

Councillor Priority Ordinary Questions to Cabinet Members

1) From Councillor Imran Uddin to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Could the Cabinet Member outline how the budget gap has grown to £32m?

Reply

Since the council's business plan was agreed by full council in March 2014, the anticipated budget gap has increased by over £10m. 90% of this increase is as a result of estimated further cuts in our funding from central government, as the table below outlines:

SUMMARY OF CHANGES

Council 5 March 2014 to Cabinet 20 October 2014

	2015/16 £'000	2016/17 £'000	2017/18 £'000	2018/19 £'000
Council 5 March 2014	0	7,350	15,246	21,440
Inflation - Pay	30	75	120	165
Inflation - Prices	62	126	191	255
Pooled budgets - inflation	30	60	90	120
Replacement Savings	340	100	100	100
Income	669	1,339	2,008	2,676
Other	0	(2)	(4)	(8)
Capital financing costs	(444)	(1,159)	(1,981)	(2,346)
Settlement Funding Assessment	74	2,814	8,468	9,863
Council Tax Yield	(194)	(195)	(196)	(197)
Collection Fund	421	0	0	0
Use of Reserves	(255)	255	0	0
Cabinet 20 October 2014	732	10,763	24,041	32,068

Supplementary

I am sure the cabinet member shares my frustration that government has slashed money for local services even further than expected and I would like to ask him how difficult this further funding cut from Central Government will make it for Merton, in ensuring that those residents most in need get the help that they need.

Reply

As explained, 90% of the increase in the savings we have to make come from the cuts in funding from Central Government and we have to save £30m per year in terms of the medium term financial strategy. Just to give members an idea of the scale of that, it is equivalent to an increase in council tax of 40%. It will not be easy to find those savings and I daresay that we may even fall out, but this is a business-like council with a business-like Leader and we will do our best to continue to provide good value public services for all our residents, including those most in need.

2) From Councillor Linda Taylor to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:

What will the council do to ensure that adequate investment is made in infrastructure projects to address the increased pressure on parking/health care/school places and the risk of flooding that the current AFC Wimbledon/ Galliard Homes proposal for the Wimbledon Greyhound Stadium site would bring were it to be approved?

Reply

The Council's planning policies seek to ensure that development is supported by necessary infrastructure. Planning permission for the AFC Wimbledon /Galliard Homes proposal would need to satisfy the council's policies that the infrastructure necessary to support this proposal can be provided. Since 2012, the council has been working with infrastructure providers, including Wandsworth Council (particularly on school places and transport), Thames Water, Transport for London, the Environment Agency and others to help identify infrastructure needs relating to the site. Now that a specific planning application has been submitted, the council continues to work with these providers and the applicants to assess the proposal. In addition, if planning permission were to be granted, the developer would pay the Community Infrastructure Levy once building work started which will also help to support infrastructure locally. Local communities will be able to propose directly how some of this funding should be used to support their local area.

Supplementary

I note in the response that he says, in relation to the community infrastructure levy, that some of the funding should be used for the local area. My question is, will he make a commitment with regard to the proportion of the contribution that will be made available to be spent in the immediate area around the stadium should this proposal go ahead, and if not, I would like to know why not.

Reply

15% of the CIL is going to be spent at the discretion of local councillors, so I won't make a commitment at this stage because it is going to be dependent on local

councillors talking to local residents' associations about what they want to see in their local area. I think it would be excellent if you, with the other Wimbledon councillors, were to consider with local residents what improvements you would like to see and then see what the costings are and whether they can be generated from the CIL from any successful application on that site, or other sites in the area.

3) From Councillor Mary Curtin to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health

Would the cabinet member join me in welcoming FISH to Lower Morden?

Reply

Yes, I am pleased that FISH have been able to offer a service in Lower Morden. I value what FISH do so any enhancement of their activity is to be welcomed. This is without any extra funding from the council, and shows that FISH along with other voluntary organisations are looking at how to sustain their services with potentially reduced public funding due to government funding cuts. I want to continue to explore with these organisations how we can do this, because the contribution of volunteers and voluntary organisations is so important.

Supplementary

Is the cabinet member aware of FILM (Friends of Lower Morden), and will she come to the introductory session in April which will launch our services to the over fifties in Lower Morden?

Reply

Yes, I am aware of FILM, which I think is a very clever name. I will come to the launch. I would like to congratulate you and the other trustees and express my appreciation to your staff and volunteers.

4) From Councillor David Dean to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Cleanliness and Parking:

Can the Cabinet Member please tell me:

If the administration's unpopular wheelie bin pilot uses £48,000 of un-ring fenced funds, why couldn't the spare money be used to support the Adult Social Care budget?

Where is the written proof that Central Government gave Merton the other £67,000 specifically for this kind of waste pilot scheme?

Reply

a) The £48000 has been allocated from an underspend in this year's Capital Programme for Traffic and Highways on bridges and structures. This will be noted as an adjustment in the Capital Programme. This money could not have been used for day to day Adult social care costs

b) The Authority was awarded £650,000 from the DCLG to incentivise and promote recycling. This is tied into a commitment to maintain a weekly collection. The implementation of the pilot scheme supports this objective and its use is entirely consistent with the purpose for which the fund was allocated

Supplementary

Why is it that in question one, the cabinet member says we need £2.3m extra to spend in capital, yet we have £48,000 which has no home, which we spend on wheelie bins?

