

ITEM 7 COUNCILLORS' ORDINARY PRIORITY QUESTIONS TO CABINET MEMBERS AND THE RESPONSES

1) Cllr Abigail Jones to the Cabinet Member for Education

Can he update us on the plans to commission adult education services.

Reply

Cabinet will receive a report on the 14th September updating them on the progress made so far with the commissioning of adult education. The report will detail the soft-market testing exercise we carried out to engage with potential providers, changes in approach reacting to cuts in the Government's Skills Funding Agency (SFA) funding, updates on how we are complying with the councils commissioning principles, work done with learners and other stakeholders to design the service specifications and recommend the formal beginning of the procurement process.

If approved the procurement will proceed in the autumn with the aim of launching the new commissioned service in September 2016.

Supplementary Question

Does the Cabinet Member agree the government's recent in- year funding cut to adult education in Merton backs up the council's decision to commission adult education services?

Reply

Yes it does back that up, given that it was a cut of £118,540 midway through our financial year. That's on top of £400,000 cuts over the past four years. It's quite clear that the adult education service as it stood was not sustainable. We need a service which offers both a nurturing and supportive environment for learning needs, which is why we have 13 commissioning principles for achieving value for money, to protect learning and allow flexibility in the provision of the service.

2) Councillor Gilli Lewis-Lavender to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:

For the last 8 years the major park in my ward - Sir Joseph Hood Memorial Playing Fields - has been proud to accept the prestigious award of a Green Flag. This year they have lost this mark of excellence. Will the Cabinet Member accept that under his leadership more attention should have been paid to the maintenance of our local park and that he has failed to deliver support to the Friends of the Park and ultimately adequate provision for leisure and pleasure to the residents of West Barnes?

Reply

The fact that Sir Joseph Hood Memorial Playing Field did not achieve the Green Flag Award standard was disappointing. However, in our view the park's condition was no

less good than it has been in previous year's when the Award has been granted. The major difference this year was that the park was assessed by two new judges who were unfamiliar with the site and their critical points were of a minor nature.

In our view the maintenance of the site has not declined to any significant extent and the standards in the park, overall, remain high.

The Greens Flag judges recognised that the Council was, at the time of the judging exercise, on the cusp of making some important improvements to the park, specifically the main entrance area and was imminently to install the park's very first green gym. Ultimately these significant additional investments did not contribute to the park's points score as they had not been completed at that time.

The former project is currently underway and the latter project was completed in June of this year and was warmly welcomed and appreciated by the Friends and park users at the time.

We trust this position will be better reflected when the Park is reassessed next year.

Supplementary Question

Can the cabinet member please tell me why the Friends of the park weren't warned of the impending visit by Green Flag inspectors and with regard to the necessary maintenance work at the entrance not being carried out on time? Can he explain why the replacement gates were not ordered at the appropriate time and why, once ordered, they turned out to be the wrong gates and why were they not fitted in time for the inspection?

Reply

I can't answer right now, but will investigate and make enquiries about these issues. I know that Councillor Lewis-Lavender shares my love of parks and I was glad I was there at the very outset of the improvements to Joseph Hood park. I remember going on an inspection with Councillor Kirby perhaps ten years ago, when there was a tree growing up through the tennis courts. So we began this path to improvement, and we are pretty confident that the Green Flag award will be restored.

3) From Cllr Jeff Hanna to the Leader of the Council

Can the leader update me on our use of shared services to save the council tax payer money?

Reply

Merton has always stressed the importance of shared services both as an economy and efficiency measure but also to deal with skill shortages. The main services under shared arrangements are shown in the table below:

Service Area	Arrangement
Children & young people	
Adoption recruitment	Merton, Richmond, Kingston and Sutton
School governor support	Merton and Sutton
School admissions service	Merton and Sutton
Travellers education service	Merton and Sutton
Out of hours children's social care duty service	4 boroughs. Hosted by Sutton
Adult social care	
Shared Social Care Emergency Duty System	Merton, Richmond Kingston and Sutton
HR	
Main Service	Merton and Sutton
Payroll and HR IT	Merton, Richmond, Kingston and Sutton
Governance	
Legal	Merton, Richmond, Kingston and Sutton
Internal audit	From 1 st October Merton Richmond and Wandsworth
South West London Fraud Partnership	Merton, Sutton, Richmond and Kingston
Finance	
Pensions IT system and Pensions service	Merton, Wandsworth and Camden
Bailiffs service	Merton and Sutton
Environment	
Transportation	Merton and Sutton for elements of service
Regulatory services (i.e. Environmental Health/Trading Standards and Licensing)	Merton and Richmond
South London Waste Partnership Disposal – joint contracts. Environmental services Phase C (target 2017)a joint procurement of Waste Collection and recycling, Commercial waste, Street Cleaning, Winter Maintenance, Vehicle Maintenance' Green spaces	Merton, Sutton, Richmond and Croydon

