

6: Councillor Questions to Cabinet Members

From: Councillor Brenda Fraser to the Cabinet Member for Children and Education:

Can the Cabinet member update the council on the extension of SEN provision to the Whatley Road site?

Reply

Following an extremely positive meeting with Kids First (the representative group for parents with children with SEND) Cabinet agreed a fortnight ago (22 June) to start a statutory consultation to expand Melrose School to provide the additional SEN provision at Whatley Avenue, which had long been an education facility, most recently been used as a temporary site of the new Harris Wimbledon Academy. This consultation started last week and runs for the 4 weeks required by statute to 29 July. Subject to the outcome of the consultation a decision will then be made to proceed. We are on target to open the expanded new provision in September 2022, providing 80 additional places for the growing number of children with special educational needs, with a focus on ASD.

From: Councillor Adam Bush to the Cabinet Member for Performance, Recovery and the Local Economy:

What steps has the council taken to support local businesses as we move out of the pandemic?

Reply

The last 18 months has had a devastating effect on the economy, with some businesses feeling the brunt of the crisis far more than others. And although we may be moving out of the worst period of the pandemic, it remains likely that we remain amid a prolonged economic downturn.

In anticipation of the impact the pandemic would have on local businesses, in April 2020 the council formed a COVID-19 Business Tasks Group. Chaired by James McGinlay, Head of Sustainable Communities, the task group included representatives from Future Merton, Property Management, Business Rates, Regulatory Services Partnership and Communications. It also included Diana Sterck from the Merton Chamber of Commerce.

Initially meeting every week, and now every fortnight, the task group has built on the council's already strong relationship with the business community, the task group enabled the council to take a community informed and fully integrated approach to its support of local businesses.

Complimenting the task group, the council has worked closely with partners including the Chamber of Commerce, Business Improvement Districts, the Department for Work and Pensions, Merton Connected, and several local training providers to understand and respond to local business needs as and when they developed.

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Furthermore, a weekly business bulletin is sent to business rates payers (who have opted in) inform businesses of the support available and enable them to work with us as they responded to pandemic and prepare to the recover. This includes guidance on latest legislation, business support available including grants and public health messages.

In 2020, the Council's Business Rates team was quick to recognise the immediacy of the financial challenges that many local businesses faced and were in the top three quickest London Boroughs to pay the small business, retail, hospitality, and leisure grants.

In 2021, the Future Merton team, the Business Rates team and the Communication team worked together to both facilitate the reopening of the high streets in spring. There was also the awarding of the Additional Restrictions Grants payments with the support of MVSC and the Merton Chamber of Commerce to eligible businesses by the end of June, which should hopefully trigger the award of a further £1.9m.

Accompanying the direct payments to businesses, the Future Merton team has also procured parklet spaces – to promote Al Fresco dining and so support the badly hit dining sector – and is now working with retailers to adapt their forecourts and shop fronts, and procuring both a market management programme to support outside trading and an e-trading platform to promote the shop and stay local offer in Merton.

A list of the grant schemes and financial support is detailed below:

Extended retail, hospitality and leisure relief	£44.5 million	Business rates relief
Nursery relief	£0.779 million	Business rates relief
Business Support Grants – small business grants and retail, hospitality and leisure grants	£29.318 million	Direct grants
Discretionary Grants	£1,312,750	Discretionary grants (own scheme)
Local Restrictions Grants – Addendum – (lockdown 5 November to 2 December)	£3,099,762	Grants for business rate payers mandated to close in national lockdown
Local Restrictions Grants – Open (17 October to 4 November)	£360,853	Grants for business rate payers affected by tier 2 restrictions
Local Restrictions Grant – ARG (Discretionary Grants (5 November to 31 March 22)	£4,130,960	Discretionary grants (own scheme) – phase one being administered
Local Restrictions Grants – Open (2 December to 19 December)	£305,984	Grants for business rate payers affected by tier 2 restrictions

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Local Restrictions Grants – Closed (2 December to 19 December)	£13,924	Grants for business rate payers affected by tier 3 restrictions
Local Restrictions Grants – tier 4 (20 December to 4 January)	Not notified yet	Grants for business rate payers affected by tier 4 restrictions
Christmas Support Package for Pubs	£38,400	Grants for wet led pubs
Local Restrictions Grants – Addendum – (lockdown 5 January to 15 February)	£4,649,643	Grants for business rate payers mandated to close in national lockdown
Closedown Business Grants	£9,297,000	One off grants for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses
Top up to Local Restrictions Grant – ARG (Discretionary Grants (5 November to 31 March 22)	£1,834,777	Additional funding for Discretionary grants (own scheme)

From: Councillor Sally Kenny to the Cabinet Member for Women and Equalities:

As once again women in Westminster struggle for equality, with Stella Creasy MP being denied maternity cover, can the Cabinet member please let us know what she is doing to improve workplace conditions for women at Merton Council?

