

AGENDA ITEM 6 – QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. From Councillor Chris Edge to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Would the Cabinet Member please tell me the outcome of the consultation regarding the support by businesses of the proposed Mitcham bus lane going through the Fair Green?

Reply

A total of 26 responses were returned by people who identified themselves as business owners in Mitcham Town Centre. Of these 61% strongly agreed with the proposal for a bus lane, 15% slightly agreed, 4% slightly disagreed and 8% strongly disagreed. 12% did not know.

2. From Councillor Agatha Akyigyina to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Could the Cabinet member update me on the results of the recent inspection of our adoption service in Merton?

Reply

The Ofsted inspection of Merton's adoption service took place in February 2013 and the report was published last week. Having been assessed as 'satisfactory' at the last inspection in 2009, the service has improved its overall rating to 'good'. In arriving at this judgement, inspectors found leadership and management, outcomes for children and arrangements to safeguard children all to be 'good'. The judgement for quality of service was 'adequate' based, largely, on historic issues of delay in key processes including assessing prospective adopters and decision-making over whether a child should be placed for adoption. Inspectors acknowledged that significant improvement has already been made in addressing these issues while recommending ongoing focus on improving timeliness. Other recommendations for improvement included providing additional information for children in the guides which are provided and improving the information provided to birth parents about support available to them.

In line with the strong commitment to continuous improvement, an action plan to address recommendations arising from the inspection will be produced and monitored by senior managers at the CSF Department's Continuous Improvement Board.

Supplementary

Could I congratulate the Cabinet Member on her turning around the adoption service, and can I ask her what steps she took to ensure this excellent result for our young people.

Reply

I will thank you for bringing the adoption inspection to the attention of the Council. I don't know who has had the opportunity to read the report yet, I suggest that you do. The inspection has moved us from Satisfactory to Overall Good. How did we achieve that? Not without a lot of hard work, obviously. We've restructured the whole team and inspectors were pleased to see that. They tell us that the weak areas are now judged as good. We're not perfect, we're not there yet. Good, better, best, never let it rest, till the good

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be better and the better best. That is the mantra that we have in Children's Services and asking all service areas to adopt that mantra because we are on a continuous journey of improvement, not only for Children's Services but for all services here in Merton under this Administration and we're getting better all the time.

Last year's scorecard really worried everyone in the chamber but that was a blunt instrument and the inspectors found that when they investigated Merton's circumstances that in fact, we're pretty good. Let's keep looking after our children.

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

Is the Cabinet Member looking forward to her new role overseeing public health?

Reply

I am excited about the move of public health back to local government where I feel it belongs. We already contribute to improving people's health through our existing services such as environmental health and we have the potential to improve health further through our duties around education, employment, and the built environment, for example.

We already have a strong partnership to build on. We have worked together to use public health expertise and skills to ensure that our services meet the needs of our local residents and are based on evidence of best practice. Prior to becoming a Health and Wellbeing Board our Healthier Communities Partnership was seen as an example of good practice and pioneered initiatives designed to reduce health inequalities, such as smoking cessation for mentally ill people and weight loss in east Merton. Our Health and Wellbeing Board and Health and Wellbeing Strategy bring together our joint priorities across Merton, including the local authority, the Merton Clinical Commissioning Group and the voluntary sector. By bringing together the work of health and wellbeing partners, we can improve the quality of life of residents and make savings by more closely aligning our health and social care agenda and by prioritising prevention.

Examples of ongoing work between public health and the council include:

- Support to local business and other organisations to make public pledges to help improve the health of residents, including:
 - 14 food businesses pledged to achieve the 'Healthier Catering Commitment'
 - work with small retailers to reduce proxy sales of alcohol in partnership with the Merton Council Licensing and Regulatory team and
 - 29 other organisations pledging to support their staff and residents to lead healthier lifestyles.
- Stimulating participation in sport and physical activity among the most inactive residents in Merton including women and girls, older people, BME residents and disabled residents.

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- LiveWell Merton is a behaviour change programme to support Merton residents to stop smoking, be more active, reduce their alcohol consumption and be a healthy weight. The programme will work through a network of health trainers and volunteer community health champions.

Local government provides many services that influence health – from children’s centres and schools to employment and social care for vulnerable adults. We are well placed to use our licensing and planning levers, for example to improve the physical and built environment, allowing our residents to make healthier choices. Working with public health we can better understand these influences and ensure that our own policies and strategies promote health and do nothing to harm health.

