

From Councillor John Dehaney to the Cabinet Member for Finance

What consideration he has made of the implications of the EU Referendum result.

Reply

I was disappointed with the result of the referendum, not only because I personally campaigned for a remain vote, but because I am deeply worried about the impact this decision will have on some of our residents who are most in need. Already we have seen the value of the pound drop, and with 40% of our food imported from the EU this is likely to result in increased prices, hitting our poorest residents hardest. It is still too early to assess what the long term impact on our residents will be but we will be watching developments as they (rapidly) unfold and factoring them in to our planning where we can have some degree of expectation. However in many cases we simply do not know what the impact will be.

Supplementary

Can the Cabinet Member tell me what impact the Leave vote will have on council resources.

Reply

I personally think the result was a very sad one. The political impact will be huge. One of the reasons we campaigned so hard to remain was the economic impact. The pound has already fallen. If the economy suffers there will be more cuts and more austerity. I can promise that this administration will all we can to minimise suffering but I have to say I think it's likely we'll have more difficult decisions to make and I am very sorry this has happened.

From Councillor Abdul Latif to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

The Wandle Meadow Nature Park has had little or no investment to improve the state of this valuable local asset. Why has the Council removed bins and therefore encouraged the dumping of rubbish; allowed pathways to become totally unusable by the disabled; and allowed the park to become generally overgrown thereby providing cover for anyone who is up to no good whilst putting law abiding residents in danger?

Reply

Wandle Meadow Nature Park is a recognised site of nature conservation value and the management prescriptions for this site are designed to protect and enhance that biodiversity interest.

Over recent years, the spread of scrub and bramble has been controlled so that the area by the seasonal ponds and central parts of the site remain open. The grassland within the central area of the site is also cut in alternate years. Much of the

remainder of the site is being allowed to mature into woodland with tree thinning anticipated from time to time as required.

With regard to disabled access, a major new pedestrian bridge has been installed at this location in recent times. This is compliant with the Disabled Discrimination Act and the ramped access to the rest of the site is also compliant with the Act too. The gravel surfaced paths across the site, whilst not an ideal surface for wheelchair users, are nevertheless appropriate for this type of site; similar surfaced paths are present in many other nature reserves throughout London.

Whereas the riverside path verges may become overgrown from time to time, particularly in high summer, this is cut back at intervals, most especially at these times of the year.

In the near future, the lighting at this site will be upgraded and a new path installed across the reserve to nearby Garfield Recreation Ground as part of TfL's 'Quietways Programme'.

We are not aware that any bins - other than dog waste bins - have been removed from this site recently. On the rare occasions when this does occur it is typically a response to the fact that the litter bins in question are attracting waste items into open spaces sites unnecessarily from the local neighbourhood.

Neither are we aware of any particular issues of anti-social behaviour at this location above the background levels that typically occur in parks and open spaces, and despite its management as a more naturalistic environment.

Supplementary

Residents have complained to the Council about the potential danger to the public from cyclists and motorbike riders using the Wandle path between Chaucer Way and Plough Lane. Can the Cabinet member explain to me why public safety on this pathway is being ignored?

Reply

I went to see the Wandle Nature Park the other day as a result of this question and there is a lot of surface water around at the moment. A reason for that is the nature of the park, it's on a flood plain, it has the nature ponds that fill up when the weather is very wet, and you'll have noticed in recent months the weather has been extraordinary. There's a problem with cycling and motorcycling in many of our parks and that's one we have and will address. We are aware of it and are dealing with it. There is a cycle path alongside the footpath. I hope that goes some way to answering the question and I look forward to discussing it with you and your residents.

From Councillor Marsie Skeete to the Leader of the Council

What plans does he have in place to work with the newly elected Mayor of London?

Reply

I am delighted that we finally have a London Mayor who will take both the opportunities and challenges the city presents seriously and will stand up for our diverse population. I have already spoken to Sadiq Khan about some of the issues we want him to focus on going forward and have specifically raised the issues of the AFC Wimbledon stadium application and the Crossrail2 proposals. I am optimistic that with a full-time Mayor now in place we will have a much more productive relationship with City Hall.

