

Merton Council

Council

**Council Questions updated including Supplementary Qus
raised at the meeting**

18 November 2015

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Agenda Item 5

Council 18 November 2015

Public questions

Procedure

The Mayor will call your name and ask if you have a supplementary question arising from the answer you have received.

If you do not have a supplementary question then simply respond thank you, no.
If you do have a supplementary question respond thank you, yes. You will be shown to a seat in the chamber where you will ask your supplementary question. Make sure you use the microphone.

Having put your question, please be seated whilst the Cabinet member responds. Once the response has been given, please return to your seat in the public gallery. The questions and answers and all supplementary questions and replies will be published on Merton's website after the meeting.

PUBLIC QUESTIONS RECEIVED FOR COUNCIL 18 NOVEMBER

1). From Andrew Boyce To the Cabinet Member for Finance

Question:

To detail the number of communications staff employed by the Council including the total staffing cost and their respective roles?

Reply

There are currently 4 Communications staff employed by the council at a staffing cost of £197,759 on communications. Two vacant posts will be cut at the end of this financial year. A further post will be cut in 2018/19 leaving 3 posts responsible for delivering communications for the council.

The four staff currently in post are a Head of Communications, two Senior Communications Officers (one responsible for media and one responsible for marketing) and one Communications Officer who works across both marketing and media.

The budget agreed by the previous Conservative administration in 2010 allowed for £283,591 in spending on communications staff, with the council having a total of 9 Communications staff at that time.

Supplementary Question

After giving examples of questions from other members of the public by Twitter, Mr Boyce asked:

Can the Cabinet Member explain why, at an average yearly cost of £49,000 per staff member, why can no communications team member find the time to respond to queries on Twitter when that is their chosen method of contacting the council? Ellen Tweets this morning, 'it's a great idea, and it's infuriating that they don't respond to Tweets'.

Reply

I would remind Mr Boyce that we have a small communications team who work extraordinarily hard at getting the messages out, for example about the refuse collection service at Christmas, about the attempts we're making to tackle litter by fining people who litter. If he would like to report problems to the council there are ways of doing that. Twitter is not a good way of doing that because it doesn't report into the person who is doing it and you can't log the problem and you can't progress the problem. You also cannot stay in touch with the person who has reported it. I would ask Mr Boyce and the people he is on Twitter with to report things to the council in the appropriate way.

**2). From Diane Neil-Mills
To the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration**

Question:

Is it (a) lawful and (b) deemed acceptable by Merton Council for the officer's report and recommendation on a particular planning application, contained in the Planning Applications Agenda, to be drafted and publicly distributed before the public consultation period for that particular planning application has closed?

Reply

The planning applications committee makes decisions on the basis of all the information submitted and received. Provided all consultees responses are fully considered within the relevant timescales and the decision makers (PAC) are made aware of all those responses, then Committee may resolve to decide such applications. There may be rare occasions when reports are drafted and circulated and there is an overlap so the consultation period goes slightly beyond the date the formal agenda is issued. However, any additional responses are provided either through late material or letter circulations to ensure members are fully aware of all responses at the time of the decision. Legally decisions can be made on that basis. Officers are also able to review any such cases and change the recommendation at any time up until the date of Committee should any fresh material considerations be raised that are considered to significantly impact on the previous recommendation.

Government policy requires the council to demonstrate it is using best endeavours to progress all applications and delays can result in appeals and potential awards of costs against the council if those delays are considered to be unreasonable. So far as I am aware, the approach to these matters has not changed since Diane Neil-Mills was herself the cabinet member.

**3). From Daniel Goode
To the Cabinet Member for Environment Cleanliness and Parking**

Question:

Why is it that Merton Council's litter code is not being applied across the whole borough, given that some areas of Morden Hall Road and Ravensbury Park are regularly not swept and were recently left uncleaned for four and a half weeks?

Reply

At present roads in Merton are defined, for the purposes of the Environmental Protection Act 1990, as either zone 1 (daily/continuous sweep) or Zone 3 (weekly sweep residential and industrial areas). However there will be times during the year when we need to concentrate our resources in particular areas and in order to

maximise efficiency and reduce the cost to the taxpayer we utilise resources where they are most needed often on a reactive basis.

Morden Hall Road and Ravensbury Park would not have been left unattended for this length of time, however sometimes a road will deteriorate quickly in spite of regular attendance by street cleansing staff.

Autumn is now with us and the leaves are falling. Our 220,000 street trees in Merton mean there are a lot of leaves around to clear up. As the leaves start to fall, our resources are realigned so we are able to focus on clearing the leaves from the streets where there are most trees. We're expecting to sweep up over 100 tonnes of leaves over the coming months. Our crews have been making their way around the borough's 1,600 roads over the last few weeks and will continue until the leaf fall season is over.

**4). From Maurice Groves
To the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration**

Question:

Please can you let me know the distribution of Road Accidents in Merton 2014/15?
Are there any Hot Spots?

Reply

In terms of distribution our accident data shows that many of the accidents take place at junctions. The key hotspots are often at major signalised junctions throughout the borough. The Council has an annual Local Safety Programme which involves analysing accidents and devising the appropriate engineering solution to address common contributory factors. Our Local safety programme also includes softer measures such as training.

Supplementary Question

How many serious accidents are there, how many near-accidents and which locations have the largest amount of accidents?

Reply

It's a very detailed question and I will come back to you with the answer. The distribution of accidents happen predominantly at road junctions and we consider them on an annual basis and we look at a safety programme that analyses the accidents and their causes and then we seek any remedy that is appropriate. I gather you want the detail of where exactly serious accidents occur and close accidents – we will have to come back to you with that.

**5). From Tony Burton
To the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration**

Question:

To ask when Merton Council will publish the draft specification for future maintenance of the Borough's green spaces as promised by the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability & Regeneration and Director of Environment & Regeneration at a meeting with "Friends"?

