

ITEM 6 COUNCILLORS' ORDINARY PRIORITY QUESTIONS TO CABINET MEMBERS AND THE RESPONSES

**1) From Councillor Peter McCabe to the Leader of the Council**

Given the Leader's commitment to retaining services at St Helier Hospital, does he welcome the appointment of a new Chair of the CCG.

**Reply**

Having publicly called for the previous CCG Chair to stand down due to his support for the downgrading of St Helier Hospital, I welcome the appointment of a new chair. I have already met with Dr Murray and have made clear our continued opposition to any closure or downgrading of our local hospital. He is fully aware of the strength of feeling from local people and the council on this issue and I look forward to an approach where the health needs of local people are prioritised.

**Supplementary**

I recall that just before the general election the Secretary of State for Health announced to the press that he would keep St Helier Hospital open. I know that the Leader agreed at the last Council meeting to write to the Secretary of State asking for full disclosure of the secret plans to close of St Helier Hospital, has he had a response?

**Reply**

Yes I have had a response, but it is not from Jeremy Hunt, but from the Parliamentary Under Secretary for State for Health and she completely contradicts his statements before the election. Her first line after thanking me for the letter to Jeremy Hunt reads as follows: As I am sure you will appreciate decisions about local NHS services are a matter for the NHS locally

I have written to the Secretary of State on the following lines: and Miss Ellison's response stands in contrast to your statement prior to the election where you said the conservative party does not support these plans and wouldn't implement them in government.

I await another response from the Secretary of State.

**2) From Councillor Daniel Holden to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:**

What action is the council taking to alleviate the taxi situation at Wimbledon station?

**Reply**

There have been reported problems with Taxis queuing at Wimbledon Station (Orinoco Lane) and spilling out onto Alexandra Road, occasionally blocking the bus lane.

One of the contributing factors is that the number of taxi rank licences issued by TFL exceeds the capacity of the Orinoco Lane queue. There is often a high turnover at the rank, but occasionally bottlenecks happen.

The Council has worked with Southwest Trains and Network Rail and secured an agreement that taxis could, at peak times, also queue in the network rail yard at the north end of Orinoco Lane. However, in the past 3 weeks, the yard was closed for resurfacing and maintenance works by Network Rail. This brought the queuing problems back, however the yard is now operational again for taxis.

The Council offered a solution of providing new taxi rank facilities on Queens Road, but this was un-popular with taxi drivers who prefer the station forecourt rank.

Wimbledon Station also has a new manager who we've been liaising with to monitor the situation. We shall continue to do this and take appropriate action where we can to improve the situation.

### **Supplementary**

Given the Council's public health remit why has the Council not been able to deal with this matter which is causing residents to claim more ill health rather than better health, which is the aim of the Council.

### **Reply**

It would appear that the reason for the difficulties is that the overflow goods yard was out of use and what happened was due to works going on there, but those works have now finished and the taxi drivers now have access to that so there should be no difficulties from this point forward. Traffic congestion is always a problem and obviously it is an everyday problem in London. If the problems continue, so will the council's application to resolve this issue. I will be very glad to go with Councillor Holden to view the issues down there if it continues to cause concern.

### **3) From Councillor Sally Kenny to the Cabinet Member for Finance**

Could he update us on progress to date on implementing some of savings agreed at the council's budget meeting in March?

### **Reply**

Initial estimates of progress in delivering savings were made in the first financial monitoring report of the year which went to the cabinet meeting of 29th of July. This was based on initial data. A more comprehensive update will be put to the Financial monitoring task group of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on the 22nd July.

## **Supplementary**

One of the biggest pressures on the council budget at present is from people on low incomes, managing their low incomes and struggling to get by. They are increasingly at risk of needing help from social services. How does he think today's announcement of £12 billion cuts will help?

## **Reply**

Clearly massive reductions in payments for things like tax credits are bound to have an impact on the life chances of many families and to increase child poverty. Perhaps it is a good thing for the conservatives that they are no longer going to be measuring child poverty but it is a bad thing for the families themselves and it will be up to people such as ourselves to support them.

## **4) From Councillor Suzanne Grocott to the Cabinet Member for Finance:**

What steps will need to be taken in respect of HR systems to "de-couple" Merton from Sutton?

