

1. From Councillor Janice Howard to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

As a ward councillor, I have recently received complaints about street trees in both Avondale Road and Kingsley Road being left to die due to lack of watering. This is extremely concerning, particularly given the recent scrutiny task group which examined this issue. What is the Cabinet Member doing to ensure that newly planted saplings receive the maintenance they need?

Reply

Scheduled watering is taking place over the summer on over 500 street trees and is being carried out twice a month on all trees planted during the last 2 years, this is increased to three times a month during periods of exceptionally high temperature and humidity, this follows guidance from both the Highways and Greenspaces Arboriculture Officers and the London Tree Officers Association.

Watering records are submitted by the contractor and trees are inspected by the council to ensure that watering takes place at the required frequencies, during watering the trees are also monitored for other problems such as stakes and ties to ensure any problems are identified and remedial works undertaken. Unfortunately, whilst every care is taken to ensure that the trees will survive there are a small percentage of trees that do die due to other reasons such as ground conditions and vandalism.

The last watering round carried out on 26th June showed the tree outside 31 Avondale Road required the stake to be replaced, and in Kingsley Road, outside 44/46, that the tree was failing and additional inspection is to be carried out by the Highways Grounds Maintenance officer to determine the cause of its deterioration.

Supplementary

It's clear that negligence or incompetence is responsible for the ongoing demise of newly planted saplings. I hear reports of saplings being left to die over the summer so that they then have to be replaced the following spring, only to be left to die again. Will the Cabinet Member address this as a matter of urgency and conduct an immediate enquiry into tree maintenance arrangements as the contractors are obviously not carrying out their duty.

Reply

It's clearly important when we plant trees that they are maintained properly and that includes watering. I think you will see Councillor Howard from the answer that's been given that for all trees planted during the last two years, watering should be carried out twice a month, with more watering during arid and hot periods, and I hope that it taking place. You appear to believe it is not taking place in accordance with the reply. I would be glad to meet with you, perhaps with the officers concerned and look into this question. I think rather than go into an independent enquiry, I think you, me and the officers would be a sensible trio, and perhaps we can make those arrangements.

2. From Councillor Russell Makin to the Leader of the Council

Could I congratulate the Leader and all our hard working staff on achieving the award of best achieving council in the country. Could he outline how this was achieved?

Reply

This is an achievement that reflects the excellent work of everyone who makes a contribution to the great place that is the London Borough of Merton. Not just our excellent staff, but our fantastic partners, all our local community groups including those who help us to deliver services, the many volunteers who give up their valuable time to make a significant difference to our residents lives. But also everyone in this chamber. So may I say thank you to every one for your help in making Merton the Best Council in the Country.

Supplementary

Could the Leader expand on the key achievements that won the award?

Reply

At the ceremony, the MJ Best Achieving Council of the Year Award, one of the judges came to congratulate the London Borough of Merton and I asked him that very question, what did he see in the London Borough Of Merton that gave you that feeling that we deserve the award, especially on behalf of all our staff? He said one word – sustainable. What you're doing in the London Borough of Merton we see as sustainable. You're locking it in, it's for the long term, and it's got approval from the political leadership and from management. From my end, I do believe that low council tax, we're an affordable council, we're a caring council, grants for voluntary sector still in place. We have an eye to affordability, the council tax benefit absorption played its part but also we constantly informed residents of the journey we were taking in these very difficult times. So a caring, sharing, listening borough. I must pay a great tribute to the wonderful staff we have here in the borough.

3. From Councillor Debbie Shears to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health

Following on from the decision of the Wimbledon Guild to close their lunch club and offer alternative provision, could the Cabinet Member reassure this Chamber that none of the increase in grant given to the Guild as part of last year's budget, and at the expense of funding for other older people's providers including Friends in St Helier (FiSH), Age UK Merton, Asian Elders and the Merton and Morden Guild, was a precursor for the change now proposed to this vital service for many of our vulnerable residents?

Reply

I understand that Wimbledon Guild had felt for some time that some of their services were not fit for purpose, including their day centre. Independent organisations decide for themselves the direction of travel of their own businesses and respecting the independence of the voluntary sector is an important national and local Compact principle.

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Supplementary

Whilst the Conservatives support keeping people active and in their own homes, there is still a section of our community who value lunch clubs as a means to prevent isolation. Could the Cabinet Member tell me what she perceives for this group of people in the future.

