

Council 14 September
07a_Councillor Priority Strategic Theme Questions

Councillor Judy Saunders

To the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Environment and Housing

Could he outline how the Housing and Planning Act will impact on Merton residents?

Reply

We have been preparing for the Housing and Planning Act for some time so that we can seek the opportunities it presents and minimise the challenges that may arise from it. A report under the Sustainable Communities and Transport strategic theme to February's full council summarised the wide range of Housing and Planning Act provisions. Most of the major changes require secondary legislation or further government guidance before they come into place, including the introduction of Starter Homes (homes for sale costing up to £450,000) as part of affordable housing. Officers are liaising with other London boroughs, the Greater London Authority and with government to keep track of the key matters and will keep councillors informed.

Supplementary

I am very concerned about this myself. Is the Cabinet Member as worried as I am that the Act will result in families being forced out of their homes and having to move miles away from their children's schools, and the impact this will have on children and families? Should he, as I am, be ashamed of this government and their actions?

Reply

The Housing and Planning Act is absolutely appalling in terms of social engineering and also the impact it will have on people living in this borough. We have already seen the bedroom tax, rising rents, unaffordable rents and we're seeing a diminishing supply of affordable homes which will be a consequence of this Act, with the right to buy for housing associations. This is increasing demand in terms of people having to be housed outside the borough, breaking families and communities apart. The government should be completely ashamed of itself for this Act and I do share the concerns of Councillor Saunders.

From Councillor Suzanne Grocott

To the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Environment and Housing

In light of the recommendations produced by last year's cross-party task group, can the Cabinet Member update me on how the council is now using the various powers it has at its disposal to challenge developers to ensure the provision of more affordable housing?

Reply

The council carefully reviews planning applications to ensure that we get the most affordable housing we can within government's national policies and consistent with our own planning policies locally. As a council we carefully scrutinise the viability assessments developers submit with their planning applications and employ independent consultants to review these where necessary as we are committed to providing 40% in line with our planning policy. We are also working closely with the new Mayor of London who is putting together a team of experts to scrutinise developer's submissions even further.

Following the Housing Task Group's recommendations, I am now taking a paper to Cabinet to propose even greater robustness in the way that the council deals with planning applications, including publishing developer's viability submissions for greater scrutiny by councillors and the public.

Supplementary

The Mayor Sadiq Khan pledged 50% of all homes to be affordable. He has just enabled Galliard Homes to get away with just 9.6% of affordable housing on the Wimbledon Stadium site. It is a measly proportion of one of the largest developments in Merton for years. Can the Cabinet Member tell me why the new Mayor has failed one of the first big tests of his mayoralty and also why Merton Council and Steve Clarke have failed future generations of Merton residents by letting large developers behave in this way.

Reply

I am slightly surprised by the supplementary. There was a full viability assessment carried out in terms of the stadium and the level of affordable homes being provided for. The Planning Committee, which includes Conservative Members, approved the application for AFC unanimously. Can I say Madam Mayor, I am absolutely shocked by Councillor Grocott, because judging by that answer, she is against the AFC Wimbledon Stadium, and is probably working hand in glove with Wandsworth Council.

Councillor Dennis Pearce To the Leader of the Council

What contact has the Leader had with the Mayor of London's office regarding sustainable communities and housing issues?

Reply

Since Sadiq Khan so convincingly won the recent election for Mayor of London I have spoken to the Mayor and his office on a number of occasions on these issues. In particular I have had discussions with the Deputy Mayor for Housing James Murray on how Merton can help deliver on the Mayor's commitment to increasing the supply of affordable housing, which Merton is well qualified to do having met our affordable housing targets. I have also discussed Crossrail2 with the Mayor's office and expressed our strong wish to see alternative proposals put forward that will safeguard existing businesses and reduce the impact on local residents. I also wrote to the Mayor in relation to his consultation on the AFC Wimbledon stadium application which the Mayor has now agreed to hand back to Merton.

Supplementary

What will the Cabinet Member do with the Mayor of London to ensure the total number of homes built across our borough increases, in order to tackle the shortage caused by the previous Mayor, Boris Johnson and his mean minded Conservative

pals in government, and that the amount of affordable homes, which we also desperately need, increases as soon as is possible?

