



Minutes of the Northacre Resource Recovery Centre extraordinary liaison committee meeting held on Microsoft Teams on 29 September 2021

Present

Wiltshire Council

Jo Emery – Waste Manager, Technical (JE)
Martin Litherland (ML)
Gary Tomsett – Environmental Control and Protection Team Manager (GT)
John Carter (JC)
Cllr Gordon King – Westbury East (GK)
Cllr Carole King – Westbury West (CK)
Cllr Suzanne Wickham – Ethandune (SW)

Westbury Town Council

Jane Russ (JR)
Janet Parker (JP)

Environment Agency

Tom Fowler (TF)

Hills Waste Solutions

Paul Scriven (PS)
Simon Allen (SA)
Ed Dodd (ED)

The Hills Group

Monique Hayes (MH)
Alex Henderson (AH)

	ACTION
1. Apologies	
Francis Morland, Heywood Parish Council; Matthew Dean, Westbury Town Council (also Wiltshire Council, Westbury West); and Dr Andrew Murrison MP.	
2. Purpose of the extraordinary meeting	
The purpose of the meeting is to provide feedback to members on work done to replace the bio-filter material and maintenance undertaken, and answer questions regarding odour issues.	
3. Site manager update	
PS provided the following update: In June 2021 the process was started to remove and replace the 1,000m ³ of bio-filter material. It was scheduled to take 12 weeks and was completed in 10 weeks. Following this a 2-week period of routine maintenance in the bio-hall area was undertaken to improve building airflow and waste inputs were suspended allowing works to be expedited and completed within 2 weeks. PS stated that the microbiological activity within the bio-filter material had not established or “seeded” as expected and as a result the filter was not functioning at its optimum. It was expected that the bio-filter efficacy would happen quickly, but we have continued to receive complaints of odour. We have agreed with the Environment Agency and Wiltshire Council, as a short-term measure, to reduce the volume of waste accepted into the site in order to allow the bio-filter material more time to develop and reach optimal efficiency.	

4. Questions from committee members

CK : How long is the bio-filter material in place before it requires changing?

SA responded: Scheduled replacement of bio-filter material is around 3.5 years to 4 years. We first changed the material in early 2018, replacing the filter material installed on construction and there were no issues with the exchange at that time.

CK: Has the material changed?

SA responded: Yes, the type of material being used is different and specifically made for this purpose and is taking longer than anticipated to establish. The previous material used did not last long enough and the new type of material will last longer, allowing the replacement of material to be required on a less frequent basis

CK: Was there a problem with the order for the material in the beginning?

SA responded: There was no problem, once the decision was taken to bring forward the replacement of the bio-filter material it was ordered as planned. We did have concerns initially due to the impacts of COVID, but none of these materialised.

JP: Was it not possible to replace the bio-filter material in a shorter time frame?

SA responded: We could not have done the work any quicker due to the constraints of the access to where the bio-filter is located, which is separate from the bio-hall. The bio-filter replacement programme was scheduled for 12 weeks and was actually completed in 10 weeks, ahead of schedule. The follow up maintenance was undertaken in the bio-hall where waste is treated, this is why waste inputs were temporarily suspended and allowed this work to be completed quicker.

JP: Why was all this work undertaken in the summer? Was there a delay in starting?

SA responses: From the point that we decided to change the bio-filter material, including appointing a contractor to undertake the works, the timing was dictated by the project plan. The initial issue we had was that the existing bio-filter material was not performing and we felt that from an environmental perspective it was the right thing to do. Our original plan had been to undertake the bio-filter material change later this year. The decision to bring forward the replacement of the bio-filter was not taken lightly and it was not anticipated that there would be any significant odour issues.

SW: The Environment Agency told residents that there was a delay in starting the works and they were originally planned earlier in the year.

SA responded: This is incorrect and is not the case. There was no plan to undertake these works earlier in the year and the work was never delayed, but brought forward.

SW: Whilst there were no issues with the previous exchange of bio-filter material, did Hills plan to let local residents know that work was being done?

SA responded: Hills told the liaison committee members that the work was being undertaken. We did not expect to have these odour issues and it is never our intention for any of our facilities to impact on local residents.

GK: Whilst we hear that there was no delay in the works, and that the bio-filter material was exhausted which necessitated the change, would Hills not have thought about communicating with local residents including a timeline and any effects to be expected? Residents expect Hills to be a good neighbour and if they had known these details then Hills could have saved this storm.

SA responded: Hills never envisaged these issues. We did advise the liaison committee of the works, who in turn are expected to advise the groups they represent and we also issued news releases and statements. We have called this extraordinary liaison meeting to give a further update to committee members. Hills have always said and permits committee members to call special meetings such as this one, but to date no member of the committee requested a meeting to be called.

GK: Hills have sent information out to selected people, but the wider population have not felt informed. It would have been better to make information available to the wider public. Lessons have been learnt from both sides.

SA responded: Hills will take on board these comments and review how we communicate. We have been heavily engaged with relevant stakeholders and will review how we engage with the wider public.

JR: I am referring to minutes of the previous liaison committee meeting which references the possibility of odours from the site for 12 weeks. Hills need to talk to people, it is not good enough to put information on your website when the whole town is affected.

