

From Cllr Brenda Fraser to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Schools and Adult Education

With the return to school this month, is it yet possible to understand the extent of the financial impact of Covid-19 on services for the borough's more vulnerable children?

Reply

In Children, Schools and Families a £460k Covid-19 cost pressure has been identified, of which £410k is a savings shortfall and a further £50k is a shortfall in income targets. These have been included in the forecast position.

There remains considerable uncertainty about the likely level of increased costs due to Covid-19. It is expected that the impact of the lockdown on children and families will emerge in increased safeguarding referrals as the lockdown is lifted. It is too soon to forecast the likely increase in families who will need the support of our family wellbeing service, children in need, children on a child protection plan or children who become looked after as a result. We continue to monitor the situation closely. Now that schools are back, we are anticipating this increase in referrals to the service, but do not expect this until children have had two or three weeks to settle back into school and build relationships with their teachers or other staff and feel comfortable expressing their worries.

Supplementary

Thank you Madam Mayor for allowing me to speak and thank you to the cabinet member for her answer. My supplementary question is; In your response, you set out the stark reality of the £460,000 cost to the Children, Schools and Families department in the Council due to Covid 19. What are the priorities you will be working to in the face of these cost pressures? Thank you.

Reply

Thank you Councillor Fraser and thank you Madam Mayor for giving me the opportunity to answer. The first thing to point out is the cost that we've outlined in the answer there is only the kind of immediate cost pressures that we are aware of. Our department has not had the immediate financial impact that some other departments have, but we think that many of the issues will come out in future in the coming months and they will be associated with financial and very real social impact costs for that. So whilst many children and families are resilient and coped well, others who are in more challenging circumstances will have faced great hardship during lockdown and there may be serious consequences of those. So in terms of our priorities, our priorities are ensuring that we at Merton are able to continue the great work that we do in protecting our children and safeguarding our children and ensuring that all children in Merton can develop and have the same successful life

outcomes no matter what their circumstances and we're going to have to be doing this in a period of even tighter budgets and tighter budgets all around us as well so while the Council is going to face pressures so are the youth and children's charities that we work with, so are all the schools around us and the other schools themselves are also going to face budgetary pressures. Thank you.

From Cllr Nick McLean to the Leader of the council as the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Health and the Environment:

Can the Leader provide an update on the ongoing work to improve the quality of the borough's air?

Reply

The Council is undertaking an extensive amount of work to improve air quality in the borough. Our activities include:

- Non-Road Mobile Machinery - Merton is a partner in the Mayor of London's Pan London Non-Road Mobile Machinery Project which runs from 2019-2022.

This project is hosted by Merton and delivers air quality improvements across all of the London boroughs. Through visits to major construction sites, dirtier machinery that does not comply with the emissions standards set by the Mayor, can be removed and replaced with cleaner and more innovative technologies.

Seven sites in Merton have been engaged since April 2020 with a compliance rate of 100% achieved by the interventions of our officers.

- Merton consider the use of the parking agenda as key to delivering cleaner air. The diesel levy was one of a number of parking/Air Quality Initiatives which now include a review of parking charges throughout the borough and a future commitment to differential charges.
- The consultation on Emission-based parking charging commenced on the 10th September and is due to finish on the 23rd October, the principle being the less polluting your vehicle is, the less you pay, and the more polluting, the more you pay. The management of parking makes a vital contribution towards our strategic transport objectives, which include:
 - a reduction in the vehicular emissions that contribute to climate change and poor air quality
 - improved public health through increased use of active travel modes
 - a reduction in traffic congestion and obstructions caused by parked vehicles
 - ensuring road safety for all users
 - good accessibility to employment, education and key services for all residents

- Further details on the consultation and the benefits of emission-based charging can be found here: <https://www.merton.gov.uk/streets-parking-transport/parking/consultations/charges-2020/background>
- We have already introduced a range of measures to support sustainable travel modes including:
 - Pedestrian routes and infrastructure
 - [cycle routes](#)
 - [cycle parking](#)
 - maintaining and improving [open and green spaces](#)
 - working with TfL and other transport operators to improve the public transport system
 - [car clubs](#)
 - [electric vehicle charging](#) infrastructure
- [Idling Action](#) – a project to take action on idling, spanning 27 boroughs.

