

# SCRUTINY BOARD

Agenda Item: 7

**Ward:** All

**Portfolio:** Neighbourhood Services

**FROM:** Cllr Josh Burr – Portfolio Holder for **Date: 18 March 2021**  
Neighbourhood Services

**SUBJECT:** **Somerset Waste Partnership Service Disruption**

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	Seen by:	Name	Date
<b>Report Sign off</b>	Chief Executive/ Deputy Chief Executive(s)	Tracy Aarons	08/03/2021
	Legal	Lesley Dolan	08/03/2021
	Finance	Richard Bates	08/03/2021
	Group Manager	Haylee Wilkins	06/03/2021
	Portfolio Holder	Cllr Josh Burr	06/03/2021
	Ward Member(s)	Cllr Matt Martin (Waste Board Member) Cllr Tom Ronan (Waste Board Member)	06/03/2021
	<b>Summary:</b>	This report and supporting presentation will be accompanied by a verbal update from the Somerset Waste Partnership and SUEZ. They provide Scrutiny with the details of the actions taken in response to disruptions to recycling services across the district during January, February and March 2021 as a result of Covid-19.	
<b>Recommendation:</b>	Scrutiny Board is recommended to:  1 – Note the content of the report, supporting presentation (to follow) and verbal update from the Somerset Waste Partnership and SUEZ.		
<b>Direct and/or indirect impact on service delivery to our customers and communities:</b>	There is a direct impact on the residents and communities of MDC due to missed recycling services over a period of time. Protecting our communities (including waste collection staff) from Covid-19 is clearly a key priority for MDC, SWP and SUEZ.		

<b>Contribution to Corporate Priorities:</b>	This paper directly links to both Corporate Priorities 2 and 3 as noted below:  2 – Delivery on our climate and ecological commitment. 3 – Protect and enhance our towns and rural communities.
<b>Legal Implications:</b>	There are no legal implications to this report.
<b>Financial Implications:</b>	There are no financial implications to this report.
<b>Climate Change Risks and Opportunities:</b>	Disruption to recycling services can potentially negative impact on climate change priorities, both due to the potential short-term reduction in recycling collection and the potential medium-term impact on people’s behaviour.
<b>Impact on Service Plans:</b>	The impacts of this report sit within the portfolio of Neighbourhood Services, however, the additional actions noted are not resourced for or noted within the operational plan due to their adhoc nature, however, it is expected to be managed within existing NS resource.
<b>Crime and Disorder Implications:</b>	There are no crime and disorder implications to this report.
<b>Equalities Implications:</b>	There are no perceived equality implications to this report.
<b>Risk Assessment and Adverse Impact on Corporate Actions:</b>	

## BACKGROUND

Like many authorities across the UK (30% as most recently reported in a fortnightly national survey), SWP has seen service disruption as a result of Covid in recent months. In Somerset these have been particularly evident in February, but also affected January and early March to a lesser extent. SWP's Evercreech depot, and therefore Mendip's recycling collection service, has been affected more than others, with Covid absence in that depot peaking at 9.2%. SWP and SUEZ are not aware of any cases of workplace transmission across the SWP contract, and the number of confirmed cases amongst our workforce is very low, reflecting the robustness of the Covid secure measures in place. The key reason for absences are the robust and precautionary processes in place to isolate crews to reduce the risk of transmission.

Covid absences resulted in a number of rounds being dropped, and some not being able to be returned for until the next week (74 rounds out of 1,160 in February), some unplanned incompletions (mostly returned for the next day), higher customer contact and higher levels of reported missed collection (peaking at 0.53% in February). Although a relatively small proportion of recycling collections have been affected, we understand that for those affected this can be very inconvenient and frustrating and apologise for this and reassure members that every effort is being made to reduce the disruption. Other waste collection services (including rubbish and clinical waste collections) have not suffered significant disruption in this period. The wider context for this has been the significantly elevated levels of recycling seen across Somerset throughout Covid-19, as more people are at home for longer. Whilst bedding in a new service such as Recycle More is always challenging (and particularly so given Covid-19), prior to the service disruption caused by Covid-19 this was progressing well.

