

Merton Council Council

7 July 2021

Supplementary Agenda 6

29 Councillor Non-Priority Questions and Replies

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Non Priority Councillor Questions – Council 7 July 2021

Ordinary Questions

From Cllr Nigel Benbow to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment and Green Spaces:

Will the Cabinet Member explain why the Nursery Road Playing Field & pavilion in Abbey ward, leased to the Council by Rutlish School, has been allowed to be neglected and vandalised, and is this another example of Labour incompetence, or does this administration not care about preventing vandalism in the same way it does not care about enforcing fly tipping or care about the residents of the Eastfields estate?

Reply

The amount of investment in maintaining the pavilion, playing fields and perimeter fencing has been substantial. Over the past three years, £60k has been spent on the maintenance and upkeep of the pavilion and further routine costs repairing perimeter fencing, but persistent acts of vandalism have proven that it is attracting antisocial behaviour to the extent that the service has had to, regrettably, commence the removal of the pavilion to ensure public safety. The service is also investigating a solution on improved perimeter fencing designs that will hopefully deter acts of vandalism.

Regarding fly-tipping according to the latest published data, we are, proudly, third highest in London in enforcing against those who despoil the borough [issuing of penalties against offenders for littering fixed penalty notices issued in conjunction with fly-tipping and specifically for fly-tipping.]

From Cllr Simon McGrath to the Cabinet Member for Children and Education

Could the Cabinet Member please set out what measures are being taken to engage stakeholders in Merton's response to falling pupil numbers resulting from the Government's decisions on Brexit, the impact of the pandemic and to the funding crises faced by Merton schools caused by the Government's decisions to change the funding formulae and to use October 2020 census data, instead of the usual January census, to decide on Pupil Premium eligibility?

Reply

The council has developed more regular communication arrangements with our school leaders since the Covid outbreak to ensure we can work together both on immediate changing requirements due to Covid and other more strategic issues. We also have a daily email to cascade written information. Officers meet all secondary Headteachers on a weekly basis and then have a more strategic meeting on a half termly basis. For primary schools we have a weekly meeting with cluster leads who then cascade information to their colleagues, and there is also a half termly meeting with all Headteachers. Falling rolls has been a substantial item on the agenda for primary schools, and we have worked collaboratively with our secondary schools to

object to planned new secondary schools that are no longer needed close to our borders in Sutton and Kingston.

The council has responded to a request from the LGA for information about the funding impact of the change in date of pupil premium census information used to decide funding for schools. This shows a loss of £560,710 to our schools as a result of this unexpected change in funding policy. I have also written to the Secretary of State for Education highlighting this, both individually and jointly with London Labour Cabinet members.

From Cllr Janice Howard to the Cabinet Member for Performance, Recovery and the Local Economy

Councillors are repeatedly having to chase member enquires for responses and many often miss the deadline. What steps are being taken to ensure the response rate improves?

Reply

In the year 2020/21 performance in responding to MEs on time ranged from 72% – 83% and for April 2021 it was 79%. Performance is monitored by the service departments and a weekly list of all overdue MEs and the ones due that week are sent to all of the departmental management teams for them to be aware of any issues and to progress chase where necessary. Unfortunately, due to resource issues on the Complaints team, the weekly list has been temporarily suspended but will be re-introduced as soon as possible.

Departments are regularly reminded of the need to respond promptly to enquiries and the progress chasing will also be affected for June and July as the officer responsible for managing the Member Enquiry function has left the council. Recruitment has been successful and the new Complaints Assistant will start once they have completed their notice period. Staff on another team have been brought in to help manage the member enquiries inbox in the interim and this will be kept under review. It is worth also acknowledging how stretched staff have been in responding to new ways of working due to the pandemic.

From Cllr Daniel Holden to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency:

It has been over two years since Mitcham bridge collapsed, can the cabinet member give firm a date when it will reopen?

Reply

Mitcham bridge remains a priority project for the council. Work is progressing at pace and the bridge span has been laid. We are looking at the bridge re-opening to traffic in September.

From Cllr Jenifer Gould to the Cabinet Member for Children and Education,

Could the Cabinet Member explain what is being done to reassure families of children entitled to Free School Meals that they will not go hungry over the long summer break?

Reply

The council is working with our schools as the best means to communicate with families on Free School Meals. We are enabling schools to provide supermarket vouchers for the school summer holidays for all children on free school meals. We are also heavily publicising the Holiday and Food Programme which is designed to provide activities with a lunch during the school holidays for children on free school meals.

From Cllr David Dean to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment and Green Spaces:

The Labour administration has failed to meet the recycling target for 123 months in a row and the latest statistics show that two thirds of all waste is incinerated. Why is Labour rubbish at recycling our rubbish?

