

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.

Supplementary Question

I would like to thank the cabinet Member for his answer, I understand the Cabinets Library taskforce is interested in Merton's Library success story could he update us on this national recognition for what Merton is doing?

Reply

I am very pleased to tell you that Cathy Settle, the Chief Executive for the leadership for Libraries taskforce, that's a taskforce that has been put together on I believe behalf of David Cameron, came to visit us in November and she was so impressed with our project for automatic enrolment of Primary School children that she's paying us a special extra visit on Library's day, this Saturday at Wimbledon Library. She's asked us to help upscale the scheme, to cover the whole of England. I think we should be particularly proud of that.

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.

Supplementary Question

I'm very pleased by what we've done learning from the events last week. But can we guarantee that any recommendations or approvals are fully and speedily implemented by Merton. We also agree to bring a report to scrutiny on what lessons can be learnt from this conflict particularly in respect to advice and support here in Merton.

Reply

There is a lesson to be learnt from last week, but I believe the Schools handled the matter correctly in terms of evacuating the schools. Secondary school heads have met with the Director of Children's services, in terms of how future issues can be approached and there's also been updated guidance issued by the Police. Our schools are a generally safe environment but there was clearly a threat for schools last week. In terms of scrutiny that's a matter for the scrutiny committee to determine, but I myself would have no problem with that.

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

Supplementary Questions

Can you update us on the shared regulatory service and our improved resilient service we can offer to residents and businesses.

Reply

We do have a regulatory service partnership with the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames, which is a intelligence lead, risk based and proportionate enforcement. That partnership is growing and others are looking to join and in fact we are the home authority for a number of big well-known companies such as the jewellery channel, ebay, paypal, the rugby football union and many, many others so the partnership is growing and there’s also quite a lot of low cost training for businesses, we have chef of the year competitions, safer food better business and challenge 25 in relation to underage selling of restricted products and I know that others look probable to join that partnership.

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 business like 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.

Supplementary Question

I'm interested to see the cabinet member refer to the annual residents survey as a way of measuring whether Merton achieves London's Best Council. Of course he admits to members that there has been no reference survey here in Merton this year. So first of all there's no baseline for us to measure our performance, so could you tell me why he simply stood by and allowed the annual residents survey to fall by the wayside for 2015/16 rather than ensuring us transition from one survey to the other and what is he going to do to ensure that the opinions of local residents are not only sought but actually viewed by this Council.

Reply

Thank you for your question, we do aim to be London's best Council and I thank our opposition for being one of the best oppositions and I'll go along with that to continue to keep us on our toes. The true answer to this is that the other company that provides the survey were unable to offer that in the last 12 months or so. We have had to start looking at the alternative ways of offering our services and what that will provide. It is important to us that we survey residents, I know it's important to her to survey residents, heaven knows I'm sure she, like me will be hammering on a few doors in the coming weeks listening to people

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.

Supplementary questions

How has a further cut in our funding from central government affected the immediate and financial strategy and savings we will have made in the coming years?

Reply

I share with him his disappointment in the Governments approach in the funding of Councils, it's very disappointing in the way they have been going about things. The reality is that the level of funding is not as yet fully determined, there are still number of things being decided even at this late stage by the Government. But taking away the certainty that we need, 10 million pounds per year by the end of the midterm financial strategy obviously creates a great deal of challenges for us as a Local Authority in balancing the needs of our residents, particularly our most vulnerable residents and in balancing that against the determination we have to be a business like and efficient council and balancing obviously the needs of the residents who are still suffering because of the very high cost of living that we are experiencing in the country.

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.

Supplementary Question

I thank the leader for his reply, but he deals with an inaccurate history, for example ignoring Ken Livingstone £20 increase real term reduction against RPI over 4 years by contrast triple the rate of inflation increases average over 97 to 2006. But appears on the wrong side of the future, this is not 2014. Our neighbouring outer London Boroughs, Labour - Croydon, Lib Dem – Sutton and Conservative – Kingston are all planning to protect services for the vulnerable by increasing their council tax by 3.99% in 2016/17. My question is this he may wish to blame the government for his predicament but what will it take for him to sacrifice his political legacy and put real leadership before self-interest.

Reply

I thank the former leader of the conservative party for his question. He referred to saying this is not 2010 or 2014. At 2014 you're still with us because it's still your manifesto charisma. You've said nothing against it you've not retracted it, you're still working on it to reduce and our council tax by 10%. A most negligent, indulgent policy I've ever seen. And you may use the term momentum in your original question, you may use that term, many of the labour party are inclined not to use that term. But you know to describe this Local Authority there are better terms, like ambitious, enterprising, fostering, vigour and if I need to describe your lot, opposite given the decisiveness, its shilly shally and it continues to be so

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.

Supplementary Question

Will he be listening to the voters of Merton and continuing his commitment in keeping council tax affordable for all of our residents?

Reply

It's quite true to say that these are very hard times for the people in the London borough of Merton particularly when it comes to the cost of living and housing. It's a great worry for a lot of people, so we do need to consider the impact of any increases of Council tax and then we need to consider that Council tax actually went up £100 for Merton residents when the other side where running the Council and that clearly had an impact on them as well. We also need to listen carefully to voters, who let's be honest about it, only 18 months ago made a decision about what they thought the Council tax should be and they were offered the opportunity of voting for a 10% council tax cut, but they decided not to go with what the conservatives promised from the Merton element but to vote for us and a Council tax freeze. And just as we listen to voters we need to listen to the whole community and that includes the scrutiny bodies because this is still a live matter and we have not yet come to the budget meeting and it's not yet been decided but clearly the impact that having to pay more council tax will have on the people will be a huge consideration for us.

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.

Supplementary Question

My question to the cabinet member is to firstly thank him for his answer, but to ask him if he is now in a position to rule out split site schools, something of which I've asked him to do previously, which parents and educationists and the DFE are so worried about.

Reply

In terms of split site schools, we, as the administration, have been clear that we do want a single site for our secondary schools; we believe that our schools are best placed on one site and that continues to be the preference of the administration. We hope to be in a position shortly that use/location of a secondary school site, but can I assure Council that is something of a high priority for this administration because we are committed to providing first places from 2014 and as an administration we fulfil that.

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 MCGG 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.

Supplementary Question

Could I congratulate the Cabinet member and her department for being short listed LCG public health award and ranked in the top 6 out of 32 London Boroughs for healthy and sustainable food in the latest report published by the natural health charity Sustain. Could she comment on how this was achieved please?

Reply

I'm happy to pass on congratulations to the public health team as I think they deserve it for their hard work, they have been hard working and very creative in their thinking, in their way of working. Case intervention is front in what they do and so I think it's also to do with Merton Councils support. I would also like to use this opportunity to welcome our director of public health. Who I am looking forward to working with, she has a history of delivering good results in her previous jobs, so I look forward to her continuing in that way here in Merton. So I'm looking forward to working with her.

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