Along with other London Boroughs, Merton takes part in a pan-London anti-idling project funded by the Mayors Air Quality Fund (MAQF), encouraging drivers to turn off their engines while waiting or in traffic.

Events around the borough have seen volunteers trained to talk to drivers about why idling is an issue. Drivers have responded positively to the campaign and in many cases idling was something they would never thought about. “No idling” signs have also been installed across the borough, with many more locations to come, warning about new council powers to fine drivers who leave their engines running unnecessary. To date over 200 anti-idling signs have been installed in the borough at schools, level crossings and taxi ranks.

Drivers who are caught idling by our civil enforcement officers are asked to turn off their engines and warned that failing to do so will lead to a fine. An Anti-Idling webpage on the Council’s website has been launched to provide information and details on campaign days etc. <https://www.merton.gov.uk/idling> Parking Service are supporting anti-idling.

- [Healthy Streets Everyday](#) (HSE) is a cross sector project across London to deliver pedestrian-priority healthy streets everyday, through increasing walking rates and reducing emissions and exposure to toxic air pollution. The Cross River Partnership (CRP) has secured £875k from the Mayors Air Quality Fund with additional match funding of £2.36 million. The project is for 3 years (April 2019 – March 2022) and collaborates with 16 London boroughs as well as businesses, academic institutions.
- [Clean Air Villages 3 \(CAV3\)](#) – Officers are seeking to deliver a CAV in Wimbledon Town Centre in 2020/21. The year-long project spanning 12 London boroughs and 4 Business Improvement Districts, aims to improve air quality in

16 different London 'villages', where both air pollution and population density levels are high.

In August the project team commenced a businesses engagement programme to collectively find solutions for improving air quality. Other ongoing targets of the projects are on the [Creating a Wimbledon Clean Air Villages directory page](#) and include promoting electric vehicle trials, communications, marketing and the monitoring of air quality impacts.

- [Citizen science Project](#) - Merton continues to support citizen science projects and provide training and resources including funding additional diffusion tubes for monitoring air quality. A number of additional tube locations expanded through Citizen Science the results for which can be found in Appendix D of the Merton [Air Quality Annual Status Report](#)

All schools in the borough have been monitored from August to December 2019. The full results for which can be found in Appendix C of the [Air Quality Annual Status Report](#).

- The Air Quality Team has been supporting the Planning Policy team on the new [Air Quality Supplementary Planning Document \(SPD\)](#). Improving air quality and mitigation in developments will be embedded in the new document.
- Officers continually review new [planning applications](#) for Major developments to ensure that any new planning consent includes a scheme of mitigation for tackling air quality including traffic reduction and low emissions strategies.
- [Air Quality monitoring network](#) - Merton has two real time automated air quality monitoring stations in the borough for particulate matter (PM10) and nitrogen dioxide (NO₂). This is supplemented by an extensive network of diffusion tubes at many locations in the borough which monitor areas of high NO₂ concentration, particularly for sources such as traffic emissions. The 50 diffusion tubes are collected for analysis monthly by the Air Quality team. Even during the period of 'lockdown', air quality monitoring was a priority and the monitoring of air quality data continued.

Supplementary

Thank you Madam Mayor and thank you to the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Health and Environment for his reply. Can the leader update the Council on the steps that have been taken to implement the low emission bus zones across the Borough which was passed by the Council in February 2019 and can he tell us the last stage when he, the previous cabinet member or any council officers held discussions with TfL to bring in the low emission bus zone?

Reply

I want to thank Councillor Nick McLean for his original and for his supplementary question. We have responded in full terms to his original question over two pages and I can say that we hold regular meetings with TfL, in particular with Heidi Alexander.

