

Merton Council Council

13 September 2023

Supplementary Agenda 6

19 Non-Priority Questions and Replies

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Non-Priority Questions

From Councillor Gould to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

Would the Cabinet Member please give an update on the Autumn COVID and Flu vaccination programmes and where walk-in centres will be located across Merton?

Reply

Autumn COVID and Flu vaccination programmes

Covid (and Flu) autumn vaccine programmes have been brought forward as a precautionary measure taken to protect those most vulnerable from illness during winter following the identification of Covid-19 variant BA.2.86.

The vaccination campaign was previously due to commence in early October.

This precautionary measure is being taken as UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) examine the variant BA.2.86, which was first detected in the UK on Friday 18 August. There's recently been more evidence of community transmission within the UK. Many of those are related to one care home outbreak in East of England in Norfolk.

While BA.2.86 is not currently classified as a variant of concern, it is a variant under monitoring, advice from the UKHSA suggests that speeding up the autumn vaccine programme will deliver greater protection, supporting those at greatest risk of severe illness and reducing the potential impact on the NHS.

Those eligible are:

- Residents in a care home for older adults
- All adults aged 65 years and over
- People aged six months to 64 years in a clinical risk group
- Frontline health and social care workers
- People aged 12 to 64 who are household contacts of people with weakened immune systems
- People aged 16 to 64 who are carers and staff working in care homes for older adults

The national vaccination programme began on 11th September with adult care home residents, staff and the housebound.

Vaccination consent forms were sent to all Merton care homes last week 5th September with a deadline of 10th September. Not all Merton care homes have completed the consent forms. Not all residents have capacity to complete consent forms and the care homes are still waiting for relatives to give consent. The care homes are being urgently followed up to ensure that all forms are completed prior to scheduling visits.

The NHS vaccination team will contact the care homes to schedule a visit to give the vaccinations. The plan is for all the care homes to complete vaccinations by the 20 October.

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From 18 September the other eligible groups will be able to book in for vaccinations from the following day (19th Sep) onwards, supply permitting.

People will be able to book online, the NHS app or call 119.

The Wilson and the Nelson are confirmed vaccination sites, we are awaiting confirmation for the list of pharmacies who have shown interest and have been certified. There are also plans currently being discussed for Merton Civic Centre to be a Walk-in option, we are still awaiting NHS confirmation on this.

The NHS will contact those who are eligible - eligible people are urged to come forward for their jab as soon as they are invited.

The annual flu vaccine will also be made available to these groups at the same time for operational expediency and in line with public health recommendations, so called co- administration to ensure they are protected ahead of winter.

The decision means those most at risk from winter illness and severe illness will be protected which will reduce the potential impact on the NHS.

There is no change to the wider public health advice at this time – that includes any changes to testing, any changes to widening the groups of those eligible for vaccinations etc. This current advice will be reviewed regularly by UKHSA through tracking the epidemiology and any wider prevailing threat.

From Councillor Willis to Cabinet Member for Transport

Assuming the purpose of CPZ's is to prevent overcrowding by limiting street parking to those who have a permit, could the Cabinet Member provide a list of examples where permits have been refused due to the area being full and point members toward a log of the number of available permits in each CPZ and which have the fewest remaining?

Reply

The common understanding within the Parking Service and Highways is that no single CPZ is saturated at this time, although some individual streets within CPZs could be deemed as under stress, there is capacity elsewhere in the CPZ.

From Councillor Austin to the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

What is the current birth rate in Merton and how does this compare with the years 2006-2014? How does the cabinet member plan to manage the declining primary school age numbers and its impact on schools?

