

Upton Bishop Parish Council (UBPC)

Drainage, Ditch and Grit Bin Survey with Balfour Beatty (BB)

15th February 2021

Introduction – Sewerage Issues

On Friday 15th January, Balfour Beatty representatives Paul Hunter and Neil James met with members of the Upton Bishop Parish Council, Keith Cornwall, Alison Feist, Mike Robins and Brian Spencer. The purpose of the visit was to:

- a) Highlight to BB the lack of maintenance that has been carried out around just a section of the Parish (as an example of our problems) that has contributed to flooding during recent heavy rainfall. This flooding has been made worse due to water not being able to enter ditches and gullies because of the lack of grips and the lack of cleaning and jetting of gullies.
- b) Review the condition of the drains and gullies through Upton Crews, around Crow Hill, at Tanhouse and Phocle Green. Interestingly, only two days prior to the meeting, BB sent a jetting vehicle to attend to some of the issues on the Upton Crews section of road known as Church Road ahead of our walkaround. Despite this many of the gullies were still full and unserviceable on the day.
- c) **Discuss the problems encountered at Powell Croft sewage treatment works over Christmas – Paul Hunter originally stated this was nothing to do with him (this was a fair comment as he is part of the Highways Team), but we discussed it on the day, and this clearly is a huge issue that a part of BB is responsible for although it is unclear who.
See Appendix**
- d) Review the state of grit bins in light of the 'audit' carried out by BB in 2019

Summary

Sewage Treatment Works

Referring to the Appendix, it is clear that there are some huge concerns over poor maintenance and the disproportionate costs related to the Powell Croft site which led to homeowners, but apparently not tenants, receiving demands for arrears on their sewage bills in the week commencing 1st February 2021. It is still unclear whether Connexus is expected to recover the same £500 arrears from its tenants as a result of the apparently extortionate charges imposed by BB for managing the maintenance of this site.

Additionally, it is clear that whilst charging HC £12,000 pa to manage the unit, nobody has taken any action on the faults reported back to BB by Metrord. Whilst this is not in Paul Hunter's remit he did discuss BB's role in the maintenance. This is a serious matter concerning a different part of BB and we need HC to look into the charges and the response to faults and issues raised by Metrord. As has been shown, Powell Croft residents are being expected to pay a hugely disproportionate amount for their sewage disposal as a result of contracts agreed between HC and BB that are totally unreasonable

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The entire management and cost basis of the Powell Croft unit needs review. Residents should not be paying disproportionate charges, maintenance visits should be reinstated to 3-monthly with appropriate charges to all residents, and Metrorod reports need to be checked and corrective action taken when faults are reported which is not currently happening.

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Appendix

This appendix has been compiled using the best data we can elicit from HC and other sources. We are prepared to be corrected on any of the data used but confirm that it has been provided in good faith. There are five known private sewage units in the Parish and a new Welsh Water unit.

Location	Owner	Manager	Maintainer	Visits per Year	Costs per year	No of Customers	Cost per household per visit	Cost per household per annum
Pomona Grove	Connexus	Connexus	Connexus	4	£600	10	£15	£60
Springmeadow	Guinness	Guinness		4	£600	8	£19	£76
The Pastures	Unknown							
Powell Croft	HC	BB	Metrorod	2*	£12,000**	26	£231	£462
Birtletons	WW	WW	WW			4		TBA

*The last 4 maintenance records were requested from HC and that shows only 2 visits per year in 2019 and 2020 even though Connexus used to visit 4 times a year

** This figure is quoted in writing to a local resident by HC. This seems to be the basis for the subsequent payment demands. It has also been suggested that this may rise.

Powell Croft

On 23rd December the local alarm sounded at the unit. The Clerk made a number of calls over the Christmas period to Welsh Water and HC. Welsh Water eventually resolved the issue by making someone at HC realise that this was their unit.

Photograph showing raw sewage spilling out on 29th December – 6 days after the alarm sounded



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They in turn called BB who finally sent Metrorod to cleanse the site 6 days later. By this time raw sewage was overflowing onto the B4224. Local residents had put up with the alarm sounding for 6 days and nights over Christmas.

Metrorod did a fantastic job of clearing the site and should be congratulated, but it is now clear that this incident should never have happened, and it has highlighted the extortionate charges that are being levied by BB to manage the maintenance of this unit. They appear to do nothing other than instruct a sub-contractor for which they are being paid many thousands of pounds.

Under the Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation, the PC has been compiling data and information. A local resident was informed by HC of BB's £12,000 charges; Guinness, Connexus and the Moody Cow supplied other data. Local homeowners in Powell Croft have recently received bills of £500 to cover arrears for sewage charges for 2019, according to a letter to a resident this was to cover BB's charges.

Connexus have told us that up to 2 years ago, they maintained the unit for HC and visited 4 times a year.