Reply

I agree with you and I think they are a good thing. We have been consulting on the Ageing Well Agenda and people are now looking to a different direction in the way that services are provided, more on an intergenerational basis. That doesn't mean to say that people running lunch clubs can't continue to do that, it's just that we had to take a decision with restricted funds about the kind of things that we will fund. For example, my community centre runs a lunch club, completely with volunteers. The homeless drop in that I helped set up has 50 volunteers running a lunch club there. It is possible to run lunch clubs with volunteers, and also for the people attending those lunch clubs to take part in helping those clubs work. Our direction is on the Ageing Well Agenda and those organisations that have taken up that challenge. This is a brave new world. We don't know how it's going to pan out but we wish it well. We've gone out to consultation and that's a direction that people are asking us to go in, and that's where we're moving.

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

Home Office guidance states that when introducing a Directed Public Places Order, such as the recently announced borough-wide Controlled Drinking Zone, a local authority should find and demonstrate evidence of disorder in every part of the borough. By its own admission, Merton has failed to do so. Could he explain this stance, which exposes the authority to legal challenge?

Reply from the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities

Elected members agreed unanimously at Full Council to undertake a public consultation on a Borough Wide Designated Public Places Order (also known as a Controlled Drinking Zone). This was borne out of an identified need, where residents requested consideration of this option from their ward members, due to the drink related issues across the borough. Full Council agreed for the formal consultation to be undertaken and for the Chief Executive to have delegated decision making responsibility for its implementation or not.

The basis for implementation of this power is based on police data. This can be found on the police site, this is in line with best practice guidance from the home office in regards to enabling this power. Anecdotal data of residents' perceptions and health data (A&E and ambulance service) have supported the police's assertion that this is a positive power. Elected members have been lobbied by their communities to implement this power in numerous areas across borough. The implementation of a borough wide zone eliminates the

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impact of dispersal into surrounding areas if numerous zones were implemented.

Supplementary

Just for the record, agreeing to a consultation is not the same as agreeing to a principle. However, can I ask the Cabinet Member why no effort was made to respond to the concerns expressed by consultees who opposed this zone.

Reply

It was quite clear that Full Council endorsed the consultation programme, and the Chief Executive had the designated powers to make sure that implementation took place. The Chief Executive also noted the objections which were made during the consultation process and these were taken into consideration before it was implemented, and I'm sure you fully understand what their views were at the time.

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

What is the Cabinet Member doing to ensure there is a variety of different type of schools in Merton for local families to choose from?

Reply

Merton already has a diverse range of school provision to support parental choice including community schools; voluntary aided faith schools; voluntary controlled schools and schools within the private sector. In the secondary sector there is a good balance of single sex and mixed schools. Three secondary Academies are in place and colleagues will be aware of the current academisation of Benedict primary school. A Free School has recently been announced by the Department for Education likely to be sited on the Merton/RB Kingston borders and officers are working with the provider on admissions arrangements to enable Merton residents to gain access to this provision.

School standards in Merton are rising with 83% of schools rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted and I am determined to see further improvements in educational outcomes for the borough's children and young people.

Supplementary

Given the news that the National Labour Party has now reversed its position on education, and is committed to keeping Academies and Free Schools in all but name after the next election, will the Cabinet Member do the same here in Merton? Will he also consider taking advantage of recent government changes to the rules around grammar schools and consider enabling a nearby grammar school to expand into Merton?

Reply

In terms of Academies, we believe that those in this borough have been extremely beneficial and they've all been started under Labour Administrations. At present, we have no Free Schools in Merton so that issue

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doesn't arise yet. In terms of grammar schools, I'm firmly against selection at 11, and being from Sutton, I've seen the huge problems that has caused.

6. From Councillor Ian Munn to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

Could the Cabinet Member update me on improvements to Wimbledon Leisure Centre?

Reply

Since we awarded them the long term leisure contract, Greenwich Leisure Ltd. (GLL) have made considerable investments in Wimbledon Leisure Centre. The council have also been investing in plant and other necessary building improvements in support of GLLs work

In 2012, the dryside changing rooms, gym and entrance were refurbished resulting in a vastly improved customer journey and a fast track entrance to the gym

This year we have opened the new Spa and changing facility at Wimbledon. The project objectives were to bring back into use the former slipper bath area of the centre which had not been in use for many years. In addition we converted an old 'village' changing area into a modern wetside changing area, including extending into the pool viewing gallery.