Reply

We have stuck with an ambitious 48% target for some years now and since the introduction of wheelie bins, have shifted performance from 34% to over 40% . However, in the last 2 years the performance has plateaued, and the operational reality is that a target of 48% is not achievable this year. Therefore, we are adding this in-year target of 40% to reflect the operational reality for 21/22. 48% remains our stretch target outside of the annual business plan and we hope to bring a paper to scrutiny to detail the challenges and opportunities around getting us there

Neighbouring conservative controlled Wandsworth's last published performance figure was 23%

From Cllr Stephen Crowe to the Cabinet Member for Finance:

Could the Cabinet Member for Finance please explain why the facility to pay for the garden waste collection service by direct debit was removed, and can he provide the figures for how much it costs to process a credit card and debit card receipt?

Reply

The facility to pay for garden waste collections by Direct Debit (DD) was removed as it is a function that our partners, Veolia, were unable to provide this year and it was decided to remove it now to manage customer expectations in the future. DD's were previously operated by the Council, on behalf of Veolia, but the actual numbers were dwindling year on year to being less than 15% of the total. The vast majority paid over the web or by telephone, with the former accounting for over 75% of the transactions. This is the cheapest form of transacting with the Council. While DD's offer some guarantee to the customer the administrative process undertaken by us was onerous, with additional requirements for refunds, failed collections and general attrition rates

all contributing to the decision to remove. Alternate methods of payment have remained readily available to customers including web, telephone, face-to-face and postal payments being accepted this year and was relayed to all customers, in writing, in March.

From Cllr Nick McLean to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency:

Please provide a ward-by-ward breakdown of where CIL money has been raised and where it has been spent since the 2018 council election.

Reply

Community Infrastructure Levy is spent for the benefit of all our residents and it is not government's intention that this is spent only directly where it is raised. The variety of types and scales of projects that have benefited across the whole borough means that spend is not allocated within precise ward boundaries. For example, many of the projects below, including BAME Voice, Merton Community Champions, Citizens Advice, street tree planting and the Towards Employment programme reach borough wide or across many different wards.

The comprehensive list of CIL spends is provided below. This excludes a further £17 million of CIL income that has been financially allocated to projects for future spending from 2021-2027.

Merton CIL spent since June 2018 (as at 31st March 2021)

□

Strategic CIL	<u>Total Spent</u>
School Improvements (Secondary/SEN)	3,385,170.71
Mitcham Library	35,000.00
Culverts	141,571.00
Crowded Places hard landscaping Wimbledon	20,000.00
Bishopsford Rd Bridge	1,014,062.09
Wimbledon Park Lake Reservoir Safety	215,208.93
Canons Parks for the People	450,393.00
Wimbledon Public Realm Implementation	398,812.82
New Street Tree Planting	25,410.70

Enhanced CCTV cameras	20,794.00
Street Lighting Wimbledon	58,319.12
Residential Secure Cycle Storage	3,513.48
Plough Lane CCTV	30,999.25
Colliers Wood Rec Improvements	9,495.04
Plough Lane - Enhancement (Eastside Footpath Only)	50,280.93
Totals	5,859,031.07

Neighbourhood CIL

	<u>Total Spent</u>
Shopping Parade Improvements (Queens Rd/Brdwy and Colliers Wood) 2018 bid Capital	381,900.00
Shopping Parade improvements 2018 bid Revenue costs	78,500.00
Bramcote Pde, Mitcham - Shopping Parade Façade 2020 bid Capital	5,850.00
Town Centre & Parades Programme Management 2019-20 20-21	82,500.00
Rediscover Mitcham Phase 6	32,957.00
Mitcham Cricket Green Improvements	49,042.52
One Soul - Merton Priory Trust	46,430.00
Merton Park Green Walks - New Footpath Surface	11,694.18
Deen City Farm Refurbishment (incl. horse riding ground, muck heap)	40,435.00
Deen City Farm (incl. rainwater harvesting, landscaping)	36,616.00
Hartfield Walk Public Realm	125,000.00
Polka Theatre	245,000.00
Community Arts Venue - Cricket Green School	29,020.00
Pollards Hill Lighting	93,759.37
London Borough of Culture	196,124.96
MVSC - Youth Action Programme	20,000.00

Community Arts Venue - Cricket Green School	20,955.00
Merton's Lost Rivers	61,600.49
FutureWimbledon (pre-implementation costs)	125,157.75
Haydons Road Recreation Ground Works	24,590.00
Signage for South Mitcham Community Centre	1,500.00
Move More Mitcham	9,459.74
CSF Employability Programme	60,516.00
The Library of Things	37,320.00
Emergency Active Travel Fund (Capital Costs LTN)	3,988.24
Emergency Active Travel Fund (Revenue Support LTNs)	49,404.65
Carers Support Merton	49,650.00
Citizens Advice – additional advisor for Merton residents due to Covid 19 demands	35,000.00
Digital Devices for schools	20,000.00
£5k per ward (Pilot) - Dennis Park Cres. Railings	5,000.00
£5k per ward (Pilot) - Friends of Graveney	5,000.00
Wimbledon Park Ward Allocation	1,900.00
Lower Morden Ward Allocation	14,747.99
Ravensbury Ward Allocation	2,882.57
Merton Park Ward Allocation	1,466.47
Colliers Wood Ward Allocation	3,277.57
Community Champions 2018-19	30,000.00
Community Champions 2019-20	30,000.00
Community Champions 2020-21	50,000.00
Community Fridge Network	50,730.00
Uptown Youth Services	30,000.00
School Streets Mitcham - Sustainable Travel Practices	50,263.00
Merton Digital Local Network	35,000.00
BAME Community Hub	24,803.00
Mitcham Scout Hut	12,000.00