Supplementary Question

Does the Leader agree with me that despite the often ground-breaking work we do in Merton, by sharing services with other councils to save tax payers' money, that there

is no 'silver bullet' and that the government's relentless attack on local services will mean yet more difficult savings to come.

Reply

Yes, I agree with him and others are also in agreement with me about no 'silver bullet' about the cuts. Here's what another council leader is on record as saying, 'I have asked the government to address the ten billion extra cost pressures all councils will face.' The author? One newly ennobled peer, new chair of the LGA, conservative leader of South Holland District Council.

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

Further to the debate on this important matter at July's Full Council meeting, can the Cabinet Member tell me what discussions he has had with Circle Housing Merton Priory about their repairs and maintenance service following the eventual publication last month of a 4 page summary report on the Keepmoat whistleblowing allegations?

Reply

One of my key priorities is to ensure that Circle Housing Merton Priory (CHMP) tenants receive good quality repairs to their homes in a timely manner. Following the release of the report on whistleblowing allegations CHMP I met with the Executive Director (Governance) at Circle Housing and with the Managing Director of Circle Housing Merton Priory. I expressed my disappointment that controls put in place by CHMP and Keepmoat had not been fully implemented, leading to CHMP being overcharged by £173,000. I noted with some relief that CHMP have been fully reimbursed by Keepmoat. CHMP have assured me that procedures to check costs and quality of works are now properly in place. Alongside Housing Officers I am continuing to monitor CHMP's repairs performance on a monthly basis.

Supplementary Question

Will the cabinet member confirm whether he or the leader have yet had sight of the full, independent report on the extremely worrying whistleblowing accusations. If he is not, will he join in me in calling for its immediate publication by Circle Housing Merton Priory, so residents can understand for themselves the full extent and manner of the over charging that has taken place.

Reply

No, I haven't seen the report yet. I do want to see the report, not just me but our group. I don't know whether it would be to the advantage of the people of Merton to see it, but don't see why not. When he speaks about it being very worrying, about the report - when it eventually came out it showed over £170,000 had been overcharged to Circle, that I believe has been repaid. I believe the reason the report was held back was that Circle wanted to make sure everything was repaid by the time it came out.

5) Councillor Stan Anderson to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Cleanliness and Waste

Can she update me on the new “any bin will do” policy in relation to disposing of dog mess?

Reply

Dog waste no longer needs to be collected and disposed of separately from the domestic waste which is sent to landfill. In light of these changes and like many other councils we are in the process of removing the dedicated dog waste bins and installing additional general waste bins where our residents and visitors are now able to dispose of their dog waste along with their general litter. This initiative will lead to efficiencies in the service and reduce our collection costs as well as making it easier for dog owners to dispose of dog waste

Supplementary Question

I congratulate her on her allowing dog owners to use any waste bin in the borough to clean up after their dogs. Is there anything further we can do to stop people who do not clean up after their dogs?

Reply

I am sure there are lots of things we could do about dog owners and their dogs' fouling. What we do need is more education. I am glad we have taken this initiative, following many other local authorities. It is encouraging people that when their dogs do poo, they pick it up and put it in the bins. We have invested in more and better bins in our parks, where we have a focus. We have also put in enforcement officers who will go into some of the parks and issue £80 fines, but we don't want to issue fines, that's the last thing we want to do, but at the end of the day it's about educating people. So we have been publicising this, so if you do see people walking their dogs and picking up using the appropriate bag, please advise about that they can use any bin

6) Councillor Peter Southgate to the Leader of the Council

With the proposed introduction of 24 hour operation on the northern line on Friday and Saturday nights, the lack of public toilet facilities at Morden station will become a more acute problem.

Could the Leader outline the steps he has taken to pressure London Underground to re-open the public toilets at Morden station?

Reply

I recognise the longstanding issue regarding the provision of public toilets at Morden Station. I have met with TFL regarding the 24hr tube project and I have stated the case for toilets at Morden. TFL have also identified that Morden is one of the few terminus stations without toilet facilities.