Supplementary

I would like to ask the Leader, does he agree that a new Mayor will respond to Merton residents who for far too long have faced rapidly increasing tube fares, rising rents and [not audible on recording]. Does he also have plans to work with our new Assembly Member, Leonie Cooper?

Reply

Madam Mayor I do believe that the new Mayor of London is addressing issues pertinent to all London residents. He is tackling knife crime. He's just reassured EU nationals that they will always be welcome in this city. He's called for employers to close the gender pay gap. He's tackling hate crime. He's putting Londoners' security at the heart of Brexit negotiations. He has an action plan to combat London's toxic air. He's finding savings to fund the fares freeze and to introduce new office based protections for SMEs, and is one of most pro-business Mayors ever. He is launching new night time tube services and the one hour hopper bus fare has been introduced.

I was pleased that Leonie Cooper won in the Assembly elections. I have had conversations with her already and I am seeing her on Saturday. There are two things to say about Leonie; she is Chair of the London Assembly Environmental Committee, so she's a good friend in very important position, and she is at one with this borough and this party and deserves cross party support to ensure Crossrail2 is a success and doesn't come here at any cost.

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

Following the recent implementation of the administration's decision to remove separate dog waste bins from across the borough, many residents – and particularly parents - are understandably concerned about dog owners now being expected to use the same bins as for general waste. This is due to the potential for contamination of the general waste bins which are often used by children in Merton's parks. What assessment of the impact of this policy change on the public health of residents in Merton has been conducted by the Council and what were the results?

Reply from the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

In comparison with neighbouring boroughs, Merton has been relatively late in adopting an “any bin will do” policy in respect of dog waste disposal. Park users who are also familiar with parks in, for example, Sutton borough should already be familiar with this practice.

The potential health risks associated with litter bins are not new, or very much altered in principle given that it has always been possible in practice for dog waste to be deposited in litter bins even when dedicated dog waste bins were provided; that in the past dog waste bins were commonly filled with general waste by users; and that, furthermore, soiled nappies are often deposited in general waste bins too, typically those within children’s playgrounds.

Both Waste Services and Greenspaces have reviewed and revised their relevant risk assessments in relation to litter bins in response to this policy change and have adopted relevant measures to mitigate those risks such as: implementing controls to ensure that bins are emptied more frequently; plans to roll-out additional hi-tec compactor bins that includes an access flap that isolates the waste from users; and to adopt plaza (lidded) bins as standard in parks henceforth.

The vast majority of dog waste deposits in parks bins are bagged-up, of course.

While answering the question, I’d like to add my plea that all Members encourage residents to take their general litter home with them from the park on those busy summer days when they’re already full. It is common practice for parks across Britain and Europe to ask that of the public; and besides, it’s common sense for us all to respect our parks and open spaces, rather than littering it and expecting other people to clear up after us.

Supplementary

Several residents in my ward and others such as Trinity have raised concerns to councillors about the rubbish bins . All too often the existing bins are overflowing, especially in the summer which encourages even more litter. Given that the separate dog waste bins have been removed, will the Cabinet Member help reverse the decline in overall numbers of bins by agreeing to provide traditional litter bins across Merton as soon as possible.

Reply

The policy came into force just as we came into our Cabinet position, and you’ll notice and I think there’s no point in denying, that there was some confusion as the policy changed over. That’s regrettable, but I can say the confusion is over. There have been many new bins put in across the borough, the dog bins have been removed and it is going to work. However, where there are situations where there is greater need for bins I do expect that councillors across the chamber will tell Cllr Garrod and tell me where there is specific need. One thing I will say is that where there is an overflowing bin, that’s regrettable but at this time of year they fill up very quickly in parks. It’s people who see a bin and rather than take rubbish home, dump extra stuff around it. I would urge all Merton residents if they see a full bin, to take their rubbish home. I would urge every councillor here to encourage their residents

to do just that. It's far better than complaining about a full bin.

From Councillor Fidelis Gadzama to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Could she outline how she intends to ensure she focuses on our safeguarding duties in her new role as Cabinet member for Children's Services?

