

Agenda item 6 – Questions from Councillors

1. From Councillor Iain Dysart to the Cabinet Member for Education

Given that West Barnes children often need to travel long distances to school, and the constant pressure for local development, please could he outline his latest thinking regarding the local provision of school places?

Reply

To ensure local places are available for residents in West Barnes we have expanded Joseph Hood and Hillcross Schools which, while not located in the ward, provide accessible primary school places for West Barnes residents. Burlington School in RB Kingston is the nearest school for a number of residents and this school has also expanded.

We are continuing to review options for any further necessary school expansion and will be keeping a close eye on the first ward level population projections from the GLA based on the 2011 census, which will be available shortly.

2. From Councillor Suzanne Grocott to the Cabinet Member for Finance

The Financial Monitoring Report for November 2012 identifies that around £2million has been spent on redundancies in Children, Schools and Families. For what reason were employees made redundant, how many employees were impacted and how has this been funded?

Reply

The £2m shown as part of November's budget monitoring represents Merton's estimated annual spend rather than year-to-date spend. The figure includes three areas of expenditure:

- £463k relates to the schools element of the pension fund deficit.
- £1.222m relates to early retirement cost which supplements the schools pension if teachers retire before the statutory retirement age.
- £317k relates to estimated redundancy cost.

The redundancy cost is provided for as part of the CSF departmental budget and at November included cost for ten members of staff.

3. From Councillor Richard Hilton to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Following the despicable actions of Labour-run Rotherham Council in November removing three children from foster parents simply because the couple were members of UKIP, can the Cabinet Member give us an assurance that the parents' political views are not a consideration for this Council in adoption and fostering cases?

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Reply

I am happy to assure colleagues that, in general, the political views or affiliations of foster carers and prospective adoptive parents are not a factor in assessing their suitability to care for Merton's looked after children. However, extreme political views – for example where a prospective carer actively supported an overtly racist political party or grouping – would be a relevant consideration. Appropriate supervision and management arrangements are in place to ensure that such judgements are carefully and professionally undertaken.

4. From Councillor Simon Withey to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

As a governor at Rutlish School, I was very pleased that one of our schools officers, PC Chris Couch has been awarded a National Jack Petchey Leadership Award for the outstanding way that he has encouraged and motivated young people in Merton. Will the Cabinet Member join me in publicly congratulating PC Couch and will she endeavour to ensure that the excellent work he does is replicated in schools across the whole borough?

Reply

I am delighted to congratulate PC Couch publicly for the very good work undertaken by him and his colleagues. There is currently a negotiation under way to put in place ongoing arrangements for continuing the work of police officers in schools. There is no doubt that they make a significant contribution to many aspects of school life.

5. From Councillor Oonagh Moulton to the Cabinet Member for Education:

I note that proposed changes to planning rules in England will make it easier for free schools to open in offices, hotels and shops as soon as this Summer.

Given that Merton has yet to announce the opening of a free school in spite of continued pressure for places in the Wimbledon area and the difficulty of finding suitable sites highlighted in the Capita Report, can the Cabinet Member tell us whether like me he welcomes this proposal?

Reply

I am aware that national government is seeking to increase the number of Free Schools across the country and has instigated changes to planning rules in order to support this policy. However, I am sure colleagues will be aware that local authorities do not have the powers to choose whether or not to have Free Schools in their areas. Although they can take a view, supportive or otherwise, the decision to fund and establish Free Schools lies firmly with the DfE.

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6. From Councillor Richard Hilton to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

I understand that the Government is considering taking adoption powers away from Councils with poor adoption rates. Can the Cabinet Member please provide me with figures for Merton's adoption rates since 2009?

Reply

In Merton we share the government's passion to improve the timescales for achieving permanency for children who come into care. This may mean returning children to their home; a member of their extended family becoming their special guardian; or through adoption. In 2012 the government published a series of performance scorecards with a new range of measures on them and for the first time LAs could benchmark their performance. The data covered the period 2008 to 2011.

As a small local authority with a low rate of children in care our actual numbers for adoption will be relatively small. We have however increased the numbers being adopted from 2 in 2008/9 to 9 in 11/12 and we are on track for another 9 in 2012/13.

In 2008/9, when we had a small cohort of 5 children being adopted the average time between entering care and moving in with an adoptive family was 1330 days and our 3 year rolling average 2008-11 was 981.7. This is far too long, albeit that the majority of children in the cohort had complex contextual factors which tend to lengthen the process. Our 2012/13 estimated average timescale is 539.1 days – a reduction of over 791 days – and our 3 year rolling average 2010-13 is estimated as 674.9 – a reduction of over 302 days.

7. From Councillor James Holmes to the Cabinet Member for Education:

In light of recent news about the 100 vacant school places reported in Merton, can the Cabinet Member specify in which planning areas these places are located and is he confident that the Council is not overestimating the number of new school places needed?

Reply

I think my colleague is referring here to information reported in the local press taken directly from a paragraph in a report on school places submitted to the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel in January 2013. What the press report failed to add, however, and what was contained in the following paragraph of the officers' report, is that the GLA school roll projections published in mid-2012 tell us that demand for school places in the borough will continue to rise for some years to come.

The current vacant places are in a number of schools in both the west and

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east of the borough which have enabled the council to ensure every child can be offered a local school in reception year. 100 vacant places out of 2730 across the borough represents less than the 5% which has traditionally been the Audit Commission's ideal level to balance parental choice and value for money.

