

STRATEGIC THEME PRIORITY COUNCILLOR QUESTIONS FOR COUNCIL 6 APRIL 2016

Councillor Tobin Byers to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Could the Cabinet Member update me on what analysis the council has carried out of the impact of the government's bedroom tax and benefits cap on our most vulnerable residents?

Reply: We are very concerned about the additional hardship that many of our residents may face as a result of reductions in their income.

The council's welfare reform and financial resilience group, chaired by Simon Williams, regularly considers the impact of welfare reform upon our residents in conjunction with voluntary sector organisations. We have looked at the impact of different welfare reforms and how we can work together to support residents. One initiative of the group is a joint arrangement with the council and CAB to pilot an additional Welfare Disability Benefits officer to support residents with advice and applications for welfare benefits, this initiative alone will see an estimated £267,000 per year in additional income for 97 customers interviewed and helped between July 2015 and December 2015.

We have been supporting residents affected by both the benefit cap and under occupation (bedroom tax) charge through additional payments of Discretionary Housing Payments. In 2015/16 we paid just under £257,000 to affected residents. 88 families affected by the benefit cap have been helped and 272 affected by under occupation (bedroom tax).

Supplementary

As the Cabinet Member will be aware, even though George Osborne has backed down on one of the more callous cuts in the budget, the Government is going ahead with other reductions to payments to thousands of disabled people. How would he characterise the Government's approach to disabled people who are out of work?

Reply

Not just disabled people who are out of work but in work also. I think the approach has been awful. We have seen six years of cuts to services for people with disabilities. It says something when Conservatives bring forward proposals that even Ian Duncan Smith cannot stomach any more, but we couldn't stomach them in the first place.

Councillor Charlie Chirico to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:

Can the Cabinet Member tell me what assessment was made of the impact on local community safety of the dimming of street lights after 8pm in Trinity ward? Given I

have had residents in Trinity Road complain that their street is now considerably darker in the evenings and they feel less safe, what communication did the Council have with affected residents prior to this change?

Reply: A full impact assessment was made on local community safety and reported to the Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel before we started to roll-out LED street lighting in the Borough, which incorporated a dimming regime after the peak hours. This is in-line with the Council's policy to improve road safety, crime & the fear of crime and to increase the feeling of security during the night-time environment.

Our capital relighting programme is now solely focussed on replacing existing lighting with white LED (Light Emitting Diodes) which is more energy efficient than the current type of lighting used and virtually maintenance-free. This will significantly reduce future energy, carbon tax and maintenance costs to help meet the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy saving targets, Merton's Community Plan objectives and the Council's Carbon Reduction Commitment & Local Climate Commitment targets to reduce CO2 emissions. All new lighting is designed and installed to meet the current BS requirements and we have installed nearly 4,000 across the borough with minimal complaints. We have in fact received a number of compliments on the new LED lights, with requests for further roll-outs.

The new LED lighting in Trinity Road has a very good colour rendition, which will allow drivers and pedestrians to see objects and hazards in their true form and colour. (For example, the old orange lights mean that you see objects in greyscale). The White LEDs provide a clearer spectrum of light. It also has reduced glare as the light is directed downwards onto the road and pavement where it's required. The previous lighting had wasted light (light pollution) and directed light upwards giving the perception that the road was brighter but this is not energy efficient.

There is no statutory requirement to consult with residents on new lighting, but as with the other roads where new LED lighting has been installed, a night-time visit to Trinity Road was done at the beginning of February and our informed opinion is that it is very well lit.

Supplementary

My question is about the dimming of lights in Trinity and residents not being consulted by the Council beforehand. A number of residents of Trinity Road do not agree with the Council's idea of an informed opinion that that their road is well lit and when I raised this with officers, the fact that none of the ward councillors or resident had been consulted, I was told it would be an "administrative nightmare" to consult with residents no this. Does the Cabinet Member agree with the officer's view on the value of consultation with local residents? If not, would he at least agree to ensure that residents and councillors will receive at least advance notice of major changes to street lights in future?

