

Merton Council

Council meeting

5 February 2014

Councillors priority questions

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|----|--|---------|
| 6. | Councillors' ordinary priority questions to cabinet members
The questions and written responses will be circulated at the meeting | 1 - 10 |
| 7. | Strategic theme: Councillors' questions to cabinet members
The questions and written responses will be circulated at the meeting. | 11 - 20 |

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1. From Councillor Linda Taylor to the Cabinet Member for Education

The Council has a legal responsibility to reduce and follow up on young people aged 16 - 19 whose destination after leaving statutory education is unknown. What action and efforts has the Council taken to ensure we are keeping these so called 'not knowns' in Merton as low as possible?

Reply

A monthly list of young people whose Education, Training and Employment (ETE) status is 'not known' is produced within the Family and Adolescent Service. This enables the My Futures - Education, Training and Employment team to track, monitor and support such young people. These young people are contacted by letter initially and then by telephone (if letters are not responded to). The team also utilise home visits in order to track young people who have not responded to phone calls and letters in order to identify their ETE status. Strenuous effort is made to contact and engage with these young people and to ensure that they are removed from the 'unknown' cohort legally.

Where removal from the 'not known' cohort takes place, this will be because the young person's ETE status has been verified and confirmed. Young people who are assessed as being NEET will become part of the NEET cohort and will subsequently be worked with and supported by the My Futures Education, Training and Employment team to rectify this risk factor.

In addition, the Schools team, within the My Futures - Education, Training and Employment team, assist school staff in ensuring that vulnerable young people remain in education post 16 and subsequently do not become part of the 'not known' cohort.

Supplementary

I would like to draw to the Cabinet Member's attention that the latest data on Merton, shows that in December 2013 the number of not known was nearly 20% higher than in December 2012. In December 2013 11.5% of our 16-18 years olds were not know this is 5954 people. This is above the national average of 9%. We must know where young people are, so that we can work with other agencies to help them become economically active in Merton and London. What will the Administration do to get this figure down in 2014.

Reply

The administration takes this issue extremely seriously, because getting young people into employment education or training is something that I think is extremely important. But it has been helped in the last few years with the abolition by the Government of the education maintenance allowance, which was introduced by the previous Government. Also the trebling of tuition fees. We have worked very closely and we want to see the number of NET's reducing. Children Services and family's takes strenuous efforts in undertaking its statutory duties and it something I view seriously as well. As a Borough it is getting those people, getting those apprentices getting them into training, and also encouraging people to stay on in school. This has become slightly harder recent years.

2. From Councillor Caroline Cooper-Marbiah to the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities

One of my constituents in Colliers Wood was the victim of a burglary and literally did not know where to report the crime as the local police office on Wilson Road has been shut and Mitcham police station is no longer open 24 hours. Could the Cabinet Member outline how the current Conservative Mayor of London's changes to policing have impacted on Merton?

Reply

I am sorry to hear about your constituent. I understand that local residents are unhappy at the Mayor of London's decision to close the police office on Wilson Avenue. The situation is further exacerbated by the reduction in hours at Micham Police station which is no longer a 24 hour station. From talking to local residents I know that this has had a big impact on their personal sense of safety.

In the absence of a local police office, all burglaries in progress (or crimes in progress) should be phoned through to 999 as an emergency. All other incidents (non-emergency) should be phoned through to 101. The latter number will ensure that an officer is dispatched at the appropriate time.

Supplementary

Would the Cabinet Member agree with me in regretting that by closing the Police office on Wilson Road , the Mayor of London, has made people in Colliers Wood feel less safe?

Reply

I do share those sentiments, which you have expressed, in that we have the same problem in the neighbourhood ward of Lavender fields. At our last meeting here with the Deputy Mayor there were lots of concerns from people over the closing over those offices and we hope that as a result of what has happened, the Deputy Mayor will think very carefully in the future that the public takes safety as a very serious issue. Councillors and this administration are here to look after the safety of our residents.