This report provides Scrutiny with details of the underlying causes and actions taken in response of Covid-19 disruptions to recycling services across the district in 2021, and the steps being taken to recover and ensure resilience. A verbal update will be provided to Scrutiny on 18 March.

It should be noted that it is fully appreciated that the crews operating on the ground are key workers providing an essential service who have worked through the pandemic under increasingly difficult and challenging conditions. Equally it should be noted that the efforts of staff extend from the front-line collection crews into the Councils Contact Centre and Neighbourhood Services team and teams at the Somerset Waste Partnership. This report does not look to bring in to question the considerable efforts of staff in any way.

## CURRENT POSITION AND INTENDED NEXT STEPS

### 1) *What has caused the service disruption?*

The direct cause for service disruption has been much higher levels of Covid-19 absence in January and February (see table 1), compounded by the ongoing high tonnages of recycling presented at the kerbside due to Covid-19.

	Jan-21			Feb-21		
	General Sickness	Covid Sickness	Combined	General Sickness	Covid Sickness	Combined
Evercreech	4.0%	7.7%	11.7%	3.2%	9.2%	12.4%

Table 1: Levels of sickness in Evercreech depot

We have 2 members of staff off at present who are Covid-19 positive across the whole contract. There have been no confirmed cases of workplace transmission, and only one case where it is thought to have been even a possibility. However, while it protects the workforce and is in line with waste industry good practice, our proactive approach to isolation does mean heightened absences. Crews work in bubble and if a crew member shows symptoms then that crew will self-isolate until the employee with symptoms gets their test results. If an employee in a bubble has someone at home that tests positive for Covid-19 then that crew may need to self-isolate in specific circumstances (i.e. is symptomatic) to protect the larger workforce. Whilst clearly this results in challenges for service delivery it is imperative that we have the wellbeing of our crews of the forefront of the decisions that we make.

In January and February Covid-19 resulted in (across the SWP contract) over 1,800 working days being lost compared to only 60 in December (across all our depots). This represents a Covid sickness level of c6% (on top of non-Covid sickness of 2.8% - 3% is the industry standard level of absence for the purpose of resource management). Table 2 below shows the level of Covid-19 sickness across the whole contract over the last 4 months compared to the pool of staff available across the contract to cover absence:

