts, MD of SERCO to give their presentation. Ronnie Coutts initially apologised to the Panel and to all watching the meeting and informed them that SERCO were working very hard to provide a seamless service for residents and were working really hard to stabilise the service. Ronnie Coutts handed over to Katy Bassett, Regional Director, to go through the very detailed presentation.

The Panel then took the public question from Mr Ed Wilson which was that he had raised a petition on the council website calling for weekly bin collections after Covid, with 5000 signatures but no debate had taken place on the matter. There had been thousands of complaints. When will the council have a debate on this very important matter? The communication around the change had been appalling from the council, who was in charge? There had been a major change attempted by the council and its contractors of waste collection, all within 6 weeks which would normally take six months to plan and implement a major change, this was a major failure, who was responsible and accountable from the council for making that decision? The council had spent £4.5 million pounds on investing in kit to collect bins, the council owned the lorries and teckal provisions are available to bring this service in-house, when would this service be brought in-house?

Ben Smith informed the Panel that with respect to a council-wide debate on the service and its operating model, whether it was in-house, whether it was commissioned or whether it was under the current contract, this debate that was taking place in the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel tonight in this forum was an opportunity to explore the current issues and also enables us to reflect on the weekly service that was being delivered that was prized by the residents as the petition clearly showed. The fact that the council were forced into an alternate weekly model by something that none of us could not have predicted or imagined would have ever happened in terms of the pandemic and the impact it would have had, but as the

guidelines and government advice changed on that towards the end of the first wave, there was no mandate from the council or from residents to keep to the alternate week collection model hence the council moved back to the weekly model. The debate could start here tonight as there are no scheduled reports for Cabinet about whether the current model that the council were working under, the commissioned contractual model was the right model or not. The contract was awarded just over twelve months ago following a full competitive process which was approved by Cabinet in terms of what the council went to the market for and the bids that were received and the contract that was awarded.

The investments in the vehicles, there were options in the contract for the council to fund the capital investment in the vehicles or the supplier to provide the vehicles and the most cost effective solution for the authority was for the council to use their capital to invest in the vehicles which then had a consequent revenue saving on the contract payments.

The communications side, in terms of the change, there was a letter sent to every individual property in the borough explaining what the situation was and whether there would be changes to their days, whether there were to be changes to their green waste collections and setting out the background to the changes, so there was widespread engagement with individual properties of shifting back to the weekly service.

Communications during these current issues that were being experienced, the councils communications team had been working alongside the SERCO communications team and the customer contact centre had worked as best as they could with the information that was changing daily to communicate back to residents or when resident bins would be collected if they had been missed. Some of the frontline contact had been transferred to SERCO to assist residents.

Councillor Bhangra asked a few questions of SERCO. Councillor Bhangra continued that SERCO took over the contract in October 2019 without any glitches and all was ok until March 2020, when, due to the pandemic, collections changed to alternate weekly collections with no issues. However, as soon as SERCO went back to the weekly collections, from 17 August, things started to go wrong. SERCO was now several weeks in and there were still missed bins being reported. Councillor Bhangra asked why change a system that was not broken? He agreed with efficiencies, but it was totally unacceptable what had happened since the change. Councillor Bhangra asked if the new operating model that was being used in the borough had been previously used and was it successful there? If it was then why was it a problem here? If it was the first time this model was being used, on what basis were you confident that the model would work without causing any disruption and had all the risks been worked through? Are SERCO confident that they can now fix the problems of missed bin collections with the new operating model that was now being used and could they confidently reassure residents that the issues would be resolved.

Ben Smith reassured the Panel and residents that the council and SERCO were working very closely together to address the issues. SERCO had put in additional resources to resolve the issues.

Councillor Greg Jones asked had Covid not happened, would the February target operating model fallen into the same problems? And the enduring model that you had hoped to arrive at, at the end, how different did you anticipate that to being to the target operating model and would that enduring model be financially viable for you?

