

Increasing access to sustainable sanitation services in Freetown, Sierra Leone

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Since January 2016, WSUP Advisory and its partner GOAL have supported Freetown City Council (FCC) in its efforts to improve faecal sludge management services in Sierra Leone’s capital city. This Practice Note provides an overview of project activities, challenges and results to date.

On-site sanitation in Freetown, Sierra Leone

Over 90% of the population of Freetown (1.1 million people) rely on on-site sanitation. However, only a very small proportion of the faecal sludge collected in pit latrines and septic tanks is disposed of at Kingtom, the official treatment and disposal site. Most faecal sludge is illegally dumped into drains or natural waterways or buried on-site, presenting serious health and environmental risks.

Freetown City Council (FCC) is the authority responsible for contracting, supervising and monitoring local sanitation services, with support from the Ministry of Health and Sanitation (MoHS), which issues guidelines and provides on-going technical assistance to local authorities. Until recently, however, FCC’s role was limited to public toilet management and the enforcement of sanitation regulations and by-laws.

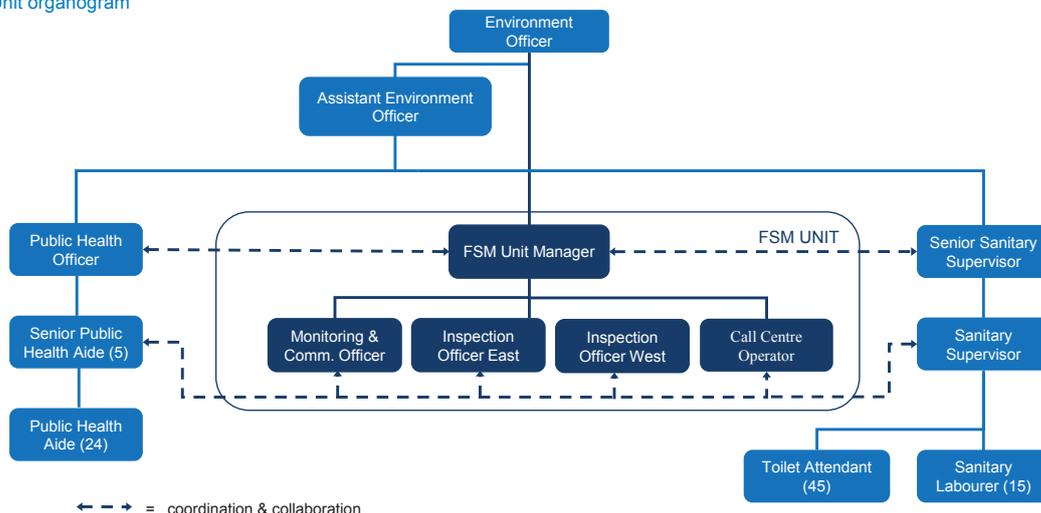
Developing an enabling environment for sanitation businesses

An initial assessment, undertaken by WSUP Advisory in early 2016, revealed that the vacuum tankers operating in Freetown were under-utilised. Frequent repairs to their second-hand vehicles led to them spending significant time off the road. Perhaps more importantly, at city level, there was limited active demand for vacuum tanker emptying services.

This, combined with logistical issues such as poor roads and no adequate FSM treatment and disposal facilities, meant that most service providers could not grow their businesses and FSM service coverage in Freetown remained low. If FSM in Freetown is to improve, existing private sector providers will need to increase their capacity to deliver services city-wide, but this will only be possible if the enabling environment in which they operate is also strengthened.

WSUP Advisory and GOAL have been working with FCC to create and sustain a more positive environment for FSM businesses. This is a complex objective, but several steps taken over the last three years demonstrate that progress is being made. Four of the most significant actions are explored on the following page.