Supplementary

Could the Cabinet Member join me in welcoming the improvements that have been made and could he explain how he managed to finance them.

Reply

Of course I do very much welcome what's been done. We can afford to do it because Leisure officers put together an excellent contract with our excellent partners, Greenwich Leisure. More to the point, we wanted to do it because we know that Greenwich Leisure, given the means, will achieve tremendous results against that contract, which they're already doing, bring profit back to Merton, which we will plough back into our leisure services, and it's a brilliant project. It looks absolutely gorgeous. I'm assured it's totally practical and it's very well priced, and it's pretty much unique to Wimbledon. I'm confident of its success and I'm sure many of you here will avail yourselves of its services in the future.

7. From Councillor Suzanne Evans to the Cabinet Member for Education

Does the Cabinet member agree with the recent Ofsted report that concluded the introduction of league tables means bright pupils have been let down by state schools?

Reply

It is right that schools are held to account for a wide range of pupil outcomes through the publication of league tables. Pupil progress is the most significant indicator and Merton schools as a whole achieve above the national average. For the last 2 years some pupils in primary schools have

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been able to achieve a L6 in English and/or mathematics at Key Stage 2 although these pupils will not sit GCSEs for some time.

In Merton schools pupils are set ambitious targets for academic achievement. The progress of all groups is closely monitored with students receiving regular feedback and parents being kept informed. In addition to good teaching in regular lessons some pupils access extension activities outside the classroom through a range of opportunities designed to raise expectation, aspiration and achievement. For instance our secondary schools working together ran challenge and support sessions for more able pupils in a range of subjects in the Easter holidays.

Pupils who achieve a L5 at the end of KS2 are the more able pupils. In Merton in 2011 91% of pupils who achieved L5 in English achieved 5+ A*-C and 93% of pupils who achieved L5 in mathematics achieved 5+A*-C. In 2012 the conversion rates were slightly lower at 87% and 86% respectively. All schools aspire for a very good conversion rate and in some Merton schools achievement of a 95%+ conversion rate is expected and achieved. Schools also monitor closely the numbers of pupils that achieve A and A* at GCSE. These pupils are very likely to go on to achieve excellent A level results and many progress to Russell Group universities.

However our schools are not complacent and will continue to raise expectations and achievement for all pupils.

Supplementary

My supplementary too was also going to be about grammar schools, because the Cabinet Member may or may not know that UKIP is the only political party that has a national policy to bring back grammar schools. Could he explain why he is so opposed to them when they have been proved to work.

Reply

I don't think grammar schools have been proved to work. I think they cream off the top 5% from a huge, wide-ranging area and I've seen the huge issues that has caused in Sutton. The example of Kent where you have grammar schools and sink schools on the other side, with some of the worse performing schools in the country. Yes I do believe in high standards. Yes I do believe in streaming, but I believe people shouldn't be written off at 11, which is the case with grammar schools.

8. From Councillor Diane Neil Mills to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Does the Cabinet Member support the principle of the Community Right to Bid legislation?

Reply

Yes I support the principle.

Supplementary

Does this mean that he will support the nominations that's allowed under this legislation of the Wimbledon Theatre car park?

Reply

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Any nomination must be by an established community organisation or voluntary organisation or a parish council. So for a bid to comply with the legislation, it has to be more than a petition organised by Councillor Nelless and a few local residents.

9. From Councillor Sam Thomas to the Cabinet Member for Education

Following the successful upper tribunal to vary the covenant at Dundonald Rec, can the cabinet member update council on the expansion of Dundonald Primary school?

Reply

The expansion of Dundonald School has had to proceed at a slower pace than other schemes in the primary school expansion programme due to the more complex legal issues involved with this proposal. For school expansions in general to proceed all schemes require planning permission and approval following a prescribed statutory process for the significant enlargement of schools. In Dundonald's case the council also needed to undertake two extra procedures – seeking to modify a restrictive covenant and then undertake statutory land appropriation procedures for the transfer of a small amount of land from leisure to education use.

