

Dear Mr Lloyd

This complaint has been passed on to me – I also saw the complaint from last week, and viewed the video, and thought it would be useful to respond to you directly. I've copied in all the councillors in the original email so they are aware of the conversation too.

Can I start by making it clear that I entirely accept there have been a number of waste collection failures by Veolia, on the Brandon Estate, and elsewhere. The immediate cause of many of these has been the high levels of staff absence due to COVID19, resulting in some collection rounds running late, and missing dates and locations, or in some cases relying on less experienced agency workers with less knowledge of routes and standards of service who then made errors or delivered services below the required standard. However, there has also been a problem of insufficient managerial supervision and control of operations on the part of Veolia, and these together have resulted in service delivery which has been inconsistent over a period of several months with a number of justified complaints.

I'm aware of regular missed collections for refuse, overflowing recycling containers, and failure to collect recycling bags on the Brandon Estate in the last few months. To address these concerns, there has been a series of meetings at Director level between the council and Veolia, and it has been made clear that the collection service performance needs to be improved. I'm sorry for the poor service your estate has often received in the last few months, and we have made it clear to Veolia that this needs to improve.

There is already some work ongoing relating to the Brandon Estate, both in the installation of Metrostor units, and monitoring of services given the recent history of service failures by Veolia. I think there is scope for further joint working between Housing, the Estate Cleaning service and Veolia to improve services, and I have asked Veolia to produce an outline proposal for a future TRA meeting and other departments to discuss. As well as the monitoring of services delivered by Veolia to make sure that their previous performance failures do not recur, I would suggest seeking views from the TRA on what information or approach may help to reduce problems of waste dumping and contamination as well as communicating better in how services are provided and should be used.

This leads me to these last two complaints about the recycling service, relating to collections last week and this. There are service standards in place for the collection of recycling bins which can be summarised as follows:

1. Veolia are responsible for emptying the recycling bins, which includes collection of clean recyclable material around the bins within reason. This would mean that they are expected to collect properly bagged recyclable material alongside the bins, and cardboard boxes around the bins, but this obligation does not go so far as to require them to sort through mixed waste and pick out the recyclables.
2. If the bins are too contaminated with general waste to be suitable for sorting, the Veolia crew is expected to mark the bins with contamination stickers, and log them as uncollected. This then creates a task for the next available refuse crew to return and collect the waste as general refuse for treatment/disposal. The crew cannot collect this waste in a recycling collection vehicle as it would contaminate the entire load. It will typically take up to around 2 working days to clear bins as refuse in this situation. The best way of this being avoided is for residents to not put general waste into the recycling bins – but in practice this hasn't happened often on Brandon Estate recently.
3. Bins should not be allowed to overflow – they should be serviced often enough to prevent it. An overflow is a performance failure by Veolia, unless they have already reported it as contaminated, and a refuse clearance is pending. Overflowing recycling bins can be reported directly to Environment Customer Services ([environmentalcustom@southwark.gov.uk](mailto:environmentalcustom@southwark.gov.uk)), and there should be clearance within 1 working day (up to 2 days for contaminated bins).

4. Veolia are not responsible for the removal of dumped non-recyclable waste around the bins. Waste they cannot remove as part of a recycling collection would include general waste, loose litter on the ground, furniture, household goods etc which may be dumped around the bins. The clearance of this waste is a task for the estate cleaning team. The recycling crew cannot clear this waste, firstly because the only waste that can be loaded into the collection vehicle must be recyclable – or it contaminates the entire load; and secondly because that is a function that Veolia are contracted to deliver.

5. There will sometimes be issues of obstruction of bins with dumped waste (or of other access obstructions such as parked vehicles, estate works etc). If a bin cannot be accessed because of obstructions, it would not be emptied, but a crew should return when it is next possible – by which time the dumped waste would be likely to have been cleared by the estate teams. In practice we might sometimes see situation where a bin is partially obstructed, but the crew will empty it anyway, rather than leave unemptied, and this may leave loose waste behind for the estates cleaning team to clear.

For both of these last two recycling collections, there is no performance failure by Veolia. The waste they left behind is not recyclable, and this waste around the bins would not fall within their contracted tasks. The clearance of waste beyond their contracted requirements is a matter for the estate cleaners, and was correctly left behind by the Veolia crew. They cannot put general waste into a recyclable load or it contaminates the load – last week the estate cleaners appear to have contaminated the bin by putting the polystyrene and plastic film into it when it should have been put into the refuse bin instead.

This split between estates and collection operations is necessary to deliver the service. Collection crews are given a collection route to complete and this is limited to specified tasks of emptying bins and collections of bags. They are not in a position to undertake cleaning tasks as well, or there would be as risk of non-completion of collections. As a result any cleaning tasks beyond the emptying of the bins are not carried out by the crew, but by the estate cleaning team (and by facilities management teams in non-council owned properties). I completely understand your frustrations in a situation like this when there is a fine line between what the collection crew's job is, and what work is left for the estate cleaning team. I hope this explanation helps clarify the separate responsibilities of each, and I'm happy to discuss directly ahead of the TRA meeting if this would help.

Yours sincerely

Mike Greenhalf  
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