We shall be meeting her very very soon but Covid and the problem with meetings is having an impact but we will get back to him as soon as we can with regard to those dates of those meetings.

From Cllr Simon McGrath to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Housing and Transport

Merton's interim Housing policy defines 'close to home' as within 90 minutes travel time from Merton. This includes children travelling to school. In the past 5 years how many people and how many children has Merton housed outside 90 minutes travel time?

Reply

The Council in discharging its temporary accommodation duties seeks to do so wherever reasonable and practicable in borough. However given the shortage of accommodation in Merton and in London generally this is not always possible and in those circumstances accommodation is sought out of Merton . The placement of homeless households is complex and arises under a number of circumstances including an interim duty section 188 Housing Act 1996 or a temporary duty under section 193 Housing act 1996

It is also the case that those households accommodated under section 188 will not progress to a full housing duty under section 193 as the household may be considered intentionally homeless, not in priority need or has no local connection

It is also the case that Merton has managed to maintain the lowest numbers in temporary accommodation in London, despite a challenging housing market

Officers welcome the question raised by my colleague but given the complexities of housing act placements cannot provide such data without looking at in excess of 1000 cases individually over the last five years. However I have asked officers to progress this request and I will report back shortly with a full picture.

Supplementary

Thank you, I'm sure everybody was shocked by the case of Mr X and I know a lot of people are shocked at the idea that a family can be housed 90 minutes away or just under 90 minutes away and it's fine. That means that a Merton family could be housed in Milton Keynes and that would still be regarded as reasonable. I wonder if the Cabinet Member could give us an absolute assurance that no one will be housed more than 90 minutes away from Merton please?

Reply

I'd like to thank Councillor McGrath for his supplementary. As a Council we do try to house people as close as possible but we do have a massive housing crisis in this country in terms of provision of affordable housing but also as well temporary

housing. Merton does very well in only having 210 people in temporary accommodation; one of my priorities is ensuring that they are as close as possible to the Borough because I think that's the area that they obviously reside in. But the housing crisis is getting no easier and sometimes it's very difficult in terms of housing people, but I'm actually very proud of our housing teams – we have learnt the lessons of this ombudsman for the work they do but also the fact that they have the lowest number of people in temporary accommodation of any London Borough which I think is testament to the work of Steve Langley and his team. Thank you.

From Cllr Agatha Akyigyina to the Cabinet Member for Women and Equalities

Due to the government not reimbursing the council in full for the cost of the pandemic, the forthcoming budget round which envisages unprecedented cuts. What processes will the Council use to minimise the impact on vulnerable residents and those with protected characteristics?

Reply

During the pandemic the council has continued to support vulnerable residents through the partnership arrangements put in place with the Community Response Hub. Bridging the gap remains central to all our work and we are committed to reducing inequality of outcomes for our residents. We already have an extensive programme of commissioned services that provide general advice services through Citizens Advice and specialist support through the Law Centres, Commonside and Polish Families Association as well as a range of wellbeing early help services for vulnerable residents. We also have our own internal welfare support service. Going forward the council is faced with tough financial decisions and will endeavour to minimise the impact on our vulnerable residents. The Council's ambitions and 'July Principles' set out in the Council's business plan make clear our intent to do all we can to protect and support the vulnerable when it comes to prioritising our resources and the new savings targets agreed by Cabinet earlier in the month reflect this.

The Equality Analysis (EA) process is well embedded in the council's service planning process and will assist us to assess the impact of proposed service reductions on the Protected Characteristics. Where negative impact is apparent mitigating measures will be implemented to reduce or eliminate the negative impact. Therefore, a robust framework is in place that ensures that the basket of saving proposals put up to Cabinet are accompanied by EAs that have considered the effect that the proposed changes will have on the Protected Characteristics.

Supplementary

Thank you Madam Mayor and I'd like to congratulate you on your position and I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for their response. I believe that having equality of representation within the Council is another way of ensuring residents who have protected characteristics are considered when it comes to making decisions. Can the Cabinet Member outline her work in encouraging applicants to roles in the Council from the under-represented groups?

