

# **Merton Council Council**

**15 November 2023**

## **Supplementary Agenda Item 4**

19 Ordinary Priority Questions to Cabinet Members and Replies

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Councillor Priority Questions to Cabinet Members

## **From Cllr Mike Brunt to the Cabinet Member for Transport**

Can the Cabinet Member advise on the progress being made in marking out bays for charging electric vehicles in Wimbledon?

### **Reply**

We have introduced 22 EV parking bays in Wimbledon with a further 28 to be installed over the next few weeks. There are 12 locations currently under consultation, with a further 11 sites programmed for consultation starting 16<sup>th</sup> November 2023. Further bays are being progressed in batches on a three-week basis. All the information on current the consultations is available online at

[Consultation on electric vehicle-only parking bays | Merton Council](#)

## **From Cllr Simon McGrath to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride**

Can the Cabinet Member please outline the responsibilities of the Safer Neighbourhood Board?

### **Reply**

*Safer Neighbourhood Boards have an important role to play in supporting engagement at a local level, promoting trust and confidence in the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and helping to ensure transparency and accountability of MPS delivery. The board sits on a quarterly basis and is chaired by Maureen Bailey from Inner Strength Network and comprises of local Cllrs, partners, and community organisations. Attendance and engagement from Board members is high, and I'd like to thank those – particularly volunteers from Neighbourhood Watch and community organisations – who give up their time to attend, and all they do to help keep Merton safe.*

*The key responsibilities/aims of the Safer Neighbourhood Board are;*

- enable local engagement with the police;*
- enable local scrutiny and accountability of the police;*
- focus on the Police and Crime Plan key principles and priorities;*
- monitor crime performance and public perceptions (community confidence);*
- inform the development of policing priorities in the borough;*
- monitor MPS support for the delivery of ward panels; and*
- engage with Borough Independent Advisory Groups and other local mechanisms (e.g. Neighbourhood Watch and stop and search community monitoring groups) to support and inform their work across the borough.*

*The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) provide Safer Neighbourhood Board funding, for communities to apply for community led projects to be delivered over 12 months. The projects must meet the criteria set by MOPAC. The criteria this year was;*

- *Reducing and preventing violence*
- *Increasing trust and confidence.*
- *Better supporting victims.*
- *Protecting people from being exploited or harmed.*

*Merton Safer Neighbourhood board submitted 4 projects to MOPAC, all were successful at receiving funding.*

### **From Cllr Stephen Mercer to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green spaces and Climate Change**

What level of expenditure does the Cabinet believe is reasonable in support of a decent level of toilet provision in Merton? If a Community Toilet Scheme is the most cost effective way of achieving decent provision, has the Council considered how much is spent by neighbouring councils in funding the same sort of schemes?

#### **Reply**

As part of our ambitions to support our local town centres to be great places for residents to shop and socialise, we are keen to ensure access to toilets, and welcomed the work of the Scrutiny Task Group on this topic. Following agreement by Cabinet that a Community Toilet Scheme is the most beneficial way to provide facilities, the Council has allocated Civic Pride funding towards re-launching Merton's Community toilet scheme.

An initial £30,000 has been allocated over three years. Whilst this may be sufficient to keep the project running, it is likely to require additional start-up costs in the first year which are being scoped by officers in liaison with other boroughs, and if required further funding sources will be identified.

### **From Cllr Stuart Neaverson to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change**

It's been fantastic to see the progress the Council has made on climate action, especially with the planting of 10,000 trees over the last year. How does Merton compare with other councils on climate action?

#### **Reply**

We're delighted to report that Merton recently came 4th in the country on climate action in an independent assessment of all councils in England who had declared a

climate emergency [Council Climate Action Scorecards | Climate Emergency UK \(councilclimatescorecards.uk\)](https://councilclimatescorecards.uk)

Climate Emergency UK undertake an assessment every year of the progress of all councils, to hold them to account on the climate action they have taken since their declaration of a climate emergency. In 2021, we came 72nd and this year we came 4<sup>th</sup> – a testament to the focus this administration and our fantastic officers have placed on this strand of work.