Katy Bassett responded to the questions asked. To begin with Katy Bassett explained that from the initial weekly collection prior to Covid, to the alternate weekly collection and then to the new service, the target operating model that was designed, there was a desire for a number of reasons, environmental, saving on emissions as multiple vehicles doing multiple collections at multiple times of the day so the fleet design and the way in which the models were done with regard to food waste and refuse on one side of the fleet and recycling and garden waste on the other side of the fleet were designed based on the prior understanding of

average tonnages to be the best and most efficient way of managing the service. The challenge that we currently have with respect to would this have always happened; we cannot really say as we will never know. This is because the profile of waste and tonnage as a result of Covid. Based on the analysis that has been carried out recently, is that the foundations of the proposal and the assumptions that were made around the efficiency of that fleet and how the contract would operate were very detailed. The future enduring model and the potential cost implications of that and the viability of that moving forward, taking a very detailed approach now to the data available on the contract to make sure that in this new world of enduring Covid that we get the assumptions right. It is possible that these may change at certain periods in the year and therefore additional overlays would be required. Katy Bassett explained that the twin-pack vehicles were able to be used for one type of waste if correctly cleaned out so they did have flexibility. Katy Bassett continued to answer Councillor Bhangra's question explaining that a number of different models were being run within the contracts that SERCO held, and many of those contracts that carried out weekly collections and had shifted to alternate weekly collections were remaining in that way to drive good resident behaviour with regard to recycling and the government waste strategy to have recycling rates to be 55% by 2025. Ronnie Coutts added that if the original model that was used between October 2019 and March 2020 would have failed due to the tonnages.

Councillor Del Campo thanked SERCO and the crews. Councillor Del Campo asked that how long the contract would have access to the additional overlay that were currently being used. Learning from this exceptional circumstance, how would SERCO forecast going forward for other unusual circumstances. The morale of crews and the support provided to them was very important, did SERCO have any concerns. The new CRM system should not have made things worse as the old CRM system was not integrated with the SERCO system either. Does the new CRM system have amplify issues? Were SERCO involved in the decision making of implementing the change of collection in six weeks or was it a sole council decision. Was the minimum miles model to reduce the number of journeys, was this still being worked to as in the original tender. Could SERCO provide information of what it would take to go back to the weekly collection that was initially done. Panel would like to see the performance tracked against the KPI's in tabular form, it might be good to include in terms of reference for audit review. Assisted collections been a real issue and these are the most important, what steps had SERCO and the borough taken for these.

Ben Smith informed the Panel that he had received the questions from Councillor Del Campo and Price and had sent them to SERCO too. Ben Smith addressed the questions that were borough related first before handing over to SERCO. Firstly the CRM system questions, Ben Smith gave a little background that there were two separate systems. CRM was the customer management system at the borough. There was a system previously used, of which the contract ended so it was time to find a new system. The original system did not integrate with the Whitespace system which is the management system that SERCO used. Part of the move to the new system was an integration with Whitespace as this would ensure a more effective and seamless process of issues that are reported going directly to SERCO and SERCO addressing the issues and being able to go back directly to the customer with feedback. The integration between the new system and Whitespace is still not in place and that is due to an issue on the borough side as the supplier of the new system does not have the resource and priority to integrate the systems as the initial focus was on the system changeover. It was never going to be a day one integrated system. It is in the supplier's work programme as a priority to action. This does not affect SERCO to go on a route and collect the bins, it does however create an inefficient system in responding to an issue. The question about whether it was a council decision or were SERCO involved in the decision making, this was a council decision to revert to the weekly model and SERCO worked with us to deliver that. There were risks with the pace at which it was being brought back and that were known to the council, but the alternate weekly model was only put into place to deal with the emergency of Covid. In terms of the KPI's, there are a suite of KPI's that SERCO are to report on, in the contract, monthly. Currently, daily reports are received from SERCO. These reports are not currently set up in any tabular format but will be.

Ronnie Coutts reported on some of the questions, these included the question on borrowing resources from other boroughs, since SERCO was such a large company, they were able to pool staff and use the staff for a number of contracts. There are also volunteers that come through from other contracts to work additional hours. The question on forecasts, when forecasting, surges were always taken into accounts, especially around Christmas, property growth and other changes like this. However, 40% increases in garden waste tonnage would not be something that was expected. This was not unusual in comparison to other local authorities.