HC have told us that they maintain the unit 2 times a year although they indicated that this would change to 4 times a year. The immediate concern is that BB charges will double to £24,000 as a result.

Metrorod have supplied information regarding their work schedules and costs:

- For the callout to cleanse the site they charged for a full day's work, two men and two tankers at a cost of £1,600 which seems not unreasonable. This bill was sent to BB so it is possible that HC received a bill which included BB overheads for simply picking up a telephone. This needs to be investigated.
- Metrorod should undertake 3 short inspections per year and one major one, details of which have been provided. This confirms they only visit twice a year. The short visit is £450 for 1.5 hours. Although no costs have been provided for the longer visit, by pro rata it should cost in the order of £1,650. The total costs for the year are, should therefore be,

$£450 \times 3 = £1,350$

$£1,650 \times 1 = £1,650$ – this may be higher as they have to de-sludge the unit on this visit

Total = £3,000 – this represents a cost to each householder of £115 per annum

In truth, for the last two years they should only have been paying £2,100 or £81 for the two visits. It is hardly the fault of the residents that HC have negotiated a contract with BB with a disproportionate management fee.

It is difficult to understand why BB are charging HC £12,000 to deliver this service and why HC think it is reasonable to pass this onto the residents without question.

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Worse if this is being repeated across the county, BB could be realising hundreds of thousands of pounds profit for doing absolutely nothing at taxpayers' expense.

The £500 bills sent to residents is totally out of proportion to the cost of the maintenance and ignoring the fact that residents have already paid their 2019 to 2020 sewage bills in advance against bills sent 12 months ago. HC have a duty to the residents to examine the terms of the BB contract and costs and get value for money from its contractor. They also need to confirm if this figure will double when the maintenance goes back to 3-monthly and explain why.

In a letter to the residents HC have claimed that the unit was blocked with wipes and other sanitary products. Having worked on wastewater sites, I can state that this is perfectly normal, and their removal considered part of routine maintenance when the filters become 'wragged up'; not a pleasant term but it is what it is. The letter goes on to discourage the emptying of cooking oil and motor oil into the waste although there is no mention of either in the report and neither were a contributory factor.

In January 2019, Metrorod reported that an additional tanker was needed to be sent to empty the Main Holding Tank - no record that this subsequently happened

In August 2019, Metrorod repaired the effluent water tank float

In March 2020 (2 months late), Metrorod attended site and fully emptied the chamber of effluent waste. This was done twice as the tanker was filled to capacity and had to return. The tank was presumably much fuller than they expected it to be. Pump No 1 was reported as faulty but no subsequent action appears to have been taken to repair it.

In August 2020, Metrorod reported that the Aeration Chamber required jetting at the next visit, there is no job report to say this was done. It was recommended that this was done at the next scheduled empty but presumably, this person would not know maintenance had been reduced to 6-monthly and not 3-monthly.

On December 29th Metrorod visited the site and reported the sorry state they found. The unit had overflowed and No 1 pump failed. The report states they found the inlet chamber to be blocked but it is not clear why the alarm was sounding or what it is linked to.

These reports contradict a statement made by Helen Beale in her email to the Upton Bishop Clerk dated 18th January that the site is not routinely emptied. It clearly is but needs to be done more frequently. Given the extended period of lockdown as a result of Covid, it is not beyond reason that the unit is receiving a much greater level of waste discharge than normal so this, combined with previous reports of the unit being over full, should also have been a reason for considering bringing the routine visit forward. It appears no-one is reading the reports.

The findings in August suggest that Metrorod had assumed the next visit would take place three months later prior to Christmas when the recommended jetting would take place. This, of course, did not happen because HC had taken the decision to reduce maintenance visits to 6-monthly with no evidence to show this would be acceptable.

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Overall, there seems to be no system in place for carrying out repairs and maintenance tasks reported by Metrorod and this will have likely contributed to the problems that came to a head on 23rd December. This, surely, is part of BB's responsibility but nobody appears to have been reading the reports. To suggest that this is the fault of the residents is, quite frankly, deplorable. It should be pointed out that of the 26 households, there is only one child under 5, probably 5/6 women young enough to be using sanitary products and several single residents. Lack of maintenance visits and response to problems reported by Metrorod are far more likely to be the major factor.

Given that the tank was full and needed emptying in January 2019 and again in March 2020, it must be easy to determine from records when it was next due to be emptied. Adding Covif lockdown into the mix means this should have been done sooner, not delayed. Given the comments made during the August 2020 visit, anyone reading the report would have concluded that it would not last until the next visit in March and a visit prior to Christmas would have been sensible but apparently nobody was reading or taking action on the Metrorod reports. It, therefore, raises the question what were BB doing for their £12,000 pa.

Finally, there is no evidence that the alarm system is linked to any remote monitoring point and the statement by Helen Beale that the system was awaiting a spare part is not borne out by any of the previous 4 site visit reports.