We scored particularly highly on:

- collaboration and engagement, at 89%, thanks also to Merton’s Climate Action Group of resident volunteers and all community groups, resident associations and business organisations who’ve worked with us and spread the message.
- planning and land use, at 78%.

This is the first time the assessment is based on actual progress towards addressing the climate emergency; previously the scorecards were based on the contents of the Climate Action Plans, so we are especially pleased to have placed so highly as the score represents how Merton’s residents, businesses, communities and the Council are working together on tangible actions.

### **From Cllr Hina Bokhari to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride**

Would the Cabinet Member set out how we are supporting asylum seekers who could be at risk of becoming homeless in Merton?

### **Reply**

Merton Council is working with Merton Citizens and other community organisations to achieve “Borough of Sanctuary” status, and is very concerned about the rise in the numbers of asylum seekers and refugees across the country that are finding themselves homeless thanks to the Home Office’s decision to move on people from asylum accommodation rapidly and without support. Their actions are putting the welfare of vulnerable asylum seekers at risk, and placing additional burdens on local councils.

The Council has a legal duty under homeless persons legislation to take homeless applications from former asylum seekers with refugee status if they are homeless or threatened with homelessness within 56 days. This places a duty on the Council to assess their housing needs and provide a personalised housing plan (PHP) that sets out the ‘reasonable steps’ the applicant and the Council will take to prevent or relieve their homelessness.

Examples of this would be assisting people to rent privately local, and referrals to local supported housing vacancies and hostels.

Where the applicant has a 'priority need' for housing as defined in law, such as those with dependent children or who are 'vulnerable' in line with the legal test, the Council would provide temporary accommodation pending further steps to relieve their homelessness.

The Council also works with local agencies and charities to provide holistic support to applicants alongside our housing.

### **From Cllr Usamma Kaweesa to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride**

It's great to see the brilliant work being done to Vestry Hall through the Civic Pride Fund, can the cabinet member highlight other successes we have had through the fund?

### **Reply**

Merton's Civic Pride reserves fund was approved by Cabinet on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2023. <https://democracy.merton.gov.uk/documents/s50495/Civic%20Pride%20Programme%20CABINET%20June%202023.pdf> The full programme is available to view in the report appendix.

The fund provides three years of funding for a range of civic pride projects. To date the fund has contributed towards improvements at Vestry Hall as well as providing funding support for;

- Mitcham Carnival
- Tennis Big Screen events
- Restoration of the Toynebee Fountain
- Raynes Park Rain Garden
- Christmas Light Switch-On event, in Morden for 2023
- Mitcham Town Centre management and associated activities such as the upcoming Mitcham Winter Weekend market events
- Mitcham Market Management tender and contract
- Town Centre business support offer and the development of a Night-Time Economy Strategy for Merton
- Resource to re-launch Merton's Community Toilet scheme
- Resource to prepare Merton's bid to be London Borough of Culture

### **From Cllr Robert Page to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services**

Only 37% of employees responded to the Council's Workforce Equality, Diversity and Inclusion survey in 2022. Would the Cabinet Member agree with me that the main driver of low survey turnouts is staff feeling that their voice doesn't make a difference, and that this is a situation that develops over time? Would she also agree with me that the only way to combat this is to build trust through regular, insight-driven staff communications, through taking action on staff concerns and proactively feeding back on this and if so, set out what she is doing to address this?

## Reply

Let me first say that I am incredibly proud of the staff at Merton Council. They do a fantastic job, delivering for residents in incredibly difficult circumstances after 13 years of Conservative and Liberal Democrat austerity. Merton staff are some of the hardest-working people I have ever met, and I am incredibly grateful for everything that they do to make Merton a brilliant place to live, work and raise a family.

