

PRIORITY COUNCILLOR QUESTIONS FOR COUNCIL 6 APRIL 2016

Councillor Linda Kirby to the Cabinet Member for Education

Could the Cabinet Member update me on the performance of our primary schools?

Reply: As at March 2016, 85% of our primary aged pupils are attending good or outstanding provision as designated by Ofsted. This compares to 84% nationally and 88% in London. Our headline Key Stage 2 performance (pupils reaching level 4+ in reading writing and maths) has risen from 78% in 2013 to 82% in 2015. This is currently above the national average (80%) but slightly below the London average (84%). Our recently published Standards Report (February 2016) provides more extensive details on the performance of our schools as well as on our work both to raise standards and narrow the gap in outcomes between our most advantaged pupils and some of the groups which have historically done less well, nationally and locally.

I would commend colleagues to read the detailed report, to acknowledge the good work being done locally by the very strong partnership which exists between the local authority and primary schools, a partnership we all hold dear. I am sure my Labour colleagues, and indeed I know some of my opposition colleagues, believe that whilst there should be diversity of provision the LA should hold a role as the democratically elected accountable local body in leading the standards agenda locally as well as advocating for the needs of all pupils and in particular the most vulnerable pupils.

Supplementary

Sadly it seems the Government are determined to force all schools to become Academies, something not in their manifesto and insulting to local government.. Can I ask what impact you think this undemocratic proposal will have on our young people.

Reply

It does greatly concern me that the Government are seeking to make all schools Academies. This will cost over £1B and there will be no additional funding provided to local authorities for conversion of schools. I am also concerned that Regional Commissioners are remote. If our schools don't do well, you can hold me to account and ask me questions. The loss of accountability does actually concern me. I think we should put standards above tinkering with structures. This will take a huge amount of school time for what I believe is an unnecessary change. I believe it's an unnecessary change as our schools in Merton have a good track record. I am delighted that 100% of our secondary schools are now rated Outstanding or Good, as are 85% of our primary schools. Local Government has a good record in terms of schools and I hope the Government reconsiders and that the Conservative Opposition join us in opposing us, like 5m of their colleague have in the Local Government Association.

Councillor Suzanne Grocott to the Cabinet Member for Finance:

When is the Council's new website expected to be launched?

Reply: Our current website is fit for purpose and has frequently been judged one of the best local government websites, including being judged the top London borough website for customer satisfaction last year. We are therefore determined not to rush into implementing a new system before we are ready and intend to take a careful approach to implementing a replacement system to ensure it provides lasting benefits to residents and the council.

Officers are currently working with General Dynamics IT Ltd (the contractor delivering the new website and associated technology to support the Customer Contact programme) to establish a launch date for the new website.

The website itself as a set of designed pages within an agreed structure is virtually complete. We took the decision, however, that to launch it without some of the associated functionality that made it possible for customers to complete new end-to-end transactions would be of little benefit to our residents.

For this reason we've delayed the release of the new site until the automation of processes within the waste service is complete so that the new site can be tested and used with some meaningful transactions.

General Dynamics have encountered a number of unanticipated connectivity issues in developing the technology which have delayed the programme generally. The automation of waste processes has also taken longer than expected by General Dynamics – this is because we took the decision to move all the processes and data into the new contact management solution so a greater degree of rework was needed. We believe this will be of benefit to residents (through smoother and more transparent transactions) and the council (through reduced system integrations) in the longer term but it has had a short term impact on timescales. We are using the levers within our contract with General Dynamics to ensure that these delays are corrected and the council is not financially disadvantaged.

Taking all this into account, we are currently working towards a tentative soft launch in April. But this is subject to user testing and relies upon there being no further connectivity or technology issues.

Supplementary

This is one of a number of projects running behind budget. Given the importance of this and other infrastructure projects, would the Cabinet Member admit to the inclusion of a project update report within the monthly monitoring report, with the inclusion of projected completion dates and status updates?