3. From Councillor David Simpson to the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities

CCTV is a key element of community safety. What is the strategy of this administration going forward to ensure CCTV is fit for purpose in the continuing fight against crime in this borough?

Reply

The Council is currently concluding an audit of its CCTV equipment and related contracts with a view to improving the service and increasing efficiency in the way maintenance and other works are carried out. This audit will assist in identifying investment needs which will be brought forward as part of future capital

programmes. The Council remains absolutely committed to a 24/7 CCTV service and function as a key part of our approach to community safety.

Supplementary

There is a recurring graffiti problem on railway path in hillside ward, and what resources do we have to better monitor this path to catch the culprits who through the lack of current monitoring have returned and undone all the good work by Council employees' in cleaning the place up before Christmas.

Reply

I am sure that you would agree with me that the residents' survey that we had independently produced states that all our residents are very satisfied with the service provided by this Council, more than ever before. Also we have learnt lessons from the past and I'm sure that the current Administration has done a good job in the last 3 years.

4. From Councillor Iain Dysart to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Now that Labour-run Camden has adopted a default borough-wide 20 mile per hour zone, adding to many boroughs in and around London of diverse persuasions, why is Labour-run Merton still refusing to consider such a scheme?

Reply

The Council takes road safety seriously and the management of inappropriate and excessive speed is of importance.

Councillor Dysart may be aware that Merton actually has a very strong record on road safety and has established a number of 20 mph zones, which are enforced through physical constraints: in particular vertical deflection measures. Cllr Dysart may also be aware the current Government whilst paying lip service to 20mph speed limits has not given Council's any means to enforce them, or the Met Police the resources to enforce them. The Council continues to evaluate the emerging picture with regard to 20 mph speed limits and zones. The research information and evidence is patchy and inconclusive. The Council will want to be clear that in implementing any measures, including possible physical measures to limit speed, it is as effective as possible. The Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel is due to receive a report shortly which will seek to set out the latest position and the Council's recommended approach to speed management across the borough.

Supplementary

Would not a default scheme informed by the experience of those Authorities, who have conceived and implemented them, now including Labour run Camden, and including public participation, be preferable to a confusing patchwork that we currently have?

Reply

We are dealing with this in a considered way; reports are coming forward to Scrutiny, but what we don't want to reduce road traffic and road safety to be pinned to a slogan and campaign format. As I suggest to the Cllr D, that is not the best way to increase road safety. I do know that some Boroughs have gone for complete 20 miles zones, albeit in inner London, rather than Outer London. And we will want to learn from what has happened from those Borough and we'll want to see is there has been significant difference in speeds on the road, where it has been implemented, without physical constraint measures. Because we actually have a number of 20 mile an hour zones, we know if you just put speed signs up that we can't enforce them as we don't have the power. The Police across London currently refuse to enforce the 20 mile an hour speed limits, so it can become an empty gesture. So we want to learn from others experience and when the evidence is available from Camden and other Boroughs, we will examine it carefully.

5. From Councillor David Williams to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Can the Cabinet Member please provide an update on the application for Village Green status for Morden Park Playing Fields given the lack of recent action in this respect?

Reply

The village green application was put forward by local residents in an effort to stop the previous Conservative administration's deeply unpopular plans to develop Morden Park Playing Fields. Thankfully the previous administration were eventually made to see sense and as a result the village green application is no longer required. We are currently working with local community groups to ensure our young people can enjoy the playing fields for generations to come.

Supplementary

With reference to the answer to the question put forward by the 'local resident' was that local resident actually Councillor Alambritis. More particularly, why are Labour Councillors advising the community trust not to put their application in before the local elections. Is it because the application includes flood lighting?

Reply

I am not privy to the detail of who is behind the Village trust's application, but I rather suspect, without asking Councillor Alambritis directly, it was members of the public. In respect of floodlighting I am not privy to any floodlighting aspect of any future application. I do know that there is a local desire to bring playing fields back into use. We are a sports driven Authority, we think sports are a good thing. We are about to bring forward a planning application for marked football pitches figs marsh, with associated changing facilities nearby.