Reply

I will work exceedingly hard to gauge with the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, who has a land base bigger than any other individual politician ever, and who will work with me to make sure that we have the level of housing that this borough deserves. We have a friend in thought. We have someone who doesn't make mistakes unlike the last Mayor who made a huge mistake in calling in the AFC Wimbledon application. Did you know Councillor Grocott, the stadium size alone, with 60 affordable homes, will amount to nearly half the affordable homes built in the whole borough of Wandsworth in the whole year 2014/15.

**From Councillor Najeeb Latif
To the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Environment and Housing**

For how long is the legal obligation to bring homes at High Path, Eastfields and Ravensbury up to the Decent Homes Standard going to be suspended so that Circle Housing can fulfil their contractual requirements?

Reply

Compliance with the Decent Homes Standard for High Path, Eastfields and Ravensbury estates are not currently suspended. The latest data from CHMP shows 0.24% of housing stock across all estates in Merton (not exclusively High Path, Eastfields and Ravensbury) remain outstanding. This is equal to 14 properties. In 6 cases the tenants have declined the works and the remaining 8 have plans in place to meet the standard. Only 1 home on the High Path Estate is non compliant with the Decent Homes Standard and the property is included in CHMP plans to make this compliant. Circle have told us they are committed to ensuring that properties on these three estates are still kept in good repair whilst waiting for the regeneration plans to be approved and hopefully implemented.

Supplementary

Can the Cabinet Member confirm what requirements and obligations there are for Circle or the new Circle / Affinity Group to bring housing on these estates up to standard as soon as possible, should the regeneration not go ahead for any reason? Also what guarantees are there that the upgrade of the Eastfields estate will definitely happen, even when High Path and Ravensbury have been revamped?

Reply

As a council we have been actively working with Circle Merton, in terms of actually addressing the obligations they have in terms of improving homes in the borough. I will say in terms of Eastfields, we are committed that it will actually go ahead and happen. It's important that the rights of residents are respected and that it does happen because it will improve the quality and standard of housing which we have on those estates which is not actually up to scratch. Of course, Circle Merton will have to address those issues if it doesn't go ahead but we are seeing this as a top priority for all three estates; High Path, Ravensbury and Eastfields, because this will immeasurably improve the quality of homes and the communities.

Councillor Laxmi Attawar

To the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Environment and Housing

What progress has been made since 2010 on developing the Colliers Wood Tower, which was voted the ugliest building in London in 2006?

Reply

Colliers Wood tower is now unrecognisable compared to what it was in 2010.

For over a decade the former Brown & Root tower stood derelict whilst various planning applications were made, and withdrawn.

Since 2010, the Council's regeneration team has worked closely with the land owner / developer to unlock the development. This included bringing the design up to date (the new glass is a step change in quality from the 2003 permission to simply paint it white) and re-assessing the development viability and phasing, to ensure that regenerating the existing tower was a priority over and above any future phases.

Work has progressed at a pace since construction started in early 2015. Much of the work was behind the scenes in terms of stripping out the remains of the Brown & Root tower and installing new infrastructure.

Since early 2016, the glass cladding has been installed and is now largely complete, which has utterly transformed the look of not only the tower, but has brightened up the centre of Colliers Wood. Shaking off its carbuncle tag has attracted more investment in the area and is a key component of our strategic vision for Colliers Wood town centre.

Over the next six months, works will continue to fit out the inside of the building which will provide 150 apartments for rent.

The area has also benefited from a significant investment in the street scene and public realm funded by the Mayor of London, Merton Council and TfL. Baltic Close in particular, has undergone an incredible transformation in the past year. The plaza at the base of the tower will be the main focus of the public space improvements and should be complete early 2017.

Supplementary

Will the Cabinet Member please pass on the thanks of the Colliers Wood community to the staff of the council for the amazing job they have done on the tower and the surrounding area, and will they help us remind people of Colliers Wood and South Wimbledon of the transformation that has taken place.

Reply

Can I thank the work of all the Colliers Wood councillors in terms of the Brown & Root Tower. It's true to say that this has been a long-running issue over many years and it took the active involvement of the Labour Administration to actually start to

address the issue and get things moving. Every time I go past the tower it's really welcoming it being regenerated, being improved. I would also like to thank the work of Siobhain McDonagh, the Labour MP who has been working with the council to ensure that things actually got moving. This will make Colliers Wood a better place and will be even better once the tower is completed, which I understand is not too far off now.