Supporting Commonsides Comm. Dev. Trust	130,000.00
Totals	2,451,041.50

CIL money received by ward since June 2018

Ward	Amount Received for Merton CIL
Merton Park	140,782.30
Village	4,747,192.08
Abbey	2,660,183.83
Graveney	451,242.00
Wimbledon Park	14,076,817.30
Hillside	659,308.35
Pollards Hill	106,166.99
Lavender Fields	186,383.74
Raynes Park	201,615.44
Dundonald	467,905.17
Cricket Green	208,663.02
West Barnes	495,044.78
Figges Marsh	57,623.59
Cannon Hill	55,274.14
Trinity	374,680.68
Ravensbury	255,118.47
Colliers Wood	224,017.67
Longthornton	43,870.90
St Helier	18,689.00
Lower Morden	14,433.47
(blank)	152,909.10

Strategic Theme Questions

From Cllr Najeeb Latif to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency:

Findings by “Property Week investigation” showed that almost 60% of the 106 & CIL Payments had not been spent by English Councils.

Can the Cabinet Member confirm that this is not the case in Merton and that all 106 or CIL funding has been spent and not returned to developers? If however, there is unspent funding that has had to be returned to developers, can the Cabinet member please provide details of the site and the amount of funding that was returned?

Reply

I am pleased to say that Merton is not one of those councils identified in Property Week. The Council carries out robust scrutiny and financial controls to ensure financial accountability and deliverability of investments to ensure CIL and S106 investments are prudent, occur in a planned and targeted way, spend is expedited and maximised, and refunds avoided.

As at 31st March 2021 100% of Merton’s CIL income had been spent or allocated by Cabinet/Council to projects. 40% of CIL income received has been spent with the remaining 60% allocated to projects by Cabinet/Full Council.

As at 31st March 2021 86% of S106 income received had been spent, allocated or is yet to reach the development milestone set out the legal agreement that permits its expenditure (66% had been spent, 15% had been allocated and 5% had yet to reach development milestones). The remaining 14% S106 will be allocated in due course to projects appropriate to the particular Section 106 legal agreement.

Financial records are kept for seven years. Since 2013 there have been no repayments of S106 balances unspent by the Council, other than a small number of repayments required following the introduction of a new central government policy exempting small sites from affordable housing contributions.

From Cllr David Dean to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency:

For months the cabinet member has avoided giving residents a straight answer about when the 107 trees will be planted outside of the Harris academy. When will the trees be planted?

Reply

The section 106 agreement required a tree planting contribution for one hundred funded trees and it is the intention of the service to plant these over the next three years during the annual tree planting season in the locality. It is imperative that the right trees and right locations are chosen to maximise the contribution of each tree.

From Cllr Anthony Fairclough to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency

Could the Cabinet Member please list how many meetings they had with Clarion about the regeneration of the Eastfields estate between May 2018 and May 2021, and the dates of those meetings?

Reply

We have been unable to obtain dates of meeting from May 2018- August 2019

2019

15 August

28 October

2020

7 February

11 March

7 May

10 September

22 September

12 October

25 November

18 December

2021

11 March

11 May

17 May

8 June

29 June

8 July

From Cllr David Dean to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency:

How many meetings has the cabinet member had with Clarion that specifically discussed the dreadful conditions at the Eastfields estate and will he circulate the minutes of these meetings to prove that they occurred?

Reply

As Cabinet Member I have attended a number of meetings with Clarion Housing colleagues where the conditions of Eastfield Estate was discussed. However and more importantly the main themes of any meetings was the formulation and delivery of an action plan to improve the conditions on the estate , which you will be aware of following your recent attendance at the Overview and Sustainable Communities meeting and a verbal presentation by Michelle Reynolds, Chief Operating Officer for the Clarion Group. Going forward I will be monitoring carefully that Clarions promises are fulfilled and that their plans have longevity.

From Cllr David Dean to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency:

When council adopted the Core Planning Strategy in July 2011 it specified that developments with more than 10 units should have 40% affordable homes. Are Labour councillors on the planning committee aware that they can exercise their judgement to reject applications that do not achieve this, and if they know this why have they chosen to disregard it?

Reply

The statement above is not correct. Merton's Core Planning Strategy specifies that developments with more than 10 homes should provide 40% affordable housing subject to viability and site characteristics, in line with national government rules. All councillors on planning committee will make decisions based on the adopted planning policies unless material considerations indicate otherwise.