

Merton Council Council

21 September 2022

Supplementary Agenda 7

26 Non-Priority Questions and Replies

1 - 8

This page is intentionally left blank

From Cllr Robert Page to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

The Council does not refund bulky waste collections when either the collection is cancelled, or items are removed. This includes situations where the cancellation is immediate, some days before the collection or where the Council has performed no service. In light of the cost-of-living emergency can the Cabinet member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change a) revise this policy and refund residents who cancel collections? B) consider whether this 'no refund' policy extends to other Council services and revise accordingly?

Reply

Our Bulky waste service is a chargeable service for the collection of larger household waste items, which is undertaken on our behalf by our contractor, Veolia. When residents undertake a booking, we do make it clear that this is a non-refundable service due to the administration and operational cost involved.

In the event of exceptional circumstances, we are able to review a possible refund, but this is on a case-by-case basis. On a number of occasions residents will find that bulky waste items such as large electrical goods and metal items have been removed in advance of the scheduled collection by local recyclers. This is beyond the control of the Council and the contractor; therefore, refunds can't be made as the costs associated with the collection service has been incurred. Please note that the charge is for the collection only and no disposal cost are charged for the domestic waste collected.

There is no standard 'Non-refundable policy' across all council services and individual chargeable services are required to set out the terms and conditions for each activity.

From Councillor Andrew Howard to the Cabinet Member for Transport

Residents report that quick hire bikes and scooters are being left in dangerous places across Merton which is causing traffic problems and poses a danger for those who have limited vision.

What steps will the Cabinet Member take to ensure that hire bikes and scooters do not cause problems for other road users and the disabled?

Reply

Merton does not currently have agreements in place with any e-bike or e-scooter hire scheme operating companies. Use of e-scooters is currently illegal outside of the formal trial hire schemes and these vehicles should not be entering non-participating boroughs such as Merton. However, e-bike hire schemes are currently unregulated and the Council cannot prevent these from operating in the borough.

Operators in London should comply with [TfLs code of practice](#) which sets out what is expected of Operators including in relation to managing parking. The main operators in London do not actively deploy bikes into boroughs they do not have agreements

with, but bikes may be ridden into the borough by users and parked. Any hire e-bikes causing a hazard or obstruction should be reported directly to the relevant operator who should remove them.

The Council is currently exploring options to work with operators to better manage and mitigate parking issues (bikes left in hazardous positions), including through the provision of designated parking areas.

From Cllr Susie Hicks to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Could the Cabinet Member please set out how many active businesses in Merton have outstanding balances on business rates due during 2020/21 and what is the total value of the sums outstanding? How does this level of indebtedness compare historically and how is the Council dealing with those debtor businesses that were detrimentally affected by lockdown during this period?

Reply

There are 182 businesses that still owe business rates. Some of these may be businesses that have closed. The total value outstanding is £902,862. The total business rates collectable for the year was £47.375 million. Just over 2% of the business rates is still outstanding.

As at the end of December 2021 the outstanding debt for 2020/21 was £1.7 million. In the past eight months we have collected £800,000 of the outstanding business rates. We have supported businesses by offering extended and delayed payment on their business rates due.

In previous years the council has collected over 99% of the yearly business rates.

From Cllr Nick McLean to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

The government has recently announced that £30 million in funding will be available from Round Two of the Changing Places Toilet Programme to improve disabled access to public toilets. Merton only has two public toilets that currently meet the needs of severely disabled people.

Does the administration intend to submit a bid to the Changing Places programme, and what does the Cabinet Member intend to do to improve his administration's woeful record of bidding for available funds?

Reply

Changing Places toilet facilities are in place at all our Day Centres and Morden Leisure Centre. We are not currently able to bid for funds from the government's Changing Places Round Two as our toilet facilities for disabled users at our libraries do not currently meet the space requirements to enable full Changing Places toilets. There are funds allocated in our Capital Programme to improve these facilities so

that we can work towards installing full Changing Places facilities where practicable, and will look to bid for available funds for this when possible.

The Council has an improving record of bidding for and securing funds, and have recently received confirmation that our bids for Family hubs and safer streets were successful.

From Cllr Chessie Flack to the Leader of the Council

Can the Leader confirm (and if so list) whether the current chairs of scrutiny have undertaken any scrutiny training sessions with the CfGS, LGA or any other external body since their appointment? Are any such sessions planned in addition to the financial monitoring and budget scrutiny training that I have asked the entire membership of FMTG and OSC to undertake prior to commencing their financial monitoring and budget scrutiny roles this session?