On 17th January 2013 the LB Merton Planning Applications Committee approved the application to expand Dundonald Primary School with linked works to the recreation ground. The Greater London Authority and the Secretary of State have both agreed they do not wish to intervene with this decision, but there remain some finalities to resolve in order for the planning approval to be confirmed. This is due to the condition attached by Sport England in their otherwise favourable consultation response that an enforceable legal mechanism for the shared use by the school and community of the tennis court facilities be put in place. Although Sport England agreed to the proposed division of school and community hours prior to the planning committee decision, the specific legal mechanism to satisfy Sport England's condition has yet to be resolved despite lengthy negotiations between lawyers for the council and the organisation.

On 26 June 2013 the Upper Tribunal agreed a modification to the restrictive covenant so that a specific area of Dundonald Rec may now be used for educational purposes in connection with Dundonald Primary School, thus meeting the desired requirements for the expansion of the school. This had been considered to be the greatest barrier to expanding the school and the administration very much welcomes this decision.

As the covenant issue is now resolved, the council can undertake the procedures on land appropriation, review the previous statutory consultation followed by the issuing of education statutory notices, as well as undertake detailed design work. There are a number of possible ways to resolve the current 'impasse' with Sport England which are currently being considered by officers and relevant Cabinet Members. Subject to the completion of all necessary outstanding procedures, we hope that the development will then be able to get underway and we hope for completion by September 2015.

Supplementary

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Can I congratulate the Cabinet Member on getting the covenants varied and progressing the project with such diligent, calm, measured style as always. Would he be able to outline the benefits of the scheme both to the local community and to the children within the community and throughout the borough.

Reply

Yes. The benefits of the expansion of Dundonald are huge. Currently this school is an Outstanding school. There were over 200 first preference applications for 30 places this year. No child without a sibling from a distance of over 120m was able to obtain a place at that school, and it's part of the Labour Administration's commitment to expanding outstanding schools, and Dundonald is an Outstanding school, and it will give much valued places to people living in Wimbledon and within walking distance. I am delighted that the Upper Land Tribunal have approved the variance in the covenant. Let me say the Merton Labour Administration is fully committed to the expansion of Dundonald Primary School.

10. From Councillor Richard Chellew to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health

The current statistics suggest that there has been an increase in the number of maternity cases one would normally expect to have been carried out at Croydon General Hospital in favour of St Helier. In view of the high profile that now surrounds maternity cases can the cabinet member throw any light on what may have caused this trend?

Reply

The latest data available is for 2012/13.

Croydon resident births:

In 2011 89% of Croydon women went to Croydon, while 6.2% went to Epsom & St Helier and the remaining went to St Georges, Kingston and Epsom

In 2012, 79% of Croydon women went to Croydon, while 3.7% went to Epsom and St Helier and the remaining went to South London (4.5%), King's College (4.1%), Surrey and Sussex (3.2%), and St Georges (3%).

Therefore the two-year trend in maternity births from 2011/12 to 2012/13 is a reduction in Croydon women giving birth at Epsom and St Helier. (6.2% to 3.7%)

Merton resident births:

In 2011/12 55% of Sutton and Merton women used Epsom and St Helier, while 45% went to St Georges, Kingston and Croydon.

In 2012 52% of Sutton and Merton women went to Epsom and St Helier, while 48% went to St Georges, Kingston, Chelsea & Westminster and Croydon (1.5%).

Supplementary

Seeing the trend, and knowing that there is a distinct possibility that we could lose our hospital, would the Cabinet Member be prepared to tell us that she will be putting together a package to help reassure those mothers in that area,

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should that hospital close. They must be finding it a very worrying, distressing time. I don't expect you to tell me now, but I just want you to reassure me that you will do that.

Reply

Thank you. I would say that the trends are both away from Croydon and St Helier in the response that we have here. Obviously BSBV is having an impact, without a doubt. This Authority is opposed to the closure of those services at St Helier, and as a collective we will be campaigning.

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

How much has been added to usable reserves at the end of last year and how much in total is now in usable reserves? Specifically how much of this relates to General Fund balances and by how much has the cash balance increased? Does the Cabinet Member have any current plans for this money?

Reply

Details of usable reserves as at 31st March 2013 are available in the draft accounts which were reported to General Purposes Committee on 27th June 2013. There is also a section which discusses managing reserves in the report "Strategic Objective Review -Corporate Capacity with a Focus on Local Government Finance" on the agenda for this Council meeting.

