

Merton Council Council

20 November 2024

Supplementary Agenda 6

- 7b Strategic theme: Councillors' questions to cabinet members 1 - 10
- The questions and written responses will be circulated at the meeting.

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From Cllr Mundy to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride and Climate Change

How has the Council worked with residents and communities to ensure all residents have a voice, and are co-partners in the work, ambitions and development of the borough.

Reply

Putting residents at the heart of everything we do, and being responsive and resident-centric in our approach, is central to our civic pride ambitions. We have strong partnerships and work closely with many people, organisations, groups and stakeholders to craft policies and deliver our services. For example:

- Reshaping our waste services and bringing street cleaning in-house based on our consultation with thousands of residents
- Engaging more than 800 residents in our Mitcham Matters engagement. This feedback has helped shape our events, activities and investment in Mitcham town centre. Seeing that responses from young people were limited to the first consultation, we undertook dedicated additional outreach with our Youth Work team to seek their views.
- Our Cost –of Living outreach, e-news and dedicated events continue to provide help and support for residents, with more than 5,000 subscribers and hundreds of residents attending multiple events over the last two years.
- The Council's new Local Plan has been shaped by residents and local stakeholder groups throughout the plan's creation to ensure that future development of the borough aligns with national policy as well as reflecting the needs of our communities.
- In developing the first council homes in a generation, we've partnered with Wandle Housing Association to bring forward a new Day Centre and 21 supported living affordable homes. This will be co-designed with end users and staff to ensure the end-built project is attractive and fit for purpose for its occupants. The wider community will also have the opportunity to inform designs and proposals for the project through the planning application process

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

Can the Living Wage Champion please explain (a) how many employees in Merton are currently paid less than London Living Wage, (b) how many businesses in Merton have become London Living Wage accredited employers since February 2023, and (c) the value paid out to the 11 employers who successfully applied for Merton's London Living Wage Business Rates Grant?

Reply

As the London Living Wage is not statutory there are no definitive statistics relating to how many employees are paid below this figure. However, the Living Wage Foundation uses Office for National Statistics wage data to estimate numbers at a

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regional level. The most recent estimate, using 2023 wage data, suggests that there are 574,000 jobs in London which pay below the London Living Wage, which equates to 13.3 per cent of jobs). It is disappointing that of all the UK regions, London has seen the least progress on eradicating low pay since 2012, with only a 3-percentage point decrease in the proportion of low paid jobs between 2012 and 2023, less than half the UK's average reduction over the same period.

It is also worrying that the outer London boroughs appear to be a particular hotspot for salaries below the London Living Wage, with four of the five Local Authority areas with the highest proportion low pay being outer London Boroughs. I am very pleased to be able to report that Merton is not one of those boroughs. Using the same methodology as that used by the Living Wage Foundation to calculate the London figure I referred to earlier, officers have estimated that the number of jobs in Merton which pay below the London Living Wage is 14,000, out of a total of 90,000 jobs, which equates to roughly 16% being paid below London Living Wage. This is a higher proportion for London as a whole, but the London figure is of course heavily influenced by high salaries in the City and other central areas. To provide local context, the average hourly salary in Merton is higher than in Sutton and Croydon.

There were 61 accredited Merton employers in February 2023, increasing to 90 in October 2024, an increase of 29 over the period. Over the same period, the number of employees who saw an increase in their salary as a result of London Living Wage accreditation was 334.

The total of the grants paid to the eleven organisations who have successfully applied for the Council's London Living Wage Grant is £5,513. The grant covers the cost of maintaining accreditation with the Living Wage Foundation for a three-year period and the figure paid to each organisation varies according to number of employees.

From Cllr Akyigyina to the Cabinet Member for Education & Lifelong Learning

Can the Cabinet Member tell us how people from disadvantaged backgrounds and particularly school leavers are being supported to get local jobs and ensure they remain employed in Merton for the long term?

Reply

Merton Council are committed to ensuring all school leavers, including those from disadvantaged background have an excellent education, and leave school with the skills to thrive in work, and with access to high quality local jobs. We're proud that all Merton Secondary schools are graded as good or better by Ofsted, with schools in the East of the borough, where there are higher levels of disadvantage, all being graded outstanding – ensuring school leavers receive an excellent start in life through a great education. All schools in Merton provide careers guidance against the Gatsby benchmarks, a framework for good career guidance developed to support schools in providing students with the best possible careers education, information, advice, and guidance.