Reply

The procurement of the parks and open space maintenance services is progressing well and to timetable. This procurement is utilising the competitive dialogue process which uses extensive discussions and dialogue with bidders to develop the detailed approach and solutions that will ultimately be adopted in delivering the services.

The process begins with a high level "output based specification" which is then developed and amended through lengthy dialogue sessions with bidders. It was hoped that this high level output based specification could have been shared with Friends of Parks and Trade Unions already, however, legal advice has suggested that there is a risk to the procurement process in doing so and since Merton Council is only one party to the procurement process it has not been possible so far to release the document in the way first envisaged.

This is disappointing, however we continue to discuss this with the legal advisers and the other councils involved in order to identify a way in which we can provide the appropriate level of transparency.

**6). From Sandra Vogel
To the Cabinet Member for Environment Cleanliness and Parking**

Question:

Can the Council please provide, in square meters, the area of grass at Mitcham Fair Green before the current town centre works began, and the area of grass present today? For clarity this is the area bounded by Upper Green West and Upper Green East.

Reply

Sandra Vogel will be aware that when the scheme is completed there will be an expanded green space in the area of the Fair Green that will be fully registered as town green, so that this enlarged green space will be fully protected for future generations to enjoy.

At this current point in the works the figures are:

Mitcham Fair Green Before = 3220 sqm

New landscaped areas now including within granite walls, as completed Phase 1 = 2590 sqm

**7). From John Davis
To the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration**

Question:

Since gas works one-way system was introduced in Morden Road, traffic turning from Mitcham jams all London Road traffic. Traffic-light timing sequencing has not changed. Why cannot controllers set lights to prevent such jams & what Council/TfL enforcement controls monitor ensuing noxious fumes + particulates build-up?

Reply

The traffic management plan for these works was jointly agreed by Merton and TfL as it affects both road networks. The diversionary route for traffic coming from Mitcham and turning right across London Road into Morden Road is one-way and should therefore have no effect on traffic using London Road. This has been monitored since the works started and therefore there has been no need to change the traffic signal phases at the London Road/ Morden Road junction.

However, we will continue to monitor this until the expected completion date of 17 December. The works are currently on target and we have warned SGN that an extension will not be granted unless there are extreme circumstances. No vehicular pollution monitoring is required as part of these works as the diversionary route is not exceeding its potential capacity.

**8). From Hamna Qureshi
To the Cabinet Member for Children's Services**

Please can you advise me of the number of Children in Merton Care and how many Safeguarding issues you have had in 2014/15?

Reply

The following data relating to looked after children and children subject to safeguarding concerns are sourced from DfE statutory returns for the financial year 2014-2015:

Children in Care

There were 157 Looked After Children as at the 31st March 2015. During the year 2014-15, 107 children started a period of care and 105 children ceased a period of care.

Safeguarding

A total of 177 children had a Child Protection Plan as at the 31st March 2015. During the year 2014-15, 226 children became subject of a Child Protection (CP) Plan and 231 children ceased being subject of a CP Plan.

**9). From Owen Morris
To the Cabinet Member for Environment Cleanliness and Parking**

Question:

Can you please sweep the pavements of the roads around South Park Gardens SW19 (Effra Road esp.), as the build-up of leaves is considerable (and dangerous)?

Reply

Yes, although we are focusing on clearing the leaves from the streets where there are most trees. South Park gardens and roads in this area are scheduled to be cleared of leaves in particular during week beginning 16 November 2015.

**10). From Tracy Wilson
To the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture**

Question:

With regards to the Ravensbury redevelopment & Merton regen, has Merton Council agreed in principle with the "needs plus one" provision in the resident's offer for rehousing from CHMP, & if so, will they honour this in the future?

Reply

The Council works closely with CHMP to deliver housing solutions to tenants in housing need. The Council will continue to set the rules about matching family size to the right number of bedrooms in a tenants new home. Those rules will be exactly the same as they are now, and they are unaffected by the regeneration plans and are set out in the Councils published housing allocations policy. The Council and CHMP are required to make best use of available housing resources and will take into account the option for families and individuals who are currently under occupying their property to have an extra bedroom above their needs in their new home.

**11). From Doll Lambourne
To the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration**

Question:

Will Merton Council gift or sell the Ravensbury garages site to CHMP or others for redevelopment BEFORE the Merton regen plans have undergone all three stages of the Local Plan consultation by future Merton and any review, possibly by the Secretary of State?

Reply

Although CHMP are looking at planning applications for the Ravensbury Garages site, the site will not be considered for disposal until such time as the Council has agreed and concluded consultation on a Development Plan Document (Estates Plan) and this has been approved by the council and been through a public enquiry by an independent planning inspector.

**12). From Christopher Holt (Chair, Ravensbury Residents Association)
To the Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member for Community and Culture**

Question:

Following polls by Ravensbury Residents Association failing to agree with results of the CHMP-commissioned survey, will Merton Council pledge to continue with all stages of the future Merton local plan consultation & properly reveal all opinions of residents, PRIOR to Merton regen getting further approval from Merton Council?

Reply

Councillors will reach their own conclusions on all the evidence at the appropriate time of the views of residents.

On 09 July 2014 Merton Council made several resolutions relating to exploring Circle Housing Merton Priory's proposals for regeneration on the three estates of Eastfields, High Path and Ravensbury, including to explore what the regenerated estates could look like by progressing with a planning document (known as an Estates Local Plan) in consultation with residents and others.

Between September and November 2014 the council consulted residents on the first stage of the Estates Local Plan to ascertain the extent to which residents and stakeholders wanted the change and to identify what the important issues, opportunities and concerns were. Nearly 300 responses were received and published.

On 12 October 2015 the council received a letter from CHMP confirming that their board decision was as follows:

“Circle Housing Merton Priory and Circle’s Management Board has approved the preparation of planning applications for the first phases of the Merton Regeneration Project, subject to reaching a mutually satisfactory agreement with the London Borough of Merton on aspects of the Stock Transfer Agreement which impact on the regeneration project”

Now the council needs to fully understand the housing, financial, legal and planning implications of what Circle Housing has agreed and the associated opportunities and impacts arising from this in order to ensure that residents remain at the heart of the project and get the best outcome.