Reply

We have a very good website that we are very proud of. The reason for updating it is to create greater functionality so people can carry on doing transactions. It would not be right to change a very good website.

This is a simple question about the website and when it is ready it will go live. It will improve services to residents.

Councillor Sally Kenny to the Leader of the Council

Could he update me on how the council as a whole is responding to the public health agenda?

Reply: The Council has responded positively and comprehensively to the opportunities that have arisen since many aspects of public health transferred to local authorities in April 2013.

The main statutory duties for public health that were conferred on local authorities by the Health and Social Care Act 2012 include the following:

1. Strategic leadership and advocacy for health and wellbeing
2. Commissioners of services including sexual health, substance misuse and NHS Health Checks
3. Commissioning support to the local NHS
4. Oversight for health protection
5. Production of an independent Annual Public Health Report (APHR) and membership of the Health and Wellbeing Board

Merton's second Annual Public Health Report was published in autumn 2015, titled 'The Time for Prevention is Now: Keeping People Healthy Reduces Health Inequalities'. It celebrates the progress made in improving public health since the transition of public health from the NHS to local government, as well as the challenges that remain to embed prevention across the business of the council and partners in order to reduce health inequalities.

The council with its partners established the Health and Wellbeing Board, and took the opportunity to have a peer review of this function in the autumn of 2013, with a positive outcome. This Board has published two Health and Wellbeing strategies (2013 and 2015) since then, and at the heart of these strategies has been a determination to use all parts of the council and the wider Merton Partnership to have a positive impact on people's health, increasing life expectancy and reducing health inequalities. The refreshed 2015 strategy was entitled Merton the Place for a Good Life, and had a strong emphasis on all determinants of health. Examples of how the council is playing a leading role include:

- Public health working with planning and licensing officers to shape the availability of healthy options on our high streets
- Work across parts of the council on a whole systems approach to obesity, with support from public health across London

- Public health working with early years officers to reshape our pre-school offer and ensure a co-ordinated approach between the council and the NHS.
- Using the opportunity of the commissioning model for adult education to ensure that this model can increase access to learning for more disadvantaged people and thus reduce health inequalities in the longer term
- Working with officers in Future Merton to ensure that regeneration opportunities are health enhancing
- Work on volunteering with pilots such as the Good Neighbour Scheme

The council has been positively supporting the emerging east Merton model of health and wellbeing. Whilst this has been largely led and resourced by the CCG, there is a shared understanding that improving health and wellbeing requires much more than an NHS reactive response, and therefore the council with other partners has been engaged in shaping these broader interventions. This is now a key area of focus for the health and wellbeing board.

The council has taken on responsibility for commissioning a range of mandated services including sexual health, drug and alcohol services, smoking cessation, and children's services. The public health team has worked with officers across the council to ensure effectiveness and value for money in these services, with some active re-commissioning having taken place.

Specifically from 1st October 2015, the council took on commissioning of the Healthy Child 0-5 services, which includes health visiting and Family Nurse Partnership (more intensive support for young parents aged 19 and under), which provides an opportunity for closer working with our children's centres, and development of an integrated 0-19 pathway across the local authority and NHS. This has been taking place at the same time as the commissioning of a new provider of NHS community services for Merton (Central London Community Healthcare), where the council has worked closely with the CCG to ensure that this can lead to improvements in effectiveness for local residents.

The Director of Public Health maintains oversight for health protection, for instance assurance of cancer screening programmes, and development of an action plan to improve immunisation services in the borough which was recently reviewed at Scrutiny. This responsibility is exercised in close conjunction with officers with civil contingencies responsibilities and with the Local Resilience Forum.

Supplementary

Can I ask the Leader to outline how we will carry the One You Programme forward, and can I also ask how his own health drive is progressing.