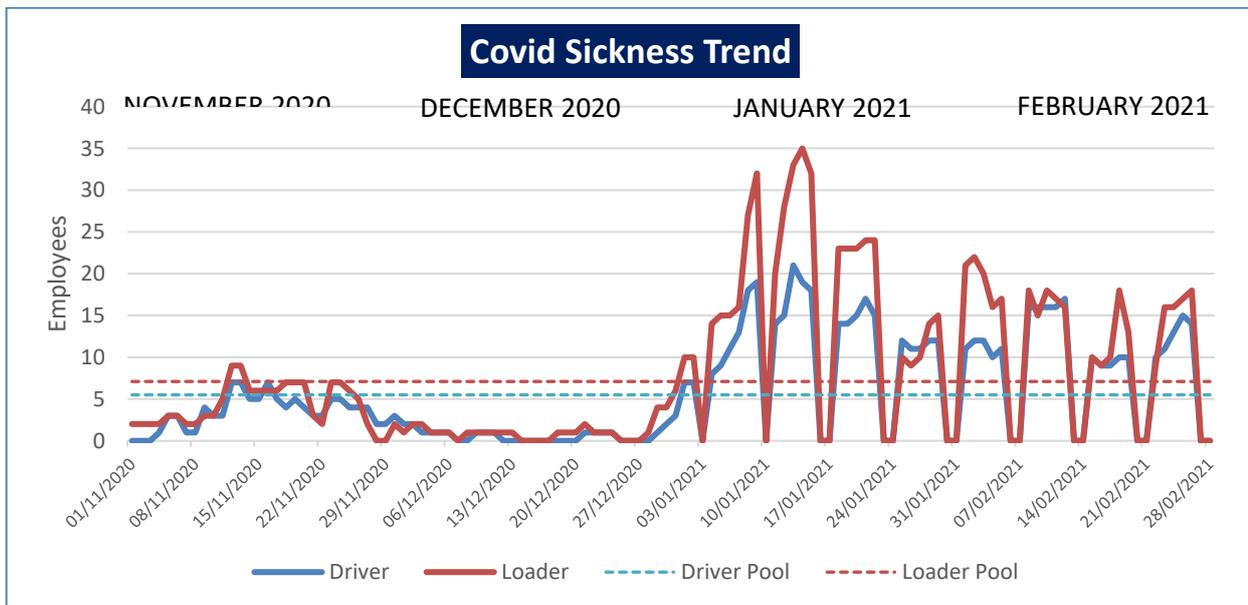


Table 2: Covid-19 absence across SWP contract over last 4 months

Unlike in other parts of the County, Covid-19 absences increased in the Evercreech depot in February by 10% compared to January. SUEZ are monitoring the situation closely and there is no evidence of any workspace transmission. Staffing levels have also been hit by a challenging agency labour market (especially for drivers). The agency staffing has now been largely addressed and as more staff return from self-isolation the service is recovering.

To better understand the reasons for Covid-19 related absence affecting the Evercreech depot (and hence Mendip’s recycling service), the breakdown of the reasons for the 313 Covid-related working days lost across February in Evercreech is set out in table 3. Whilst keeping staff safe is our top priority, SUEZ have robust processes in place to follow up on tests and to ensure that Covid-19 measures are being appropriately followed.

<b>% of Covid days lost</b>	<b>Reason</b>
24%	Contact with a confirmed case outside of the workplace (e.g. a family member),

8%	Staff isolating due to contact with an unconfirmed case outside of the workplace
17%	Staff showing symptoms (which can occur during the day, resulting in a round unexpectedly not completing their days work as the crew are isolated),
7%	NHS shielding/confirmed cases/track and trace.
43%	Crew shielding in line with waste industry guidance (i.e. where another member of their crew is off for one of the reasons above, and we isolate the crew pending testing to protect our staff)

Table 3: Breakdown of Covid working days lost in Evercreech in February by reason

## 2) **The wider context – increased tonnages throughout Covid-19**

Under Covid, with more people at home, we have seen significant increases in the tonnage collected at the kerbside over the last year and lower increases in kerbside black bag rubbish than the average. Most authorities around the Country have seen tonnages at the kerbside increase, but Somerset has seen much bigger increases in recycling due to Covid (and less increase in rubbish) than other areas. Whilst this is very welcome, it has placed our recycling crews under considerable pressure. In February 2021 we collected around 40% more tonnage than in February 2020, though this will include the increased tonnage collected under Recycle More as well as the impact of national lockdown. Tonnages in January are always high due to Christmas catch-ups and in Mendip Recycle More has also added to the levels of recycling needing to be collected, but resources are in place to deal with the extra Recycle More tonnage. Compared to our forecast (i.e. factoring in Recycle More), we have collected approx. 1.0kg per week more from each household in Mendip in Jan and 0.9kg per week more in Feb, a total increase of 410 tonnes of recycling. We expected Recycle More to increase food waste recycling by c.20%, increase dry recycling by c.30% and reduce residual waste by c.15%, and our resourcing reflects this. In the first 12 weeks of Recycle More we saw tonnages of food waste go up by 16%, dry recycling go up by 18% and rubbish fall by 19% - with these changes on top of the Covid-19 related changes (a 24% increase in food waste and a 17% increase in dry recycling).

