



Domestic household and bulky waste collection

Report of the task group of the
Performance and Finance Select Committee

Task group members:

Cllr. J. Long (Chair)
Cllr. H. Gladbaum
Cllr. N. Nerva

December 2004

Domestic household and bulky waste collection

Contents	Page
Summary	5
Perceptions and the Mori satisfaction survey	6
Site visits	7
Contract and the action plan	9
Missed collections	9
Refuse fleet	10
Collection schedule and the Contender computer system	11
Defaults	11
Bulky waste	12
In conclusion	13

Domestic household and bulky waste collection

Summary

- 1 Brent Council has a waste management contract with Onyx UK Ltd (Onyx). The contract has been in place since 1997 and will run until 2007. Its value is £6.7m a year. It covers three main areas: domestic household waste collection; special bulky waste collection; and street cleaning. The council's recycling contract is held with ECT.
- 2 As a task group, we decided to concentrate on those aspects of the Onyx contract that concern domestic household waste and special bulky waste collections in the borough. We did not look in any depth at street cleaning or recycling in this review; nor did we interview any representatives from Onyx.
- 3 We gathered evidence from a number of sources:
 - Eight housing associations in the borough informed us about their experiences of domestic and bulky waste collections on their estates.
 - We examined the contract between Brent Council and Onyx UK Ltd and the refuse collection schedule.
 - Around half of StreetCare's contract monitoring officers replied to a questionnaire about their job and their relationship with Onyx staff.
 - A small handful of elected members submitted their views on domestic waste and bulky waste collections in their wards.
 - StreetCare managers and the Assistant Director for Streets and Transportation explained the action plan they had agreed with Onyx to improve service delivery.
- 4 Although mindful of the council's waste management strategy, of reducing waste tonnage and increasing recycling, we chose to look more closely at some of the operational issues surrounding waste collection. Our motivation in taking this approach was linked to our belief that a strategy is only as good as the processes and operations that underpin it.
- 5 We made site visits to two housing associations: Hillside Housing Trust (formerly Stonebridge HAT) and Brent Housing Partnership in South Kilburn. Our meetings with officers there uncovered a number of operational issues, which we hope will be addressed in light of our report.
- 6 Our work should be viewed as an interim report; however, we would like our proposals to be taken on board as soon as possible. Key recommendations to StreetCare for both domestic household waste and special bulky waste collections are:
 - Update the contract with Onyx urgently and maintain a list of amendments to it.
 - Agree with Onyx a more accurate way to measure missed collections in the borough and ensure that this measure can identify local problems on rounds.
 - Improve communication links and problem solving approaches with Onyx, for example with regard to the condition of the refuse fleet.

Domestic household and bulky waste collection

- Put in place systems with Onyx to ensure the accuracy and effective use of the refuse collection schedule and the Contender computer system.
- Hand in hand with improved management information tools, use defaults where appropriate to improve service delivery.
- Convene a forum with housing associations to address their concerns, in particular about bulky waste collections.

Perceptions and the Mori satisfaction survey

- 7 Waste collection is arguably the most visible service offered to residents by Brent Council. It is a service that residents can see has a direct link with the payment of Council Tax. When problems arise with the service, the local press will invariably run a story¹. Such a high profile will inevitably have a bearing on perceptions. Brent residents' perceptions of council services are collated every three years.
- 8 According to a triennial Mori survey of Best Value Performance Indicators², residents placed Brent Council in an average, but deteriorating position. The public's perception of household waste collection in the borough has remained almost constant (74% were satisfied with the service in 2000/2001; 73% in 2003/2004). However, in comparison with the other London boroughs, Brent Council fell from 11th to 14th place.
- 9 Given the universal reach of the household waste collection service, this is probably a fair reflection of public opinion. It suggests that large areas of the borough receive an adequate waste collection service. The lack of response from all but a handful of elected members in the borough may also add to this assumption.
- 10 The Mori survey backs up our analysis with other public perception-based measures of net satisfaction with waste collection services. However, once again, most indicators are deteriorating from their 2000/2001 positions.

