

From Councillor Macauley to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

I was pleased to see Merton announce free swimming for under-16s in our leisure centres over the summer, what has uptake of this offer been?

Reply

Due to the reporting cycle, the usage figures for free swimming for August will not be available until week commencing 11/9/23. July's attendance are as follows:

- Canons LC - 138 total visits
- Morden LC - 209 total visits
- Wimbledon - 74 total visits

There is an expectation that August's figures will far exceed July's. Further detail will be forthcoming. Discussions are currently taking place to extend this offer in the future.

From Councillor Kohler to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Would the Cabinet Member please confirm, when the Cabinet approved a capital expenditure of £2.75m on building a new running track in Morden Park, it was done:

- without a feasibility study;
- without any discussion with Hercules, the Borough's pre-eminent athletics club or any other local athletics group; and
- without reference to senior officers' previous assurances that the existing athletics stadium in Wimbledon Park would be refurbished and the running track renewed in the next 5 years, following recent measures to make the existing track useable in the short-term?

Reply

The inclusion of £2.75m in the capital budget, was a placeholder for the potential replacement for the existing running track on the border with Wandsworth in Wimbledon Park. No expenditure has been made against this capital budget.

At the time of the decision the track at Wimbledon was in a poor state and it was a senior officer's recommendation, based on initial discussions with England Athletics, to consider relocating the track to a more central site in the borough to make athletics more accessible to a larger number of Merton residents.

Since then, in consultation with the Hercules running club, the track had been refurbished and in April this year further discussions have been had with England Athletics about the feasibility of a replacement or additional track in the borough.

In addition, through the engagement with the sporting community in Merton as part of the development of the Borough of Sport Blueprint, it is evident there is demand from

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several sports for increased provision of facilities, including hockey, football and rugby pitches.

Therefore, before any decision is made on a new running track or additional or replacement sports pitches in the borough, officers are starting the process to commission a borough wide strategic facilities review of the sporting facilities to have updated information of the local need and facilities available to support our Borough of Sport ambitions. Morden Park will be a major part of this review and will involve consultation with governing bodies and other key stakeholders, such as the Friends of Morden Park, Hercules Wimbledon, and many other relevant stakeholders.

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

Please can the Cabinet Member provide the costs for:

- Total cost of new council pigeonholes?
- Total cost of refurbishing the Labour offices?
- Total increase in the staffing budget for the Labour group office?
- Total cost of the proposed card access system to the 12 doors on the first floor group offices?

Reply

1. The costs for the pigeonholes installed is £1,497. They were installed by the in-house maintenance team, following the recommendation by the facilities team for councillors' post to move to being delivered in this way – which was offered to all political groups.
2. This information has been provided at previous Full Council meetings this year.
3. This information has been provided at previous Full Council meetings this year.
4. The estimated costs for the proposed card access system to the doors on the first floor is £19,500. This is based on 9 doors not 12; these being one for the Labour Group Office, one for the Leader's Office, and one for the Cabinet Meeting Room, one for the Leader of the Opposition's Office, two for the Liberal Democrat offices, one for the Conservative office and two for the Merton Park Independent Residents Office.

From Councillor Kaweesa to the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

It was great to see the joy and excitement of Merton students receiving their GCSEs and A-level results. How did Merton do as a borough?

Reply

Students in Merton schools who took their GCSE, A Level, BTech and other exams this year can be extremely proud of their achievements. Their education was significantly disrupted by the pandemic and they have shown remarkable emotional, personal and academic resilience to overcome the impact of lockdowns and remote

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learning. They were excellently supported by teachers, leaders and support staff in their schools to ensure they were well prepared.

Ofqual confirmed a return to pre-pandemic grading for GCSEs and A Levels in 2023, and it is most meaningful, therefore, to compare results to 2019.

At GCSE level, in English and maths, provisional outcomes show that 76% of Merton students achieved a 'standard pass' (grade 4 or above). This is ten percentage points better than the early national average, and also seven percent better than Merton outcomes in 2019. This performance is in line with 2022 outcomes, when Ofqual put in place a package of support for examination students who had experienced significant disruption as a result of public health restrictions, something that students this year did not benefit from.

Provisional 2023 outcomes for A Levels show that at A* - C the performance of Merton students is above the national average and, again, above performance prior to the pandemic in 2019. The picture is similar for Applied General and T Level outcomes as well.

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

What does the Cabinet Member consider to be their top priority challenges to improving our Open Spaces?

Reply

Merton residents and visitors have access to some of the best parks and open spaces in London and we are fortunate to have many volunteers and Friends Groups in the borough who work tirelessly with our dedicated Parks team to provide safe and accessible open spaces across the borough.

This year, in partnership with the LTA, an investment of £1m has seen the refurbishment of 47 tennis courts in 11 parks, with a further investment into playgrounds, splash pads and Multi Use Games areas enabling greater access to sporting and physical activity for young and old.

