

Merton Council Council

13 July 2016

Supplementary agenda

22 Non priority questions and responses

1 - 8

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NON PRIORITY COUNCILLOR QUESTIONS COUNCIL MEETING –WEDNESDAY 13 JULY 2016

Councillor Peter McCabe to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Environment and Housing

Does the Cabinet Member think the residents of Grove Farm Court have been treated properly by Circle Housing Merton Priory regarding the recent repairs to their roof following storm damage?

Reply

The advice that we have received from Circle Housing Merton Priory is that the repair to the roof of Grove Farm Court was completed to time and they report that they have had no issues reported from tenants as a result of the completed works. On Easter Monday – 28 March 2016 – a resident in the top floor flat reported to the out-of-hours service that some tiles had become dislodged in the high winds. Their contractor went out to assess the problem and removed any loose debris. An order was placed on 4 April to reinstate and rebed the ridge tiles and other tiles that were dislodged, including the provision of scaffolding to access the area. The works were completed by 28 April and inspected by the Director of Property Services. The scaffold was taken down on Friday 29 April before the bank holiday weekend.

Councillor Suzanne Grocott to the Cabinet Member for Finance:

Further to the recent Cabinet and call in meetings, can the Cabinet Member confirm whether or not the sale of the Wimbledon theatre car park (P4) has now been completed (including the agreement of all legal terms and conditions)? If it has not, will the result of the EU referendum make any difference to the sale, and in particular to the price achieved?

Reply

Contracts are expected to exchange shortly however the sale of the P4 will not be completed until planning permission is obtained. A planning application is being prepared by the purchaser for submission shortly and completion is not anticipated before April 2017. The purchaser has confirmed that funding for the purchase has not been affected by the EU referendum. The price is also unaffected by the EU referendum.

Councillor Jeff Hanna to the Leader of the Council:

Will the Leader of the Council's advice to residents in the run up to the consultation on the level of Merton's council tax for 2017/18 be:

that there is no need to increase council tax because the Chancellor's cuts to local government are not so severe that they cannot be managed in a business-like way whilst continuing to freeze council tax, or

that the Chancellor's cuts have been and are seriously damaging to council services, and that a moderate increase in council tax can mitigate this damage and protect the most vulnerable?

Reply

I have made it clear that I will be consulting residents about the level of council tax that they pay in the autumn, and do not wish to prejudge the outcome. Until then, the Labour administration's position remains unchanged.

Councillor Suzanne Grocott to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Environment and Housing

What is the timetable for the development of the Wimbledon master plan and what engagement is planned with elected representatives and residents in the areas impacted?

Reply

The council is working closely with TFL and the Crossrail 2 team to assess alternative options for Wimbledon Station as well as understanding the emerging proposals for Raynes Park and Motspur Park. This work allows the council to consider the varying impacts of the options on Merton.

This work will conclude by late Autumn 2016, culminating in Crossrail 2's next consultation and the launch of the Future Wimbledon master planning process. The plan could take 18 months to complete.

The launch will be the start of the conversation with residents, businesses and landowners about how we shape the future development of Wimbledon and also, how we protect our heritage assets.

The timescale remains indicative for the master plan as the council awaits confirmation on funding from TfL & GLA.

Councillor Gilli Lewis-Lavender to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

It is widely accepted that there was a legacy that Merton Concert Band should be provided with free rehearsal facilities by the Council in recognition of their contribution to civic events such as Remembrance Day. Why then has the Band been kept in the dark and provided with very little information about whether any rehearsal space will continue to be offered by the Council after August when the Dundonald Rec pavilion is due to be demolished?

Reply

The Dundonald Recreation Ground pavilion that has been a rehearsal venue for the concert band for a number of years is due to be demolished later this year. It will be replaced by an entirely new building in a different location,

thereby providing an opportunity for the Council to review all relevant matters, including past historical arrangements for its use.

The primary purpose of the new building is to serve the needs of the local primary school adjacent and to support sport in the park, predominantly in the form of changing rooms.

In on-going correspondence between band representatives and the Greenspaces Manager over several months now, no guarantees have been provided to the band about the future access arrangements, indeed, the band was encouraged to seek alternative rehearsal facilities due to the disruption imposed by the on-site construction works, the demolition of their erstwhile rehearsal space and due to the on-going uncertainty about what use and users might be best located there given the competing demands.

Whilst recognising the good work they do, the historical connection with the old pavilion and its convenience for some band members, there are some new activities planned for the pavilion that, unlike the band, cannot reasonably or logistically occur in any alternative location, as they are directly linked to the school.

The Council needs first to consider all potential interests in the new pavilion and conclude which of these offers the best value overall, given that the demands for community space in that neighbourhood have traditionally been very high and are likely to be much higher when the brand new facilities are completed; officers will, however continue to work with the concert band to determine if the new facility can accommodate their requirements.

Councillor Najeeb Latif to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Can the Cabinet Member clarify how much control the Council will have in setting business rates on a local basis once the devolution process has been implemented in 2020? Can he also set out what approach the administration is planning to take to assist businesses across Merton once the Council has gained this greater control over business rates?