2003/2004	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Net satisfaction	2000/2001 net satisfaction
Bin provided	81%	9%	+72%	+77%
Bin replaced after emptying	81%	8%	+73%	+67%
Reliability of service	80%	11%	+69%	+76%
Bulky waste collections	56%	26%	+30%	+32%

¹ Articles in the Willesden and Brent Chronicle, 18 August 2004 and 8 September 2004 are examples.

² Best value performance indicators are part of the performance management framework for local authorities introduced by central government in 1997. They are designed to monitor continuous service improvement with regard to efficiency, effectiveness and economy of service delivery.

Domestic household and bulky waste collection

- 11 The lower net satisfaction for bulky waste collections could mean a generally lower satisfaction with the service provided; it could also be the result of the fact that residents tend to express less satisfaction for services they are not aware of or have not used. This is despite bulky waste collections being a free, universally available service.
- 12 These figures gave us the confidence, as a task group, to focus our efforts on known problem areas, mostly in the south of the borough, where dissatisfaction with waste collection services was likely to be higher. We undertook two site visits to housing association estates to check this out.

Site visits

- 13 We received evidence from eight housing associations³. To varying degrees, each one had experienced problems with waste collection services, both for domestic household waste and special bulky waste. We decided to arrange site visits to two housing associations, whose wide range of issues with waste collection services covered the ones experienced by the other six.

Hillside Housing Trust

- 14 Hillside Housing Trust came into being with effect from October 2004. It had formerly been known as Stonebridge HAT. The Trust's properties include tower blocks, low-rise blocks and houses. In 2007, its residents will decide whether they want Hillside Housing or Brent Council to be their landlord.
- 15 Onyx provides waste management services to empty residents' bins and to remove bulky household items. At the time of our visit, there was no green box scheme for recycling waste. Hillside officers stated that they had no direct contact with StreetCare when problems arose with the service.
- 16 Redeveloped roads are usually adopted by Brent Council, but there is sometimes confusion with StreetCare when communicating the adopted status of them. It is hoped that all roads will be adopted by Brent Council by 2007. In 2003 there were some access problems because of building site obstructions, but these were removed from new build areas. StreetCare and Onyx were informed, according to the Hillside officers.
- 17 Waste collections have been reduced from 4 to 2 a week: two on the north side and two on the south side of the estate. Mondays and Thursdays are for collections in the tower blocks; Tuesdays and Fridays are for collections in the houses and low-rises blocks. The Trust believes that an average service is received overall, but enough problems exist to warrant a service level agreement

³ Brent Housing Partnership; ASRA; PCHA; Metropolitan Housing Trust; Griffin Group; Hillside Housing Trust (Stonebridge HAT); Bnai Brith JBG; Fortunegate Community Housing

Domestic household and bulky waste collection

between Hillside Housing Trust and Brent Council/Onyx.

- 18 The Trust's private contractors provide some waste management services. As a result, there is a feeling that residents are being asked to pay twice for waste management services, through the Council Tax and a rental service charge (to pay for private waste contractors).
- 19 In respect of bulky items, residents have been informed that only one free collection a year is available, even though the Brent Council offers three collections. Private contractors have had to be taken on to remove bulky waste. It is not known where these contractors dispose of the bulky items.
- 20 A major problem for Hillside Housing Trust is the capacity of Onyx's waste collection vehicles. In general, Onyx crews do not return if they need to empty their waste before the round is complete. Another issue concerns rubbish left on the ground. Onyx crews will not load this waste into their trucks. The Trust's cleaners will follow Onyx crews and place the rubbish into the bins.
- 21 Similarly, Onyx crews will not empty bins if the lids are not closed properly. We observed this when we walked along four of the Trust's roads that had supposedly had their bins emptied earlier in the day.
- 22 There was a StreetCare proposal to mail shot every resident about recycling initiatives, but nothing has been seen yet. The new civic amenity centre has opened nearby. It is too early to assess its impact on local waste tonnages.