Reply

I am absolutely clear that ensuring that council services and schools are safeguarding Merton's children effectively is one of the most important areas of my new portfolio. In broad terms I will be holding service leads to account in terms of performance but I will also be seeking to support practitioners and managers who undertake some of the most difficult and stressful work the council does. I also intend to use my role to influence how other agencies fulfil their safeguarding duties.

In specific terms I will be a standing member of Merton's statutory Safeguarding Children Board and will also meet regularly with the Board's Independent Chair. I will also be a standing member of the council's Corporate Parenting group, chaired by the Chief Executive. I will meet regularly with the Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Youth Inclusion and intend to bring both support and challenge to those meetings. I will regularly receive data on performance in order to inform my conversations with senior managers. Furthermore, I will be attending the Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel at which I will expect challenge from colleague elected members. Finally, and importantly, I will have regular contact with young people to hear directly the safeguarding concerns they may have.

Supplementary

Given her prioritisation of the council's role in safeguarding our children, could she outline what factors she expects the council to take into account when considering the results of the Rutlish Path consultation?

Reply

Obviously this is about a balance of needs. We are proud of Merton's open spaces. However, safeguarding does need to take priority. I am sure we can all agree that the safety of our children is paramount. I am looking forward to the results of the consultation, and working with residents and ward councillors to understand what the need is so we can come to a resolution that ensures we protect our green spaces and safeguard our children.

From Councillor Oonagh Moulton to the Leader of the Council

There has been no Annual Residents' Survey now since 2014. Can the Leader update me on what arrangements are being made to ensure that the Annual Residents' Survey takes place again this year and how the Council plans to

benchmark the results against other London councils going forward?

Reply

We will shortly be inviting market research organisations to quote for the 2016 resident's survey. Our expectation is that fieldwork will take place in the autumn with the results available in either late 2016 or early 2017. Part of this process will include exploring opportunities for benchmarking but with no London wide survey taking place any more it will not be possible to benchmark in the same way as in previous years.

Supplementary

The Leader announced at last week's meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission that a consultation would be launched in September on the level of council tax. For the sake of transparency, can he set out for this chamber both the timetable for the consultation and proposed costs. And can he explain how he is intending to ensure that not only is it fair and balanced but that as many residents as possible have the opportunity to contribute?

Reply

We undertake surveys regularly at LB Merton. Yes, we will liaise with residents through My Merton. We have an excellent staff who will carry out the annual residents survey, which we weren't able to do this year but will endeavour to do next year. The dates for consultation will be fleshed out in the very near future.

From Councillor Abigail Jones to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Environment and Housing

Could he update us on his plans for improving our transport infrastructure?

Reply

Improvements to Merton's transport infrastructure are guided by the Mayor's Transport Strategy and Merton's Local Implementation Plan (LIP)

Our Transport Vision

That in 2031 Merton is a place where people would chose to use sustainable transport modes. It will have a safe, accessible and sustainable public realm with reducing levels of traffic congestion.

Objectives

- Mitigate against the negative impact of transport on climate change;
- Reduce road traffic casualties;
- Encourage active transport (walking and cycling);
- Reduce the impact of traffic congestion levels;
- Contribute to the improvement of all public transport and community transport services;

- Improve the general transport infrastructure, including arrangements for parking and loading;
- Improve accessibility and address the issue of social inclusion within the transport network; and
- Further develop Merton's relationship with strategic partners to support the regeneration and reinvigoration of the town centres in the borough

Key Challenges

- Conversion of town centre one-way systems to two-way working;
- Road traffic casualty reduction;
- Public transport provision;
- Balancing the road space requirements for all transport modes with the need to reduce traffic congestion;
- The condition of footways and carriageways, street clutter and confusing signage; and
- Parking for all road users and freight access to local business centres

Funding

The key funding source for the LIP programme comes from Transport for London (TfL). Merton also seeks to maximise other funding sources via developer contributions, CIL, central government, Mayor of London, public transport providers and partnerships with the business community and Merton Partnership.