This shift of public health to the local authority marks a new era where we Councillors have increased oversight to ensure that prevention becomes a priority and that our residents who do become ill receive better coordinated care. Having public health within local government will enable us to work together to reduce our significant health inequalities, something about which we are all concerned. I very much welcome the opportunities that my new role provides.

Supplementary

I’m very pleased to get the answer from the Cabinet Member. Truly a very long and impressive list of events. You will recall at the last Council meeting I commented on a large government grant that hadn’t been spent and was unallocated. Surely from the questions that you’ve heard from the public gallery about the Freedom Pass for people with mental illness, surely this would be an excellent project to use that money for, to help them with their health and wellbeing.

Reply

Can I just say that today Margaret, Suzanne and I said goodbye to Val Day and thanked her for her time here as an interim director of public health and welcomed Kay, our new director. I would say generally that public health is quite a challenge for us, although we’re looking forward to it. It is a corporate thing that we all have to be behind. In terms of budgets in general, the funding we’ve received for public health, as you will be aware, is significantly less than our neighbouring borough, Wandsworth. We’ve just been through a budget exercise. It’s been quite a difficult challenge. We are struggling quite hard to achieve the cuts that have been proposed by Adult Social Care and I think that the budgetary process that we’ve been through demonstrates that we are not awash with money and the monies we’ve got have been allocated to those services where they are needed. I don’t think there’s any wriggle room. This is money that we have dedicated coming from the government for this purpose and money that we will spend on that purpose and I think it’s going to be a major challenge.

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4. From Councillor Iain Dysart to the Cabinet Member for Environment and Regeneration

Further to his Administration's decision to ignore the warnings from the Lib Dem Group and proceed with the £ 50k reduction to the Walksheets Budget, could he tell us what specific contingency fund has been set aside to address a) the likelihood of more serious repair jobs becoming necessary and b) the possibility of legal action against the Council in the event of serious accident or injury?

Reply

To make the budget savings only defects that are urgent and meet the council's intervention criteria will be repaired. Other non-urgent maintenance will be considered as part of the Carriageway and Footway Planned Maintenance programme funded from capital.

The council introduced a more robust Highway Safety Inspection Regime from January 2013 where roads are inspected more frequently allowing defects to be repaired thereby providing the council with a solid defence against any third party claims as a result of trips and falls and damage due to defects on the highway.

The most recent highway condition survey completed independently of the council shows that our highway condition is improving following a stable capital investment programme and an increase in 2012/13. Both volume and financial cost of insurance claims related to highway condition have reduced in the past 3 years reflecting the improved condition of the roads.

Supplementary

Since the Cabinet Member makes no reference to a contingency fund which I asked about and past is no guide to the future, what does he think residents and visitors to the borough would make of this inadequate planning? It's such a basic issue of public safety.

Reply

I don't know if you read the answer, because it makes it clear that we've introduced a more robust scheme of inspection and we've been directing funds to urgent repairs and as a consequence, an independent survey of our roads shows that there's been significant improvement over the last three years, and there's actually been a reduction in claims. So when residents look at the systems that we have in place and work that we do, I think they could be very satisfied with the level of caution, of professionalism and of efficiency.

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

What discretionary powers does the council have regarding business rates? How have these changed over the past five years and will these change with the introduction of the new business rate regime? Which organisations currently receive discretionary business rate relief? What is the cost of this relief on both a gross basis and net (of any central government reimbursement)?

Reply

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The Council can grant discretionary rate relief – our policy allows for it to be granted in addition to the 80% mandatory relief applicable to charities and also to non-profit making organisations up to 100% e.g. community sports clubs.

The types of organisations that currently receive discretionary rate relief are local and national charities, non-profit making organisations where the user base is at least 80% for Merton residents, community sports clubs.

Gross cost of discretionary relief for 2012/13 is £515,987

The cost to Merton is £346,902.

The Council also has the discretion to grant hardship relief – our policy allows for it to be granted in circumstances where a ratepayer can show benefits to the wider community, sustaining employment for Merton residents or provision of a unique service.

Gross cost of hardship relief for 2012/13 is £57,921

The cost to Merton is £43,440.

These discretionary reliefs have not changed over the past 5 years.

