

From Councillor Ben Butler to the Cabinet Member for Children and Education

What has been the cost to the Council of the government's failure to fully fund our SEND service since 2018?

Reply

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The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) funding has four ring-fenced blocks within the grant, these are as follows:

- Schools Block which funds the individual maintained Primary and Secondary schools budgets;
- Early Years Block which funds the provision for under 5 year olds for schools with Nursery provision and the PVI sector;
- Centrally Retained LA Block where a small element of funds are retained centrally for services provided by Merton;
- High Needs Block is an allocation that supports the SEN(D) service and children diagnosed with SEN(D) and where the main elements of overspend are.

Since 2018 the annual pressures (outturn) reported within the accounts are:

2018/19 £2.9m

2019/20 £9.3m

2020/21 £12.7m

2021/22 £12.6m (forecast)

From Cllr Thomas Barlow to the Leader of the Council:

To ask the Leader if he has received legal advice on the covenant covering the sale of land from Wimbledon Golf Club to the All England Lawn Tennis Club (AELTC) and if he will share this in full with the residents of Merton?

Reply

I understand that all party leaders, including his Group Leader, Cllr Nick McLean, have received the legal advice and that Cllr Barlow has also been advised it can be appropriate to share legal advice received by the Council with some councillors on a confidential basis, with the knowledge they can be trusted not to share it further.

I also understand he has been advised that advice is subject to legal privilege and that the reason for keeping such information confidential is that at some point the Council may find itself in court, and that it would put the Council at a disadvantage should the full detail of the advice be in the public domain as that would mean that the counterparty in the proceedings was also privy to that advice.

Given this, the nature of privileged information therefore means that it would be irresponsible to publish any advice, as doing so would harm the Council's position in this matter. Nevertheless, I can confirm that a covenant in the interests of the residents of Merton exists on the Wimbledon Park Golf Club land, and the council intends it to be respected.

The covenant, and the legal advice about its status, does not affect or predetermine the outcome of any planning application. There will be a debate about whether or not a new park on land that has never previously been freely open to the public would be a welcome addition to the local community. That will be a matter of judgment separate from any legal considerations. I appreciate this is a confusing distinction but I hope it is helpful.

From Councillor Billy Christie to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment and Green Spaces

Can the Cabinet Member please update us on the rollout of the Fix My Streets app?

Reply

I am pleased to report that the implementation of the new FixMyStreet reporting function went live on the 13th of December. This new tool has provided our residents, street champions and Ward Members with an improved and efficient tool to report street issues. To date, residents have made over 2,200 reports, with 60% of these reports relating to fly-tipping. The system also allows improved functionality if residents need to report issues when outdoors by using the dedicated FixMyStreet mobile app.

I am also pleased to report that Merton Council is the most responsive Council of FixMyStreet users in the time taken to fix problems from when they are reported. In addition, the system also allows Officers better oversight in analysing where incidents are occurring through heatmaps and with this tool, they are able to look at issues on a Ward basis to better inform where resources should be directed.

We have further plans over the next few months to widen the range of issues that can be reported using this system, with Highway reporting being the next phase in the rollout.

<https://www.fixmystreet.com/>

From Nigel Benbow to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment and Green Spaces:

What is the cabinet member doing to maintain the waste service?

Reply

I am pleased to advise that the waste service has continued to be prioritised throughout these unprecedented times, both due to the pandemic and the national shortage of qualified drivers for large goods vehicles, in which we are operating. Our

service Business Continuity Plan (BCP) has been activated throughout this period and we continue to work closely with our service provider Veolia to minimise the impact the recent increase in Coronavirus cases has had on our waste and recycling services.

We are reviewing these impacts daily and have, to date, been able to rely on a core collection and street cleansing service being delivered across the borough. It is acknowledged that in line with our BCP and as part of our agreed prioritisation of services, we have at times needed to collect different materials from our communal flats locations. Our waste contractor is also training nine (9) additional drivers in Merton to provide further future resiliency to our services.

