

Merton Council Council

18 September 2024

Supplementary agenda 7

20 Non-Priority Questions to Cabinet Members and Replies

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From Cllr Hall to the Leader

Despite assurances from the council last year, drinking water fountains have still not been installed in Wimbledon Park. Can the Cabinet Member outline when this project will commence?

Reply

On behalf of the Council, I'd like to apologise for the delay in installing the proposed bottle filling stations in Wimbledon Park. The council have agreed with project funder (AELTC) that five bottle filling stations will be installed at Wimbledon Park. I am pleased to confirm that we expect the works will commence within the next four weeks

From Cllr Flack to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Can the Cabinet Member provide a full list of all the sports centres and facilities in the borough that have received investment from the Council since May 2022, with a ward-by-ward breakdown? Please include the specific amount of funds allocated to each project.

Reply

As part of our commitment to nurturing civic pride and establishing Merton as London's first Borough of Sport, the Council has done a great deal of work over recent years to improve and maintain sports centres and facilities in our parks and green spaces in the borough so that they can fully utilised and enjoyed by residents.

Due to the amount of data requested, this will be sent to you directly. I can confirm that it will cover expenditure per annum since May 2022 for sports centres and facilities in the borough.

In total, the Council has invested £6.317 million in sports facilities and our parks and green spaces since May 2022, supporting our mission to become the London Borough of Sport. This total does not include the additional and significant investment of private and community organisations in the borough that the Council has been able to attract, leverage and secure through our partnership-led approach.

Our investment since May 2022 includes, but is not limited to, Canons and Wimbledon Leisure Centre upgrades, the resurfacing of 47 Tennis Courts, Wimbledon Beach Volley Ball Court, Merton Saints BMX Track, Wimbledon Park Athletics Track and play spaces, splash pads and recreation spaces in all areas of the borough.

Since May 2022, we have also invested in improvements in the following parks and greenspaces: Abbey Recreation Ground, Cannizaro Park, Cannon Hill Common, Canons Park and Grounds, Colliers Wood Recreation Ground, Donnelly Green, Dundonald Recreation Ground, Durnsford Road Recreation Ground, Garfield Recreation Ground, Haydons Road Recreation Ground, Holland Garden, John Innes Park, King Georges Recreation Field, Miles Road, Morden Park, Morden Recreation Ground, Moreton Green, Morley Park, Mostyn Gardens, Nursery Road Recreation Playing Fields, Oakleigh Way Recreation Ground, Ravensbury Park, Sir Josephs

Hood Memorial Playing Fields, South Park Gardens, Tamworth Recreation Ground, Wandle Trail, and Wimbledon Park.

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

What plans does the council have to compensate pensioners who will lose out financially due to the Labour government in Westminster changing the eligibility criteria for the Winter Fuel Allowance?

Reply

Following the discovery of a hidden £22billion black hole in the public finances, after years of Conservative ministers making policy commitments whilst refusing to fund them, the new Government have had to take emergency measures to stabilise the situation. That regrettably means taking tough decisions to clean up the Conservative mess. Despite this, the Government has committed to an extension to the Household Support Fund to March 2025 - a welcome commitment from the Labour government. Further details of the HSF extension will be sent to Merton and published ahead of the launch of the new scheme in the coming weeks. The likelihood is that these details may include a focus on assisting pensioners who are not eligible for the winter fuel allowance. Additionally, we will be putting in place support to assist pensioners to claim Pension Credit and we will be rolling out a Pension Credit awareness campaign to ensure that we maximise take-up amongst those who are eligible, building on the work we have already done on Pension Credit take up earlier this year with Policy in Practice.

Work is also underway in the council to review the outcomes of Cost –of Living Support-funded activity and consideration being given to how this can be further utilised to focus on a range of priorities linked to poverty, including support with energy bills for pensioners. In addition to this, the council is engaging with partners and with other local authorities across London around support for pensioners.

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

Can the Cabinet Member provide an update from Environmental Health on the number of housing complaints received in the last 24 months, the outcomes of those complaints, and how many relate to housing association properties?

Reply

From August 2022 to August 2024 there were 726 complaints received by the Council's Housing Enforcement team. Of these 153 were about housing association properties.

At the start of this financial year, the Council adjusted the process of recording housing complaints to include the outcomes of those complaints. Previously, the Council would record the complaint and the enforcement action taken, for example if we served notices on a Landlord, requesting works within a specific timescale. Additionally, the Council is in the process of implementing a new IT system for

housing enforcement and we hope to develop further what information we hold on case outcomes.

Since April 2024, we have served 165 notices on private Landlords. Of the notices served, 40 have been complied with, delivering a positive outcome for the resident and closing the case. A further 18 cases have been closed through the resident or other resolution. There are 107 cases that remain open and our Housing Enforcement Officers are working to resolve them.

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

Will the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services commit to preparing the 2024/25 budget on the basis of freezing Council Tax at the current rate?