The council has £19m of General Fund reserves available that provide a contingency for unexpected events. Councils are required to keep a prudent level of general reserves. The latest information available shows approximately 2/3 of London Boroughs have between £13 and £30m of general reserves.

The usable reserves comprise those usable by the council for general revenue purposes, which increased by £5.208m last year, usable capital reserves, which increased by £7.553m and can only be used towards the capital programme or debt redemption, and those controlled by schools and unavailable to the council, which reduced by £331,000.

In addition, revenue reserves earmarked for a specific purpose increased by a net £7.732m of which £1.573m was attributable to schools related reserves. In total, £19.183m is available as General Fund balances.

The balance of cash and cash equivalents increased by £3.063m in 2012/13, and £2.570m of this relates to cash equivalents. Cash equivalents are investments that mature in three months from the date of acquisition and that are readily convertible to known amounts of cash with insignificant risk of change in value. Cash advances to schools which account for £21.122m of the £24.082m balance as at 31st March 2013, increased by £0.614m.

The vast majority of useable reserves are earmarked for specific purposes and are needed for important projects. Over £27m is set aside for capital work, almost £21m for schools, whilst £40.7m is allocated for other purposes. Details of the anticipated use over the Medium Term were set out in the report to Cabinet and Council as part of the overall Business Plan and Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Supplementary

Isn't it true that last year's budget already included £4m that was surplus to requirements that could have been used for the 5% council tax cut that the Conservatives wanted?

Reply

This will come as a considerable disappointment I'm sure to the Conservative Group, but this Council's finances have not fallen apart. This Council's finances have enabled us to deliver council tax freezes, which other

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neighbouring councils haven't been able to do, including Conservative councils. We are putting this Council's finances on a sound footing and may I remind her something that we've known for some time actually, that George Osborne's economic failure and inability to get the deficit or the debt down has meant that there are going to be 10% extra cuts to local authorities. We would be reneging on our commitment to help the hard pressed people of Merton if we did not prepare for that. That is precisely what we are doing and they may not like it, but we have prepared for the future.

2. From Councillor Agatha Akyigyina to the Cabinet Member for Finance

What representations has the Cabinet Member received in regards to adopting the London Living Wage for all Merton's staff?

Reply

The Cabinet has been giving careful consideration to the London Living Wage for some time. Representations have also been received over the past two years from staff side. Through prudent financial management and working carefully with staff side representatives Cabinet has decided to adopt the London Living Wage, acknowledging that the cost of living is a big issue for our employees – many of whom live in the borough.

Supplementary

I would like to congratulate the Cabinet Member. Could he comment on how he feels this partnership, working with our employee representatives, contributes to our achievement as a Council.

Reply

The staff who work here are incredibly important to us, they helped deliver us the award that we celebrated just minutes ago. It was right that we should honour them in this way by delivering the London Living Wage. I would like to pay particular tribute to the persistence of the Staffside Secretary, Keir Greenaway, who has been absolutely fabulous in representing his staff. I know that trade unions have been going through the mire over the last few days and not all of them have behaved appropriately and not all politicians have behaved appropriately either. He is a real example of a good trade unionist, delivering real improvements for his members.

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

Can the Cabinet Member tell me how much is in the current budget for acquisitions?

Reply

The current Capital Programme 2013-17 contains £2.5 million for acquisitions, this is split as follows:

2013-14	£1 million
2014/15	£1 million

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2015/16	Nil
2016/17	£500k
Total	£2.5 Million

Supplementary

Under the last Conservative Administration, there was provision set aside to purchase a small piece of land at the end of Rookwood Avenue in the Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames for a small sum of around £7000. Given the very high reserves that are held by this Administration and the fact that this piece of land is currently up for auction, and please note the auction is on 15 July, would the Council purchasing it, and if not, why not?

Reply

If in fact, as she has asked this supplementary, it really reflects what she's going to say when she moves her motion later in this meeting. I am very wary of saying what the Council would spend on a piece of land prior to an auction, because to expose our commercial position would not be helpful.

4. From Councillor Iain Dysart to the Cabinet Member for Finance

In answer to a question raised at the November 2012 ordinary Council meeting, he quoted £ 275K as the likely cost of introducing a local London Living wage in Merton. We welcome the Cabinet's recent approval of an LLW, yet magically 8 months later the cost has plummeted to £ 10k for directly employed staff and £ 41K for agency staff. Assuming he is not Houdini, can he explain this stark discrepancy?

