

## PRIORITY QUESTIONS FOR COUNCIL 3 FEBRUARY 2016

### **Councillor Agatha Akyigyina to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture**

Would the Cabinet Member update us on the performance of our libraries?

#### **Reply**

Merton's Library Service is currently reporting record performance in 5 of its 6 key performance indicators. These figures include record numbers of people using our library service and going online to access our new e-services. In recent user surveys satisfaction is at near perfect levels with 100% of children satisfied with our services and 99% of customers satisfied with our e-services support. Resident satisfaction is also at record levels.

The service goes from strength to strength and the redevelopment of Colliers Wood Library is well underway. Since 2011 we have kept all our libraries open and extended their opening hours. We have received a lot of interest from central government and other boroughs in our delivery structure. Our schools and libraries membership scheme is only the second of its kind in England, giving all our school children first class access to libraries and reading.

### **Councillor Linda Taylor to the Cabinet Member for Education:**

I would like to pay tribute to the staff and pupils at those various schools in the borough which were recently faced with bomb and security threats for the way they conducted themselves. This was clearly a very concerning experience for all involved. Can the Cabinet Member reassure me that a full review will be undertaken of the relevant emergency procedures in place to support the borough's schools?

#### **Reply**

Over 20 schools nationally and in Europe were disrupted by the spate of bomb scares over the last week or so. I understand that the majority of the schools affected both in the UK and in Paris received the same recorded message, probably distributed over the internet. It is thought that some of the schools may have been called by copycat hoaxers. The schools in Merton which had to respond to these alerts included Raynes Park, The Ursuline, Wimbledon College, Ricards Lodge, Bishop Gilpin and Harris Merton.

Our schools managed this very difficult situation with their usual professionalism and worked in partnership with the council and local police to minimise the disruption and restore business as usual as soon as possible. The young people also responded magnificently and I am sure the whole chamber will agree we owe our school communities and police colleagues our thanks.

Due to the number of these alerts around the country Avon and Somerset Police have been appointed to lead an investigation into the circumstances and instigators.

The Director of Children's Services is also liaising closely with senior officers in the Metropolitan Police to consider learning from the events and future responses should they re-occur. Council officers, our secondary heads and local police colleagues have also met to look at any learning from events and to ensure we refine our critical incident responses accordingly.

### **Councillor Marsie Skeete to the Leader of the Council**

Would the Leader update us on how we work in partnership with businesses in the borough to ensure a fair deal for local consumers?

### **Reply**

The council provides regulatory services such as licensing, trading standards and environmental health which work in partnership with local businesses to ensure safety and a fair deal for local consumers provide advice on how to comply with the aim of businesses treating consumer fairly. However, it is accepted that many businesses will not comply with a rule unless they see the benefit of doing so and action would often follow in such cases. We are in the process of building a new relationship with the business community which involves changing the perception of regulation as red tape to making businesses understand the direct links between complying with "fair trading" laws and the effect that this has on consumer trust, retention and therefore growth. Businesses will come to understand that customer retention brings superior profit growth and our "rules" act as a guide book to treating consumers fairly before, during and after a transaction i.e. providing excellent customer service, thus retaining them.

We also support businesses to be more economically viable and reduce their own costs through the package of business support that is in offer, which should translate into a better service for residents. This includes:

- Merton's Business Support Service where businesses get free advice in growing their business, support with high growth and signposting on matters such as accounts, recruitment or business law.
- Business Rates discounts, especially encouraging businesses to locate in Merton and create jobs
- Shop Front Improvement Grants and Business Premises Improvements Grants that enhance the business offer and make the high street more attractive
- Brighter Business programme where the Council provides support to businesses to reduce their energy consumption.
- Supporting Business improvement Districts (BID's) who collect a levy which can be used to deliver services as decided by the BID Board. For example in Wimbledon Town Centre this has enabled the BID to host events and improve the public realm for its visitors.

You can see a full list of the business support package on our website at [www.merton.gov.uk/business/businesssupport.htm](http://www.merton.gov.uk/business/businesssupport.htm)

**Councillor Oonagh Moulton to the Cabinet Member for Finance:**

It is this administration's ambition for Merton to be 'London's best council by 2020'. Can the Cabinet member outline in detail a) the criteria by which residents and councillors will be able to judge whether or not the administration's goal has been achieved and b) how Merton's residents have been consulted on this to ensure their views help inform what it actually means to be 'London's best council by 2020'?

