

Merton Council Council

15 November 2023

Supplementary Agenda Item 3

18 Strategic Theme Councillor Questions and Replies

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Strategic Theme Priority Questions

From Cllr Michael Butcher to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

How are we engaging with community groups as well sports clubs to ensure we have a whole borough approach to creating the Borough of Sport?

Reply

From its inception, Borough of Sport has engaged both sports and non-sports community groups to help shape and guide the plans. This approach, led by London Sport consultants, involved discussions with over 100 local groups and individuals, highlighting a commitment to diverse community engagement. Key non-sports groups such as Age UK (Merton), Baitul Futuh Mosque, Wimbledon Guild, Merton Connected, and Merton Dementia Hub played a significant role in these early stages.

The stakeholder advisory group, central to the initiative, includes both sports and non-sports representatives. Members such as BAME Voice, Merton Mencap, Youth Inspectors, and NHS Southwest London ensure a balanced perspective in decision-making, reflecting the varied interests of the community.

Additionally, the participation of non-sports groups in events such as the first Borough of Sport Online Forum, held on 14th November 2023, demonstrates their ongoing involvement and influence in shaping the initiative.

Overall, the Borough of Sport exemplifies a collaborative and inclusive approach to community engagement, where diverse voices from across the community spectrum contribute to creating a dynamic and comprehensive sports initiative.

From Cllr Paul Kohler to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

The running track in Wimbledon Park is no longer fit for purpose. Given the urgency of the situation can the Cabinet Member please confirm what plans the Council has to reinstate both the track and spectator facilities in the Wimbledon Park stadium and what enhancements are planned in respect of disabled access for both athletes and spectators?

Reply

Contrary to the suggestion in the question that the Wimbledon Park running track is no longer fit for purpose, Merton has made extensive improvements to the track in 2023 which have enabled the facility to obtain a level 2 competition license which meets the current needs of the site. Following the renovations, a thorough professional evaluation was conducted, ensuring that the track and its accompanying facilities meet the high standards required for TrackMark accreditation. These improvements have enabled the current users to both hold competitive events at a district level and ensure that the facility can be used as a high-quality training facility.

In addition, TrackMark accreditation is a rigorous process that assesses a facility's management, maintenance, and accessibility. It ensures that a venue adheres to the minimum standards set by the National Governing Body for Athletics in the UK, which includes provisions for disabled access. This accreditation confirms that our facilities meet England Athletics' requirements for disability access, both for the track and the ancillary facilities.

Regarding spectator facilities, we acknowledge the previous damage to the grandstand due to arson. However, restorative efforts have been undertaken to make these facilities operational and improve them. We are committed to further enhancing accessibility and will conduct a review with our Facilities team and Idverde colleagues. This will help us identify and address any ongoing issues and ensure that our facilities are accessible and welcoming to all visitors.

From Cllr Eleanor Cox to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Why does Merton charge £12.60 for an hour's tennis in Wimbledon Park at peak times. How is this supporting Merton as a 'borough of sport' when the costs of hiring a public tennis court are so high, thus prohibiting those that cannot afford it to play?

Reply

The charge for tennis at Wimbledon Park during can be justified by several factors, reflecting a fair pricing strategy. Firstly, the costs are in line with the high demand for these courts, especially given Wimbledon Park's renown in the tennis world. High demand often necessitates a pricing model that balances accessibility with the need to manage and maintain these popular facilities effectively.

Additionally, the fee structure in Wimbledon Park can be considered reasonable when viewed in the context of alternative options available in the area. Merton residents have access to free tennis courts in other local parks, offering a no-cost option for those who find Wimbledon Park's fees prohibitive. This alternative provision ensures that tennis remains accessible to a broader section of the community, aligning with Merton's vision as a 'borough of sport.'

Overall, while the charges at Wimbledon Park might seem high at a glance, they are justified by the need to manage a high-demand facility and are balanced by the availability of free alternatives within the borough. This approach demonstrates a commitment to maintaining quality sports facilities while also ensuring that sport remains accessible to all residents of Merton.

From Cllr Joan Henry to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Given the cost-of-living crisis, Merton residents are facing financial challenges. Could the Cabinet Member detail how she has factored this into her borough of Sports plan?

Reply

The Borough of Sport plans have a particular focus on free and low-cost activities in order to help residents find affordable ways to get active during the current cost of living crisis. These have been brought together in a single place - a new Borough of Sport Activity Finder - which helps residents find what is on offer and helps clubs and community groups promote what they are doing.

Free swimming for under 16s was made permanent in the run up to Merton's Big Sports Day in September, with expanded hours. In November the Council launched free swimming for 65s and over providing regular free swimming slots at all three of the borough's leisure centres.

Merton's Big Sports Day gave residents a great day out and a chance to try out a range of sports and physical activities for free. Around 5000 residents of all ages attended the day. Just over 73% of those who attended and provided feedback on the day said they, or a family member, were either very likely or somewhat likely to take up a new sport or activity as a result of the Big Sports Day.

In addition, all of the Borough of Sport exemplar projects provide free opportunities to get active and play sport. This includes Walking Netball at Morden Park and Our Parks exercise classes at Fair Green in Mitcham. Further exemplar projects are in development including a new ParkRun in Morden and bringing ParkPlay to sites across Merton.

From Cllr Samantha MacArthur to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Could the Cabinet Member please advise us of the cost of the recent Borough Sports Day?