Reply

In fact, we are talking about replacing street lights across the whole borough and the roll-out of LED lighting is not happening just in Merton, but happening across the country. People often don't like change and think it's a bad thing. But with the new LED lighting, natural colours and definition are observed by the person subject to the street lighting, rather than things being in a greyscale, which is what we have with the previous lighting.

On every ground, safety, environmental, reduction of use of energy and cost, LED lighting is a good thing. It has been a subject to a full report on local community safety to the Sustainable Communities O&S Panel which is our means of addressing these technical issues, of informing councillors. I wouldn't accept we have been poor on consultation. We're doing it across the borough. We've been in the public domain and everyone's doing it.

Councillor Katy Neep to the Cabinet Member for Education

In terms of the diversity of schools governing bodies, could the Cabinet member update us on the re-constitution of school governing bodies in line with the government's decision to reduce local authority representation.

Reply: All Merton maintained schools have reconstituted and each continues to have a Local Authority nominated governor representative. Following the recent announcement from central government of the proposed academisation of all schools, officers have begun to work through details of the implications for school governance and the future of Local Authority representation on governing bodies.

Supplementary

Given that LA representation on governing bodies has already been reduced could the Cabinet Member comment on the Government's recent decision to axe parent governor membership and how it will further reduce diversity on school governing bodies.

Reply

This causes me considerable concern in terms of accountability, because parents know their schools and are committed to them and give great time to them. I am concerned about diversity of school governing bodies and this change will not address that. It's important to keep parent governors on school governing bodies and this is a wrong decision by the Government. It seems that remoteness and lack of accountability is the order of the day for this Government.

Councillor Adam Bush to the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities:

Can the Cabinet Member tell me what the Council is doing to respond to the Government's recent announcement about tackling inequalities across the public sector, in particular with regard to the recommendations from the Bridge Group on

socio-economic diversity in the civil service and the introduction of an 'inequality index' and name blind recruitment?

Reply by the Cabinet Member for Finance

The Bridge Group report (commissioned by the Cabinet Office and published in Feb 2016) entitled 'Socio-economic diversity in the Fast Stream' looked into social mobility in the Civil Service in relation to graduate recruitment.

A number of measures were announced by Matt Hancock, Minister for the Cabinet Office in response to the report, including:

- Rolling out name-blind recruitment across the public sector to make sure that jobs are awarded on merit alone – the NHS and Civil Service will roll out name-blind recruitment (i.e. names of candidates redacted) by 2020
- Publishing the pay ratio of the salaries between the median and highest paid employees – this 'inequality index' will allow taxpayers to hold the government to account
- Creating over 200,000 apprenticeships in the public sector by 2020, of which over 30,000 will be in the Civil Service
- Taking graduate recruitment outside of London by establishing regional assessment centres
- Urging Britain's major employers to take a similar approach to inequality

The current position at Merton is:

- The Council doesn't undertake a name-blind recruitment process at present. There is the opportunity to include such a process in a new recruitment system currently being procured.
- Pay ratios are already published on the internet via the Council's annual Pay Policy Statement, approved by full Council each year. Merton's current information is:
 - o Pay ratio of 1:11 between highest and lowest paid. Sadly the government have not yet made the civil service pay ratio public.
 - o Median pay ratio of 1:7
 - o Gender gap ratio is -2% or £539 (i.e. females earn on average more than men)
- The Council already operates an apprenticeship scheme. As part of the scheme priority is given to Merton's Looked After young people and young people that reside in the borough. We are reviewing recently announced legislative changes including an apprentice levy and apprenticeship targets for public sector bodies, to see how Merton might best respond.
- The taking of graduate recruitment outside of London is to address specific issues within the Civil Service who have working locations across the UK. Merton currently sources its graduate recruitment via the National Graduate Programme.
- Merton currently pays its staff the London Living Wage of £9.40 an hour
- The Council's recruitment process is designed to be non-discriminatory.