Reply

I can confirm I am not Houdini!

The original estimates that were prepared in October 2012 were the best available at that time but did not model the changes in detail and were based on a number of assumptions. However, given the significance of the issue, and the importance to the Administration of being a good employer, we continued to develop improved reporting facilities and this enabled more detailed cost analysis to be carried out. Costs have also fallen due to the reduction in the number of agency workers since October 2012, and to changes in the profile of agency workers roles, with a lower proportion in the 'manual' (and hence lower paid) category since October 2012. It was on the basis of this enhanced information that Cabinet decided to implement the London Living Wage at its meeting on 1 July 2013, and to backdate it to 1 April 2013.

Supplementary

The disparity is still stark in the last eight months. In his reply to the question raised in November, there was some caveats, some caution, there was reticence, so doesn't the timing of this welcome announcement owe at least something to political expediency in an election year?

Reply

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I can only apologise to members. Clearly with council questions we only have a very short time to provide an answer and the answer that we provided several months ago was clearly a long way out. A number of factors can change and that can affect it. However, as I say in the reply, because we know how important it is to our members, to our staff and to us as councillors, we have persevered and we actually got to the bottom of the figures which has enabled us to do this. I might have a bit of egg on my face but I don't mind because we've done the right thing for our staff.

5. From Councillor David Simpson to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Will the Cabinet Member confirm that the budgeted cost of a by-election in Merton is £13,000 and that the last 'stand alone' by-election held in 2003 cost £10,000? Did that 2003 by-election, which brought Councillor Alambritis to the Council, represent good value for money?

Reply

The budget for local election expenses for 2013/14 is £14,020. This budget is to cover any on-going annual costs, any incidental costs that may arise that should be charged to the local election budget, and the costs of one by-election.

The last council by-election that was not combined with another poll was the Ravensbury Ward by-election in March 2003. This took place in the same financial year as the full council elections of May 2002 so the final costs would be contained within the overall expenses for the year. However, the total of £7,433.78 is identifiable solely to the by-election.

Value for money is a subjective thing, but I suspect that most local authorities would value very highly the election of any Member who subsequently becomes the Leader of a Council that is voted Best Achieving Council.

Supplementary

Would the Cabinet Member agree with me that the figure of £60k plus for three by-elections quoted in the Local Guardian by the Leader of the Merton Coalition Group was not only a grossly informed, ill-informed guess, but that by-elections in wards represented by party defectors will represent good value for money for democracy?

Reply

I wouldn't want to get too involved in family grieving. I can understand why colleagues on the other side would be so upset that friends of theirs they had had for many years have decided to behave so appallingly towards them, and are now using the dog whistle of immigration and gay marriage to explain what they did in previous weeks and months before that. That would not make me very happy. I would say to all members, when it comes to by-elections, we have a by-election because we've lost a really close friend, and the sorts of reasons for having that are very serious, and I wouldn't want to belittle the terrible thing that's happened to Gam Gurung and his family because of the awful behaviour of some of your previous colleagues.

6. From Councillor Stan Anderson to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Could the Cabinet Member outline how our funding from central government has changed under the current government in comparison to the previous national administration?

Reply

Aside from the reduction in levels of government grant over the period of the current government there have been some complex changes in the methodology and control totals upon which funding allocations have been made. These include:

- The removal of ring-fencing for a number of grants and rolling into formula grant, together with subsequent reductions in overall funding year on year.
- The introduction of the Business Rates Retention scheme
- Localisation of council tax support and technical reforms
- Transfers to and from local government responsibility, particularly health.

This question is well timed as there is a report on the agenda for this meeting (Council 10/07/13) which provides a “Strategic Objective Review –Corporate Capacity with a Focus on Local Government Finance” and this contains comprehensive analysis of how the Council’s spending and funding have changed from 2010/11 to 2013/14. Section 4 of the report looks at local government finance and in particular, paragraph 4.4 analyses government grant.

This concludes that:

“On a like for like basis government grant to fund services in 2010/11 was £109m and this has been reduced to £90m in 2013/14, a reduction of £19m or 17%.”

From the data available it is not feasible to calculate changes in government grant funding from 1997 the date of election of the previous government, due to the complexity of establishing a like for like base.