Reply

On 5 July 2016 the Government issued a consultation document “Self-sufficient local government: 100% Business Rates Retention” and a further document “Business Rates Reform Fair Funding Review: Call for Evidence on Needs and Redistribution.”

The deadline for responses to the consultation is 26 September 2016.

It is intended that the Government will continue to set the Business Rates multiplier and “propose the same system of revenue neutral revaluations with economic growth cancelled out through a change to the multiplier will continue to apply for the 100% business rates retention scheme. “ although “authorities will have additional flexibilities around the operation of the multiplier”.

The Government is required at the revaluation to reset the multiplier to ensure no more is raised in business rates. So if rateable values increase overall at the revaluation the multiplier will fall (and vice-versa). As a result, at the national level, any increase in the economic value of the tax base does not lead to any additional business rates income.

The Government has announced that the move to 100% business rates retention will be fiscally neutral. To ensure this, the main local government grants will be phased out and additional responsibilities will be devolved to local authorities in order to match the additional funding from business rates.

As announced in the Budget 2016, the Government is taking the opportunity to pilot the approach to 100% business rates retention in Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region, and will increase the share of business rates retained in London.

So, in summary the setting of multipliers is expected to remain with the Government and therefore Council control on the level of business rates is not expected to change greatly. It is not possible at this stage to outline the approach the administration is planning to take until the Government's proposals are better defined.

Councillor Oonagh Moulton to the Leader of the Council

Can the Leader please update us on the success or otherwise of his 'prawn cocktail offensive'?

Reply

I believe Cllr Moulton may be referring to a comment I made in the Wimbledon Guardian back in June 2015 when launching the South London Partnership's response to the Treasury's stated ambition to devolve funding to regional groupings of councils.

As no doubt she is aware, I am Chair of the South London Partnership's Leaders Board, having been elected by my fellow Council Leaders from Conservative Richmond and Kingston upon Thames, Labour Croydon, and Lib Dem Sutton. As a first step in our response to the Treasury's devolution plans, we established a statutory joint committee which put the South London Partnership on a more secure footing, enabling it to be taken seriously as a sub-regional partnership with ambitions to run devolved budgets.

Following on from this, in July we launched the SLP Growth Prospectus, "Distinctly South London", our lobbying brochure for the sub region which sets out in detail our growth agenda and the support we need from government in terms of devolving decision making and funding to the sub region in order to unlock some of these opportunities. In particular, some of the devolved decision making and funding we are lobbying for includes:

- An SLP 'Growth Deal'
- Further financial devolution beyond business rates eg national insurance and other property

- Exemption from permitted development rights to change office to residential use
- London devolution on adult skills, employment support and health – and exploring opportunities to go further
- Explore devolution of funding, functions, powers from the London LEP to a sub-regional board

To further the above aims we now have a dedicated team in place who will seek to push forward on the strategy outlined in Distinctly South London, under the stewardship of our newly appointed Director, Sarah Sturrock. Work had started on developing a Growth Proposition by the autumn. This will reflect where working together sub-regionally could add value, including influencing the new London Plan and other new Mayoral strategies and securing investment, powers or other support to further our goals from the government or others.

Councillor Janice Howard to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Environment and Housing

My impression is that the budget cut of £18,000 to drain and gully maintenance exacerbated the impact of the recent flash flooding. I certainly witnessed blocked drains locally in Wimbledon Park ward as did other colleagues around the borough. Can the Cabinet Member comment on this and explain what is he proposing to do to prevent future such occurrences?

Reply

While there was a reduction of £18,715 in the surface water revenue budget from year 2013/14 to year 2014/15, there has been a significant increase in overall funding for Flood Risk Management due to Defra's Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) allocation from central government and this has more than offset any reduction in the surface water drainage revenue budget. This has allowed us to increase the amount of planned drainage works. As a result, we have actually increased the amount of gully cleansing across the borough through a planned cyclical 'high risk' gully cleansing programme.

We experienced an exceptional amount of rainfall in an incredibly short period of time on the 23rd June and in most locations the drains and sewers simply aren't designed to take that much water in that short space of time. This resulted in several sewers and drains to become surcharged, however, once the level in the receiving sewers reduced, most areas drained away relatively quickly.

Merton Council has undertaken cleansing of gullies in identified 'higher risk' areas on an annual basis – the higher risk areas are based on those roads that were reported as (i) flooding during the July 2007 surface water flooding event, (ii) identified as being at risk according to Environment Agency surface water modelling or (iii) to have previous recorded or reported drainage problems. A significant number of roads within the Wimbledon Park ward are covered by the high risk gully cleansing programme. In addition, Merton also undertakes reactive gully cleansing to specific locations or addresses throughout the year following reports from residents or businesses.

This winter 2015/2016, we have increased our total number of 'high risk' road gullies to be cleansed across the borough to 5450, from 4795 gullies in 2014/15 and 4450 in 2013/14. In a recent public consultation on our Local Flood Risk Management Strategy, residents and businesses responded to say that gully cleansing is considered to be 'the' No.1 priority action that the Council should undertake to reduce flood risk and this action has been taken.