Major Projects

Merton's Major Scheme projects form an integral part of the borough's regeneration and investment programme. Following the successful delivery of Raynes Park Enhancement Plan in 2011 and Destination Wimbledon Major in 2012, focus has now shifted towards developing similar schemes in Merton's remaining town centres.

The approach and plans for each scheme has been individually shaped to address the specific strengths and problems of the area in partnership with the wider community, local businesses and other stakeholders.

The areas in order of priority are:

- Rediscover Mitcham
- Connecting Colliers Wood
- moreMorden

Rediscover Mitcham

A major regeneration scheme for the transformation of the transport offer and public realm is progressing well in Mitcham Fair Green with the first phase recently completed including;

- New Market Square & feature lighting
- Refurbished Clock Tower and wild-flower gardens
- Majestic Way refurbishment and cycle lanes
- Introduction of short term parking around Fair Green
- Croydon Road segregated cycle lanes
- Bus stop accessibility enhancements, around Mitcham

- Restoration of Three Kings Pond with improved water quality and biodiversity.

The next phase of Rediscover Mitcham will start late July 2016 and run till December 2016 which will see the re-introduction of buses in London Road, increasing Mitcham's public transport accessibility levels and directing footfall towards businesses in the town centre.

Connecting Colliers Wood

The area of Colliers Wood around the station has a rich history, is crossed by the River Wandle, is well served by open space, benefits from good transport links and has strong retail offer and Colliers Wood Tower's transformation continues apace. Yet despite its strengths the area presents visitors and residents with a poor impression of a low quality and disjointed public realm dominated by the busy A24.

Connecting Colliers Wood is transforming the town's public spaces. Due to complete in August 2016, Colliers Wood will have new paving, better lighting, CCTV and cycle parking around the station. Baltic Close is transformed into a pedestrian and cycle friendly home-zone with improved access to the Wandle Trail.

Further improvements to the riverside @ M&S-Sainsbury's include new paving, lighting and wider footpaths and riverside piers. The road system has been simplified to improve traffic flow and provide more convenient and shorter pedestrian crossing points.

The public realm design detail begins to reveal the area's rich heritage (Colliers Wood gets its name from the charcoal works in the area) emphasised with charred timber cobbles and lamp columns. Wandle Park gateways are made of metallic glazed brick reflecting the lustre-wear from William De Morgan's factory and the areas new benches are bespoke William Morris patterns, reflecting the large printing blocks that would have been found at Abbey Mills.

moreMorden

At the heart of Morden town centre is the busy A24 London Road, which divides the town centre in two. The bus station outside the tube at Morden is convenient for commuters but presents an unwelcoming environment to visitors to Morden and suffers from poor air quality.

Overall, the design and quality of streets and public spaces for pedestrians, motorists, cyclists and public transport users in Morden is under-par and the council has spent the past 18 months preparing the evidence base and research that will support a £9m Major Scheme package of works by Merton Council and TfL to overhaul Morden's public realm. The first stage was approved in April 2016.

We are proposing to reduce the dominance of traffic, remove the gyratory, create new public spaces and achieve a step-change in the quality of Morden's High Street.

There's a lot of testing still to do and the council will consult on options in due course. The scheme would be implemented in 2018/19.

Crossrail 2

Crossrail 2 is set to be a huge project which will have a significant impact on Wimbledon town centre. In the long-term, Crossrail 2 will bring opportunities to the area. We are a pro-growth borough and want the best for Merton.

All parties at Merton Council support Crossrail 2 in principle, but not at any cost. The council has a duty to represent current businesses and residents of the borough and has significant reservations about the proposals. As they stand at the moment, they will cause an unacceptable level of upheaval and disruption for businesses and residents. The council recognises its duty to represent the people living and working in Merton. The welfare and interests of those who would be directly affected by the works and the eventual development will continue to be its priority.

We are working closely with TFL to assess various options and the impact of Crossrail 2 in Merton.

Supplementary

Can the Cabinet Member update us on what we are doing to convince the Government that the current plans for Crossrail 2 won't work for Wimbledon residents and businesses.

Reply

The Council supports Crossrail 2 but not at any cost. We are working very closely with businesses and local residents in Wimbledon about the proposals which are unacceptable. I am also liaising closely with the GLA and TfL and shortly I'll be meeting with the Deputy Mayor for Transport.