The issue is now with TFL to identify funding and space within Morden Station for public toilets. Ironically, the roll-out of the Mayor's programme of ticket office closures may provide the physical space within the ticket hall, but still requires funding.

We have also put public toilet provision as an output of the Morden regeneration plans which are progressing with TFL and the GLA and we will be asking residents, businesses and commuters their opinions on toilet provision in Morden station as part of our public consultation this year.

In the meantime, we also promote our Community Toilet scheme which has 3 facilities in Morden Town Centre

<http://www.merton.gov.uk/search.htm?q=community+toilets>

Public toilets are also clearly marked on Merton's wayfinding maps in Morden town centre and also on TFL's locality maps in Morden Station and all bus shelters

Supplementary Question

I'm pleased to note the efforts already made to take this issue to TfL. I'm grateful too for the reminder about our community tolerance scheme. I wonder if he shares my disappointment that when councillors were briefed on the new 24 hour service (Fri/Sat nights) the operations director for that service told us he was not aware that the provision of toilets was an issue at all. We disabused him of that, but will he re-double his efforts to ensure that all key players in the initiation of this service are aware of just how critical this is.

Reply

I personally had a conversation with Sir Peter Hendy, former commissioner/chairman of TfL. I know he's moved on, I will seek to have a conversation with his successor. Morden tube station is a terminus and is one of the few stations without toilet facilities and we will engage with anyone on this issue. There are some ground breaking toilet schemes in central London, where for 20p you can have a wee, so that might be the way forward.

7) Councillor Najeeb Latif to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:

Can the Cabinet Member please tell us what actual numerical evidence the Council has on the types of built form, material, typology and style of development that local people prefer in Merton?

Reply

The Council, like others, doesn't collect or hold numerical evidence on local preferences other than that contained and reflected in our core strategy and associated policies as well as the conservation guidance in the Borough character studies and Conservation Area documents.

Merton supports high quality design and public realm that complements or sets the character of local neighbourhoods. The Council has a number of mechanisms in place through our planning policy suite to ensure the delivery of housing and to improve design quality.

In assessing all development, we have our LBM design policies, Mayoral design standards, professional planning and design officers an independent Design Review Panel and of course, Planning Committee. All of whom have a role in creating great places. Often, a lot of buildings that are criticised in Merton are ones where PAC have refused, but permission has been granted on appeal.

We also have 28 Conservation areas and our Borough Character study, which defines, at a neighbourhood level, the character and quality of a place which we expect developers and architects to respond to in presenting proposals to the Council.

Understanding residents views on major development is important, and we do this at the project level in more meaningful dialogue as we prepare masterplans for schemes such as Mitcham Town Centre and Colliers Wood town centre public realm, and what we are soon to embark on for Morden Town Centre.

To assist councillors, officers, landowners, residents and others in delivering high quality design through the development process that safeguards the best of the borough's character and secures positive improvements elsewhere, the council is preparing Merton's Borough Character Study: www.merton.gov.uk/bcs.htm

Two thirds of the borough's +30 neighbourhoods have had an in-depth analysis of the area including its history, general characteristics, built form, architectural interest, public realm and movement, trees, landscape features and economic vitality. Once the whole borough has been completed everybody will be invited to have their say on the guides. In addition, the council is preparing design guidance for the whole borough through a new Design SPD and has extensive conservation area guidance for those historic areas: www.merton.gov.uk/designandconservation

Supplementary Question

He has admitted the council does not have any evidence of what local people want to see in terms of development so could I please ask the cabinet member to ask the officers to undertake a survey of what local people want to see in Merton.

Reply

We had extensive consultation of local residents when we put together our current suite of planning policies which include those that relate to design, so that consultation process was taking into account public concerns. But we are having a borough wide character study which is being carried out in practically every location of the borough. Two thirds of the neighbourhoods have already been completed. Once completed they will be put out for consultation and then I hope we will get quite a few responses of local views of what character is lacking, what is there but needs sustaining and assisting and what character is excellent and needs preserving.

8) Councillor Laxmi Attawar to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Can he update me on the improvements to Colliers Wood?

Reply

Funded by the successful bid to the Mayor's Regeneration Fund and using Council and Transport for London funding, contractors are currently working in Colliers Wood, providing a range of public realm enhancements including new riverside railings, new energy efficient lighting and substantial improvements to the paving and junctions at the heart of the town centre.