6. From Councillor Peter Southgate to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

How many licences for fixed odds betting terminals are currently held for premises open to the public (eg betting shops) in LB Merton? How many were held two years ago i.e 2011/12?

This question will be answered by the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities

Reply

Premises are licensed as opposed to individual fixed odds betting terminals. Premises are then entitled to have no more than 4 fixed odds betting terminals. The number of premises licensed are as follows:

2014

39 – including:

37 betting shop licences

1 dog track licence

1 adult gaming centre licence

2011/12

37 - including:

35 betting shop licences

1 dog track licence

1 adult gaming centre licence

Supplementary

I noted that 37 betting shops licensing could mean 148 fixed odds betting terminals, within our Borough, with each capable of absorbing bets of up to £100 at a time. I wonder if the Cabinet Member shares my disappointments that recent attempts to legislate for control at a Local level on the spread of betting shops failed and would the Cabinet Member undertake that should such legislation be enacted by Parliament, to use such powers, in Merton both in licensing and planning to control the further spread of betting shops

Reply: This question was answered by the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

I agree with you 100% I am deeply disappointed over the luke warm response at Westminster to the efforts from people putting forward to get some form of check on the betting industry. Once legislation has been past you can be assured that Merton will be one of the first Councils to put it into practice.

7. From Councillor Stan Anderson to the Leader of the Council

How will he ensure local residents have a say in the design for the new Morden pool?

Reply

We are just about to appoint some external consultants to carry out our first stage public consultation in February/March to find out exactly what local residents, users and non-users would wish to have included in the replacement facility. We will also be asking them to tell us what leisure activities they would like to do in what sort of facilities, prioritising these within the £11m we are making available.

Further public consultation will take place later in the process once the findings of the first stage have been evaluated.

Supplementary

The previous plans for the pool were unrealistic, how has he ensured that the Administration will deliver when the previous administration has failed?

Reply

With our prudent financial management of this Council, we have allocated between £10-11millions to rebuild Morden Park pool, which was built 47 years ago.

8. From Councillor Rod Scott to the Cabinet Member for Education

The Cabinet Member was quoted recently in the Wimbledon Guardian as saying Rutlish and Wimbledon College moved from 'notice to improve' to 'good' in their latest Ofsted inspections. In fact, Rutlish and Wimbledon College moved from 'Satisfactory' to 'Good' under the old Ofsted regime. Does he accept therefore that his use of the term 'notice to improve' is misleading and possibly damaging, not least because by this point Rutlish had two good years of results, and will he apologise publicly?

Reply

I am happy to acknowledge that I inadvertently used incorrect terminology when asked to comment on the schools' inspection status and have apologised to the schools concerned accordingly. The same article did also mention that Rutlish school had improved its rating to 'good', which is extremely encouraging and I am delighted at the progress made at this comprehensive school, along with the improvement in results.

9. From Councillor David Dean to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Why was it, considering the Mayor of London's request to garner cross party support and input for a Merton Mini-Holland plan, that other parties have been excluded from more recent meetings on the process? In particular, why has the Council proposed a bus lane down the Broadway when the Mayor expressly asked for cycling ideas?

Is the Cabinet Member concerned that this lack of cross-party input could jeopardise the outcome?

Reply

The only recent meeting on the process was a presentation to the GLA, Transport for London, the Mayor's Cycling Commissioner and other parties. This took place on January 20th. The Council was restricted to no more than 4 representatives and thus it was necessary to limit attendance to the Cabinet Member, Director and two transport and urban design experts to deal with the matters presented. We expect to hear about the success or otherwise of our bid in March and will continue to keep all parties informed of developments.

The submitted bid, supported by all parties, envisages two segregated cycle paths running in both directions along Wimbledon Broadway whilst retaining bus movements from West to East only. If successful in receiving support as part of the Mini Holland funding, this will be subject to further formal consultation.

