

Operational Services Cabinet Committee

Wednesday, 22 September 2021

7.30 pm

Present:

Cllr Lee Croxton (Chair)
Cllr Gurbax Singh (Vice-Chair)

Councillors:

Gary Harding
Nirmal Khabra
Leslie Pearton
Alan Ridgers
Brian Sangha
Frank Wardle
Jordan Meade
Lyn Milner

Stuart Alford	Assistant Director (Operations)
Elizabeth Thornton	Service Manager (Property & Regulatory Services)
Mark Lees	Regulatory Services Manager
Mandy Francis	Licensing Manager
Joel Simons	Waste Projects & Compliance Officer
Jackie Denton	Customer Services Manager (Minutes)

7. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was received from Cllr Conrad Broadley and Cllr Jordan Meade attended as his substitute. An apology for absence was received from Cllr Gurdip Ram Bungar and Cllr Lyn Milner attended as his substitute.

8. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 8 June 2021 were signed by the Vice-Chair.

9. Declarations of Interest

Cllr Nirmal Khabra declared an interest in Item 6 Taxi Tariff as he is a taxi driver.

10. Operational Services Update

The Assistant Director (Operations) provided the Committee with an update on Operational Services projects and performance. The Chair asked that the report be broken down into sections and Committee could ask questions after each section.

All the teams have continued to provide services throughout the Covid-19 pandemic including refuse and recycling, tending to parks and open spaces, burial services and maintaining council fleet.

Street Cleansing

Parks & Shopping Parades Litter Bin Replacement Programme: Roll-out of the recycling 'on-the-go' bins starting at Riverside Leisure Area and Woodlands Park. Together with St Andrews Gardens and Camer Park we will achieve a 168% increase in litter capacity. Litter housings for bulk bins have also been installed to increase capacity. The bins are covered in pictures of landmarks to promote the borough. In conjunction with increased bin capacity, enhanced emptying and litter picking at weekends there has been an improvement in litter management across our open spaces.

Binrastructure Grant Funding: Following a grant of £13,180.40 towards our shopping parades litter bin replacement programme, shopfronts at 17 locations across the borough will receive new bins as part of the improvement programme. This will increase bin capacity and allow for recycling.

Parks and Town Centre Litter Campaign: This had been delayed due to Covid-19 but bespoke signage has now been introduced into the town centre. It is very visual and hopefully will make people think more about how to dispose of their litter. Different campaigns will be used across the borough. There is also a campaign with a rural focus as well as a bespoke campaign for Perry Street and the Hive where littering is high e.g. – "Welcome to the Hive, help us keep your area clean and tidy".

The Assistant Director (Operations) and Waste Projects & Compliance Officer responded to Members comments/questions:

- There is a community spirit. We have a very good Street Champion programme and a lot of people are litter picking, cleaning up streets and working with us and this is across the borough
- The dog bins are already being looked at as some are rusty. We have moved to a new model. We are also looking at bins along main roads. We are only using certain types of litter bin across the borough.
- 168% is the total increased capacity over the four sites but against the base line all four sites are increased above 100%
- The shopping parade at Higham is challenging in the way it is laid out. We have worked closely over the last three years with Higham Parish Council to install litter bins where they are appropriate but we will look at installing some bins which also have a recycling element. We will take the comments on board and see what can be done
- In the more urban areas we will have mixed bins for litter and dog waste. People don't like dog bins outside their houses but don't mind litter bins. It isn't cost effective having two bins next to each other so we are concentrating dog bins in the open spaces and the streets mainly have litter bins
- There are signs on the recycling bins stating that it is for cardboard, plastic bottles and paper. When the crew empty them they do look in them as we don't want cross-contamination. There has been some analysis over the last week in St Andrew's Gardens where in the past half of the sacks were being rejected, now only 29% are being rejected. Once we have finished collecting data we will consider installing more signage. We are putting a new system in place where we will be able to record fill levels from individual bins which will indicate how these are being used and the success of the investment in them
- We are ensuring the signage on the bins is suitable for anyone with sight impairments

- The slot for the recycle bin housing is small so as to stop people putting black bags in them causing contamination

New 15 Tonne Scarab

Investment was made earlier this year on a new mechanical 15 tonne sweeper, double the size of the previous vehicle and is used on main routes and rural areas freeing up the smaller machine to do more frequent sweeping in the smaller streets. The new machine only has to tip-off once per day saving on fuel and increasing tonnage collected.

Deep Clean Machine

We continue to use the deep clean machine to remove chewing gum and grime from the pavements within the town centre and shopping parades.

