

Merton Council Council

18 September 2024

Supplementary Agenda 4 - Strategic Theme Councillor Questions and Replies

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From Cllr Ofeimu to the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

What steps are the Council taking to ensure parents, students, young people and children have access to high-quality schools and education in all parts of the borough?

Reply

The Council has a strong offer of support and challenge for Early Years settings and for schools to ensure that there is excellent access to high quality education in all parts of the borough. As a result of the work of local leaders, currently 97% of childminders and pre-school settings, and 96.4% of local schools and academies are now judged to be good or outstanding by Ofsted. In particular of note is that over half of our secondary and special schools are judged to be outstanding, which is significantly above national averages for these phases. Only two schools are not yet judged to be good or outstanding.

Our schools work tirelessly to ensure that outcomes for our children and young people are the best they can be. Outcomes from exams and assessments at all phases have been consistently above national averages for many years. There are some notable strengths in our data when compared against other local authorities in England. In 2023 (the last published data) this included top 20 performance in all bar one of the KS1 indicators, and in all of the reading and maths indicators at KS2. The Progress 8 score in Merton (judging the progress pupils make between the end of KS2 and KS4, their GCSE year) was well above National and London averages and ranked Merton 5th in the country – such strong performance has been consistent in Merton since the introduction of this indicator nationally. Our performance in the Attainment 8 indicator ranks Merton 15th nationally.

We are pleased to see that early and unvalidated results for Summer 2024 show ongoing strong performance.

We congratulate our schools on their performance and continue to strive for the best possible outcomes for our pupils.

From Cllr Galea to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

What assessment has the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage made of the effectiveness of PE and physical activity programs in schools for children with disabilities?

Reply

The Council recognises the importance of sports for children with disabilities and Special Educational Needs (SEN), not solely because of the benefits of improving overall health, fitness and co-ordination, but also because it provides opportunities for children to develop relationships and reduce their isolation by bolstering a sense of belonging in our Merton community. Play and sports activities create forums to enable children to interact with peers, build friendships, and develop social skills. This can be particularly beneficial for children who may struggle with social interactions. In addition, engaging in sports can reduce anxiety, depression and enhance self-esteem. Participating in sports can improve concentration, problem-

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solving skills, and academic performance. It encourages strategic thinking and quick decision-making.

To that end the Council has supported the provision of excellent PE and physical activity programmes for children with disabilities through a range of initiatives:

- Merton's Borough of Sport initiatives have been designed to benefit all residents across the borough but have a focus on children (4-16 year olds) in particular. The plans also seek to reach out to underserved groups, including those with disabilities (as well as girls, residents from the Global Majority, as well as less affluent members of our communities).
- Current initiatives, funded by Borough of Sport grants include:
 - Inclusive Self Defence Classes for Visually Impaired Children
 - Pump It Up - sports opportunities for inactive Merton children and young people (CYP) aged 4-16 with Special Educational Needs or Disability.
- Tim Henman Foundation Project – delivered in collaboration with the Tim Henman Foundation, Disability Sports Coach and Pentathlon Challenge. The Disability Sports Coach delivers adapted tennis and multi-sport sessions in all of Merton's SEN schools weekly. A weekend Community Club will be established for young disabled people and their families, allowing a child with disability to participate in physical activity alongside a non-disabled sibling.
- The Merton Schools' Sports Partnership (MSSP) works with all special schools and all but one primary school, providing support with the PE curriculum, the provision of coaches, support for coordinators and the wider workforce, and running competitions. They have a focus on ensuring that all activity is accessible to all children; with specific and targeted approaches to children with special educational needs and disabilities.
- The Council also increased its offer for SEND children and Young People through the Holiday, Activity and Food Programme this past summer. This included the provision of a range of physical activities.

The effectiveness of schools' provision is measured through schools' own assessments and external evaluation, both by Ofsted and 'deep dives' carried out by Merton's School Improvement team and the Merton Schools' Sport Partnership. Ofsted have identified that 96.4% of Merton schools and academies are good or better. 'Deep dives' carried out locally have highlighted much good practice as well as areas for individual schools' development.

MSSP gathered data shows that 98% of their affiliated schools provided two lessons of PE per week last year, and 96% of schools achieved a Merton Schools Sports Mark silver award or above for their delivery of physical activity. This means they deliver a physical activity programme to include all children in short bursts of activity throughout the week to support their 30-minute activity a day at school recommendation.

Effectiveness is also measured through the Children & Young People's Active Lives survey carried about by the majority of Merton schools. Data from this is captured and highlights areas of need and priority groups for Merton. At the moment this does not include children in our special schools, and so the Sport & Leisure Team and Merton School Sport Partnership are in discussions with Sport England to develop a mechanism for collecting data from them. A provisional report will be available in December 2024 with a final report in February 2025.