Supplementary

Has there been any cross party impute, as I have talked to a number of my colleagues and we do not remember any impute at all? I also asked about the bus lane and did not get an answer; instead I got some gobbledegook response 'Mr Bureaucracy', *retaining bus movement from West to East only*. I think what that means is there is going to be a bus lane, but then it says about consultation. I want the Cabinet Member to answer this, the Mayor of London asked for cycling ideas, we have got bus ideas, does he think that he going to ensure that this Council doesn't get money because he answered the wrong question?

Reply

The application has not changed one jot since, the Leader of your Group, your Environment spokesperson, the Conservative MP for Wimbledon and the Conservative Member for the London assembly, all signed up to the application. It is the same application, so if you think it is a bad application you are really implicitly criticising the wider leadership of your Group and Party. They very sensibly got behind a cross party, cross borough bid for cycle improvements with particular focus on Wimbledon town centre. Yes we can't move the bus stop outside Centre Court. That was always the case, because the buses past the Prince of Wales and people get on and off the buses outside the Centre Court shopping centre. We can't bring them back past the Prince of Wales, so they must continue down the Broadway. I have to say in the presentation to TFL representatives and Andrew Gilligan, there was no criticism of that.

10. From Councillor Sam Thomas to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Cleanliness and Parking

Could she outline what steps she is taking to ensure people do not litter our streets?

Reply

Merton takes seriously the issue of litter, litter enforcement and street cleansing within the borough.

Our officers monitor the levels of waste in the borough and identify littering hotspots. Depending on the cause of the litter, resources are allocated to resolve the problems, taking the form of local education (including litter awareness road-shows), targeted enforcement actions and, where appropriate, enhanced cleansing and sweeping of the area.

Merton continues to promote a more robust approach to litter, with increased levels of enforcement and education activities. During 2012/13 and on-going in 13/14 we rolled out the Gum and Butt Bins project to aid in the fight against chewing gum and cigarette related litter. These bins have been installed on lampposts in Morden, Raynes Park, Mitcham and Colliers Wood, and have proven highly effective in reducing litter. During February and March 2014 the final phase of the scheme will see these bins installed in Wimbledon and South Wimbledon.

In order to improve the street scene we have introduced a "time-banded" waste collection pilot in Wimbledon. Studies have shown that a significant contributor to littering on the highway is waste from carrier and refuse sacks as well as incorrectly contained waste that can be left out all day. Initial indications have proven positive and have seen visible improvement to the street scene. Added together with a "zero tolerance" approach to littering being adopted, we believe this supports Merton's commitment to cleaner streets. During 2014/15 we expect time-banded collections to be rolled out to further town centres.

Supplementary

I'm sure we all have seen how bad the weather has been recently. How has the street cleanness been affected by the very awful weather?

Reply

I would like to commend all the staff that work in the refuse collection and the street sweeping, it really has been bad weather over the last few weeks. These Officers are out there from a least 6am in the morning sometimes earlier and do a tough job especially when the weather has things and objects strewn across the street. Not anything they've left behind, but the effects of flooding and or trees. They are worked to full capacity during that period. Also like to highlight that during that period we collected 10500 Christmas trees

11. From Councillor Suzanne Evans to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Does the Cabinet Member believe signs advertising parking restrictions should be easily understood by motorists so they can avoid unwittingly falling foul of them and incurring fines?

Reply

Yes, however all signs displayed on the highway indicating the parking regulations/restrictions must conform to the Traffic Signs Regulation and General

Directions manual issued by the DfT and which is statute. The London Borough of Merton cannot change the style or wording of these signs without an approved variant agreed by DfT. All our signage conforms to DfT Directions.

Supplementary

There is a particularly controversial sign in a road in Hillside in Raymond Road. One of my residents has got 5 tickets and she was so incensed she asked all her friends and neighbours if they understood the sign, because she did not, only 17% of them did. She took it to adjudication and the adjudicator ruled in her favour and stated the sign was not clear. I have been in correspondence with the Department for Transport, who say Merton Council can change it, but officers seem very reluctant. Can the Cabinet Member please give it his urgent attention and set the process in place to change it for us?