We are also in the process of analysing data on admissions preferences from Merton residents for September 2013, and the first borough-wide population projections from the GLA based on the 2011 census. Early indications show level/very slight fall in demand for September 2013, though not all the information has yet been received. Projections continue to show a significant rise in demand from September 2014 and beyond. We are closely considering both sets of data to make future decisions, ensuring we provide places where they are needed and protecting the financial position of the council.

8. From Councillor Suzanne Evans to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health

Will the Cabinet Member join me in expressing dismay at the fact the £219million St Helier hospital redevelopment programme is having to be postponed because of continued delays and uncertainty caused by the NHS's Better Services Better Value review? Will she further join me in expressing solidarity and support for the beleaguered staff at the hospital who, in a time when the Government is increasing health spending above inflation year on year, should be looking forward to a bright and secure future, not fearing for their jobs?

Reply

Our local MP Siobhain McDonagh fought a long campaign to secure £219m investment into St. Helier so I am appalled that St. Helier's A&E, maternity and other services may be facing closure as a result of the £370m cuts the local NHS is being forced to make due to the coalition government's failure to invest in the NHS and its obsession instead with wasting money on top down re-organisations of our health service. She is no doubt aware that the Conservative Secretary of State, Jeremy Hunt, has written to the Leader of the Council to confirm that he is the ultimate decision maker. I would therefore hope that the hard working staff at St. Helier and their unions will be lobbying the Secretary of State to halt any plans to close these services.

9. From Councillor Maurice Groves to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health:

How many Merton officers supply the reablement service for the mentally ill?

Reply

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We do not have a specific number of officers supplying a reablement service to people with mental health problems. We currently have a generic reablement service accessible to all care groups, consisting of:

Manager	1 Full time
Organisers	3 Full time
Senior Carers	8 Full time
Carers	35.7 Full time equivalent
Total Officers	47.7 Full time equivalent

10. From Councillor Suzanne Grocott to the Cabinet Member for Finance

(a) How does the Council envisage it will treat any future dividend payments payable from the newly formed "CHAS" company? (b) Is any estimated amount going to be included in the budget for 2014/15 when it is likely any dividend for the year ended 31/03/2014 will be paid? (c) What reduction in the 2013/14 income budget has been made to take account of the removal of CHAS income from the Council's books? (d) What reduction in the cost base has been made to the 2013/14 budget to take account of staff being TUPE'd? (e) What margin is expected to be charged on recovered costs of accommodation, goods, services, staff or any other service provided? (f) Will any of the Directors be Council employees?

Reply

- a) As a central credit to the General Fund
- b) As previous budget papers have indicated, it is estimated that payments of dividend will commence in 2015/16
- c) A net increase in cost of £1,226,000 has been reflected in the budget. This will be shown as a central adjustment in the 2013/14 budget. The actual income budget will be removed after a decision to proceed with the company
- d) A net increase in cost of £1,226,000 has been reflected in the budget. This will be shown as a central adjustment in the 2013/14 budget. The actual staffing budget will be removed after a decision to proceed with the company
- e) Actual costs will be charged with an appropriate overhead/margin for central and fixed costs. The latter will vary depending on the specific service
- f) The composition will be a decision taken when the company is established. The company will be a wholly owned council company and the board structure will need to be appropriate for this situation

11. From Councillor Richard Hilton to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Given the fact that Merton Council and our residents are having to make economies, can the Cabinet Member comment on the very high amount the

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MP for Mitcham and Morden spends each year on postage and does he think this represents value for money?

ANSWERED BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Reply

This is not a matter that relates to council business.

However, Siobhain McDonagh is considered by the electorate of Mitcham and Morden to be extremely popular. For instance, although the national Labour Party's share of the vote fell significantly between 1997 and 2010, her majority has almost uniquely remained consistent at around 13,000. Her desire to communicate more with local residents and to correspond more on their behalf than any other MP seems to be something the people of Mitcham and Morden like.

12. From Councillor Richard Hilton to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Merton has many hard working residents on low wages. Does the Cabinet Member think it is right that benefits should increase by more than average workers' pay rises?

Reply

This is not a matter that relates to council business.

However, I understand around 70% of people affected by the Government's reductions in benefits are in work, and as a result these workers will see their overall income fall. These workers' incomes will not therefore be rising as fast as average workers' pay.

13. From Councillor Linda Scott to the Cabinet Member for Finance

The average ratio of managers to staff in the private sector is reportedly 1:16. What is Merton's ratio of managers to staff, both overall as a council and broken down by department?

Reply

The ratio provided is derived from the self-service element of i-Trent that captures reporting ratios. This is an overall ratio of 5.28:1, which excludes all staff in schools and all casual employees. The appropriate ratio of staff to supervisors will clearly vary depending on the type of work being done. Nevertheless, Harvard Business School suggests an organisation's optimum span of control should be 6X6.

A departmental breakdown is shown below:

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1st Unit Down (From Selected Structure Start Point)	No. of Managers	Positions Reporting to Manager	Employees with No (Vacant Post)	Ratio 1 to ?
CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S	1	2	0	2.00
CHILDREN SCHOOLS & FAMILIES	110	486	11	4.42
COMMUNITY & HOUSING	90	531	0	5.90
CORPORATE SERVICES	98	428	0	4.37
ENVIRONMENT & REGENERATION	94	628	0	6.68
Total Non Schools	393	2075	11	5.28

Total Number of positions = 2086 + 1 Chief Executive = grand total 2087

14. From Councillor Diane Neil Mills to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Please could the Cabinet Member provide a list of all subscriptions received by the council, a brief description of the information provided and the cost?

