

Councillor Priority Ordinary Questions to Cabinet Members

1. Cllr Tobin Byers to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

Can the Cabinet Member update me on progress towards delivering the new Morden Leisure Centre?

Reply

I am pleased to be able to report that Cabinet recently agreed the project scope and the preferred site for the new Morden Leisure Centre. It will be located close to the access road to Morden Park Car Park on the frontage with the main arterial A24, London Road; the site known as MLC3

Cabinet also agreed that the range and mix of facilities to be included with the new centre would be prioritised in line with the recent public consultation findings so far as the budget set aside will allow.

Already various surveys have been commissioned regarding the ecological, landscape and ground conditions of the site and so local people will see those investigations taking place in the coming weeks.

Cabinet also accepted that in the delivery of this new leisure centre the existing Morden Park Pools would be demolished after the new one is open and the site would be reinstated to for of the heritage landscape.

Although they have not requested pre-decision scrutiny of this matter since it commenced last year, I am delighted that the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel have advised that they would wish to play a role in this project as it evolves and as such will receive regular updates on progress being made at their meetings.

Supplementary

Can the cabinet member assure me that it is his firm intention that the pool will remain open while the new one is built?

Reply

Yes indeed I can confirm that. When we were first planning this, I was insistent we should keep the current leisure centre open for as long as we possibly could, while the new one is being built. This wasn't just for sound business reasons but because we wanted the people who use the leisure centre currently should be able to continue to do so, in particular the children who swim there need to do so without interruption. It looks like this is what we will be able to do.

2. From Councillor Michael Bull to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:

Does the Cabinet Member believe that green spaces should be protected?

Reply

National, London and Merton Planning policies offer strong protection for our parks and open spaces and we operate within these guidelines at all times.

Merton enjoys a large number and a diverse range of different types of open space from sports grounds and play parks to gardens of horticultural excellence, urban nature reserves and large wilderness areas such as Wimbledon and Mitcham Commons.

Nonetheless, there will be times when we will make careful changes to open spaces to benefit the community as a whole, for example we have taken advantage of the need to expand Dundonald Primary School to ensure that we obtain the best new investment in the Recreation Ground for a generation, with new changing rooms, a new community room, an expanded play area, an additional tennis court at the same time as increasing the amount of real open space, readily accessible by the general public. We have achieved this partly by replacing the footprint of old buildings with more appropriate new facilities with benefits for both children and their parents and park users. Similarly, in Morden Park we intend to move the new leisure centre to an area that is currently green space but we will again retain the open space footprint by returning the old site to landscaped green space.

Supplementary

Cllr Judge promised residents of Dundonald back in 2010 that he would replace the covenant on Dundonald Rec that was modified by the council. Will he now honour that promise and put the recreation ground land back into trust for the residents?

Reply

I am very pleased with the scheme we have put forward for Dundonald Recreation Ground, which continues to have all the protection of our excellent planning policy, and it also has the protection of a restrictive covenant. In respect of trusts generally, for parks, we have been open to the idea of trusts. These have to be transparent, in the public interest and financially sustainable. When I have consulted with friends' groups in the past it has become apparent that it is very difficult to achieve those objectives in relation to an individual park or open space. In the future, we will be open as an administration to the possibility of a trust for all our parks and open spaces, but those conditions have to be satisfied.

3. Cllr Russell Makin to the Leader of the Council

Can the Leader outline how Merton will be supporting Small Business Saturday?

Reply

Merton Council strongly support the Small Business Saturday initiative. It is one of Merton's strategies for promoting and supporting the borough small businesses. Merton Council's support for small businesses recently led to the borough being named the 2014 Best All Round Small Business Friendly Borough by the Federation of Small Business and London Councils.

Winning the prize for Best All-Round Small Business Friendly Borough, Merton was recognised for successfully implementing a wide range of initiatives to support and develop the local small business community. By working with partners including Merton Chamber of Commerce, the council has invested over £2 million in high-quality support programmes including the Merton Business Support Service (MBSS), Merton Business Loan Funds and Wimbletech as well as developing industrial estates and creating the Merton Business Directory.

