

07a_Councillor strategic theme priority questions

From Councillor Imran Uddin to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Could he update us on progress towards agreeing a balanced budget for 2017/18?

Reply

The council has a statutory duty to set a balanced budget for the following year. Proposals will be brought to Cabinet over the next few months in accordance with our Business Planning timetable, outlining measures to achieve this.

From Councillor Hamish Badenoch to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Can the Cabinet Member update me on the council's plans for engaging with residents and their concerns via Twitter?

Reply

Twitter is often an inadequate means for communicating with the public. Access to Twitter is not equal, and some users are particularly fixated, and this can lead to problems ranging from misinformation to personal abuse to presidents-elect abusing their powers to call for failed politicians to become ambassadors. There will be circumstances when it will be appropriate for the council, through its communications team, or even through individual councillors, to communicate on Twitter. However residents have a wide range of other channels to communicate with the council about their concerns more effectively, and we encourage them to use the most appropriate one in each case.

From Councillor Marsie Skeete to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Could she update us on the funding pressures she foresees in her department over the period of the MTFS?

Reply

Colleagues will be aware of the pressures on council budgets generally. In respect of children's services, I am being kept well informed of specific pressures in the department's budget both in the current year and also in the context of the MTFS. In 2016-17, these include predicted overspends on staffing; placement costs for looked after children, SEN Transport and costs associated with our response to unaccompanied asylum seeking young people.

The main pressure on staffing budgets results from the need to employ more expensive agency staff to fill key social worker vacancies. As a result of the implementation of specific recruitment and retention strategies, officers have made significant progress in employing more permanent social work staff – in the current year our agency rate for this group of staff stands at 20%, its lowest for many years. To September 2016, we had spent £178,000 less on agency social workers compared to the same period in the last financial year. However, because of the nature of the employment market for social work staff it is likely that budget pressures will continue to occur during the term of the MTFS.

As at end September 2016, LAC placement budgets are projected to overspend by £1.46 million in 2016-17. Placement costs vary significantly depending on the needs of children coming into care and the types of placements required to meet those

needs. Officers in the department's Access to Resources service routinely seek best value for the council when seeking placements for children. At a strategic level we continue to recruit more affordable in house foster carers in order to minimise use of more expensive independent sector providers. The council makes use of regional and sub-regional placement 'framework' agreements and consortia arrangements designed to drive down costs. Officers are also currently engaged in developing strategies to reduce the need to use more expensive residential placements. Although I anticipate limited growth will be provided in the MTFs for placement costs, this area will continue to face budget pressures going forward.

SEN Transport costs have increased in recent years, largely because of demographic reasons. In the current year officers have undertaken specific work to reduce pressures on this budget. Through more robust implementation of eligibility criteria, encouraging the use of Personal Budgets and obtaining lower costs for taxi journeys, we are spending some £188k less on these costs than in the same period last year. Additional developments are planned for next year – including the transfer of taxi procurement to CSF department – in order to further reduce pressure on this budget.

In 2016-17, spending on UASCs is increasing. While the council receives some central government grant aid it falls short of actual spend and our work with this group has become, effectively, an underfunded 'burden'. Due to international factors, numbers of UASC are likely to continue to grow nationally and across London particularly. Merton's Director of Children's Services is playing a lead role in the London-wide response to the most recent increase in UASCs and in the lobbying of government in respect of cost pressures arising. Officers are monitoring the implications on the council's budgets carefully and will continue to do so in the medium term.

From Councillor David Williams to the Cabinet Member for Finance

With reference to the Financial Monitoring Report for September 2016 - showing a projected year end overspend by service departments of £9.979million - and the recommendation of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission to Cabinet regarding the draft Business Plan 2017-21 (in respect of meeting the Council's statutory duties in relation to adult social care), what assurance can he give the Council that the latest projected Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) can be balanced in the next three years without an increase in Council Tax in 2017/18 or 2018/19?

Reply

Members will need to consider all options in relation to the statutory requirements for adults and indeed children's social care to balance the budget. We will need to consider the impact of the Autumn Statement today on our MTFs and await details of other information in order to be able to update it sufficiently. No options can be ruled in or ruled out until proposals are presented to cabinet for Council later in the year in accordance with the Business Planning timetable. It is quite clear that the government wants our Just About Managing residents to pay for its failure to tackle the social care challenge by introducing a so-called "levy" and by allowing its NHS to threaten to withdraw funding to councils that don't increase council tax. In contrast, residents can be assured we will be on their side and will be demanding our share of the £350m a week promised by members of the government for our

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health services, which was strangely absent from the Autumn Statement earlier today.

From Councillor Russell Makin to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Could he update us on our approach to sharing our services with other boroughs to save money in a time of government cuts?

Reply

Merton has been at the forefront of sharing services. In particular we have shared legal services, regulatory services, debt recovery services, internal audit, pensions administration. We are currently close to finalising the award of 2 tenders as part of a shared arrangement with three other neighbouring boroughs for our refuse collection, street cleansing and parks maintenance.

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

Can the Cabinet Member tell me:

- a) When the council will commence its consultation on how the Neighbourhood Proportion of the CIL contributions should be spent?
- b) What criteria it will use to determine where and how this money is spent?

Reply

- a) we are due to commence the Neighbourhood CIL Fund consultation on or around the 28th of November this year. We plan for it to run until the 19th of January next year.
- b) The government has rules setting out how the neighbourhood CIL must be applied locally. The Council will confirm assessment criteria for the allocation of the money in accordance with the government's rules following the conclusion of the consultation which will be published. Please refer to www.merton.gov.uk/cil for consultation and details.

From Councillor Mary Curtin to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Could he comment on the pressures on this year's budget and the financial challenge we make in relation to overspending services?

Reply

The problems mainly arise from Adult Services from increases complexity of care and increase in provider prices. This is common across many authorities with this responsibility. An action plan is in place working on mitigation measures and alternative options for dealing with the issues.

From Councillor Hamish Badenoch to the Cabinet Member for Street Cleanliness and Parking

Can the Cabinet Member please update the Council on details of progress made as part of the Phase C 'fine tuning' process for the waste services contract?

Reply

We are making good progress and ensuring the contract documents are clear and understood by all and that assumptions made as part of the final tender process are being firmed up.

We are still on target to conclude within agreed timescale leading to contract award in Mid December.

From Councillor Agatha Akyigyina to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Can he update us on our collection rates in relation to Business Rates?

Reply

As at the end of October we have collected 65.49% of the business rates charged for 2016/17. The total net debt collectable for the year is £89.2 million and so far we have collected £58.4 million. In addition we have collected £1.9 million of outstanding debt relating to previous years business rates.