The Assistant Director (Operations) responded to Members comments/questions:

- We can have a look at deep cleaning in the Higham area but we do concentrate on high footfall areas such as the town centre as it is time-consuming
- Over the last two to three months we have managed to increase frequency of sweeping and hopefully we can continue that moving forward. We have a raft of schedules depending on the road. If you live in New Road you will probably have the sweeper four times a day, seven days a week. Some areas need very little sweeping
- Deep cleaning machine is used in the town more than other areas but we are working around shopping areas such as Perry Street even moving out to Meopham, Vigo and Higham
- The sweeper can cause tailbacks of traffic but we will have a look at plotting routes to avoid peak times
- Our main focus is to continue the refuse and recycling services on the days we say. A number of authorities have suspended garden waste and recycling but other than the disruption caused by the snow earlier in the year we have managed to deliver that service. When staff have had to isolate we have prioritised waste and taken staff off street cleansing to assist. We are now starting to get all staff back and so we will increase sweeping in most parts of the borough
- With Covid there are still a lot of people working from home hence cars being parked on the roads so it makes it difficult to road sweep between them. Some people are reluctant to move their cars but hopefully as more people return to work that should help. With increased parking we do have issues accessing some roads with the dustcarts
- We are doing a trial next week on the Dickens Estate to ask people to move their cars to one side of the road then the other so we can sweep the road channels better.

Fly-Tipping

To date 60 Fixed Penalty Notices have been issued and one prosecution has taken place. We had success recently at Brookvale where 6 vehicles were removed with Police assistance. As an authority we won't accept fly-tipping and we will take action against people who think fly-tipping is appropriate. We have regular joint meetings with Housing and the Enforcement Team and working much closer together on reporting.

Street Cleansing Improvements – Bartec Collective

We are introducing the Bartec system to the street cleansing service which will enable us to remove paper schedules and everyone will have a Tablet and once work is completed it is marked off. This will allow Managers to monitor work throughout the day and immediately allocate work to a crew rather than having to phone or put through a paper job ticket the next day. Customers will be able to receive real-time updates on work.

We are currently going through the process of mapping our litterbins. We want to have an “amazon service” whereby if someone reports something they will be able to get an update on what’s happening.

Members’ made the following comments:

- The council’s biggest weakness is feedback to residents whether it’s planning enforcement, street cleaning etc. People report it but don’t know what happened as a result so Bartec will be progress. The Chair felt it would be useful to see Bartec in operation
- Delighted to see the amount of enforcement capacity around fly-tipping particularly when the tip was closed and we saw an increase in fly-tipping around the borough. Also pleased to see an increase in prosecutions
- Some authorities have brought in amnesty days for hotspots and residents can leave rubbish out and it will be collected free of charge. The Chair advised that it had successfully been done in Northfleet with local groups, the church and the scouts so it is something we should consider
- All Members would agree that the results we are seeing, particularly on enforcement, are second to none and credit should be given to our communication colleagues who have shown that councillors and the council are doing a lot of work in encouraging residents to report fly-tipping

The Assistant Director (Operations) responded to Members comments/questions:

- The Enforcement Team sits under the CSU so we don’t have a figure on how many of the FPNs are paid but we can get this information
- There isn’t a backlog in bulky collections but an increase in demand. This month we have done an extra 80 collections as the crews have been working on Saturdays. Fridge freezers used to be 24 collections every two weeks, we are now doing 30 collections three out of four weeks of the month. We are trying to get that down to a couple of weeks maximum but it is having willingness of the staff to work Saturdays
- We have had amnesty days in the past but we ended up with vans turning up with rubbish and it discriminates against those who are paying
- Licenses are easy to apply for and they are administered by the Environment Agency. We have jointly signed a letter with the Kent Resource Partnership to the Magistrates saying that the fines are not high enough and that has been co-signed by a lot of partnerships across the country. There is a lot of discussion about licenses and a lot of publicity about rogue traders. We are pushing this out through social media and the website link to the Environment Agency allows you to check if someone is registered. Licensed traders who don’t have enough drivers are sub-letting to unlicensed traders

Refuse and Recycling

The council has achieved a recycling rate of 43.5% in the year 2020-21, an increase of 1.0% compared to 2019-20. An additional 3,826.5 tonnes of household waste was collected in 2020-21, an increase of 13.1% compared to 2019-20.

We are looking at ways to get people to reduce residual waste and hopefully with residents going back to work that will help. Contamination has dropped by 3% as we did a lot of work through social media to teach people about contaminated waste. The plastics campaign will continue into next year and is funded by RECOUP (a plastics recycling charity).

Buzz Garden

This is around climate change. Works have continued in Windmill Gardens with additional planting and wild flower areas and we are looking at some wild flowers in the cemeteries to attract bees.

Cemetery Service

Introduced set funeral times as a result of Covid to enable us to manage increase in demand. We are making improvements to Northfleet Cemetery which is the only one used for new burials and have removed the roundabout, straightened the road and created passing bays.

