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SUBMISSION TO BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY INQUIRY INTO GREEN WASTE COLLECTION CHARGES

Thank you for your invitation to submit my thoughts on your Committee's Inquiry into the Green Waste Collection Service. I welcome the invitation and I would have liked to discuss the matter in person with your committee. However, I am afraid I am not in Birmingham on 23rd September so I hope these written comments will suffice.

CONTEXT – BIRMINGHAM DOES NOT GET A FAIR DEAL

I have been raising concerns about the changes to the green waste collection service with the City Council since early this year. In doing so, it is important to emphasise that I fully understand the context in which the changes have been made. Birmingham continues to be hit unfairly hard by cuts imposed by central government. The way some Conservative politicians complain about the impact of green waste and other changes whilst simultaneously acting as cheerleaders for the Government is disgraceful. Shallow photo-opportunities next to piles of green bags are no substitute for standing up for a fair deal Birmingham. I highlighted this issue on my website in April:

<http://richardburden.com/2014/05/green-waste-collection-local-people-deserve-better-than-double-talk/>

However, this does not alter the real problems which people have experienced with the introduction of charges for green waste nor the need for the City Council to change course.

ORGANISATION AND INTRODUCTION OF THE CHARGE

First, there were real problems with the implementation of the changes when they were first introduced. The kinds of cases my office took up with the City included:

- Delays running into several weeks in delivering green bins
- Issues with residents' not being able to pay for the green waste service unless they have a debit or credit card.
- Residents who had ordered the wrong item (either bags or a bin) being effectively told "tough, you have to live with what you've got"
- Generally off-hand and poor customer service, of which the above was an example

RECYCLING SITES

In addition, there is little doubt that the introduction of the green waste charges added considerably to the extra pressure which the City's household recycling sites get in the

spring of each year as residents undertake more gardening after the winter break. The problems around Lifford Lane were particularly acute as there were already big traffic hazards on adjacent roads unrelated to the green waste issue. For example I have been raising traffic hazards on Melchett Road since last year and my colleague Steve McCabe and I have continued to take the matter up over the summer

<http://richardburden.com/2014/06/calling-for-urgent-action-on-lifford-lane-congestion-and-traffic-danger/#more-1939>

I am pleased that some changes to the traffic management system have alleviated some of the problems on Lifford Lane itself somewhat. It also seems clear that congestion has been eased considerably when, at weekends, domestic customers have been able to use routes inside the site which are reserved for commercial vehicles on weekdays. I think this indicates the City should look into the possibilities of finding more radical ways of separating domestic and commercial tipping. It should also be noted that the Melchett Road issue is still a problem throughout the year which the City Council needs to address in cooperation with businesses on the Kings Norton Business centre campus.

FLY TIPPING

There is little doubt, however, that the issue that has caused most widespread anger amongst my constituents has been the piles of bags that have ended up littering streets, often for long periods. The problem seems most acute in areas where there are grass verges alongside pavements. Grass verges on residential streets are common in constituencies like mine and therefore areas like the Northfield District have been severely hit.

I am convinced that simply responding to the dumping of green bags by putting yellow stickers on them saying the bags will not be collected is not the way forward. There is no doubt that people who have paid £35 for their green bin get angry if they hear that people who have not paid will have their bags collected anyway. However, there is rarely any reliable way of identifying which house a fly-tipped green bag has come from unless the culprit owns up. Therefore the chances of the Council being able to track down and charge people doing fly tipping green waste are usually remote.

The result is that bags simply accumulate. Once the problem starts and is left unattended, moreover, it only gets worse. Not only do more green bags pile up but the piles themselves attract fly tipping of other items. That, in turn, leads to a general impression of more mess on the streets. And when that happens, things go from bad to worse. Mess breeds mess. Tidy streets are more likely to stay tidy.

All fly tipping is an offence but the Council still has a responsibility to keep the streets clean whether or not it is able to apprehend the fly tippers. I believe the Council should approach fly tipping of green waste in the same way as it would do any other fly tipping. Bags should not be left littering the streets for weeks on end simply because they contain green waste

rather than something else. I am pleased that the city Council is now responding more quickly to my frequent reports of fly tipped rubbish in my constituency but there is still a long way to go.

None of this is to excuse fly tipping. It is anti-social behaviour. Fly tipping garden waste is as unfair to neighbours as fly tipping anything else. That is the case whether you are in favour of charging for green waste collection or against it. This is why the tone of the Conservatives' so called "garden tax" campaign is so irresponsible. It is geared to give residents the impression that if fly tipping takes place, it's the Council's fault, rather than the fault of those doing the fly tipping. Most people will not believe that such political campaigning absolves themselves of their own responsibility to play by the rules. But some will. Conservative campaigners should remember that. They may believe that their photo-calls next to piles of green bags will win them votes but the campaign message is shallow. It does not sit well with their Party's frequent proclamations that individuals should take responsibility for their own actions.

In the article below I tried to strike a different balance. It says that the Council should act on its responsibilities for clearing fly tipped rubbish more quickly. It also underlines the important of local representatives in advocating on behalf of the community and, yes, there is even a photo there to reinforce the message. But it still makes clear that fly tipping is anti-social behaviour by those who do it. I am pleased to say that the article has had a very positive response from the public.

<http://richardburden.com/2014/08/fly-tipping-in-longbridge/>

CONCLUSIONS

Lastly, there is the question of the green waste charge itself. Again listening to some of the political comments that have been made in Birmingham over the last few months, you would think that anything other than free collection of green waste is unknown. That of course, is far from the truth. It is not many years ago that Birmingham itself did not collect green waste at all as part of its normal refuse collection services. Many other Councils have charged for a long time or they have introduced charges more recently in response to government cuts to local government funding. Even next door to Birmingham, Conservative-controlled Bromsgrove charges for green waste collection. It is interesting that the Conservatives who often complain loudest about green waste charges here are silent when asked to comment on the situation in Bromsgrove.

However, no local charging system can work properly if it is not seen to have credibility. Unpopular or not, it still needs to command public consent. Whether because of problems with the organisation of its introduction, the expansion of fly tipping or congestion at recycling centres, the fact is that in Birmingham green waste charges have not been able to

command the public consent achieved in other areas to date. I therefore believe that the Council must change course and my recommendation is that the charge be dropped.

Whether the green waste charge is dropped or modified, however, there are additional actions which the City Council should take. These include changes to the way recycling sites work and a more imaginative approach to the encouragement of community composting and other initiatives. The new Cabinet Member has indicated her support for looking at these kinds of issues and I welcome that. The Council should also welcome, support and spread best practice when local communities themselves act on these matters. In my own constituency New Frankley in Birmingham Parish Council undertake excellent work on environmental matters and deserve more “joined up” and consistent support across City Council Departments.

And throughout all the above, the City Council should ensure that the culture in its departments is focussed far more on customer care. At a time of unprecedented Government attacks on the City Council’s ability to deliver services, unpopular decisions are unavoidable. However, there is no excuse for the Council appearing to behave in a remote or high-handed manner in the way customers are treated. On the contrary, it is at times like this that a focus on customer care is even more important both on the part of the Council itself and on the part of the contractors it commissions.

I hope the above assists the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in its Inquiry.

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