I do agree that regular staff engagement and two-way staff communications that show staff concerns being acted on are the best way to build trust. As outlined to you in your correspondence with the Executive Director for Innovation and Change, on 28th October, Colleagues in OD and communications have developed a year-round staff engagement calendar to create regular opportunities for information sharing, for celebrating success, and for listening to staff concerns.

Officers are preparing to launch a procurement exercise to find a digital solution to creating more regular staff surveys, alongside online performance appraisals, 360 reviews, and exit interviews. This will provide a financially sustainable way to carry out regular staff insight, as externally commissioned surveys are very expensive.

To address these concerns and continue to build trust within the workforce to increase our future survey participation rates, several concrete actions have been taken, including the procurement of EDI training with input from our staff network groups, the development of an Inclusive Language Guide, and the introduction of a zero-tolerance approach against bullying and harassment.

Ethnically diverse staff are now invited to recruitment panels, fostering diversity in hiring decisions. In order to keep staff informed we have created regular EDI communication through quarterly EDI updates and several CMT members have also taken the initiative to have internal EDI focused live streamed interviews. These interviews provide an opportunity for staff to gain deeper insights into the views and backgrounds of our CMT members and also gives staff the chance to ask any EDI related questions directly to CMT.

Upcoming initiatives include an Aspiring Leaders Program, EDI training rollout, mandatory E-Learning courses, and continued senior leadership engagement. We are also focusing more on supporting our staff networks and introducing a new Women's Network and Muslim Faith Network. Finally, "Conversation Cafes" have been introduced as dedicated safe spaces for meaningful discussions. In conclusion, significant strides have been made in response to the survey's findings, with a commitment to ongoing improvement.

## **From Cllr Nick McLean to the Cabinet Member for Finance**

In a recent video the Cabinet Member said he was 'excited' to launch the Merton Young Savers accounts with the credit union Croydon Plus.

Please can the Cabinet Member tell me:

- How much money has been allocated to fund the Merton Young Savers accounts and the additional £10 for a parent or guardian to open an account?
- What is the rate of interest that is paid on the Merton Young Savers accounts?
- What is the interest rate charged by Croydon Plus on their Saver Loan and Family Plus Loan?
- Did the Cabinet Member know that at the 2023 AGM the Croydon Plus Treasurer reported that "there was an overall deficit for £21k which has resulted from charging £25k for the payment of a dividend in 2020/21"?
- What due diligence was done on the decision to partner with Croydon Plus and what alternate options were considered? Please provide all reports, correspondence and officer emails.

## **Reply**

A recent report from the Children's Society has shown that future financial stability is the issue most troubling children aged 10 to 17, with more than one in three worrying about having enough money in their future. The time is now to help our children and young people by providing them with an opportunity to start their savings career. The Cost of Living Strategy and Action Plan highlighted the need to develop some work specifically aimed at "The Next Generation" to ensure that young people's futures are not defined by the cost of living emergency.

As outlined in the Cabinet report from March 2023, part of the second tranche of the Council's £2million Cost of Living Fund has been allocated to working with the Merton, Sutton and Croydon Credit Union (which operates as CroydonPlus) to develop a pilot scheme for all year 7 children resident in Merton in 2023-24. £50,000 has been allocated which includes the setting up costs of the technical and administrative resources, and funds to cover the initial deposit for accounts that are set up. We are also currently developing the education side of this scheme which will involve the Credit Union engaging with schools in the borough on opportunities for young people across age groups to learn about money management.

Credit unions are community-based financial co-operatives, owned by members, that offer fairer financial services for their members. They put people before profit and are not driven to make money for external shareholders, and they must make decisions in the best interest of their members. Credit unions are an ethical home for people's savings and the place where accessible and affordable loans are available for people struggling to make ends meet, or to make a larger one-off purchase eg a replacement washing machine. To support them as the substitute to unscrupulous lenders and illegal loan sharks in our communities, there is a need to help credit unions grow as a



viable alternative in the marketplace. According to Fair4All Finance, over a million people in the UK are in debt to illegal money lenders. Offering these Merton Young Saver Accounts through CroydonPlus will help it grow its savings base, its engagement with residents and in turn boost its short and long-term sustainability. Our decision to work with a local Credit Union on this scheme was driven by these wider considerations.

