

Councillor Priority Strategic Theme Questions to Cabinet Members

1) From Councillor Tobin Byers to the Leader of the Council

Could the Leader outline how we have worked in partnership with the Merton Chamber of Commerce and Love Wimbledon as part of the Merton Partnership's strategic vision to improve our town centres.

Reply

The Council has been incredibly active in working with partners to ensure that our town centres remain successful and attractive to visitors, employers and investors.

We work with the Chamber of Commerce in running town centre business forums and supporting business through our Merton Business Support Service. The forums are focused on each of our 5 town centres as well as our three main industrial areas (South Wimbledon, Weir Road and Willow Lane) tackling issues such as parking, street cleaning and broadband connectivity.

We have recently held stakeholder focus groups relating to our Inward Investment and Retention strategy, which seeks to strengthen the employment offer in our town centres and industrial areas.

Also through the Merton Partnership; we have seen improvements in access to work through the Employment & Skills strategy and Economic wellbeing sub-group. We have secured employment opportunities for over 150 young people in our first year of activity.

We have worked very closely this year with LoveWimbledon is running the FutureWimbledon ideas competition. From this we have an exciting range of visions for Wimbledon from both professionals and the local community. We are establishing a 2 year programme of work to bring these visions to reality through the preparation of a masterplan, programme of cultural activities and as part of our inward investment work to promote Wimbledon as a place to invest for office HQs. We are also jointly championing Crossrail 2 and have commissioned work to establish the economic uplift of Crossrail 2

Our strong business partnerships with MCC and the borough's BIDs have contributed to Merton Council being voted 'Best Small Business Friendly Borough' by London Councils and the Federation of Small Businesses.

Supplementary

Can I congratulate the Leader and the Merton Partnership on the work that it does, and could he update us on the more recent successes for Wimbledon Town Centre?

Reply

There is excellent news for Wimbledon town centre, only last week we heard that Close Brothers in Tolworth are moving to Wimbledon, they are a Footsie 250 company. They have decided to base themselves in a Labour controlled area, with 600 staff, 60000sq ft, this bodes well for Wimbledon town centre. We will redouble our efforts for Mitcham, Colliers Wood, Raynes Park and Morden town centres.

2) From Councillor Adam Bush to the Cabinet Member for Finance:

Given that the proposed £200,000 reduction to council day care services for disabled residents is due to the administration's failure to implement its own previously agreed savings, would the Cabinet Member agree that vulnerable people and the voluntary sector are paying the price for this administration's incompetence at delivering savings?

Reply

This is not due to a failure to achieve a savings target, but due to prudent planning ahead. It is normal practice every year to review savings planned for subsequent years, re-assess our level of confidence in achieving them, and if necessary find alternative replacement savings. Changes may be required if external factors impact on a saving's deliverability, and this is especially relevant in the area of adult social care where contracts with suppliers can go up as well as down, or last minute Government policy changes can necessitate revisions.

Where such replacement savings are needed, we seek to minimise the impact they have. We also consult with the relevant Scrutiny bodies, and this saving was considered by Merton's Healthier Communities and Older People Scrutiny panel on 12 November and 14 January, and by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 25 November and 29 January. As the Council needs to find savings of £32m a year by 2019, and no alternative savings were agreed to replace this £800,000 saving over the period of the medium term financial strategy, Cabinet will need to consider on 16 February how to balance the Council's budget while providing value for money services despite cuts to the Council's funding from Central Government.

Supplementary

Rather than criticising the government, why is he not following Labour run Hammersmith and Fulham by choosing to fund adult social care budgets by cutting the council marketing budget instead?

Reply

When the government is cutting our budget by 40% and we have to make savings of £32m a year, we are having to make some very difficult decisions. What we have been doing has been appropriate for the savings we have got to make. As soon as it became apparent that we were not going to be able to reduce what we pay for care

packages, we came to Scrutiny with alternatives. It's been to Scrutiny in November and January. Obviously it's not something that everybody wants to do, but this is an example of us working closely with other councillors to do things in an appropriate way. While I wish we could live up to the standards of another Labour council, clearly much better than a conservative one, I still think that what we have done has been the right thing.

3) From Councillor Russell Makin to the Leader of the Council

Can the Leader outline the work we do via the Merton Partnership with the Fire Service?

Reply

The Fire Service is a statutory partner for the Safer Merton Partnership and attend the Safer and Stronger Strategy Group and Executive Board meetings and sub groups. They are actively involved in the setting of partnership priorities and action plans. They attend local multiagency problem solving meetings and the fire misuse group meetings around Halloween and bonfire night. Their home safety checks greatly assist in reducing domestic fires and following training these visits assist fire officers to identify possible domestic abuse and vulnerable residents to signpost to support services.

