

From Councillor Whelton to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

What impact has the mini-budget of 23 September, and the subsequent financial and economic turmoil, had on the Council's finances?

Reply

The mini-budget had a major initial impact on the bond market and therefore interest rates. The impact on Bond markets had a knock-on effect on Pension fund valuations. Given the major u-turns since then the effect has been largely reversed and the market is waiting for this week's Autumn Statement.

There is currently a black hole in the government's finances, rumoured to be c. £55 billion and it is said that there will be cuts in government department spending which in turn will have a detrimental impact on grant allocations. The government may have to loosen Council Tax referendum limits allowing councils to increase council taxes by more than initially planned but allowing the government to pass the burden on to council tax payers. There is also likely to be a restraint on council pay awards etc.

Although the Council is benefiting from its investment returns in light of increases in interest rates (following recent Bank of England base rate increases – currently 3%) it is expected that the additional demands on Council services from the Cost of Living crisis will more than offset any interest gains that may accrue.

So probably the fallout from the mini budget in September has not yet been felt but will hit home when the Provisional LGF Settlement is announced, and through the continued increase in demand for council services, temporary accommodation, and financial support.

From Councillor Simon McGrath to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Could the Cabinet Member please outline any changes made in the Civic Centre Car Park since May 2022, the cost of any such changes, the reasons for making such changes and whether specific representations were made to the Council for any such changes.

Reply

Since May there has been a reassignment of parking spaces within the Civic Centre car park after concerns were raised. These works occurred in August and involved removing and remarking parking spaces by the Council's contractors FM Conway. The total cost of this was £152.32. Alternative options would have significantly added to the cost of the works.

From Councillor Hayes to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Can the Cabinet Member outline the role that Merton's libraries can play as hubs in our communities?

Reply

Merton's seven public libraries are the high street presence of the Council and provide an invaluable range of services to our communities. Beyond the usual things you would expect to see in libraries such as a range of materials for borrowing, study space, information and free computer access our libraries deliver a huge range of services working in collaboration with partners. Over 60 community organisations deliver services via our libraries and over 450 events are delivered each month.

With regards to the Health & Wellbeing Offer in our libraries we host weekly events delivered by our health partners including Merton Uplift and One You Merton that promote a range of preventative services such as smoking cessation, weight management and wellbeing. Launching on 24 November at Morden Library new Health & Wellbeing Zones have been established at all of our libraries and will provide a range of digital services to support residents including health monitors and massage chairs along with information and events. A partnership with Nuffield Health will mean that residents will have access to free exercise classes in our libraries along with health advice.

Regarding Culture & Creativity we have two dedicated Arts Spaces at Wimbledon and Mitcham libraries that host a range of arts and cultural events in locations that have professional equipment such as staging, lighting and sound systems. All of our libraries work with cultural partners to deliver theatre, music and arts events in our libraries and we have recently been successful in applying to Arts Council England to become a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO). The Council will receive £357,000 of NPO funding over the next 3 years to invest in cultural opportunities via our libraries. The funding will ensure that a high quality cultural offer will be delivered utilising high quality artists and performers. A particular emphasis is on enriching arts and cultural opportunities in the east of the borough and ensuring that all residents have access to high quality activities and events.

With regards to Employability & Skills support our libraries host a range of job clubs and CV writing sessions working with partners such as Job Centre Plus. They also host a range of adult learning courses supporting residents into better work and developing their career opportunities. Business start up centres are also located at Wimbledon and Mitcham libraries that have supported hundreds of residents to set up their own businesses and get advice leading to greater inward investment in the borough.

Our libraries provide quality information and digital support. With regards to our information services we have a set of skilled staff who can support residents with a range of Council and other services and in particular to support residents to access services online. All our libraries are Citizens Advice Bureau information points and a range of partners deliver legal and money management advice for residents. In terms of digital support beyond the free computers and Wi-Fi our libraries provide

one to one and group IT training sessions from beginners through to intermediate levels. Our pioneering Connecting Merton scheme loans high quality computer equipment and broadband to residents along with providing a dedicated support and training programme for any resident who is socially or digitally excluded. This scheme has been nationally recognised and is being promoted as a good practice example by the London Office of Technology and Innovation (LOTI) and has so far supported over 200 residents to get online.

From Councillor Nick McLean to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change:

After the recent traveller incursion on Cannon Hill Common, can the Cabinet Member update me on the current status of the council's 'Persons Unknown' injunction?

Reply

The Council had obtained an injunction covering the borough however following a Court decision this is no longer available to us. An appeal against the decision of the Courts means that whilst the Council can no longer obtain a borough wide injunction it could now apply for a new injunction relating to a smaller number of specific sites.