Reply

The council does receive other sources of income but does not receive subscriptions.

15. From Councillor Diane Neil Mills to the Cabinet Member for Finance

When did Merton council last review all subscriptions received by the council?

Reply

The council does receive other sources of income but does not receive subscriptions.

16. From Councillor Diane Neil Mills to the Cabinet Member for Finance

When does the Cabinet Member expect to be able to answer the question originally raised at the Council meeting of 12 September 2012, as set out below?

“What are the Council’s headcount and Full Time Equivalent (FTE) figures (broken down by teaching/non-teaching/agency) for each year since 2006? What are the corresponding costs (salary/salary plus benefits)?

Reply:

There have been some difficulties extracting the information from the previous HR database. Full information will be provided in due course.

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In the interim, some information regarding the costs relating to more recent years are set out below:

	Staff Costs £'000	Agency £'000
2008/09	79,446	11,327
2009/10	81,875	10,706
2010/11	78,101	10,991
2011/12	74,705	9,778

Reply

The Council's headcount and FTE figures are shown below (Table 1) for the years 2008 onwards. Legacy data prior to 2008, whilst retained, cannot be readily extracted by the Council using the same methodology.

Table 1

Total Headcount

	PAHRIS Dept	PAHRIS Dept	PAHRIS Dept	PAHRIS Dept	PAHRIS Dept	PAHRIS Dept	PAHRIS Schools	ITrent Total
	Chief Execs	Children Schools & Families	Community & Housing	Corporate Services	Environ. & Regen	Total Non Schools	All Staff	*Grand Total
2008/09	65	538	920	534	732	2789	3176	5965
2009/10	46	563	866	505	739	2719	3241	5960
2010/11	45	580	629	433	701	2388	3363	5751
2011/12	7	553	610	500	701	2371	3509	5880

*Average number in year not including Casuals

Year	ITrent Dept	ITrent Dept	ITrent Dept	ITrent Dept	ITrent Dept	ITrent Dept	ITrent Schools	ITrent Schools	ITrent Total
	Chief Execs	Children Schools & Families	Community & Housing	Corporate Services	Environ. & Regen	Total Non Schools	Support Staff	Teaching Staff	**Grand Total
2012/13	3	497	531	428	628	2,087	2,122	1,291	5,500

**Figure as at December 2012 - Does not include Casuals

Total FTE

PAHRIS Dept	PAHRIS Dept	PAHRIS Dept	PAHRIS Dept	PAHRIS Dept	PAHRIS Dept	PAHRIS Schools	ITrent Total
Chief Execs	Children Schools & Families	Community & Housing	Corporate Services	Environ. & Regen	Total Non Schools	All Staff	*Grand Total

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2008/09	63.01	429.82	695.70	495.18	666.49	2350.20	1958.35		4308.55
2009/10	43.26	438.83	654.53	468.59	668.96	2274.17	1990.49		4264.66
2010/11	40.56	426.75	445.37	405.39	626.59	1944.66	2063.96		4008.62
2011/12	5.75	397.55	438.10	408.84	587.92	1838.16	2157.79		3995.95

*Average number in year not including Casuals

Year	ITrent Dept	ITrent Dept	ITrent Dept	ITrent Dept	ITrent Dept	ITrent Dept	ITrent Schools	ITrent Schools	ITrent Total
	Chief Execs	Children Schools & Families	Community & Housing	Corporate Services	Environ. & Regen	Total Non Schools	Support Staff	Teaching Staff	Grand Total
2012/13	2.00	414.39	444.22	402.78	578.73	1,842.12	1,140.67	1,093.81	4,076.60

**Figure as at December 2012 - Does not include Casuals

The Council's cost of staffing is shown in Table 2.

Payroll Costs - Gross Pay

*Gross pay = Total pay for all employees from each payroll, this does not include any on costs

**The PAHRIS data does include payments made to Voluntary Organisations which were paid on Merton's Old Officer payroll

***Old Officers payroll is reducing as all new starters are paid using the New Officers payroll, the only exceptions are new Senior Management staff are added to the Old Officers payroll

Year	PAHRIS Old Officers Gross Pay	PAHRIS New Officers Gross Pay	PAHRIS Teachers Gross Pay	PAHRIS Fees Gross Pay	PAHRIS Total *Gross Pay
2008/09	79,734,868.05	11,252,989.62	40,037,115.80	393,300.65	131,418,274.12
2009/10	84,342,519.43	14,785,665.91	41,651,122.89	2,240.50	140,781,548.73
2010/11	71,043,702.63	16,667,868.51	44,084,986.74		131,796,557.88
2011/12	65,624,768.75	21,768,414.22	46,036,712.56		133,429,895.53

*Total Gross pay for year by payroll

Year	ITrent Old Officers Gross Pay	ITrent New Officers Gross Pay	ITrent Teachers Gross Pay	ITrent Total Gross Pay
2012/13	42,725,202.54	19,356,891.31	34,170,292.19	96,252,386.04

*Total Figure as at 31st December 2012

2012/13	56,966,936.72	25,809,188.41	45,560,389.59	128,336,514.72
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*Annualised Figure based on the totals as at 31/12/12 (Figure at December 2012 / 9 x 12)

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The previous figures were estimates based upon the council's general fund excluding ring fenced school budgets. The latest figures include school based staff where the council runs the payroll.

