

ITEM 8A COUNCILLORS' STRATEGIC THEME (CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE) QUESTIONS TO CABINET MEMBERS AND THE RESPONSES

1) Cllr Marsie Skeete to the Cabinet Member for Education

Would the Cabinet Member join me in congratulating our A level and GCSE students on their excellent results?

Reply

Merton schools continue to perform strongly and this year has seen one of our best performances at GCSE, building on some of the fastest improving results in London over the last five years. I would like to congratulate all our young people who have achieved some great results. My thanks also go to their families and teachers who have supported them through their education. Our results are still provisional and we know there have been national issues in connection with the marking of some subjects, with appeals in progress and being considered. We are unable, therefore, to provide the borough average at this stage.

Merton's sixth forms have seen their best-ever A-Level results with provisional figures showing an increase in pupils achieving the top grades this year as well as an improvement in every grade band. I am delighted that so many of our young people are now going on to top universities. I would like to congratulate all of our A-Level students on their results and also their parents and teachers.

As a council we are committed to supporting our young people to achieve their full potential and we are determined that our schools continue to give them the best possible start in life.

Supplementary Question

I would like to extend my congratulations to the young people who have taken their GCSEs and A levels. Can the cabinet member outline how these results compare to the previous years?

Reply

I would like to thank Councillor Skeete for the work she does on the CYP panel. We've had another strong set of results, our second best ever. For the third year in a row we've had above 60% A - C GCSE, five years ago that was just under 50%. We've also seen Raynes Park achieve their best ever GCSE results so I would like to congratulate all our young people. It was great to meet so many successful young people at the Top Achievers' event last night. I would also like to thank their families and teachers who have supported them through their education. We should be very proud of the efforts of our young people at GCSE and A level for our best ever results which show continuing improvement in education and long may it continue, thank you.

2) From Councillor Linda Taylor to the Cabinet Member for Education:

Can the Cabinet Member for Education please advise the council whether the Plough Lane stadium site was ever considered for a new secondary school that is so desperately needed in this part of the borough?

Reply

The council's cabinet has made no final decision on its preferred site for a new secondary school, and the final decision rests with the Education Funding Agency.

The council commissioned a site search report which we have previously published. This considered all sites for a new secondary school for their viability, and this included the Plough Lane stadium site.

However, it should be recognised that there is a live planning application for a football stadium, housing and other uses. This will be considered by the council's Development Control team officers and then Planning Applications Committee on its merits in compliance with the legal requirements for planning applications. It is also recognised that there is some contamination and flood risk on the site and the only financially viable development is one with a substantial high value return.

Supplementary Question

I didn't really understand the response from the cabinet member, it sounded like the site had been rejected as a suitable place for a school. I ask him to expand in more detail, for the benefit of Wimbledon Park residents, if this was the case?

Reply

The Wimbledon Greyhound Stadium was actually considered as the site for a new school in the Capita Symonds report back in 2013. It was rejected as it was not financially viable, not affordable and would prevent the return of AFC Wimbledon to the borough. We need to ensure we have value for money schemes and we have to think about the borough as a whole. If we built a school at the greyhound stadium, most of the places would go to Wandsworth residents and not Merton residents. We have a big issue to address with school expansion, but Wimbledon Greyhound Stadium is not the answer.

3) Cllr Brenda Fraser to the Cabinet Member for Education

Could he update us on our primary school expansion strategy?

Reply

Our primary school expansion programme continues to run successfully, with further completions of major projects over the summer period for children and teachers to enjoy for the start of term in September. Brand new extension buildings at Hillcross, Merton Abbey and Pelham were all completed to schedule for the start of term, and the adaptation of the former Jamia building for Singlegate Primary School is now being enjoyed by children. The expansion of Dundonald Primary School is also running to schedule, with the adaptation completed for the start of term to enable an extra reception year class to be provided, with the major extension on schedule to be completed for next September.

We were able to offer a school place for all children in permanent classrooms for the start of term.

Supplementary Question

I congratulate the cabinet member on his success to date in ensuring that Merton children get a place at a good, local primary school. Can he outline how he intends to replicate this success as they move forward to secondary schools.

Reply

We are already planning ahead for secondary school expansion. Our criteria is of having a proven track record of success that's why we were delighted that Harris was approved. Planning in advance we know we have a big increase in 2018 which is why we are planning now in terms of the new secondary school. We are also ensuring it is value for money in these financially challenged times. We know finances are crucial and it has to meet those criteria along with schools being good and outstanding being for expansion.

4) Councillor Daniel Holden to the Cabinet Member for Education:

How many primary school aged children in Raynes Park, Hillside and Village wards have been offered school places in Mitcham this year?