Supplementary

Given the new fire station has moved from my ward to his ward, can he give any information, through his dealing with the partnership, what is promised for the old fire station site?

Reply

I am delighted about the move to my ward in terms of the fire station. It is an excellent ward in which to base yourself. The fire station opens next week. I know that I will be there. There will be discussions about the site being vacant. At the end of the day the owners will have a big say, but the heritage group are talking about ideas for a restaurant/café and the Partnership will engage and the Partnership has a presence in the Borough Commander. At the end of the day it is for the owners to decide what to do, but we will engage with residents and the heritage group as well.

4) From Councillor Najeeb Latif to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:

As the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Economic Development, Regeneration and support of the Business community, can the Cabinet Member outline what plans, if any, the administration has to ensure Merton is taking full advantage of the greater

discretion now enjoyed by local authorities' in relation to business rates? What reassurance on this can he give to business ratepayers and residents both in Wimbledon Village and across the borough?

Reply

From April 13 we introduced a new local discount for new and expanding businesses – the aim of the policy is to

- Support the attraction of new businesses (and the associated investment and jobs) into the borough, particularly into the East and other part of the borough undergoing regeneration
- Help reduce the number of empty premises and thereby reverse the physical and economic decline of areas associated with high levels of vacant premises
- Help increase Council income generated from business rate in the medium and long term
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Businesses can receive between 20-100% discount on their rates for the first year and a further reduction in the second year.

Future Merton work closely with businesses to help them co-ordinate and develop their business and receive help through the local discount scheme.

Retail relief is being increased to £1,500 from 1 April 2015 for qualifying businesses and we will automatically grant this relief without the need for written applications.

Further information, and to apply, can be found at merton.gov.uk/business/businessrates/businessratesrelief/localdiscount.htm

Supplementary

As well as business rates, Village residents have also raised a concern about mansion tax to me. Given their policy on a mansion tax, bearing in mind their own Labour MPs are against it, can the cabinet member tell us with a straight yes or no answer, are you in favour or against the mansion tax?

Reply

Am I in favour of Labour's policy that puts £2.5bn into the NHS every year, part of which is to be raised on a proper tax on residential assets worth more than £2m? I would say yes, because only Labour will protect the NHS and provide appropriate levels of funding and what we've seen under this government is a gradual run down of the NHS, so now we have an emergency situation where many Accident and Emergency departments are declaring major incidents. Labour will not allow this to continue and we will provide appropriate funding.

5) From Councillor Marsie Skeete to the Leader of the Council

Will he outline some of the work we undertake in partnership with MVSC?

Reply

The London Borough of Merton has a longstanding partnership relationship with MVSC.

The Merton Compact is recognised nationally as an excellent example of a local compact and has won 13 awards. MVSC was one of the key signatory organisations which signed up to the Compact in 2004 and has worked very closely with Merton Council and other partner agencies to promote a 'Compact way of working' in Merton. MVSC is represented on Merton's longstanding Compact Board. In 2014 Merton celebrated 10 years of Compact working in the borough and MVSC was a key partner involved in running the Compact 10 years on awards and ceremony, to further raise the profile of Compact working in Merton.

MVSC is a key member of the Merton Partnership. The Chief Executive of MVSC sits on the Merton Partnership Executive Board, as a senior representative for Merton's voluntary and community sector. MVSC also administers the INVOLVE Community Engagement Network (CEN), which elects representatives to sit on the various bodies within the Merton Partnership structure.

In November 2011, the Shadow Health and Wellbeing Board were awarded Performance Reward Grant Funding, to set up a Community Health and Wellbeing Fund in east Merton. The fund was administered by MVSC, and is now at the end of a successful third year.

MVSC manages the Voluntary Sector Development Fund on behalf of Merton Council. This £12,000 annual fund aims to develop and improve the way groups deliver services to Merton residents. 21 applications were received for round three of the Fund at the end of 2014.

Merton Council works closely with MVSC to promote volunteering in Merton. The Merton Partnership Volunteering Awards takes place annually in the borough. In 2014, MVSC administered these awards on behalf of Merton Council. MVSC, working with the Council and other key partners has also the run the Shout About Your Volunteering (SAYV) project every year during National Volunteers' Week in June. The project aims to highlight the contributions Merton residents make through volunteering, and in doing so inspire others to volunteer. Approximately 40,000 people in Merton engage in 'formal' volunteering with many more volunteering informally. The overall value of volunteers to Merton is £100m.