Clearly Crossrail 2 will bring huge economic benefits to the town but we must ensure that issues in terms of retail businesses are addressed. We want a thriving business community in Wimbledon, but we also recognise the considerable role of retail in the town centre.

There will be further consultation by Crossrail 2 in September and I look forward to working with residents, businesses and councillors about the proposals and to engaging with the local community to ensure there are proposals that work for them.

From Councillor Linda Taylor to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

How much does the Council spend each year on grass cutting in the borough?

Reply

The cost of grass cutting in the borough is not a specific item in itself within the Greenspaces' financial accounts, owing to the manner in which the grounds maintenance service as a whole is delivered within Merton. The actual spend can only be estimated therefore.

The core grass cutting service within Greenspaces, covering parks, open spaces and highways verges is delivered by 6 full-time grass cutting staff (4 for parks & open spaces; 2 for highways) supported by 4 seasonal staff for the highways operation during the cutting season).

The core team equipment includes 2 tractors, 4 ride-on mowers, plus assorted smaller powered tools, including pedestrian mowers, strimmers and blowers.

Fuel, oil, sundry small parts and spares and regular equipment servicing and maintenance are all relevant costs.

The borough's conservation hay meadows are cut by specialist agricultural contractors annually at an additional cost.

Excluding the capital costs of the team's operational equipment and relevant management support costs, the front-line delivery costs of the grass cutting operations, including staff, fuel, servicing, etc. as outlined above, is estimated to be in the region of £225,000 per annum.

Supplementary

If the Cabinet Member is anything like me he will have received very many complaints about delays in cutting grass verges and small green spaces and pocket parks. I would like to know if he will apologise to the residents for the very poor value for money that they have received this Spring from the grass cutting service. Will he guarantee the outsourcing of Merton's parks maintenance to a third party will not lead to the council losing control of the grass cutting schedule, or that the lessons learned from this year's copious problems would be addressed or rectified in future years?

Reply

Yes of course it is a great shame that the grass verges have grown fast in this very wet weather, and it's regrettable that there have been delays in getting them cut. This isn't an excuse but this is something we contract out because we don't have the staff to do it, and because it's not very well paid, the contracting company has difficulty in recruiting staff. It's something we've been dealing with and we do hope it will be sorted out in the very near future.

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

Does the Cabinet Member think the leaseholders of the Watermeads estate have been treated properly by Circle Housing Merton Priory over the cost of repairs and maintenance to their homes?

Reply

The Council has taken advice from Circle Housing Merton Priory and is assured that residents of Watermeads estate have been treated fairly and in

accordance with Section 20 consultation, which commenced on the 7th October 2015. As part of this process the main issues and concerns coming from residents were failure to consult, unreasonable costs, unnecessary works and disruption. In order to deal with these matters Circle Housing Merton Priory commissioned independent reports on all areas of concern and Circle have now reached a decision to carry out remedial work in a number of areas rather than full replacement. This has resulted in a reduction in overall costs from £2.1 million to £1.2 million. Revised costs were sent to leaseholder in week commencing 6th June and they were invited to a "meet the contractor" which occurred at the end of June. The work has now commenced and is expected to take 16 weeks.

Supplementary

I would like to ask if the Cabinet Member would agree with me that he might get a better view of how leaseholders are being treated by talking with leaseholders and councillors without whose intervention, the leaseholders would have been overcharged by £10K each.

Isn't it time that the relationship we have with them came to an end and we gave this organisation a good kick up the backside for a persistent failure to do things properly.

Reply

I recently met the Chief Operating Officer of Circle Housing, Austin Reid, and I expressed the concerns which I know many members share about the performance of Circle Housing, which has in many areas been completely unacceptable, including their repairs services. A number of colleagues have spoken to me about issues experienced in their ward. Clearly there is a duty and responsibility for Circle Housing to put their house in order, and I am glad to meet with any councillors who have experience of problems and please feedback to me as they should be held to account for their performance, which has been pretty lamentable over the last few years.

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