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The South London Careers Hub, funded by the Greater London Authority (GLA), Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) and the European Social Fund (ESF) works with schools to further enhance the support for young people, and support young people in Merton find and secure employment.

A key aspect of schools' careers advice and guidance work is supporting young people in Merton to undertake work experience, giving young people a chance to experience the world of work and helping them to understand their career options. These work experience opportunities are often located in the Borough, enabling young people to understand local employment opportunities. The Council has always played our part in this offer, providing work experience opportunities for our young people, and this offer has been further enhanced over the last two years through T-level placements for post-16 students. In addition, the Council has also just set up a new supported internship program with Project Search to support young people with special educational needs gain skills through employment opportunities at the Civic Centre. This project builds on the excellent work with Cricket Green School and St George's Hospital. Supported Internship models have a high success rate into employment.

The My Futures team, alongside colleagues in the Corporate Parenting Service, Youth Justice, the Virtual School and our Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Integrated Service (SENDIS) work to track, identify and support young people aged 16-18 who are not in education training and employment (up to 25 for care experienced or those with Education Health and Care Plans). They will support young people with a range of barriers, many of whom are from disadvantaged backgrounds, back into college, training or supported routes into work.

Early Help Support Coordinators (EHSC) run Family Information Support Hub (FISH) sessions from our family hubs, to ensure families within Merton can access information, advice and guidance on a range of topics, including employability. EHSC's can signpost families to employment search engines, job centres as well as support with job requirements, for example, supporting with a DBS application. The EHSC's will also signpost to our Supporting Families Employment Advisor (SFEA). Our SFEA can support families with CV writing, job applications, mock interviews, as well as financial support. This can include providing laptops to complete virtual interviews or funding to purchase formal wear or travel to the interviews.

Between January 2020 and December 2023, the Towards Employment Team (TET), received referrals for 551 Merton residents, with over 100 job offers being made to those engaged. Of which 34% (187 residents) were aged 16 – 18 years old, the remainder ranged in age from 19 to 77 years old. Of those 551 residents, 35% (192 residents) identified as global majority/BAME and 57% (314) were either known to social care, to offender services or had additional needs. TET works closely with internal and external stakeholders supporting the economic wellbeing of residents and have established reciprocal referral and practice arrangements.

After the age of 19, residents can be supported to continue to gain additional skills and qualifications through our Adult Learning offer. This was inspected by Ofsted in September. Inspectors noted that 'Leaders and managers have a well-designed

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strategy for the adult skills and community learning curriculum which links well to national and local priorities. They have a good strategic focus on courses related to green skills, well-being and skills for employment. They use adult skills funding to create good progression routes for learners on ESOL courses.

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

Can the Leader of the Council explain whether the Council maintains a record of residents' queries and whether they have been answered?

Reply

Questions submitted via the resident's Ward Councillor or MP are logged and tracked through to response by our Members Enquiry team. Overdue responses are flagged to senior managers on a weekly basis to ensure oversight. Members will also be aware that the Council is about to implement a new Members Enquiry system that will allow individual members to more easily track the progress of their enquiries.

We do not currently have a single system for responding to questions directly from residents to officers. These questions can come in myriad forms – for example library staff may be asked about other Council services by a resident using the library; a social worker may be asked questions about benefits by someone they are working with and so on. Similarly, there will be email or telephone communication between residents and officers, either while making a general enquiry, or as part of an ongoing engagement about a particular issue.

From Cllr Reiss to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride and Climate Change

Can the Cabinet Member for Jobs, Skills and Education outline which sectors within the local economy she believes are growing and what is being done to support further growth?

Reply

We're proud of the active role the Council has played in crowding in jobs and economic growth to the borough. Through our Council Plan and clear strategic priorities, we've been able to communicate a clear vision to investors and businesses, leverage investment that supports our vision for the future of Merton, and secure economic spillover benefits for other local businesses and residents across the borough.

- Green Economy – through the Council's action on climate change, we've been able to attract sector leaders to the borough, including at the South London Retrofit Skills Summit, which was hosted in Merton to showcase the technologies, training and job opportunities within the sector. Additionally, through the Council's construction of new energy-efficient homes, we have attracted skilled, well paid jobs to the borough, whilst also building a pipeline of talent through our Adult learning courses, helping residents upskill and reskill to be first in line to take advantage of the economic opportunities these projects bring.

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- Arts, Culture and Leisure – Merton is already a thriving cluster of arts and cultural businesses and a key draw of visitors to the borough. That's why the Council are committed to not only retaining this as a local strength but growing the sector further.