Under business rates retention the cost of all discretionary reliefs will be divided between Central Government, GLA and the Council. Merton's share will be 30% from April 2013.

A new Localism Discount has been introduced giving the Council a new power to grant discounts on business rates using its own criteria. Like discretionary relief the cost to Merton would be 30%.

From the 1 April 2013 Merton will meet 30% cost of any hardship relief granted.

Supplementary

Could I draw your attention to one of the phrases here which says "*a new Localism Discount has been introduced giving the Council a new power to grant discounts on business rates*". This is in contrast to a press release which said "*it has not been within the power to influence business rates*". I just hope that you would agree with me that at the appropriate time you could withdraw that remark.

Reply

Clearly the global expert on small businesses, certainly in this Council, is the Leader of the Council, from his time on the Federation of Small Businesses, and he would be very aware that the degree of discretion that we have over these matters is very small because we have to bear in mind the impact upon council tax payers. The amount of discretionary relief that we give, mainly to charities, is the equivalent of about 0.5% on council tax, so we have to balance the interests of council tax payers and businesses, and get that right, because we want our businesses and our charities to thrive, but we also don't want to increase the burden on local people. That is why we are the only Council in South London that has frozen council tax and has not reduced rebates for people on lower incomes.

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6. From Councillor John Sargeant to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Following Council's decision to introduce a one year trial to webcast council meetings and a limited number of other meetings in the Council Chamber the experiment is about to go live. Since council also resolved that parameters to measure the success of the trial were to be defined in advance, can the Cabinet Member tell me what parameters are to be adopted?

Reply

The evaluation of the pilot will take into account viewing figures, costs and feedback on the customer experience. Viewing figures will be collected for each meeting that is webcast so that there will be data on number of live viewings during the meeting and the number of subsequent viewings on the website. Costs will be provided for the service provided by the webcast host company plus staff time. There will be an analysis of viewer feedback – this will be generated through the “feedback” button that viewers can use to provide comments on each webcast, plus a log of other comments received by the Democracy Services team, as well as any press reports. It is proposed to carry out a viewer survey towards the end of the project – this will be linked to the webcast view so that it can be filled in easily and quickly by viewers.

Supplementary

I would like to thank the officers for the technical quality of the webcast that have been undertaken so far. As well as collecting the data, we do need a clear and quantified idea of what acceptable results of the pilot will be, and in particular, can we have an explicit understanding of what would be an acceptable of public involvement generated by the webcast.

Reply

I would like to thank the camera operators and all the staff involved in this. I accept what Councillor Sargeant says about the importance of having an idea about how we analyse the data that comes out of this pilot. However, equally, we will all have different views as to what value for money is when we're spending tens of thousands of pounds of other people's money on broadcasting ourselves. We would probably all have a variety of opinions as to what was good value and that is why the final decision about whether this is extended beyond will be down to Full Council to decide.

7. From Councillor Richard Hilton to the Leader of the Council

How much has the total annual council expenditure been in each of the last three years?

REPLY FROM THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE

The published accounts for the last 3 years (2009/10, 2010/11, and 2011/12) show the following gross expenditure.

	£m
2009/10	968
2010/11	407
2012/13	482

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It is important to recognise that the published figures are based upon economic resource utilisation as defined by accounting standards. This means that they include measures such as the accounting cost of the stock transfer of the HRA in 2009/10, a notional cost saving arising from the change in inflation factors on pension increases reflected in 2010/11 and other completely notional changes in pension costs relating to Private Sector accounting standards that are reversed out later. Similarly, expenditure will include items such as depreciation and impairment in respect of assets held by the council which will vary between years depending upon market conditions. None of these items have an impact on the bottom line budget and hence taxation required by the council. Intangible items such as this represent the bulk of the change over the period.

In addition to this local authority spending includes a variety of areas where central government passports money through council's books and this cannot be used on other services. Thus spending on schools via DSG and Housing and Council Tax Benefit grew substantially over the period and significant levels of service spending were transferred in from the NHS. Although this is reflected in spending it cannot really be regarded as areas where the council has any discretion to use resources.

Supplementary

Given that gross service spending in Merton has actually gone up from \$483m in 2010 to over £512m for this year, which is an increase of 6% to front line services, could he explain why he has cynically decimated front line services in the past and yet the only thing he hasn't cut, given his apparent concern for council tax payers, is local council tax.

