

Agenda Item 7a – Strategic Theme

1. From Councillor James Holmes to the Cabinet Member for Education

Will the Cabinet Member join me in welcoming the introduction by the Mayor of London of the new London Schools Atlas, which means that for the first time there will be a range of information and data about school numbers, location, catchment areas and attainment publicly available in a way that is easy to use and to interpret?

Reply

I am happy to welcome this initiative. The council has worked in partnership with the GLA for many years to aid its planning of school places and the publication of data in a mapping format is helpful. I was also reassured to see that the London School Atlas reaffirms our approach to expanding more primary schools in the areas where they are most needed around the town centres of Wimbledon, Colliers Wood and Mitcham. Colliers Wood is identified as one of the highest growth areas, which is why we bought the adjacent Jamia School building so that Singlegate school could increase from 210 to 630 places. Merton's Director of Children's Services in fact acted as an expert witness to the Mayor's Education Committee which informed the production of the Atlas.

Supplementary

Would the Cabinet Member join me in welcoming this report which means that anyone who is interested in opening a free school in the borough will have the information that they need to know where the principle demand is, and in particular the views of the Shadow Education Secretary that parents are now welcome to open schools, would that not encourage him to endorse that as well.

Reply

We already publish comprehensive data about school places in this borough; about where there is demand for places. This Administration has delivered an additional 21 forms of entry over the last few years in our schools. Clearly free schools came forward but I'm in favour of local authority schools.

2. From Councillor Jeff Hanna to the Cabinet Member for Education

What analysis has the Cabinet Member made of the impact of grammar schools on social mobility and the extent to which the social background of young people affects their experience of this two-tier education system?

Reply

There has been no work carried out locally to analyse the impact of Grammar Schools on social mobility as the current Administration will not be putting forward a Grammar School option as part of expanding our secondary school offer. There are Grammar Schools in neighbouring boroughs and there is choice and diversity within Merton.

The most comprehensive analysis of grammar schools was commissioned in 1959 by the then Conservative government when the grammar school system was in place. It found that of the entire national cohort of 16 year olds in the late '50s only 9% achieved 5 or more O levels. That figure today is around 70%. Moreover 38% of grammar school pupils failed to achieve more than 3 O levels. In terms of more recent analysis on areas where grammar school remain, a report for the Sutton Trust found that children from families that can afford private tutoring dominate grammar school places.

Supplementary

Will the Cabinet Member be supporting the motion on grammar schools and if not, why not?

Reply

No, I won't be. I am concerned about what grammar schools do for social mobility. I came across some information from Sutton Council today about free school meals at grammar schools. One grammar school, had a paltry 14 pupils on free school meals out of 1240. No school had more than 3%. Clearly, whilst some parents find them popular, I don't think they cover a wide range of people and are taking from the higher strata, and children who have been tutored through the 11+ and not local people. I understand this is the case in Sutton where people are coming from 25 miles away. I don't want to see that here in Merton.

3. From Councillor Oonagh Moulton to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Can the Cabinet Member provide figures or the number of children in care in Merton in each of the last 5 years?

Reply

Numbers of children looked after by LB Merton aged under 18 years, as at 31 March (statutory 903 return to DfE) were as follows:

120 in 2008/09

140 in 2009/10

135 in 2010/11

130 in 2011/12

140 in 2012/13

Supplementary

We know that the life chances of children in care are well below the national average. What are you doing to reduce and prevent the number of LAC in the borough and place them in more stable families through adoption?

Reply

You're well aware that we have enormous family support for all the children who come to our attention, for one reason and another. We hesitate to bring our children into care, we are aware that it's not the best way to start a young

life, and chances are perhaps reduced a little when you get into the care system. Looking at the raw figures, the numbers of LAC has increased from 106 in 2008. We have a lower than average 0 – 9 age in Merton, but a higher than average 16+. We've had a 65% increase in 16 and 17 year olds to be looked after in the last couple of years. 38% of our looked after population are 16+. Some of these young people come into care as a result of the Southwark Judgement which I'm sure you're aware of, and some of those children are unaccompanied asylum seekers. We're working with Housing to ensure that youngsters are given the help they need, many don't need the full care package, they just need housing. We are looking to work with a local university to study the cohort and develop a strategy to improve practice in this area.