Officers are therefore not recommending that the second consultation on the council’s draft Estates Local Plan should start until Cabinet has been advised what Circle Housing Merton Priory’s decision on regeneration means for residents and the council. This consultation will be brought to Cabinet and Council for decision only at that time.

There are no legal limitations on when planning applications can be submitted to the council. The council is required to undertake public consultation on submitted planning applications and consider all consultation feedback received to inform subsequent determination of applications.

**13). From Sam Peacock
To the Leader of the Council**

Question:

Can you list or bullet point below the actions and steps you have taken so far to protect the interests of residents being affected by regeneration, specifically for the private tenants, freeholders, leaseholders living across High Path, to ensure we are not 'socially cleansed' out of the area?

Reply

In September 2014, the council jointly signed up to a list of 10 commitments with Circle Housing Merton Priory to protect the interests of residents and ensure residents get the best out of any regeneration proposals for the three estates. These commitments are as follows:

1. Circle Housing Merton Priory will consult with residents, consider their interests at all times, and address concerns fairly.
2. Current homeowners will be entitled to at least the market value of their home should they wish to take the option to sell their home to Circle Housing Merton Priory.
3. Current tenants will be entitled to be rehoused in a new home of appropriate size considering the number of people in the household.
4. Existing Circle Housing Merton Priory tenants will keep all their rights and have the same tenancy agreement, including rent levels, in the new neighbourhood as they do now.

5. All new properties will be more energy efficient and easier to heat than existing properties, helping to keep down residents' fuel bills.
6. Circle Housing Merton Priory will keep disruption to a minimum, and will do all it can to ensure residents only move once if it is necessary to house them temporarily while their new home is being built.
7. Circle Housing Merton Priory will offer extra help and support for older people and/or disabled residents throughout the regeneration works.
8. Circle Housing Merton Priory will continue to maintain the homes of residents across the three neighbourhoods throughout the planning process until regeneration starts, including ensuring a high quality responsive repairs service.
9. Any growth in the number of homes will be in accordance with the Council's Development Plan so that it is considered, responsible and suitable for the area.
10. As a not for profit organisation, Circle Housing Merton Priory will not profit from any regeneration and will use any surplus to provide more housing or improve existing neighbourhoods.

The Council continues to ensure that these commitments are upheld in all of our discussions with CHMP.

If the regeneration does proceed, the Council would expect all residential freeholders, leaseholders and Circle Housing tenants living on the High Path to be offered a suitable and better home on the High Path. Private sector tenants' rights are, in any event, far more circumscribed and as the current law stands the Council can offer them no more and no less support and protection than it is able to offer the many other private sector tenants in the borough.

**14). From: Cypren Edmunds Chair/Treasurer: High Path Community Association
To the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture**

Question:

CHMP have consulted residents regarding their proposed Regeneration and passed this via their board, is it not remiss to not advise on a similar level to service providers? I say this because NHS's MCCG has had no involvement and we are concerned about the plans of an increase of density.

Reply

In accordance with relevant requirements the council will consult with a number of statutory consultees, including NHS England, Local Director of Public Health and Merton Clinical Commissioning Group, on any submitted Planning Application and regeneration proposals.

**15). From Ann Baldwin
To the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture**

Question:

As Merton Council agreed to further delay the decent home programme across the three estates affected by Merton regen?

Reply

There is currently a temporary suspension in place with regards to delivering decent homes on the three estates. This suspension comes to an end on 8 January 2016 and there is no plan to extend this at this time. The Council will work with CHMP on the most appropriate means to achieve the decent home programme on the three estates.

16). From Omer Ali

To the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Question:

Should CHMP submit a planning application for regeneration on High Path, then what will be the criterias used to assess this?

Reply

The statutory Development Plan for Merton is currently the Mayor's London Plan 2015 (for all London boroughs), Merton's Core Planning Strategy 2011 and Merton's Sites and Policies Plan 2014. Any planning applications submitted currently would be considered against the policies within these plans.

The council is proposing an Estates Plan (a Development Plan Document) specifically to guide future development on Eastfields, High Path and Ravensbury.

If a planning application were to be submitted after the adoption of the council's Estates Plan, the council would use the Estates Plan and the other parts of the Development Plan listed above to help determine planning applications in these areas.

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PRIORITY QUESTIONS FOR COUNCIL 18 NOVEMBER 2015

Ordinary Questions

Councillor Tobin Byers to the Leader of the Council

Could the Leader outline the work undertaken over the last few years to make the council a more efficient and business like organisation and the role of the trade unions in this endeavour?

Reply

Over the past few years there has been significant changes in the organisation both in the response to reductions in funding from central government and the review and modernising of services by exploring different delivery models, increase in partnership working and ultimately reduction in workforce.

To support the changes the Council has introduced Shared Services, (HR, Legal, Regulatory Services, Audit, Pensions, and Investigations) and partnership working such as South London Waste Partnership. To enable the Council to continuously improve it has adopted the Target Operating Model (TOM) and will incorporate channel shifting through the review of Customer Contact. Forecasting medium and long term savings (4 years) allows a strategic approach to budgeting and business planning.

By adopting the above models there have been economies of scales savings which has benefitted both the organisation and service users/customers.

By working with the Trades Union we have been able to consult with our staff through collective bargaining, used one central point of contact thus saving management time and resources, been able to resolve employment issues prior to costly litigation, and been open to challenge on management decisions where sometimes a better solution can be found. There has also been active engagement by our trade unions in Departmental Consultative Committees (DCCs) which monitor, inform and resolve specific departmental emerging themes such as health & safety, equalities, new legislation, and priorities such as sickness, use of temporary workers and workforce development.

Through our relationship with the Trades Unions we have jointly promoted health days, staff surveys and employee development. The TUs are a particularly useful conduit for our manual staff which make up about a third of the workforce.

