

Merton Council Council

7 February 2024

Supplementary Agenda Item 3

18 Ordinary Priority Questions to Cabinet Members and Replies

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From Cllr Attawar to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

What progress have the Council made in keeping Merton's streets clean, green and tidy over the winter months?

Reply

For a 10-week period between October and December the annual leafing programme is instated, with additional resources deployed dedicated to leaf removal. During this period last year, 570 tonnes of leaves were removed by the dedicated leafing crews. Leafing season presents one of the biggest seasonal challenges for the street cleaning service with leaf debris often contributing towards detritus. As such, a concerted effort was made to tackle this by also providing scheduled deep cleaning for areas that are subject to high parking density. Residents were communicated with and informed of the applicable sections of their street that requires deep cleaning. This proved successful with a 70% participation rate from residents within applicable streets, enabling improved access to remove detritus from the channels and gullies.

Between October and December, the Street Environment Officers undertook 1,956 quality assurance inspections. Where a street was found to be below the required standard, this was raised on the system for the contractor to respond to within the required SLA. The performance during this period was positive, with 88% of streets identified as being at the required standard for litter, exceeding the target of 87%, and 80% of streets being at the required standard for detritus, achieving the target of 80%. During quarter 3, 83.3% of all street cleaning issues reported as requiring remedial action were rectified within SLA.

From Cllr Matthew Willis to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

On Merton's emerging Local Plan: Can we have an update on expected timing for the progression of it toward adoption please?

Reply

We have recently received notification from the Planning Inspectors examining Merton's Local Plan that we can move to the next stage. The Inspectors have approved a list of modifications to the Plan which have arisen from their examination so far, including the five weeks of public hearings which took place in 2022. The Inspectors are now inviting comments on the modifications to the Local Plan until Friday 22nd March 2024 Please see the Local Plan examination website for more details www.merton.gov.uk/local-plan-examination

The Inspectors will consider all representations received and will then write their final report. Subject to receiving a positive report from the Inspectors, we aim to put the Local Plan to full council for adoption later in 2024.

From Cllr Michael Paterson to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Does the Cabinet Member still believe that this is a "business like" administration?

Reply

Yes, I firmly believe that we are an administration that is both business like and that remains absolutely focused on delivering better outcomes for our residents, communities and businesses.

Like most businesses experiencing the ongoing impact of a hostile, and worsening, financial environment, labour shortages, and other challenges we of course have had to make difficult decisions. But, as successful businesses do, we have not shied away from making those difficult decisions imposed on us by fourteen years of austerity.

Despite the challenging financial environment in which we operate we have, for example, invested £3million in cost of living support for our most vulnerable households, as well as taking action to improve our high streets and town centres. We are, through our groundbreaking work to become London's Borough of Sport, doing what every successful business does in developing a USP that increases our visibility and enhances our reputation. Again, like many successful businesses, we have, through CHAS become the market leaders in a competitive market-place and then capitalised on that success by negotiating the sale of that business unit and raising a significant capital sum that both supports our financial sustainability and creates opportunities to invest in the continuing wellbeing and development of our communities. The prudent and mature way in which we as an administration have sought to maximise the benefit of that significant capital receipt demonstrate that we are an administration that is committed to the long-term health of the borough and our residents, much like the boards of successful companies always have an eye to the future.

So, yes, I still believe that we are a business-like administration and one that, by our commitment to the borough and our residents, many other businesses could learn from.

From Cllr Henry to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

What recent investments and progress has the Council made toward reaching our ambition to become London's Borough of Sport?

Reply

We have made significant progress towards reaching our ambition to become London's Borough of Sport, including:

- Free kids swimming over the summer holidays. This has been extended to be a year round offer and includes term time sessions within all three leisure centres. We have also launched free swimming at our leisure centres for over 65s.