In relation to Merton, on the information available, legal advice is that it is unlikely that we would be able to satisfy the Court of a sufficient urgent need to proceed with an injunction unless we have evidence of substantial and serious risk to particular identified sites, based on a recent history of unlawful encampments. The advice is to keep this under review over the next 12-24 months.

From Councillor Jenifer Gould to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

According to a study undertaken by the Natural History Museum, the UK is one of the world's most nature-depleted countries on Earth, this decline is projected to worsen with business-as-usual scenarios. So, can the Cabinet member explain why, over the past twelve years, the Council has failed to update the maintenance plans including ecology reports for Merton's 15 nature reserves and will she commit to doing so now? Would she also include what actions the Council is taking for climate change mitigation in relation to Merton's Nature Reserves?

Reply

It was nice to meet you at Cherry Wood Nature Reserve on 4 November along with the Council's Head of Parks Andrew Kauffman and Tree Officers Chris Rayner Rix.

As discussed while on site, the majority of Reserve Management Plans are out of date and do require updating. Since taking over the head of parks service role in February 2022 Andrew and his team have been reviewing both the Nature Reserve and Park management plans (see list below of sites under review).

In line with wider discussions while on site relating to tree planting, please be aware that linked to the Phase 1 Tree Strategy recommendations that the borough will also

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be reviewing tree species planted and ensure that plant species with Climate adaption in mind, choosing appropriate and native species that have greater drought tolerance.

Site	Management Plan Date
Bennett's Hole	No Plan
Beverley Meads/Fishpond Woods	(2001-2010)
Cannon Hill Common	(2001-2010)
Cherry Wood	(1998)
Merton Green Walk	(1998) Now forms part of the Abbey Recreation Ground Green Flag Management Plan
Morden Park	(2000)
Myrna Close	(2007-12)
Sir Joseph Hood Memorial Woods	(2007-12) Now forms part of the Abbey Recreation Ground Green Flag Management Plan
Oakleigh Way Railway Sidings	(No plan)
Wandle Meadow Nature Park	(1997)
Cramner Green	(2001) Working with Trees for cities on a community woodland proposal.
Lower Wandle	(2001)
Ravensbury Park	(2001)
Pyle Brook Nature Reserve	(2001-10)
Fishponds Wood and Beverley Mead	(2001-2010)

1. Abbey Recreation Ground (2012-2022) Action Plan annually reviewed linked to Annual Green Flag visits
2. Colliers Wood Recreation Ground (2012-2022) Action Plan annually reviewed linked to Annual Green Flag visits
3. Dundonald Recreation Ground (2012-2022) Action Plan annually reviewed linked to Annual Green Flag visits
4. John Inness Park (2012-2022) Action Plan annually reviewed linked to Annual Green Flag visits
5. South Park Gardens (2012-2022) Action Plan annually reviewed linked to Annual Green Flag visits
6. Sir Joseph Hood Memorial Playing Fields (2012-2022) Action Plan annually reviewed linked to Annual Green Flag visits
7. Cannizaro Park (2023-33) New 10-year plan developing with Friends of Cannizaro
8. Haydon's Road Recreation Ground (2023-32) New 10-year plan developing with Friends of Haydon's Rd
9. The Canons House and Grounds (2022-32) New 10-year plan developing with Friends of Canons House and Grounds linked to recent National Heritage Lottery upgrade

The Greenspaces Team (including borough ecologist and tree officer) are currently working with service provider at idverde UK and other conservation partner

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organisations - including Woodland Trust and RSPB - to review the current plans and source the necessary funding to update them, and prepare a prioritised programme for updating the plans

Once we have sourced the funding to update the plans we will communicate with the Friends of Nature Reserves and Parks and work with the community to develop the future management plan and associated action plan for each site using the Green Flag Award management and maintenance plan methodology.

From Councillor Attawar to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

What discussions has he had with NHS partners about their plans to relocate health services from St Helier Hospital to Belmont?

Reply

As an administration we remain deeply concerned that the decision to relocate services from the current site at St Helier to the site in Belmont will reduce access to essential health provision for residents of the borough, particularly those in the East of the borough. With the developing cost of living crisis and the impact this will have on household finances, the potential future impact of travel costs to get to the new site only increases this concern.

With the Leader I have, since very early in the life of the new administration been seeking answers from the senior leadership of the new Integrated Care Board as well as from the Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust, both on whether there is an opportunity to further review previous decisions and whether the proposed new hospital remains affordable. I regret to report that the responses received from NHS colleagues thus far have been both incomplete and disappointing in their content. It is particularly concerning to be told that the Outline Business Case for the new hospital has not yet been approved by NHS England and that there appears to be no clear timetable for this decision making.

