

Merton Council Council

20 November 2024

Supplementary Agenda 7

26 Councillor Priority Questions to Cabinet Members

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

With widespread housing pressures facing councils across the country, what are the supply, demand and financial challenges facing Merton?

Reply

The Council has a statutory duty to prevent homelessness and to manage a housing register for local social housing vacancies. Merton Council has the lowest number of households in temporary accommodation of any London Borough. The housing needs team has a track record of taking positive preventative action over many years and the service has always been geared to place this at the centre of our work with customers, and this directly contributes to our low numbers.

Nationally the numbers of households in temporary accommodation have risen to the highest levels since records began in 1998.

The rate of homelessness in Merton over the last 18 months has significantly increased in line with the national picture with the Council experiencing the highest levels of statutory homelessness seen in Merton for many years, leading to more placements in temporary accommodation. As the Council is non-stock owning, the Council must use private providers of temporary accommodation to meet this need.

It is also the case that far fewer private sector properties on the market are affordable for our clients meaning that there is lack of alternative local housing options for people. All these factors mean that there is an increase in temporary accommodation demand which places financial pressure on the Council.

To respond to this the Council is looking to increase supply of private sector accommodation and has recently entered a new arrangement to do so with an organisation called BEAM who will also provide employability services and other wrap-around support as well as tenancy sustainment.

We are also seeking to acquire and investigate additional temporary accommodation sites in the borough with a view to improving outcomes for household in temporary accommodation and making potential savings.

The Council worked with Clarion housing association in the last year to acquire 10 units of social housing that was offered to households in temporary accommodation via the LAHF fund and is also working to do so again in the next tranche of funding.

The first 93 new build properties will start on four sites by the Spring of 2025. A further 307 homes located across the borough have been endorsed by cabinet and are scheduled to start on site between 2026 and 2027. This is in addition to the ongoing work with housing association partners to maximise delivery of new housing in Merton.

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

Can the Cabinet Member confirm that local government will be exempt from the rise in employers' national insurance contributions?

Reply

It is not for me to confirm government tax arrangements. The Chancellor will set out arrangements for the public sector and the change to employer's National Insurance contributions in due course.

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

Can you confirm whether all staff—including agency, interim, and contractor staff—who are required to hold up-to-date DBS checks currently have them; and if not, how many checks remain outstanding

Reply

DBSs do not formally expire, but the Council has adopted a robust process to ensure that DBS checks are carried out for staff and agency workers. In roles where a DBS is required, the Council would recheck a staff's DBS, for instance, every three years. This means there are no employees currently working for the Council who require a DBS check for their work without a previous DBS check. However, there are some staff with a valid DBS check that we are currently renewing in line with Council policy.

The number of DBS checks currently undertaken by the Council changes on a daily basis. At the end of October there were 38 staff with DBS's in the process of being updated. We do not hold data on contractor staff.

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

Many councils have been unable to continue hosting fireworks events; however, in Merton, I know residents are delighted that we've kept ours going. Could the Cabinet Member explain how we have been able to achieve this?

Reply

This year's fireworks displays were the most popular and profitable displays the council has put on. On Guy Fawkes Night our displays at Wimbledon Park were the biggest events in London with both the BBC and ITV covering them, and nearly 40,000 people attended this year's shows in Morden Park and Wimbledon Park.

The success of our fireworks displays is down to the effective management, planning and delivery of them. One of the main issues for other council's is that they often turn a financial loss, but in Merton our model turns a good profit, which goes back into funding the services our residents rely on.

There are other factors in continuing to host fireworks displays:

1. The events reduce the carbon footprint of ad hoc displays being organised in the community or in private settings. The displays we organise are

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responsibly sourced and we limit the carbon emissions as much as possible. Examples of this include procuring all fireworks materials from within Europe and using recyclable materials and electric generators wherever practical. The carbon footprint of the firework displays is the equivalent of driving a car for approximately 20 miles.

2. They are safer. Having organised gatherings means that we can ensure that our communities remain safe and enjoy the fireworks at a safe distance.
3. They are extremely popular, three of our shows sold out with high family attendance.