From Cllr Charles to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Can the Cabinet Member expand on the extra help that can be offered to children living in temporary accommodation. What provision can be made for those who have had to change schools during their GCSE year? Also, what support can be given to children to integrate into their new surroundings, given that they may have had to leave their friends behind and make new ones.

Reply

Children living in temporary accommodation can face a range of challenges and that's why the Council provides a wide range of support to help them succeed in their academic studies, make friends, and live fulfilling lives.

Outreach visits and support is provided for families, particularly those living in the larger provisions of temporary accommodation, such as Hall Place and the Holiday Inn hotel. Early Help coordinators work with the families, linking them into universal and targeted provision, including health visiting, activities for children under five, and to ensure access to education. The coordinators also ensure families are tapped into local community support groups, including food banks (if needed) and the voluntary sector, to support with any cost of living issues in particular.

Merton runs a multi-agency children missing education panel. This allows us to track new children who have arrived in Merton and are placed in temporary accommodation when we are aware of them either by another borough alerting us or when a family apply for a school place. We have seen an increase in families applying for school places when placed in hotels and then the family being moved on prior to accepting that place in a school. Merton's Education Welfare Service will then track these families and inform the next authority that they are living in their area to ensure they get the support they need.

As far as possible, should a child be moved as a result of temporary accommodation changes, where it is reasonable (i.e. the school is within travelling distance) we would seek to ensure that they stay at their existing school to minimise any upheaval.

Where a school change is required Merton's application process is kept as simple as possible to enable all parents to make an application. We put as much information as possible on the website ensuring it is accessible at all times but where further advice and guidance is required, a parent can contact the Admissions Team directly where response times are quick. Additionally, a parent is able to visit the Civic Centre in person to receive support in completing their application. An application from a family living in temporary accommodation will not be delayed while circumstances of the move are checked. The aim is always to place the child back into education as quickly as possible.

Once a school place has been allocated, details of the child are passed to the school to make the admission arrangements. The background details are shared with the school to help with their assessment of the child and to identify what additional support may be required.

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All Merton schools are used to admitting pupils throughout the academic year for a variety of reasons, including those who have moved into temporary accommodation. They provide a wide range of support to these children, and an assessment of any needs forms part of the induction process. Pastoral support, mentoring and providing a buddy for new joiners are all methods that schools will employ to help a new child settle quickly, establish new friendship groups and develop their sense of belonging.

Changing school during GCSE years will always prove particularly difficult. Schools need to not only assess a pupil's needs but also to match subjects as closely as possible to what was being studied at the previous school. Merton secondary schools are very proficient in this process. During the 2023/24 academic year, Merton secondary schools admitted 69 pupils into Year 10 throughout the academic year. Each school will have put processes in place to ensure those pupils were supported to integrate into a new setting – both socially and educationally.

Children whose families have No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF), and who are often also in temporary accommodation, are supported by officers within our Children's Social Care services to ensure they have access to education, health and social activities. A number of them will have suffered from domestic abuse and trauma, and those needs are supported specifically through our work with them.

When a child in the care of Merton Council moves, for example to a new foster care placement, again we try to ensure that school changes are minimised as much as possible. In particular where a change is needed, Merton's Virtual School works with foster carers, social workers, and with the school attended to ensure the child's needs are supported and local relevant resources signposted.

From Cllr Manly to the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

How is the Council ensuring young people living with SEND have an excellent education in Merton?

Reply

The Council has provided significant support to local schools and academies to ensure that young people living with SEND have an excellent education in Merton.

- Early Years settings and schools work hard to ensure that their provision is inclusive for all children with additional needs. In support of this the Council has recently developed 'Ordinarily Available Guidance' which outlines what should ordinarily be in place for children and young people with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND) in our mainstream schools.
- The Council convenes very well attended forums for Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in Merton where best practice is shared, updates provided, and support ensured to these critical members of the education workforce.
- Support from Council provided services, including Educational Psychologists, Speech and Language Therapists and Occupational Therapists has been strengthened to ensure a 'team around the school' approach.

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- Our Early Years Inclusion Team provides support to pre-school settings, to develop their inclusive practices.
- Over the past two years over half of local schools have been supported through Merton's Inclusion Project, providing focused support on a school-by-school basis from our advisers, enabling inclusive practices to develop further.
- We have a dedicated lead inspector for SEND in our school improvement team, and the wider team of advisers are also skilled up to support schools with regards to SEND.

All our local maintained special schools are good or better, with both Perseid and Cricket Green having longstanding outstanding judgements from Ofsted.