Reply

Training for Scrutiny Chairs has been delivered and we are following up on finance training for the members of the Financial Monitoring Task Group. Members are of course able to do further training if they so wish and should speak with their Group Leader to make the relevant arrangements.

From Cllr Thomas Barlow to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

The recent Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel papers show that the council is failing to meet its own targets regarding removing fly tips, street litter collections, refuse collections, weed removal, and graffiti removal.

This has been a long running problem in Merton which the Labour administration and Veolia have failed to resolve. Considering Veolia's inability to keep the borough's streets clean how can the Cabinet Member defend her intention to extend the waste collection and street cleaning contract?

Reply

The waste collection and street cleansing contract with Veolia commenced in April 2017 for 8 years at which point there is provision to extend the contract for up to a further 8 years in 2025. I have tasked officers with bringing forward a cabinet report that outlines our options and legal position.

From Cllr John Braithwaite to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green spaces and Climate Change

Could the Cabinet Member please set out the annualised cost of the waste and recycling services over the life of the current contracts, but inclusive of monies spent with all relevant contractors and direct Council costs - with a pre-contract comparison? Please could these figures be supplied gross and then net of any contractual clawback/deductions

Reply

Over the first 5 years of the contract the total spend on waste collection and street cleansing provided by Veolia was £37m which equates to an average annual spend of £7.4m per year. An individual breakdown by year can be seen in the table below.

	Waste Collection	Street Cleansing
17/18	4,685,629.86	2,674,117.95
18/19	4,157,480.52	2,501,793.99
19/20	4,848,253.34	2,917,633.56
20/21	4,760,240.97	2,990,132.20
21/22	4,516,338.05	3,396,130.99

In comparison to the pre contract operational costs in 2016/17 the cost of running these services was £9.8m

With direct reference to performance deduction / contractual claw backs the contract with Veolia provides provision for financial deductions to recognise some of the additional cost that may be incurred by boroughs.

It is important to note that the contract provides a 3-month grace period at the start of the new contract and any subsequent service change. As such no deductions were applied between April – June 2017 at the start of the contract and again in Oct 2018 following the role out of the new waste collection service. In addition in the first contract year the standard of service delivery was significantly below acceptable standards outlined within the contract. The application of the service performance indicator (SPI) framework was not fully operated as it required IT integration with Council systems. Due to the monitored performance of the contract a set application of deductions was applied which had an annual accumulated value of £410K.

The table below summarise the financial deductions applied over the first 5 years of the contract totalling £635k

Year 1 2017	£410,000
Year 2 2018	£73,000
Year 3 2019	£22,000
Year 4 2020	£25,973 (COVID)
Year 5 2021	£104,203
Total	£635,176

From Cllr Simon McGrath to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Could the Cabinet Member detail how much the Merton local app cost to develop and publicise and set out what the criteria are for assessing if it has been a success?

Reply

The Merton Local App cost a total of £14,950, which was funded by the Government's Re-Opening the High Street Safely Fund and has been claimed and received in full for this programme. So, this is not a cost to Merton.

The cost to publicise was paid by our Comms Team as this was integrated into the distribution of Merton's summer booklet which cost £15k. This was also claimed back from the Governments Re-Opening the High Street Safely Fund.

The Welcome letter, printed and posted second class is a cost of @£2.49 per business joining.

Our criteria for success were the numbers of residents downloading the App and the number of businesses using the App. We hoped that circa 200 businesses would have joined in the first few months but see it as a success as we now have 323 businesses promoting themselves for free through the App and 3604 residents signed up as of 8th Sept 2022. We are also using the App to promote Merton events and have advertised an early bird offer for fireworks which generated 145 ticket sales.

From Cllr Matthew Willis to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Since a cyber-attack in June, phone lines at Clarion have been suspended for all but emergency repairs. Could the Cabinet Member set out how the Council has supported Clarion tenants through this period and how Clarion is being held to account for the slow response?

Reply

Clarion Housing has been working closely with the Council to keep its residents informed on the damage from the cyber-attack and the availability of services. Clarion was a victim of a criminal act and while there has been significant disruption, the situation is improving.

Since September the 1st, the service operating in the borough is now at around 80% of full capacity. Clarion residents can report all types of repair through their online live chat facility on the website and this is a 7 day per week service.

Regular updates are posted on their website and work is continuing on restoring the phone system, with positive news expected in the coming weeks.

