

Merton Council Council

20 November 2024

Supplementary Agenda 11

27 Non-Priority Questions to Cabinet Members and Replies

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Non-priority Questions to Cabinet Members and Replies

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

Can you provide details of the total financial cost incurred in procuring and preparing land at the Former Farm Road Church, Raleigh Gardens Car Park, Elm Nursery Car Park, and Canons Place for development; to state the acreage of each site; and to confirm the advertised asking price for each of these sites when the Council considered their sale in 2021/22.

Reply

Whilst the sites were considered for disposal they were not taken to the market as the Council's priority was to develop the sites as part of the Council's affordable housing programme. Therefore, asking prices were not provided or advertised.

The site areas are available in Merton's Local Plan site allocations;

Mitcham

<https://www.merton.gov.uk/planning-and-buildings/planning/local-plan/newlocalplan/mitcham>

- **Mi4** Elm Nursery. 0.1ha
- **Mi5** Land at Canons. 0.16ha
- **Mi11** Raleigh Gardens. 0.11ha

Morden

<https://www.merton.gov.uk/planning-and-buildings/planning/local-plan/newlocalplan/morden>

- **Mo2** Farm Road. 0.12ha

Costs incurred across the whole programme to obtain updated planning consents and to redesign the schemes include; necessary updates to current building and fire regulations, revised designs to achieve passivhaus standards, surveys and detailed design stage for construction pre-tender packages amounts to £1,632,688. (up to October 2024)

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

What is Merton doing to embrace the roll-out of 5G technology across the borough, in particular, in Wimbledon where it is widely recognised that coverage is poor?

Reply

We have recently extended our relationship with what was the South London Partnership to focus on improving connectivity in the borough for our residents and businesses. A funding bid is also being submitted to the GLA and Mayor of London for

consideration to address key connectivity issues, this is focussing on both the fibre in the ground that delivers high speed connectivity but also street furniture that can be used for small cell technology to supplement mobile connectivity in the borough.

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

What assessment he has made of the impact of the Government's decision to increase employer National Insurance contributions on Merton's hospices and care homes, and what discussions he has had with these employers since the Budget.

Reply

Officers have commenced an analysis of the financial impact of the increase in employer National Insurance in addition to other inflationary pressures, such as the recently announced increase in the London Living Wage in November 2024, and the outcome of this exercise will inform the inflationary increase recommended for the 2025-26 financial year. We are continuing to engage with our service providers through our regular forum meetings as well as contract management activities

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

Following the autumn budget, the Office for Budget Responsibility has said, "budget policies push up CPI inflation by around ½ a percentage point, meaning it is projected to rise to 2.6 per cent in 2025". How much will this increase in inflation cost the council?

Reply

From March 2022 to October 2024, CPI inflation increased by 15.2% and RPI by 20.8%, following Liz Truss' mini-budget in September 2022. In relative terms, RPI inflation over that period was 12.3% higher than expected, meaning an approximate £20.3million of added budgetary pressure on the Council in general terms over that two and a half year period.

It would be extremely difficult to accurately put a figure on the cost to the Council of any movement in inflation given the short amount of time it has been since the budget. It will depend on whether the suppliers of goods and services to the Council reflect any inflationary increase in their charges together with the Council's ability to negotiate best price on the range of goods and services it procures.

From Cllr Gould to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

Can you provide an update on the progress and chosen location for a breast screening service in Merton, and whether it is possible to deploy a breast screening van in the interim.

Reply

Breast Cancer Screening helps to identify cancers early when they are easier to treat and when treatment is more likely to be successful. The responsibility for commissioning Breast Cancer Screening Services sits with NHS England (NHSE) and

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the service in Southwest London is provided by St George's Hospital. Merton Council is not directly involved in the commissioning or provision, but has an oversight and assurance role, via our Director of Public Health, and a wider place shaping leadership role.

In June 2023, the Cabinet expressed concern that Merton is the only borough in Southwest London without a breast screening site and requested that our NHS colleagues address this issue as a matter of urgency. Since then, I have been pressurising the ICB and St George's at every opportunity to introduce a breast screening service to Merton.