**From Councillor Gilli Lewis-Lavender
To the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture**

In view of the fact that dog walkers must now either place their dog's excrement in the ordinary litter bins or take it home with them, is the Cabinet Member aware that there has been an increase in the number of owners who are not scooping up the dog waste? Is he not concerned about the increased danger of Toxocariasis that presents severe risks particularly to young children?

Reply

There has certainly been an increase in the number of reported incidents of residents not scooping up their dog mess in parks recently, but whether that is a genuine effect, or the result of an increased awareness of the problem arising from the change of policy is unclear. Certainly there appears to be some discontent amongst some dog walkers at the change, but since there are in excess of 400 litter bins in parks, including additional ones added following the withdrawal of dog waste bins, it is the Council's view that there is more than sufficient provision of waste bins overall, provided that dog walkers are prepared to behave responsibly and respectfully to the environment and other park users. Individuals who fail to clean up after their dog are committing an offence under pre-existing Dog Control Orders and are at risk of being issued with a Fixed Penalty Notice and a hefty fine.

Supplementary

At the last meeting, the Cabinet Member invited councillors to tell him where more bins are needed across the borough so they can be provided. Yet when I requested a new bin I was told by officers, and I quote "it is not our policy to replace and move dog bins with litter bins. This was a savings exercise in the Greenspaces and there are not additional resources to buy additional bins or staff to service them". Therefore isn't it the case, that far from improving the service to residents, this was a cost cutting measure and an excuse to issue more penalty notices?

Reply

Last week I was walking in Mostyn Garden and I put my foot into what the councillor was talking about. I thought is this the council's fault? Is it the dog's fault? Whose fault is it really? It's the owner's fault. Nobody forced that owner to get a dog. The owner allowed the dog to defecate freely on Mostyn Gardens which is how it ended up on my shoe. It is the owner who bears the responsibility. We, as a council, and we do this as a Labour Administration and you as a Conservative Administration. We provide litter bins for the benefit of decent public citizens and work on the basis that people will use those bins responsibly. If they choose not to use the litter bins, regardless of how many there are, and you know, we all know, that we can travel the length and breadth of this country and not see a single litter bin for miles. It's not the

answer, the answer is for individuals to take responsibility for their actions. If they don't, what we do is fine them.

Councillor Mary Curtin

To the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Environment and Housing

The housing crisis is one of the biggest challenges we currently face in Merton; what will your priorities be as cabinet member for housing?

Reply

My top priority is to address the housing crisis we face as a borough to ensure that we build more affordable homes that ordinary people can genuinely afford and that we maximise the supply of affordable homes in the borough.

That is why we are committed to working with the Mayor of London and Transport for London on building more than 1,000 new homes as part of Morden's Housing Zone and on ensuring that the major regeneration opportunities are maximised and delivered.

The rebuilding of High Path, Ravensbury and Eastfields estates is also a priority and we are working closely with Circle Merton to transform these communities by rebuilding the estates and providing the additional homes we so desperately need.

Later this year I hope that the council will support setting up a development company which could develop sites (on its own or with partners) to provide new homes for sale or rent and generate a revenue stream for future investment and increase our local housing supply.

Supplementary

Could the Cabinet Member tell me the number of people Merton has in temporary accommodation compared to other London boroughs, and how the council is addressing their housing needs.

Reply

In terms of people living in temporary housing, Merton continues to have the lowest number in London, which is testament to the work of Steve Langley and his Housing Needs Team which do an exemplary job. When we compare it to other boroughs, we look at Kingston, where our figure is 200, they are nearly 600. Wandsworth is 1100, Sutton is 372, Richmond which is a much more affluent borough than Merton is 241.

Clearly, this is more and more of a challenge because the number living in temporary accommodation has actually doubled in the past four years, which is extremely regrettable. Our Housing Needs Team is giving them advice in terms of housing options. It's getting more and more difficult in terms of social housing, so it does mean some people will have to unfortunately go outside of the borough. It's also as well, accessing private housing which is no easy thing because rents are rising as a consequence and housing allowances are being capped. It is a big challenge we

face but I am confident our team here in Merton will address the issues, but it's not easy dealing with some of the policies at present.

From Councillor Charlie Chirico
To the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Environment and Housing

Can the Cabinet Member please update me on whether confirmation has yet been received from Transport for London and the GLA on funding for the Wimbledon master plan?