Councillor Brian Lewis-Lavender to the Cabinet Member for Street Cleanliness and Parking

Would the Cabinet Member please tell me:

- a) How many staff are there in the Environmental Health team?
- b) How many queries have they received this year?
- c) How many of these are currently outstanding?
- d) What is the average time that it takes for Environmental Health to resolve a query?

Reply

- a) We have 17.48 full time equivalent staff within the Environmental Health Team
- b) Environmental Health have received 2,432 queries this year
- c) 'Outstanding' includes 'live' cases that are under active review / monitoring – thus it is not currently possible to give an accurate figure in the timeframe but this information will be provided to the Councillor once an accurate figure is available
- d) Queries are usually resolved within 15.6 days

Councillor Brian Lewis-Lavender to the Cabinet Member for Street Cleanliness and Parking

Would the Cabinet Member agree that there has been a marked increase recently in graffiti in this borough and can he tell me what he intends to do about it?

Reply

The Council's quarterly independent inspections suggest that there has been a reduction in the levels of graffiti. The percentage of areas where graffiti was found reduced from 5.53% to 4.78% when comparing the first quarter of this year to the same period for last year.

However, despite this reduction the council continues to take seriously the impact of graffiti. Our Graffiti Team responds to all offensive graffiti and more recently incidents of hate crime within 48 hours in the majority of cases. If reports are received during the working day it is removed more quickly. We remove all graffiti on council street furniture within 5 working days, and aim to remove any on residential property and small businesses with granted permission within 10 working days

Our Community Engagement Team works with the Dangerous Theatre Group visiting all primary schools at key stage 2 level. The Theatre Group's show puts on a production called Joey and the Vandal Graffiti and alternates every year with a "Your Choice" workshop, both covering graffiti daubing and throwing litter.

Councillor Gilli Lewis-Lavender to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Environment and Housing

Can the Cabinet Member a) reassure me that when developers damage local pavements and verges they are charged and pay for the repairs and b) provide me with evidence that this has indeed happened in Merton?

Reply

Developments within Merton are visited as soon as they become known to the Future Merton Infrastructure Team. They are encouraged to undertake a Highway license under Section 171 of the Highways Act 1980 and a deposit is taken from them. Where damage occurs this is taken from that deposit at the end of the development and repairs undertaken. Where this License is not entered into we have to recover the costs of repairs from the developers which can be a long process. We do in many cases succeed in recovering those costs but there are a number that would cost more in legal fees than we can recover through legal action. This is due to the company being set up for the development then closing as soon as the development is complete. I cannot list these details due to Data Protection.

Councillor Suzanne Grocott to the Cabinet Member for Street Cleanliness and Parking

Can the Cabinet Member explain to me why, until very recently, the council's Love Streets app had not been working for months? Was this part of a deliberate policy decision to try and reduce the number of complaints received by the council about the state of Merton's street scene?

Reply

The Love Clean Streets app is an application developed wholly independently of the council, similar to the Fix My Street app. The council has no control over its use by members of the public. Although the council continues to receive and respond to reports generated through the Love Clean Streets app, it is very much another tool for members of the public to report issues which we welcome.

It is not an app primarily designed for making complaints but for reporting incidents or issues. The council's complaint function is completely separate from the Love Clean Streets app and there are formal processes which the complaints policy follows, reporting street scene issues does not form part of the complaints process as these are a request for action. However, the council welcomes complaints and reports in any form they are received,

including by phone, email and via our website, as this assists the council to ensure that our streets are kept clean.

Councillor David Williams to the Leader of the Council

Would the Leader please list the meetings and correspondence he has had since the last ordinary meeting of the Council on 6th April 2016 to save St Helier Hospital?

Reply

I thank Cllr Williams for his regular question which allows me to keep residents informed as to the work we do on behalf of our residents to safeguard the future of their much loved local hospital at St Helier. Since the last full council meeting I have:

- Helped organise a public meeting of residents in Morden with Daniel Elkeles, Chief Executive of Epsom and St Helier Hospital Trust. Sadly Mr Elkeles did not turn up for the meeting as presumably he had other more important business to attend to. However it was a very well attended meeting where residents again made clear their strong support for retaining A&E and maternity services at St Helier.
- Met with the Chair and Chief Executive of Merton CCG, along with my Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health and the Chief Executive where, while welcoming the new focus on prevention, partnership and community services, we made clear that the STP process must not be used as a way of downgrading St Helier Hospital by the backdoor.

Councillor Jill West to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health

Can the Cabinet Member update me on the Council's progress in implementing the very considerable savings made to Adult Social Care budgets in 2016-17 and can he tell me how much has been drawn down so far from the "Savings Mitigation Fund" established as part of this year's Budget process?

Reply

Adult Social Care proposed to save £5m a year in 2016/17 on staffing, placements and contracts. The Staffing restructure took effect from the 1st of July but as this is part way through the year this saving will not be fully realised. The full saving should be achieved in budgets from 2017/18 onwards. Contracts has been decommissioned and the reviewing of placements will commence shortly. To date Adult Social Care has not reported any unexpected impacts of their savings which has necessitated a call on the Savings Mitigation Fund.