They could make the alternative collections possible at really short notice was due to having good processes in place including a good business continuity process. The only point was that this was mainly for short-term issues and with Covid it was a more enduring basis. Katy Bassett continued to inform the Panel that all points such as the duration it took to go to the tip were taken into account in the design structure and as in Ascot, the spikes that have been seen are in these most rural areas where it takes longer to get to the tip. Katy Bassett explained that assisted collections were assigned and visible to crew in their in-cab devices and any missed assisted collections had now been added to the hotspot list and the crew would ensure that these collections would be made as soon as practically possible. The assisted collections have their own KPI's and clear process.

Councillor Price started by saying that it was good to see the improvement and great to hear that this was set to continue. Councillor Price requested responses to the following questions which had a common theme of communication between residents, borough, councillors and SERCO. Councillor Price said it would be good to try and work out what happened and what should be done differently in order to improve the contract. It was essential that both organisations worked together and were self-critical to learn and better themselves. Councillor Price asked if the new system was to be implemented in February or March 2020. She asked for when the actual date for implementation was and the reason to ask this was that if it was February, Covid was not a big threat then so implementation should have taken place. Councillor Price asked about local knowledge and if it was lost when we transferred to SERCO. It seemed as though we needed to recover that knowledge. Had any steps been put into place to recover the local knowledge from the crew that had the old rounds to pass on to the new crew?

Councillor Price pointed out that residents had been instructed not to report problems in the first two weeks, she asked why this decision was made. As a result, the scale of the problem was not known till much later and SERCO would not have known the scale nor where the problems were taking place in order to rectify them as soon as possible.

Councillor Price asked for clarification on how missed bins that weren't put on the report function, which was where the residents were directed to, how was this passed on to SERCO and why did this part go so wrong?

Councillors were then given a named officer to report issues to, where there were problems of more than two weeks, it seemed that that person was overburdened with the amount of issues so no response was received from them, therefore councillors could not respond back to residents on what was happening. Why was a special was a bin line not created when their actual scale was realised.

Councillor Price continued that initially, updates were received from the lead member and the managing director, neither had the detailed knowledge so could not answer any specific questions and that once again lead to councillors not being able to respond to residents.

In the middle of all the issues, the RBWM website was changed and in that some of the links were lost. Anyone trying to report something couldn't find the new links or they just didn't work. This just made things worse. Why did this all get done at the same time ?

In order to improve the service, SERCO then allocated staff from around the country to each councillor. Councillors were not informed of this and it all just happened haphazardly. There were no updates from the borough.

Councillor Price talked about green bins and the fact that SERCO believed that the green bin volumes would drop but many residents had waited to order green bins and been prevented from doing so but this had now been released so there would probably be a big surge on green bins.

Ben Smith started the response to Councillor Price and the Panel and stated that the implementation date for the target operating model was for an early March. In terms of whether the local knowledge was captured from the previous crew, when the contract was awarded to SERCO, the previous employed staff were transferred across to SERCO and stayed with them, so they would have had the local knowledge. However, with the new operating model, new rounds and new assisted collections, many learning points were still there for the crew.

In respect of the initial two weeks of not reporting missed bins, that decision was consciously made as it was known that a few bins would have been missed with the new system. We wanted to give the new operating model the best chance of succeeding. With respect of the reporting issues, the report-it system did work and it captured the enquiries and issues from residents and sent onto SERCO to action. It would have been and, would be more efficient if the two individual systems were integrated. Ben Smith reported that the volume was significant when the generic mailbox was used but it was monitored daily and all bin collection emails were separated into another area and acted upon. The residents were being kept updated.

Ben Smith reported that with regard to the CRM system transfer, this had caused some complexity but it was used council wide and delay to the overall project while waste issues were resolved would have had a significant authority wide impact. The borough had been informed that individual officers from SERCO were going to be assigned to councillors to get an insight into the actual issues and pick up individual circumstances that they could then resolve. This caused some complexity as there were then three strands of reporting but was put in place with good intentions to engage and update directly with Members.