Reply

Crossrail 2 and our Future Wimbledon project are a priority not only for unlocking economic growth, but for managing change strategically for the next 15 years. The Council is working in close partnership with TfL on alternative options for Crossrail, however, to date there has been no financial commitment from the GLA or TfL to support the Council's regeneration team in this project. There is a commitment to share data and studies that have been undertaken for Crossrail, which is positive, but a financial contribution has, as yet, not been forthcoming.

We recognise that there is considerable local interest in the masterplan and as cabinet member I have already met with residents' groups, businesses and attended forums to start this dialogue. I will continue to do this in advance of its publication as it's important to work with them in shaping our communities and listening to their viewpoints on creating a vision for Wimbledon.

Whilst the Council is funding the project at present, we will continue to pursue other sources of funding, including TfL and the GLA, for this vital project to ensure we not only create a great plan for our town, but ensure that it's also the best value for our residents.

Supplementary

Crossrail2 are due to hold their next consultation in the Autumn. Given the intense interest and concern about this issue from many residents in Wimbledon, will the Cabinet Member give a public commitment that this council will do all it can proactively to engage with residents this time round, including publicising the consultation by every means possible, and encouraging as many people as possible to respond?

Reply

Just last week, I was attending a meeting chaired by Councillor Dean on Crossrail2, I understand you couldn't be there, but I know Councillor Grocott was there as were other councillors as well. We are actively engaging with residents in terms of Crossrail2. We actively support Crossrail2 but not at any cost. I am also in the process of meeting with the Friends of Wimbledon Town Centre. I have met Leigh Terrafranca from the Wimbledon Hillside Residents Association to talk about this. I have also spoken with the Wimbledon Society about Crossrail2. Clearly the options will be published later on this year. When that happens it's important that residents are engaged and we are working with Crossrail2 in terms of having those opportunities for people to come along and have their say about whatever option is

proposed. It is my belief that Crossrail2 will benefit Wimbledon in terms of jobs and the local economy but also in relieving transport congestion which we know all too well we suffer from greatly, given the capacity issues at Waterloo. I look forward to working with Councillor Chirico and councillors from all sides in terms of Crossrail2. It is a big issue we face and we will be on the case to ensure that we have a solution.

Councillor Abigail Jones

To the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Environment and Housing

Would the cabinet member update council on the estates plan and the liaison he has had with Circle Merton in improving housing and building additional homes?

Reply

The council is finalising the Estates Local Plan (ELP) which will provide strategic planning guidance for any regeneration proposals for High Path, Eastfield's and Ravensbury estates which will increase the supply of new housing in Merton over the next 8-10 years.

The council consulted extensively with local residents in February and March 2016. All responses to the consultation are now online (anonymised, with personal details removed) at www.merton.gov.uk/estatesplan.

We'd also like to thank all residents who took the time to attend the consultation events and those who submitted responses to us.

Officers have been working through the feedback and making amendments to the Estates Local Plan (where relevant) with a view to taking the ELP through the Council's decision making process this autumn.

The feedback from the consultation and the revised Local Plan will be considered by the cross-party Borough Plan Advisory Committee (November) as well as Cabinet (November) and Full Council (November).

There is regular and ongoing liaison with Circle Housing Merton Priory on a number of matters including housing supply, maintenance, delivery on the promises of the Stock Transfer Agreement and the proposed merger with Affinity Sutton and ensuring Merton's residents (tenants, leaseholders and freeholders) benefit from better services as a result.

Supplementary

Irrespective of the merits or otherwise of the Estates Plan can he reassure me that councillors will do all they can to ensure that Circle continues manage repairs and improvements on our estates in the meantime.

Reply

The councillor brings out genuine concerns about performance of Circle Merton because it has been a cause for concern for this council, and I know councillors from across the chamber have had to deal with casework relating to Circle Merton and that has not been actively addressed. We also have issues in terms of the repairs service and improvements on the estates. I hope that things get better after the

merger with Affinity Sutton who I understand have a better reputation than Circle Merton. It is important that residents do have confidence in Circle Merton. That has a knock on impact in terms of their confidence in Circle Merton / Affinity to deliver regeneration for those areas. I will say to the councillors here this evening, this is something that I have actively said to Circle Merton, when I have met with them. We will not give them an easy ride on this. They need to address the issues. There are signs that it is happening but service improvement must be continuous. There has to be clear action to address the issues and it's something we've also communicated to the new Chief Executive, as the Leader recently had a meeting with him. These issues must be addressed in the new organisation going forward. We want to improve our estates but it's also important that our major social housing provider gets things right.

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