Reply

I don't think I know about that particular issue. I don't believe I have been copied into any of the correspondences so far. But I would be very glad to look at the issues that have been raised by Councillor Evans or any constituent.

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Agenda item 7 – Councillors strategic theme priority questions and answers

1. From Councillor Janice Howard to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance

Is Merton Council's commercial waste collection service profitable on a full cost basis using Merton's current cost of capital and proper allocation of G & A and depreciation? Please state all assumptions and show all calculations.

Reply

Yes it is profitable. Overall Merton's Commercial Trade Waste Collection is operating with a projected surplus of £247,997, excluding overheads. Commercial Wastes' forecasted expenditure is £1,247,211, (including all operating costs and depreciation) with an income stream of £1,495,208, thus showing a projected surplus of £247,997. This forecast is based on residual waste being 4,447 tonnes and recycling tonnage of 1,153.

Supplementary

A surplus minus overheads, if these are added back then the service does run at a loss, so would the Cabinet Member comment on whether this represents unfair loading and what controls have been introduced as a result to the report

Reply

As part of our approach to the finance of the Council, we look to what is best for each individual service and we will continue to monitor each individual service we provide a great deal of financial monitoring information, that is one of the reasons why this Council has been able to get on top our finances. She should remember when her Conservative party was the Administration they put up council Tax by £100, whilst the current Administration have frozen Council Tax and protected priority services, and improved services like waste. That is the difference between a Labour administration that knows what it is doing and a conservative opposition that doesn't have a clue.

2. From Councillor Brenda Fraser to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance

Following a statement by the Chair of London Councils, Mayor Jules Pipe, in December 2013 regarding the Government's intention to expect councils to manage a 25% reduction in their budgets whilst continuing to deliver improvements in services, is the Cabinet Member planning to write on behalf of Merton Council regarding the disproportionately large share of the reduction in budget that Local Authorities are required to shoulder and could he state the impact of this reduction on the management of the budget.

Reply

The reduction in Government grants is a major factor in the pressures on the council budget. I will be working closely with London Council's to lobby for the appropriate levels of funding for both the borough and London as a whole. While Merton Council has thus far done a good job in protecting priority services and keeping Council Tax

Agenda item 7 – Councillors strategic theme priority questions and answers

frozen for all, the Government must understand that their spending reductions could impact on the quality and levels of service that can be offered.

Supplementary

Does he agree with me and the people of Longthornton ward that it is important to continue to protect the key services residents that they value such as street cleaning and weekly refuse collection

Reply

I agree with much of what she said, these are difficult times for our country and everyone is feeling the pinch, but I can reassure her that this council will continue to protect priority services while keeping Council Tax down. 4 years ago few people believed we could achieve that, but we have shown we are up to the task. The independent survey of residents says we are providing better value than ever before and all of us this side are up for the challenges ahead.

3. From Councillor Suzanne Grocott to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance

What reduction in Council Tax precept are you expecting from the Mayor of London?

Reply

On 20 December 2013, the Mayor published his 2014-15 draft revenue budget and capital spending plan for consultation. This includes the budget proposals for the GLA (Mayor and Assembly), the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC), the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority (LFEPA), Transport for London (TfL) and the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC).

The budget proposes a reduction in the Mayor's Band D council tax precept of £4.00 (1.3 percent) from £303.00 to £299.00 in 2014-15 for council taxpayers in the 32 London boroughs.

The budget comprises of £218.88 to support the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, £49.76 for the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, £28.03 for the GLA (Mayor and Assembly) and £2.33 for Transport for London (TfL).

The final draft budget will be considered by the London Assembly on 14 February 2014 and the Assembly can amend and agree an alternative budget by a two-thirds majority so the draft precept of £299.00 could change as a result.