17. From Councillor Suzanne Grocott to the Cabinet Member for Finance

The Service Plan for Business Improvement (page 104) shows that the number of systems supported will reduce from 129 in 2012/13 to 126 in 2013/14; 120 in 2014/15 and 110 in 2015/16.

Please would you list the 9 systems which will no longer be supported that will result in the reduction from 129 to 120 systems in 2 years?

Reply

This measure of demand was used in an effort to reflect the expectation that over time the number of systems that we support in the organisation should reduce. There is a recognised need for the Business Improvement division to rationalise the council's business systems as far as is possible (within the constraints of maintaining quality services) in order to ensure the costs of technical support are as lean as possible. Generally speaking, a more streamlined and integrated systems architecture will accommodate more efficient maintenance and support. This also reflects more generally good industry practice.

The figures used were estimates of the degree to which systems might be rationalised over time. Therefore it is not practical to give a commentary on which new systems will be introduced and which will be removed, as these decisions will be made on an ongoing basis, depending on the Council's business needs at the time.

We have therefore removed this as a measure of demand, because the figures are best-guess estimates and, perhaps more importantly, because this indicator is better placed as a measure of progress and performance rather than of demand. A reduction in systems per se may not necessarily alter customer demand – the type of systems and the degree of technical skill required for their support are key factors here.

The need to deliver against the strategic aim of rationalising systems, however, remains important to the success of the Division. For this reason a performance indicator has been introduced to track the percentage of bespoke systems, with a view to this decreasing by 15% over the lifetime of the business plan. This measure has been introduced because it is bespoke or highly customised systems that involve the greatest degree of support and maintenance, and require highly specialised technical support, and therefore this performance indicator is felt to work better as a measure of progress in terms of the improving efficiency of the service.

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18. From Councillor Logie Lohendran to the Cabinet Member for Finance:

Can the Cabinet Member provide me with figures for the number of consultants engaged by Merton Council so far in 2012-13 and the amount spent on consultants in this financial year?

Reply

Based on spend assigned to the code that covers this area of spend, £736k was spent on consultants up to the end of January 2013. It has only been possible to gather meaningful consultant numbers for two departments (Corporate and E&R). Their spend totals £298k and this equates to 39 consultants.

As per the table below, under Labour we have succeeded in reducing the amount the council spends on consultants compared to the previous administration.

2008/09	2009/10	2010/11*	2011/12	2012/13 to date 31/01/13
£1,541,939	£1,814,006	£1,767,483	£1,541,509	£736,000

*Figures for 2010/11 relate to the previous administration's budget

19. From Councillor Margaret Brierly to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Please can the Cabinet Member provide me with figures for the number of claims for compensation received by the Council in each of the last 3 years broken down by category; how many of those claims it was obliged to pay out on in each of those years; and at what cost?

Reply

The insurance claim position is as below:

Public liability compensation claims	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
(*) Total claims received (insurance)	293	234	208
Total value of claims paid (insurance)	£403k	£426k	£222k

(*) Note: claims received in one year may take several years before settled

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The breakdown by category is as below:

Public Liability Claims

Value of claims paid	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Potholes	56,338.00	54,246.00	42,726.00
Trips	204,156.00	199,581.00	91,004.00
Subsidence/Fallen Trees	102,634.00	104,797.00	62,746.00
Waste Collection	1,106.00	-	4,496.00
Street Cleansing	17,122.00	7,365.00	-
Schools	723.00	4,625.00	1,755.00
Parks/Leisure	258.00	10,801.00	6,029.00
Miscellaneous	20,882.00	44,898.00	13,285.00
Total	403,219.00	426,313.00	222,041.00

Total claims received	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Potholes	88	49	40
Trips	74	78	76
Subsidence/Fallen Trees	77	56	44
Waste Collection	7	2	15
Street Cleansing	3	0	2
Schools	14	10	9
Parks/Leisure	12	15	10
Miscellaneous	18	24	12
Total	293	234	208

Our internal insurance fund pays for the first £100k of any claim (excess) and then Zurich Municipal will pay any claim that is above £100k.

The Council is protected by an aggregate deductible of £1.5m. In essence this means that the most the Council can be liable for in any one year is 1.5m.

The Council introduced higher excesses about 7 years ago to substantially reduce its annual premiums and increase its own internal funding. This is considered best practice by CIPFA and ALARM (Association of Local Authority Risk Managers).

20. From Councillor Ian Munn to the Leader of the Council

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Does the Leader join me in congratulating Raynes Park on being recognised as the best performing high street in the UK, with the highest levels of business occupancy in the country?

Reply

The success of Raynes Park as a local centre is an extraordinary achievement and demonstrates the value of a joined up approach between teams across the Council and a pro-active community organisation such as the Raynes Park Association. Changing demographics and ‘the Waitrose effect’ have certainly played some part in the centre’s success. Despite tough times for the High Street, Raynes Park, as a cherished local centre, is proving to be very resilient.

The coordination of development and public realm investment between the Council’s Development Control, Enforcement, Highways and Future Merton teams; championed by the local community and Councillors has created a visible uplift in Raynes Park which we are now seeking to emulate in Mitcham, Merton High Street and across our forthcoming regeneration programmes.

21. From Councillor Iain Dysart to the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture

What steps are being taken, in partnership with other boroughs, to widen further the scope of the London Libraries Consortium?