Supplementary

Could the Cabinet Member tell me how does this impact on our services and our financial planning?

Reply

It’s going to be very bad.

7. From Councillor Suzanne Evans to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Can the Cabinet Member please confirm the current net pension liability for the year just ended 2012-13?

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Reply

The pension fund is currently 84% funded. Pension Fund liability £67.109m equivalent to the remaining 16%. The deficit recovery period is currently 15 years, twelve of which remain outstanding.

Supplementary

I understand that the cost of administering the Pension Fund is much higher than in other London boroughs. Does he know what the cost is and how much higher it is and whether or not he might look at that as a future saving.

Reply

I was a little bit surprised because I kind of expected the blame for the Pension Fund to be put on immigrants or people who want gay marriage because that seems to be the UKIP answer to everything at the moment. I don't in any way seek to belittle people who vote UKIP but people who switch to them I can't understand. The Pension Fund is very well run and we're happy to defend it.

8. From Councillor David Williams to the Leader of the Council

In the context of local government reorganisation since implementation of the Local Government Act 2000, there have been at least two occasions on which the council has considered the suitability of having wards with three members or one member, including extensive public consultation on the model used by the London Borough of Merton.

Can the Leader confirm:

1. The timing, extent and nature of previous public consultation exercises?
2. The likely timetable and other considerations associated with implementing changes to the number of councillors in each ward?
3. The cost and implications of a re-warding exercise to enable the rebalancing of ward size and electors per councillor, if not already included clearly in the reply to 2) above?
4. The outcome of the previous consultations and the subsequent decisions taken by the Council along with the reasons for this?

Reply from the Cabinet Member for Finance

Reviews of the electoral arrangements in the London Borough of Merton are carried out by the Local Government Boundary Commission in a programme of reviews led by them, or sometimes at the request of a Council.

1. The last periodic electoral review was commenced in June 1998 with publication of draft recommendations in January 1999 followed by an 8 week public consultation period. The final report was published in June 1999 after representations were received from the Council, political parties, residents associations and residents. The recommendations were implemented for the May 2002 elections.

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2. The usual timetable is approximately 12 months from start to finish of a review with implementation of recommendations at the next timetabled election.

3. The cost of the previous review in officer time is broadly estimated at £100,000 over two years.

4. The outcome implemented by the Council were the current electoral arrangements with a Council size of 60, with 3 members in each of the 20 wards. The Boundary commissions prime objectives and reasons in reaching its findings are to:

- achieve electoral equality
- establish electoral areas that reflect community identity
- promote effective and convenient local government

9. From Councillor Sam Thomas to the Leader of the Council

I note that we have put up posters around the borough letting people know that we have frozen their council tax for the third year in a row. Could he confirm how much the posters cost us?

Reply from the Cabinet Member for Finance

The cost of the council tax poster was £672 for the design, print and placement across 42 sites borough wide. This expenditure was drawn from within the existing Communications budget.

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

What are the occupancy rates of Council-owned car parks in Wimbledon; are there any plans to sell any of them and, if so, what will the revenue be used for?

Reply

Occupancy rates in respect of Council owned car parks are measured against potential income that would be received for full occupancy. On that basis the following occupancy rates were recorded for the first quarter of 2013/14:

- Hartfield Road: 84%
- St Georges Road: 41%
- Broadway: 74%
- Queens Road: 9% (this car park is used predominantly by season ticket holders)

With regard to the sale of Council owned car parks; there are long standing decisions of the Council to dispose of both Hartfield Road (decision taken in 2004) and Broadway (decision taken in 2007) car parks, both of which were only seen as temporary car parks. These disposals are to further the regeneration of the Town centre through appropriate redevelopment and

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recognise the fact that there is currently an oversupply of car parking provision in Wimbledon. Any disposal of the Hartfield Road car park has been delayed until 2019 to allow a restrictive covenant to expire.

Any consideration for the sale of assets would be deemed a capital receipt and are not available to offset the cost of revenue related activity. Up to 4% of the receipt value may be used to offset any costs directly attributable to the sale.

There are restrictions on the use of capital receipts and as such they may only be used for:

- a) Funding of new capital expenditure
- b) Paying the premium on the redemption of debt
- c) Repayment of debt in relation to capital expenditure in previous years

There strict definitions of what is and is not capital expenditure and capital receipts can only be used to fund this type of expenditure.