Supplementary

Can the Cabinet Member explain to me how the Council is currently monitoring levels of community cohesion here in Merton; given there has been no annual residents' survey since 2014. What is the Cabinet Member for Community Safety and Engagement doing to ensure how well people from different backgrounds are settling in Merton?

Reply by the Cabinet Member for Finance

Unfortunately the company who normally conducts the Annual Residents Survey was not able to do it last year, so we're actively pursuing a new way to engage in that information. Purely coincidentally, a few of us on both sides of the Chamber have been doing a little bit of research on community cohesion on doorsteps. The reality is that we live in a community that really gets on well with each other. We don't have major problems or tensions between different communities. Most people I speak to in all parts of the borough think that Merton is really a fantastic place to live, and one of the things they like about it is being in a mixed community that gets on well with each other.

Councillor Laxmi Attawar to the Interim Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Could the Cabinet Member update me on how she has been ensuring we continue to focus on delivering quality children's services those of our children most in need?

Reply: Merton's Safeguarding and Looked After Children Services were last inspected in January 2012. The overall effectiveness of these services and our capacity for improvement were both graded Good by Ofsted. Since 2012 our own local expectations and those of the government and our regulators have risen. In a challenging contextual environment over the last 4 years Merton's Safeguarding Board (MSCB) partners and the council have remained committed to our continuous improvement journey to ensure we are making the most difference for the most vulnerable children and young people.

Over the last 4 years we have made a number of significant changes to deliver performance and practice improvements and to ensure that we remain fit for purpose. Our continuous improvement achievements include:

- Strengthening MSCB governance with a stronger focus on driving improvement with more robust challenge to all agencies, to provide an increased focus on delivery, performance and impact.
- Refreshing our Children and Young People's Plan with continued prioritisation of improving outcomes for Merton's most vulnerable groups of children and young people.
- Establishing a Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) with key partner agencies.
- Delivering an effective Transforming Families programme which is successfully 'turning around' families with multiple challenges.

- Achieving strong partner and parent/carer engagement in delivering wide-ranging Children and Families Act reforms.
- Maintaining a strong relationship with Merton's CCG including jointly re-commissioning community health services for children with NHS and Public Health colleagues, strengthening the service offer for more vulnerable children and young people.
- Undertaking a Child Sexual Exploitation peer review, refreshing our CSE strategy, guidance and support tools and implementing our improvement action plan.
- Achieving strong partnership engagement with the 'Prevent' agenda involving key partners including police, schools, early years settings and faith communities.
- Maintaining our strong focus on children and young people: informing case work, practice and strategic planning through our User Voice Strategy.

Over the last 4 years we have worked hard to establish the prerequisites to deliver good social work practice. We have evolved our structures to deliver to larger numbers of children and families and meet the challenges of a range of public policy initiatives. In a difficult regional recruitment context, we have increased our number of social workers, provided reasonable caseloads and continue to focus on reducing agency rates. We will maintain our sharp focus on this going forward.

This significant change programme has led to improvements in key performance indicators:

- The majority of Single Assessments are completed in 31 - 40 days (42%) with 90% completed with the statutory 45 days. Merton has the third highest completion rate in 45 days amongst its statistical neighbours and 6th highest in London.
- 100% of Merton's Troubled Families were 'turned around' in phase one.
- Merton had improved court proceeding timeliness from 72 weeks in 2011/12 to 24 weeks in Quarter 4 2013/14.
- 95% of all LAC were placed in good or better placements (March 2015) and none where in inadequate
- 75% of all LAC are placed within 10 miles of their home (2014/15).
- Since the establishment of a dedicated Access to Resources team in October 2011 we have approved 39 new in house foster carers (December 2015).
- Year on year we have improved the average time from receiving court authority to place a child and matching them with an adoptive family (Scorecard indicator A2) Merton's three year rolling average for this indicator is 193 (2012/15) - this is better than the national average of 217 days (2011/14).
- Merton has reduced First Time entrants from 188 (2009/10) to 88 (2013/14) and only 60 (2014/15)
- 96% of Merton's Youth Justice clients are in Education, Training or Employment (March 2015)

We continue to be ambitious to do better and have a continuous improvement approach as a department and partnership. We will continue to provide leadership and governance through our MSCB partnership identifying and addressing our shared priorities for improvement to maintain our ambitions for all our services to be good or better.