Outcomes for our children with SEND are also strong. In 2023 (the most recently published data):

- 33% of EHCP pupils met the year 1 phonics standard. This was 13% points higher than the England average, ranking Merton ninth of all England local authorities, and top among statistical neighbours
- The attainment of EHCP pupils at KS1 was also particularly strong, ranking within the top five local authorities in England for the proportions reaching the expected standard in each of reading, writing and maths
- KS2 attainment of EHCP pupils was strong across the headline measures, with a particular strength in reading. The percentage of EHCP pupils achieving the expected standard or higher in reading (31.7%) was the third highest in England
- The average Progress 8 score for EHCP pupils was 0.75 points higher than the England average and the second highest among local authorities in England.

We have continued to expand our excellent local provision for pupils with SEND, recently in particular, increasing the number of children able to attend Primary ARPs, and significantly increasing provision at Melrose school with the new campus at Whatley Avenue.

The Council, in conjunction with local partners including children and young people with SEND themselves, and their parents and carers, recently launched the new Merton SEND Strategy. This will continue to inform and direct future work to ensure that provision continues to deliver the best outcomes for our children.

From Cllr Bokhari to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Could the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services provide a breakdown of the number of children living in relative poverty in each ward?

Reply

Using the latest available data that is possible to apply to wards, full data is available for 2022 and partially available for 2023.

Geographies have been allocated using 2011 Census Output Areas (COA) matched to the May 2023 ONS National Statistics Postcode Lookup File (NSPL). Local Authorities reflect boundaries as at April 2023, Westminster Parliamentary Constituencies reflect boundaries as at 2010, and electoral wards as at May 2021. Percentages are calculated by dividing the number of children aged 0 to 15 living in

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low income families in a geographical area (for example, a local authority), by the population aged 0 to 15 in that geographical area. Populations have been taken from mid-year population estimates which are an estimate of the usual resident population as at 30 June of the reference year.

Ward	Number of children FYE 2022	Percentage of children FYE 2022 (%)	Number of children FYE 2023
Abbey	181	8.5%	177
Cannon Hill	143	7.3%	123
Colliers Wood	247	14.5%	234
Cricket Green	597	20.5%	599
Dundonald	74	3.3%	
Figge's Marsh	637	22.6%	599
Graveney	277	15.0%	329
Hillside	68	4.1%	61
Lavender Fields	451	19.1%	381
Longthornton	435	18.6%	349
Lower Morden	193	10.3%	216
Merton Park	119	5.9%	97
Pollards Hill	633	25.3%	622
Ravensbury	416	19.3%	351
Raynes Park	168	7.9%	149
St Helier	479	19.6%	434
Trinity	130	6.3%	
Village	27	1.7%	71
Wandle			115
West Bames	151	7.0%	135
Wimbledon Park	161	6.0%	125
Wimbledon Town and Dundonald			69

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

Can the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development tell us how many children under 18 are currently living in temporary accommodation provided by Merton, what percentage are housed within Merton, and what percentage attend Merton schools?

Reply

Currently there are 913 children in temporary accommodation of which 19.5% are housed within Merton. 80.4% are housed in neighbouring boroughs in South West London. The Council recognises the impact on families that the location of temporary accommodation has and is in current discussions with a number of accommodation providers within the borough to secure more accommodation within the borough.

The School Admissions data system does not allow the council to record the applicants from temporary housing, but as per the question from Cllr Charles, the school admissions team prioritises all in-year admissions to ensure they are provided with a school place as quickly as possible.

From Cllr Hayes to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

What innovative approaches is the council taking to ensure that all children, regardless of their family's financial situation, have equal opportunities to thrive?

Reply

The Council is fully committed to ensuring that all children, regardless of their family's financial situation have equal opportunities to thrive. In addition to the range of information within the Council's thematic report approaches include:

- Our approach to the delivery of early years services is to promote and maximise the take up of universal services for all families living in Merton across a wide range of services including midwifery, health visiting, community early childhood services (i.e. toddler groups, libraries under 5s activities that take place in Children's Centres, parenting support services) and family learning. We also target our resources with a range of more targeted and evidenced based approaches, where data and population profiles show that children are more at risk of not achieving good early years outcomes.
- Specific measures taken to tackle childhood poverty through an integrated approach, delivered in Children's Centres include:
 - Co-location and multi-agency partnership delivery in Merton's Children Centres, with an enhanced offer in our buildings that are within the 30% deprived geographical areas.
 - Family Information Support Hubs (FISH): one to one family sessions with an Early Help Coordinator (skilled and knowledgeable in local services that can support families, including financial inclusion and better off calculations) providing advice, guidance and signposting around cost of living, housing, benefits, employability and financial inclusion.
 - Childcare brokerage, focus on the two year offer for low-income households.
 - Healthy Start distribution for vouchers and free vitamins
 - Access to under five activities in Children's Centre's for families where additional needs are identified and may be living in low-income households and living in housing that reduces opportunities for playing indoors and outside ELT Toddler by London Borough of Merton
 - Delivery of evidenced based programmes, supporting early learning and development so that children are ready to start school.
 - Employability support through partnership working with Department for Work and Pensions and Supporting Families Employment Advisor.
 - Pre-school provision for two-year-olds who are eligible through the low household income criteria
- Merton successfully bid for the Family Hub Transformation Fund and was successful (out of 13 local authorities nationally), piloting this specific programme around transforming the way we work. Key to our transformation is the approach to early intervention and early help, with the focus of an integrated offer within communities located in identified geographical areas. There are two main Family Hubs in Merton, located in the Cricket Green ward and the Figges Marsh ward. This model supports work with families living in low-income households, who may be impacted by the higher cost of living and experiencing issues associated with family poverty. Work has focused on the colocation and coordination across the core 24 Family Hub service offer,