Brent Housing Partnership

- 23 Brent Housing Partnership (BHP) does not manage Onyx directly, but there is a direct contact point with StreetCare. A good relationship exists, according to the officers we spoke to. One said a StreetCare officer attends housing partnership meetings in the south of the borough.
- 24 Problems in South Kilburn seem to run in cycles and often occur at the end of rounds (Alpha/Gorefield House in particular). The collections will run normally for 3-4 months, after which vehicle breakdowns might occur. Bank holidays are often problematic periods. Bins are sometimes damaged when they are emptied, in particular the older paladin bins. BHP invoices StreetCare, who should then recharge Onyx. BHP is replacing paladins with newer euro bins as funds allow.
- 25 South Kilburn estates are densely populated. The estates are very open; missed collections are visible and quickly become a dumping ground for waste. Morale of BHP estate cleaners is affected, as they feel blamed for missed collections. Waste collection vehicles return on Saturdays if collections are missed on Thursdays. On Saturdays, estate cleaners may not have taken bins out. A senior StreetCare officer is notified of problems when they arise, but it is uncertain if these are logged onto the Contender computer system as missed collections.

Domestic household and bulky waste collection

- 26 Smaller estates in the north of the borough (North Wembley) are generally well served. A recent incident of non-collection may have been caused by an inexperienced new driver, but collection crews seem to be better established in the main. Access to narrow roads is sometimes an issue, as vehicles cannot enter the roads or blockages prevent bins being pulled out by estate cleaning staff. Overall there is less need to contact StreetCare.
- 27 BHP puts out 32 skips over Christmas period for residents' bulky waste. The estate cleaning contract includes bulky waste removal. Few BHP residents use the StreetCare bulky waste service, according to BHP officers. Often, private contractors will remove bulky items before StreetCare trucks arrive.
- 28 Last year, StreetCare approached BHP over recycling trials on 15 BHP estates, mostly in the Wembley area. More promotional work is needed to develop this further on additional sites.

Contract and the action plan

- 29 StreetCare provided us with an extract of the Brent Council's contract with Onyx. We learnt, to our surprise, that it has not been updated since its issue in 1997, despite changes to refuse collection services in the meantime. In addition, StreetCare has not requested information it is entitled to under the contract, such as vehicle details and the collection schedule. This poor practice must have extended to the parts of the contract dealing with street cleaning, as there have also been significant changes to this service over the years.
- 30 It is vital, in our view, that StreetCare updates its contract with Onyx urgently and maintains a list of amendments to it. Members will then have a better understanding of the current standards being applied and enforced.
- 31 StreetCare has agreed an action plan with Onyx to improve all of its waste management services in the borough between now and March 2005. Our focus was on the sections of the action plan for waste collection services. In particular, we considered missed collections; the refuse fleet; the refuse collection schedule; the Contender computer system; defaults; and bulky waste collection.

Missed collections

- 32 Onyx has committed itself to a performance target of 50 missed collections per scheduled 100,000 collections of household waste by March 2005. The intention is for a new definition of this performance target to be negotiated between StreetCare and Onyx in time for April 2005.
- 33 Currently, the target is measured according to guidelines issued by the ODPM for a former Best Value Performance Indicator for missed collections per 100,000. The number of missed collections is arrived at by totalling the number

Domestic household and bulky waste collection

of calls that StreetCare receives from residents to say that their bins have not been emptied.

- 34 There are a number of anomalies to the way missed collections are calculated, which affects the accuracy of the figure. The calculation does not take into account all the households that may not have had their bins emptied, only the number of residents who have called the StreetCare helpline. Similarly, an unemptied bin in a block of flats only counts as one call received, and so one missed collection, even though many households may be affected.
- 35 Such calculations do not give members accurate enough management information on service delivery to make informed decisions. By April 2005, we recommend that StreetCare and Onyx agree a new definition of missed collections that more accurately reflects the reality faced by residents in the borough. The new measure should be able to identify problem rounds in local areas, below the levels of borough and ward.