Reply

Thank you for a timely supplementary question. Today, we hear the WHO reported throughout the media that there is an unprecedented march of diabetes throughout the world with nearly 1 in 11 adults suffering. With regard to the One You programme, adults are being encouraged to take a new online quiz that asks "how are you" and gives personalised recommendations based on the results and gives

help on taking action. More than half of 40 – 60 year olds taking the quiz have said they would like to change their lifestyle because of the advice it gave.

I have undertaken a fitness regime, including taking the stairs, using the Step Jockey programme, which all staff are encouraged to do here in the civic centre. I've gone from 102 to 93 kilogrammes.

Councillor John Bowcott to the Leader of the Council:

What is the difference between Merton 'taxing' local people to provide Council services and the Government 'taxing' local people to provide Council services when there is a national need to repair finances?

Reply by the Cabinet Member for Finance

Councillor Bowcott raises an interesting question about the most appropriate form of taxation for local expenditure. Under the current government, there has been a significant withdrawal of funding for councils from the government, which is now encouraging councils to raise council tax. Our primary concern is that council tax is a relatively regressive tax, compared to other alternatives, and we are one of only 8 councils in the country to have frozen our council tax under George Osborne's "precept".

We feel council tax should be set at a level that is fair, and represents the high cost of living under both the current government and the previous coalition government. We also note that these governments have sought to offer tax cuts to millionaires, have agreed paltry tax settlements from wealthy corporations such as Google and have done little to discourage tax avoidance by wealthy individuals, as exposed in the "Panama papers", while at the same time introducing measures like the bedroom tax for relatively less well off families, cutting benefits to people with disabilities, reducing local housing allowances, and so on.

Our concerns about the government's unfairness are shared by many others, including his Conservative colleague Ian Duncan Smith who acknowledged that the government's proposed cuts to disabled people's benefits are "not defensible in the way they were placed within a Budget that benefits higher earning taxpayers."

This government's ideological tax policies which benefit the rich while punishing disabled people, contrast with Merton's approach. We have kept council tax, a regressive tax which hits the poorest hardest, low and have protected those on the lowest income from the government's cuts to council tax benefit.

Supplementary

Would the Leader explain to this Chamber and to residents why he did not accept the opportunity presented by Boris that would allow an unchanged council tax and some extra funding for the truly needy. If he feels that he has already answered that question, as I suspect he might, could he also explain how he proposes to consult with residents about future levels of council tax as he suggested in the budget speech.

Reply

I think it's a bit rich to be lectured by a party that allows tax evasion and gives tax cuts to millionaires. It's rich to be lectured about fairness in taxation by a party that introduces the bedroom tax and tried to introduce extra charges for the disabled so bad that the quiet man spoke up and said "no, that's too much for me".

Councillor Fidelis Gadzama to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture

Could he update me on the new arts space in Wimbledon library?

Reply: Arts Council England has awarded Merton Council a £62,000 grant which will be spent on refurbishing the back of Wimbledon Library to create a flexible out-of-hours performance and exhibition space. The award of the grant follows a successful bid from the council's libraries and heritage service.

The space will enrich the cultural offer to the people of Merton who will benefit from a broad arts programme. The project, led by Merton Council, is working in partnership with Wimbledon College of Art, Wimbletech, Attic Theatre Company, Wimbledon Bookfest, Merton Music Foundation and a range of other community organisations.

The refurbished space will be open this summer with a programme of events expected to be published in early June.

Supplementary

Can the Cabinet Member comment on how we have managed to keep all of our libraries open and can I congratulate him.

Reply

Thank you for congratulating me, but actually the success is down to hundreds of people working together in partnership. It started with the political will of this group, to make this initiative work, and the officers who created and manage the initiative, and the trade unions who helped to formulate a supportive role for our volunteers, and Merton Volunteer Centre, now part of MVSC who attracted and trained the volunteers and of course the army of volunteers from all over Merton, who work in our libraries every day, and our wonderful front line staff who organise them to best effect.

That's why we have the best regarded, most successful and cheapest libraries in London. That's why the Government task force has complimented us and actively sought our advice, included it in its reporting. That's why our service has won awards and why we may be up for some more in the future.