Our research collaboration with LoveWimbledon and Wimbledon Quarter found that more people are visiting and spending money locally than pre-2019. 2023 and 2024 footfall in Wimbledon surpassed pre-pandemic levels and existing and new businesses are capitalising on the increased local spend with Mastercard transactions (adjusted for inflation) are now 25% higher than 2019. This has supported private investment such as opening of new leisure experiences like Third Space, cafes, shops and restaurants, showing our collaborative efforts support Wimbledon as a thriving, attractive town centre providing jobs and services for our residents.

We're delighted to see an increase in economic activity in Mitcham Town Centre and the Council are determined to continue this trend. That's why we have funded and held 19 events in the town centre to help attract greater footfall, and support the year round cultural and artistic offer of Mitcham Town Centre. We have also refurbished and invested in Vestry Hall for the benefit of the community and to provide affordable workspace to local businesses in Merton.

Transport for London (TFL) data also shows that Morden has also sustained its pre-pandemic footfall with TFL reporting c10m touch-ins at Morden Station annually, with around 10,000-15,000 people per day boarding buses. The Council are diversifying the local offer in Morden, including through supporting The Vault, a multifunctional café, bar; workspace and events location, helping expand the cultural and artistic offer in the Town Centre.

- Admin and financial services – these businesses are one of the biggest sectors in Merton and across London. In partnership with the government, we're creating the conditions to support innovation and growth in this sector, including through the provision of workspaces across the borough, our local business e-newsletter and our living wage business grants.

We are working through our South London Partnership partner boroughs to deliver the **Knowledge Exchange Workspaces** across Merton, including at Canons House and Vestry Hall in Mitcham, The Vault Morden, The Workary at Mitcham Library and Wimbletech at Wimbledon library to provide affordable spaces with commercial appeal for start-up businesses. The benefit of using these spaces is that they come with the support of the BIG programme which helps businesses to innovate and partner with the local authority, local providers and Higher Education Institutes.

We are supporting inward investment opportunities and local employment offers through collaboration with Chambers of Commerce and Business Improvement Districts. These include +200 businesses attending the Business-to-Business Expo in collaboration with Kingston and Merton Chamber of Commerce on the opportunities available in both boroughs. The Evolve Wimbledon conference in October 2024 connected businesses and developers to promote investment in Wimbledon.

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Building our award winning Towards Employment team by piloting an **Employ Merton service**, taking a whole system approach to ensuring Merton's businesses have a pool of labour and our residents are supported into work. This includes working with local businesses to address training needs and to ensure vacancies for people out of work.

Borough of Sport – our ambition to become the London Borough of Sport is attracting new sports teams, clubs and businesses to the borough, who in turn bring jobs and economic spillover effects in cafes, food and leisure businesses across the borough. The Council supported the London Broncos in making the Cherry Records Stadium their home, and has invested in numerous sport facilities across the Merton, helping attract visitors from out of borough to experience and spend money in Merton.

We are continuing to work in active partnership with residents and business to deliver our civic pride ambitions to promote inward investment and support residents to access employment and better employment opportunities. This is set out extensively in our Strategic Theme report to this meeting.

CIlr Brunt to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride and Climate Change

Can the Cabinet member tell us how the Council has supported town centres to thrive and breathe new life since the Covid-19 pandemic?

Reply

Town centres are changing as people's habits change. We're committed to supporting our local town centres to be thriving places for not only our local residents, but also workers and visitors. Therefore the council has made a substantial investment making our town centres better places to visit, do business and live in as part of our ongoing commitment to promoting civic pride. We have allocated funding, which includes funding collected from developers as well as the council's own reserves, to invest in town centres across the borough. We're combining our financial investment with targeting our council powers such as environmental enforcement, licensing and street cleaning, to the greatest effect to ensure we attract more footfall and benefit our businesses and residents. Some examples of our town centre investment include:

Mitcham – We have funded a dedicated town centre manager for Mitcham to lead on collaboration and co-design with Mitcham businesses and residents, including the Mitcham Matters engagement, which has shaped our activities. These include launching and supporting year-round pop-up activities (e.g. Dinner Club in Fair Green, food and craft markets) Mitcham Market and larger events like Mitcham's Winter Weekend.

Morden – The Remaking Morden project is delivering change in the short, medium and long-term. We have held workshops, pop-up events, a community walkabout and a street festival coinciding with World Car Free day to not only hear the views and ideas from hundreds of people or Morden's public spaces, but to also implement

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these ideas, with the first phase of new seating and community planting now in Abbotsbury Road. Morden's new town centre manager will continue this work into 2025.