**Reply**

The administration recognises that there are major challenges facing all London local authorities at this time, due to funding pressures and demographic change. However, as a businesslike council, we strive to achieve the best that we can within those limitations, and we want our staff and councillors to aim to be the very best.

The criteria for measuring success results both from listening to the public and from analysing potential. As politicians we consult residents about their priorities in the most meaningful way at regular intervals through the ballot box, and at the last local elections, there was significant support for policies such as:

- A council tax freeze
- A call out service for residents to contact the council about dirty streets and a weekly refuse collection service
- New primary school places
- Maintaining a library service
- Opposing police cuts by the London Mayor
- Opening a new leisure centre in Morden

In addition, we are developing a performance management framework that draws on local and national indicators for us and our partners and aim to capture the progress we make towards our ambition. We anticipate that our Residents' Survey will feature heavily, as it already prioritises their key concerns as well as other existing indicators that allow us to benchmark our performance with other local authorities (such as the performance indicators monitored through London Councils, for example).

In developing service plans and TOMs (Target Operating Models) service leads have, on a service-by-service basis, examined the current requirements of customers, and undertaken analysis to anticipate future need. This will be critical in helping us understand how our services best meet customer expectations and, therefore, what should be measured.

**Councillor Dennis Pearce to the Cabinet Member for Finance**

Could he update us on the level of government funding we can expect as part of the local government settlement announced by government in the week before Christmas?

**Reply**

We are still awaiting final details of the settlement, but in the provisional settlement announced in December, Merton's Settlement Funding Assessment in 2016/17 (i.e.

Revenue Support Grant and Baseline funding from Business Rates) reduces by £9.4m (14.15%) to £55.5m from the equivalent 2015/16 figure of £64.9m. Over the period 2015 /16 to 2019/20 Merton's Settlement Funding Assessment is expected to reduce by 41.8% in real terms.

**Councillor David Williams to the Leader of the Council:**

What sort of 'Momentum' does the Leader see behind his maintenance of a 'business-like' approach to the pursuit of a Council tax freeze and the associated cuts in services?

**Reply**

I appreciate the Councillor's attempt at humour. To answer what I think may be his substantive point, he knows I am a man of my word. I promised residents a council tax freeze and I intend to deliver on that promise.

I'm sure he recalls his own brief tenure as Leader of the Council when he managed to hike up council tax by almost £100 whilst still attempting to shut down All Saints Day centre and Friends in St Helier at a time of increasing local government funding. Since being relegated to opposition by residents, he and his party have changed their policy and in 2014 promised a reckless 10% council tax cut that would have decimated local services in Merton – and was rightly rejected by residents.

From the tenor of his question it appears he and his party have now changed their policy on council tax for a third time. It remains to be seen how residents will reward them for what could be seen as indecisiveness or weakness but I am sure is simply down to not understanding the impact of his own government's assault on local services, the Conservatives in government having cut more than 40% of local council's funding since 2010. He is in good company however as it seems the prime minister is similarly unaware of the impact of his own policies, having written to his local Conservative council complaining about the cuts his government has caused.

In contrast to the Conservatives, Merton's Labour administration have taken a business-like and honest approach to council tax. We won't hike it up by £100 like he did. And we won't cut it by 10% like he later promised. And we won't pretend it's not the government's fault that services up and down the country are being decimated. We'll continue to freeze council tax just like we promised while looking after those who need our help the most. That is what residents voted for. That is what they expect from us. And that is what they will get.

**Councillor Tobin Byers to the Cabinet Member for Finance**

Could he update us on his approach to council tax?

**Reply**

Council tax has long been a top concern for Merton residents but as a result of this Labour administration's council tax freeze it is no longer the top concern, vindicating

our approach on this issue. However, although it is no longer the top concern, it is clear some residents still struggle to pay, due to the high cost of living, particularly in relation to housing costs. I think many residents feel that as a tax it's not as fair as it should be, with residents on lower incomes paying a greater share of their income, proportionately, compared to more affluent residents. I believe this is why residents voted for a Labour administration whilst also rejecting the Conservative's unfunded 10% council tax cut which would have decimated local services.