Reply

The total cost for the Borough of Sport Big Sports Day was £131,867.79. We secured contributions for more than half of the event cost totalling £67,500 from Cappagh Public Works Ltd, Chas 2013 Limited, AELTC (Championships) Ltd, FM Conway, Clarion, GLL, and Veolia. A further £30,000 was contributed by Public Health, and the remaining £34,367.79 was allocated from within budget.

From Cllr Daniel Holden to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Over recent years the council has made efforts to use their leisure and heritage assets to bring in income. What criteria are used to determine if an event is suitable to be held in/on our assets?

Reply

When determining the suitability of events in our leisure and heritage assets, it's important to clarify that our approach is not solely driven by financial considerations. While generating income is a factor, our primary goal is to enrich our parks and green

spaces with a variety of cultural and leisure activities. These events are carefully selected to appeal to and benefit our wider community.

We actively seek opportunities to host diverse events, ranging from outdoor cinema and food festivals to cultural celebrations and funfairs. These activities are chosen to cater to residents of all ages, enhancing the community's cultural and leisure experiences. Our focus is on bringing vibrant, inclusive events that contribute to the social and cultural fabric of our community.

To ensure the appropriateness and success of these events, we conduct a thorough review process. Each week during the peak event season, a meeting is held involving internal council officers from sport and leisure, greenspaces, licensing, and other relevant departments. We also involve external partners such as the police in these discussions. This collaborative approach allows us to assess each application comprehensively, considering factors like community benefit, safety, and the potential impact on the environment and local residents.

In summary, our criteria for hosting events in our leisure and heritage assets extend beyond financial gain. We aim to provide a range of activities that enrich our community's cultural and leisure options, ensuring our parks and green spaces are vibrant, inclusive, and enjoyable for residents of all ages.

From Cllr James Williscroft to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

How are we ensuring that the whole Borough can benefit from becoming London's Borough of Sport?

Reply

The new Borough of Sport Activity Finder brings together over one thousand ways to get active across the entire borough. Many are free or low cost. We are working with clubs and groups across the whole of Merton to encourage and help them to upload the activities to the portal. The activity finder includes lots of activities which are accessible for people with a range of disabilities and impairments, and you can filter the activities on the portal to find something that meets your individual needs. For example, FA Wildcats and Walk and Talk at Plough Lane sessions both run by the AFC Wimbledon Foundation that welcome all abilities and disabilities.

There are several initiatives which reach across the whole of the Borough for example the:

- free swimming offer for kids and the 65s and overs;
- refurbishment, with partner funding by the LTA, of 47 tennis courts at 12 sites;
- refurbishment of the beach volleyball court in Wimbledon; and

Almost £300,000 from the Department of Education and London Sport secured for 23 Merton schools to help them open up their facilities beyond the school day for use by the local community, this includes Cricket Green and Perseid Special Schools.

In addition, 85 residents have redeemed/used their free 60 minutes Forest bike usage. Forest are impressed and pleased with this level of up take and we will look at how we can expand this offer in future.

We will also seek to ensure that exemplar projects are located across the entire borough and will be seeking advice and guidance from organisations who sit on the Borough of Sport Advisory group to make sure that interventions are as impactful as possible. We are also working to make sure these exemplar projects are, where possible, accessible to everyone – such as the Netball and the Our Parks classes, which both welcome and tailor their sessions to meet the needs of people with disabilities.

From Cllr Chessie Flack to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

The Playing Pitch Strategy back in 2019 gave some ambitions for female involvement in sport in the borough - Rugby moving from 2 to 7 teams, Football up 20% and an addition of projected female cricket demand requiring new cricket facilities to be added in the area. Could the Cabinet Member please report on progress made with these targets over the past four years?

Reply

In addressing the progress on the ambitious targets for female involvement in sports as outlined in the 2019 Playing Pitch Strategy, it's important to consider the timing and subsequent challenges that have impacted implementation. The strategy was completed in August 2019, just a few months before the onset of COVID-19 restrictions, which significantly limited the opportunity for immediate action on its recommendations. This had a varied impact on sports participation. While some sports have experienced an increase in engagement, others, particularly adult team sports, have witnessed a decline. This shift in participation patterns necessitates a reassessment of our approach.

Regarding the specific targets you mentioned, such as the increase in female rugby teams, the growth in football participation, and the addition of cricket facilities, these have not been fully realised due to these challenges. Instead of relying on pre-pandemic data, we are committed to undertaking a comprehensive consultation process as part of the refresh of the Playing Pitch Strategy in 2024. This updated strategy will provide more relevant and current recommendations, taking into account the impacts of both the changes in sporting needs following the 2019 strategy and the ongoing cost of living crisis.

This reassessment will allow us to set more accurate and achievable ambitions for these sports within the borough, aligning with the latest participation trends and community needs. These efforts will be undertaken in collaboration with partners and other organisations, ensuring a holistic and community-informed approach.

From Cllr Agatha Akyigyina to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

People generally get less active as they age, which has a negative impact on their mental and physical health. Can the Cabinet member tell us how the Council is supporting older people to be physically active in Merton?

Reply

Providing opportunities for older people, particularly those aged over 65 is a key strand of the Borough of Sport ambition. We have recently launched free swimming sessions for over 65's at each of our leisure centres and introduced free walking netball sessions in Morden Rec. Organisations who work closely with older people such as Age UK and Wimbledon Guild are represented on the Borough of Sport Advisory group and we will take their advice as well as our colleagues in Public Health to not only introduce more activities for this age group where gaps are identified, but also to better promote the wide range of existing opportunities in Merton for older people to ensure we do everything we can to reverse the trend of decreasing activity levels as you get older.