

Ordinary Meeting of the Council – 8 December 2021

Notice of Motion – Garden Bin Service

Notice of the following motion has been given by Councillors Harper (the mover), M Rose and Coates:

The Garden Bin waste service is a popular one with residents, with a large number of Maidstone residents subscribing to this paid Maidstone Borough Council service. However, as a result of Covid-19 and Brexit, the service is not being delivered as contracted with customers.

Residents pay for a fortnightly collection and this is supported by a yearly payment currently of £45. The two weekly collection is clearly stated in the terms and conditions on the Council website.

Different residents are getting different messages. Some have been individually notified by text as to the state of the service, other residents have negotiated for their contract payment to cover a period of 13 or more months, and others have had no contact from the Council as is evidenced by the level of complaints coming through.

The service is not running as it was until the middle of the year. This is not good enough, a large number of people do not have space at home to compost garden waste, which will frequently include weeds etc.

This Council therefore resolves to:

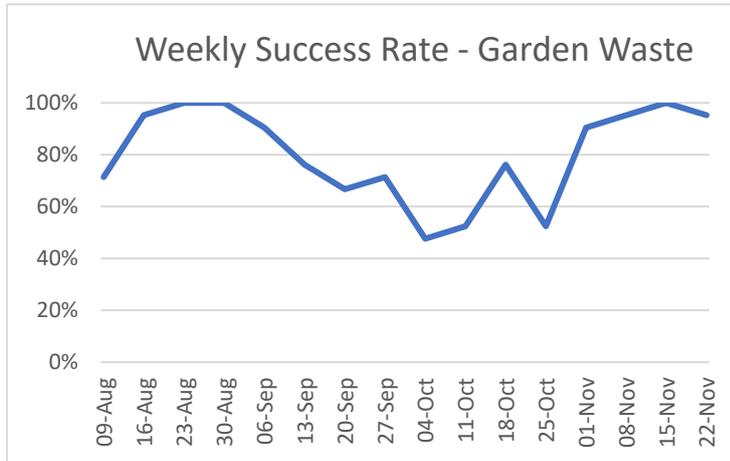
- 1. Make it clear to residents that the service is sporadic at the moment and the frequency will most likely be monthly.*
- 2. Receive a full report on what actions can be done to get the service back to the fortnightly collection which the Council contracts to deliver.*

The garden waste collection service is provided to over 32,500 residents in the Borough on a fortnightly basis. There is a £45 annual charge for the service which includes the provision of a bin and collection of the waste. The terms and conditions of the service specifically advise customers that we are unable to guarantee the number of collections per year as the service may be suspended in exceptional circumstances.

Since August 2021, the Council's waste collection contractor has experienced difficulties recruiting and retaining HGV drivers due to a national shortage of over 100,000 drivers in the UK. The shortage has been attributed to EU drivers returning home during lockdown, uncertainty of the EU exit and loss of over 30,000 HGV test slots during the pandemic. During September and October, the contractor had 11 HGV driver vacancies and was only able to fill 5 of these with agency staff. With the added pressures of staff sickness and annual leave, this meant on some days there were not enough drivers to provide all services.

Whilst it is recognised that the garden waste service is important to many residents, it is considered a lower priority than the refuse and recycling services. This is because less than half of Maidstone households subscribe to the service

and there are alternative options to dispose of the waste including home composting. Therefore, in line with the Council’s business continuity plan, daily decisions have been taken to partially suspend the garden waste service to protect the other services. At no point since August has the whole garden waste service been suspended.



The graph below shows the weekly success rate for delivering the garden waste service.

The service has stabilized since the end of October 2021, with 92% of garden collections in November completed successfully.

The Waste Contractor has already invested considerably in their contract with Maidstone Borough Council to maintain services this year including retention bonuses, enhanced agency pay rates and training packages. Corporately, Biffa have also invested in accelerated driver training programs, including professional apprenticeships, and have developed more attractive recruitment packages and policies, including flexible working, and promoting “Women in Waste”.

The current improvements in service delivery are largely due to a new 2-year pay agreement, increased reliability with agency employees, reduced sickness levels and fewer staff on annual leave. There are now 10 vacancies covered by 9 temporary staff and two further agency staff are being inducted this week. Five employees are also due to start HGV driver training once they receive their provisional licences from the DVLA.

Residents have been encouraged to sign up to the Council’s text alert system which enables them to receive specific updates about their collection. This is proving particularly popular with over 32,000 residents signed up. Registration is available through the daily update page on the Council’s website which also provides specific information about services:

<https://maidstone.gov.uk/home/primary-services/bins-and-recycling/primary-areas/bin-collection-updates>

Where residents have experienced severe disruption to their service and remain dissatisfied, the waste team are working with the customers directly to address their concerns and where appropriate have extended the subscription period by one month. However, official complaints have remained relatively low considering the number of customers affected by service suspensions, less than 0.5% of garden waste customers. In addition, email and telephone calls to the customer services team, as well as reported missed collections, remain lower than the previous year.

Alternative options to manage the disruption have been considered including implementing a monthly garden waste service. Whilst this provides greater

predictability of collections, it is evident that more residents would be impacted. On average customers have experienced 1.75 suspended collections in the past 4 months, with 33% of customers only missing one collection during that time.

The stability of the service continues to be monitored daily and the team are working closely with the contractor at all levels to ensure every effort is made to limit disruption to services. However, the longer-term impacts of the national HGV driver shortage remain unknown and so whilst the service has stabilised, the crisis continues within the industry.