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

Does the Cabinet Member believe that the government's decision to scrap the Winter Fuel Allowance for thousands of pensioners in Merton was a lawful decision?

Reply

Yes, I believe the measures the government is taking to target financial support to those who need it most, and to close the black hole in our nation's finances left by the reckless Conservative government, are legal.

From Cllr Dresselaers to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

How many tennis coaches registered to coach in Merton within the last 12 months will be unable to continue unless they join Tennis in Merton, the parent company of Emma Wells Tennis.

Reply

We are delighted to have appointed Tennis in Merton as the operator for our tennis court provision. This innovative initiative has been developed in collaboration between Merton Council and the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA), with a total investment into our tennis court provision of almost £1,000,000.

As part of the conditions of the funding we have appointed an operator in Tennis in Merton to maintain the courts and create a 'sink fund' of income that will be reinvested back into our courts, to ensure they remain some of the highest quality public courts in the country. This new arrangement will also mean that a high-quality coaching offer will be provided by LTA registered coaches under the Tennis in Merton umbrella.

These arrangements will ensure that we continue to offer free access to our public tennis courts for residents and are in keeping with our Borough of Sport commitments. The 'Tennis for Free' initiative that currently operates in 2 sites will continue with plans in place to grow the free offer to include Wimbledon Park, as well as other concessionary offers that will enable broader access to tennis for residents.

Regarding your query concerning registered tennis coaches - Before this arrangement was put in place there was no registration process for coaches. What we do know from our park's contractor idverde, who previously administered the

tennis court bookings, is that most coaches are unsanctioned and often don't book courts under business names. Therefore, we would have no awareness of the quality or safeguarding of what they are delivering, and some are not qualified coaches. Tennis in Merton have reached out to existing coaches and coaching businesses and they have been invited to work with Tennis in Merton to try and improve the quality and consistency of our coaching offer across all our sites.

From Cllr Charles to the Leader of the Council

Please can the Council Leader outline the Civil Defence contingency plans and preparations that are in place in the London Borough of Merton, in the unlikely event of an armed conflict, or a meteor strike, or another unforeseen far reaching disaster.

Can he please highlight the role the Chief Executive will play, alongside her counterparts in the other London Boroughs. Can he also please confirm that the underground shelters and command centres in the Borough are fully equipped and that strategies to evacuate residents under the age of 16 are in place.

Reply

The Main contingency plan that would be implemented for a large-scale far-reaching incident affecting Merton is the Major Incident Plan, the aim of which is to enable the activation of an appropriate and flexible structure capable of producing a timely, effective, and scalable response to a major incident. In the examples you provided, such as a meteor strike or armed conflict, the London Resilience Partnership would take the strategic lead, as the incident would likely impact all London Boroughs and possibly beyond. Plans that may be implemented include the London Mass Evacuation Framework, the London Mass Shelter Framework, the Strategic Coordination Protocol, and the London Recovery Coordination Framework, among others.

Regarding the role of the Chief Executives of London boroughs, they all form part of a joint rota as members of the London Resilience Partnership, where they act as the London Local Authority Gold (LLAG). Should a major incident occur, a pan-London Strategic Coordination Group will be formed, led by the Met Police, with the LLAG acting as the strategic lead for all of London's boroughs where they will have the authority to make decisions on behalf of London local authorities. The London Resilience Unit will act as their secretariat, and all London boroughs will feed into their structure to provide situational updates and receive information updates.

Finally, regarding evacuations, underground shelters and command centres, there are no specific plans in Merton for implementation of a mass evacuation of residents under the age of 16. A mass evacuation would be managed centrally under the guidance of the pan-London Strategic Coordination Group who would likely establish an Evacuation and Shelter Coordination Group or appropriate equivalent to support their work.

Cllr Ofeimu to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

London Sport has announced the creation of a new sports club database, which will be incorporated into the GLA's Civic Strength Index—a measure in which Merton currently performs well, with most of our wards ranking in the 4th or 5th quintile. Could the Cabinet Member clarify how this database will enhance our understanding of participation levels across different wards in Merton?