4. From Councillor Iain Dysart to the Cabinet Member for Education

Those of all parties and none will welcome the Council's advance strategy to address the issue of securing sufficient secondary school places. Does he share my regret that, due to short-term considerations, previous administrations failed to plan adequately for the sharp rise in demand for primary school places, which has caused many of today's parents considerable worry and uncertainty?

Reply

I cannot agree that Merton's approach to meeting increasing demand for primary school places has been led by short-term considerations of previous administrations. As the strategic objective report on council's agenda this evening demonstrates, the administration has put in place plans which have enabled the council to fulfil its statutory responsibility to provide sufficient and suitable places for those families wanting to secure places in Merton's primary schools.

I would add, however, that the approach taken by the current administration to expand, wherever possible, schools which are popular and successful and agreeing expansion plans which are as close to the areas of growing demand as possible has resulted in increasing access for Merton's children to high quality educational provision and more children being educated in their preference schools than in 2011. I am not aware of another council which has planned better for what has been an unprecedented increase in demand and I am proud of this administration's achievement.

Supplementary

It's no secret that other authorities face the same difficulties, yet some, like LibDem controlled Sutton did help themselves with longer term planning in preference to the shorter term planning in Merton, placing great urgency on this Administration to act. Could I ask you how realistic you think the target date of September 2014 is for the expansion of Dundonald Primary School.

Reply

As Councillor Dysart knows, it's going through the appropriate procedure. We do hope work to get underway and this Administration is fully committed. On his point, since this Administration was formed, we've planned 13 out of the

24 forms of entry, and I'm pleased to say this year we've had no bulge classes which I think is a contrast to Sutton Council which does. That's been done though very careful planning and I'd like to thank officers as well. We're not complacent.

5. From Councillor Suzanne Grocott to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

What was the average time it took for a child to be adopted in Merton in each of the last 3 years?

Reply

The average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family in days (source: Adoption Scorecard indicator A1) was as follows:

681 in 2010/11 (number of adoptions 5)

807 in 2011/12 (number of adoptions 9)

467 in 2012/13 (number of adoptions 5)

Supplementary

Education Secretary Michael Gove has spoken eloquently of his own experiences of adoption in the last week or so. What are Merton doing to speed up the process to at least the time shown on the website, so children can benefit from a stable family environment by the time Merton thinks they should, but are failing at the moment.

Reply

I can't give an easy one line answer and I wouldn't even if I could. You'll appreciate that the scorecard is a really blunt instrument in assessing what our children are doing and how quickly they're being assessed for adoption. Our position within the national scorecard shows a continued improvement over the measured 3 year rolling average. For 2011-13 our average was 684 against national average of 636 days so we are improving there. Our Ofsted inspection this year showed that Merton Adoption Service was overall good, but, and it is a big but, many factors come into play to ensure that our children are placed in a forever home. Matching children with complex needs is a lengthy one, and during this period health conditions can change, then further medical assessments can cause delay in concluding the court process, even though the child may have been living with the adoptive parents for a considerable length of time. The child is not left drifting in the system, the child is living with the parents whilst the court proceedings are concluded. We have three children with very complex needs and the adoption process is likely to take in excess of 1500 days. We are monitoring, tracking and wherever possible speeding the process and working to ensure all partners are taking necessary steps. We never take our eye off these children and want them in steady homes.

6. From Councillor Laxmi Attawar to the Cabinet Member for Education

Would the Cabinet Member comment on the importance of the role that Teaching Assistants have in our classrooms?

Reply

Teaching Assistants play very important roles in schools. They support individual pupils and groups of pupils in a wide range of learning activities working alongside teachers in carefully planned and targeted ways. They also provide significant support on some pupil welfare issues and engage in many pastoral activities both during and beyond the school day.

Supplementary

I would like to ask what the impact would be if teaching assistants were to be lost from our schools.

Reply

I think it would be huge. As I go around the borough, Headteacher greatly value the work that they undertake, especially with many SEN children within our schools. I am also concerned that there have been certain comments made by Michael Gove, calling them 'Mums Army'. I think that's derogatory. Teaching assistants were brought in by the Labour Government and have supported schools in driving up standards, and I would fight tooth and nail if there were plans to get rid of them.

