

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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