Reply

Thank you Madam Mayor and I thank Councillor Akyigyina for her question. In Merton we're taking this very seriously and are working with the BAME staff forum looking at a number of options ensuring that there's diverse representation of staff especially at senior level. We're looking to ensure there's a diverse representation on the panel looking at applications, we're looking at training as well, to have made equalities training mandatory and looking at training on racism and anti-racism across the staff and mentoring of staff within the Council to give them appropriate training with a view to promoting and encouraging promotion of the Borough. We are also working with London Councils to see what other Councils are doing to see what we can adopt within the Council to make sure that Merton Council is properly represented at all levels in the Council. Thank You.

From Councillor Peter Southgate to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Housing and Transport

How does the council propose to respond to the consultation on "Planning for the Future", the White paper advocating a major restructuring of the current planning system in England?

Reply

Government's White Paper, "planning for the future", was published on 6th August 2020 with a consultation deadline of 29th October 2020 <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future>. The White Paper proposes significant changes to all aspects of the planning system including what the Local Plans will contain and be based on, methods of community engagement, developer contributions and levies, changes to how affordable homes and other infrastructure will be delivered and how planning applications are determined. The council is considering the contents of the White Paper carefully and will respond by the consultation deadline.

I have significant concerns myself about the white paper and the its implications on the borough in terms of democratic oversight and implications on delivering affordable housing and we will responding to the government consultation.

Supplementary

Thank you Madam Mayor and I thank Councillor Whelton as the Cabinet Member for his response, I note he has significant concerns about the white paper and may I say that I share those concerns in fact I find very little to like in it. Does he agree with me that local people are in the best position to decide on the type of development they want to see in their own communities and can I ask him to press for a continuing role for our local Planning Applications Committee in determining applications for development in our Borough?

Reply

I'd like to thank Councillor Southgate for his supplementary question and he is quite right in what he says. I am very concerned about the Planning white paper and that it will take away democratic accountability in terms of Planning permission. You look in the white paper growth renewal and protect and giving permission in principle to developments without any kind of oversight to Councillors and I think that is completely wrong and as a Council we will be taking a robust response both on this and a number of other areas in the Planning white paper when we make our response. Thank you.

From Cllr Nick McLean to the Leader of the council as the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Health and the Environment:

Can the Leader update the council on what future steps the administration is planning to take in light of their rejection of the recommendations of the IHT consultation?

Reply

The council is awaiting a response to its referral to the Secretary of State on the terrible decision to downgrade St Helier Hospital.

Supplementary

Thank you Madam Mayor and once again thank you to the Leader of the Council for his response as Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Health and Environment. Due to the dither and delay of this administration the £54.5 million pound GLA land fund investment for Morden and Morden regeneration has now been lost. How can the Leader be certain that his administration's actions to delay the proposed investment in our local NHS will not cause the £500 million investment to be lost also?

Reply

I thank the Leader of the Opposition Nick McLean for his original question and for his supplementary. We're not dithering, we're not delaying, our reaction and our next course of action is entirely dependent on the answer of his own Health Secretary.

From Cllr Pauline Cowper to the Cabinet Member for Voluntary Sector, Partnerships and Community Safety

What work is the council doing in partnership with the police to reduce the spread of Covid-19 by tackling unlicensed music events?

Reply

Officers from Safer Merton and the Regulatory Services Partnership are working closely with the South West Borough Command Unit (SW BCU) to monitor and prevent Unlicensed Music Events (UMEs).

Where early notification is received, the council and police have worked collaboratively to share information and been successful in preventing UME's occurring in the first instance or in closing such events down before they become established. Information from services such as Safer Merton, Licensing and the Council's Noise & Nuisance team are routinely shared with the SW BCU on an ad-hoc basis and also through regular scheduled engagement such as the COVID-19 Joint Response fortnightly meetings.