Wimbledon – We work closely with Love Wimbledon (Wimbledon's Business Improvement District) to support the changing face of our busiest town centre. For example, we sponsored their recent high profile Evolving Wimbledon conference this autumn, which celebrated the evolution of Wimbledon town centre and promoted Wimbledon as one of south London's best-known business and cultural hubs. We continue to actively participate on the Board of Love Wimbledon and work collaboratively on events including Wimbledon Winterfest to bring visitors into the town centre and boost business footfall. We have invested in the street scene with shopfront improvements at Queens Road, supported private investment in the YMCA regional hub, Romulus's Wimbledon Quarter and new and refurbished offices at 247 The Broadway, Wellington and Pinnacle House.

Raynes Park – We've invested in pocket parks, rain gardens and sustainable drainage measures in Raynes Park to improve its appearance and climate resilience. We have developed a longer-term project in collaboration with the Environment Agency, Network Rail and Thames Water to investigate flood alleviation solutions across the wider area that will benefit Raynes Park.

From Cllr Fairclough to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Cleaner Streets

Can the Cabinet Member for Transport and Cleaner Streets explain why the diagonal crossing in Wimbledon town centre, introduced in 2012, does not have dropped kerbs?

Reply

The signalised crossing at the junction Wimbledon Hill Road and St George's Road does not include dropped kerbs on the radius corners where the diagonal crossings are located. This is because there are concerns that there could potentially be issues with road users with visual impairment or mobility issues navigating to the opposite corner due to the length of the diagonal crossing. This is supported by the Department for Transport guidance on the use of tactile paving, where the guidance is to avoid having flush crossing points on the radius kerb and that a straight section of kerb upstand (900mm-1000mm long) beyond the radius helps pedestrians including vision impaired people to align themselves correctly before crossing the road.

Cllr Johnston to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

What regular and new communications are the Council using to grow engagement with residents, business, visitors and new audiences?

Reply

Our Communications and Engagement efforts have made significant steps forward this year.

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Today our social media channels reach an average of 600,000 accounts every month, up from an average of 200,000 compared to the same time last year. And this follows an overall follower/subscriber increase of 11,000 across our digital channels over the same period.

While the majority of these followers are residents, we have also been using our content to grow our reputation across London and beyond – especially at key moments for Merton, such as the Wimbledon Fortnight. These two weeks saw us produce 39 unique pieces of content, the most popular of which was viewed 27,000 times on our relatively new Instagram profile alone. We also grew our Instagram audience by 20% across the tennis championships.

We have increased our communication on LinkedIn- reaching businesses, potential employees and a wider stakeholder audience, with an increase of nearly 2,000 followers since these efforts began earlier in the year. Just two weeks ago, the council launched a Whatsapp channel and has over 150 followers already and a strategy in place to grow this significantly.

Email marketing is the council's most popular digital channel - in terms of audience recognition, size and engagement. The council operates a series of newsletters, and these have expanded in both focus and frequency in the past 12 months. The main ones being:

- Libraries InMerton reaches nearly 30,000
- News InMerton, our core weekly title, reaches more than 26,000 accounts
- What's On InMerton has moved from a bi-monthly mailout to a weekly mailout and reaches more than 25,000 accounts
- Our Cost of Living enews continues to provide information on the help and support available for residents most in need and has more than 5,000 subscribers
- Business InMerton launched as a weekly mailout recently and is aimed at businesses owners and has already accrued nearly 2,000 subscribers There are also several subsidiary bulletins, dedicated to specific audiences or services.

Across the piece, Merton has a 71% subscriber engagement rate for these direct mails.

The council's recently relaunched and modernised InMerton magazine is distributed to more than 80,000 homes and other community locations every quarter. It is the council's primary communications channel and vital to reach those that are digitally excluded and our most recent residents' survey showed it was one of our most popular channels.

The communications team has allocated an officer to communicate with businesses and on businesses related issues, for the first time, and they are working on a strategic plan to spotlight, engage with and communicate more effectively with our

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business community, and we now also have a dedicated Business Engagement Officer within the policy team to work on building strategic partnerships. These roles will ensure the council can support local businesses; work collegiately with them on shared issues, and to help unlock the potential of business opportunity in the borough. They bring additional communications and engagement capacity to support the regular business engagement work undertaken by the Regeneration and Economy team who work closely with the borough's Business Improvement Districts, Chamber of Commerce, local Business Associations and more recently with the Council's investment in town centre managers for Mitcham and Morden.

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