Reply

Merton's live birth figure from 2006 to 2022 (ONS calendar year) is as follows:

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Year	Live births
2006	3,092
2007	3,300
2008	3,330
2009	3,462
2010	3,523
2011	3,537
2012	3,476
2013	3,370
2014	3,274
2015	3,412
2016	3,246
2017	3,172
2018	3,018
2019	2,924
2020	2,783
2021	2,739
2022	2,497

As can be seen, after a substantial rise in live births from the early 2000s to 2010 and a plateau to 2015, it has reduced substantially over the past 7 years, with the resulting reduction in the number of children as they reach school age

The council has a 'School Places Planning Strategy' which has been updated again this month and is being considered at the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 20 September 2023. The paper is available here:

<https://democracy.merton.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?Id=153&MId=4392&Ver=4>

In brief it is a combination of reducing admissions numbers to multiples of 30 for education efficiency when practical to do so, consider alternative models to operate schools for school improvement and to manage a balanced budget e.g. hard and soft federations, and only close schools when absolutely necessary, as per the statutory guidance. This would be for example where standards are poor without a viable strategy for school improvement; the school is not viable financially after all options have been exhausted, and pupil forecasts do not suggest an increase in demand. In all such circumstances we would ensure that there are places elsewhere for children that would be displaced. The council will also be wary that once land is lost for schools it may not be possible to get it back for any future increase in demand that cannot be foreseen.

From Councillor Hicks to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

Can the Cabinet member confirm what happens when weeds on a street are reported through FixMyStreet, in particular whether and if so, how, it is confirmed that work has been satisfactorily completed before the issue is flagged as resolved?

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Reply

When street cleaning reports are entered on FixMyStreet a separate report containing the relevant details is generated on the contractor's case management system. This information is allocated to the street cleansing reactive teams to investigate and resolve.

The possible interventions that occur from reports by residents will require the contractor to attend to the reported location and remove the weeds manually, or the site is attended and 'no further action' may be required because the report is within acceptable service standards or relates to land not managed by the council or, if there is a schedule weed spraying operation, the location is noted and no further action is taken. For proactive weed spraying to be most effective, plant material is required to ensure that the herbicide is absorbed effectively.

Once reports are completed, the operative updates the action in the contractor's case management system and this information is then updated in real-time onto the FixMyStreet report. Client management officers routinely inspect the work of the contractor to ensure that service delivery standards, including weed management, are delivered efficiently. This comprises between 700 –850 individual inspections per month of borough roads.

Additional information: As part of managing weeds in the borough, the borough's streets are also treated with a herbicide (glyphosate) to limit the growth of weeds, which is typically applied three times a year. This year we are trialing the use of non-glyphosate treatment in the Wandle Ward and we have ceased the application of glyphosate in Merton Garden Streets, which totals 195 streets across the borough.

From Councillor Paterson to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Please can the Cabinet Member provide an update on the progress of Morden Town Centre regeneration and the search for a development partner?

Reply

Merton Council had been working in partnership with TFL to seek a development partner for the comprehensive regeneration of Morden Town Centre. However, the pandemic had a profound impact on TFL's finances and the development industry in general. Therefore, the Council paused this work to reflect and re-assess the market conditions as well as the overall scheme viability and deliverability.

The Council has commissioned new research, and we are currently assessing the viability of the Morden Town Centre regeneration scheme and the different options open to the Council to deliver an ambitious vision in what is a challenging development market. Merton's new Local Plan provides an updated vision for the town centre regeneration.

The Council will agree a direction of travel in due course and intend to provide an update as part of the Scrutiny work programme in the new year.

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From Councillor Braithwaite to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

Please could the Cabinet Member tell me what factors are important for determining whether a site is suitable for mobile / pop up community waste collections ('Garth Road on the Road'), and list the sites that have been identified so far? When will the pilot scheme end?

Reply

Thank you for your question about this exciting new community service. I am pleased to report that we have collected over 27 tonnes of waste during this trial from our local communities and, importantly, 46% of the material collected has been recycled.

The criteria used to select suitable sites for our 'Garth Road on the Road' mobile and pop-up community waste collection initiative, are varied and designed to ensure the effectiveness of these events. We aim to choose locations that are not in the vicinity of the Garth Road site, so residents who live further away and those who may not have the use of private cars can access localised services for bulky waste items, while also offering recycling services so we can collect recyclable items, including waste electrical equipment.