In 2014 the council will continue to support Small Businesses Saturday by talking directly to businesses across the borough and encouraging them to promote and engage with the event. For example, the Mitcham Business Taskforce will be supplying its businesses members with promotional material to display across the town centre. Businesses can also access material independently at <https://smallbusinessaturdayuk.com/>

I will be visiting small businesses in all five of the borough's town centres as I did for the inaugural Small Business Saturday last year, when I went out to "Serve the People". I am a passionate supporter of small businesses and the value they bring to local economies, and this is one way in which I want to show my support and get involved in the work they do. As well as the Leader visiting small businesses, the council publicises small businesses in the run up to the event, encouraging people to shop locally.

Supplementary

As part of his commitment to business, can I congratulate him on our FSB business award, can I congratulate him again on free parking at Christmas, and how does he see this helping local businesses?

Reply

We are delighted to be in a position to support 'Small Business Saturday'. I shall be doing a tour of small businesses, throughout all our town centres on Saturday 6 December. On 5 December we shall be having the Morden Light Up event. I can confirm that free parking for Christmas will be available on 29 and 30 November, 6, 7, 13, 14, 20, 21, 24 and 25 December and this will be a great boost to small businesses here in Merton.

4. From Councillor Suzanne Grocott to the Cabinet Member for Finance:

Does the council have a good relationship with Agilisys?

Reply

The Council does not have a direct relationship with Agilisys as the only services provided are through the shared HR Service which is led by the London Borough of Sutton. However, it is felt that that relationship with Agilisys Payroll Services is positive and responsive. The Team in Rochdale, Greater Manchester is knowledgeable, professional and customer-focused. A robust and constructive client/contractor relationship is tightly managed, by both parties, with the best interests of the four partner boroughs involved in the joint payroll service being the common prime objective.

Supplementary

If they are so responsive, how come after three years they still can't give me a figure for the vacant positions in the council and how many of these are not filled by agency staff. I asked a question at the last council meeting, can the cabinet member provide me with a) a full list of currently vacant positions in the council and b) the current actual employee full time equivalent and head count figures broken down for teaching staff, i.e. teachers/assistants/managers and separately broken down for permanent staff, temporary staff and agency staff, for which I got no response whatever?

Reply

Sharing services like HR with other boroughs and agencies has enabled us to make savings without having to take money out of front line services. This does mean that we have to make compromises in back office services and it does mean that not all the information is always available to us. I have to warn her that while we constantly strive to make improvements if she wants the 'bells and whistles' service she will have to pay for it. We face enormous cuts from government, we have a budget gap of £32m and one of the reasons they lost the election was that no one felt they had a grasp of the money. You can't promise tax cuts of 10% and increases on spending on services – people just don't buy it. So when she is spending more on back office functions to get the information she wants, she has to bear that in mind. She's not fit to run the council.

5. Cllr Sally Kenny to the Cabinet Member for Education

Can the Cabinet Member update me on plans for adult education services in the borough?

Reply

Due to cuts in our funding from central government, the council is facing £32m of cuts over the coming years. This will mean all areas of council services will need to be looked at to see if we can provide services in a more efficient way. We will have to make some very difficult decisions but Cabinet have agreed, as in previous years, that children's services and adult social care should take a lower share of the cuts.

As part of this difficulty process of finding savings, we are looking at how we provide adult education services in the borough. Despite the difficult financial situation, the Cabinet has ruled out ceasing to offer adult education series in the borough. However we do need to make savings or other vital council services will be affected.

Following Cabinet discussion on the 10th November we have launched a consultation with residents as to how we can continue to run the service in a way that offers value for money for tax payers. Five options will be consulted on. Cabinet has ruled out the sixth option, to cease offering adult learning in the borough, and this option will therefore not be consulted on. After considering the evidence, the Cabinet identified a commissioning model as their preferred option. This option, if chosen, would see the council agreeing a contract with other education providers to offer adult learning services in the borough on the council's behalf.