Members will be aware that there is much speculation in the media about whether the New Hospital Programme is properly funded and as an administration we will be continuing to press hard for clarity on this point. We will also continue to stress the need for an alternative plan that protects and enhances the buildings and services at the current St Helier site so that should, as appears increasingly likely, the national New Hospital Programme be delayed or discontinued there is a plan B in place that ensures our residents can continue to access the high quality services they have a right to expect from the NHS.

From Councillor Max Austin to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride:

Please can the Deputy Leader tell me whether Merton's Winter Night Shelter, organised by Faith in Action, will operate this Winter with the Council's support?

Reply

Faith in Action (FIAMHP), which does so much good work, operating two drop in sessions for the homeless and insecurely housed every week, will decide upon their

own night shelter provision this winter. Faith in Action are independent and do not depend on Council funding to run the winter night shelter.

As a statutory organisation the Council follows the Government's guidance 'Operating principles for Night Shelters' which requires us to provide single room accommodation. The guidance indicates that communal night shelters should only be used if there is significant demand and there are no alternatives. The GLA follows the same guidance. The Council will be providing 6 further single rooms of accommodation which allows the rough sleepers to use the rooms day and night.

Faith in Action wants to run a communal night shelter for 12 -14 people for overnight stays. Merton Council has offered Faith in Action the use of the 'six bed' self-contained accommodation, but this was not accepted, so the Council will run its own provision.

If Faith in Action operate a communal shelter, Public Health and Housing officers will work with them to mitigate any risks of infection. Council officers met with a representative from government on 8 November who affirmed Merton's approach was correct. Merton officers will aim to assist rough sleepers to move into more settled housing and have opportunities to develop new skills and open doors for meaningful employment.

We recognise that there are many wonderful volunteers who work with Faith in Action, and we will aim to work with them as part of a response in future years.

From Councillor Robert Page to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Could the Cabinet Member set out:

- a) the approach taken by the Council to collect Council Tax arrears;
- b) the number of overdue accounts pursued in each of the last 5 years; and
- c) the number of overdue accounts resolved in each of the last 5 years by use of bailiffs/bailiff services?

Reply

- a. The Council follows the collection and recovery procedures as prescribed by the Council Tax (Administration and Enforcement) Regulations 1992 and Council Tax (Demand Notices) (England) Regulations 2011 (as amended).

Specifically, this involves the issue of a reminder notice, or final notice, when an amount payable becomes overdue. If the amount remains unpaid after 14 days, any right to pay by instalments is cancelled, and a court summons is issued in respect of the full amount payable to the end of a financial year, for a hearing at the Magistrates' court.

If the council tax amount remains unpaid at the date of the court hearing the council makes application for a liability order. A liability order gives the council a number of options by which to collect the debt. This includes passing the debt to

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enforcement agents (bailiffs) for collection, or making an attachment to a person's earnings or benefits.

- b. The number of accounts where a court summons has been issued, and a liability order obtained are as follows:

	Summons	Liability orders
2022/23	2,907	2,100 (from 1 April – 31 October 2022)
2021/22	11,744	8,152
2020/21	1,624	1,401
2019/20	8,675	6,538
2018/19	10,011	7,424

- c. Number of accounts paid in full following the use of the enforcement agents:

2022/23	798 (from 1 April – 31 October 2022)
2021/22	1,596
2020/21	687
2019/20	2,262
2018/19	3,016

From Councillor Daniel Holden to the Cabinet Member for Transport

Please can the Cabinet Member tell me how many EV charging points have been installed since May 1st?

Reply

The Council installed 90 extra chargers in 2021. However, no EV charging points have been installed since May 2022. However, the Council has concluded a procurement exercise in this time and appointed an operator to provide 500 lamp column charge points across Merton by March 2023. Our contractors have begun work on structural/ electrical surveys. The installations will happen in batches with the first batch due to commence this month.

Residents can find out more about EV charging on the Council's website, including a live map of available chargers. The new installations between now and March 2023 will be added to Zap-Map as they go live.

From Councillor Williscroft to the Cabinet Member for Transport

Can the Cabinet Member provide an update on the administration's plans to provide 500 additional EV charging points across the borough by March 2023?

Reply

The Council has concluded the procurement exercise to appoint an operator with the contract in place since August 2022. The contractor has been conducting extensive survey work to assess the electrical and structural suitability of lamp columns and has

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now identified viable locations to proceed with for just under 150 sites. Details of these locations have been published on the website and a Section 17 notice has been placed on the lamp column giving residents 28 days to comment. The first batch of site installations is due to commence towards the end of November. A significant number of columns tested so far, either require additional tests or have been assessed to be unsuitable for the installation of a chargepoint, so additional survey work is ongoing to find alternative viable locations for the remaining sites to deliver the 500 additional chargers.

Residents can find out more about lamp column chargers roll-out on the Council's website at [Electric vehicle charging : Plans for new lamp charging points | Merton Council](#).