## 3) **What has the disruption been to services?**

In a change of approach from the first lockdown, rather than suspending services such as Garden Waste, bin/box deliveries, bulky waste collections; SWP has taken the approach of dropping a minority of recycling collections to manage pressures. This amendment to our Business Continuity Plan was taken in conjunction with our contractors and partners (including Mendip District Council). This provides us with extra flexibility when service suspension is not the appropriate response to Covid-19 pressures and when mitigation measures (use of pool staff, additional agency staff, overtime, Saturday working, support from other Depots) are not sufficient to manage the service pressures due to Covid-19. Whilst there were a number of properties in Mendip in January affected by incomplete rounds (caught up the next day) there were no dropped rounds in January that were not caught up until the next week, the staff absences in February 2021 have resulted in:

- **Planned dropped rounds** - In February 74 rounds out of 1,160 were dropped and not able to be returned for until the next week (see table 4). **When it is clear that, despite mitigation measures, Covid absences will mean that not all the planned work for a day can be completed.** This avoids failures on multiple rounds and rounds are either

rescheduled for the next day or the following week. SWP and SUEZ have processes in place to ensure the same round is not affected in subsequent weeks, and apologise for any instances where this has not been possible (e.g. due to vehicle breakdown or a crew having to self-isolate mid-round).

- *Incomplete rounds* - which may be a result of a crew having to withdraw from service during the day if a crew member is contacted by the track and trace system, develops symptoms, or where the heavy tonnages mean that they are otherwise unable to complete a round. Details of these are set out in table 4.
- *Higher level of missed collections* - As crews undertake rounds unfamiliar to them or where because of inability to resource support crews due to staff absence, crews are having to cope with a much higher level of work, work longer hours and cope with significantly higher tonnages presented. Whilst SUEZ and SWP aim to protect service quality even at times of stress, this has resulted in more missed collections. The weekly average rate of missed recycling collections reported during February was 284 per week. Usually we expect to receive around 40 in a week. Putting this in context, missed collections in February were 0.53% compared to 0.15% in December and our contractual expectation of a maximum of 0.045%. This disruption has put MDC's contact centre under pressure due to contact about missed collections. Whilst people have been understanding by and large, clearly patience can run thin and this has resulted in an increase in complaints over the period related to collection issues, peaking in w/c 8/2/21/

Table 4 shows the numbers of rounds affected from our Evercreech depot, and clearly shows the highest impact in weeks commencing 8 February and 15 February and the improving picture since then. At the time of writing this report (5 March) the picture continues to improve, with no rounds in w/c 1/3/2021 dropped until next week.

