

Further submissions about Waste, recycling and street cleaning

Stephen Hammond MP submission to Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel

I am writing on behalf of the residents of Wimbledon who have been blighted by litter and late waste collections since the contract with Veolia came into force in October 2018.

On a nearly daily basis I am contacted by constituents regarding Veolia's performance. These complaints touch upon all elements of the Council and Veolia's duty to deal with waste, and cover street litter, overflowing public bins, fly tipping uncollected private bins and litter covering the streets after the bin collection.

Fly tipping has been a specific problem in that there is often a dispute over whether it is the Council's duty, or Veolia's, to deal with the waste. While disputes like this continue, residents suffer.

I have also held community clean up sessions with local councillors and residents, and we were all shocked at the volume of rubbish we managed to collect.

Last year we were informed that the number of missed bin collections has increased by a third, the target for removing detritus from our streets has not been hit since April, and 25% of sites were considered to be below standard for litter collection in June and July.

In my correspondence with constituents, and from my own experience around my constituency, I have seen no evidence that this has situation has been improved.

Merton Council should be scrutinised for the poor procurement of this contract and the full costs of be made transparent. The Council has a history for poor contract management this must improve and a clear plan for such should be subject to scrutiny.

Veolia must be held to account for their performance on behalf of the Council Tax payers of Merton. Having bins collected on time and walking down clean streets are a basic quality of life issue, and one of the most fundamental duties of a local authority.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Hammond MP

Edge Hill Area Residents' Association

(These remarks are based on experiences in the Edge Hill/Darlaston Rd/Worple Ave area covered by EHARA. We are sure that these experiences are shared by other areas.)

When Veolia took over the cleaning/waste disposal contract we hoped (optimistically) that we might see the end of the deterioration of these services which had been apparent for several years. Unfortunately, we were wrong.

Although it appears that most of the problems over the new bins and collections have now been solved, there are still some outstanding, which seem mainly to relate to small, purpose-built blocks of flats, all of which fell straight through a serious crack in the new system. The classifications ("communal" or "household") seem to have been made completely randomly, and at least one such block in the EHARA area (4 Darlaston Road) is still incorrectly classified. The problem now seems to be that it is difficult for a member of the public or one of our Councillors (who have worked tirelessly on this problem) to contact anyone either in Veolia or in the Council, in order to receive simple, direct answers to the problem. We believe a nominated person (either Council or Veolia) should take responsibility for ensuring that these matters are followed through. It really isn't a difficult problem, it just needs direct communication and joined-up working. These are two of the things that are seriously lacking in this whole system.

Street cleaning, however, goes from bad to worse. Long gone are the days of regular automatic street cleaning. The only way to get a residential street cleaned now seems to be for several people separately to complain – on the Council's website, of which more later – and if we are lucky this may be followed by some attempt at cleaning. It appears that a full clean, i.e.: pavements, roads, gutters and gullies, requires the separate attendance of at least three teams of workers. It is very rare indeed for all three teams to appear in one road within a week of one another. This is wasteful and inefficient.

Edge Hill itself has areas which are overhung with semi-deciduous trees. These trees shed leaves in late spring rather than in autumn. This appears to be a totally alien phenomenon to Merton Council (or Veolia) who make no attempt to address this annual occurrence. Thus, some of the steepest parts of the hill remain covered in deep drifts of spiky, leathery leaves for months, despite all attempts by residents to get them cleared. The leaves gradually break down into mulch, which blocks the gutters and gullies, causing flooding at the bottom of the hill, and turning the pavements into dangerously slippery footpaths. (My husband, a pensioner, has nearly fallen over several times because of this). All of this could be so easily avoided if the "weekly inspections" which the Council claims to make of all roads, resulted in any action.

I personally spoke to a worker with a large pavement cleaning machine which was stationary on Edge Hill. He told me that the pavements were so bad that the tank of his machine was full so he would need to take it back to the depot at Colliers Wood to empty it. We never saw him again. The point where he stopped work was still visible several weeks later.

Darlaston Road and Worple Ave suffer particularly from weeds in the gutters, some of which attain the height of small shrubs. The more these weeds are allowed to take root, the more difficult it becomes to clear the gutters, hampering drainage of rainwater to road gullies. This negligence is actually making the work harder for those who eventually have to do it – thus, it takes longer to do, and prevents the workers from going on to another job. So, the cycle is self-perpetuating.

Several EHARA members now make a point of going out at intervals to clear the human-generated litter from the pavements, because it is not acceptable to us to live in such an untidy, dirty area (which is, incidentally, a designated Conservation Area). Surely, the presence of two large schools on Edge Hill should flag the area up as being at extra risk of litter?

We are told to put all complaints on the Merton Council website. We have found it very difficult to do this, as the website is poorly structured. The site is frequently out of service, and recently the page for complaints about street cleaning disappeared completely. Even when it is up and running it requires information to be repeated, will not accept information unless the format is totally in line with its requirements, refuses to accept photos of more than a pathetically small 2.3mb (even using monochrome and putting them through the email system, my photos are never less than 4mb) and won't accept a complaint from a particular source unless any previous complaint from that source has been cleared. The two complaints may not be for the same problem, but that doesn't matter. A clear, simple, working channel of communication for complaints, preferably with a back-up option of speaking to a human being based in Merton, is urgently needed.

All of these examples simply underline the fact that neglect, confusion, lack of responsibility, and inflated bureaucracy lead to bad services, dirty streets, unhappy Council Taxpayers and, ultimately, a great deal of extra man-hours, fuel and cost (taken from the tax payers' money) to put right things which should never have happened in the first place.

Meanwhile, regular visits to residential parts of Westminster, which also uses Veolia's services, show clean streets and daily patrols by workers with large carts, carrying brooms, shovels, etc. It is also a fact that Westminster's Council Tax levels are substantially lower than those of Merton. It can be done properly, so why isn't it?

Sally Gibbons
Chair, EHARA

Eastfields Residents Association

The issues at Eastfields Estate are ongoing. Nearly a year down the line, and still nothing has been fully resolved. The council have promised to provide weekly collections until a long term solution can be found, but I have still had to ring up most weeks in order for the collections to take place.

It seems to me that all three companies, LB Merton, Clarion HG and Veolia are too busy blaming each other rather than genuinely trying to resolve the issue.

It was said publicly at the site meeting held at Eastfields Estate by Siobhain McDonagh MP on the 11th July, that a technical meeting will take place between LB Merton, Clarion HG and Veolia in the following couple of weeks. Surprisingly, this meeting has not taken place yet. The latest I have heard is that it will take place on the 4th September. Why does it take nearly 2 months to hold a meeting? If all three parties genuinely wanted to resolve this issue, surely this meeting would have taken place by now?

I have heard that Clarion HG and LB Merton want all town houses on the estate to remain as wheelie bin collections (which make sense) and the flats return to communal bulk bins (which also makes sense), yet we have heard that Veolia are refusing to accept this as a solution. I cannot understand why this is such a difficult concept and why Veolia would refuse to carry this out.

All the residents on the estate are absolutely sick and tired of being treated so badly.

Is it because Eastfields Estate is being regenerated so Clarion HG are happy for us to live in filth?

Is it because we live in Mitcham so LB Merton don't care about us?

Or is it because Veolia have now got the contract and will only do the bare minimum that they have to?

Will residents receive a rebate on their council tax bills, due to all the issues we have faced? It seems very unfair that we have to pay for such a shoddy service

Ann Baldwin