SA responded: In hindsight we would not take on this type of work in the summer, but the decision to undertake the work was made because we saw efficiency in the old bio-filter material reducing and believed we were taking the correct approach to bring forward the replacement of the bio-filter.

JR: If this was your family that had been affected, would you not expect the company to offer something to the community and apologise?

SA responded: Hills has apologised and I would like to repeat that apology. As a legitimate waste operator, we try to pride ourselves on being a good neighbour.

JR: How can you apologise, would you offer something to the community for ruining the whole of their summer?

SA responded: I don't think it is the case that we have ruined the whole of summer for the whole of Westbury. However, I wish this had not happened and we will continue to work to resolve the situation. Lessons have been learnt and will avoid being repeated.

SW: I have been contacted by lots of people who are clearly distressed and upset about the situation and who state have been unable to go into their gardens or open windows at various times of the day and night. They have also expressed concerns about their health and stated that they have felt nauseous, complained of headaches and sore throats. Residents have also told me they regularly reported these incidents to the Environment Agency and there is an issue in loss of trust in the company resolving the problem and the lack of communication with residents.

SA responded: We understand that there could have been more communication and will work to improve communications. We do provide the opportunity for residents to complain to us direct via the website or telephone helpline and look to respond to everyone that contacts us. We are not passed details of complaints sent to the Environment Agency due to data protection and therefore unable to investigate these complaints and feedback directly to the complainant.

JP: People are upset and they are angry and we would like to see better communication and an apology to the community. I have a question about the deodorising chemicals that are being used. I stood outside the plant site for a period of time whilst being interviewed by the local media about the odours and inhaled the deodorising chemicals – after that I felt ill. People have been complaining about an acrid smell that catches them in the throat. What is in those deodorising chemicals? I would like to hear back from both Hills and the Environment Agency. Perhaps you should think about taking out an advert in the White Horse News to say sorry to the people of Westbury.

SA ask PS to responded: The deodorising chemicals are the same formula as those used in household deodoriser items and the concentrations are similar.

JP: Can you provide me with a list of the ingredients?

SA responded: Yes, we can provide this.

JP: There is no complaints form on the website, only the usual contact us form. People did not feel that they were taken seriously when contacting Hills.

SA responded: We do feedback to people who complain directly to Hills. We cannot provide feedback to people who contact the Environment Agency as we are not provided with that level of detail.

CK: I have heard that some people were physically sick as a result of the odours. Do Hills staff who work at the plant suffer any effects from odours?

SA responded: No, we have not had an increase in the sickness rate and the employees are not affected. Some of the employees work in close contact with the waste material especially when they have to go into the bio-hall to clear blockages in the equipment.

We have noticed an increase in odour in the general area; we operate the plant from 06.00 – 22.00 but do not accept any waste material into the site after 16.00.

<p>ED stated that experiencing odours is very subjective, and the health of employees is extremely important to Hills. It is possible that those who work at the site have become desensitised. What is acceptable to some is not for others.</p> <p>SA stated that the bio-filter is not working to maximum efficiency, it has not seeded, as well as we expected and that is why the further decision has been taken to temporarily reduce waste inputs as the company have been advised that this may accelerate the bio-filter reaching optimal efficiency. We are not where we want to be regarding the odours. The reduction in waste input does mean that this material will be diverted to a landfill site.</p> <p>SW: What are the outcomes of the Environment Agency investigation and breaches of the permit?</p> <p>SA asked TW from the EA to respond: The EA has had officers out since we were first advised of the issues – 3 times a day and during the night if required to substantiate valid complaints. The EA believes that the odour has reduced in the past few weeks and is now faint to noticeable, however the issue of concern is the duration that odour has been present in the community and is considered to be of a “reasonable annoyance”. The EA still believe there are additional actions that need exploring to improve the situation. The EA cannot comment on the final outcome of the breach as we are still in the ‘incident’ mode. Once the incident is over then The EA will move to the enforcement stage. The permit is very specific about odour and the EA is still investigating the breach in the permit condition.</p> <p>SA stated: We are working as hard as we can to resolve this and don’t want to have a negative impact on the community.</p> <p>GK: I endorse all the comments from the committee members and residents who have been affected. Perhaps Hills need to publish a timeline and issue an apology? The liaison committee needs to get together again and establish what the committee does with information it is given at meetings and how to effectively work together.</p> <p>SA responded: We agree that we need to review how the committee works and also the timing of the next meeting which should be held after we have resolved the odour issues. Giving timelines can be difficult and we are being held to account by both the Environment Agency and Wiltshire Council.</p> <p>JR: Has Hills at any point considered the topography issues of Westbury? Could this account for the night-time smells? On one occasion I was woken in the very early morning experiencing significant odour.</p> <p>SA responded: We understand that odour can travel in that way and we have considered this aspect</p> <p>JR: Where I live has been bearable but there have been reports of intense odours in the early morning.</p> <p>SA responded: We cannot comment specifically but we do consider wind movement and meteorological aspects when investigating all complaints and throughout this period.</p>	
<p>5. Meeting close</p>	
<p>There were no further questions or comments and the meeting closed at 17.00</p>	
<p>6. Next meeting</p>	
<p>It was noted that the next scheduled liaison meeting was due to be held on 7 December at 16.00, but agreed that a further extraordinary meeting would be held to provide an update. Date to be advised.</p>	<p>ALL</p>