Vehicle Workshop at Brookvale

Installing a MOT facility so we can MOT all GBC fleet and third party vehicles.

Employment opportunities

The workshop has a strong history of training staff and three out of four staff are former apprentices. We have two apprentices at the moment. We have been talking to North Kent College about providing additional work placements to aid the professional development of other local young persons. We maintain everything from a strimmer to a dustcart and not many workshops do that variety of work and anyone who comes to us gets a real grounding.

Members commented as follows:

- We welcome the focus on apprenticeships particularly with the current level of youth unemployment
- Thrilled to see the bee garden and work around the site on Windmill Hill, it is a key focal point on the hill
- Very much welcome the investment that has gone into Northfleet Cemetery. It is great we are getting more grave space

The Assistant Director (Operations) responded to Members questions as follows:

- Not sure if Members grant went towards the bee garden but do know that there was external funding and will look into that and get some signage on the Hill
- There has been incidences where people have been locked in Gravesend Cemetery. It is locked because of anti-social behaviour. We will make sure we are more explicit about the times

- It would be a great idea to have wild flowers on the roundabouts and verges as it would be good for the ecosystem but they are mostly KCC maintained. We can open up dialogue with them. We have been looking at verges we own to see if we can do something around wild flowers. This is something high on the agenda of the Climate Change Working Group
- Some people think these wild meadows are just because we aren't cutting grass and we are doing it for a purpose. However, it does take a lot of effort to maintain them. We can put some more information out there around why they are there and the benefits
- We limit workshop apprentices to two so we can give them the right education as they have to be overseen. Over the last few years we have had six and all have continued to work for us. We are looking across all the disciplines at the depot, caretakers, cemeteries and offering a wide range of skills, teaching them to use hand tools such as strimmers and helping them with the discipline of getting up at 7am for work

11. Flats Recycling Update

The Assistant Director (Operations) and the Waste Projects & Compliance Officer provided the Committee with an update on the improvements being made to the recycling provision at flats within the borough to increase resident participation and minimise contamination.

An audit of all flats within the borough is underway including purpose-built flats with communal waste and recycling storage areas to look at how we can improve recycling. The review of all the Housing Revenue Accounts flats has shown that 70% of GBC flats have access to recycling provision but we want to be 100% where that is possible. We aim to look at this in a more structured way. We have tested the concept on some smaller schemes and now want to roll this out across the borough including private flats and our desktop exercise has shown that only 32% currently have dry mixed recycling provision.

The project will be delivered in three stages:

Stage 1 Sheltered Flats – To introduce dry mixed recycling at 83 properties in Longferry Court, Blenheim Grove and Cleveland House and to introduce food waste collections at all 16 blocks containing 454 flats.

Stage 2 General Housing Flats – To work with external contractors to improve waste storage provision and to introduce dry mixed recycling to 19 blocks (655 flats) that currently don't have provision.

Stage 3 Private Flats – To audit private blocks of flats identified as being without dry mixed recycling in order to identify managing agents and offer advice on what is required.

Communication – This has increased to educate residents about what should and shouldn't be put in recycling bins. New stickers and leaflets have been prepared which will catch the eye. Signage is based on what has been tried and tested in many London boroughs.

If it does become a legal requirement to offer food waste collection to everyone we want to be in a position to roll that out to flats by trying to future proof what we are doing.

The Assistant Director (Operations) responded to Members' comments as follows:

- With regard to having multi-collection points in areas such as the car park behind the houses in Mackenzie Way, potentially this is something we could look at as it has been successful in other areas where there has been flats above garages and we have put in some enclosed storage and the residents have keys. They now have somewhere to store rubbish and fly-tipping has gone away
- Care has been taken to ensure the signs meet requirements in respect of being suitable for someone who is partially sighted or Dementia. A lot of work in London has been done around signage and this mimics what they have been doing very successfully
- We have been looking at how we can improve bin store signage and we have been working with private Letting Agents to get something that works across the county and not just Gravesham

Members noted the report and are pleased to see the progress being made.

12. Taxi Tariff

The Regulatory Services Manager advised that the purpose of this report is to present Committee with the proposed consultation methodology for the taxi tariff and ask Committee to accept the methodology and give consent to proceed as set out.

The council has an on-going undertaking to review the tariff every two years. It is best practice and not a statutory requirement but seems to work well among local trade. In the past Gravesham has chosen to set a tariff which represents the maximum that can be charged rather than fixed or minimum fares. Committee reviewed the tariff this time in 2019 and we introduced a revised tariff put through by the traders at the time. We haven't had any complaints brought to our attention by the trade or the travelling public and so the structure seems to be working well.