Reply

I'm terribly sorry I must be the only person in this room who has misread what's been going on in the world over the last few years. Maybe I've misread the papers, but my understanding is, and I think it's the understanding of most people in this country, that we're going through a period of austerity, during which George Osborne, the Chancellor, is expressing the view that we need to cut down on public spending. Eric Pickles is reducing the amount of money available for councils. Perhaps if I've misread the situation and it was actually us that was decimating services rather than both people from the Government then I can only apologise. I think that most people who read the same papers as I do will think that it's the Government cutting the amount coming into councils and the Government that needs to take responsibility for it. If it was that easy, why is every single Conservative Council in South London and Surrey raising council tax or raising council tax for people on low incomes? If it was that easy why are Tory Councils not doing what we're doing in freezing council tax for everyone?

8. From Councillor Agatha Akyigyina to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Could the Cabinet Member outline how the government's changes to benefits are likely impact on vulnerable children in Merton?

Reply

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The implementation of the Benefit Cap affecting out of work claimants from July 2013 may well impact on vulnerable children. Officers across the council and with partner agencies have been proactive in considering the potential impact and have concluded that over 300 families will be affected by this change. Work is currently being undertaken within the council and with Jobcentre Plus to consider ways of supporting families to mitigate the impact - through the provision of advice and support and, in particular, measures to help residents into work.

The council has been working with housing associations to notify those families affected by the implementation of the bedroom under occupation changes to housing benefit and to provide advice on the options available. An increased amount of discretionary housing funding is to be available to support the most vulnerable.

Supplementary

Could the Cabinet Member tell me how the bedroom tax will impact on foster families and disabled children in Merton.

Reply

I'm afraid I can't be quite as upbeat on my response on this occasion. Whilst I welcome the recent statement from central Government indicating that foster carers will not be subject to the new regime, I'm afraid details remain unclear. In fact it's still very unclear how the bedroom tax will impact on our foster carer recruitment and retention programme. It's thought that foster carers who look after one child may be exempt but those who foster multiple children will have to apply for financial support from the Discretionary Housing Fund and this will restrict the exemption. This Government is leaving many foster carers struggling to access the funding and this is at a time when we are striving to find foster homes for those children who, for many reasons, are unable to live with their birth families.

There is further uncertainty around disabled children. Also, our looked after children going on to university might not have a home to return to in the holidays as a result of families having to move to smaller properties. This is also a concern for young care leavers who join the armed forces and who may have no home to return to when on leave from active service such as in Afghanistan (and nationally we know that many LAC go in to the military).

9. From Councillor Oonagh Moulton to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

We have all been particularly concerned by an article in the press (Article Sunday Mirror 17/03/13) and confirmed by officers that possible safeguarding issues and concerns have arisen at a local nursery at which a convicted sex offender has been found to be living with the manager. This is the second private nursery at which serious concerns have arisen within the last year. Could she comment?

Reply

At the time of responding to this question, this matter is subject to police investigation and I am limited in what details I can give. This private nursery

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has been closed by Ofsted, the regulator for day-care provision, until further notice. The Children, Schools and Families Department is liaising closely with all agencies involved. Support is being offered to parents and carers of children attending the nursery during what is clearly a concerning and uncertain time and we are providing assistance to those seeking alternative day care places. The Director of Children's Services will provide further briefings as and when this is appropriate.

Supplementary

I confirm that appropriate briefings have been provided from the Director concerning both nurseries. What assurances can the Cabinet Member give us that procedures to handle these concerns are correctly and swiftly followed to ensure that all children are protected as quickly as possible.

Reply

Obviously, everyone has been very distressed and very concerned for the families of those children who were attending this nursery. I have to thank the Director and her staff for moving as quickly as they possibly could, because this is a private nursery so we were not in possession of any data, we couldn't get in touch with people as quickly as we may like to have done, and the person involved, the manager and the boyfriend, live in Croydon, so they are subject to Croydon Police. It's Croydon Police who are leading on that side of it. It's only in Ofsted's power to close the nursery, so we had to wait until they stepped in to close the nursery and it will remain closed until everybody is quite comfortable and happy that there is no further investigation required. I have to say, and will emphasise this to everybody, at this point, there is no question or suggestion that any of Merton's children have been subjected to anything untoward.