The interest rates enquired about are: Family Loan Plus – 34.5 APR; Saver Loan is Tiered – 26.8% 0 to £2999 or 19.6% £3000 and over. Credit unions are ethical lenders who build relationships with their clients, and will always ensure that loans are only given in circumstances where people are able to manage repayments. Often their lending relates to unexpected household expenditure and as already noted, gives people in need an alternative to illegal money lending.

CroydonPlus does not pay credit interest. Subject to making a sufficient surplus it can pay a dividend, but this will be subject to a vote by the members at the Annual AGM. If applicable Savers through this scheme would become eligible to access their first dividend in March/April 2025. Savers are encouraged to open their accounts as early as possible to benefit from a higher percentage of their first annual dividend.

With regard the incomplete and edited extract from the Treasurer's report to the 2023 AGM that you have included, there was a deficit of £21k for financial year 2021/22 (ended 30 September 2022) but this was after charging for a dividend paid in respect of 2020/21 (not in 2020/21). It is incorrect to conclude that the deficit 'resulted' from this. This is the unedited text of what was reported to the AGM:

*There was an overall deficit for the year of £21k but this is after charging £25k for the payment of a dividend in respect of 2020/21 agreed by last year's AGM. It is also after charging £37k for exceptional items which are non-recurrent. These relate to historic reconciliation differences which were written off in the year. Before these items there was a surplus of about £41k.*

### **From Cllr Matthew Willis to the Cabinet Member for Transport**

We have heard that the Mayor's ULEZ scrappage scheme has now paid out £121 million or 75% of the funds available. Could the Cabinet Member please state what the equivalent is for Merton's scrappage scheme in £ and % terms?

### **Reply**

Merton's scrappage scheme was launched on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2023.

In the first two months of the scheme's operation, we have processed a total of 447 application forms. As it's a two-stage application process, this comprises of;

- 252 Stage 1 applications approved (grant reserved)
- 195 Stage 2 applications approved (vehicle scrapped, payments made or payments currently being processed)

There is a time lag between stage 1 approvals and stage 2 submission of proof of scrappage to allow residents time to scrap their vehicles and/or apply to the TFL scheme.

Budget-wise, Merton Council have paid out £195,000 (out of £252,000 committed so far) Therefore in the first 2 months of the scheme's operation, we have committed 25.2% of the £1m allocation.

The scheme to date has enabled 195 higher polluting vehicles to be removed from Merton's streets, contributing to better air quality and our climate action plan.

### **From Cllr Helena Dollimore to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care**

The St Helier Hospital impact assessment shows that there will be a huge increased pressure on local hospitals' maternity, A&E and paediatric services if St Helier's services are closed. Can the cabinet member outline how waiting times for local people might be impacted?

### **Reply**

The Council has been very clear through this process that it does not support the decision to close Maternity, Paediatrics and Accident & Emergency services at St Helier Hospital. Our view is this will have a severe and detrimental impact on the residents of Merton, in particular residents in some of the most deprived areas of our borough.

The impact assessment and recently commissioned, independent analysis by Newton Europe, demonstrated the potential change in what would be considered resident's nearest hospital. It demonstrated a significant potential increase in attendances at other Acute Hospitals locally, in particular St Georges Tooting, Kingston, and Croydon Hospitals.

We are all too aware, through national and local news headlines, that NHS trusts and Acute Hospitals are experiencing extremely high demand and pressure, heading into their most demanding period of the year –winter.

It is therefore possible to draw the conclusion that, any change of attendance pattern by residents of Merton, or others who would have previously attended St Helier, could potentially overwhelm neighbouring hospitals.