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

In light of the desperate shortage of affordable housing in the borough, why has the decision about the amount of affordable housing to be built on the Council-owned sites which are due to be sold, been left to an Officer of the Council to decide?

Reply

The Council recognises the challenge of increasing the delivery of affordable housing and Cabinet recently approved Merton's Housing Delivery Strategy and on 6th December, approved the disposal of four LBM owned sites to deliver 100% affordable homes. The level of affordable housing for these sites has been determined by Cabinet; to address the acute need for more affordable housing. The disposals process is delegated to senior officers to progress in accordance with Merton's scheme of delegation.

From Councillor Joan Henry to the Cabinet Member for Children and Education

Can you please update us on the number of children in Merton living in poverty, and how this compares to the number before the pandemic began in March 2020?

Reply

Growing up in poverty is damaging to child health and well-being. Adverse childhood circumstances are associated with future adult ill health and negatively affect future health and life chances.

In 2018/19, 5,195 (13.1%) children in Merton under 16 years lived in low-income families, a lower proportion than the average for London (19.2%).

East Merton has a higher proportion of children living in poverty than West Merton, with Pollards Hill, Cricket Green, Figge's Marsh, and Ravensbury wards most affected. The gap between child poverty in East and West Merton between 2014/15 and 2018/19 has widened, with child poverty increasing more in East Merton wards than West Merton wards.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been greater for those already on lower income as they are more vulnerable to changes in income. More families are likely to fall into poverty due the economic impact of the pandemic, particularly in East Merton where a higher proportion of families work in professions that are more likely to have been disrupted.

The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) is a useful proxy indicator for family income and child poverty. The proportion of school pupils eligible for FSM in Merton before the pandemic was 17.5% (academic year 2019/20) however this has risen to 22.1% in 2020/21, showing the negative financial impact the pandemic has had on families locally. This is an extra 1,220 pupils in Merton eligible for FSM in the academic year 2020/21.

From Cllr Daniel Holden to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health

Is the cabinet member worried about future parking income not rebounding to the previous high point in 2019-20?

Reply

Parking income funds a range of transport related activity across the Council. This is particularly important when funding via TfL is much reduced and uncertain for the immediate future. Parking income has been significantly affected during Covid and this has been recognised by Government who have provided some compensation. All aspects of parking income have been affected and the situation remains turbulent, and is therefore of concern since our Medium Term Financial Strategy has factored in parking income. But it is also of concern because the reduction in income does not of itself denote a reduction in care use, which therefore means we continue to observe poor air quality and congestion.

From Cllr David Simpson to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Public Health

The Your Merton consultation has drawn fresh attention to the areas of the borough that suffer from poor air quality. What steps does the Cabinet Member have planned to improve air quality in these areas?

Reply

Merton remains committed to tackling air quality in the borough, last month we saw one the largest rollout of new automated monitoring regimes of any borough in London. This network includes 68 new Breathe London Monitors as well as traffic and transport monitoring in areas of concern in the borough. This will show pollution hotspots and sources in detail we have never seen before.

This will also enable us to see the impact of ultrafine dust (PM2.5) which is a priority pollutant.

Some of the activities we have underway in the borough include:

- An anti-idling plan focusing on priority areas in the borough, with our Air Quality Team welcoming support and ideas for locations to focus on.
- Our programme of work around schools air quality audits and school specific monitoring is continuing.
- We have projects including a Clean Air Village in Wimbledon and our Healthy Streets Everyday project is building environmental learning areas at 3 schools in the borough.
- Our Air Quality Team are still delivering the world's first Low Emission Zone for Construction across London in partnership with boroughs and the GLA, a project that is shaping the air quality impact on construction throughout London.
- Our new Air Quality Supplementary Planning Document is now in place and gives clear guidance to new developments in the borough as to what we expect of them to actively contributing to tackling air pollution.
- We have a unique Behavioural Insights project focused anti-idling at Level Crossings and the use of interactive signage.

Our officers are starting to put together air pollution monitoring data for 2021 as part of our annual reporting; this will be published in the next couple of months.