The tariff is made up of two parts, the 'flag' which is the amount shown on the meter at the start of the journey and the minimum fee payable and the 'yardage' which dictates how quickly the meter goes up over distance. When we engaged with the trade in 2019 they asked to simplify our consultation going forward so we only consult on those two items.

We are proposing to ask the Hackney Carriage drivers to advise what their preferred option is for the flag – decrease by 20p to £2.60; remain the same at £2.80; increase by 20p to £3.00 or increase by 40p to £3.20. It was requested that any changes are made by 20p.

We now have a very good on-line offering and can reach out to every driver by email and so we are proposing to consult by email only to Hackney Carriage drivers over a period of three weeks.

The Regulatory Services Manager responded to Members' questions as follows:

- We don't know how many of our vehicles are also licensed with Uber, the answer should be zero as our policy prohibits them doing that. There is established case law that once a vehicle is licensed as Hackney Carriage or private hire it remains as only that. Because this consultation is going out to Hackney Carriage drivers it would be unlawful for them to be private hire at the same time

- We will carry out the consultation and then bring back the results and at that time we will also set out where Gravesham sits in the national league table
- It was agreed to discuss the issue of Hackney Carriage drivers doubling up outside of the meeting as the concern is that it is a major problem in the borough and we need to crack down on it particularly as those who rely on Hackney Carriage could be disadvantaged
- There is a cost involved to make changes to the meter as it has to be re-calibrated but the trade are aware of the cost and are used to having a tariff review every two years
- In terms of what Uber charge, we can try to get some figures for that but because they are private hire they are not working on a tariff, there is more discretion so we will struggle to get comparisons
- The Chair agreed to have a discussion with the Regulatory Services Manager and the Licensing Manager before the consultation results come back to Committee

The report was noted and agreed.

13. Corporate Performance Report: Q1 2021-22

The Regulatory Services Manager presented the Committee with an update against the Performance Management Framework, as introduced within the council's Corporate Plan for Quarter One 2021-22 (April to June 2021).

The following comments were made by the officers during the update:

PI 3 – There has been a drop in Q1 compared to Q4. Having looked at the reported accidents in detail, the small peak in Q4 appears to have been the result of icy conditions resulting in some additional slips and falls.

PI 4 – There is a slow downward trend. It doesn't reflect a reduction in the level of compliancy. If a food establishment is closed down it is seen as non-compliant if it can't be inspected. By Q3/Q4 we expect we will see it start to pick up to pre-Covid levels.

PI 5 – This is consistently high at 98% despite an elevated level of complaints and service requests in Q1. This is a positive outcome.

PI 8 – This is slightly up on the last quarter and is a national trend. We are working on strategies to see how we can reduce that.

PI 10 – Working with KCC and continuing to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill which is positive.

PI 11 – There has been a slight increase in graffiti compared to this time last year. Covid had an impact on response time as we have had to prioritise services but we are now getting back to normality and we respond as quickly as possible.

Members noted the information contained within the report.

14. Corporate Register of Partnership

The Service Manager (Property & Regulatory Services) presented this report to inform Committee of the council's involvement in partnerships that are within the remit of the committee.

Members raised the following questions:

- Kent and Medway Air Quality Partnership – We are paying £6,000 each to this organisation, are we getting our monies worth and what weight have they on infrastructure projects? Would they fight our corner on projects such as Lower Thames Crossing? Are all the other partners paying their share as well? A number of District Councils across Kent have cut their funds to this organisation and so should we be paying this amount when others are paying nothing?
- Have we weighed up the benefits of adopting the model that Dartford and Sevenoaks have with King's College? Do we feel we are getting something out of this group compared to finding our own way particularly around infrastructure projects and would like to see others fighting our corner. Dartford may have paid more but some of the data they have pulled out on Lower Thames Crossing may have gone in their favour

The Regulatory Services Manager responded to Members' questions as follows:

- The Kent and Medway Air Quality Partnership is a forum for sharing best practice. The £6,000 is the contribution we have to make towards our air quality network monitoring. It is a statutory requirement and includes our tube networks across the borough and two permanent 24/7 air stations. We have the best monitoring response rate of all the boroughs. Every District is part of the partnership. Dartford and Sevenoaks aren't part of the monitoring network as they have separate ones with King's College so they don't pay in but all the others share the cost
- I don't believe the partnership feeds into the local infrastructure projects as it is dealt with through the planning system but it does provide advice and best practice. It would have been a lot more money to go through King's College. We benefit by economies of scale through the partnership

It was agreed that a meeting would be arranged between the Chair and the Regulatory Services Manager to discuss the two issues raised i.e. Hackney Carriage drivers and air quality monitoring.

Members noted the information contained within the report.

Close of meeting

The meeting ended at 9.25 pm