The Assembly will also need to take account of the impact of falling expenditure on the quality of some of the services he provides. For instance, as a result of the Mayor's budgets, the number of police employed by the Metropolitan Police has reduced, and some influential figures are calling for Councils to increase their expenditure to restore some of that service reduction, although they "do not have a clue where that money will come from". I very much hope that the Mayor will consider such concerns before he further reduces the expenditure of the Metropolitan Police.

Supplementary

Agenda item 7 – Councillors strategic theme priority questions and answers

Will he join me in welcoming this reduction from the Mayor and would he tell me why if he is so on top of finances, why can't the Administration do the same with Council Tax?

Reply

What I think is the Mayor's budget shows when money is tight the Tory's don't have a clue as there are difficult decisions to make, Labour in Merton shows the way. We have kept council Tax down and protected the services that are most important to our residents, like libraries and weekly street collection. The Mayor of London has cut his most important service the police by 80 officers in Merton and her colleagues are so unhappy about it that they want some of them back even though they do not know where that money will come from.

4. From Councillor Iain Dysart to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance

How does he reconcile the increasing need for children's and adult social care with continuing underspends in these areas?

Reply

Children's' social care is now overspending as a result of increased demand. Spending on Adult Social Care is being contained by the Council agreeing growth from its own resources (the only area that received growth in 2013/14) and the availability of significant money from the NHS. Recent underspends in this area have largely been due to the very late arrival of NHS grants. Rather than splurge these grants in the financial year in which they were received, spending has been phased over a longer period.

Supplementary

Last year Council failed to spend £1.5 million budgeted for adult social care, so with rising young elderly populations, coupled with by officers own admissions inadequacy of budget management isn't Merton failing these key stakeholders

Reply

I don't remember describing our policies as inadequate. We have significantly increase the amount of financial monitoring that we publish and it helps us to get a better picture of our spending and plan effectively. We are careful with money and I should have thought it was a good thing, that sometimes we can spend less than was budgeted whilst providing the right level of service. It helps us avoid making big cut elsewhere and it is one reason why according to the annual survey that Merton's residents thinks this administration is delivering better value for money than ever before

Agenda item 7 – Councillors strategic theme priority questions and answers

5. From Councillor Diane Neil Mills to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance

How much has been cut from the budget in the last 3 years by department as a result of improved procurement?

Reply

It is always difficult to accurately estimate the level of savings arising from one particular cause, but analysis of the savings for the past three years indicates that the level of revenue savings included in the budget by department is as follows:-

	2011/12 £'000	2012/13 £'000	2013/14 £'000	Total £'000
CSF	200	105	100	405
C&H	2,365	2,668	2,063	7,096
CS	182	695	180	1,057
E&R	431	142	581	1,154
	3,178	3,610	2,924	9,712

Supplementary

How do these savings compare with targets which were established by Deloittes for the same period and what are the Cabinet Member targets and/or expectations for further savings from procurement beyond 2013/2014

Reply

Cllr Neil-Mills is obviously a clever women and has helped substantially the way that we procure our services, I am very grateful for that and I would always take her suggestions on board. I clearly don't have the information to hand but what I would say this Administration has done a good job overall protecting priority services and keeping Council Tax down and clearly procurement has had a role to play. Which is why we have reviewed the procurement strategy and published our procurement register on the London portal. We will certainly bear in mind her suggestions, along with other from the Scrutiny task group as it important that we deal with the Council's finances in a professional manor and do what is best for our residents.

Agenda item 7 – Councillors strategic theme priority questions and answers

6. From Councillor Richard Williams to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance

Could the Cabinet Member indicate what indications he has had from the Wimbledon Common Conservators about the implications for Merton of any decision by them to raise their levies?

Reply

The WPCC precept in 2014/15 will be £293,184.23, a change of £24,669.52 from the 2013/14 levy of £268,514.71.

Although the total cost of the precept to Merton has increased by 9.2%, the average Band D cost to a council taxpayer in the WPCC area has reduced from £27.84 in 2013/14 to £27.38 in 2014/15. (1.65%) The reason for the cost increase to Merton is due to the rise in Council Tax Base, relative to Kingston and Wandsworth, who are also subject to this levy.