There are a number of key challenges that the sector faces as a whole that is London centric, which is supporting Merton council in prioritising its actions for sustained improvement of the boroughs parks and open spaces for the next 10 year and beyond.

Strategic Direction: Merton Council requires a Parks and Open Spaces Strategy, harnessing the progress made on the Merton Local Plan and associated Climate Action Plan and Green Blue Strategy to ensure a strategic plan for future Management, Maintenance and Development of our wonderful parks and open spaces. The boroughs Greenspaces team are currently scoping out the Merton Parks and Open Space Strategy requirements and would hope to tender the strategy development in 2024-25.

The recent adopted Merton Tree Strategy (20th June 2023) [Tree Strategy 2023-2029 | Merton Council](#) and associated Action Plan for the next 7 year is helping the service design the future management and maintenance of the boroughs 56,000 trees, with the councils newly procured Arboriculture service contractor Barkland Tree Specialists which commenced in November 2022.

Asset Management: In 2022-23 the Greenspaces Team have conducted an extensive inspection and recording exercise of the boroughs 56,000 Highway and Street trees linked to the adoption of the recent Tree Strategy. This data set means the council has 2023 data for all its Highways and Park Tree that can be used for the ordering of management and maintenance activities on the council's tree stock.

The team are now working on recording all its Parks and Open Spaces Assets across its 67 Parks and Open Spaces including paths, fence lines, playgrounds, sports pitches, horticulture elements, amenity and conservation grass, buildings, structures to ensure we have a clear what we have, its current conditions and future management maintenance and upgrade. Once this data is logged and mapped the council will have a clearer picture of what we have and the necessary investment required for the future.

Biodiversity Net Gain: Biodiversity net gain (BNG) is a way to contribute to the recovery of nature while developing land. It is making sure the habitat for wildlife is in a better state than it was before development. This will apply from November 2023 for developments in the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. In preparation for this process the Greenspaces Team are working closely with colleagues in Planning to ensure Merton's Nature Reserves and Parks have appropriate Habitat types recorded using the approved Metric database and have an appropriate 10-year management and maintenance plans to ensure we are able to improve Nature Recovery in Merton's Parks and Open spaces in line with development activity expected in Merton.

Harnessing Community Action: Merton Council is lucky to be blessed with a diverse range of community volunteers from its network of Friends of Parks, Residents Associations, Clubs and Societies that all contribute massively to the development of parks and open spaces in Merton. The Greenspaces team record and manage these community volunteer's relationships and use the National Green Flag Award benchmark for quality greenspaces as a tool to generated sustained improvement in the borough's parks and open spaces. The recent restructure of Public Spaces has meant the community engagement function has been limited in the last 2 years 2021-23, but current recruitment is in progress to develop the community engagement function, and this combined with a specific Greenspaces Communications Officer will see these community engagement opportunities to expand.

In 2021 Merton Council ranked [Good Parks for London 2021 edition 2.pdf \(parksforlondon.org.uk\)](#) 26th in London for their parks. In 2022, Merton council improved its ranking moving up to 18th in [Good Parks for London 2022](#)

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

FOI requests show that Merton has the second highest number of requests granted for staff to work from abroad at 251 requests. Can the Cabinet Member tell me how staff are monitored to ensure taxpayers are getting value for money?

Reply

The staff at Merton Council do an excellent job of delivering quality services to local residents in increasingly challenging circumstances after 13 years of austerity. The council's comprehensive cyber-security measures mean that any member of staff or councillor must register to access any LBM system from abroad, including their emails.

Many of these requests are for very short periods of time, on many occasions accessed on phones rather than laptops, and do not necessarily mean that staff are spending their paid worktime abroad. In a sign of their dedication to the organisation, many staff, particularly senior leaders, often request access whilst on annual leave, in case of emergencies and to stay in touch with their teams for support.

All requests are subject to line management review & approval. There are also a range of other reasons staff may need support to work from abroad at short notice, including personal/ or family issues, which we do try to support where reasonable.

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

It has been sixth months since this Administration's cost of living budget, how have the measures we introduced helped local people?

Reply

Following the government's mismanagement of the economy nationally, Merton Council declared a Cost of Living Emergency in July 2022. Subsequently, a £2mil Cost-of-Living Support Fund was agreed by Cabinet in September 2022, as well as allocations for the first £1 million. Allocations for the second £1 million were agreed by Cabinet in March 2023.

Funding from both tranches has been allocated to various initiatives aligned with Merton's Cost of Living Strategy and Action Plan 2023-25.

Measures to help local people in the last six months and beyond that have been funded through the Cost-of-Living Support Fund have included:

- Over 1,800 residents attended Merton's Cost of Living events held across the borough (nine events since July 2022).
- Through funding to the Community Fridge Network (Sustainable Merton, Commonsides Community Development Trust, Polish Family Association) and groups funded through Emergency Assistance Fund, a greater number of

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residents were able to access food provision. The Community Fridge Network distributed 57,169 kg of food between October 2022 – June 2023.