Reply

The London Libraries Consortium (LLC) is not just a shared library management system across 17 London boroughs but it also jointly procures stock and transport services. The efficiencies delivered through these contracts have provided significant savings over the last few years and opportunities continue to be explored. The sharing of best practice has assisted with some of the projects detailed in the Council paper on Libraries and Culture. As the cheapest library service in London and the best achieving on cost versus performance, partnership working is integral to improving the service offer in Merton. The LLC is currently working on joint projects to improve the accessibility of web services and to provide a web portal for customers to provide e-book services in one place from a range of different providers. Merton acts as one of the 6 lead authorities for LLC and will continue to investigate all potential opportunities to improve services for its customers and deliver efficiencies.

22. From Councillor Iain Dysart to the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture

What assurances can he provide that, notwithstanding the huge contribution made to our services by volunteers, they will not be expected, either now or in the future, to substitute for paid staff, and that clear transparent role profiles demonstrating the differences will be maintained?

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Reply

As the Council works to meet the huge financial challenge we face we will be constantly looking at how we can work more closely with volunteers to supplement and complement the services we provide, with the overriding principle that volunteers are there to support rather than supplant our excellent permanent Library staff. In some instances this has already resulted in us looking to utilise volunteers to help provide existing and new services we can no longer afford to deliver by ourselves – the West Barnes library service is a good example of this. I take my cap off to the tireless work of the West Barnes volunteer team who staff the library by themselves on Mondays, and to the professionalism of the permanent staff there who make it possible for them to do so. We benefit hugely from the volunteer capacity and commitment we have in the borough and we will continue to look at how it can play a legitimate part in the changing nature of public service provision; but I will resist any use of volunteers as a cheap way of supplanting paid staff.

The role definition between staff and volunteers is one of the greatest strengths of Merton's new library service operating structure. This clarity has led to Volunteering England highlighting the delivery model as good practice model for increasing volunteer opportunities whilst being sensitive to staff concerns. Clear role descriptions are in place for all volunteering opportunities and a structured induction and review process means that all volunteers are given clear guidance on what they are expected to do. Staff have been extremely well supported with the changes in their roles and all have responsibility for supervising and supporting volunteers. The value that volunteers bring to the service is recognised by all library staff and volunteers are acknowledged for their contribution on a regular basis.

The library service operating structure is built on a structure that a core set of staff will always be required and makes our service more sustainable than other models put forward by other boroughs. There has been a lot of discussion recently about community managed libraries but based on the evidence that we have seen our delivery model provides cheaper services, better quality and a core staffing complement.

23. From Councillor Iain Dysart to the Leader of the Council

I am sure that, like me, he is relieved that Merton is unaffected directly by the recent London Fire Authority proposals to save money by closing fire stations or reducing the number of engines. However, given the possible indirect consequences for our fire service in the event that remote back-up assistance needs to be summonsed from affected boroughs, does he share my dismay that the Mayor of London has chosen to ignore the London Assembly vote and pursue the proposals regardless?

Reply

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I am also relieved that Merton is not directly affected by the proposed LFB cuts. However, the member is mindful that at this stage these are proposals that are out for consultation and are not agreed. Having discussed that matter with our local fire borough commander – Darren Munro – I have been assured that should these proposals go ahead there will be no detriment to Merton.

Nonetheless I sympathise with the residents of other London boroughs who may see their local fire station close and I share your dismay that as yet the Mayor does not appear to have listened to the genuine safety concerns of Londoners.

24. From Councillor Iain Dysart to the Cabinet Member Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

South West Trains have recently decided to close the waiting room at Motspur Park station due to misuse. Yet this penalises the vast majority of passengers, particularly over the winter months. Supplemental to Member lobbying, what influence could he and officers bring to bear upon SWT to reverse their decision?

Reply

Officers have recently initiated discussions with senior representatives at South West Trains in order to understand the full rationale behind the decision to close the waiting room, and explore whether solutions can be found to overcome existing issues.

25. From Councillor Henry Nelles to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:

Dog fouling is an issue of increasing concern to residents I talk to in Abbey. I understand that the perpetrators can be issued with a fine for £80. Can the Cabinet Member please tell me how many such fines were issued in the borough in 2012?

Reply

We have only issued one FPN in 2012. This is a difficult matter to enforce as it requires the enforcement officer being at the location at the right time. We have seen an increase in residents reporting dog fouling in recent months. Officers have collated a list of hot spot roads for fouling and the enforcement team have been putting up dog fouling signs and delivering letters to local residents. Officers have also been sending street cleansing the list of roads so that sweeper pays attention to this issue. Unfortunately at this time of year we see an increase in fouling as dog walkers do shorter walks hence normally local areas get affected. We are in the process of preparing an article to go in our next dog watch newsletter regarding dog fouling as this goes out to over 700 members.

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26. From Councillor David Simpson to the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities

How would the Cabinet Member respond to Lewisham Liberal Democrat councillor Duwayne Brooks' recent letter to the Evening Standard in support of police station closures, particularly in light of the comments made in the press recently on this same issue by Liberal Democrat councillors here in Merton?

Reply

I am not aware of the letter referred to. I would refer the Councillor to the motion passed at full council on 6 February 2013 which states Merton Council's opposition to police station closures.

27. From Councillor Suzanne Evans to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health

I have previously asked the Cabinet Member what she intends to do to extend the Community Toilet scheme in Merton and she replied that this is a matter she is anxious about and wants to improve. What has she done about this since I last asked the question back in September 2012?