The Government has still not issued its Council Tax Requirement form (CTR1) or related guidance with respect to Council Tax referendums and the WPCC precept will need to be considered as the year on year change in average Band D council tax is used for this purpose.

Supplementary

Would he agree with me that it is outrageous that each year millions of pounds worth of funding to this authority is put at risk by Eric Pickles refusal and the actions of the Conservative in increasing their precept and would he also agree with me that it is very ironic that Conservative in Wimbledon Common that the true blue areas of Merton, Wandsworth and Kingston are not actually able to do what this Administration did in Merton of protecting services and keeping the Council Tax frozen

Reply

I do agree with him and he makes a very good point this Council has been able to protect priority services and keeping the Council Tax down, because we are good with money and are able to make efficiency savings and I do agree with him that the Conservatives should do the same

7. From Councillor Richard Hilton to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance

What progress has been made to date on the report into serious allegations of corruption in November 2013 and why is an interim report not being presented at this meeting?

Reply

Following receipt of the allegations the Council appointed it's external auditors to carry out a full investigation.

Agenda item 7 – Councillors strategic theme priority questions and answers

The investigation included

- A review of the whistleblowing statement.
- Identifying processes and procedures used by the Council to procure interim and consultancy work
- Identifying payments made by the Council in respect of a number of consultants
- Identifying the manner in which payments associated with consultants have been accounted for
- Identifying budgets concerning the cost centres used to account for consultants time

Following this work which was completed before the Christmas period the auditors requested to interview a number of officers to complete their investigation. Eight interviews were conducted and completed by 24th January.

The Auditors are currently finalising their report to the Council which includes seeking further responses from individuals interviewed during the process. The outcome of their work is expected to be provided to the Council within the next three weeks.

The latest update received by the Council for members information at this meeting is that their work to date has not identified evidence of corruption, malpractice or unlawful expenditure.

Supplementary

My question relates to the serious corruption allegations received by all of this Council Chamber in November, put forward by 6 officers of this Council, which are serious. To date I question is why is there no interim report. Whilst it disgraceful that we have not received the full report yet and we have not even received an interim report.

What we do have is an email sent at 4.22pm today to Group Leaders basically saying that the rates of pay given to these Consultants, which have been hired and has been accepted, was in line with norms. However nothing about the process about how we went about doing that. What we do know is that procurement processes were not followed properly, so can the Cabinet Member explain why he is not taking such a serious issue seriously.

Reply

Of course I wished that the investigator that concluded finished their enquiry by now, and this cloud has been hanging over too long. These were anonymous allegations that are being investigated, the length of time the investigation has taken and the lack of disciplinary actions that has been taken does suggest that the investigator have looked under every stone, and still have not found any serious misdemeanours, but of course there might be some procedures that we can tighten up. But we have to wait for the outcome of that report. We must give them time to do it and rather than insinuating that things are very wrong with this Council, and essential smearing

Agenda item 7 – Councillors strategic theme priority questions and answers

the good record of our staff here, he should let the investigation be concluded and responded to it in a measures fashion just as we will.

8. From Councillor Samantha George to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance

There is £8.4million in reserves earmarked for transformation projects. The last administration left £3.5million of this amount and since then considerably more has been put into the reserve than spent from it. Could this administration not think of any "spend to save" technology projects which could have been bearing fruit after 3 years on which this money could have been spent for the purposes for which it was intended?

Reply

It is our view that the amount set aside by the last administration was insufficient to transform the service and increase the resilience of the Council, and that the expenditure should take place in a controlled manner over a longer period in order to ensure that improvement would be lasting. The Outstanding Council Programme Board Reserve has been increased by the consolidation of other specific reserves. As can be seen from page 480 of the Overview and Scrutiny Agenda, there are already plans to reduce this £6.7m by the end of the MTFs period. This includes projects such as replacing Financial Systems, Customer Contact, Document Management etc. Other reserves are being used to fund the enhancement of Social Care systems. Savings arising from these transformational projects are built into the MTFs, and have helped to reduce the budget gap. There are other projects in the pipeline e.g. around the Mascot Service and Confirm that will utilise the bulk of the remaining money.