Supplementary Question

Would the Leader join me in acknowledging good industrial relations in improving productivity and efficiency in Merton and would he confirm his opposition to the anti-democratic and anti-business Tory Trade Union bill?

Reply

As a former member of the GMB and a former member of the National Union of Journalists I agree with Councillor Byers that the trade unions do a very important job here in Merton. Because of our good relations with the trade unions we are able

to consult fully and in an efficient manner with our staff on issues such as service reorganisations and our target operating models. This has allowed us to maintain our services in challenging times. As a businessman myself I know how central good industrial relations are in ensuring productivity and good morale amongst the work force. I am therefore utterly amazed at the government of the side opposite wants to go ahead with the Trade Union Bill, a very nasty, mealy-mouthed piece of legislation which fundamentally misunderstands the business case for trade unions. It puts a cap on facility time which will impact on our ability to consult our staff about changes we want to implement. Just think on this for a minute everyone. Even those staff who buy a bicycle through their pay packet will not be able to pay their union through that same method. I commit to Councillor Byers that in Merton we will continue to be business like to value the staff who work so hard to provide services to our residents. Mr Mayor I can therefore confirm to him that Merton will continue to seek it's own locally agreed industrial relations strategy we will take every measure possible to maintain its autonomy with regard to facility time and the continued use of 'check off' for the collection of union subs Mr Mayor.

Councillor Michael Bull to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture:

Has the full independent Savills report on the investigation into Keepmoat's record of failure on Circle Housing repairs and maintenance been published yet and is it open to inspection?

Reply

Circle Housing Merton Priory have released a report summarising the results of the Savills' investigation. The report can be found at <http://www.circle.org.uk/~media/7BBCC788C31147D38635EA6BF89064DD.pdf>

CHMP have taken the decision not to release the full Savills' report.

Supplementary Question

It is disappointment that this report has not yet been released. Circle residents deserve transparency in the way in which this provider manages its stock. If Circle will not be open and transparent with residents on its record of repairs how can it be trusted to be open, transparent accountable and reliable during the proposed regeneration of the Eastfields, High Path and Ravensbury estates?

Reply

It's really sad that Circle have chosen to release only the small report. We have no legal powers to force them to produce anything extra. I can't really answer your question because it is rhetorical. All I can tell you is that, as far as repairs are concerned, we work incredibly hard to get a decent service from Circle. As far as regeneration is concerned for leaseholders we are working incredibly hard there as well. As far as the regeneration project is concerned we are working hard to make sure what they are doing is good for the people of Merton.

Councillor Linda Kirby to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance

Could the Cabinet Member comment on the work he and officers are doing to bring forward a balanced budget for agreement by full council in March, despite the 40% cut to local government funding since 2010?

Reply

The council has established a medium term approach to financial planning. This means that work on balancing the 2016/17 budget started some years ago. Officers prepare budget reduction options for member consideration 3 to 4 years in the future. This means that a substantial portion of the work required to be completed in setting the next years budgets has already been completed. The budget process aims to protect front line services especially the social care received by vulnerable groups by focussing savings on the back office and services for the less vulnerable

Supplementary Question

I would like to know how the Cabinet Member feels officers will face the additional 30% cuts and how this will impact when we have already been working hard to bring in that balanced budget.

Reply

If these reports are correct a further 30% of cuts are coming in and will have a big impact for our residents. The trouble is the government are so out of touch they don't understand that, the Prime minister, himself, might think that council's like his own, in Tory controlled Oxfordshire won't have to make a single cut. But all of us who work on the coal face of local government, knows that he does not know what he is talking about This is a business- like council but if the government don't understand that cutting money means cutting services it is going to be harder and harder for councils like ours to provide services. I hope they listen.

Councillor Hamish Badenoch to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:

A number of residents have contacted me with concerns about the frequent road works in Copse Hill and the damage being done to it and surrounding roads as a result of the development of the Atkinson Morley site. Can the Cabinet member confirm what action the council is taking to minimise disruption to residents and to ensure that the developers compensate and repair any damage done to these roads?

Reply

We have worked very closely with all Utility Companies and the developer to minimise any disruption by co-ordinating their works thereby reducing the requirement and impact of traffic management.

We were aware that some damage to the road had been caused by emergency utility works but these were repaired at no cost to the Council. There are still some

connections to be undertaken and these will be monitored and enforced to ensure that any further damage caused will be repaired by those responsible.

There is a legal agreement between the council and the developer to ensure that any damage caused by works associated with this site is made good at their expense. Any defects that arise within a 12-month period following completion will also be repaired at their expense. The council also holds a financial bond to ensure that the road and footway is left in a safe condition following completion.

Supplementary Question

The Cabinet Member's response was genuinely helpful and I will be able to share it with residents and I know they will be pleased. As a follow up, since the council has signed up to the London Permit Scheme in 2013 how many fines have been issued to utility companies and building contractors to enforce compliance and will the council commit more generally to increased enforcement on roadworks across the borough?

Reply

I don't have the information but I am sure we can provide it. In terms of enforcement it's not all about fines but about relationships and I am sure it's the same with environment issues throughout the country.

Councillor Imran Uddin to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Cleanliness and Parking

Could the Cabinet Member outline how she is working to combat the problem of people who choose to litter our streets?

Reply

There are a number of steps we are taking which seek to balance providing the right opportunities to dispose of litter properly alongside actions to tackle those individuals who choose to break the law.

In April 2014 the council started work with specialists in enviro-crime enforcement to undertake a 6 week education and awareness programme advising residents of the impact of littering, including cigarette butts. This was focused around our town centres and station. Following the education initiative these specialist enforcement officers started issuing Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN) for littering offences.

We have invested in anti-litter campaigns over a number of years including investing in litter bins with ash trays and in the roll out of new gum and butt bins across our town centres. We are hopeful that through on-going provision of suitable bins, continued education and enforcement, the numbers of FPNs issued will reduce. Our intention is to prevent litter in the first place and satisfy the demands of our residents.