Reply

The aim of the Merton Community Toilet Scheme is to improve the provision of toilet facilities available to the public within the borough's town centres and areas of particularly high foot fall – the scheme is advertised as a “hot topic” and, also, as a main feature on Merton Council's home page.

Payments to the existing businesses in the scheme will be honoured long term and individual businesses that request to be added into the scheme will be agreed based upon the criteria regarding location - i.e. town centre / high footfall.

Businesses that were part of the scheme in May 2010 were:

Merton Council (Link) Civic Centre, Morden
Café Doro 2-4 Abbotsbury Road, Morden
Kings Arms 260-262 London Road, Mitcham
McDonalds 1 Majestic Way, Mitcham

Since they we have added new businesses such that the businesses currently involved in the scheme are:

Merton Council (Link) Civic Centre, Morden
Café Doro 2-4 Abbotsbury Road, Morden
Kings Arms 260-262 London Road, Mitcham
Rose Lea Café 74 London Road, Morden
Corleone Restaurant, 186a High Street, Colliers Wood
Haydons Café, 341 Haydon's Road, Colliers Wood

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Savoy Café, 234 Merton Road, Colliers Wood

A suitable business is being sought to be added to the scheme in light of the closure of McDonalds in Mitcham Town Centre. We shall continue to look to attract new members of the Community Toilet Scheme where appropriate.

28. From Councillor David Simpson to the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities

Would the Cabinet Member welcome, as I do, the news that both Wimbledon and Mitcham police stations are being recommended to remain open and congratulate the Borough Commander and all those who have been supporting his campaign for this to happen? Will she also welcome with me the more flexible concept of the new Local Policing Model that will bring more constables onto our streets and importantly greater flexibility for the local Borough Commander to deploy his staff in conjunction with his partners in areas of greatest need and vulnerability?

Reply

I welcome the proposed retention of Wimbledon station but am shocked that Mitcham police station is proposed to operate as a daytime station only. I know the Leader has publicly made our opposition to this known and I am pleased to support him in this. In terms of the local policing model, it is still unclear how this will impact on us locally in Merton but I will vigorously oppose any attempts to reduce staffing of our local safer neighbourhood teams.

29. From Councillor Richard Hilton to the Cabinet Member for Performance and Implementation

When will the Parking consultation summary of responses be available?

Reply

The findings of the first phase of the “Review of Town Centre Parking” consultation which looked at car parking policy in and around Merton’s designated town centres is due to be presented to the “Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel” February 13th 2013 for Member comments. The report will cover the findings following the extensive consultation that was carried out last year and will also detail a number of recommendations based on the findings of the consultation.

30. From Councillor Richard Hilton to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Does the Cabinet Member agree that with a record number of noise complaints being logged in Merton, proposals to expand the noise control service need to be implemented sooner rather than later?

Reply

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A recent report to Sustainable Communities and Transport Scrutiny Panel showed that the noise pollution service is highly effective in dealing with noise pollution matters. The feasibility and need to provide an expanded noise pollution monitoring service is due to be considered at the meeting of Cabinet on the 18th February, 2013.

31. From Councillor Richard Hilton to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Will the Cabinet Member join me in welcoming the decision to retain the Wimbledon Thameslink Loop?

Reply

The recent announcement that Thameslink through-services beyond Blackfriars will be retained is excellent news, and emphasises the strength of feeling demonstrated by the community as part of the recent Department for Transport consultation. Moving forward, the council will continue to work with stakeholders in order to focus future efforts on increasing the frequency of services on the loop line, to further enhance public transport facilities.

32. From Councillor Richard Hilton to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:

With recycling rates across the borough producing a saving of £40,000 per % increase, what plans does the Cabinet Member have in place to encourage uptake?

Reply

We have been very successful in increasing participation and recycling rates have increased as a consequence. We have recently secured an additional fund over 3 years amounting to over £600,000 from the Governments Weekly Collection Support Scheme This will help in funding a range of initiatives to further increase recycling rates . These may include :

- Introducing on-board weighing system for residual waste, food and dry recycling vehicles to measure collection tonnage to improve our data and analysis .
- Community and individual incentives to encourage residents to recycle more.
- Individual incentive entitled “message in a bottle”, this may include regular prize draws to encourage recyclers to continue recycling.
- Community incentive will be split between houses and flats. Winners are those who have increased their recycling the most after a given period.

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- Houses will compete for ward prizes that benefit their community. For example, perennial planting.
- Residents in flats will compete in groups of up to 3000 residents. The winning block of flats will receive a prize that benefits the residents of that block.

This will be backed up with further communications and engagement to encourage behaviour change.

33. From Councillor Richard Hilton to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

What plans are in place for resurfacing roads in Lower Morden in 2013/14?

Reply

The 2013/14 carriageway and footway programme is currently being developed and has not yet been agreed.

34. From Councillor Janice Howard to the Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member for Performance and Implementation

Can the Cabinet Member tell me how long the Council has been operating a traffic enforcement vehicle at the junction of Haydons Road with Plough Lane and Gap Road? How many PCNs have been issued so far at that junction and how much income has been generated by the Council as a result?

Reply

The Council's Parking Control Service has never deployed a traffic enforcement vehicle at this location (Plough Lane/Haydons Rd Box Junction) as the level of compliance by the motorist is extremely high. If the level of compliance were to reduce then we would consider carrying out enforcement using the mobile CCTV camera units. In order to achieve clarity, officers have undertaken a detailed search to establish if any Penalty Charge Notices (PCN) have been incorrectly issued for this location. Records show that a single PCN was incorrectly issued for this location as a result of incorrect details being entered on the database in respect of the location where the PCN was incurred. The offence actually took place in Queens Road. Although the PCN was paid by the motorist the case has since been cancelled and the vehicle keeper informed with all monies being refunded.