Refuse fleet

- 36 In comparison to other London boroughs, Brent has a relatively cheap waste management contract. For refuse collections, Brent pays Onyx £2.7m per annum (the total contract value each year is £6.7m). The cost of refuse collection in Westminster City Council is £9.2m per annum; for Camden Council it is £4.7m per annum. Both Westminster and Camden contract with Onyx.
- 37 When Brent's contract was tendered, Onyx's bid was three quarters of a million pounds less than that estimated by the council. Once awarded the contract in 1997, Onyx offered an additional £1m discount over ten years. It soon became apparent, however, that Onyx was operating the contract at a loss. As a consequence, this has limited the amount of capital and human resources that Onyx has been able to invest in the contract.
- 38 Onyx recently replaced three older vehicles in its fleet of refuse trucks. There is now also a spare vehicle to mop up missed collections if they occur. Unfortunately, bad communication between StreetCare and Onyx resulted in the newer vehicles not having the correct hoists to lift bins. It was necessary for Onyx to purchase new backs for the vehicles in order to make them fit for purpose. In another incident of bad communication, it was discovered in November that a number of refuse trucks did not have valid MOT certificates.
- 39 It is critical, in our view, for StreetCare and Onyx to share accurate management information, at the appropriate level, on the make-up and condition of the refuse fleet to ensure that a situation like the MOT fiasco does not happen again. This recommendation extends to all operational information needed to manage the contract and resolve problems when they arise.

Domestic household and bulky waste collection

Collection schedule and the Contender computer system

- 40 Ineffective communication and a lack of a problem solving approach between StreetCare and Onyx appear to us to be a recurring source of service breakdown. The accuracy of the refuse collection schedule and the use of the Contender computer system are prime examples.
- 41 The refuse collection schedule and the Contender computer system are the information bedrock of operational activity for waste collection services. By ensuring their accuracy and adequacy, it improves the chances of delivering what are fairly basic services with a degree of sophistication.
- 42 We noticed several inconsistencies with the refuse collection schedule, in particular on rounds where problems are occurring⁴. Similarly, our research suggested that StreetCare and Onyx are applying different standards in the use of the Contender computer system, as a result of different levels of training. Without consistent use of these key operational tools, service problems will inevitably arise, and recurring problems will take longer to resolve.
- 43 Onyx has recently recruited a manager, whose duties include looking at the logistics of rounds in the refuse collection schedule. This is a welcome move, which should allow StreetCare and Onyx to put processes in place to ensure the accuracy of the schedule. Joint updates of the schedule are also required between both parties, especially when new roads are adopted in the borough.
- 44 Consistent application of the Contender computer system, by stable teams in StreetCare and Onyx, would certainly help in improving waste collection services. It is a pity, therefore, that Onyx has only two monitoring officers in post at the moment; although we learnt that it is interviewing to fill three more monitoring posts and may recruit for another three. Such a level of staff turnover makes effective training in the use of the software a critical element in service delivery, both within Onyx and between Onyx and StreetCare.

Defaults

- 45 Defaults are a means for StreetCare to penalise Onyx if the service delivered falls below standard. StreetCare has used this stick to hit Onyx more and more. In 2003-04, Onyx paid £106k in defaults; in the first eight months of this year the figure has reached £147k. The breakdown for defaults in 2003-04 was £38.8k for refuse collection and £67.2k for street cleansing. This year, so far, the breakdown has been [awaiting figure].
- 46 Some StreetCare officers we questioned in June and July were concerned that