With the support of this administration, our NHS partners have managed to secure capital funding until the end of this financial year for a breast screening site in Merton but, to date, SWL ICB has been unable to identify a suitable site. Officers and the ICB are working to ensure a workable site is identified as soon as possible.

The Council supported the successful capital bid for the screening equipment, subject to the identification of a suitable site, but a further business case will need to be developed to bring the screening site to Merton; that would fund the on-going staffing and revenue costs of the service.

As well as exploring a site in Merton, we have explored other options such as a 'lift and shift' of equipment and staffing from an existing site in Southwest London to Merton.

As an interim solution the working group has discussed with NHSE is the option of using a Breast Cancer Screening van until a permanent site can be located. However, all available vans are already assigned to local areas across London as part of the services' 3-year-round plans.

We will continue to press our NHS colleagues to explore options to bring a Breast Cancer Screening Site to Merton and SWL ICB will look to identify urgently a clinical and community site that meets the clinical requirements for a breast cancer screening facility. This work is ongoing, and a longer-term option might include the Wilson Community hub. We will also continue to promote greater uptake of this essential screening programme.

From Cllr Howard to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainability

The council is progressing its plans to build 93 affordable social rent homes as part of a wider programme to deliver 400 affordable homes. What assurances can the Cabinet Member provide that these houses, funded by Council Taxpayers, will be occupied by residents with long term connections to the borough?

Reply

The Council has a legal obligation to let all social housing in accordance with its published housing register and nominations policy. This policy sets out the prioritisation scheme and the groups that this applies to. There is a residential requirement policy that sets out all applicants must be resident in the borough for at least one year. There are also other groups to which the Council must give

reasonable or additional preference to, such as those where the Council has accepted a statutory homelessness duty, or cases nominated by children services.

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

How many total applications have been received since the Trees for Streets scheme started, how many trees have been planted under the scheme, and the average time taken to process applications. Additionally, where delays have occurred in processing applications, what have been the primary causes?

Reply

2023-24 update:

In **2023-24** planting season the Council received 76 street tree sponsorship requests and 8 parks tree sponsorship requests.

To date **52** trees of **76** Street Trees have now been completed.

The remaining **24** Street Trees and the remaining **8** Parks Trees will all be planted before the end of January 2025 in line with the council's tree replacement program.

The delays during 2023-24 were largely a result of higher-than-anticipated demand, following strong enthusiasm from residents and our local community to support tree planting across the borough. The engagement process for each individual request proved to be more intricate than initially expected, requiring multiple visits and in-depth discussions to ensure each street tree proposal met the needs of both residents and the local environment. We're delighted with the level of involvement and engagement with residents, whilst acknowledging this also placed greater demand on staffing and resources, leading to some delays.

The Council are implementing the learnings from this year in collaboration with our working group of (1) LBM Arboriculture and Highways officers (2) Trees for Street Campaign Team (3) Term Contractors from FM Conway and Barkland Tree Specialist, who are all now trained in the Trees for Street interactive sponsorship platform, meaning processes in future years will be more streamlined.

2024-2025 update:

For the 2024-25 year, the Council has received 99 Street Tree Requests and 16 Park Tree Requests. We have begun the inspection of 50 of these requests in the Wimbledon and Morden area and are aiming to respond to all applicants by the end of December 2024 on the Trees for Street interactive sponsorship platform

From Cllr Paterson to the Cabinet Member for Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride and Climate Change

The council has recently installed metal fencing around three sides of the Joseph Hood Recreation Ground to prevent residents with garden accesses from accessing the recreation ground. Please can the Deputy Leader tell me how much it cost to install the fencing?

Reply

Making sure that our greenspaces are secure is important not only because it helps to protect the greenspace itself, but also because it enhances the safety for neighbouring properties and provides less opportunity for anti-social behaviour.