35. From Councillor Henry Nelles to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Can the Cabinet Member please provide me with a breakdown of the number of live and closed planning enforcement cases on a ward-by-ward basis for 2012?

Reply

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Overall in 2012 there were 703 new enforcement cases and 746 cases closed. A more detailed report providing a breakdown of these figures on a ward by ward basis will be supplied to Members via an electronic report. However, for technical reasons this would need to be 2 separate reports at the moment, one for live and one for closed cases. These reports will be emailed to members.

36. From Councillor Henry Nelles to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

In light of the increased concern amongst many residents about the proliferation of urban foxes in the borough, will the Cabinet Member consider launching a public education campaign to discourage people from feeding foxes?

Reply

As far as I am aware, there is no evidence that preventing residents from feeding foxes will impact on the number of urban foxes. Residents do however need to be careful that they do not make them too tame as this can lead to problems for both the fox and other residents. We are reviewing the information provided on the Council's website to include frequently asked questions in relation to foxes.

37. From Councillor Miles Windsor to the Cabinet Member for Performance and Implementation

I am pleased that there are procedures in place should Merton's new Parking Charter not be adhered to. Could the Cabinet Member clarify for me however whether this means that, if the Council is found to have breached its own charter, the relevant PCN will automatically be cancelled?

Reply

Every representation received against the issue of a PCN will be considered based upon the representation made by the motorist. If that statement refers to the breach of the Parking Charter then consideration would be given on that basis and an appropriate decision will be made based upon the merits of the individual case.

38. From Councillor Krystal Miller to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

In the current housing market particularly, more and more homeowners in Merton are considering excavating into the space below their properties or extending their existing basements. In some London boroughs, hydrology reports and surveys are required as part of the application process due to concerns about the potential effect on the water table. What planning policies does Merton have in place to ensure such excavations do not impact

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adversely on the local water table? Will the Cabinet Member consider providing clear guidelines for future such applications?

Reply

It is recognised that throughout London home owners and developers are looking to utilise potential basement space as a more efficient use of land for building purposes that has minimal visual impact. Many such developments have been successfully completed in London with no adverse impacts resulting. Converting an existing residential cellar or basement into a living space is in most cases unlikely to require planning permission as long as it is not a separate unit or unless the usage is significantly changed or a light well is added, which alters the external appearance of the property. Excavating to create a new basement which involves major works, a new separate unit of accommodation and/or alters the external appearance of the house, such as adding a light well, is likely to require planning permission.

In Merton where planning permission is required, if the ground conditions are sensitive or if there is any concern regarding potential impact on neighbours, then a condition is imposed requiring a Basement Construction Method Statement to be submitted prior to construction to ensure potential impacts can be assessed and addressed. In respect of guidelines for future applications, Merton's emerging Sites and Policies Development Plan policy on flood risk management will require basement developments to be designed to be flood resilient and resistant where ground conditions are sensitive.

Apart from the requirements in respect of planning permission, building control approval will almost always be required for works to create a basement extension. When submissions are made to Building control for the excavation of a basement the drawings and work on site are checked for compliance with the Building Regulations. This includes structural integrity of the basement, existing property and any neighbouring properties, which could be affected by the building works. Precautions have to be carried out to prevent the ingress of moisture and any adjacent land drains diverted to ensure that the integrity of the drainage system is not impaired.

Agenda item 7 – Strategic theme questions from Councillors

1. From Councillor Maurice Groves to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

Can the Cabinet Member update me with regard to progress on the Community Trust model for Merton's libraries?

Reply

Initial feasibility work is being carried out into looking at the formation of a Community Trust for libraries. I intend to share any conclusions from this work when it is completed. In the meantime, I would like to reassure Councillor Groves that Merton's libraries already have the cheapest cost per visit of any library service in London, as well as being one of the best-regarded for user satisfaction.

2. From Councillor Samantha George to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

Can the Cabinet Member outline how Merton has publicised the new Armed Forces housing policy following Council's adoption of the Conservative motion back in November 2011?

Reply

The new housing policy welcomes applications for housing from ex service men and women. So as to ensure that applicants and their advocates are aware of the Council's ongoing commitment to assist this group we have ensured that the new policy is published on the Council's web site. Registered Providers working in the borough are aware of the policy and officers have met with partners at Haig Homes (a Charitable Trust for ex service men and women). The housing policy is referenced within the Housing Strategy and officers have published the scheme at various housing partnership forums including the Homelessness Strategy group.

3. From Councillor Samantha George to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

How many people have so far benefited as a result of Merton's new housing policy for the borough's ex-servicemen and women?

Reply

Since the inception of the new housing policy 3 households have been considered for inclusion onto the special quota for ex service men/women. One family has benefited from the offer of a 3 bedroom house from a housing association. Unfortunately despite this offer the family have decided not to accept the tenancy preferring instead to remain living in the Chippenham area where they are currently posted. A second family is waiting for an offer of a 3 bedroom home and we are committed to offering them assistance just as soon as circumstances permit. A third household has been considered but

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was deemed not eligible for inclusion onto the special quota as it was felt his housing need were already met in the private rented sector. He was however provided with advice and assistance on low cost home ownership schemes in the borough.

