

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.