Councillor Janice Howard to the Cabinet Member for Finance:

Will the Cabinet Member confirm how many posts and in which Departments have been filled by non-permanent staff for a) more than 12 months and b) more than 24 months (i.e. 12 to 24 months and more than 24) and at what total cost for those

posts still filled on a temporary basis as at 31 March 2016 which have not been filled on a permanent basis for at least 12 months over the last two years?

Reply: Although, in most posts, staff will be recruited on a permanent basis, non-permanent staff may be appointed to fill roles in certain circumstances. For instance, non-permanent staff may be used to fill roles that need to be recruited quickly while a longer term appointment is made, roles for time-limited projects where a permanent post is not appropriate, roles that are business critical where applicants cannot be found to work on a permanent basis, and so on. Service Directors may also recruit temporary staff in the knowledge of a future restructure, in order to provide the same continuity of service while minimising redundancy costs to the council. There are also areas within the council where there are difficulties in recruiting to certain professional positions eg lawyers, engineers and Children’s social workers.

The process for recruitment, as well as for any extensions, is managed by HR, which demonstrates the need for the post, and a decision to recruit is authorised by finance, HR and the service Director.

The data below is based on agency staff, through our main contracts or other agreed HR recruitment arrangements on or over £30 per hour as at end February 2016. The estimated gross cost of these posts for the financial year 2015/16 is £1.9M, or approximately £55k per post (including employer costs), which reflects the specialist and highly qualified nature of many of the posts. Costs are met from a range of sources including contributions from schools, external organisations and external grant funding.

Department	12 months	24 months	Total (placements 12 months and above)	Note
Number of posts				
Corporate Services	8	4	12	1
Children, Schools and Families	8	5	13	2
Community and Housing	2	0	2	3
Environment and Regeneration	7	0	7	4
Total	25	9	34	

Notes

1. Includes 10 lawyers for which we have had 3 unsuccessful recruitment campaigns.

2. Social care staff, as need to maintain safe caseloads for staff, whilst undertaking rolling permanent recruitment. Working with the recruitment team in HR, there has been a successful rolling campaign in Children's Social Care to recruit permanent social workers with a dedicated micro site, golden hellos, exploring overseas appointments etc. but a number of social workers do not want to become permanent members of staff, so we work with them to ensure they are on the best contract arrangements for us. There are additional pressures because neighbouring boroughs pay more than us for permanent and agency staff.
3. No permanent recruitment as restructure planned to reduce redundancies.
4. 6 are covering engineers positions.

Supplementary

The Administration committed itself publicly to reduce the number of consultants in our employ and yet we see it has spent £1.9m on temporary staff in the last year alone. How exactly does that square with the business plan?

Reply

Obviously we've tried to reduce the number of temporary staff where appropriate. There are times when it is not, for example when working on short projects where the cost of full time employment would not be appropriate.

Because of the very high cost of living in London, a number of highly qualified people prefer to work as a agency staff. We have to ask ourselves if we want lawyers, and children's social worker posts that are vital to safeguarding the vulnerable, to up sticks and leave and those posts not to be filled? Where we seek to reduce the numbers of people who don't work permanently for us, we have to balance the issues. It's not straightforward. You can see we have some very highly qualified, specialist people whom we need working for the council.

Councillor Marsie Skeete to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Could he update me on how the council dealt with the aftermath of Storm Katie?

Reply: The greatest material environmental impact of Storm Katie was in relation to the borough's street trees. Our arboriculture contractors were on the ground dealing with tree issues from around 3am on Easter Monday, soon after the first reports of issues were received from the Council's Highways Street Inspectors, the police and members of the public via the Council's out-of-hours emergency contact centre.

Some 20 fallen, damaged or dangerous trees were dealt with during the following 12 hours, representing the most urgent needs on the highway. Less urgent needs were processed during the following 48 hours. Some 60 trees were recorded as sufficiently affected by the storm to require professional intervention, with damage ranging from fallen trees to large fallen branches.