Supplementary

Could the Cabinet Member outline our approach in our safeguarding of all of Merton's children.

Reply

As you saw earlier, yes we've received an award but that was in partnership with lots of other agencies, and that's certainly the way we'll be moving in future when safeguarding our children, including those with disabilities. We have some fantastic partnership working going on, as I've seen in the last few weeks. This includes Public Health, the NHS, and the voluntary sector. Where appropriate, as we move forward, we'll look at the private sector as well because that's the way the Government is moving. We need to look at if our ambitions are achievable and ensure our outcomes are measurable. We also need to focus on training and retention of social workers.

I would like to thank Councillor Katy Neep for the initiative that she took at the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel in getting us to go into groups and look at our role as corporate parents. That's probably the most important way forward for all of us to remember that our role is one of corporate parent.

Councillor Michael Bull to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Cleanliness and Parking:

How much parking revenue has been lost as a result of the recent spate of thefts from parking meters in the borough?

Reply: In the period 24 August 2015 to 13 January 2016 a total of £22k has been stolen from parking pay and display (P&D) machines. The thefts occurred due to criminal damage caused by the use of electric drills used to drill into the P&D machines leading to small amounts of coins being stolen from each machine.

As a counter measure we have introduced reinforcing measures to the P&D machines which have stopped the criminals from being able gain access to the P&D machines. We have also increased the frequency of cash collections from P&D machines, so reducing the amount of monies in each machine should thieves manage to gain access.

These measures have greatly reduced the thefts and no losses have been reported since mid January.

Supplementary

£22,000 is a huge amount of revenue to have lost in a matter of a few months. Given the expense to the tax payer, what efforts is the Council making to try and claw back this money from the thieves and how confident is she that Merton will be able to protect against this crime in the future?

Reply

This is something that's happening in other boroughs as well. I don't know if the thieves have been caught although this certainly went to the Police. The moves that we are making, obviously you know that we have cashless parking in car parks. I think it's important that people do still have choice about how they pay. We are monitoring this, we haven't had any more thefts since January and there are more people collecting cash more frequently, which has a cost. I'm glad to say at the moment that it's not necessarily stopped but we are keeping a close eye on it.

Councillor John Dehaney to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Services and Parking

Could the Cabinet Member comment on what she is doing on ensuring that parked cars do not impede disabled residents access to pavements in the borough?

Reply: Having received a number of concerns from Merton's residents and pedestrians regarding vehicles obstructing pedestrian access on the pavement, the footway parking policy has been revised and the changes will be implemented from 4 April 2016.

From 4 April 2016 footway parking will only be allowed at certain locations and then only if a minimum gap of one metre has been left on the pavement for wheel chair users and pedestrians to pass the vehicle. Vehicles parked inconsiderately by not leaving a minimum gap of one metre on the footway, will be issued with a PCN.

Vehicles are not permitted to park on grass verges and as such will be issued with a PCN if parked on a grass verge.

There are 50 roads within the borough where it has been decided we will not enforce this policy because the narrowness of the road, coupled with the narrowness of the footway makes it impossible to force vehicles to leave a 1m gap between the vehicle and the property boundaries, without impeding the flow of traffic.

Supplementary

Could the Cabinet Member advise how this will be enforced across the borough.