Reply

In addition to a range of flexible working benefits that Merton provides to all our staff Merton is one of the few London Councils that provides up to 10 days leave additional paid leave for woman and their partners who suffer Stillbirth or Miscarriage. We also provide up to 10 days additional paid leave for the parents of a premature baby (a baby born before 36 weeks) in order to recognise the fact that these premature babies are likely to have ongoing medical problems. Merton have also done a lot of awareness raising with staff on how women can suffer from the menopause and are currently in the process of adding this as one of our absence reasons on our HR self-service system.

Merton also provide a range of tools, training and information to support mental health and all employees, Members and their families have access to our employee assistance programme.

Merton have recently had a Member on maternity leave, with maternity cover provided for their role in the Cabinet.

From: Councillor Hina Bokhari to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration

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Other than simply including them in the Local Plan, what plans do the council have for the sites identified for use by Merantun Development Ltd?

Reply

The council is current looking at options for those sites and hope to decide imminently on their use. Information is currently being gathered on relevant matters [including ground conditions and title for example] and the sites all have planning permission for housing which is their preferred use.

From: Councillor Mary Curtin to the cabinet member for Adult Social Care and Public Health:

Can the Cabinet member update us on the status of Merton's Dementia Hub and the services it provides to our residents?

Reply

The Dementia Hub has continued to operate as best they can in line with government guidance during the pandemic. If the current restrictions are lifted later in July, then we expect them to be re-opening for face to face support and activities in August.

Thanks to an additional health funding, I am pleased to be able to confirm that the service will continue to operate from the Hub building in Mitcham. However, it has always been an ambition that the Hub does outreach work and is not just focussed in one place, but is accessible to all. We have already engaged in discussion with stakeholders through various forums. We will also be running two online events on the 6th and 14th July for customers and carers of the Hub. An online survey will also be going live shortly. Once we are able to do so we will be organising face to face events as well. We will be seeking views on what is important to them and how they like to access services.

We are in the process of renewing the contract with the Alzheimer's Society to commence October 2021.

From: Councillor John Dehaney to the Cabinet Member for Finance:

Can the Cabinet member tell us how many of our very welcome citizens originally from the EU have applied for settled status here, and what can be done for those that may have missed the deadline?

Reply

As of 31st March 2021 there had been 43,820* recorded applications of EU citizens living in Merton to the EU Settlement Scheme. The council undertook a comprehensive communications campaign to raise awareness of the 30th June

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deadline, highlighting key points of support within the community such as Citizens Advice Merton and Lambeth and the Polish Families Associations.

The deadline for applications has now passed. However, we are continuing to work closely with local providers to ensure the provision of advisory and specialist immigration support to those members of our community who continue to need it, as there may be extensions to the deadline, but the criteria is not clear at this stage.

*statistics are published quarterly; next update due August 2021

From: Councillor Nick McLean to the Cabinet Member for Children and Education:

The repurposing of Lavender nursery will help the most vulnerable children in the borough. Does the cabinet member agree with me that this issue is beyond politics and must be urgently delivered?

Reply

The administration has the difficult job of managing the requirements of our vulnerable children with medical needs and ensuring that there are sufficient nursery places for families in the east of the borough. We always intended to balance these needs, and provide education and childcare for the most vulnerable children. We take consultation seriously, and the extensive feedback received in our consultation earlier this year generated further ideas which we have therefore needed to look into. Cabinet a fortnight ago (22 June) agreed to engage with stakeholders on these updated options, and we are now speaking with affected parents and staff to discuss best options that will ensure we can provide for children with medical needs and provide nursery provision existing parents, those on a low income, and SEND children. The administration is clear that its priority is to provide for the most vulnerable children in the borough.

From: Councillor Stan Anderson to the Cabinet Member for Women and Equalities:

Can the Cabinet Member please update us on what funding support is being offered to the voluntary sector, particularly as it continues to recover from the effects of Covid?

Reply

Council funding to the voluntary sector in 2020/21 was £10.5 million. This is an increase of 5% over the previous year and the third year in a row that council support to the voluntary sector has increased. Over the past year the council has allocated £900k to the voluntary sector to support the sector during this challenging time and to meet the substantial increase in demand the sector has experienced as a result of

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the pandemic. The additional funding has resulted in the continuation of the Community Response Hub, provision of emergency assistance particularly around food and supporting smaller grass roots organisation supporting communities particularly impacted by the pandemic e.g. older people, people with disabilities and BAME communities. The council has also worked closely with MVSC and the Chamber of Commerce to grow Merton's highly successful community giving scheme – Merton Giving. With support from the council and other partners Merton Giving has distributed over £340k over the last year to small voluntary sector groups and has recently announced a further funding round of £150k.