Joseph Hood Recreation Ground was identified as one of Merton's greenspaces, which required works to be carried out to secure the council's boundaries. This was due to there being 18 properties where the council's pre-existing perimeter railing had been cut allowing un-approved access from the Recreation Ground and into those properties' gardens. These works cost £6,240.00 in total which equates to £346.66 per property. The funding for which came from Parks Security Capital Funding.

From Cllr Braithwaite to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Street Cleanliness

What communication was provided to permit holders in Merton about the move from RingGo to a new portal for CPZ permits in the borough, and what were the reasons for the change.

Reply

Our contract with the previous provider (RingGo) was approaching its expiration date, and therefore the Council needed to reprocure this service. Following a procurement exercise, the winning bidder was chosen and offers not only an enhanced quality of service but also an improved experience for residents and users.

Prior to Go-live emails communicating the changes were sent to 17,500 permit holders (with 77% of these emails being opened), and a further 350 postal letters were sent out to those who do not have an email account or where we received an undelivered/unsuccessful email.

The Council has been aware of some issues experienced by users during the first few days, and we have worked hard to address these issues quickly and we are continuing to support residents with the move over to the new system. Our webpages are also on hand to help residents, providing thorough information related to the system change and each permit type, and a step-by-step guide on how to apply is included.

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

Can the Cabinet Member for Transport and Cleaner Streets tell us what value of Merton's TfL Local Implementation Plan funding 2023-24 remains unspent, and what projects this funding was allocated to?

Reply

For the 2023/24 financial year TfL Local Implementation Plan funding we returned £64,000 to TfL. The majority of this (£40,000) was for the Bushey Road/Martin Way junction improvement scheme that TfL did not approve the proposed design for. The remainder of the underspend was for three schemes that were delivered under budget (Dorset Road/Morden Road; Milner Road Healthy Street; and Cycle route 20 Ravensbury Park).

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

Can the Leader of the Council explain how many resident-facing telephone numbers for Council services, including standard and 'out of hours' lines, incur charges for callers, and whether the existence of such charges is clearly indicated wherever these numbers are provided?

Reply

The Council's main switchboard and out of hours numbers, advertised on the Contact us page on the website, are standard rate numbers. In addition to those main numbers there are a further 115 or so direct dial numbers, for libraries, Children's centres, Council Tax and a range of other services, which are also all standard rate numbers and therefore included in most people's mobile or landline calling plans. I understand there is a premium rate number in use by the Council, but this is a redirect service, so the cost is borne by us as a Council, not by the person contacting us. Given that all of our direct dial numbers are standard rate, and covered by most calling plans, there is no specific information on the website or elsewhere relating to call costs.

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

Can the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development provide the total number of housing complaints received in the last 12 months, the outcomes of those complaints, and the number that relate to housing association properties?

Reply

In the last 12 months 100 disrepair complaints have been received of which 15 related to housing associations.

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

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we served notices on a Landlord, requesting works within a specific timescale. 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. As a result, we are still collating outcome figures, and we hope to update them in relation to this aspect of the cases shortly.

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

Can the Cabinet Member for Transport and Cleaner Streets, explain when residents in Dora Road, Vineyard Road, and Kenilworth Avenue, will see their street lighting, which is currently below statutory levels, improve?

Reply

We have upgraded/converted lamp columns 1-9 within Dora Road over the past few weeks, these columns are located from its junction with Leopold Road to no. 43 Dora Road. The remaining 11no lanterns along Dora Road (no. 51 Dora Road to Home Park Road) that haven't been converted yet will be undertaken before the end of the year. Once these lantern conversions are undertaken in Dora Road, we will be undertaking lantern conversion in Vineyard Hill Road shortly afterwards.

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

Can the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services provide Council with the information in the Chief Executive's message to colleagues, *12 November: Online budget overspend briefing*?

Reply

The information from the briefing to staff was shared via a recording which was uploaded onto the hub the next day (13th November). A number of questions were raised by staff at the briefing, and answers to those questions will be shared via the hub shortly.

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