Supplementary

In his answer on the transformation programme it appears that the Cabinet Member is agreeing that he has done nothing on transforming the Council over the last 3 years. On the customer contact programme, how does he justify making no progress on this, despite the deloitte report and despite bring back former employees to work on the programme?

Reply

I don't actually agree with the premise of the follow up question, the latest independent survey, more people think that the current Administration is doing a good job and providing value for money than ever before. We have been awarded the best Council of the year and that is no accident. We are careful with people's money, we do not throw it around, and we have moved to longer term financial planning. We plan ahead and we build resilience, we don't just think of way to spend money like as she has suggesting, we use it effectively as a result we are the first Administration ever in Merton to Freeze Council Tax every year for everyone while protecting priority services likely library and creating an extra 2000 school places.

Agenda item 7 – Councillors strategic theme priority questions and answers

9. From Councillor Agatha Akyigyina to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance

Can he outline how he has ensured Merton residents on low incomes have not faced an increase in council tax?

Reply

For 2013/14 central government cut the funding for Council Tax Benefit by 10% and merged it into general grant funding, effectively abolishing the old scheme. Many councils decided to respond by reducing the benefits paid to claimants. Despite the “localisation” of benefits government required payments to pensioners to remain unchanged. The result of this was that if the funding reduction were passed onto others in receipt of benefits then they faced a cut in excess of the 10% reduction. This would have a particular impact on those who are low paid.

In July 2011, the Council agreed its ‘July principles’ which would govern this administration’s priorities. One of the very top priorities was to keep Council Tax low. We therefore seek to avoid increasing Council Tax for our low paid residents.

The administration recommended, and council agreed, in setting the budget for 2013/14, that own scheme should therefore be the same as the old council tax benefit scheme, so that those on low incomes would not have to pay more in Council Tax if their circumstances remained the same. It was further agreed that this would continue in 2014/15. It should be noted that those councils that took the alternative approach have seen substantial increases in council tax arrears from those affected and so are unlikely to have recouped the loss of government grant.

It should be noted that the lack of a specific grant means that government support will be cut at the same rate as general funding and that any increase in demand/cost will fall fully upon the council to meet.

Supplementary

Can I congratulate the Cabinet Member for being in a position of having 4 years of a Council tax freeze? Does he agree with me this is important to ensure that the people with the lowest income pay the least?

Reply

By maintaining rebates we are the only Council for miles around to freeze Council Tax every year for low paid household and I think that is the right approach. It’s everyone paying the right amount. Clearly as Government funding for low income households is falling and it will be more difficult for us to achieve that. But we do have a good track record and low Council Tax remains one of our top priorities.

10. From Councillor Suzanne Evans to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance

Does the Cabinet Member believe that it is right to lie to the public about the Council spending?

Reply

Agenda item 7 – Councillors strategic theme priority questions and answers

No doubt she is referring to the suggestion from her Party Leader that UKIP representatives are “Walter Mittys seeking a role in politics”. Therefore, if she is asking me for advice as to whether or not she should lie to the public I would strongly urge her to consult with her Party Leader before doing so.

Supplementary

Does the Cabinet Member know the difference between fiction and finance? I was referring to his comments to the Wimbledon Guardian 23 January, where he refers to the cost of Group officers, with certain ones costing of tens of thousands of pounds. In fact it is only the Labour and Conservative Group offices, that cost tens of thousands of pounds, to run; £130,000 and £80,000 respectively. Could he please apologise to me?

Reply

I really don't like the implication of the question that a serious public servant is lying. Just to be clear her and her colleagues were not elected as UKIP councillors, but their allowances, the value of their Town Hall office space, their phones, computers their staff, also the cost in officer time in answering all their questions, enquiries, their baseless calls to sack staff, amounts to tens of thousands of pounds. She should think about that for a moment rather than complaining about other people allegedly lying.

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