Even with all this good work, we cannot be complacent, we cannot resolve the problem of air quality as a borough alone as pollution does not respect boundaries and traffic from outside the borough directly affects our residents.

This year we will be producing a new Air Quality Action Plan and I look forward to working with Members, businesses, community groups and the public to build a new plan for the next 5 years.

From Councillor John Dehaney to the Leader of the Council

Can the Leader please reassure us that during national lockdowns, enforced during the pandemic to slow down the spread of the virus, every effort was made in Council buildings to adhere to measures mandated by the Government?

Reply

So far as I am aware, the Council has at all times aimed to operate within guidance and advice from public health officials.

As part of the Council's wider response to Covid-19, a number of physical adjustments and additional measures were introduced within the Council's operational buildings to ensure the safety and protection of staff and visitors.

These included the introduction of suitable and sufficient social distancing arrangements and reduced occupancy within the Council's buildings, the use of one-way systems and additional cleaning/sanitisation of workstations, common areas and any potential 'touch' points such as door handles with a suitable hospital grade disinfectant.

All the measures introduced were initially discussed and agreed with colleagues from Public Health to confirm that they were suitable and sufficient, and the arrangements were then reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that they met the constantly changing advice from central government.

From Cllr Omar Bush to the Cabinet Member for Children and Education:

Please comment on how successful the council's efforts are to get care leavers into work and employment?

Reply

This is something we take very seriously and are always trying to improve on, as we understand the importance of education, training and employment for the later life outcomes of our care experienced young people. Excitingly, our current performance has improved and in Quarter 2 we were the 2nd best performing borough on the Pan London Dash Board* with 72% of our care experienced young people in ETE. We have a dedicated post in our virtual school committed to engaging some of our hardest to reach care leavers and track all our young people who are not in ETE on a monthly basis. Of recent success, we were very proud to see 2 of our care experienced young people be successful in their application for the Civil Service Care Leaver Internship Scheme.

From Councillor Mary Curtin to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency

How is the cabinet member progressing with retrofitting fuel-poor homes, a crucial measure councils can take in tackling the climate emergency?

Reply

Over the last year, the Council has worked with partners to apply for national retrofit funding for fuel poor homes in Merton through the Green Homes Grant Local Authority Delivery (LAD) Schemes, the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF), and the Sustainable Warmth Competition. The Council is awaiting confirmation of delivery mechanisms for the GLA's Sustainable Warmth funding, but referrals for eligible households are being progressed through local and regional partners for the LAD schemes. Sustainable Warmth is open until March 2023.

The Council is also working with local housing providers to understand the key obstacles and operational challenges to retrofitting their local housing stock and to consider opportunities for collaboration, including knowledge and skills sharing between housing providers.

To date there has been limited capacity within the Council to drive borough-wide retrofit. However, funding has been secured to recruit two additional members of staff from April 2022 to promote borough-wide retrofit. Securing and delivering national retrofit funding for fuel poor homes in Merton will continue to be a priority in 2022. Priorities will also include the development of a retrofit strategy for the borough to consider key barriers to retrofit in Merton, mechanisms to overcome supply chain issues and upfront costs, and how best to identify and engage with local

homeowners, businesses and landlords to drive the uptake of good quality retrofit. This will be subject to being able to recruit suitably qualified staff which may be challenging given the intense competition in the market for energy professionals.

The Council is also supporting the Merton's community-led Climate Action Group to engage with residents and encourage the uptake of retrofit in Merton. The Climate Action Group has developed a proposal and secured Neighbourhood CIL funding to run energy training in 4 pilot schools in Merton to empower the younger generation with knowledge to drive behaviour change around energy use, and help tackle fuel poverty in the borough. The intention is to develop a delivery model which could be replicated in schools across Merton.

Merton is also working with the South London Partnership to consider opportunities for collaboration to drive domestic retrofit across the sub-region, including the Mayor's Construction Academy for South London which is looking to support an expansion of green construction skills and jobs.

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