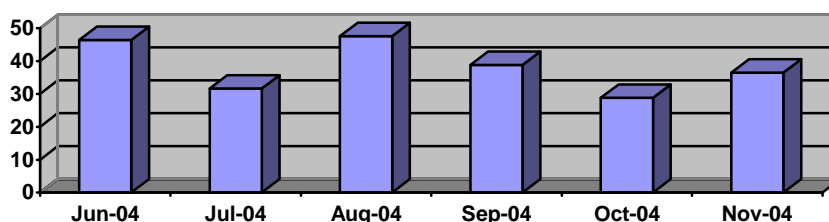
⁴ For instance, Gorfield House was listed as Corefield House with two Tuesday collections; neighbouring Alpha House has collections on Tuesdays and Fridays. Sneyd Road and Ashford Road are other examples of roads missing from the collection schedule.

Domestic household and bulky waste collection

defaults were not being applied to Onyx consistently. It seems since then that monitoring has become tighter, given the higher level of defaults imposed.

- 47 It is difficult to determine, however, to what extent defaults have served their purpose in improving waste collection services to residents, as problems still persist while defaults have been increasing. For example, the average number of complaints per ward each month⁵ has fluctuated (see chart below).

Average number of monthly complaints per ward regarding refuse collection (source: StreetCare)



- 48 We believe, nonetheless, that defaults are a route that StreetCare will have to follow as fully as necessary, given the unlikely event of major contract revisions before 2007. Closer monitoring by StreetCare, wielding its default stick, should at least give enough incentive to Onyx, a private company, to maximise its contract payments.
- 49 As a tool on their own, though, defaults will not work in improving waste collection services to residents. They must be part of a framework of agreed problem solving procedures at all levels between StreetCare and Onyx and of reliable management information shared between both parties. Other problem solving solutions may also include bringing together StreetCare officers and Onyx operatives in problem areas for joint workshop or training sessions.

Bulky waste

- 50 Special bulky waste collections are a universal service to all households in the borough. Three collections a year, up to five items per collection, are free of charge. Onyx holds the contract for these collections.
- 51 StreetCare has agreed a target with Onyx to collect 95% of special bulky waste on the scheduled day and 100% by Friday. Current performance hovers around 75-80%. There are roughly 200 special bulky waste collections per week. All collections are being directed to the new civic amenity site at Twyford, where more special bulky waste can be recycled, instead of immediately going to

⁵ While the breakdown of complaints by ward makes interesting reading, it does not clearly identify problem collection rounds in local areas. See also our recommendation on missed collections.

Domestic household and bulky waste collection

landfill. Fridges and other white goods are picked up separately.

- 52 The system being put in place is a fixed daily quota of jobs expected to be completed by three Onyx crews. A fixed daily quota is designed to enable StreetCare to give residents a firm date for collection. Once the fixed daily quota has been reached, any additional requests for collection will be moved to Fridays.
- 53 As with ordinary waste collections, StreetCare and Onyx need to have effective communication processes in place to solve problems in collection as they arise. The same need extends to contacts between StreetCare/Onyx and housing associations.
- 54 Our site visits unearthed the concerning fact that housing association environmental managers, unable to rely of the council's special bulky waste service, are using their own contractors to remove waste from their estates. This has two consequences. Firstly, it is not clear whether such waste is being disposed of properly; secondly, housing association residents are having to pay for special bulky waste collections twice: once through their Council Tax and again through rent payments to their registered landlords.
- 55 We believe that the Assistant Director of Streets and Transportation should convene an urgent meeting with senior representatives from the borough's housing associations and Onyx to discuss how to resolve problems about waste collection services on these estates. Housing associations should also have a direct contact with a named StreetCare/Onyx officer who can address operational problems when they arise in the future.

In conclusion

- 56 StreetCare should be striving to hold Onyx to their mission statement:

"Refuse collection is fast, efficient and responsive. [Onyx staff] are experienced in providing not only prompt service, but also in maintaining a good relationship with the community in which they work."
- 57 StreetCare helps them to keep their word through clear and consistent operational standards and a common approach to problem solving. All our residents deserve nothing less and a whole lot better for their domestic and bulky waste collections.