Additionally, ease of public access to these sites is important to ensure that the facilities are accessible and foster community participation. We also look for locations that are secure, including fencing gates and sites that are equipped with CCTV monitoring as a security measure to help deter any illegal fly-tipping activities post-event. Furthermore, adequate space is required at locations to accommodate both the Veolia waste collection vehicles and residents who may need to arrive by car for the disposal of their waste items.

So far this year, we have successfully organised events at the New Horizon Centre in Pollards Hill, the Chaucer Centre in the St Helier & Ravensbury and at Singlegate Primary School in Colliers Wood. The next scheduled location is at Haydons Road Recreation Ground in South Wimbledon this weekend on Saturday, 16th September.

I can confirm that there are plans to incorporate this valuable community service into the procurement of our upcoming waste service contract. As for the near-term schedule, we anticipate conducting one more event before the close of this calendar year and another prior to the end of the financial year, which would bring the total number of events to six since the pilot initiative was launched this year.

From Councillor Page to the Deputy Leader/Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Local events such as the Big Sports Day and Mitcham Carnival are not added to the Merton Local app, has it been discontinued? If not, could the Cabinet Member provide the number of unique users in each of the last 3 months (June, July, August 2023)?

Reply

Non-Priority Questions

The Merton Local App is still live, and as of 6 September 2023, the number of residents signed up to Merton Local is **4807**. It continues to receive new downloads new downloads for the last 3 months:

- **June = 41**
- **July = 64**
- **August = 47**

We are still encouraging businesses and council departments to put events on it, and will continue to monitor its use and impact.

Strategic theme non priority questions

From Councillor MacArthur to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Could the Cabinet Member advise on details of the procurement process for the contract awarded to London Sport? I would like to know how they were appointed, the criteria for bids and sight of a copy of the tender document.

Reply

London Sport has significant expertise in sport and physical activity, and to help Merton realise our ambitions, we agreed staff secondment for a period of time.

From Councillor McGrath to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Name blind recruitment is regarded as best practice by the Wimbledon based Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development. Will the Cabinet member ask council officers to prepare a report for cabinet on the advantages and disadvantages of applying this in Merton?

Reply

We are actively exploring the feasibility of implementing blind recruitment at Merton. Our current system operates with two application forms - a long one and a short one. The short form, primarily used for social worker positions, collects personal details and CVs. The long application form requires candidates to fill in their own work history. If we switch to blind recruitment within our current ATS system, we will need to use the long form exclusively, and all identifying information, including names, could be removed.

However, blind recruitment goes beyond removing names and in its truest form requires the removal of all identifying characteristics. For example, reference to attending a School for Girls will identify the gender. We are actively looking at the capability of our current software to assess the extent it can truly anonymise all protective characteristics so that all bias is removed from the long and short-listing stages.

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It's also important to note that blind recruitment may not work at senior levels in a sector as interconnected as local government, where people may be recognized based on their employment history.

In summary, we are actively looking into the possibility of adopting blind recruitment practices and will investigate the necessary software or resources required to do so effectively.

From Councillor Holden to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

What are the plans to honour the memory of Queen Elizabeth II in Merton? For example, the council could consider a statue or renaming a park in honour of our late Queen.

Reply

Whilst there are no existing plans for a commemoration of this kind, we welcome and support the idea of a permanent way of honouring Queen Elizabeth II in the borough. We would be happy to bring together a cross party group of councillors to discuss this. We are also delighted to be able to continue to pay tribute by displaying the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II by renowned painter June Mendoza in the foyer of the Civic Centre in Morden.

From Councillor Dresselaers to the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

Children with SEND can have different needs to those without. But they have the same right to have fun, care and support over summer. The Local Offer contains clubs and playschemes which require a referral, or where places are significantly limited. Even families who receive vouchers for holiday clubs can be unable to take places up, because the cost of the support they would need to attend them is prohibitive. Does the Cabinet Member agree with me that just referring parents to the Local Offer and/or private providers is not enough, and will she agree to carry out an audit of holiday provision to see how well it meets the needs of families with disabled children, and take steps to address any shortfall?