Flytipping often causes litter and we are taking strong and decisive action including three successful prosecutions in the Magistrates Court in the past week, serving to

send a clear message that the council will not tolerate those who seek to despoil our borough.

In addition we have recently piloted a wheeled bin service which has shown a significant improvement in litter reduction and street cleanliness.

Supplementary Question

Can I congratulate the cabinet Member of the three successful prosecutions for fly-tippers through the courts and can she tell us how she intends to continue this good work.

Reply

I am delighted we have been able to prosecute fly-tippers. Fly tipping is something I receive a lot of information about through Twitter and emails. These prosecutions were done through our enforcement officers gathering intelligence and they continue to do that. Going back to working with residents, there was an area in Mitcham I cannot name and shame because we are still going through the process of it, but I myself went down there to investigate it and got some evidence myself. I ask that if your residents get in touch with you, or if you yourselves see anything anywhere please photograph it and pass it to our officers – that's how we can catch these people and that's the only way we are going to solve this problem.

Councillor Peter Southgate to the Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure:
Who approved the business plan for the inaugural Classics in the Park event, and what profit was it forecast to make?

Reply

THIS QUESTION WILL BE ANSWERED BY THE CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND REGENERATION

The Business Plan was developed by the Commercial Manager working with staff in Parks and Communications / marketing and was signed off by the Director of Environment and Regeneration with the Parks and Greenspaces manager, in consultation with the Cabinet Member. It is an approach that is line with other councils as many local authorities seek ways to develop new income streams in the light of government cuts. No profit was built into the 2015/16 budget at the start of the year as this event was in addition to those planned and budgeted for. A surplus was anticipated of c£80k and built into budget forecasts after the event was planned.

To date our commercial event management has been confined to the annual fireworks display. The Classics in the Park event was a pilot project as part of our efforts to protect services from cuts by increasing income in other areas. Lessons have been learned from this first event, not least that developing new income streams will be difficult and may require initial outlays and losses over time before the skills and experience are developed to build up a successful commercial event management service. With the significant financial challenges this government has

landed local councils with, we cannot afford to be overly risk averse in terms of developing alternatives to cuts, but at the same time neither can we afford to put money into ideas that are impractical and unlikely to work. We are therefore looking in detail at the lessons learned from this pilot and incorporating them in any future proposals.

Supplementary Question

Can the cabinet member agree with me on two points: one is that Wimbledon Park is not Kenwood, as much as we might love it and second one is that a business plan that manages to turn a forecast surplus of £80000 into a loss of £78000 demonstrates a rather reckless approach to risk management which we simply can't afford in our constrained circumstances.

Reply

I would say that we don't take reckless decisions. Events in Parks in the future I believe will be a very important means for gaining income for this council in the future. We have been developing experience of that, we have to take measured decisions - we have to weigh up all the risks and sometimes we won't succeed but you have to speculate to accumulate and I believe we can learn the lesson from this concert and hold events that are well prepared and do much better financially in the future.

Councillor David Williams to the Cabinet Member for Finance:

The council's field study centre, Stouthall, on the Gower peninsular was closed by the Labour administration as from September 1998. Only within the last 12 months has the property now been subleased to Carreg Adventure. In the interim the Council has paid over £1 million in revenue and capital costs to keep it empty. Do these sub leases of the property and woodland cover the cost of the original lease and, if not, by what margin is the council subsidising a private enterprise? Also, how long is the remaining lease on Stouthall and its grounds and what is the length of these sub leases?

Reply

Councillor Williams will be well versed with Stouthall, having been Leader of the Council from 2006-2010 when he failed to make any income at all from Stouthall (the lease for which was which was transferred to the council back in the 1990s as a result of the closure of the old Inner London Education Authority under the previous Conservative government). Thankfully this current administration has managed to sub-let the property which goes some way to re-couping our costs and we are making a saving of £156,000 compared to previous years.

As Councillor Williams is aware, having recently asked the same question of officers and been given the following response on 10 September 2015, the main lease which is for the buildings and some land expires on 1st January 2024.

The lease of the adjoining woodland expires on 1st April 2025.

Under the subleases the sub tenant is responsible for:

- Internal decoration and repairs.
- Maintaining the grounds (excluding removal of knotweed).
- Reimbursing the insurance premium.
- Reimbursing the rent (currently £16,500 p.a. for the main lease and £1,900 p.a. for the land adjoining) subject to a rent free period of three years.

The shortfall is therefore £18,400 pa for the first three years subject to any external repairs and decoration costs required during the remainder of the term plus costs of removing knotweed at £12,000 pa

The Council will remain responsible for external decoration and repairs to the main building (including the boundary walls and fences) but as major refurbishment has recently been completed the liability should not be great. In addition the Council no longer has the liability for security, grounds maintenance and mains services and gas. The budget saving is £25,000 for this year but will increase when the knotweed is resolved and the rent free period ends. The total spend last year was £187,000. Compared to this figure the saving is £156,000.

Supplementary Question

Normally I would thank the Cabinet Member for the reply, but I don't welcome his typical bucket of sarcasm for putting a matter of public expenditure on public record. Over a million pounds has been spent since it was closed in 1988 and there is no hint of regret in his reply that a whole generation of Merton school children were locked out of Stouthall while it remained empty. Does the Cabinet Member agree with me that the charity Friends of Stout Hall chaired with Chris Lockman should have been given the opportunity to run Stout Hall on a non for profit basis as they sought to do?

Reply

I apologise for any for my sarcasm. It is interesting to hear about Stouthall because it was transferred from ILEA to Merton and they lumbered us with a centre that was not well used. He spent four years leading the council and in all that time he could not find a single tenant. Well this administration has, and we will be saving more than £150,000 a year compared to previous years. If you want a business like council, look this side of the chamber because we all remember what it was like under him.

Councillor Katy Neep for the Leader of the Council

Does he welcome the recent letter from the all party Children and Young People's scrutiny panel to the Chancellor asking him to think again in relation to his proposed tax credit cuts?