Over the next six months, the contractors will move to Baltic Close, opposite the underground station and the gateway to the Wandle Park to provide new paving, lighting, oak benches, sustainable urban drainage and tree planting. The council concluded the adoption of Baltic Close in August and this month we will be consulting residents on the traffic management and car parking solutions for the area.

Members will also note the significant progress in converting the Brown and Root Tower into residential accommodation which will further enhance the area.

Supplementary Question

Can you tell us more about the planned new entrance to Wandle Park and how it will enhance Colliers Wood?

Reply

Its going to be an excellent new entrance to welcome people to Wandle Park, it is going to be a home zone and it will contain elements of local heritage (which is very substantial of Colliers Wood). It will be an inviting place to walk in, cycle in, a place for enjoyment.

9) Councillor Brian Lewis-Lavender to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture:

Is the Cabinet Member aware of the petition that is being raised both by the Friends of Sir Joseph Hood Memorial Playing Fields and separately by local people in West Barnes as well as a third online petition with over 2000 signatures asking for the retention of a paddling pool in our local park due to the enormous pleasure it gives to many children living in our area?

Reply – ANSWERED BY THE CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND REGENERATION

Thank you for bringing this to our attention. The Council has yet to receive any petition in respect of the future of the paddling pool at Sir Joseph Hood Memorial

Playing Field and whilst the Council is certainly reviewing the future of water play provisions in the borough in the light of continuing budget pressures and in the context of the relatively large sums that it invests on an annual basis in supporting 8 separate water play facilities across the borough, no firm decisions have yet been made on any future investments or closures.

Council officers are currently working with local groups and individuals on opportunities to secure and extend the opportunities for water play in the borough through a variety of alternative funding mechanisms, in fact, and welcomes the opportunity to work with local stakeholders to achieve that.

Supplementary Question

When you claim that the paddling pool is closing in Joseph Hood Memorial playing fields, would the cabinet member agree to match funds, or at least revise significant contribution to any funds raised by Friends of the Park to replace the existing pool with an interactive one like the one recently installed at Tamworth Recreation ground. So that this very valued resource does not totally disappear.

Reply

Of course we will work very closely with community groups, no decisions have been made on closures of paddling pools, this has got to be subject to budget discussions. As the written answer indicates, our first point of call is to try and secure opportunities for new funding, different resources for water features which do exist some of which are excellent and are very much enjoyed.

10) Councillor Tobin Byers to the Leader of the Council

Could the Leader update me on plans to bring Crossrail 2 to the borough and how this will affect local residents and businesses?

Reply

Crossrail 2 is still in its infancy with TFL & Network Rail currently leading this project and assessing the route options, identifying engineering challenges and building a business case for Treasury approval.

We know what the opportunity for Merton will be in terms of enhanced transport accessibility and journey times. We also know that the opportunity for economic growth is compelling in Wimbledon - aligned with our Inward Investment Strategy and there are important lessons to learn from Crossrail 1 to ensure we get the best deal for Merton.

We need to fully understand the construction impacts on businesses and residents as it's an issue we know is of great importance to our citizens and businesses. The future Merton team are leading on Crossrail 2 and are in regular dialogue with TFL to seek information on these key issues.

The Council is being pro-active in how we prepare for Crossrail 2 which includes the Future Wimbledon Ideas Competition.

We are also arranging a stakeholder group of land owners and are working with LoveWimbledon BID and Stephen Hammond MP to ensure views on the project are aired early on, and that there is a proper forum for detailed dialogue when needed.

We have also stated our commitment to preparing a masterplan to guide investment decisions and control the quality of the built environment in the event of Crossrail 2 being confirmed. The timing of the masterplan is provisionally 2016 but it may flex to align with any government approvals and progress on Crossrail2.

We wish to see a positive impact from Crossrail2 in the borough and will work to maximise the economic impact as well as mitigate the construction impact as well as working pro-actively to deliver the best outcomes for the Wimbledon station area and the borough as a whole.

Supplementary Question

Is the Leader aware of the Crossrail 2 group commission and has he any plans to ensure that the interests of Wimbledon residents and local businesses are foremost in their thoughts?

Reply

I can say that I am fully aware and up to speed with the announcement made by the mayor and chairman about the Growth Commission for Crossrail 2 and the appointed chairman of that group Sir Merrick Cockell (former chair Local Government Association and former chairman of London Councils) and I have already had a discussion with Sir Merrick Cockell about Crossrail 2 and its impact and opportunities and some of our concerns how to proceed for the benefit of Wimbledon. I have also had a discussion with Stephen Hammond, Member of Parliament for Wimbledon.