Katie Bassett continued answering the questions raised by Councillor Price. With regard to the garden subscriptions and the data from 2020, it showed that the number of new subscriptions had not gone up. The homes that had multiple bins and therefore multiple subscriptions, the weight in the different bins was far more than normal. The split compartment lorries did not limit the collections and the lorries could be used in more than one way, to collect more than one type of rubbish just as long as they were cleaned correctly. Katie Bassett briefly talked about what SERCO were doing with the tonnage data.

Katie Bassett agreed with Ben Smith's comments on the communications aspect. SERCO were now stabilizing the operation and understanding the areas of the borough that remained problematic for them and that enabled them to focus on communications on a shared basis with the borough. SERCO would be taking over the element of the waste customer services in the near future. This transition would give SERCO the ability to input into both systems at the same time by taking the customer calls and therefore the lag would be reduced.

Councillor Bowden commented that in Windsor, residents had received a very poor service and we're still receiving a very bad service. Councillor Bowden asked for an explanation on why certain blocks in Windsor were not receiving a regular service. He asked if it was because the crews did not know their route and the routes being changed on a regular basis. Councillor Bowden gave specific examples of where they had been issues as a result of lack of knowledge of where to collect the bins and sometimes the size of the vehicles that were required. These had not been issues under the last contract. Windsor and Eton both had narrow streets and very dense areas. The collections had been such an issue that they were

causing high concerns with pests such as pigeons, seagulls and rats and the many increasing issues from the pests. The main problems have been with the crews not being regular, therefore not knowing the area, having no knowledge of the route and therefore missing the bins. Councillor Bowden felt that the supervision of the collections had not been adequate. The new target operating model was moved into too quickly with not enough staff and support which had caused all the issues. Councillor Bowden asked to see the tonnage figures including the 40% increase.

Katy Bassett suggested an offline conversation of the specific areas that were experiencing repeat missed collections so that the correct procedures could be followed to address the concerns. The crews had standard rounds that they operated and these were not changed daily. Each morning the driver would come in, collect the same vehicle and the round sheet, each day and each week and that was not subject to change. Katie Bassett spoke about Osborne Mews and the use of narrow lorries of which SERCO had two. A transit van would never be used.

Councillor Coppinger, lead member, informed all, that he had not been participating throughout the meeting as the questions were for the officers of the borough and the contractors, that were being challenged, to answer the questions. It was his main role to make sure that SERCO delivered on their contract and to make sure any future models they wanted were thoroughly checked to make sure it met all the needs and to improve the communications, both to the residents and the councillors.

Councillor Baldwin informed the Panel that he had attended the meeting, listened to the presentation and wanted to thank the SERCO team and the crews for all their hard work. Councillor Baldwin also thanked Ben Smith and his team and also thanked Councillor Coppinger for his assistance. Councillor Baldwin hoped they would all maintain the momentum that they had reached in the last few weeks. Councillor Baldwin asked two questions, he asked if a refund would be offered to residents using the Green Waste scheme as they had received a particularly bad service and what was the overall message from SERCO to the residents about their commitment to the contract ongoing and their ambitions of the quality of service they would deliver in the future. Ben Smith commented on the Green Waste subscriptions and said that he could not give a definite answer but would speak with the lead member to discuss this further and find a solution such as extending existing subscriptions or applying for a refund. There were many options currently being discussed. Katie Bassett continued to say that having now worked in this division she had understood a lot about the climate and the government waste strategy. SERCO had great ambitions to address the emergency but would work together towards the strategy and how we should all treat our waste in the future. Katie Bassett commented that recycling rates over the covid period had increased in the borough by 6% which was really momentous. One of the aims were to continue the great work and work towards the climate and waste strategy targets. The main message to residents and councillors was to use the processes in place to report issues not just social media as this would not assist in knowing where and what the issue was and therefore could not be resolved. Ronnie Coutts added that some of the complexities had been addressed now but SERCO could have done better.

SERCO were trying to fix all the issues quickly and the service had improved and was continuing to improve. SERCO would be held accountable to deliver on their promises. SERCO would work hard to get the service more stable and then start all the innovation going forward. Councillor Coppinger commented that SERCO had done a great job reacting to the issues that had been raised with them.