## **Reply**

We are working closely with the London Borough of Sutton to understand the detailed contractual and staff implications of the "de-coupling". From a staff perspective we will need to ensure that we comply with TUPE regulations and from the contractual side we are working to understand which contracts can be continued with post the de-coupling and which will need to be retendered, novated or varied in some way. The central IT system within the HR service is ITrent and this is a contract signed individually by Merton; we are currently investigating all potential options for how to provide HR and payroll systems to the council.

Alongside this work we are working closely with the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames and Wandsworth Borough Council to pursue the potential development of a new shared HR service between the three boroughs. Assuming this goes ahead we will be working with staff to design and implement this model.

We have appointed a project manager to lead this work and are working to ensure continuity of service and at the minimum of disruption whilst also delivering an improved HR service for the borough within the same cost envelope as set out in the MTFS.

## **Supplementary**

Given that we have been asking for at least five years for accurate head count and position information where I feel we are slowly getting to that point, will the cabinet member assure us that any new arrangements with regard to HR will include a pre-requisite that this will be provided?

## **Reply**

Our aim in providing a new shared service with a new provider is clearly to provide an efficient and effective service. I can assure her that we will not be spending the earth on the new back office system but will try to provide as good a system as we can.

### **5) From Councillor Agatha Akyigyina to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services**

There have been a number of changes to care proceedings and adoption, could she outline how Merton has responded to these changes?

## **Reply**

Taking a child into care is obviously done in exceptional circumstances and when we have worked with the family and exhausted all the alternatives. Once a child enters care we absolutely want to achieve permanency for them with pace. It is right therefore that in recent years, both nationally and locally, higher expectations have been set to speed up care proceedings and to achieve permanency sooner. An ambitious target of reducing care proceedings from 72 weeks in 2011/12 to a nationally set target of 26 weeks has been set and councils have been challenged to increase the number of adoptions whilst reducing timescales for completion of the adoption process.

These higher expectations have challenged not only children's social care but the courts and we have been working in partnership with all the relevant agencies to streamline processes. Courts now expect assessments on parents and the wider family to be carried out much more speedily and are less inclined to commission "external experts" in addition to the social work assessment. This means we have had to work even harder to ensure our social work assessments are comprehensive and, in relation to care proceedings, that parental assessments have been robust and purposeful. This has meant extra training and development for our lawyers and social workers as well as significant streamlining of processes, careful planning and robust management oversight of both care and permanency proceedings.

### **6) From Councillor John Sargeant to the Leader of the Council:**

Following announcements in the press that a joint committee has been formed, comprising the leaders of five London boroughs and with the Leader of Merton Council as its Chairman, could he tell members of the council what commitments have been made on behalf of Merton, including financial commitments and our ability to remove Merton from the group at any time in the future if the group decides on any course of action which Merton would not support?

## **Reply**

This Council like our neighbouring boroughs in the South West of London believes in sustainable growth and in driving forward our ambition. Collectively we are stronger and for this reason we have formed a Joint Committee to clarify and deliver our shared objectives. No additional resources outside of those agreed in existing budgets are required. I believe that this is an investment in the economic prosperity of our borough and we are fully committed.

The joint committee deals with matters of common agreement. As Merton chairs the Group, it is highly unlikely that the objectives of the joint committee would not align with our own.

## **Supplementary**

Given the apparently exciting transformational and far reaching impact of the five borough proposals when will he get all members of the council to contribute to the process or at least hear an interim report or is it just to be a fait accompli next month?

## **Reply**

The joint committee that was signed up was agreed by this full council previously and all other four boroughs that engage in the South London Joint Committee did likewise, so it has gone through the process, but I take his point about going forward and the chief executives have been mandated to work up streams where we as a grouping can put up our hand up and seek more devolved powers and seek more funding so that by getting together we can be stronger with boroughs from all political parties, including conservative and liberal democrat along with the labour councils within this five borough grouping. The other way forward of course is to make you aware that each council's scrutiny can look at the work of the joint committee and the joint committee allows local authorities to put their hand up to the Treasury and to the powers that be in seeking more devolved powers and more funding so that we can do things together on jobs and housing rather like the combined effort of the Manchester local authorities.

## **7) From Councillor Linda Taylor to the Cabinet Member for Education:**

I was recently reviewing a copy of the Capita Symonds report on potential school sites. On first glance at the cover I thought we were just looking at a site for a single sex boys' school. I counted 12 boys on the cover and one blurred girl. Visual image is very important in matters of promoting equality of the sexes. What message to girls is the administration trying to project with this cover?