Reply

After years of Conservative underfunding of Merton council, and after experiencing soaring inflation thanks to Liz Truss' disastrous mini-budget, the council is already facing a funding gap as we prepare to set a balanced budget for 2025/26. The MTFS 2024-28 agreed by Council in March 2024 assumes that Council Tax in 2025-26 will increase by 2%. If we reduced that to 0%, there would be an additional £2.4m gap that would need to be closed. This would quite clearly be a reckless approach to managing the council's finances. Merton's Labour administration will never follow this reckless Conservative approach. Council on 26 February 2025 will approve the budget and council tax for 2025/26.

From Cllr Kohler to the Leader

Please can the Cabinet Member set out, since May 2022, both: (a) how many informal issues about the behaviour of Kingdom operatives have been raised with Merton Council, and (b) how many complaints about the behaviour of Kingdom operatives have been raised under the Council's complaints procedure? Can the Cabinet Member confirm if Kingdom operatives are incentivised to issue FPNs?

Reply

a) Since May 2022 there have been five Members Enquiries that have been raised about the conduct of Kingdom operatives, and there have been a further three issues that have been raised directly to Council Staff that have fallen outside of the Members Enquiry process or complaints process.

b. There have been six formal complaints about the behaviour of Kingdom operatives that have been raised under the Council's Complaints procedure. Of these complaints, two were upheld, three were not upheld, and one was inconclusive.

As previously advised, Kingdom Operatives are not incentivised to issue FPN's.

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

Will the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services commit to maintaining the single adult Council Tax discount until the end of this parliament?

Reply

Single Adult discount is a statutory discount under the Council Tax Regulations. The discount will continue as long as the Council Tax Regulations require it.

From Cllr Braithwaite to the Leader

Please can the Cabinet Member set out (a) how the Council plans to increase the disposal options for vapes beyond Garth Road following the fires at Suez Recycling that the Council states was likely caused by a lithium-ion battery in the waste, and (b) whether the Council has applied for any external funding to support the development of new options?

Reply

There are currently many disposal points in the borough as most electrical and electronic shops accept used disposable vapes and will ensure they are recycled in accordance with the electronic waste retailer and distributor responsibilities set by Government. Merton residents can also place their batteries in an untied carrier bag on collection day on top of their bin or box for collection by our crews. These are safely stored in a separate compartment within the vehicle.

These preventable incidents are primarily caused by poor behaviour due to a lack of awareness. To raise awareness on the severity of these consequences, the Authority has been working closely with our waste contractor on a Dangerous Waste Campaign. The campaign highlights the consequences of improper disposal of batteries and vapes and provides guidance on how such items should be discarded. The campaign launches this month and will be on socials and advertised on the waste and recycling collection vehicles operating in Merton.

There are several sites that locate drop off points, such as www.recycleyourelectricals.org.uk which will be further promoted through this campaign

From Cllr Reiss to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Can the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning provide a year-by-year breakdown of data on children's usage of library services over the past five years, including the number of books borrowed and the number of children using the complementary premium school library card?

Reply

The libraries and schools' membership scheme is a sector leading and innovative offer that ensures that every Merton school child has access to high quality library and information services. This is topped by a year-round approach to delivering activities

and events to encourage regular library usage and the improved life chances this leads to. The breakdown of children's usage and book borrowing per annum over the last 5 years is:

Year	Users	Books Borrowed
2019/20	4,598	345,577
2020/21	1,450	118,794
2021/22	3,486	374,427
2022/23	8,232	392,190
2023/24	8,786	384,489

From Cllr Cox to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

How is the Council supporting schools and children from families with limited access to technology in nurturing and encouraging the development of digital skills?

Reply

The Council is dedicated to supporting schools and children from families with limited access to technology in developing digital skills. While funding decisions are delegated to individual schools, we provide guidance and resources to help them foster digital inclusion. This includes signposting schools to the London Grid for Learning (LGfL) purchasing frameworks for affordable devices, promoting Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers, and ensuring that digital skills training is accessible to all students. Additionally, we may collaborate with other council departments to address barriers to access, such as exploring Wi-Fi provision in council-managed accommodation and ensuring that information for parents is available in multiple languages.

As Corporate Parents CLLF supports secondary aged Children in Care through the Virtual school with laptops, enhanced with additional security measures and support to engage with their education.

Additionally, the Council, via its libraries, provides the Connecting Merton service. Connecting Merton is a unique offer available to all Merton residents aged 18 and over that loans high quality computer equipment (laptops, tablets and broadband) for free. The service is tailored to individuals needs and its primary aim is to support more residents to get online and more confidently manage their matters online.

On top of the equipment loaning a personalised training programme is available to all residents. This includes tailored one to one sessions with a volunteer or staff member and also access to group sessions and tutorials. Since launching the scheme has supported over 1,500 residents to get online. This service is on top of the free computer and WiFi access we have across our libraries.

A digital maker space has also recently launched at Mitcham Library that supports children and families to learn and access new technologies such as coding, 3D printing and artificial intelligence.

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

From September, working parents can access 15 hours of government-funded support for children aged nine months to three years. Can the Cabinet Member for Children's Services tell us what percentage of nurseries in Merton are at capacity and how many available nursery places are there across the borough to meet this new demand? For each Merton community school nursery, what percentage of applicants were successful for September 2024 places, in the last round of applications?

