

27 January, 2021

SWP update: Early collections from next week

COVID continues to put pressure on recycling and rubbish collections. We and our contractors are doing everything we can to keep disruption to a minimum while keeping staff and public safe.

We continue to take a precautionary approach to limit contact and minimise risk: for example, crews work in tightly-controlled team bubbles and the whole bubble isolates when a member is symptomatic, has a positive test or is in contact with someone who tests positive.

This inevitably means far higher staff absences than expected, as well as unpredictable daily changes as team bubbles isolate or return to work, and crews are reallocated to maintain all services.

In the first three weeks of January, COVID contributed to the loss of nearly 800 operational days – compared to 58 in December.

We are also taking a very precautionary approach to bringing in extra agency staff to cover shortfalls. That adds to the strain on crews, many of whom have been working long hours for a long time.

With current pressures set to continue, we are taking additional steps to protect crews, help them manage the workload and maintain services.

Extra steps being from Monday, 1 February

6am starts for collections, rather than 7am

This early start will further reduce contact between team bubbles as crews have staggered starts over a longer time. It will also allow them a head start on work that may take longer if staff are absent

Residents have understood and supported early starts in the past, such as the 2019 heatwave and to avoid specific traffic hold-ups.

Householders will need to put recycling and rubbish out by 6am – or the night before. We will start communicating this from today, Wednesday 27 January. Initially this will be for a month and will reviewed to see if it needs to continue.

We will not immediately return for some missed collections

We will not take such decisions lightly, but staff absences will sometimes make it impractical to return for missed recycling or garden waste collections the following day. In these cases residents need to take containers in until their next collection.

Rubbish collections will not be affected and any missed recycling collections would be prioritised the following week, with extra recycling taken. We will communicate as widely and as soon as possible with affected areas when decisions are made not to return, through social media and updating key stakeholders.

We ask for your patience would encourage you to follow the SWP Facebook page @somersetwaste for the most up to date information.

We have updated our online system for missed collection reporting so residents will know when we will be returning.

A wide range of safety measures and options are already in place for collection crews and depot staff.

These include working in bubbles, minimising contact with colleagues and customers, use of PPE, and careful hygiene.

SUEZ has a rigorous approach to tracing any contacts and isolating bubbles of staff should there be any suspicion of COVID.

We support staff who choose to wear masks, providing them with reusable masks and guidance for safe use. All staff have full work PPE, including gloves.

Note: Government guidance does not recommend face masks for the operational waste sector. It inevitably leads to frequent touching of the face which carries its own risks when constantly handling waste.

As well as working in closely monitored small team bubbles, collection crews - where possible - meet their driver at an agreed point each day rather than at a depot. There is a rigorous and effective approach to tracing contacts and isolating bubbles when necessary. Note: guidance acknowledges that social distancing may not be possible inside vehicles and we encourage crews to keep their windows open to allow a fresh airflow.

All staff are encouraged and helped to maintain high hygiene standards, with hand sanitisers freely available at all locations and to crews on the move, as well as washing facilities, including those on the new recycling vehicles. At depots, safety steps already include screens, one-way systems, and spaced starts, which will be extended from 1 February. Additionally, crews clean down their vehicles cab and touch points at least three times a day and this is regularly monitored by our supervisory team.