



Councillor Mark Fryer  
Leader  
Cumberland Council  
Cumbria House  
117 Botchergate  
Carlisle  
CA1 1RD

28<sup>th</sup> August 2023

Dear Mark,

Like all of my constituents, I was delighted to see an end to nearly five months of bin chaos across the Workington constituency. But I am bitterly disappointed to see us simply end up close to where we should have been back in April. That you have allowed this to drag on unnecessarily for 19 weeks should be a source of shame for the council, who should have been using that time to set out a positive vision of its future, rationalising buildings and resources, and identifying readily available savings in order to prevent a repeat of the huge council tax hike we saw across Allerdale this year.

More than that, the effort that the council has expended to fight against paying refuse collectors in Allerdale the same as those just down the road should be a significant source for shame for Labour councillors and a Labour council.

You had eleven months running a shadow authority to plan for the 1st April. When you made the decision last summer to harmonise the wages of the top tier but not the frontline, I warned you that this would happen. Those warnings - like my numerous requests to meet with you, the unions, and our bin men, to ensure a deal was thrashed out in order that bins could be collected again – went ignored.

In 19 weeks, residents have seen and heard nothing of the portfolio holder with responsibility for waste collection. Similarly, not a peep from the portfolio holder for finance – at the stroke of whose pen this dispute could have ended before it began. And nothing from either of your two(!) Deputy Leaders. But all serve at your pleasure, and all have taken their lead from you – their invisible Leader.

They say history repeats itself. In late-May 2019 when the Conservatives took control of Allerdale Borough Council, residents across the borough had suffered disrupted bin collections for weeks – and senior councillors, including you, were nowhere to be seen. The council had been under Labour control, with many of the same faces at the top as have been heading up this latest debacle in Cumberland. Similarly, the council had just hiked residents' council tax by the maximum legally allowed on the 1st April – ironically, the day your bin chaos (part one) had started.

So, I have been in the same position. Thousands of angry residents wanting their bins collected – wanting a refund on their council tax. But unlike your Executive, we faced it up – I levelled with residents about the problems and the solutions. Marion Fitzgerald, the Council Leader at the time, sat late into the night personally answering emails from residents, often giving them the news they didn't want. Contrast that with the thousands of emails on behalf of residents from my office to the council that have gone unanswered.

Despite nothing having been done in the first 7 weeks of that disruption by your then-Executive, and despite the solution coming at a cost a significant multiple of that required in this latest dispute, on a budget 1/20th of the size, the disruption to recycling collections was still just a fraction of the length of this year's.

We took huge decisions, such as ending 25 years of Labour privatisation of council services and bringing bin collection back in-house, and we were visible and honest with residents throughout.



Your Labour MP at the time had been silent during those initial weeks under your control. But no sooner had you lost control of the council after the elections, and her calls in the press for a council tax refund started:

*"If it's genuinely going to take as long as two months to resolve then they absolutely need to look at reimbursing people for this huge inconvenience. This is one of the key services the council has to provide. People are having to make a decision about what to do with their rubbish and how to manage it." <sup>[1]</sup>*

**Former MP for Workington, Baroness Sue Hayman**

Having been put in your position previously by an incompetent Labour council, I had some sympathy with your position on council tax refunds. I knew the arguments that the council would proffer – that only a small portion of the council tax funds waste collection, and that the payment of council tax is not contingent on the regular delivery of services.

To date, I have resisted calls from many of my constituents asking me to call for a council tax refund. I wanted to have faith that the council would be pulling out all of the stops to find a resolution. But it has been increasingly apparent throughout that that wasn't the case. The council has negotiated in bad faith throughout - publicly attacking workers who simply wanted to be paid the same as others doing the same job for the same authority, just down the road; constantly seeking to muddy the waters on pay rates to confuse the ratepaying public; disingenuously attempting, initially, to suggest that the council weren't the employer and weren't in control; and letting officers of the council and Allerdale Waste Services front up where councillors should have been – a gross dereliction of leadership.

So I have now decided to add my name to those calls for a refund, because of both your inaction and the disingenuous, at times callous, actions you have taken.

In 2019, Labour wanted a refund for just two months disruption. My constituents have had five months of disruption, dragged out needlessly by the council only to end up where you should have been in April.

In 2019, we recognised that residents had had both Labour's maximum council tax increase and significant disruption to services. So in April 2020 their council tax rise was just £2/year on a band D property.

In April 2023, despite the cost-of-living pressures faced by all of my constituents, your executive chose to hike council tax for Allerdale residents by 6.7%, almost the highest rate in England – a £110/year increase.

Since then, all they've had to show for it is cancelled recycling collections; huge disruption to domestic waste collections; cuts to frontline services; a significant decline in the tidiness of our town centres; a proliferation of weeds; and the cancellation of levelling-up projects, such as the Maryport swimming pool funded by this Conservative government.

If your current plans play out, they're also soon to be hit by another huge increase in council tax, their weekly bin collections are at risk of being moved to fortnightly, and we hear again that you're considering charging for garden waste collections – a plan that we had to stop in 2019.

I believe that the very least you can do is to refund Allerdale residents this year's increase, and I will be gauging my constituents' thoughts on that.

Yours sincerely,

cc. All councillors

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newsandstar.co.uk/news/17758420.workington-labour-mp-sue-hayman-demands-allerdale-council-tax-refunds-fcc-environment-bins-chaos/>