Reply

You will have heard the financial responses at Scrutiny last night. You don't like wheelie bins. Let us go ahead with this pilot. This was discussed last night. I welcome you to be part of the pilot scheme.

5) From Councillor Katy Neep to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration

Could the Cabinet Member update us on the council's vision for regeneration along the South Wimbledon/Colliers Wood corridor?

Reply

The Council's vision for the wider Colliers Wood and South Wimbledon area is set out in our adopted Core Planning Strategy (2011) and highlights the area as one of our regeneration priorities. The area is one of the Mayor's areas for intensification and capable of accommodating growth in terms of jobs and housing.

Circle Housing Merton Priory are already advanced in the preparation of a masterplan to guide the potential regeneration of High Path estate. The Council has also undertaken its own consultations to understand residents views and ensure that any plans for the future fit with our Core Strategy and the views of residents.

- Merton High Street has already seen significant investment in the public realm and quality of the streetscape. Our investment includes:
- Creation of additional parking and servicing bays
- Environmental enhancements to the street entry points

- Provision of new cycle lane infrastructure
- Additional street tree planting
- Creation of a new public space at Wandle bridge (Sainsbury's M&S)
- Further works planned this year as part of Connecting Colliers Wood including enhancements to Wandle Bank, Wandle Park and Baltic Close.
- Resurfacing of Morden Road

The Council's economic development team have also been promoting the Merton Business Support Service and our Shopfront grants to businesses in the locality.

The council recognises the need for a strategic masterplan to guide development in the area and we have been working with the GLA to scope out the preparation of an area planning framework. This is tied to the outcome of the regeneration proposals at High Path as a major catalyst but we have also committed to working with Colliers Wood residents association to work on the preparation of a framework over the next 2 years.

We are also working on designs for improvements to South Wimbledon junction; which will be consulted on later in 2015.

Supplementary

I was delighted to see that work has begun on the Colliers Wood tower. Would the cabinet member join me in congratulating officers, local ward members, Siobhain McDonagh and the Cabinet for all the work that they've done on getting this development moving, after much delay from the owner?

Reply

It is noteworthy that after decades of dereliction we are getting movement on this building. We are looking at a resolution that will see redevelopment of the site - a far more attractive building. We are currently improving the public realm in Colliers Wood and it will be one of the most attractive places to live and work.

Congratulations do go to officers, local ward members, the MP for Mitcham and Morden and the Cabinet for this progress.

6) From Councillor Oonagh Moulton to the Leader of the Council :

Has this Labour-run council abandoned its own 'July principles'?

Reply

THIS QUESTION WILL BE ANSWERED BY THE CABINET MEMBER FOR FINANCE

I'm surprised the Councillor is interested in our ground-breaking July principles, agreed by full council in July 2011 with the backing of Labour, the Merton Park

Independent Residents and the Liberal Democrats, given that her party, the Conservative group, did not vote for them. The council and the administration remain committed to these principles as a responsible way of dealing with the difficult decisions her colleagues in the Conservative-led government have forced onto local councils and onto our residents.

We are disappointed that the Conservatives have repeatedly refused to support these July principles, which have been the basis of our approach to making savings as a result of Government cuts, and have meant that we make smaller savings in the Community and Housing, and Children, Schools and Families Departments than elsewhere as a proportionate of their expenditure.

With the Conservative-led government slashing funding for local council services it is important that the council has an agreed approach to how we endeavour to continue to provide services to those most in need of our help at a time when central government seem intent, as the government's own Office for Budget Responsibility has confirmed, on taking the level of investment in public services back to the 1930s.

Supplementary

I am surprised the Leader didn't answer my question himself, perhaps he would like to answer this one instead? Why is it that the Labour administration is making cuts to areas that their own national party said it wouldn't make? Would he clarify this discrepancy for the audience present?

Reply

I am astonished that the Tories are so keen on the July Principles because they have always opposed them. They should remember why we had the July Principles, it is because of the scale of cuts from their government that we need to prioritise. The July Principles will ensure they are made fairly. Just imagine how much worse it would be if the Tories had their way and there were no July Principles. They say we are all in this together, but all we see from them is cuts and more cuts, tax cuts for millionaires and service cuts for people who need them most.

7) From Councillor Joan Henry to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health

Could the Cabinet Member give us some more information on the four national awards Merton has recently been nominated for?

Reply

The Local Government Chronicle awards have shortlisted Merton Council in four categories for our work around dementia, hoarding and preventing homelessness. Merton's Dementia Hub has been shortlisted in two categories, Commissioning Pioneer and Business Transformation. The first of its kind in London and one of the

first in the UK, Merton has commissioned the Alzheimer's Society to manage the hub as neither a traditional care home nor a respite/day centre, but a unique community based service for people with dementia, their family and carers, at any stage in their journey, providing access to different health and social care professionals all under one roof.