Reply

We are committed to ensuring that children with a Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND) have access to activities they can enjoy, whether that is after school, at the weekend or over the school holidays. This is exemplified through the provision at Brightwell (our purpose-built provision, providing respite and short breaks for children with a range of complex needs who have a learning disability and / or physical disability), Merton MENCAP's 'Saturday Club' (a fun place for children with a learning disability aged 5 – 12 to go and play and make friends, commissioned by the council), and 'ACES' (a youth service for young people aged 14 – 18 who have a diagnosis of high functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Asperger's, commissioned by the our Integrated Care Board).

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Merton schools also run inclusive provision after school and in the holidays - Ofsted expect that children and young people with SEND are included in all aspects of school life, including after school clubs and provisions.

We have particularly focused on provision for SEND children in our Holiday, Activity and Food (HAF) programmes locally, not just over the main holiday times as funded by central government, but also over half terms, as funded by the Council. The numbers of children with SEND joining in these programmes has risen over the past year, and now at least 16.3% of the whole cohort of children attending a HAF programme have a declared SEND. There is evidence that SEND seems to be under declared when parents and carers register their child, and so the proportion is, in reality, higher than this. At 16.3%, this is just below the proportion of children attending our schools with a SEND.

Our providers make considerable efforts to meet the needs of all the children booked into their settings. To enable providers to meet needs, we have provided funding for additional workers, and this summer we funded an additional 8 staff to support children with SEND; we anticipate that the take up of this additional funding will increase over the coming months. In addition, we are delivering some HAF projects which are particularly aimed at children with SEND.

We continually maintain an oversight to understand how clubs are provided or commissioned to meet children's needs.

From Councillor Howard to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Will the cabinet member further increase the use of planters, hanging flower baskets and declutter our key town centres?

Reply

The Council works with many organisations to provide planters and hanging baskets including business groups and BIDs, the All-England Lawn Tennis Club as well as planters and parklets provided and maintained by the Council. Planters are also available for bidding via the Neighbourhood Fund and Ward Allocation schemes.

The Council also considers de-cluttering in designing any public realm schemes with notable schemes including the public realm investments in Colliers Wood, Mitcham Fair Green, Raynes Park, Wimbledon Hill and the station forecourt. We will also be undertaking some de-cluttering in future years utilising the Civic Pride fund.

From Councillor Hall to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Beyond apprenticeships, what steps have this administration taken to open up recruitment across all departments for neuro-diverse people? In their reply could the Cabinet Member also detail what training all managers have received to improve support given for new recruits?

Reply

Non-Priority Questions

We offer an autism e-Learning module available to all staff and have conducted face-to-face autism awareness learning modules on behalf of adult social care. We also have a neurodiverse hub page that provides guidance in collaboration with public health

Moving forward we aim to promote job opportunities through channels catering to neuro-diverse communities. And affirm our commitment to exploring both blind recruitment and further support for neuro-diverse recruitment as part of our ongoing EDI efforts.

From Councillor Galea to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

The 2021 Census shows that around 28% of disabled people live in socially rented housing. This equates to 2.9 million people. One in twenty of us. Building more 'wheelchair accessible' homes and 'accessible and adaptable' homes can also help reduce the cost of care assistance in the home and reduce welfare benefits. Therefore, would the Council commit to building more than just 10% wheelchair accessible homes (as required by the London Plan) when building affordable / social housing?

Reply

We are committed to delivering our Council new build homes to exemplary standards and quality. This will include ensuring all our new build homes are "accessible and adaptable", in line with the London Plan to ensure homes are accessible for those with disabilities. In terms of wheelchair accessible homes, we will look at this on a case-by-case basis for each site we develop.

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