10. From Councillor Richard Williams to the Leader of the Council

Given the motion passed at full council on 2 February 2013 regarding a meeting with Anna Soubry, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Health, to discuss St. Helier hospital, can he report back on this meeting?

Reply

I did not receive an invitation to any such meeting and therefore cannot report back on it to council.

Supplementary

I thought on 2 February it was very much the Council at its best in coming together across the political parties to defend St Helier Hospital and speak very clearly with one voice. I am therefore very distressed that the will of the Council meeting and the motion that was passed unanimously has been thwarted, and there's been no invitation received by the Leader to this meeting. Can I encourage him to take urgent steps to make sure that the cross-party unity is carried forward to the DoH when the meeting goes ahead.

Reply

I will leave it to the Chief Executive with regard to motions passed at Council that are not followed through. Thank you.

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AGENDA ITEM 7– STRATEGIC THEME QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

1. From Councillor Linda Taylor to the Cabinet Member for Performance and Implementation

How well is the Council doing on recycling and waste collection?

Reply

Performance as at January 2013 in relation to the waste and recycling targets contained within the council’s business plan 2012 – 2016 is set out in the table below.

PI Code & Description	December YTD	January YTD	January Target	Annual Target	Polarity	Progress
SP 64 - % of residents satisfied with refuse collection	Annual	71	72	72	High	R
SP 65 - % household waste recycled and composted	39.61	39.27	40	40	High	<input type="checkbox"/>
SP 69 - Amount of kitchen waste collected per household per week	1.02	1.12	1.15	1.15	High	<input type="checkbox"/>
SP 262 - % residents satisfied with recycling facilities	Annual	74	70	70	High	G
SP 66 - Kg of residual household waste per household	389.88	436.81	490	590	Low	<input type="checkbox"/>
CRP 47/SP 68 - Number of refuse collections including recycling and kitchen waste missed per 100,000	57.1	57.53	70	70	Low	<input type="checkbox"/>
SP 67 - % of municipal solid waste sent to landfill (waste management & commercial waste)	51.36	51.18	61	61	Low	<input type="checkbox"/>

Merton’s performance in respect of resident satisfaction is above the London average.

Supplementary

Can the Cabinet Member tell me why the targets are set so low, e.g. recycling at only 40%? In the last sentence he mentions Merton’s performance – what is the average for London?

Reply

I am glad Councillor Taylor has asked me this question because with regard to Merton’s performance in recycling and refuse, we have a performance level of 74% according to our annual residents’ survey and that is above the London average, which I can quote because I had the forethought to print it out tonight. We are 5% above the London average for recycling. With regard

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to refuse, we are at 71% which is again 5% above the London average. This contrasts favourably with the last Conservative Administration which only achieved 69% on both of those measures. I'm glad the Councillor gave me the opportunity to explain that.

2. From Councillor John Dehaney to the Cabinet Member for Performance and Implementation

Could the Cabinet Member outline what steps he has taken to improve recycling in the borough?

Reply

The council is currently achieving an overall rate 39.27% against a target of 40%, (January 2013). This is an improvement of approximately 2.27% on the 2011 target of 37%.

The council has, through our current recycling processing contractor, extended the range of materials that can now be accepted. Residents can now recycle aluminium foil, aerosol cans and plastic tubs and trays.

Merton has an extensive programme of community engagement road-shows such as the "Love Food Hate Waste" and "Metal Matters" campaigns that aims to bring about greater awareness recycling.

In 2012, the council completed its organics collection programme that enabled the council to roll out a 100% borough-wide food waste collection service and introduce a subscription based service for garden waste that is now serving around 5000 customers.

In recent years there has been a re-vamp of on-street recycling banks often with an increase in on-site facilities to meet resident's demands, with further sites being identified for possible use.

Town centres have benefited from "dual litter bins", in which both residual and recyclable waste can be now deposited.

An extensive range of services are offered with respect to recycling and composting, together with the improvements in the quality of the collection services, this has resulted in a significant increase in resident satisfaction with results of the ARS indicating that satisfaction has increased by 7% compared to last year and puts Merton (74% satisfaction) 5% ahead of the London average (69%) and 2% ahead of the outer London average (72%).