This early liaison between the police and the council ensures:

1. The early intelligence sharing and liaison to prevent/disrupt events based upon a shared risk assessment.
2. The prioritisation of council and police resources.
3. The gathering and sharing of evidence on any event organisers
4. Where applicable, the review previous events to identify any patterns

Where officers are not aware in advance of a UME taking place the council will respond and liaise with the police through Merton's Out of Hours Noise service. This reactive approach to events ensures that the police are alerted to UME's as soon as possible, ensuring a timely response.

Supplementary

Thank you Madam Mayor and to the Cabinet Member concerned. I think the public's trust and confidence in policing is key to the success of issues like tackling unlicensed music events. What work are you aware of that the police are doing to build trust in the community?

Reply

Thank you Councillor Cowper for your supplementary question. The police have continued to engage with our communities to explain the new rules and encourage people to comply. Obviously should people choose to ignore the Covid legislation, then in order to protect our Merton communities they will use their enforcement powers. The BCU will also be resourcing enforcement on cars that will be responding to local concerns including large groups of more than six people. Thank you Madam Mayor.

From Councillor Edward Gretton to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Can the cabinet member update the council on plans to spend Merton's share of the £500 million of additional support for councils announced by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government in July? Can the cabinet member also confirm how much of the £12.1 million received so far has been spent on directly related Covid19 costs?

Reply

I can confirm that the Council's share of the £500m national pot announced in July was £1.590m. This, together with the £10.559m unhypothecated grant previously received, brings Merton's share to £12.149m. Our July Monitoring Report highlights our net spending on Covid related areas (after applying the grant) at £26.822m. As such the Council has incurred spending well in excess of the Central Government allocation to Merton for Covid related matters.

Supplementary

Thank you Madam Mayor and all the best for your mayoralty. It's been great to see the £80million worth of grants coming into the Borough for local businesses from Central Government to the £20million or so direct financial support to the Council. Councillor Allison claimed at the last meeting that the Council was on the verge of bankruptcy he said and my question to him Madam Mayor is, given the huge amount of funding we're going to see soon from Robert Jenrick's statement about 70p in the pound is going to be funded to cover revenue losses and the Council's confirmation yesterday that the Council has got enough cash reserves to take the Council through the long term and meet all its' payment obligations, could Councillor Allison clarify what he meant by saying that the Council's on the verge of bankruptcy and is he going to issue a section 114 notice or call an emergency budget? If he isn't going to do one of those two things will he retract his statement and apologise to the officers and the contractors of this Council and perhaps reconsider his position and offer his resignation to this chamber?

Reply

Thank you to Councillor Gretton for his very interesting follow-up question and his original. I think that if he understood maths and finance I know that he's the opposition spokesperson for finance, he would be a little bit more aware of the struggle that Councils across the country are facing due to the Government failing to keep their promise to fund Councils for whatever it costs for the cost of Covid19. I'm very disappointed with the tone of voice that he's used. Quite clearly if a Council like ours receives £27 million pounds less than it has cost us and £27million equates to a quarter of the money - more than a quarter of the money that we receive every year in Council tax. If Councils lose that amount of money, if they do not make corresponding cuts to services, then yes they will go bust and yes the monitoring officer will need to use their powers. Now we are a business like Council and we will not allow that to happen. However, if they do not support enormous cuts to our budgets because of what their government is putting us through, then there is yes a possibility that the Council will be in extreme financial difficulty. Already we are looking at £27million that we will need to find and next year where we've already established that we're will need to make cuts of more than £17million to our budget. That is the responsibility of the government for not funding the Council and I hope that he will recognise that and support us in our aim to get the money that it has cost the Council to tackle Covid19 as effectively as we have. Thank you.

From Cllr Hayley Ormrod to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Education:

Can the Cabinet Member provide an update on the level of attendance at the borough's schools since the start of the new term?