The Highways team received over 50 out-of-hours call outs for assistance, 26 of which related to trees on the Highway and footway. All calls were responded to by 8pm on Easter Monday. We had cleared all trees causing any obstructions on the

highway and footways. The clearing of the cut trees followed on Tuesday and where arrangements for footway repairs were needed should have been completed by our highways contractor by 1st April.

A small number of damaged trees in parks were identified by Greenspaces staff. Those that were considered to pose an elevated risk to park users were made safe swiftly by our contractors. The parks staff themselves removed a number of large branches that were affecting boundary fences and footpaths.

Damage was reported to the roofs of two parks buildings as a consequence of the storm. In one case, Sherwood Recreation Ground, the park was closed pending the structure being made safe. Both locations have subsequently been inspected by Corporate Facilities to assess what remedial action is appropriate

Supplementary

Can I ask the Cabinet Member how we prepare for such eventualities.

Reply

The key is to be prepared for a rapid response to these events, particularly with fallen trees or damaged trees, to be able to deal with them quickly.

Councillor Linda Taylor to the Cabinet Member for Finance:

What plans does the Cabinet Member have for the Council to hold a financial interest in the new Wimbledon Stadium should the application be agreed by the Mayor of London?

Reply: The Council has no plans to hold a financial interest in the stadium

Supplementary

The response very interesting, given that council officers tell me that an options appraisal is being prepared about whether the ownership of the site is in the interests of this Council. Can he explain how the Council can possibly afford to consider entering into this financial commitment but at the same time make swingeing cuts to adult services. How does the options appraisal tally with the Administration's complete refusal to consider retaining the freehold of sites already owned such as P4?

Reply

We look at things on a case by case basis. We're a business-like Council and look at what's best for council tax payers. We take a pragmatic approach. If there's something we can do to help AFC Wimbledon we would consider it. In this case there are no plans to hold a financial interest but if they want to talk to us in future, I would welcome that.

Councillor Peter McCabe to the Leader

Could he update me on what he has done to assist leaseholders on the Watermeads estate in Ravensbury?

Reply: I have worked with leaseholders and Circle Housing Merton Priory in order to address the leaseholders concerns regarding the potential costs of the planned works on their homes and the Watermeads Estate.

Following a request by myself and ward councillors, Circle have commissioned an independent report on the replacement of the roofs and communal electrics.

Remedial works will now go ahead on the roofs rather than a full replacement

Where leaseholders have previously replaced their own windows, and where those windows have the necessary certificates and approvals, those leaseholders will not now have to have their windows replaced again and will not be charged for the costs of the glazing in their neighbour's homes (however they will still be required to pay a contribution towards all frames and to the glazing in the communal areas). A final decision has still to be reached on the extent of the works on the communal electrics

I have agreed with Circle that the Section 20 Consultation process will not be finalised until the various leaseholder queries have been addressed.

Once the works and costs have been agreed, the invoicing to leaseholders will be delayed until April 2017.

Circle have agreed to continue the promise made at transfer to offer leaseholders an interest free two year period in which to pay the invoice for works. Further payment options are being explored with Circle, especially with regards to vulnerable leaseholders.

Supplementary

Does the Leader agree that the credibility of Circle Housing has been undermined by their disgraceful treatment of leaseholders, presented with a bill for £22,000 which has been stopped by residents and councillors working together?

Reply

We are very disappointed with regard to their approach to proposals about improvements to their properties and taking advantage of their legal ability to charge. I want to thank my ward councillor colleagues and the MP for Mitcham and Morden for their hard work, in engaging with the Leasehold Advisory Service, and giving some advice to residents. We will continue to hold Circle to account not only on these issues, but across the borough, and the regeneration of three estates. They have paused their approach and they are much better, and now know they must get it right from day one when engaging with residents.