- In the seven months to the end of July 2023 just under 500 Merton based individuals engaging with Citizens Advice Merton and Lambeth's Merton Cost of Living team and 166 individuals receiving cost of living advice support for over 550 advice issues. Outreach support commenced in January at the following venues: Mondays - Colliers Wood Library, Tuesdays – Wide Way Medical Centre, Thursdays – Wimbledon Library; Fridays – Pollards Hill Library.
- Through the first quarter of 2023-24 (April 23-June 23) Thinking Works and Merton's Warm and Well partners (Wimbledon Guild and Age UK Merton and the LBM handyperson service) have already distributed 184 fuel vouchers, completed 169 energy efficiency visits, carried out 33 heating checks, 21 residents were supported with small energy measures installed by the handyperson service and there was £101,000 in benefits uptake.
- From May 2023, Merton's Holiday Activities and Food Programme have been extended to half term holidays.
- Funding allocated from July 2023 has enabled Merton to retain one Towards Employment Team project manager and one project officer following DWP funding coming to an end. Since July there have been 4 job/apprenticeship offers and 8 job/apprenticeship starts for Merton residents with various employers through this scheme. This is in addition to the job clubs hosted and attended and numerous hours of employability support provided to residents.

From Councillor Flack to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

At its meeting on 5 December 2022, the Cabinet adopted a report highlighting the need for a "dedicated officer/contracted support" to carry out its Tenants' champion service, which should "have knowledge of landlord and tenant law", further noting that there would be "a form for tenants to complete to detail their concerns. And that "this should come in the first instance to the officer/contracted support to handle." Would the Cabinet Member state when this Cabinet decision will be followed through?

Reply

The Tenants Champion is directly supported by the Head of Housing Needs and Strategy via a dedicated two weekly meeting where individual cases are raised and discussed. Further direct support is provided by the Housing Enforcement Manager. There has also been liaison with South-West London Law centre to ensure that where cases require specialist legal advice there is a referral process.

The Council has developed an online form for residents to raise their cases with the tenant's champion and this has recently completed the testing process and will shortly go live on the Council's website alongside a revised web page. Administrative support with the logging of cases will be provided by the Housing needs team.

From Councillor Cox to the Cabinet Member for Transport

Providing better access to amenities will boost local business trade. An important project which can achieve this in Merton is completing the Missing Link bridges. Will the Cabinet Member please provide an update on progress on completing the Missing Link bridges, across the Wandle at Wimbledon Park to Earlsfield, and the other at Ravensbury Terrace footbridge, and confirm that the council is fully committed to the completion of these bridges within the next 12 months?

Reply

Merton Council supports the creation of the Wandle 'missing links' and we, alongside Labour-run Wandsworth Council, have sought developer contributions from neighbouring developments to realise this local opportunity.

The project consists of completion of the Wandle Trail under the rail bridge approaching Earlsfield (the Wandle missing link) and a footbridge from Ravensbury Terrace in Merton to Groton Rd in Wandsworth.

Merton Council has taken the lead on this cross-borough project and appointed consultants, The Project Centre, to undertake technical feasibility studies for the Wandle links which include engineering, hydrology and flood modelling including input from stakeholders such as the Environment Agency, Network Rail and the borough's. The appointment commenced in May and we're expecting the final report in October.

The Project Centre are carrying out stakeholder engagement and various site surveys to put together a list of site constraints and design criteria. Once this has been completed, a feasibility report will be prepared with the most feasible options for the missing links. Once the Council has reviewed and selected a preferred option, the Consultant will undertake detail design and costings.

As the planning contributions being used for the work is for feasibility only, there is not yet any funding in place (from either borough) to fully deliver the bridges which will be multi-million pound infrastructure projects. Once the designs and costing is understood, each borough will need to consider funding mechanisms and seek planning permissions for the structures. Therefore it will not be possible to commit to the completion of the bridges within 12 months.

From Councillor Attawar to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Greenspaces and Climate Change

It is great to see the council has approved plans to refurbish play parks in the borough, which will benefit Merton residents. Could the Cabinet Member update us on where we are with the year one sites?

Reply

Year 1 Sites Proposed for the Capital Growth Priority Parks Playground Programme are outlined in the below link for the council's website and sites along with designs for

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Rowan Rec and Miles Road Rec Playgrounds. Sites were chosen based on prioritised findings from the Merton Council Annual ROSPA Inspection 2023

[Playground and paddling pool upgrades | Merton Council](#)

- **Rowan Rec Playground** (Longthornton Ward) Consultation Event Held on Thursday 31st August (Currently reviewing findings and updates will be reported on council website w/c 11th Sept)
- **Miles Road Playground** (Cricket Green Ward) Consultation Event Held on Friday 1st September (Currently reviewing findings and updates will be reported on council website w/c 11th Sept)
- **Lewis Road Playground** (Cricket Green Ward) Awaiting revised design ready for consultation event proposed for October 2023 Half Term.