Reply

On the basis of the most recent data available (9th September) schools are mostly reporting good attendance from pupils following their return after the summer holidays. There is no LA average yet available, but Merton schools are reporting the following:

- Primary schools – between 72.2% and 98.3%, with the vast majority of schools reporting in the high 80s and 90s.
- Secondary schools - between 81.8% and 97.7%, with the vast majority reporting over 90%

Schools have worked hard to prepare their sites for return, completing risk assessments, putting in measures to mitigate risk, and communicating with their parents and families about these measures. These figures are a testament to the impact of this work. Where parents are anxious about their children's return, and as a result are continuing to keep them away, schools are working with the Education Welfare Service and school nursing to try to support them and to enable all children to return as quickly as possible. For the majority of schools, attendance has steadily improved since 3rd September (the first day back for most Merton schools), both as they have opened more widely to all pupils (some schools had staggered starts) and as some parents have seen the success of, and felt reassured by, the measures put in place by schools.

Supplementary

Thank you Madam Mayor. Can I ask the Cabinet Member what action can be taken by the Council if parents do continue to not allow their children to go to school due to Covid fears and also would it be possible for all Councillors to have regular updates on attendance as part of the officer's regular reporting of children in the Borough during the pandemic please?

Reply

Thank you Councillor Ormrod for your follow up question. As explained in the answer, we don't yet have a problem with attendance, we've got increasing levels of attendance of which I'm really proud because opening schools and opening safely was a top priority for us and Childrens Schools and Families and done a brilliant job of ensuring that children are back. We have an excellent education welfare team who will get involved where there are any particular circumstances where they need to but I'd like to draw colleagues attention to the key challenge to increasing

attendance which is the ability to quickly access tests when a member of staff, a pupil or someone from the household develops any symptoms. I already know first-hand the families keen to do the right thing and keep their children off if they get a cough, but then struggling to access tests. You might have seen Siobhain McDonagh MP's already contacted Matt Hancock about these issues and I'd urge all opposition councillors to focus their lobbying efforts there too, not just at the Council. Thank you.

From Cllr Nick Draper to the Cabinet Member for Commerce, Leisure and Culture

What research does the council carry out to measure resident satisfaction with local parks?

There are three (3) main avenues by which the Greenspaces team conducts research on residents' satisfaction with the borough's parks and open spaces, including;

1. By way of questions about the service posed within the Merton Residents Survey, the last of which, carried out during 2019 revealed:
 - 81% of parks users rated Merton's parks as very good or good.
 - 86% of young residents rated Merton's parks as very good or good.
2. Contractually, through our service partner idverde's ongoing customer survey protocols and their targeted consultation works with local stakeholder groups, including sports clubs.
3. One-off consultation exercises commissioned by the Greenspaces team such as that conducted during the second half of 2019 that entailed professional surveys conducted both in the field and, subsequently, in residents' focus groups. The information from this type of surveying has enabled the service to further develop specific plans to enhance specific aspects of the service.

As an example, during this immediately past summer, a follow-up online survey promoted widely within the community that elicited more than 2,600 individual responses. The data collected has provided an important insight into the needs and aspirations of both park users and non-users that will be used to inform future investment and development priorities, especially in relation to water play and barbeque use in our parks. Given the immense value and importance of our parks during the recent coronavirus lockdown, a continued use of survey of our parks users will be integral in the sustained improvement and development of our valued parks and open spaces.

From Cllr Paul Kohler to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Housing and Transport

Does the council know how many purpose built blocks of flats, within Merton, are now subject to property speculators building up to two extra storeys without planning

permission, as a result of the Conservative Government's recent decision to widen the categories of permitted development?

Reply

The Council does not hold a record of the number of blocks of flats that might potentially qualify under the new permitted development procedures. Any such applications will be displayed on the Councils Planning Explorer on the website.

From Cllr Natasha Irons to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and Transport

Following the recent government announcement that the money available for London's affordable housing is being reduced, what effect does the Cabinet Member envisage this will have on those living in overcrowded accommodation or who are homeless?

Reply

The recent announcement is only likely to exacerbate further the housing crisis here in Merton and increase the level of overcrowded housing. There is a desperate needs of homes for social rent to be built given that we have over 10,000 people on the housing waiting list with many of them living in overcrowded accommodation. We also have over 200 people living in temporary housing.

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