Councillor Brar informed the Panel that Cookham and Bisham had been hit the worst and had copied in the lead member in all emails from residents. Councillor Brar asked why the main road bins were being missed but the side roads were being collected. She appreciated that everybody was doing a great job but in over 30 years she and her residents had never experienced this before. In Burchetts Green, the recycling bins had not been collected for 5 weeks. Could this please be addressed. Councillor Brar had requested a list of assisted

collections in her Ward but had not yet received this. She had recently walked with the crews to show them where the assisted collections had not been collected for 4 weeks. Katie Bassett commented that Cookham and the surrounding areas had been an issue with regard to completion of the work that SERCO had been experiencing over the last 6-7 weeks. They were trying to identify the areas so that Saturday collections for those bins not repeatedly collected for 4-5 weeks could start. This would begin step 1 of a supervisor visiting and carrying out an inspection and to look at the access issues. Step 2 would include the information collated being given to the crew and added to their in-cab device for the next collection. Katy Bassett could confirm that Cookham and surrounding areas had been the most affected and they were working very actively to resolve the issues.

Councillor Sharpe commented that he was very surprised that a large company like SERCO had run into these difficulties. Within Ascot and surrounding areas they were still roads where collections had not been made. Councillor Sharpe wanted to know when these would be cleared up. He was disappointed that SERCO were not already at the stable state.

Councillor Davey thanked Katie Bassett for the presentation and the responses she had given to the questions raised. Councillor Davey thanked all the team at SERCO. Councillor Davey commented on the recycling rates going down. Councillor Davey asked if this meeting would have happened had the petition been rejected in the first instance as it should have been as it broke the petition rules.

Katie Bassett responded to Councillor Sharpe explaining that Ascot was similar to Cookham where SERCO were having major issues to collect waste. Any collections that had not been made would be collected over the weekend as previously communicated. SERCO were trying to understand why this was happening on a repeated basis and in the meantime were working with the council to make collections at weekends going forward whilst discussions were taking place about the future.

Ben Smith responded to Councillor Davey's question and explained that the contract that had been awarded had been based on a weekly collection. The alternate weekly collection was only put into place under the emergency powers by the council during the situation of Covid. There had been no council or cabinet debates about moving away from the weekly model. Ben Smith felt that we would still be having these discussions.

Councillor Taylor thanked everyone at SERCO. Councillor Taylor had found it really helpful having a contact from SERCO that she could send the hotspots to as she had many in her ward. Councillor Taylor asked that whilst we were moving forward into a better position, was this something that could continue to prevent having massive hotspots again and it would enable councillors to respond and resolve issues more quickly.

Councillor Hilton commented that if SERCO continued as they were collecting and analysing data, a solution would be found. Councillor Hilton asked why did it take SERCO so long to react to the issue in the borough before trying to resolve it.

Ronnie Coutts answered Councillor Taylor, pointing out that he had hoped that the comms. champions would not be required once the service had stabilized but would be happy to consider it if it had been helpful and successful. Ronnie Coutts continued and answered Councillor Hilton's point and commented that SERCO would have done better and rectified issues sooner but that was said in hindsight. SERCO wanted to be sure of what the issues actually were, was it the crews experience alone or something else. However, once escalated SERCO had reacted promptly. Councillor Hilton commented that it would be worth putting on record that SERCO would have done better even though they were now almost on track.

Councillor Price referred to the audit review and the service under contract and suggested the following terms of reference for the audit review, to look at the original contract and to see if it was fit for purpose (in the current situation). To ask what needed to be done differently now. Councillor Del Campo suggested adding, to have a more detailed look at the KPI's and the

performance against them and to ask SERCO to summarise what lessons have been learnt from this situation.

Councillor Price requested that a report be presented to the panel but the January meeting was too far. the clerk would look at additional dates between November 3rd and the January meeting depending on when the audit was going to be carried out.

A named vote was taken and it was unanimously agreed to send the suggested terms of reference to the audit review panel.

The meeting, which began at 6.20 pm, finished at 9.00 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....