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- Almost £300K from the DfE/London Sport secured for 21 Merton schools to help them open up the facilities beyond the school day with additional funding of up to £2k per school to come in 2023/24, as well as additional funding for 4 SEN schools to increase their provision.
- Merton's young people winning the Most Improved Cup in last year's London Youth Games by moving up 18 places to 11th. The same provider has been commissioned to lead on this year's Merton entry so we are hoping to build on last year's success
- Plans are in place along with funding for six ParkPlays in the borough, starting with Canons House and Grounds in March. Parkplay is two hours of community play, every Saturday morning in a park or public space bringing the generations together. Local Play-leaders are recruited and the programme, initially funded by Public Health and Borough of Sport, becomes self-financing and sustaining after the first year. The roll out of the other five ParkPlays has begun and is linked to the network of Family Hubs
- Two regular Ourparks sessions on Mitcham Fair Green, to enable free activity to take place in Mitcham.
- Emerging strategic partnerships with Tim Henman Foundation and London Broncos which will bring investment and there are emerging proposals to develop initiatives to engage young people. These initiatives will focus on those less active such those with SEN who will benefit from increased opportunities to be active.
- £20k investment has been secured from the GLA for a Safe Spaces project which has resulted in 5 proposals being submitted from organisations in the borough, who will develop projects that look at how having the right activity, in the right places, with the right coaches, can contribute to some of the issues which prevent young people travelling across postcodes and different places to be active.
- Merton's expression of interest for the Football Foundation Playzones project has been successful which bring in £25k investment for capacity and consultation to take the project forward to the full application stage, likely in summer 2025. This has the potential to develop much needed facilities in some of the most deprived parts of the borough.

From Cllr Paul Kohler to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Given her responsibilities for trading standards, regulatory services, commercial environmental health and arts & cultural activity in the borough what lessons has the Cabinet Member learnt from public concerns over the health & safety and appropriateness of the "Wimbledon Festive Light Trail" in Cannizaro Park in November/December, and does she agree with the Council's assessment that it was value for money & safe and not reputationally harmful to Wimbledon?

Reply

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We are lucky to have so many parks and greenspaces in our borough, and we are keen to use them to host exciting events for residents and visitors to Merton. It is important that this is done with the support of the local community and Friends of Parks groups, and that the local community benefits from any commercial activity.

Early health and safety and value for money concerns about the Wimbledon Festive Light Trail, an event put on by a private company, were addressed immediately.

The Friends of Cannizaro Park and myself raised concerns about the event after the first weekend, which were acted upon by council officers, in consultation and approved with the organisers and the Friends group. The Friends group thanked the Council for the prompt action and support which it gave the organiser.

The Council worked closely with the organiser to review the event's health and safety assessment, and assessed value for money based on ticket prices, other light shows and feedback and comments from attendees.

The organiser wanted their event to be an affordable light trail for residents. The intention was that it was not in competition with other big, more expensive light shows. Negative and positive feedback was monitored, and the initial negative comments on social media died down. For future events careful consideration needs to be given to the location, the expectations of local residents, and to ensure marketing is clear and facilitates the intended message to manage expectations.

The local community benefited from the event as the organiser gave:

- £3,000 to the Wimbledon Guild for their Gift of Hope Christmas Appeal.
- Hampers purchased and couriered to the Wimbledon YMCA for their 121 homeless teenagers with hats, scarves, gloves and food
- Lighthouse Trust Sutton Amazon Gift List to purchase presents for the children in children's homes
- a donation of £500, and 300 books to the Salvation Army
- a large shed and wheelchair ramps donated to the Charity the Friends of Cannizaro Park

From Cllr Mundy to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

The government's housing crisis has led to a sharp increase in the number of families and children living in temporary accommodation; how is this impacting demand in Merton and the Council's budget?