This is recommended because the model would move financial risk away from the council, make the best use of the local providers in Merton and maximise the benefits to the service users by reducing the amount spent on non-teaching activities. This option is also the most likely to provide long term cost certainty and stability to adult education provision in Merton.

Whilst Cabinet has expressed this preference, we are consulting on all the options presented within the Cabinet report except for the one which completely ends the council's involvement in adult education. We are asking residents and other interested stakeholders to consider, and comment on, the five remaining options. The consultation is not a referendum but is an opportunity for evidence to be provided in support of the various options.

The consultation will be live until the 4th January, including a survey and public meetings. No decision will be made until the consultation has concluded and we have considered the strength of the evidence provided by the respondents. A report summarising the consultation results will come to Cabinet in January.

Supplementary

I very much appreciate the difficulties the council is facing and congratulate Cllr Whelton on seeking a way forward that would allow us to continue to offer adult education in the borough. Can he clarify how he intends to ensure any new way of working that focusses on bring the educational attainment and the employment gap between the more and less affluent areas of the borough?

Reply

I assure council that we will continue to offer adult education in this borough. In terms of bridging the gap, we find that extremely important. Currently 80% of the courses take place in the west of the borough. If we take our ESOL 70% of our users are in the more affluent west. This gap has to be addressed. Focussing on employability, focussing on basic skills, and focussing on the needs of the most deprived people in this borough, should be the focus of Merton Adult Education going forward and this is something I believe will happen and should happen.

6. From Councillor Charlie Chirico to the Cabinet Member for Education:

What alternative funding options and income generation strategies is Merton Council considering in order to avoid the closure of the Merton Adult Education centre and protect services for five and a half thousand people across the borough?

Reply

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Due to the volatile funding environment adult education operates in, income generation has been a key part of MAE's efforts to protect teaching even as funding has reduced. Over the past few years MAE have:

Adopted a fee policy aimed at maximising fees from courses within the creative areas generating over £250,000 in income each year.

A new strategy to increase room lettings has resulted in generating increased revenue from events and room bookings

We have held Art and Craft fairs that have generated additional income

Won contracts from the Job Centre Plus to help long-term unemployed people get back into work

Developed a commercial course strategy that has resulted in our securing accreditation from Cambridge and ABE to run specialist courses a new marketing strategy is under development.

Commenced discussions with Kingston University regarding delivering a foundation degree as part of a franchise arrangement with the university which would result in increased income.

However, none of these innovations has protected the service from the funding reductions and the service is still financially vulnerable.

As such we are currently looking at alternative models for adult education and how these could enable us to protect the services we provide to learners. We are currently consulting on five options for the future of Adult Education in Merton.

Each of these options is designed to ensure that we can protect services for Merton's adult learners without impacting negatively on the budget of other council services. Cabinet has explicitly ruled out any option that would involve ceasing to offer adult education in the borough.

The Cabinet, after considering the evidence, has identified a commissioning model as their preferred option at this point. However no decision will be made until the consultation has concluded and deliverable alternatives to the five options proposed will be considered. The consultation will be live until the 4th January, including online and paper forms and public meetings. No decision will be made until the consultation has concluded and we have considered the strength of the evidence provided by the respondents. A report summarising the consultation results will come to Cabinet in January.

7. Cllr Pauline Cowper to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Cleanliness and Parking

Can the Cabinet Member update me on plans to save £1m by seeking a combined waste and greenspaces contract through the South London Waste Partnership?

Reply

THIS QUESTION WILL BE ANSWERED BY THE CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND REGENERATION

Due to cuts to our funding from central government, the council is facing having to make £32m of savings over the next few years. We will need to look at all of our services to see if there are ways of doing them more efficiently or in a different way if we are to protect the most vital services that people rely on and keep council tax affordable for our residents.