In December 2012 the council was successful in securing a further £655,000 from the DCLG Weekly Collection Support Scheme to support a borough wide "Encouragement and Incentivisation Programme". This is a three year funded programme aimed at introducing individual and community incentives to encourage further recycling and composting. The programme will incorporate an extensive door knocking consultation and survey work to establish baseline indicators on attitudes and behaviours with respect to recycling. This will be followed up with a high profile campaign that will involve both community and individual prizes.

Supplementary

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Could the Cabinet Member please outline what impact a further £4m cuts in the Council budget would have on our recycling services.

Reply

£4m per year is equivalent to 5% of the council tax. Of course it would have a massive impact on our refuse and recycling services. We know because the figures have been presented to Council as part of the budget rounds last year and this year what the implications would be of these cuts. We would see an end to regular street cleaning, we would see removal of the free bulky waste collection system and we would see the end of the free food waste collection which we've just rolled out, very popularly, across the borough. These are significant amounts of money, which would be on top of the existing budget gap, so I would say they are, to quote the Leader, "wild in their aspiration". They would have a huge effect on the very services that so many of our residents depend on, which is keeping the streets clean and looking after refuse and recycling.

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

What are the economics of the council's commercial waste collection service including revenue (price per collection, price per customer, number of customers, volume (tonnes), total revenue) and costs (labour, vehicle depreciation, vehicle operating costs, disposal costs, overheads, landfill taxes). How does the council intend to grow this service as per budget proposals? Does the council charge VAT? Do competitors charge VAT?

Reply

Merton Council operates a commercial waste service to approximately 1,100 businesses. This accounts for 27% of the available market, and makes our commercial waste service the largest provider to business.

The commercial waste service offers a range of residual and recycling services, in both "hard", (bins), and "soft", (bags), and containers.

The service is high quality and offers the flexibility of am and pm collections.

The estimated annual tonnage of commercial waste for 2012/13 is 5769 tonnes.

The pricing structure is based upon the type and weight of waste, frequency of collection and container used.

In line with current legislation, Merton does not charge VAT for collection and disposal of waste.

Currently private waste collection companies do charge VAT for collection and disposal services.

Detailed breakdowns of operating costs are available, however the headline information for 2012/13 are as follows:

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Commercial Waste Service 2012/13	
Employees	£461,213
Transport inc depreciation	£291,020
Depot	£1,864
Supplies & Services	£31,060
Disposal including Land Tax	£821,359
Total costs	£1,606,516
Income Budgeted	-£1,678,500

Note: Overheads are determined centrally at year end.

Commercial Waste Merton council having engaged independent advice, confirms the service is responding well in early 2013 with an increase in new business and business retention. The improvement in this service will be critical if we are to meet challenging income targets in the coming years.

A major aid to the operational cost to the service will be the improved waste disposal costs reduction as a result of the Phase B contract from April 2014. This will allow the service to reduce its base charges to customers and allow a more competitive edge in acquiring contracts and provide an improvement in the potential of increased income.

Merton waste collection service is also developing an aggressive business plan that seeks to increase market share by delivering a more flexible service, that includes more emphasis on commercial recycling, and containerised waste.

Supplementary

My question is why has the service failed to achieve the budget targets for 2012/13?

Reply

Thank you for the portrayal of a service which I believe is run quite well and is seeking to do what I can to maximise its business at a time when, whether we like it or not, there is an economic crisis in this country and that does have an impact on local businesses and it does have an impact on our ability to get money from local businesses. Throughout the year and throughout scrutiny there are opportunities to scrutinise the performance of our departments and we regularly challenge them through the financial monitoring reports that are issued. That is a good thing for us to be doing and I hope that it will continue.

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4. From Councillor Iain Dysart to the Cabinet Member for Environment and Regeneration

In July 2011, other Council Groups regrettably failed to support the Liberal Democrat Group's call for flexibility to help residents on low incomes to pay for the now chargeable waste collection service (e.g. by instalments) However, please could he provide figures for take-up in respect of the years 2009/10, 2010/11, 2011/2 and 2012/3?

Reply

In 2010/11 Merton introduced a chargeable Green Waste Service. Prior to the implementation, the council received 48,174 requests from 14,002 properties. At the end of the first full year of the new service (2011/12) the service had 3,671 registered subscribers. Currently the numbers of properties that have registered for the service are 5,050. At this level, based on 24 weeks, the service will have made 120,000 collections annually.