Reply

The Council's numbers in temporary accommodation have increased from 230 in March 2022 to 469 in December 2023. The main issues are increasing demand and dropping supply across London and the south-east. There has been new research published by London Councils which shows a 41 per cent reduction in the number of London properties available for private rent since the Covid-19 pandemic with

warnings that turbulence and supply constraints in the private rental market is worsening added to near-record levels of homelessness across the capital.

In February 2023 Shelter published a report showing that evictions by s21 notice (which is the biggest cause of homelessness in Merton and London) were up 143% in one year.

We have seen a significant increase in the numbers of former asylum seekers presenting to the Council following the grant of status from the Home Office. Such presentations are often at short notice which means that temporary accommodation is usually the only response the Council can make. November, December, and January have also seen much more significant activity by way of court evictions from the private sector.

The forecast net spend is £2.365m with a net overspend forecasted of £1.375m. The Council continues to proactively take steps to prevent homelessness wherever possible and avoid the need for temporary accommodation. Notwithstanding the increase in numbers, Merton still has the lowest number of households in temporary accommodation of any London Borough.

From Cllr Victoria Wilson to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Please could the Cabinet Member provide an update on the number of Merton Residents in temporary accommodation, and in doing so provide details of the numbers and percentages of those:

- 1) Housed within Merton;
- 2) Housed outside of Merton but less than 90 minutes away from Merton;
- 3) Housed outside of Merton but more than 90 minutes away from Merton, setting out the local authorities within which they currently reside; and
- 4) Any details that he has on average length of time residents spend in temporary accommodation separated out as an average for those housed in Merton and those housed outside of Merton.

Reply

At the end of December 2023 there were 469 households in Temporary Accommodation. Of those, 120 Households (26%) were in Merton. 344 (73%) were outside of Merton but less than 90 minutes away, and 5 (1%) were greater than 90 minutes away. Those households are in Aylesbury Vale, Dartford, Leicester and Slough. It should be noted that some households choose to move out of London on a voluntary basis to be near to family or because of other factors.

We do not hold details on average length of stay in temporary accommodation as the Council operates a choice-based lettings scheme where applicants can choose whether or not to bid for a particular property or area when we advertise what properties are available on a weekly basis. It is fair to say that due to the availability of larger family sized homes that households needing such accommodation will wait for longer for an offer.

From Cllr Dan Johnston to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Please can you provide an update on the progress of Operation Hambling, and the recent steps the Council have taken to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour in Mitcham Town Centre?

Reply

After increasing their activity in Mitcham through the new Operation Hambling in response to some specific incidences in the town centre, the Met Police have now integrated this into its “business as usual” and where possible have a daily presence in Mitcham. It continues to receive Police Senior Leadership Team support. The Council work alongside Police and conduct joint activity, patrols and engagement in the area. Operation Hambling has improved partnership working with teams such as CCTV and has allowed for direct intelligence sharing, resulting in positive outcomes. The local community and businesses have provided positive feedback in relation to the increased visibility and engagement since the start of Operation Hambling and there has been a reduction in crime and ASB in the area.

A partnership action plan was created to outline the main concerns raised by residents, businesses and communities, as well as what was reported to Police and Council departments. This set out clear activity and ownership to address these concerns, improve residents' feelings of safety as well as disrupt and enforce criminal activity. There are a range of teams involved in the action plan such as Safer Merton, Housing, Parking, Licensing, Youth Services, Public Spaces, Kingdom, and Public Health. Activity includes:

- Detached youth workers engaging with young people
- Clarion Neighbourhood Wardens patrolling areas
- Kingdom conducting PSPO patrols
- Waste service checks/Fly tipping hotspot visits and litter patrols
- Safer Merton conducting engagement visits with business and residents
- Police, ASB and Kingdom joint patrols
- VIA conducting drug and alcohol outreach
- Rough sleeping team outreach
- CCTV team monitoring

Bi-monthly meetings between the Council and Police are in place to review ongoing matters and ensure there is a joined up partnership response, and to look at the long-term approach alongside the wider Mitcham vision through the town centre managers work.