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including the delivery of financial inclusion and support for families who may require additional assistance to access the full range of services available to them locally.

- Access to work and employability for families with children is supported through a sufficient and buoyant childcare market. Key to the child poverty agenda are opportunities for employment and affordable childcare, so families can move into work and improved financial stability.
- Holidays Activities and Food Programme - this provides holiday schemes for 5–16-year-olds where they receive free school meals. Merton receives £686,000 to fund work across the three main holidays. Over this last year Merton Council provided a further £220,000 in addition to spread that offer to all the half terms. Last year's data shows that in national comparisons Merton is in the top 15% in terms of performance by
 - Reach - 2000 young people attended
 - Depth - children attended on average 8 days
 - Value for money - our costs per place
 - Quality - assessment through QA visits.

From Cllr Oliver to the Cabinet Member for Transport

Please could the Cabinet Member for Transport outline how many zebra crossings have been introduced in the last 5 years and the expenditure on each of those zebra crossings?

Reply

Since 2019, there has been one zebra crossing implemented - on Dorset Road, between Daybrook Road and Morden Road. In that time we have also introduced a pedestrian phase at two separate signalised junctions, and we have upgraded a number of island crossings and introduced road narrowing and junction entry treatments.

The crossing on Dorset Road was introduced due to a school opening and because of a number of incidences at the Dorset Road and Morden Road junction involving pedestrians crossing there. The cost associated to the implementation of the zebra crossing was £50,806.76.

From Cllr Johnston to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

What support has the council provided to children and families affected by the cost of living crisis?

Reply

Since declaring a cost of living emergency in July 2022, the council has provided a range of support to children and families affected by the crisis. The Cost –of Living Strategy and Action Plan contains a number of measures to support residents, and the £3million Cost of Living Support Fund has gone towards a range of initiatives including those which directly help children and families.

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Merton's HAF Programme has provided children and young people opportunities to enjoy physical exercise, arts and cultural activities, healthy food, trips out and other activities. HAF Holiday Clubs are free for children and young people between five and 15 years old and who are eligible for benefits-related Free School Meals. £200,000 from tranche 2 of the Cost of Living Support Fund enabled the HAF provision to be extended to half term holidays from May 2023 to May 2024 – making Merton one of the only Councils in the country to extend this offer into half terms. In the first full half-term funded through the Cost –of Living fund, October saw over 1,200 pupils attend over 3,500 sessions in 26 projects across Merton. Merton is one of the few councils in the country that fund HAF provision during half term holidays.

The council has also run a series of cost –of living events in Merton's libraries and the Civic Centre since Autumn 2022. These events have supported residents through the provision of advice services and signposting related to the cost –of living. Over 3400 residents have engaged with the events since their inception and feedback has been consistently positive. Residents have also been able to access a supermarket voucher, funded by the council, which has provided immediate relief for those who are struggling with food costs. In August, there was a family-focussed cost of living event at the Acacia Centre with information about employment, childcare and early education.

The council has also funded Cost of Living advisers at Citizens Advice Merton and Lambeth who have supported over 1299 people in Merton with over 4,000 advice issues, with the most common issues being benefits, debt and housing. The recorded financial outcomes i.e. additional benefits claimed, for the period January 2023 to June 2024, totals £213,694, whilst the equivalent financial outcomes for July and August 2024 totals £145,176.

To support long-term poverty alleviation the council launched a pioneering saving scheme in partnership with CroydonPlus, the credit Union for Merton, Sutton and Croydon. This scheme incentivises year 7 starters to open a savings account by depositing £20 into their student accounts, alongside an additional £10 for their parent or carer.

In addition to this, the council secured grant funding in 2022 to develop a Family Hub model approach across our family and early help system. Over the last 18 months significant work has taken place across the following three themes: Access to services; Connectivity across a range of services and leadership; Relationship based practice. The Family Hub Programme has been integral to delivering a local and accessible early help offer.

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