

Report to: Lead Member for Transport and Environment

Date of meeting: 10 November 2025

By: Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Title: Installation of fire suppression systems at waste transfer stations

Purpose: To seek Lead Member approval to the installation of fire suppression systems at Maresfield and Pebsham waste transfer stations.

RECOMMENDATIONS: Lead Member is recommended to:

- (1) Note the heightened increasing risk of fires at the Council's household waste transfer stations and the proposal to install fire suppression systems;**
 - (2) Subject to approval by Council to the variation of the Capital Programme to include this proposal, agree a 50% contribution towards the installation of fire suppression systems at Maresfield and Pebsham waste transfer stations; and**
 - (3) Delegate authority to the Director of Communities, Economy and Transport to finalise the written agreement relating to fire suppression systems between the Councils and Veolia.**
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1. Background

1.1 Maresfield and Pebsham waste transfer stations (WTS) are service critical hubs for the management of household waste in East Sussex. Waste and recycling from household collections are delivered to these transfer stations by the borough and district councils where it is bulked up and transported to sorting and treatment facilities. Maresfield and Pebsham handle approximately 45,000 and 84,000 tonnes of waste respectively each year and are operated and insured by Veolia as part of the Integrated Waste Management Services Contract (IWMSC), the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contract.

1.2 Waste fires are becoming increasingly common due to the growing numbers of lithium batteries in household waste and recycling, often linked to improper disposal of consumer electronics. Despite campaigns to encourage proper disposal, there were over 1,200 battery fires recorded in bin lorries and waste sites across the UK in 2023.

1.3 There have been 45 fires at Veolia sites in East Sussex and Brighton & Hove over the last 3 years, fortunately, none have resulted in damage to the infrastructure. The last major incident was a night-time fire at Hollingdean WTS in Brighton in August 2019, which resulted in the facility being out of action for over a month. This caused extensive disruption to waste collection services in Brighton & Hove and generated significant negative publicity and concerns from residents and stakeholders. A fire suppression system was subsequently installed in 2020.

1.4 In September 2024 there was a small fire at Pebsham WTS. This closed the site for a day and required support from the fire service, but fortunately there was no damage. However, despite a relatively short closure period, the impact felt by district and borough collection crews

was great, with crews spending several hours in additional travel time to tip at alternative sites. The incident demonstrated that alternative sites for tipping waste are limited and that a major fire at Maresfield or Pebsham could cause widespread disruption to bin collections for weeks or months.

2. Legislative requirements

2.1 There is now a legal requirement for fire suppression systems at sites that store combustible waste in a building, as directed in the Fire Prevention Plan (FPP) guidance first published by the Environment Agency in March 2015 (updated in 2021). Whilst the Council's waste facilities pre-date this guidance, the Environment Agency has the power to impose a FPP on existing permit holders in certain circumstances, which include following a major fire, a change of operator, or if the operator wishes to vary other conditions in the environmental permit.

2.2 The Environmental Protection Act 1990 sets out that district and borough councils are entitled to claim tipping-away payments from a county council if directed to tip waste outside their district boundary. If a fire disabled one of the Council's facilities, the Council would be duty bound to pay tipping-away payments until the facility was rebuilt, or an alternative facility provided.

2.3 Whilst the Council's PFI contract with Veolia offers some financial protection through the application of unavailability deductions when a facility cannot accept waste, these are capped and therefore if the facilities were lost, the unavailability deductions would only cover a few months of tipping away payments.

3. Supporting information

3.1 To secure the sites from structural damage, major service outage and protect from additional financial risks, Veolia, East Sussex County Council (ESCC) and Brighton & Hove City Council have provisionally agreed to jointly fund the costs to fit sprinkler systems to the Pebsham, Maresfield and Hove sites. Veolia are not under any contractual obligation to contribute funding but have agreed to fund 50% of the costs at each of the three sites. Brighton will contribute 50% of the costs at Hove and ESCC will contribute 50% at Maresfield and Pebsham.

3.2 Veolia has carried out preliminary design work, site investigations and market engagement to develop and cost the solution at each site. Veolia received planning consent for the required alterations at the Maresfield facility on the 15 August 2025 and at the Pebsham facility on the 22 September 2025. Veolia is able to proceed with the construction phase of the works, pending ESCC drawdown of funds.

3.3 The construction programme is estimated to take 23 weeks at Maresfield and 28 weeks at Pebsham. Works inside the tipping halls will take place at night and weekends to minimise the impact on day-to-day tipping operations.

3.4 The cost per site (including a 10% contingency) is shown below. These costs are based on quotations from Veolia's preferred suppliers.

Facility	Costs: April 2025	ESCC contribution
Maresfield WTS	£893,192	£446,596
Pebsham WTS	£1,471,649	£735,825
Phases 2&3 project management	£65,413	£32,707
Total	£2,430,254	£1,215,127

3.5 The financial risk of claims for a change in law and tipping away following a serious fire at East Sussex transfer stations is subject to regular review. At the last review, the value of this particular risk was assessed at £2.27m. Whilst it is acknowledged that fire suppression systems cannot guarantee that property damage and disruption to services will be prevented, the installation of fire suppression measures will reduce the risk to a more acceptable level and safeguard the sites beyond the end of the PFI contract in 2033, when the transfer stations and fire suppression systems revert to ESCC ownership. Additional financial information is set out in an exempt report later in the agenda.

4. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

4.1 The proposal to install fire suppression systems is supported by the East Sussex Fire Service, the Environment Agency and insurers, and is considered industry good practice. It will help mitigate the risk of a major business continuity event impacting waste collection services across the county and increase the resilience of ESCC waste management facilities through the current waste PFI contract and beyond.

4.2 There is an ongoing risk of a qualifying change in the law and tipping away claims against the County Council, should there be a major fire at one of the transfer stations. This proactive approach would align mitigations consistently across sites and stabilise the ongoing risk.

4.3 Veolia has agreed to a contribution towards infrastructure which could otherwise be an ESCC cost. This provides ESCC with reduced financial liability and supports wider commercial contract arrangements.

4.4 The Council's waste team will continue efforts to support residents in safe recycling; however, the increasing risk of fires is likely to remain as demand for electronic products grows. The Council must therefore protect its assets and service operations effectively to mitigate both service and financial risks.

4.5 The Lead Member is therefore recommended to note the heightened increasing risk of fires at the Council's household waste transfer stations and the proposal to install fire suppression systems.

4.6 Subject to approval by Council to the variation of the Capital Programme to include this proposal, the Lead Member is recommended to agree a 50% contribution towards the installation of fire suppression systems at Maresfield and Pebsham waste transfer stations.

4.7 Finally, the Lead Member is recommended to delegate authority to the Director of Communities, Economy and Transport, to finalise the written agreement relating to fire suppression systems between the Councils and Veolia.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

Cllr Roy Galley – Maresfield & Buxted
Cllr Charles Clarke – Bexhill East

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None