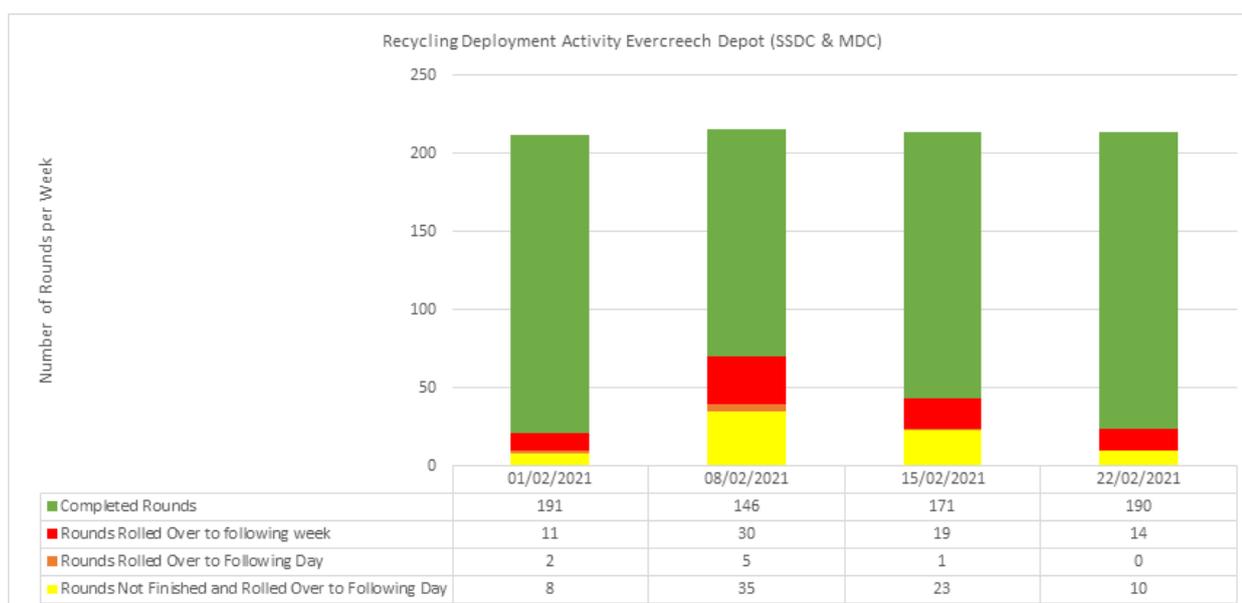


Table 4: Disruption to recycling rounds from Evercreech in February

Unfortunately some areas of Mendip have been affected more than others, particularly Wells in w/c 1/2/21 and 8/2/21, Frome and Street in w/c 8/2/21 and Shepton Mallet in w/c 22/2/21. Glastonbury saw a lower (but still significant) level of disruption in w/c 8/2/21 and 15/2/21. The nature of routing means that some days require more staff resources than others (i.e. to cover a discrete area some days require more crews to be out) and when resources are constrained these are more likely to be more significantly affected. SUEZ are still also working to fully bed in the service post Recycle More and on some

days support rounds are still deployed to ensure crews can cope with the tonnages presented – again, when resources are constrained these are more likely to be affected. SWP are working closely with SUEZ to ensure that these underlying issues, including productivity, are fully addressed but without ongoing disruption to services. Systems have been put in place to ensure that the same area was not affected twice and that extra support was applied to collect the extra recycling the next week. In a number of limited occasions this did not happen effectively (for example due to human error, vehicle breakdown, staff shortage e.g. a crew having to isolate during the day), and SWP apologise for this.

As part of the SWP's Business Continuity Plan we have significantly enhanced the communications to inform residents of service disruption – particularly to let them know if their recycling will not be collected and whether it will be returned for tomorrow or not until the next week. Website information is updated daily and significant missed collections publicised through the SWP Facebook page and efforts made to publicise directly into community pages and groups where possible. Partner customer services are informed and our CRM system has been updated so that if a resident reports a missed collection they understand the reason for any disruption. Where rounds are not being returned for the following day this includes communicating with (via District Communications teams) relevant parish, District and County Councillors.

#### **4) *How quickly will services recover and what lessons have been learnt?***

Whilst clearly future Covid related service disruption cannot be ruled out, with staff returning from self-isolation, additional support from other depots, Saturday working, additional agency staff we anticipate the current recovery to continue and service stability will be resumed in early March. We are working closely with SUEZ to ensure that additional resources are brought in to minimise the disruption during this period – through recruiting permanent staff, training loaders as drivers, improving processes to secure agency staff support more quickly, more robust tracking of return from self-isolation, use of Lateral Flow testing, to ensure that lessons are learnt from this period are applied and the service is more resilient to Covid-19 pressures. An update will be provided on these measures at the scrutiny committee.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Scrutiny Board is recommended to:

1 – Note the content of the report, supporting presentation (to follow) and verbal update from the Somerset Waste Partnership and SUEZ.

Contact Officer: Mickey Green – Managing Director – Somerset Waste Partnership  
e-mail: [mickey.green@somersetwaste.gov.uk](mailto:mickey.green@somersetwaste.gov.uk)

Contact Officer: Haylee Wilkins – Assistant CEO and Group Manager for Neighbourhood Services  
e-mail: [haylee.wilkins@mendip.gov.uk](mailto:haylee.wilkins@mendip.gov.uk)

### **Background Papers**