Reply

I have checked the position with School Admissions and I confirm that just 1 child residing in the Raynes Park/Wimbledon area will attend a school in the Mitcham area for this year's primary school reception entry. Thanks to our extensive primary school expansion programme, there have been primary school reception places available in the general Raynes Park/Wimbledon area for all Raynes Park/Wimbledon residents, and there are a still a small number of vacancies.

Supplementary Question

I wish the cabinet member had answered the question, how many places were offered, rather than how many places were taken up, as they could be different things. Please let me know after the meeting by email.

Reply

I will ensure that information is provided to Councillor Holden.

5) Cllr Ross Garrod to the Cabinet Member for Education

With a recent report that children in the UK are some of the unhappiest of countries surveyed, can the cabinet member update me on how the council works with local schools to tackle the issue of bullying?

Reply

The recent survey is very concerning and is a challenge to us all about how we help our children cope and negotiate the challenges they face. Schools teach children about these challenges and how to cope and they also commission a range of services that support children and parents when the challenges occur. The local

authority works in partnership with our schools in a range of ways to support both the curriculum and support offer.

We have a Multi Agency Anti Bullying Strategy 14 – 16. This was refreshed using focus groups of children across a range of our schools. Anti Bullying week resources are sent out to all schools. We facilitated an outside organisation to train schools and parents about the bullying of Children with SEN and Disabilities this year – this project was very well received. With all of our secondary schools we continue to commission the safer schools Police officers. These officers, based in schools, undertake the role of supporting individuals and their parents to deal with a range of issues including bullying and e safety. Training is provided to schools on dealing with derogatory language - particularly Homophobic and Racist language. We test out our approach by being part of the Stonewall Champions scheme. This involves Stonewall considering our policy and practice and rating the authority. We have improved our rating and now rank 14th out of 47 local authorities. Schools also commission a range of organisations to support children and families which includes bullying issues – Targeted Mental Health in Schools workers are available in 21 schools and 16 schools buy in Jigsaw4 U or have Emotional Literacy Support Assistants. Together these workers provide a mental health support service in response to the needs of our children. The local authority also runs networks for teachers to share problems and resources – the SEAL network (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) and the Child Sexual Exploitation School Champions Group consider proactive curriculum ideas and materials to promote healthy relationships.

Supplementary Question

Given the importance of tackling bullying and discrimination in schools, may I congratulate him on the Stonewall education equality index – I now believe we are the best performing borough in London in promoting equality in schools and tackling discrimination. How does he think we achieve this?

Reply

We see it crucial that children learn and accept diversity from a young age. We also make sure our schools have the resources to support equalities and diversity. It is great that we have actually this achievement of Top Performing Borough in London. It shows that we put equality at the heart of everything we do and we will continue to ensure we remain at the top.

6) Councillor James Holmes to the Cabinet Member for Education:

What can the Cabinet Member tell the residents of Merton about the closed Labour Party meeting on secondary schools that took place at the Civic Centre on Saturday 25th July 2015?

Reply

I can confirm that as Cabinet Member for Education I held a briefing session for Labour Group members and other interested Labour members in July which outlined the Labour administration's successful programme of primary school expansions and looked at the challenge of replicating this success in the secondary sector where the demand will soon rise as those primary school children move through their

education. in spite of the Government's failure to adequately fund local authorities in London for the extra growth in pupil numbers I am confident we can rise to this challenge and look forward to bringing forward cabinet reports in the coming months on how we ensure all our young people can continue to attend a local school.

Supplementary Question

Given that tax payers' money was spent and given that the Labour party meeting was held on council premises can the cabinet member tell us why the Labour party members are getting briefings that the public are not on the very important issue of secondary schools.

Reply

From time to time we do have consultations with our members about issues related to local government. This meeting was fully in compliance with those rules. If you believe it wasn't, I suggest you make your complaints. I think it is crucial that we engage with people so they know about the secondary school places issue, and that they are fully informed about the challenges we face in terms of providing those additional school places.

7) Cllr Katy Neep to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Can she update us on how we are addressing the issue of teenage pregnancy?

