

Beddington waste transfer station July incident briefing

This briefing note has been prepared for the South London Waste Partnership, Joint Waste Committee, September 2019 as an update of the recent waste transfer station incident and the next steps following the 11th July.

Location overview

The Beddington Waste Transfer Station is a separately permitted facility which has its own waste and fire procedures in place. It is located near to the Energy Recovery Facility (ERF) and landfill area which forms part of the larger Beddington site (Appendix one).

The waste transfer station is used by Viridor to receive waste collection vehicles from the South London Waste Partnership including bulky deliveries from HRRCs and fly tip removal loads. Vehicles collecting mixed recyclables, green and food waste safely tip their loads into the waste transfer station. This then enables the specialist collection vehicles to continue their rounds within local communities. The material is then loaded onto larger vehicles before being transported to specialist food waste, composting and recycling facilities. The bulky or fly tip removal loads are transferred to the ERF for inspection, shredding or delivery to the waste bunker.

This is a common process in the waste management industry to reduce the number of vehicles required to transport waste material. The SLWP is supported by another waste transfer station, operated by Viridor, in Kingston.

Overview of the incident

During the mid-morning of 11th July 2019, a small fire started within an incoming load of material delivered from the South London Waste Partnership. When handling the material, smoke started to appear from within the pile of waste, before flames appeared after approximately 45 seconds. The Viridor team activated its emergency procedures, evacuated the site and the London Fire Brigade (LFB) attended the site and managed the fire. This continued until the evening of the 11th when a fire check was started and the LFB departed site.

The London Fire Brigade crews from the local fire station have been attending the Viridor site on an ongoing basis for familiarisation sessions with the Beddington ERF and wider site team to ensure that, in the event of an incident, the crews have accurate records on their files and are familiar with the site surroundings.

The fire was restricted to the waste transfer station and did not impact on the energy recovery facility or landfill area, which form part of the larger Beddington site. Deliveries to the ERF were temporarily diverted whilst the initial phase of the fire was managed. Impact on recycling and waste collections was minimal.

The local community liaison group were emailed, and this was followed up by a series of telephone calls to members of the community immediately after the start of the incident. A number of media enquiries were fielded by Viridor, and a statement was drafted. The community liaison group were emailed again at the end of the day on the 11th July, and then on the 12th July to confirm the fire had been extinguished.

In the days and weeks after the incident

The site team have increased their observation checks, including with thermal imaging equipment on the material stored in the waste transfer facility, and continue to monitor waste during its time in storage.

The cause of the fire has not yet been identified. The way waste fires are managed results in the waste being handled and turned during the process of fighting the fire, as a result it may be difficult to identify. Experience of our waste site operations suggests a likely cause may be attributed to lithium ion batteries or barbecue coals. These items are the main cause of waste site fires across the UK.

The Environmental Services Association (ESA), the trade body representing the resource and waste management industry, reports that of the 510 fires reported by ESA members across the UK in 2017-18, at least 30% were attributed to lithium ion batteries, up from 20% in the previous year.

The Environment Agency officer for the regulation of the Beddington waste transfer station attended the site on the day of the fire and continues to liaise with Viridor and the London Fire Brigade to continue its regulatory process.

The London Fire Brigade is carrying out an investigation into the fire. The findings will be considered carefully and will feed into a separate Viridor investigation, which is also underway.

Upon conclusion of the investigations, the Environment Agency will determine whether any permit breaches occurred and if all appropriate measures had taken place. Viridor will share an update of its findings and will work with the SLWP and the London Fire Brigade to raise awareness of the measures in place at the site to minimise the risk of fires. Viridor will also communicate with local residents to raise awareness of the 'right thing, right bin' message, to help prevent items such as lithium ion batteries from ending up in the residual waste stream.

Appendix one

Aerial photograph of the Beddington site (September 2018)