Reply

I very much welcome the letter the cross party Children and Young People's panel have sent to the Chancellor in relation to his decision to cut tax credits. This is a great example of the importance of Scrutiny in Merton and I commend the panel for standing up for our Merton residents who will be affected by this nasty cut to the livelihoods of working families.

Supplementary Question

I am sure that the Children and Young People's panel will welcome the Leader's support for our letter and we have our fingers crossed that we get a response. Would he agree with me that these cuts to tax credits will hit working families hardest and will undermine the commitment to make work pay?

Reply

I entirely agree with you that the cuts to working tax credits will hit working families hardest and will undermine the commitment to making work pay. In applauding Councillor Neep for Chairing and her work on the CYP panel, I also want to salute those members of CYP who sit opposite who have chosen to graciously question their own chancellor's plans on the cuts to tax credits. Can I also add that this letter clearly shows that our scrutiny processes here in Merton are so robust to lead to the drafting of this letter to HM Treasury, reminding him to do all he can to make work pay.

Councillor David Dean to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:

Where is Merton's food waste processed?

Reply

As part of the South London Waste Partnership Merton is contracted with Viridor Waste Ltd for the disposal of food waste.

This waste stream is processed/composted by Agrivert Ltd at their facility in Surrey. The address is as follows: West London AD Facility, Trumps Farm, Kitsmead Lane, Surrey, KT16 0EF.

Supplementary Question

I am not sure why we cannot have food waste processed here in Mitcham for example. We could have it processed in Willow Lane industrial estate as it used to be. Can we get this back inside the SLWP as per guidelines?

Reply

This is out of our control, it is a subcontractor of Viridor and the former Conservative Cabinet Member agreed the contract in 2008 with all its provisions. When we have

an opportunity to revise those contracts in the future we will certainly do so. Viridor has always had our food waste contracts, but when the phase 8 contracts commenced in 2008, they initially subcontracted to vertile in Mitcham. However, it is said by Viridor that vertile imposed a minimum fee per tip which made the arrangements financially unsustainable and they put in place alternative arrangements with another sub-contractor Agrivert. At the moment we have no recourse because of that contract in 2008.

Councillor Ross Garrod to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance

Would the Cabinet Member agree that his decision to continue with the council tax support scheme which ensures low paid residents in Merton continue to pay the same rate of council tax that they did before this government's 10% cut to the funding for this benefit helps make work pay for Merton residents?

Reply

Despite the government's decision in 2012 to cut the funding for the council tax support scheme for people on low incomes by 10%, in Merton we decided not to implement this government cut and we have kept council tax low for all our residents, including those on low incomes. We have managed to protect Merton's low paid and poorest residents by continuing to implement the council tax support scheme as if the old council tax benefit scheme had continued. This decision means the poorest residents have not faced higher council tax bills since the introduction of localised council tax support schemes in April 2013 unlike those in many London boroughs and particularly some of our neighbouring boroughs. It also means that some residents still do not have to pay any council tax at all.

More than 3,000 working households will benefit from this decision which supports low paid working Merton residents and continues to do so.

Supplementary Question

Given the Tory government's 10% cut, to council tax benefit and their intention to cut tax credits, both of which help working families to make work pay, in addition to their assault on workers' rights, would he agree that the Tory party are making it much more difficult for hard working residents in Merton to stay in employment?

Reply

I agree. The government always say we are in this together, but we know this isn't true. While they cut taxes for millionaires at the same time as they are cutting credits for low paid working families. By reducing the support they are giving councils for council tax discounts they are hurting hundreds of thousands of working families and they should be ashamed.

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7a) Strategic Theme: Councillors questions

Councillor Marsie Skeete to the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities

Given recent press coverage of increases in violent crime in London, could the Cabinet Member clarify whether crime overall has gone up in Merton over the last 12 months?

Reply

Crime as recorded by Total Notifiable Offences reported to the Police has increased in Merton over the last 12 months. However, there has been a larger increase in reported crime across London so that compared to the level of the London wide rise Merton remains one of the safest boroughs in the capital.

Supplementary Question

While Merton continues to be one of the safest boroughs, crime has started to increase in Merton. Does she therefore think that this is the right time for the Mayor of London to cut neighbourhood policing ever further and with no proposal to do away with all the PCSOs in London.

Reply

I do not agree this is the right time for the Mayor of London to cut police teams and also the proposals to take away PCSOs. We all know we live in a dangerous society. We all know what happened last Friday, we have to be very mindful. We as politicians have to make decisions for the safety of our residents. It was very good to see Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe making a speech on Friday about ensure our policing must be fit for purpose and I don't support with the Mayor's proposed reductions.

Councillor John Bowcott to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:

I and many Village residents are certain that people live permanently in vehicles parked on the Causeway. What rights do they have to do this and what is the Council's attitude towards it?

Reply

No one has the right to live within a vehicle parked on the public highway. We are working with the Metropolitan Police to agree the best course of action to remove any vehicles that are being used in this way. We shall be taking appropriate legal action once satisfied that we have the evidence and we have completed the appropriate checks as per the protocol.

An intervention that the Council is currently investigating is the introduction of the appropriate parking management which will address this problem on a more permanent basis at this location as well as addressing the needs of visitors and ensuring access at all times.

Supplementary Question

How long does it take to be satisfied, for instance, to know that a smoking chimney is part of a home and not a dangerous fire – presumably requiring different treatment.

Reply

It depends on the circumstances and Councillor Bowcott has given us some close detail for consideration and he should be advising ourselves and the Met Police on the evidence we have to consider that before we take legal action.

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

Could she outline the work Merton does with the police and other partners to ensure that residents are kept safe in the event of a terrorist attack or public order and other emergencies?

Reply

Local planning and co-ordination is developed and tested through the Borough Resilience Forum (BRF) which is a statutory body under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. All local emergency services partners along with health, transport and Merton emergency planning representatives meet regularly to review and assess both London and local risks and ensure we understand and have the ability to co-ordinate our response to any local incidents. Local hazards and risk are also exercised and tested with BRF members and council staff.