Since the cyber incident Clarion have made 10,000 outbound calls across the country, to update older and more vulnerable residents on the situation and ensure they are supported as far as possible.

The Council will continue to work with Clarion to ensure that their tenants receive access to services.

From Cllr Daniel Holden to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Since ITV News exposed the appalling living conditions at the Eastfields Estate the council has been focussed on Clarion Housing, but there are other providers who cause problems for both tenants and leaseholders. What is the Cabinet Member doing to help residents in these non-Clarion homes?

Reply

The Council has a statutory duty to enforce standards in the private sector under the Housing Act 2004 specifically under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS). Where a private tenant has disrepair issues and their Landlord fails to meet their statutory repairing obligations, if this is reported to the Council an inspection will take place and a housing enforcement officer will work with the Landlord to resolve the issues. Where Landlord do not cooperate formal enforcement action is carried out.

The majority of cases concern private landlords, but tenants of housing associations can also report disrepair if they feel their Landlord has not dealt with any repairs. Where this occurs the enforcement team work directly with the housing association to resolve the issue and can take formal action if necessary.

The Leader of the Council has been visiting social housing estates to listen to the experiences of tenants, and this includes estates of other registered providers. The visits include members of the housing team and officers from housing associations in question. Where issues are identified these are raised with the housing association formerly to deal with urgently.

From Cllr Jil Hall to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable development

Could the Cabinet Member please set out how many households, and in which wards, across Merton are on pre-payment meters, and if the information is not collected yet, what plans there are to do so?

Reply

This information is not held by the Council. There are no plans to do so.

From Cllr Victoria Wilson to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

The charity Crisis has warned that up to 1.7 million renting households could be at risk of homelessness this winter due to the cost-of-living emergency. Can the

Cabinet Member share the Council's projections for the number of households at risk of homelessness in Merton and what targeted support the Council is providing to these households to help mitigate this risk?

Reply

The Council recognises that cost-of-living crises, and other factors mean it is likely that there will be an increase in demand on the Council's housing services. The Council is working with partners on a national, regional, and local basis to be part of a joined up approach with other services to take proactive and preventative approach to dealing with the issues that are likely to arise and this includes homelessness.

The Council has a statutory duty to assess cases that are threatened with homelessness within 56 days to see if we have a duty to prevent or relieve homelessness. Where this is the case the Council has to produce an individual personalized housing plan (PHP) that sets out the 'reasonable steps' that the Council and the applicant will take to prevent their homelessness. This might be via a rent or mortgage rescue payment, help with a rent deposit, legal advice or the offer of alternative accommodation. More details on the types of intervention are contained in the strategic themes report.

From Cllr Kirsten Galea to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Para 9.28 of the strategic theme report prepared for this council meeting indicates there are potentially 3,458 empty homes that could be brought back into use as homes for those seeking permanent and safe housing across Merton. Does the Cabinet Member agree the need for urgent work to turn this into a reality, and if so, what do they plan to do to make it happen?

Reply

The Council recognises that positive and proactive work with empty homes can address issues with crime, anti-social behaviour, and impact street scene, as well as increasing the supply of housing, potentially for those who are homeless or threatened with this.

In line with this the Council has produced a report on a range of options, including a proposed Empty Homes Scheme that looks at incentives to encourage Landlords to bring properties back into to use, that can then be offered to households in housing need. This scheme is currently being actively considered by Cabinet and is a priority for the Council.

From Cllr Hina Bokhari to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Given the cost-of-living emergency, would the Cabinet Member please agree to developing innovative and progressive changes to the council tax support scheme currently out for consultation, to enable those residents who fall just outside the benefit boundary to be considered for financial help?

Reply

The council has one of the most generous council tax support schemes in London and the country with an estimated annual cost to Merton of approximately £12.3m. Unlike the majority of council's Merton has not passed on the reduction of funding to its residents. Consultation has commenced to retain the existing scheme for 2023/24. The scheme will be updated in line with the Housing Benefit scheme to ensure that residents do not have to pay any more council tax if their government benefits increase. This will be presented to full Council in November for approval. If the council wanted to make major changes to the scheme detailed financial analysis, software testing and a 12-week consultation including with the GLA as they would also have to contribute to any increased change in the level of support is recommended. However, as an administration we are committed to doing everything we can to help and support residents during the Cost-of-Living crisis, and Cabinet will be considering this week options for increasing this support, such as: funding free school meal vouchers during the school holidays, funding an application-based grant scheme, providing support to residents to reduce their energy bills, and funding additional debt advisor.