Supplementary

Will the Leader join me in thanking Ian Beaver for the work he has done as interim chief executive of MVSC and in welcoming the new CE Mr Khadiru Mahdi.

Reply

It was very sad that we lost Chris Frost. We are hugely indebted to Ian Beaver for the work he has done in holding together MVSC and last week we welcomed Mr Mahdi who comes from Tower Hamlets with huge experience in the voluntary sector and I know he will be an excellent CE and the volunteering side of MVSC will continue. 40,000 volunteers at MVSC providing the equivalent of £100m to the borough. LBM is proud and I need to thank the administration before us for continuing that volunteering element as well and I do think we need to go from strength to strength on volunteering and the new CE will do an excellent job.

6) From Councillor James Holmes to the Cabinet Member for Education:

Can the Cabinet Member please outline in detail what savings would be made through the closure of the Whatley Avenue Centre?

Reply

The running costs of the Whatley Avenue Centre in 2013/14 (full year outturn) were as follows:

Premises costs: £139,999

Depreciation: £91,536

These costs don't include any of the elements of running a service within the building.

The current consultation about the future of the Adult Education in Merton is not about the site but instead about the delivery model for adult education in Merton. If the service is not changed and an alternative model not found then even a 10% cut in SFA grant could see the council liable for approximately £300,000 per year additional un-budgeted expenditure. This is funding that would need to be taken from other services.

Supplementary

If the Whatley Avenue Centre does close, is it his view there will be a Harris School there?

Reply

We are considering future options for the site. Harris have indicated their wish to use the site. We are concentrating first on the future of MAE.

7) From Councillor John Dehaney to the Leader of the Council

Can he outline how we have worked through the Merton Partnership with its volunteering strategy to keep all of our libraries open?

Reply

Working with our colleagues at Merton Voluntary Service Council (MVSC) our Library & Heritage Service has established a pioneering volunteering model. In the last year it has seen over 530 volunteers contribute at least 37,000 hours of voluntary time to our libraries, the most significant levels in London. This contribution has not only assisted with keeping all of our libraries open but has also enabled us to extend opening hours at all of our sites whilst delivering ongoing efficiencies.

The model developed has been promoted as a best practice example by Volunteering England and our Library & Heritage Service and MVSC staff have developed best practice guidance in volunteering for other London boroughs. All of this has assisted with a continual increase in usage of our libraries and record satisfaction levels.

Supplementary

I do understand we are the envy of other boroughs in using our volunteer strategy in supporting services. Could he confirm how we are helping the spread of best practice?

Reply

We are spreading best practice by staying where we are in the civic centre and having a queue of local authorities coming to us. Their heads of libraries ask about our template and how we use the volunteers and the excellent work of Councillor Draper to get extended powers, improve our libraries, keeping every library open and those boroughs include Harrow and Lambeth, great Labour boroughs, but also include Barnet, a conservative borough. We will continue to do what we can to improve our libraries and provide best practice by extending the queue of councillors coming to see how we do it.

8) From Councillor David Simpson to the Cabinet Member for Finance:

How many self-employed consultants have currently been engaged by the council for a period of a) 1 year or more; b) 2 years or more; and c) 3 years or more? Please provide a breakdown of which teams these are in.

Reply

There are no consultants in Corporate Services, Environment and Regeneration or Community and Housing who have been engaged by the council for more than a year. Just one department, Children, Schools and Families, has any consultants engaged for this period, due to the nature of the work this department undertakes.

Corporate Services:

1 year or more – 0
2 years or more – 0
3 years or more – 0

Communities & Housing:

1 year or more – 0
2 years or more – 0
3 years or more – 0

Environment & Regeneration:

1 year or more – 0
2 years or more – 0
3 years or more – 0

Children Schools & Families:

1 year or more – 0
2 years or more – 3
3 years or more – 1

The individuals provide consultancy to schools on very specialist areas of the curriculum and matters related to health and safety of children in science and on trips. They are paid in the region of 5k per annum to do so. One is also commissioned to be the council's curriculum advisor on children home educated children the contract value for 2014/15 is c£14k.

Supplementary

Broadening out my question and not expecting an answer straight away, how many agency staff do we employ, not just consultants? Would you agree with me that the cost of agency staff is considerably higher than would normally be for permanent staff? In the light of last year's whistle blowing, are the administration acting on the recommendations in the employment of agency staff?