Supplementary

Notwithstanding that July 2011 decision, could I ask the Cabinet Member what steps, if any, he is prepared to take to assist residents in paying for the service when they have low incomes, given that his Administration always talks about helping residents on low incomes.

Reply

We have to rely on evidence rather than the speculative questions of Councillor Dysart. If there was a significant demand from residents actually to spread out their payments then that is something we would certainly respond to. But what we can from the answer to this question is that actually we have a very responsive service and the number of subscribers has now gone up to 5050. At that level, we're looking at 120,000 collections annually, which is rather more than the number of collections that took place before this service was changed and the paid-for service introduced. We have to be mindful we're in conditions of severe financial constraint and this is not a statutory service. We are dedicated to equalities issues and outcomes but we have to measure what we do by the amount of money available.

5. From Councillor Gilli Lewis-Lavender to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Can the Cabinet Member provide me with a breakdown of recycling levels by individual ward? How do levels of recycling in Mitcham & Morden wards compare to those wards in the Wimbledon constituency?

Reply

Merton Council does not currently breakdown recycling levels by individual ward, however some work is currently being undertaken to review the feasibility of information being captured on a ward by ward basis.

Supplementary

I'm very pleased to hear that the information will be collected on a ward by ward basis. I am quite surprised to hear it's not already being done. Can you tell me therefore when this information is expected to be received. Secondly,

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does the Cabinet Member think it will be a good idea to issue the refuse collectors with little information pamphlets to give to the residents that quite clearly do not recycle on a regular basis?

Reply

We're not necessarily introducing that information on a ward by ward basis. Work is currently being undertaken to review the feasibility of information being collected on a ward by ward basis. In terms of leaflets being handed out, my belief is that our crews are not currently trained for that customer liaison role through the recycling collection, but we do, through waste services, have a very strong customer liaison and we are using all means of communication to improve and increase levels of recycling. As you will have seen from the table presented by my colleague, Councillor Betteridge, which points to increased recycling and satisfaction with recycling.

6. From Councillor Suzanne Grocott to the Cabinet Member for Performance and Implementation

Can the Cabinet Member provide all relevant data indicating whether the bulky waste system has reduced fly tipping in the borough since its introduction?

Reply

It is difficult to draw a direct correlation between the free bulky waste collection and the levels of fly-tipping in the borough. Other factors may have an impact on the level of fly-tipping, such as economic conditions.

The table below shows service requests for free bulky waste collections and the recorded level of fly tips over the same period

Free Bulky Waste Collections and No. Reported Fly Tips		
	Bulky Waste	Fly Tips
Year	No. of Requests	Reported
2009/10	5311	2501
2010/11	7965	3404
2011/12	12130	3129
2012/13	12058	3789

Source data from Fly-capture, Merton Confirm.

Prior to July 2012, bulky waste tonnages were not identified separately, however based on current known volumes, tonnages for 2012/13 are in the region of 1,000 tonnes.

Supplementary

I am glad that the Cabinet Member has said that it's difficult to draw a direct correlation between the free bulky waste collection and levels of fly tipping, because otherwise you would have thought that the more bulky waste requests you get, the more people fly tip. Given that this was implemented based on the claim that there was a direct correlation, would the Cabinet Member now think that we should carry on charging for bulky waste, given that we're in such severe financial constraints.

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Reply

Perhaps an indication of future policy for the group opposite that they believe in charging for bulky waste collections, which is very interesting. Of course it's not a straight binary decision, that one goes with the other, as she reiterates in her supplementary question to me. There will be other factors involved here, but of course we would anticipate that when we offer free bulky waste collections, it cleans up the area and may have an effect on reducing some of the fly tipping we face. There are clearly other factors, as highlighted in my answer to the question. It's about economic conditions and also about awareness of residents, who are more aware of fly tipping and can report it more easily. We are hopeful we can provide that facility to people and therefore be able to respond better to it as well. I don't think it's a straight choice. We do believe it assists, and that the free bulky waste collection does provide for a cleaner borough and we're proud of that. I'm very interested to hear that she's maybe teasing us with some ideas about charging for a bulky waste collection. I'm sure our residents would be very interested to hear that.

7. From Councillor Sam Thomas to the Cabinet Member for Performance and Implementation

Could the Cabinet Member confirm that we remain committed the regular street clean in Merton?