The BRF has recently completed an assurance assessment for all partners against all the London plans and frameworks.

In addition as part of the sub-regional planning programme the BRF and council staff participate in testing London plans three times a year to ensure a broader understanding of and co-ordination requirements for the London wide plans. The last workshop on 5th November in fact tested the London Marauding Firearms Attack (MFA) scenario with council and emergency services colleagues from the five south west boroughs.

Merton also participates in the two annual Pan London exercises: Exercise Preparer and Exercise Safer City, the latter of which includes activation of the Borough Emergency Control Centre and co-ordination of council responses to requests for assistance from emergency services.

Also, the council's statutory Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (Safer Merton) works with public, voluntary and community and business organisations to develop crime and disorder audits and implement strategies to reduce crime and disorder.

Annually Safer Merton undertakes a Strategic Assessment to identify and interpret the summary findings of intelligence analysis and assist the partnership in identifying the major issues within the local area, to allow resources to be allocated and activities prioritised in a safety plan for the borough.

The council works with partners (particularly the Police) to assess potential risks to the borough's residents and through the Safer and Stronger Thematic partnerships has implemented plans for numerous matters including; Counter Terrorism, Domestic Violence and Abuse, Sexual Violence, Hate Crime, Reducing Re-Offending and Anti-Social Behaviour.

The partnership has worked with the Faith and Belief Forum to identify potential rest places and given the representatives counter-terrorism awareness training. Proposals are also being developed to provide counter- terrorism awareness to front-line staff.

Supplementary Question

We feel a great affinity with the people of Paris at this time given what has happened. It is in the Guardian recently they discussed that neighbourhood policing is the eyes and ears of counter-terrorism. What is his view?

Reply

We are all thinking of the people of Paris. Paris like London is one of the world's great cities and security is obviously paramount. Clearly the neighbourhood policing has a role to play in tackling issues such as terrorism and at the moment our thoughts are rightly with victims of last Friday. We will be working to ensure neighbourhood policing will remain a high priority in Merton.

Councillor David Simpson to the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities:

In just one year the new London only approach for recruitment into the Met Police has seen the number of recruits from minority ethnic backgrounds more than double across London and female recruits increase from a quarter to a third. Can the Cabinet Member tell me the number of new recruits that have come to Merton as a result of the Mayor of London's successful, new recruitment policy?

Reply

New recruits are defined by the Met as probationary officers in their first two years of service. Merton has 108 probationary officers who started in the last two years. Of these probationary officers, 13 are from ethnic minority backgrounds. This brings the level of BAME officers in Merton to just under 12% of the total number of officers, compared to the Merton population which is 37% BAME.

Unfortunately, the Mayor's plans to cut neighbourhood policing across London, including in Merton, demonstrate that recruitment campaigns will have little impact in

making residents feel safer if there are actually less frontline neighbourhood based police officers in place.

Supplementary Question

What steps has the administration taken over the past twelve months to encourage and incentivise Merton residents to step up to the plate and play their part in the safety of the community in which they live by volunteering to become special constables. How many more Merton residents have done so in the past year?

Reply

If you were at the AGM you would have seen there have been lots of volunteers, over 37 in each of the wards, who volunteer. This event it was well received by magistrates in the community who were here at that meeting.

Councillor Abigail Jones to the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities

Could she outline the number of Safer Neighbourhood ward specific officers in place in Merton in January 2010 compared to the number in place in January 2015.

Reply

It is my understanding that in 2010 each of the borough's 20 wards had 1 Police Sergeant, 2 Police Constables and 3 PCSOs ie 120 officers in total. Currently, the allocation in 2015 is 20 Police Constables and 20 PCSOs acting as Dedicated Ward Officers, ie 40 officers in total. Further additional officers can be deployed to wards when required although they are not dedicated ward officers as was the case in 2010.

Supplementary Question

Given that Sir Bernard Hogan-Howell, Britain's most senior police officer, has stated in relation to the Mayor's plans to cut London's police force, we think that we can loose between 5000 and 8000 police officers. How does she think that will affect Merton's residents?

Reply

Councillor Jones is quite right, it will affect the safety of residents in Merton. I think we must vigorously oppose any government spending cuts that take police officers off our streets and affect our safety neighbourhood teams. Following last Friday, we should make sure we increase our police present across the borough.

Councillor Oonagh Moulton to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:

What is the administration's current policy on introducing and expanding 20's Plenty schemes in Merton in order to improve road safety, particularly in residential areas?

Reply

During 2014 the Council together with most other London boroughs as part of the London Environment Directors Network commissioned a review of policy and practice with regard to 20 mph speed limits and zones. In addition we looked at all existing 20 mph speed limit locations within the borough. The report also considered evidence and information drawn from across London and beyond. This was reported to the Scrutiny Commission and is included in the minutes of 11th November 2014: <http://democracy.merton.gov.uk/documents/s5967/20%20Mph%20Zones%20and%20limits.pdf>

The report concluded that 20 mph limits (ie 20 mph signs) have very limited impact on speed reduction. In fact it is only where physical interventions (humps, chicanes, etc) are implemented that driver behaviour changes significantly.

Excess speed is enforced by the police and we work closely with them to identify those locations where evidence supports the need for intervention. Road safety and the reduction of serious and fatal accidents is a priority and our scarce resources are applied to those locations where we identify the opportunity to reduce accidents with particular attention to those immediately outside schools.

Further detailed research into this whole subject is being undertaken by the Department for Transport however this is not expected to report for at least another 2 years.

Supplementary Question

I have recently been contacted by various residents about the 'twenty is plenty' schemes, particularly around Home Park Road and also Wimbledon Park School, when I asked at council I was told, 'the council is no longer introducing 20 mph speed limits and any proposed twenty mph zones need to be subject to the appropriate traffic calming measures'. The reality is that Home Park Road has road humps as to other neighbouring roads. Could he also in addition refer to this answer regarding the school because he says, 'particularly with attention to those outside schools'. Can we have a discussion on this?