Figure 1: FSM Unit organogram



Establishing a new FSM Unit

Project partners designed an institutional and functional structure for a new FSM Unit within FCC, which was established in October 2016 (see Figure 1). During its first year of operation, WSUP Advisory worked with FCC staff to develop its FSM strategy and workplan. WSUP Advisory established Standard Operating Procedures for the Unit and for FSM operations, covering staff health and safety, daily operations and customer acquisition, latrine emptying, faecal sludge transport and disposal, recording and reporting. The organisation provided training, on-the-job mentoring and monitoring and evaluation tools for Unit staff.

Starting a call centre

A call centre was established to inform the public about available FSM services and to channel demand to existing service providers. Initially paid for by project funds, the call centre's staff costs are now covered by FCC. An FCC-led FSM public awareness campaign in late 2017 publicised the call centre which led to an upturn for the VTO businesses. The call centre is seen as a positive development by private sector operators although the initial upturn has not been sustained in a consistent manner beyond early 2018.

Improving FS treatment and disposal facilities

A common obstacle to efficient FSM service delivery cited by private sector operators is poor access to the official treatment and disposal site, as site roads are often blocked by solid waste or deep mud. A WSUP Advisory assessment of Kingtom identified short-term measures to improve access and facility operations while an alternative site was identified and developed by FCC; this plan was presented to key stakeholders in October 2017, where they recognised the need for the site's rehabilitation and agreed to the plan's implementation. This is now being supplemented by the African Development Bank as part of its emergency response to the Freetown mudslides of August 2017.

Supporting monitoring and enforcement activities

GOAL has continued to work with the FSM Unit during 2018 to strengthen monitoring and enforcement. Unit Inspectors coordinate with public health aides in the municipality to ensure that VTOs and manual pit emptiers provide emptying services in line with the SOPs. By fining members of the public whose sanitation facilities break public health by-laws, FCC seeks to deter others from breaking the law and encourage greater use of approved pit emptying services.

Results and challenges

The work undertaken over the last three years has raised the profile of FSM services in the city and helped FSM Unit staff develop their understanding of key sanitation issues while increasing their capacity to address them.

However, despite business development support provided to the three best-performing VTOs during 2017, these private sector providers still face significant challenges in investing in new vehicles and equipment and maintaining these vehicles. Low demand for FSM services remains the key barrier to sustaining FSM businesses in the city. The enabling environment for urban sanitation in Sierra Leone remains weak in critical areas including financial flows, institutional capacity and private sector enablement; the challenges of working in such an environment should not be underestimated.

However, the step-by-step approaches proposed by WSUP Advisory and GOAL will encourage the municipality to work alongside the private sector to promote and improve services, and to incrementally implement the approved SOPs so that the private sector is consulted, trained and supported as they work to strengthen and expand their businesses at city level.

Next steps

Following the election of a new municipal government in March 2018, the mayor established a sanitation sector working group to develop a 4-year transformation plan. WSUP Advisory and its partners have been invited to participate in this working group.

FCC is keen to upgrade the fleet of vacuum tankers providing FSM services in Freetown. GOAL is providing the capital and managing the procurement process for the purchase of a new vacuum tanker, which will be leased out to the private sector. FCC and private sector operators have been involved in the development of the technical specifications for the vehicle.

WSUP Advisory is drawing from its own experience with the SWEEP model in Bangladesh to develop a leasing model which is appropriate to Freetown and will serve to move the entire market forward.¹ This model has been developed in discussion with the relevant departments of FCC and the planned procurement process is expected to take place in early 2019.

1. WSUP (May 2017) From pilot project to emerging sanitation service: Scaling up an innovative PPP for citywide faecal waste collection in Dhaka.

Credits: The work described in this Practice Note is part of the project 'Strengthening of the regulatory environment and improved public infrastructure for faecal sludge management in Freetown', delivered by WSUP Advisory and GOAL in partnership with FCC. Author: Jane Olley, Technical Manager, WSUP Advisory. Thanks to Amrita Mahtani (GOAL) for her valuable inputs. Series editor: Sam Drabble. Design and coordination: Rosie Renouf.

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