7. From Councillor Richard Hilton to the Cabinet Member for Education

The report we will be asked to consider later on this evening (Nov 20th) regarding primary school expansions says "this major programme of expansions has been undertaken effectively." Does the Cabinet Member stand by that statement?

Reply

I do, indeed, consider that the major expansion of primary school provision in Merton over the course of this administration has been undertaken effectively. The policy position taken – to focus on expanding popular and successful schools as close to the increasing demand as possible – has enabled the council to place every child in a local school, to place more children in good or outstanding provision, and to place a higher percentage of children in their preference schools this year than in 2011. I believe our policy and approach to expansion of existing provision has also been affordable and financially prudent. The work of officers to project demand accurately, maximise capital income from central government and deliver expansion projects efficiently has also effectively supported the delivery of the administration's strategy.

Supplementary

Can the Cabinet Member confirm that there are not one but three schools where the costs of the developments have spiralled out of control.

Reply

I don't share the view that costs are spiralling out of control. Clearly we have to manage budget very closely. Building costs are rising at the moment. At this time we are going through the contract to get value for money and keep

within our financial remit. We are committed to these expansions, they are the right expansions.

8. From Councillor Linda Taylor to the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities

What are the statistics for the last three years in terms of the number of young people who are in the Youth Justice system here in Merton?

Reply

From an analysis of full-year data from 2010-11 to 2012-13, Merton's Youth Justice Service worked with a total of 986 young offenders in the three year period (378 in 2010-11; 361 in 2011-12 and 247 in 2012-13). These figures relate to both statutory interventions and preventive activity, both of these elements being critical to the remit of the service. The significant reduction seen in 2012-13 resulted largely from fewer reprimands and final warnings and fewer orders handed down by courts to young offenders. Monitoring of current year data shows this reduction is being sustained.

Supplementary

I note the point about fewer reprimands and final warnings but please could he provide me with some practical examples of schemes that have been implemented in the last few years that have helped to reduce the numbers.

Reply

I think you can see from the answer that the reduction has played a pivotal role in terms of what Probation officers have been doing in this borough. Thanks to all of your councillors; Councillor David Williams has sat on the youth courts for 25 years played a pivotal role. The Courts, in terms of the magistrates play a very good role in terms of taking into consideration the reports that are made from the Probation officers and this has caused the reduction which will continue in the borough.

9. From Councillor Brenda Fraser to the Cabinet Member for Education

Will the Cabinet Member update the Chamber on the efforts being made to accommodate the increase in the need for Primary Schools places in this Borough and the projection for ensuring that all Merton's children have access to education within their locality?

Reply

From a baseline position in 2007/08, Merton is committed to providing 21 additional forms of entry in the borough's primary schools in permanent accommodation, which will provide an extra 4,410 permanent primary school places. 13 of these projects are largely completed, and we are on track to ensure the remaining will contract shortly.

We are monitoring the position very closely in relation to any further expansion that may be required. We again ensured that all children were placed this year, and we have increased the percentage of children obtaining places at preference schools. We are now managing the increase in demand

that will flow into secondary schools from 2015/16, and our strategy was approved by Cabinet last week.

Supplementary

I'd like to congratulate the Cabinet Member in planning so well for our primary aged children. How does he intend to cater for the secondary aged children as the birth rate increase starts to take effect.

Reply

I was very pleased last week that Cabinet endorsed the Secondary School Strategy. This is essential because we do have to plan in advance; that is vitally important. Firstly we need to fill the surplus places in our schools, then look at expanding existing sites, working closely with those schools; and then new provision from 2018. As an Administration we realise the figures are going up and it's important that we start that planning process and are not caught short.

10. From Councillor Linda Scott to the Cabinet Member for Education

Following recent industrial action in Merton Schools, can he explain how attendance by teachers is recorded across the borough? Will he join me in expressing disappointment that teachers went on strike, causing disruption to the education of Merton children and to the lives of their parents?

Reply

All schools notified the Local Authority of the non-attendance of teachers and those figures were passed to Payroll for appropriate salary deduction. The DfE were also notified in relation to schools which remained open and which closed.

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