Merton's Hoarding Protocol is also the first of its kind in the country and has been shortlisted in the Innovation category, which Merton also won last year for its Merton Managed Accounts, a pre-paid card service which gives adult social care service users more control over their personal budgets. Developed in collaboration with local partners including Circle Housing Merton Priory, the hoarding protocol is unique in that it looks at practical actions to work with people who hoard, by assessing their needs and finding solutions through a multi-agency approach. Since its introduction in 2013, 25 customers have been supported, meaning they can now enjoy a better quality of life in their own home, as well as reducing the cost to the public purse.

Merton's work around preventing homelessness has also been shortlisted in the Business Transformation category. With 220 private sector households affected by the benefit cap, a sustainable solution to stop people becoming homeless needed to be found. With no access to housing support services and the threat of possible eviction, many were alone and unsure what to do. With an excellent track record as the London borough with the lowest number of people in temporary accommodation, Merton teamed up with the DWP to develop a unique, proactive and holistic approach to support these households, resulting in over £1million savings.

Supplementary

I congratulate the cabinet member for the award for the dementia hub. Could she clarify how members can get involved in the ground breaking-project?

Reply

I have already sent emails to everyone regarding a tour at the dementia hub. You are all very welcome to come and see the beautiful place and get familiar with it and the services, so you can tell people in your wards what is there. This year the first tour will be Thursday, 5th Feb, 2.30 – 4pm and another one at the end of Feb and two further tours in March.

8) From Councillor Daniel Holden to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Cleanliness and Parking:

Would the Cabinet Member please confirm how she intends to handle the preparations for the Christmas waste and recycling collections this year?

Reply

We are reviewing the arrangements at present and no definite plans have yet been established. Every festive period the refuse collection arrangements are different to

the rest of the year to ensure our staff have much deserved time of with their loved ones. We do not intend to change that approach in 2015/16. In the lead up to Christmas & New Year 2014/15 the Council publicised the changed collection days in My Merton as well as in the local free newspaper. Information was also circulated using social media and published on Merton's website. Many Councillors also publicised the changes. The amount of waste collected in the last festive period was unprecedentedly high and this created additional workload for our staff. As a result we will be reviewing how to deal with any additional workload in future years.

Supplementary

When you formalise your plans for Christmas, please could you let us know so we can inform our residents. Also, the putting adverts in newspapers that most people don't receive any more was a failure and can you let us know how the ad hoc arrangements in making additional collections cost, compared to the savings made by not communicating properly.

Reply

I can't give the costings, but I can give you that later. I accept that what we did last Christmas was not what we had done before and when people's collection dates were moved forward, rather than one day later, it caused problems. We are starting to look at how we address this now. Perhaps we were naïve to think that putting it in the Guardian and My Merton would be good enough. We know it was an issue that we don't want to have happen again next year, so we are looking at it as a priority.

9) From Councillor Abigail Jones to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Could the Cabinet Member update me on progress towards setting a balanced budget for the council?

Reply

Cabinet and Scrutiny have received regular reports since October on the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) and the progress on setting a balanced budget for the Council. The first report in October to Cabinet updated the MTFS with changes to some assumptions on inflation, government grant reductions, council tax yield and adding a further year. The capital programme was reviewed, with slippage, new schemes and deleted schemes. New savings targets were also set for departments, with weightings of 0.75, 1.0, 1.5 and 1.5 for Children's Schools & Families, Community & Housing, Environment & Regeneration & Corporate Services respectfully. There were also some revisions to previously agreed savings. All of these, along with the revised capital programme were presented to Scrutiny in November. A further report was taken to Cabinet in November with further revisions to previously agreed savings and then new savings were brought forward to December Cabinet, along with draft Equality Assessments. These were then

presented to scrutiny in January, along with the changes from November. There has been a further Cabinet report in January with an update on the financial settlement and Council Tax base. Whilst savings of £16.591m have been identified, there is still a gap of £15.377m up to 2018/19. However, current proposals, if accepted, would balance the budget for 2015/16 and 2016/17, but leave further savings to be found in 2017/18 and 2018/19. This is even after the use of earmarked reserves and capital receipts.

We would rather that the Government were not putting us in this position, but we will take a responsible view on this, and maintain a business-like approach and deliver a record fifth Council Tax freeze, despite the pressure of lost funds. This business-like approach is one of the reasons why residents continue to rate the council highly through the residents' survey results which show that the number of people who say that the Council is efficient and well run is at a record high.

Supplementary

Can the cabinet member advise councillors what representations he has received regarding the 10% council tax cut that was promised by the Conservatives and what impact this will have had on the council's budget?

Reply

It's not really my responsibility to help the Conservatives with their alternative budget, however I have received no representations from them about the £8m extra a year they would need to cut from council services to meet this reckless cut. However, what we plan to do is to have a council tax freeze for a record 5th consecutive year. In our view, an additional £8m a year cut would mean closing children's centre, libraries, swimming pools and even day centres. If you can come up with the services cuts you need, you will be closing day centres, it is not what the people voted for.

This page is intentionally left blank