4. From Councillor James Holmes to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

With an increasing number of Merton residents living in private rented accommodation, does the Cabinet Member welcome the Mayor of London's current consultation on the introduction of a London Rental Standard? Can he tell me what, if anything, the Council is doing to encourage Merton's renters and landlords to respond to the consultation?

Reply

We welcome initiatives that aim to raise the standard of private rented accommodation, and we will be responding to the Mayor's consultation on a new London Rental Standard. We are emailing landlords on the list of our Private Landlords Forum to alert them to the consultation and provide them with a link. We will also bring this to the attention of any homeless households being assisted in accessing the private rented sector.

5. From Councillor Maurice Groves to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

I understand from residents that the Christmas lights in Mitcham did not work for all of the 12 Days of Christmas, let alone the rest of the festive period. Why was this and can the Cabinet Member advise whether we have received compensation from the contractor?

Reply

Initially there was a technical problem with the Christmas tree lights which were fixed by the contractor on 18 December. Sadly on Christmas Eve, the lights were vandalised and unfortunately CCTV have been unable to trace what happened. We are currently looking at claiming back the cost of the damage on insurance.

6. From Councillor Janice Howard to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

I was concerned to see that the Christmas lights in Wimbledon Park were not functioning for a significant part of the festive period. Can the Cabinet Member explain to me why this was and what measures he is putting in place to ensure this doesn't happen again next year?

Reply

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The timers on the Arthur Road Christmas lights were faulty the first week of December, but were fixed on 9 December by the contractor. The lights are all checked each year by the contractor as each illumination is installed, but unfortunately the timer element can only be tested once the lights officially go on.

7. From Councillor Richard Chellew to the Cabinet Member for Finance

In light of the recent announcement that the Lee Valley will be reducing its levy on Merton by 2% in 2013/14, can the Cabinet Member tell me whether the Council will be passing that additional money onto the Wandle Valley Regional Park or will the administration be keeping it for themselves and absorbing it into the General Fund budget?

Reply

This matter will be considered as part of the overall budget report. Members must recognise that if this reduction is passed on to the proposed Wandle Valley Park it will be at the expense of spending reductions on Council services which it could otherwise have been used to offset. Hence it would only be appropriate to pass this money on a one year basis.

8. From Councillor Richard Chellew to the Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Can the Cabinet Member confirm whether his administration is planning to introduce car parking charges at cemeteries in Merton?

Reply

I can confirm there are no plans to introduce car park charges in cemeteries.

9. From Councillor Gilli Lewis-Lavender to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

What are the arrangements for taking care of HM The Queen's black poplars which were planted in the borough during 2012 to celebrate Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee, including future arrangements once those currently in place come to an end?

Reply

All the Black Poplars in question are located in parks or open spaces where they might reasonably be expected to survive with relatively light maintenance compared to trees located in more hostile and exposed urban environments. The current plan is to monitor them during their establishment period of five years: watering, re-staking and pruning as required and as weather events demand. The precise planting locations of some of the trees were chosen in order to minimise the need for watering insofar as possible: by Three Kings Pond and the River Wandle, for example. At the end of that five year period

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the trees should be well established and are not currently expected to require special attention over and above the normal care and inspection procedures for young tree stock.

10. From Councillor Diane Neil Mills to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

Can the Cabinet Member tell me if there are plans to engage consultants as part of the review of Merton's parks and leisure/culture teams? If so, what will be the costs and what are the full terms of engagement?

Reply

The precise details of the Public Value Reviews in parks and leisure/culture have yet to be determined and as such there are no plans to engage consultants at this time.

11. From Councillor Samantha George to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

What action is the council taking to pursue the Conservative campaign to return the Lee Valley precept funds to the Wandle Valley where it could be better spent?

Reply

The campaign is cross party across the 4 boroughs. I have personally been an advocate of legislation to return the precept to a Wandle Valley Authority since joining the Wandle Valley Partnership in 2010 and have pursued this initiative through meetings of the Partnership Board and pursue it still as a Trustee. As a consequence successive chairs of the former partnership Board raised the issue with the Lee Valley Authority and a campaign was run in the press on behalf of the Board. As stated, Merton is a contributing and key member of the wider Wandle Valley partnership initiative and two of its members (myself and Cllr NeilMills) serve on the Board of the now recently established Wandle Valley Regional Park Trust. Members of the Trust's Board are drawn from a range of organisations within the Valley, including the London Boroughs of Merton, Sutton, Wandsworth and Croydon, and some with wider strategic interests, including two official Mayor's Observers. The latter raised the matter of the Lee Valley precept at the Mayor's Question Time in November 2012. Unfortunately, so far, the Mayor has been non-committal.

As stated, meetings have been held between Wandle Valley representatives and senior officials of the Lee Valley Regional Park and as a result of these (and possibly representations from other local authorities), the precept was reduced by 2% in the financial year 2012/13. All four Wandle Valley boroughs committed to ring-fence this saving to the Wandle Valley last year. A further reduction in the precept is currently anticipated in 2013/14.

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The repatriation of the Lee Valley precept remains a high priority for members of the Trust who regard these contributions as important to the success and sustainability of the Wandle Valley Regional Park project.

Merton representatives will continue to play an active part in those efforts, working in partnership with the other stakeholders. The current approach being pursued which I support, is the promotion of a Private Bill owing to the statutory basis upon which the Lee Valley was established and is funded.