Reply

I don't have immediately to hand the answer. I would say that in terms of consultants we have done a lot of work to make this number appropriate. I note that back in the conservative administration there was one particular year when you spent nearly £2m on consultants. That figure has fallen considerably since then. There are particular issues with agency workers in areas such as social work and legal services where I believe where it's not always easy to recruit people at the going rate so sometimes you have to go to an agency, to ensure there is sufficient cover to provide safety for children in particular. That is something that has been

addressed through the general purposes committee under the sterling work of Councillor McCabe. It is something I hope we can work on a cross party basis to improve that particular situation.

9) From Councillor Stan Anderson to the Leader of the Council

Could he outline the work the Merton Partnership is undertaking on the health and wellbeing strategy?

Reply

The Health and wellbeing strategy is a statutory requirement of the health and Wellbeing Board, a sub-board of the Merton Partnership. The strategy attempts to align with the Merton Community Plan. The first strategy was produced in 2013 and we are now refreshing this, building on an agreement from the 2013 Merton Partnership conference to address the health inequalities in Merton. This conference agreed that all Merton residents should have access to a good life, made up of the following themes with some examples of underpinning areas to contribute to the theme:

Theme 1 Best start in life – early years and achieving a strong educational base for children and young people

- Childhood immunisations
- Promoting the emotional wellbeing and resilience of our children and young people.
- Promoting healthy lifestyles and choices.

Theme 2: Good health – preventing illness, ensuring early detection of illness and accessing good quality healthcare.

- Embed prevention into local public policy and make health everyone's business to ensure that influences on health make a positive impact
- Promote and support healthy settings such as workplaces and schools that enable individuals to make healthy choices
- Make every contact count, embedding prevention of ill health into the day to day role of frontline staff
- Enable and increase the number of adults making healthy life choices, including taking up clinical prevention services.
- Develop health services that meet the needs of residents of East Merton.
- Reduce Accident and Emergency attendances and emergency admissions for long-term conditions, such as diabetes and deliver care in the most appropriate location.
- Raise awareness of dementia prevention and enable those with dementia and their carers to have access to good quality, early diagnosis and support.

Theme 3 Good life skills, lifelong learning and good work.

- Continue to reduce the number of JSA claimants and residents who are economically inactive.
- Encourage skills provision in growth sectors.
- Support local employers through business engagement activities to identify their business needs that will lead to local employment/ apprenticeship/ traineeship opportunities. (the Economic Wellbeing Group works closely with Merton Chamber of Commerce to understand what our local businesses want from their employees).
- Provide opportunities for more people to make a positive contribution to their own wellbeing through access to adult learning and development of skills.

Theme 4 Community participation and feeling safe

(Safer Merton is also developing additional outcomes on this theme)

- Consider both higher crime and higher fear of crime data in the deployment of local Metropolitan police resources to areas of the borough in order to increase police visibility in these areas.
- Increase involvement of older people through volunteering
- Increase activity of community groups in leveraging funds into Merton for work around health and wellbeing.
- Build capacity across community groups to enable them to partner the public sector on health and wellbeing work.

Theme 5 A good natural and built environment

- Embed positive health and wellbeing outcomes within major developments by making positive health impacts a condition of granting planning permission in Merton.
- Help tackle fuel poverty by promoting and managing collective energy switching programmes for Merton's residents.
- Increase the number of street trees and trees in parks.
- Provide opportunities for local communities to grow food to help encourage a healthy diet, community co-operation and local enterprise.
- Achieve the affordable housing targets set in our Local Plan.

The themes address the most significant influences on health, including education and income which are the largest influences. The health and Wellbeing Board has asked that the outcomes are focused on a few key areas that reduce health inequalities and are in need of improvement.

The task and finish group set up to develop this 3-year strategy brings together officers from across the Council who contribute to the other three sub-boards of the Merton partnership; i.e., Children's Trust Board, Safer, Stronger Merton and Sustainable Merton. A community consultation is planned for Thursday 5th February at Vestry Hall.

This work will be drawn together for approval by the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Merton Partnership, we expect in the spring of 2015

Supplementary

I know the Leader publicly called for the chair of the CCG to step down and I see this has now happened. What are his hopes for the new chair and of ensuring the future of St Helier Hospital?

Reply

I was informed of the resignation of Dr Howard Freeman and the appointment from 1.4.15 of Dr Andrew Murray to take the chair of Merton CCG. I've had a discussion with our CE, Ged Curran, and there will be an early meeting between myself and Dr Murray. In this meeting I will emphasise and hope that he will join with me in being a supporter of major hospitals, of A&Es and of maternity units and that they should stay en bloc and in situ, and whether the new chair of the CCG will from 1.4.15 join me in supporting St Helier Hospital and improvements in its services to residents and especially it's A&E and its maternity unit.

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