Reply

Of the 27 Community Schools where the council coordinates nursery admissions, 44% are operating at capacity for the universal entitlement places at the time of allocating places for the academic year 24/25.

The latest data available for Academy/ Voluntary Aided schools (for which the council does not coordinate admissions) is from the summer term 2024. At that point 13% of these schools/academies were operating at capacity.

To support occupancy and the offer to parents, many Merton schools also offer the working parent entitlement (the extra 15 hours) and manage admissions for the extra 15 hours directly with parents. In the summer term there were 554 such places taken up across all schools.

The continued decline in the local birthrate and estimated under 5 population has, in recent years, resulted in more vacancies in school nursery classes and in the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector. The new entitlement provides an opportunity to support sustainable existing provision as well as support occupancy in schools.

There has been significant engagement across the sector (including with PVI providers such as Ofsted registered Childminders, Day Nurseries and Preschools) to assess the potential and maximise the supply of places. This engagement has shown that there are sufficient places available to meet the expected demand from eligible families across the age ranges of the new entitlement.

For Merton community schools, a total of 584 on time applications were received for pupils due to start nursery in September 2024 (15-hour universal provision). Of these, 511 received an offer for one of the two nursery schools named by the parent. This equates to 87.5% of on time applicants receiving an offer for a September 2024 nursery place. For the remaining 12.5%, the parents will have received notification that a place could not be offered at one of their preferred nurseries and they would have been invited to name an alternative community school with places available. Sufficient capacity existed to offer a place for every child in a school local to the home address.

From Cllr Gould to the Leader

Although granted a temporary reprieve, in the light of questions about the long-term sustainability of the Household Support Fund, the Children's Society is seeking responses from local authorities and the voluntary and community sector about how they think local welfare should be designed in the future. 'The Future of Local Welfare Inquiry' is open to responses until 30th October 2024. Will the Leader of the Council submit a response on behalf of the Council?

Reply

After many months of uncertainty under the previous Conservative government, it was very welcome news that the new Labour government confirmed the extension of the Household Support Fund into 2025. This fund has been instrumental in the provision of local services which support those struggling the most in our community. I can confirm that the Council will be submitting a response to the Children's Society's inquiry on the future of local welfare.

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

Can the Cabinet Member for Children's Services provide the number of EHCP applications processed in Merton over the last 3 years and, of those, how many were (a) refused at the first request, (b) successful following mediation before Tribunal, and (c) successful at Tribunal? What has the subsequent legal spending been by the Council on SEND Tribunals?

Reply

Please note that the decision to assess, whether at original panel or via mediation or tribunal, is recorded by the date the decision is made and may not be directly related to the referral date received – the LA has a 6-week statutory timescale to make a decision on an agreement to assess (therefore for example, a referral could be made in 2022 where the decision to assess, or not, is made in 2023 or a Tribunal could commence in 2023 but this could be about a decision made in 2022).

Number of referrals received:

- 2024 - 360 referrals (Jan - Aug)
- 2023 - 534 referrals (Full year)
- 2022 - 387 referrals (Full year)

a) Number of Education Health and Care Needs Assessment (HCNA) referrals with a 'No to Assess' Decision:

- 2024 – 96 (Jan - Aug)
- 2023 – 137
- 2022 – 99

b) Mediations

- 2022 - eight EHCNAs were conducted for children/young people following mediations that took place in 2022 without a subsequent Tribunal being needed.
- 2023 – nine EHCNAs were conducted for children/young people following mediations that took place in 2023 without a subsequent Tribunal being needed.
- 2024 to date – three EHCNAs were conducted for children/young people following mediations that took place in 2024 without a subsequent Tribunal being needed

(c) Tribunals

- 2022 – seven Education Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNAs) were conducted for children/young people following the lodging of a Tribunal appeal in 2022
- 2023 - five Education Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNAs) were conducted for children/young people following the lodging of a Tribunal appeal in 2023,
- 2024 to date – four Education Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNAs) were conducted for children/young people following the lodging of a Tribunal appeal in 2024.

All appeals regarding a decision not to conduct an EHCNA in the above noted time periods have been dealt with by internal SENDIS staff and without incurring additional legal costs.

From Cllr Dresselaers to the Cabinet Member for Children’s Services

The Strategic Theme Report notes that the rate of EHCPs has slowed considerably in Merton, increasing by only 3.98% in 2023 compares to a London average of 9.21%. Could the Cabinet Member for Children’s Services please provide possible explanations for this?

Reply

This lower rate in the rise in the number of EHCPs seen in Merton can be attributed to:

- The rigorous, but fair decision-making process with regard to Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments and the issuing of plans.
- The discontinuation of EHCPs maintained by Merton. Discontinuation takes place because ongoing educational or training needs can be met without an EHC plan, or because the child or young person:
 - no longer wishes to engage in education (this is relevant for older young people, particularly those above the age of 18)
 - reaches the maximum age for an EHCP (25)
 - transfers to another LA

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- moves on to higher education
- moves on to paid employment, (excluding apprenticeships)
- has moved abroad
- has died.

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