Due to the level of the cuts required, every area of the council's services will be affected but as in previous years Cabinet have agreed that children's services and adult social care should take less of a share of the cuts.

We currently spend about £9m each year on waste collection, street cleaning and greenspaces. In the context of the cuts required we need to look at how we

deliver these services in a more value for money way, whilst protecting the things that matter to residents such as a weekly waste collection, the weekly street sweep and keeping all our parks open and well cared for. By working with our three neighbouring boroughs we have identified that we could save around £1m a year by jointly contracting a provider to deliver these services on our behalf. The new provider would be able to offer greater efficiency and economies of scale, working across two, three or four boroughs, that we cannot deliver on our own.

However, Merton will retain the management of our parks and of our waste services, specifying the level of service we expect but with day to day work being carried out by the provider.

Staff have been fully informed and full consultation will take place. Affected staff would be transferred to a new provider, maintaining their current employment rights under TUPE.

The four boroughs are each going through their own decision making processes at the moment and it is envisaged that this process will be completed by mid-January. Subject to approval across all four boroughs an OJEU Notice for the procurement will be published in late January to early February 2015.

Supplementary

Can you reassure me that residents will continue to have a weekly refuse collection and the weekly street sweep and that we will continue to work closely with our friends' groups including Friends of Canon Hill Common and other friends' groups?

Reply

Yes, we will definitely continue with the weekly street sweep and refuse collection. In terms of the friends' groups we will retain, as the council, the responsibility for every park and open space. We anticipate friends' groups continuing to operate in the future through any tender of the contract as they do today and that we as the council should continue to respond to the friends' groups exactly in the future as we do today. The only potential difference is that the staff employed to maintain the parks and open spaces may end up being employed by a private company rather than directly by the council.

8. From Councillor David Dean to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Cleanliness and Parking:

Is the administration planning any changes to the street cleaning service in Merton?

Reply

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In the short term we will continue to expand the use of technology to improve this service. Shortly, a number of 'Glutton' machines will be used borough wide to improve cleanliness and we will be rolling out a bespoke version of the Love Clean Streets 'app' to improve customer contact and speed up the responsiveness of the service.

Supplementary

Can the cabinet member confirm the cuts are more to do with Labour's bizarre obsession with the introduction of wheelie bins. Can she confirm that the cuts in parks maintenance is so that you can introduce these huge bins that nobody wants into this borough?

Reply

Whether we want wheelie bins or not is something to discuss in the future. We are making cuts because the government we have at the moment is enforcing these cuts. We have got to find these savings across our services and you know as well as I do that's not easy, and I don't like that you're calling our streets dirty, and I won't have you standing up in this chamber condemning our staff.

9.

Cllr Marsie Skeete to the

Cabinet Member for Education

Can I ask how the council has celebrated the achievements of our young people in this year's GCSE exams.

Reply

I attended the celebrating success event at the Chaucer Centre in early September when high achieving Young People from all of our schools were congratulated on their achievements and photographed with the Mayor, Cabinet Members and Officers. On November 13th there was an evening of celebration at Perseid School where nominated students from all our schools received certificates and a gift voucher. There were guest speakers and entertainment provided by musicians from Merton Schools.

Supplementary

How did the council celebrate the achievements of young people in this year's GCSE exams, and will the councillor join me in congratulating our young people, parents, teachers, governors and school support staff, in being the only borough in London, and only one of six in the country to have again improved the GCSE results.

Reply

I attended a celebration of success earlier this week and it is great to celebrate all the success in the borough. We have had improved GCSE results over the past five years, are above the national average and the only borough in London to have improved the GCSE results this year. I would like to congratulate all our young people on their magnificent achievement in (lists all secondary schools), in allowing us to have this success. As an administration we are committed to raising standards in this borough and improving our GCSE results. This is a great achievement and hopefully it will improve again this academic year.