Reply

We welcome London Sport's new sports club database, and the information and data will continue to support us in our mission to become London's Borough of Sport. You have rightly pointed out the high performance of Merton in the GLA's Civic Strength Index and we will look to strengthen our position even further via our Borough of Sport projects and programmes.

We already have a trailblazing app / web resource in our Activity Finder, which enables local sports clubs and organisations the opportunity to promote their offer. Having developed the Activity Finder by working with local sports clubs and organisations we are already seeing the benefits of connecting residents to local sporting clubs. We will continue to develop the Activity Finder and ensure that there is good cross promotion between the two sites.

The database information will be useful as part of a range of different tools and measurements we are developing to demonstrate the impact of our Borough of Sport projects. This work is ongoing, and an intensive piece of work is currently starting to draw together different data sources into a dashboard that can be used to review the impact of our services.

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

Lime Bikes continue to annoy residents by inconsiderate parking across the borough, such as outside Wimbledon station, and on Edge Hill. These two locations in particular have dedicated E-bike bays. When will he enforce the use of these bays and what actions will he take to address ongoing problems with Lime Bikes directly?

Reply

I recognise the frustration that inappropriately parked Lime bikes may cause residents, including the impact that of poorly parked e-bikes on the accessibility of pavements and walkways in the borough. That's why I have recently raised this issue with the Minister for Local Transport, Simon Lightwood MP, who has since been in contact with me regarding the matter.

In addition, I have written directly to Lime to express my concerns, and that of residents, and urged them to take rapid further action to address this issue.

At present Lime is operating in the borough without formal agreement with the Council, this means the Council cannot directly enforce against inappropriate parking. However, we are working with Lime so that once the Council has established a wider network of designated parking bays, we will enter into a formal

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agreement with them, which will include measures to ensure that Lime e-bikes are parked only in the designated bays, ensuring residents' concerns are considered.

Residents can get in touch with Lime directly to report obstructive bikes, or raise any other concerns by emailing support@li.me, or calling 0800 808 5223. In limited instances where the e-bike is obstructing the highway and posing a danger to road users, the Council may take action to relocate the e-bike. Reports of this nature can be made via [FixMyStreet](#).

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

How many Biodiversity Gain Plans the council has approved since May 2022 and what proportion of those plans included (a) projects in Merton and (b) projects outside Merton.

Reply

Since May 2022, Planning has issued one planning permission with a condition securing Biodiversity Gain Plan however this has not yet been discharged. So, to date, we have not yet approved any Biodiversity Gain Plan.

Cllr Syeda to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride and Climate Change

I am thrilled by the progress made towards establishing public toilet provision at Morden Tube Station, a much-needed resource that enhances accessibility. Could the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride provide an update on this project's timeline?

Reply

We are committed to working with partners to improve the accessibility and availability of toilets, particularly at busy hotspots. So I am delighted that Morden Underground station has been selected as part of a £3million Transport for London programme to increase toilet accessibility across the capital.

Over 8 million journeys each year begin or end at Morden Tube Station, however the station currently has no toilet facilities, sitting at the end of the longest "loo desert" in the entire tube network, where there are no toilets for 12 stops on the Northern Line all the way to Elephant and Castle.

Alongside Councillor Alambritis, local groups like More Loos for Merton, and hundreds of residents, I have campaigned repeatedly for toilet facilities at the station, and Transport for London's (TfL) decision will boost local transport accessibility, comfort and hygiene across Merton and the capital.

The benefits of providing toilet facilities at Morden Station were recently outlined by Councillor Alambritis at a meeting with the Deputy Mayor for Transport, where he detailed how the provision of toilets at Morden Station would particularly support travellers and local residents with disabilities, older people, women and children, and the homeless. We welcome this investment by the Mayor as it also reflects feedback

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we've heard recently during our Remaking Morden community engagement this summer.

TFL will now undertake further detailed design assessments. We understand Morden is in the first phase of TFL's programme. We anticipate the funding to be available and delivery to be in next financial year (2025/26). When we have further detail from TFL we will be happy to update members.

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