## **Reply**

This report was undertaken by an independent consultant and is not a council document. It was initially produced for council officers and was never intended to be a public document. Following an external request for the report, it was released in

the spirit of openness and transparency. Colleagues should be reassured that officers are extremely mindful of the importance of imagery and ensure that council publications appropriately reflect the diversity of Merton's population.

### **Supplementary**

I am not very reassured because the Merton logo appears on the cover, so it's a Merton document. My question was about girls and I really want the cabinet member to tell me what his administration are doing about raising the academic achievement and career aspirations for girls in our secondary schools as covers with all boys on is not very reassuring.

### **Reply**

I think it is important that we have a diverse range of people on our publications. Clearly this was an external publication commissioned by the council and not by the council itself. I agree it is important to raise aspirations for girls and I agree that we value the work done in the area of careers. We do have to be mindful of these things but we do note your comments.

### **8) From Councillor Tobin Byers to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Cleanliness and Waste**

Could she update me on how many enforcement notices we have issued to people who litter our streets?

### **Reply**

Between 2 June 2014 and 1 July 2015, the council has issued a total of 7176 enforcement notices with respect to litter and waste offences.

### **Supplementary**

I welcome the zero tolerance on street littering. Could the cabinet member give any further plans on developing our enforcement further?

### **Reply**

We have had a lot of success with our enforcement in the town centres over the past year and we are looking to move to other areas with that and the prime candidate will be parks. I have been talking to officers about that, we have to look at where we are targeting, but we will be looking at parks.

### **9) From Councillor Michael Bull to the Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration:**

Can the Cabinet Member please confirm what the increase in air pollution in Merton will be as a result of the proposed Viridor incinerator on Beddington Lane?

## **Reply**

The Energy Recovery Facility (ERF) in Beddington Lane was considered very carefully as part of Sutton Councils planning regime. As part of the planning process there were some very detailed scientific reports submitted surrounding the potential impact upon air quality and health, these included our borough. These reports and submissions were considered very carefully and were also challenged at a number of stages as part of this process.

It is generally accepted that emissions from the chimney stacks, because of controls and filtration, would have a minimal detrimental impact upon air quality. There were concerns surrounding the number and impact of HGV movements during the construction phase which although unavoidable, can be controlled by good construction logistics planning.

Merton will continue in its commitment to monitor and manage air quality within the borough

## **Supplementary**

A recent meeting of the Apostles Residents' Association it was revealed that recent recordings of air pollution showed air quality and pollution levels three times higher than that permitted by European regulations. On that basis can I ask what Merton Labour are doing about air quality in Merton particularly in view of the Viridor incinerator on Beddington Lane.

## **Reply**

The Viridor incinerator will have no noticeable effect on air quality in the borough. We have ample expert reports and technical reports through our partnership with Sutton that proves that is the case. This is going to be the best possible technology available similar to those in Sweden which has a very good environmental record. With respect to vehicles, which is a completely different issue we have already been investigating first of all increasing street trees and providing a shield between pedestrians/residents and vehicles and increasing street trees at points where vehicles are queuing in congestion ie South Wimbledon and Merton High Street, and it is important that we take action, and it is also important that we consider other possible responses including referencing those of the Central London Low Emissions Zone which I think will come into effect in 2018. We will be looking at best practice possible. Pollution from diesel vehicles is a significant problem across London causing tens of thousands of premature deaths and we are determined to deal with it in Merton.

## **10) From Councillor Marsie Skeete to the Cabinet Member for Education**

Could the Cabinet Member update me on our primary school expansions?

## **Reply**

The primary school expansions are running very well, with all the schemes therefore running to the critical programme timescales and to the allocated budget.

Poplar and St. Mary's RC were recently successfully completed, and Hillcross is on track to be completed during the summer holidays. Pelham is also on track for the building to be completed during the summer holidays with the external works following in the early autumn. The adaptation to the former Jamia school building has now been completed for the benefit of Singlegate Primary School and by re-tendering we have contracted the final extension phase to budget. Lastly, Dundonald Primary School is progressing well but is not due for completion until next summer. However, the school is providing for the extra reception year pupils this September.