Reply

We know clean streets are important for our residents and we are always trying to do better. The cleanliness of our streets remains a priority.

We also know from the results of the latest residents' survey that satisfaction with Street Cleansing remains high and is this year above the London and outer London average and we intend to maintain our good performance in this area.

We are concluding a Public Value Review of the Street Cleansing Service and this will provide the Council with valuable information to help us to make the right decisions on how we continue to improve this service. We remain absolutely committed to ensuring streets are kept clean and are regularly cleaned.

Supplementary

I thank the Cabinet Member for his and this Administration's tireless efforts, quite literally, to clean up the mess left by the party opposite. Could the Cabinet Member expand slightly on his answer to Councillor Dehaney earlier as to what exactly the impact would be of £4m extra cuts on street cleaning.

Reply

I think it's very clear that this is a figure that is exercising members in the chamber this evening because of the direct effect such a cut would have on services, and on street cleaning particularly. It would mean the end of regular street cleaning and that would have a hugely detrimental effect on the quality of life for people living in our borough.

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8. From Councillor David Dean to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Could the Cabinet Member update us on plans for the Energy Recovery Facility at Beddington Lane and residents' response to these?

Reply

Following a lengthy procurement exercise, the South London Waste Partnership, (SLWP), of which Merton is a member, entered in to a contract with Viridor Waste Ltd to provide residual waste treatment services that will result in the building of a state of the art energy recovery facility that will treat all of Merton's residual waste.

The London Borough of Sutton, also a member of the partnership, and the Planning Authority, is expected to make a decision related to the Energy Recovery Facility at Beddington Lane, and the matter will go before their Planning Committee on 24 April.

SLWP have been tracking correspondence and media coverage through the its own Dashboard over the past year, and have noted there has been very few responses to the issue of the facility

The Partnership have sought to canvas views on (among other issues) on landfill and energy recovery, research shows that three quarters of residents in the Partnership area think it is important to send less of our waste to landfill with over two fifths citing space and the environment as their main reasons.

Two thirds of residents claim to know something about energy recovery facilities (66%). Generally ERFs are viewed as a sensible way to dispose of non-recyclable waste, with almost two thirds agreeing (64%) with this statement. Seven in ten (70%) residents agree that ERFs are a better way of disposing of waste than landfill, and just 3% disagree.

Supplementary

I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for his answer, but he didn't actually give the answer. I want to know where energy from waste is going to go, it needs to go in a pipe to some houses or factories or something. What is the answer?

Reply

I understood that Councillor Dean was advising the Greens in Croydon against the Conservative Administration's interests and I'm glad to see he's now advising the new Leader of the Conservative Group. Energy from waste, Councillor Dean, is what it suggests. Energy. It's electricity. It goes into the grid and it replaces electricity made by fossil fuels so it has a beneficial environmental impact. It earns income for the borough and it reduces otherwise the production of climate change gases.

9. From Councillor Richard Williams to the Cabinet Member for Environment and Regeneration

Crossrail 2 will of course require substantial removal of waste materials from any tunnelling. What recent discussions the Council has had with TfL and the Department for Transport on proposals for Crossrail 2?

AGENDA ITEM 7– STRATEGIC THEME QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

Reply

The Crossrail 2 project is at an early stage. However officers are attending regular project briefings on scheme progress. It is also understood that TfL are planning to undertake a strategic consultation on potential routes toward the end of April. The consultation will be high profile, giving people the opportunity to comment on the plans.

Even with favourable progress in securing the necessary funding and enabling powers, any construction is a minimum of 10 years away. However, as with the current Crossrail1 project, the council will seek to work with the project delivery team and contractors to minimise impacts to both residents and the road network i.e. by encouraging the use of the rail network in transporting materials and excavated spoil.

Supplementary

Clearly there will be benefits from this substantial improvement to public transport that Crossrail 2 might bring, but does the Cabinet Member share my concerns that the Mayor of London and the Department for Transport appear to have signed up to a blank cheque that could see substantial construction work and perhaps even demolition of houses between Raynes Park and Wimbledon, which would cause substantial amounts, lorry loads of waste, being needed to be carried away through residential streets. Can he give me assurances that the Council will be following this closely?

Reply

I'm sure that the Council has noted the remarks of my colleague, Councillor Williams, in the knowledge that Councillor Williams himself will continue to monitor the situation and the impact.