Reply

Merton has sustained a long running and successful strategic, evidenced based approach to reducing teenage pregnancy with the current strategic integrated substance misuse and teenage pregnancy strategy running to 2017. The strategy is delivered through annual action plans and supported through a historically strong local partnership. This strategic approach has been instrumental in reducing local under 18 conception rates which have consistently fallen since the strategy began with a total rate reduction of 57% since 1998, surpassing the 50% strategic reduction target (current rate stands at 22.1/1000). The very latest quarterly data indicates that rates are continuing to fall with a 17.8% reduction in Q2 (2014) from the same quarter in the previous year. Teenage pregnancy is addressed in Merton through:

- Provision of young people's sexual health clinics increasing access to Long Acting Reversible Methods of Contraception and clear pathways to sexual health treatment and termination services.
- Targeted one to one sexual health provision for vulnerable young people.
- Free condoms and emergency contraception for young people.
- Supporting the delivery of effective sex and relationships education.
- Sexual health promotion activities in schools and non-school settings.
- Workforce training and development for front-line staff.
- SW London Gettington health website and social media campaigns.
- Supporting teenage parents through the Family Nurse Partnership and Children's Centres.

Supplementary Question

I would like to congratulate our cabinet member on her achievement and could she outline more about how we support our young mums?

Reply

I am very pleased to give good news around our teen pregnancy achievement. We are very pleased with the work of our family nurse partnership which provides intensive support for mums under age 19, throughout their pregnancy and for the first two years of the baby's life. Family nurse partners can work with up to 30 young mums and their partners. The programme supports effective parenting and is making a real difference to some of the most vulnerable young mums and their babies.

8) Councillor David Dean to the Cabinet Member for Education:

How will closing down the Merton Adult Education Centre at Whatley Avenue and reducing the number of courses help the impoverished in our borough to learn the skills necessary for them to get the best jobs in London?

Reply

The commissioning of the adult education service will not have an impact on the number of courses offered. The number of courses offered is set by a funding formula set by the Government's Skills Funding Agency and the council is committed to continue honouring these funding criteria within the new commissioned service.

By commissioning adult education rather than being a direct provider the local authority is reducing the financial risk to the council of operating this service and ensuring that we do not need to subsidise this funding.

Any reduction in courses, and knock on impact on residents skills, will be directly related to grant cuts from the Skills Funding Agency. For information there have been in year cuts from the Government's Skills Funding Agency of over £200,000 this year alone.

Supplementary Question

I would like to thank the cabinet member for his answer, but he hasn't given me one. You see, I don't want to spend all night going through this, but one person said if you tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything. The last time you stood up you gave a different answer. You said you didn't want to educate affluent people in Wimbledon. Paragraph one says there will be no cuts while paragraph 3 says there is. I don't understand. I did get an adult education to learn things but I've never understood what the cabinet member has to say. Are you cutting the number of course and are you closing MAE because it's in an affluent area. Two questions.

Reply

MAE does need to be on a sustainable, long term footing. It's suffered government cuts of over half a million pounds over the last few years and I haven't heard any condemnation from any people opposite including Councillor Dean. The flexibility will exist from moving towards a commissioning model. This current service is not sustainable, we need to make those changes but also to ensure we can provide what's best in MAE under new providers but also to ensure we have a range of courses across the borough in the west as well as the east given that 70% of the courses are in the west. This service needs change, it has to change, we've taken difficult decisions to make that change.

9) Cllr Agatha Akyigyina to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

I know the Cabinet Member shares our aspiration to keep our looked after young people close to home, what is our local performance like in this respect?

Reply

We have a strong commitment to placing our looked after children close to their local community wherever possible.

When a child comes into care we make great efforts to place them as locally as possible. 70% of our children are placed within 20 miles of which 35% (55 children) are placed in Merton, and a further 26% (40 children) are living in our neighbouring Boroughs. This enables us to access them readily and for them to maintain some continuity in their lives.

There are, however, occasions when it is appropriate for children to be placed at a distance: they may be in a specialist children's home; hospital or secure unit; on remand or need relocation to exit gangs. We always endeavour to match the placement with our young person's needs although this is often challenging with a very tight supply of placements across London and the south east.

We ensure a high level of scrutiny for all children and young people placed outside of the Borough with placement sign off at DCS level. The placement sign off involves analysis on why the placement out of Borough is required for that child or young person.

Children placed at a significant distance are likely to fall into the following categories:

- Have specific needs that result in a highly specialist placement being required that is not available locally
- Are placed for adoption/in permanent placements
- A decision has been made to place the child/young person outside of London due to specific concerns (e.g. gang affiliation, CSE).

Supplementary Question

I congratulate the cabinet member on her performance to date in keeping our looked after children close to home. Could she tell us if this has been helped by recruiting our own foster carers?

Reply

Last year we recruited 15 new sets of foster carers and a further ten this year so far which is quite a success story and an ongoing situation and we keep applying hoping people will come forward. While we need to maintain the recruitment of a wide range of foster carers 60% of the carers we recruited last year were for our target group of carers of teenagers and sibling groups. As of March this year 58% of children were placed with Merton foster carers either in or close to Merton compared with 50 last year.