Reply

I give that assurance we can have that meeting. I have seen Councillor Moulton's publicity that she shared in around the concerns of residents. In terms of limits I think the evidence is that without physical measures they are relatively ineffective and therefore we always seek physical measures to slow traffic down and if there are

already humps in certain roads then the presence of the hump should inevitably slow the vehicles down to 20 mph. If they are not, we need to look at that. What we would really like is to enforce 20 mph speed limits as a council and I would be quite willing to join with Councillor Moulton to have her colleagues to make this happen, to lobby government to give local authorities the ability to enforce 20mph limits as this would be the most effective means of reducing speed to 20 mph overnight.

Councillor Agatha Akyigyina to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Is the Cabinet Member concerned about increasing levels of knife crime amongst young people in London?

Reply

Whilst Merton continues to be one of the safest London borough's we are, of course, concerned about levels of knife crime in the capital. 14 young men have died this year as a result of knife crime in the capital and each one is someone's son, brother and friend. We are fortunate that the few knife related incidents we have had in the borough this year have not involved very serious injury. In a significant number of them the perpetrators and/or victims were not Merton residents. This is why we have been working closely with our Police and council colleagues in our neighbouring boroughs to tackle the issue together. In Merton our safer Schools officers, youth workers, gangs worker and wider CSF colleagues are working hard together to divert and deter young people from carrying knives. We believe that by working together we are making a difference and this is evidenced by our very low rate of young people entering the criminal justice system, and relatively low rates of serious youth crime. We will continue to work hard together to keep the borough safe for our young people.

Supplementary Question

Given the increasing level of knife crime in London, how can we keep our young people safe in the face of government cuts to policing?

Reply

Knife crime across London has increased with the tragic loss of 14 young lives this year. Thankfully in Merton the two recent stabbings weren't fatal. With the government cuts to policing how long can we ensure the safety of young people on our streets? We know that we can as a Local Authority but in all honesty it's just not the right time from all areas to be cutting back on police, we have to lobby this unfeeling Tory government hard and it is not the right time to be cutting back on policing in any shape or form.

Councillor Michael Bull to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:

Can the Cabinet Member detail what investigations have been made into road safety in Dundonald ward following the serious road accident involving an 11-year old boy on Dundonald Road on Wednesday 30 September?

Reply

Council officers have kept in contact with the police regarding their on-going investigations, although the investigating team are unable to release any information at this time regarding the accident.

A council officer and the Traffic Management Police Officer carried out a site investigation on 9th October 2015 and it was observed that vehicles did travel at slow speed on approach / exit at the roundabout; pedestrians were confident in crossing the road (at the roundabout at various arms); the road markings and signs are fully visible; our observations were between 3.00 and 4.30pm and there was no obstructive parking. The site assessment of the roundabout and the arms feeding into the roundabout concluded that there were no obvious physical improvements (in engineering terms) that could be applied. However, notwithstanding this, officers will be looking at any recommendations that the Investigating Police Officer may make following the completion of their investigation.

A *Theatre in Education* session was carried out at the school on 6th November 2015 regarding road safety and distraction on the road. It was well received by the pupils and the teachers. A council officer is liaising with the school, PCSOs and Year 6 tutors to undertake further targeted work on road safety which will include cycling.

Supplementary Question

I note the Cabinet Member believes not action is required at the junction on the recommendation from the police. At a meeting held by Dundonald councillors on 11th November, we can confirm this is not the view of residents. Will the Cabinet Member take into account residents' views from the meeting for improvements to be taken at the Dundonald grid to ensue road safety in this area.

Reply

We always take residents concerns into account around road safety, they are very important, but we have to base what we do on evidence. From the report we do not know how the accidents occur. So far we have carried out four investigations. The original accident occurred on 30th Sept and officers were on site on 9th October carrying out their observations and assessing the situation. That is as far as we can go at the current time. Beyond that we need to look at the report, which is quite detailed, the police officers who investigate road accidents are experts in training so they are able to assess the evidence and witness statements and attend shortly after the accident so they will reconstruct how the accident has occurred and then we will draw any lessons from that in taking appropriate measures.

Councillor Mary Curtin to the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities

Could she outline some of the work our Interfaith Forum undertakes to ensure

people of all faiths and none in the borough work together to build a safer stronger Merton?

Reply

The forum's membership is diverse and includes representatives from the Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu faiths. It also includes a representative of the British Association of Humanists. To reflect this, the forum is now known as the Faith and Belief Forum.

The forum and individual faith and belief organisations participate in numerous charitable acts including supporting the winter night shelter project for homeless people. Different venues host the shelter with faith groups taking turns to help out – Wimbledon Mosque organises food and volunteers when the Salvation Army Hall is used. Faith and Belief groups have also supported Food Banks, with the Morden Islamic Community Centre recently opening a new food bank open to all residents in the borough who are in need.

An important part of the Forum's calendar is the annual civic event to mark Holocaust Memorial Day on 27 January, which has included speakers from all faiths, as well as Holocaust survivors. It is an attempt to remember this terrible period in history, and other acts of genocide across the world, and make a stand against prejudice and discrimination today.

This year to mark Inter Faith Week 15-21 November the forum has arranged a Faith in the Media seminar (17 November), activities in the libraries and a community cohesion event called Diversi-tea (21 November). The latter event is being hosted by the Morden Islamic Centre and participants will be treated to different teas from across the globe and given an opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds. The Muslim Women of Morden are to be particularly commended for their efforts in working with council staff to organise these events.

Supplementary Question

Would the Cabinet Member join me in congratulating the emergency services in their response to the recent fire at the Batu Futu mosque and would she agree this was a heartening example of communities in Merton working together in times of need?

Reply

I support what you have said and congratulate the police and also the emergency services. We have great community cohesion in this section of the Borough and it was good to see the MP for Mitcham and Morden who gave her support and also the local churches in assisting the mosque in their time of need. We have to be proud of a borough for that community cohesion and I am pleased of the cross party working on this.