In line with our promise to residents my approach to council tax has been to freeze it again this year, delivering on our manifesto commitment. We have also agreed to continue to ensure those on the very lowest incomes continue to be protected from council tax increases. Due to our business-like approach and good financial management, we have also been able to mitigate some of the worst effects of the government's cuts to local services. We have used our July Principles to focus on the services residents value the most and to look after those most in need of our help.

**Councillor James Holmes to the Cabinet Member for Education:**

Could the Cabinet Member advise the latest position regarding the site for a new secondary school and confirm which Merton owned sites are being put forward for consideration?

**Reply**

The council continues to work closely with the Education Funding Agency to identify a site for the planned new Free School in Merton. Two specific options are being actively pursued neither of which are in the sole ownership of the council.

Unfortunately I cannot disclose details of these sites at this stage, in order to protect the commercial interests of the EFA and the council and also to ensure the current owners of the sites are not destabilised. We will make an announcement as soon as we can.

**Councillor Sally Kenny to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health**

Could she update us on the work we are doing to deliver the public health agenda in Merton?

**Reply**

The main statutory duties for public health that were conferred on local authorities by the Health and Social Care Act 2012 include the following:

1. Strategic leadership and advocacy for health and wellbeing
2. Commissioners of services including sexual health and substance misuse
3. Commissioning support to the local NHS
4. Oversight for health protection
5. Production of an independent Annual Public Health Report (APHR) and membership of the Health and Wellbeing Board

Since 2013, the Public Health team have been working across all of these areas to improve health and wellbeing of Merton residents, with the aim of increasing life expectancy and reducing health inequalities:

- Public Health have championed health across the whole of the local authority's business, for instance:
  - Coordination of a Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2015-2018 – *Merton the Place for a Good Life* that covers themes across the wider determinants of health from education and employment to community safety, with a strong focus on prevention and reducing health inequalities, and joint accountability for implementation;
  - Working with planning and licensing colleagues to shape the availability of healthy options on our high streets through responding to alcohol licenses and commenting on planning applications, using public health data and feedback from local residents;
  - Current work with colleagues across the council from all Directorates on a 'whole systems approach to obesity', part of a Sector Lead Improvement Programme through the Association of Directors of Public Health.
- As commissioners of services from smoking cessation to sexual health, we are working to ensure value for money (efficiency and effectiveness) in both procurement and performance management. From 1st October 2015, Public Health took on commissioning of the Healthy Child 0-5 services, which includes health visiting and Family Nurse Partnership (more intensive support for young parents aged 19 and under), which provides an opportunity for closer working with our children's centres, and development of an integrated 0-19 pathway across the local authority and NHS.
- Public Health provide valuable commissioning support to Merton CCG, with a regular programme of Health Needs Assessments (HNAs) to inform commissioning decisions and strategies (recent HNAs include Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Cancer, Neurological conditions, Falls Prevention, Dementia Cardiovascular Disease, Mental Health), and input to a number of the CCG's Clinical Workstreams e.g. 'Keeping Healthy and Well'. We have ensured that common prevention indicators are built into the CCG Operating Plan, linked to the 2015-18 Health and Wellbeing Strategy, and have worked in partnership with MCCG to procure a new Community Health Services contract to start in April 2016, ensuring that the core service specifications have a stronger focus on prevention and referrals for the four key lifestyle factors: alcohol, physical activity, healthy diet, smoking.
- The Director of Public Health maintains oversight for health protection, for instance assurance of cancer screening programmes, and development of an action plan to improve immunisation services in the borough which was recently reviewed at Scrutiny.
- Merton's second Annual Public Health Report was published in autumn 2015, titled 'The Time for Prevention is Now: Keeping People Healthy Reduces Health Inequalities'. It celebrates the progress made in improving public health since the transition of public health from the NHS to local government, as well as the challenges that remain to embed prevention across the business of the council and partners in order to reduce health inequalities.

In recognition of the strong work of council to deliver the public health agenda in Merton, the council has been shortlisted in the Public Health category of the 2016 Local Government Chronicle awards.