Reply

This is something that's being just introduced now and we have a bedding in process. I know that there are some concerns that people have raised about wheelchairs passing through, people pushing buggies for some example. We are not enforcing for the next few weeks, we're looking at people's concerns and putting a note on windscreens to let people know that it will be enforced in future. Some people have contacted me, but I will be having meetings with officers from next week to look at concerns raised. If you have any, please contact me or the Head of Parking.

Councillor Stephen Crowe to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:

Could the Cabinet Member please provide a ward by ward breakdown of serious accidents in Merton that involve cyclists for the most recent year for which figures are available?

Reply: Accident records are released to the Council up to four months after any reported accidents.

Our latest data for the most recent annual period covers 1st November 2014 – 31st October 2015.

In this period, there were 6 serious accidents involving cyclists. Thankfully none were fatal.

Of these 6 accidents, 4 occurred in Colliers Wood ward, 1 in West Barnes ward and 1 in Ravensbury ward.

There were no other reported serious accidents involving cyclists for the rest of Merton.

Officers will assess the incidents reports to determine the cause of such accidents and where appropriate, recommend improvements to the cycle network as part of the borough's cycle infrastructure investment.

The Council also has an excellent programme of road safety education in schools, training for cyclists and specialist cycle awareness training for HGV drivers to ensure that Merton is as safe a place as possible to encourage cycling as a sustainable transport choice in Merton.

Supplementary

Thankfully there were no cycling fatalities but I see that there have been six serious accidents and we're all agreed that it's six too many. Could the Cabinet Member outline plans for 16/17 for new cycle quietways and similar facilities, and for improvements to existing facilities.

Reply

The main cycle quietway we'll be working on in the next year is the one from Clapham Junction to Wimbledon Town Centre, and the significant works along the Wandle Way, then coming out through the Poets Roads to cross Haydons Road. There will be some junction changes at Haydons Road which will have to be consulted upon with local residents. Then it's anticipated the quietway will go up South Park Road and part of the issue there is how we allow access to residents whilst reducing some of the through traffic, making it safer for cyclists to use that road as well as local residents. These are particular issues that we must get right, and consult with residents.

There is a quietway, mainly funded by Kingston, that will be coming into Raynes Park and we're just consulting with local residents about the alterations needed there. But that will end before it reaches Coombe Lane. To take that on, we would have to seek to prioritise future cycle expenditure to be able to link it with our other quietway that goes from Raynes Park to Wimbledon Town Centre.

There are also extensive works continuing to put in a new cycle way at Croydon Road from Croydon into Mitcham. This has been agreed by the Mitcham Common Conservators. This should make cycling and walking along Croydon Road safer than it has been in the past, in an area where there have been significant accidents in the past.

Councillor Dennis Pearce to the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities

Could the Cabinet Member update me on the work of the council-backed interfaith forum and how the different communities in Merton work together for the good of all residents?

Reply: Merton has a diverse religious and cultural mix and the Faith and Belief forum brings together people from different religious backgrounds to celebrate this diversity, promote understanding and join together to tackle issues of mutual concern.

The borough marked Interfaith Week in November 2015 with a number of different events. There was a discussion about 'Faith in the Media' held in the Council Chamber with guest speakers including Dr Chris Allen from the University of Birmingham and Helen Freeman, Principal Rabbi from West London Synagogue. There was also a very popular afternoon tea event organised by the Muslim Women of Merton and held at the Islamic Community Centre where attendees sampled different teas from around the world.

The Faith and Belief Forum has also worked with Faith in Action and the YMCA to support homeless people in Merton by providing venues and volunteers. It has also coordinated support to the Food Banks in the borough. Merton's religious communities have also come together as part of the borough's offer of support to refugees from the conflict in Syria.

Supplementary

Will the Cabinet Member join with me in extending our sympathies to the Ahmadiyya community based in St Helier ward on the recent tragic killing of one of their community last week.

Reply

I would like to express my sincere sympathy on behalf of all members of the Council, from all parties, to the Ahmadiyya community.