

Merton Council Council

15 November 2023

Supplementary Agenda Item 5

20 Non-priority Questions to Cabinet Members and Replies

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From Cllr Anthony Fairclough to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Please can the Cabinet Member set out for each of the last 5 years:

- (a) The total number of planning applications determined by the planning department for each given year;
- (b) The number/percentage of these which were decided by PAC for each given year;
- (c) The number/percentage of such applications referred to above that were refused by (a) planning officers; and (b) PAC (where a decision has been issued in that year).

Reply

The total number of planning applications made

The figures below are derived from the Council's planning data base and only include those categories of applications on which officers report for the purposes of performance monitoring both internally and to the Government.

The table does not include applications for prior approvals, discharge of conditions, adverts, listed building consents or miscellaneous planning categories.

Year	Large scale majors	Small scale major	All majors	Minors	Others	Total
2018	0	44	44	421	1930	2436
2019	0	65	65	415	1777	2264
2020	0	37	37	381	1720	2143
2021	0	35	35	355	2030	2433
2022	1	27	28	314	1743	2096
2023 (1 st Jan to 30 th Sept)	1	14	15	255	1197	1480

The number decided at Planning Applications Committee

Figures below are for those applications where a decision was taken by PAC and where a decision has been issued.

Where more complex applications (those routinely coming before PAC) require the completion of a planning agreement the decisions can sometimes be issued some months after the PAC meeting in the following year or even the year after.

Therefore, the numbers of decisions issued in any one year will not necessarily correspond with the number of applications considered by PAC that year.

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Year	Total applications decided at PAC where the decision was issued in the year specified
2018	73
2019	64
2020	52
2021	58
2022	39
2023 (1 st Jan to 30 th September)	22 (includes decisions on 4 Merantun applications considered by PAC in 2020)

The number of the total applications refused (a) by planning officers and (b) by PAC

Year	Approved by PAC	Refused by PAC contrary to officer recommendation (includes applications subsequently considered at appeal)	Refused by PAC in accordance with officer recommendation.	Total
2018	61	13		74
2019	58	6		64
2020	57	7		64
2021	41	5	1	47
2022	30	4		34
2023 (1 st Jan to 30 th September)	11	1		12

From Cllr Klaar Dresselaers to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

As we know residents prefer to have health services closer to home and be easier to access - particularly STI testing - could the Cabinet Member explain why on the 16th of October Cabinet agreed procurement for integrated sexual health services which fails to provide access to STI testing in the East of the Borough, making access more challenging for Mitcham and Morden residents, with the nearest accessible location at the Patrick Doody Clinic in Wimbledon or Falcon Road in Clapham Junction? Is there an opportunity now with the re-procurement process approved through Cabinet for the new service to ensure more accessible clinical provision in the east of the borough and could the former Wilson Hospital site be an appropriate location for this provision?

Reply

The re-procurement of the Integrated Sexual Health (ISH) service recommended for approval for Cabinet on 16th October aims to address the provision of services in the East of the borough by presenting the number of hours of clinical provision expected to be delivered but not being over-prescriptive about where this activity should take place, allowing innovative approaches to be set in place by a provider. The current provider has struggled to find available clinical space in the east of the borough which is something commissioners are working on with the ICB.

To address this problem and to respond to resident, Councillor, and professionals feedback a new clinical community outreach arm of the model has been included in our new requirement which specifies the need for provision in the east of the borough. The provider who will deliver the new service specification from October 2024 will work with commissioners and local partners to explore and identify appropriate clinical space for the provision in the east of the borough, therefore we cannot comment on where this will be located at this stage, however The Wilson site alongside GP clinical space, Family Hubs and other spaces where clinical services could be run should clearly be considered.

Currently the hub clinic for this service is based in Clapham Junction (Falcon Road) as this was the only suitable space found for a level 1-3 service which requires its own laboratory facilities; and the spoke site in Merton is in Wimbledon (Patrick Doody) as a well-established clinic which is popular and well used by many residents across Merton.

The clinic in Wimbledon is more convenient for those in the Morden area although we appreciate this is more challenging for many Mitcham residents and have identified this as a gap which needs to be addressed in the re-procurement.

It is also worth noting that alongside the ISH service, we commission other sexual and reproductive health services funded separately from the ISH contract, to provide sexual and reproductive health services closer to home. This includes: Long-Acting Reversible Contraception (LARC) in GP surgeries in East Merton to enhance the core contraceptive offer that GPs already provide; emergency contraception &

chlamydia/gonorrhoea testing in community pharmacies and outreach services for those at high risk of poor sexual health.

The Director of Public Health has a statutory responsibility to commission 'open access' sexual and reproductive health services for residents. In practice this means Merton residents can access sexual health services anywhere (even if this is outside the borough) and the Local Authority will pay for these interventions which is separate to our core ISH service offer.

For example, some residents prefer to access the clinics at St Helier, Kingston or Chelsea and Westminster as they may prefer, access maybe easier, or in many cases they wish to remain anonymous and so want to go somewhere they can be assured they will not be seen by family or friends/people known to them.

Therefore, any Merton residents including those in Morden or Mitcham can choose to use the clinics in neighbouring boroughs. This is often preferred in a city the size of London due to movements across the Capital (many people work or socialise in another borough) therefore it is more convenient in some cases to access services elsewhere.

Please note residents in the East do also use the Croydon sexual and reproductive health service, as for example this is more accessible to many Pollards Hill residents and is a short trip on the number 60 bus.

From Cllr Thomas Barlow to the Cabinet Member for Finance

Following on from the Cabinet Member's inability to answer the previous question on this subject during the September council meeting, and his subsequent failure to supply an answer, can the Cabinet Member please tell me what the statistics are on the length of time that staff work from abroad and how many requests have been turned down?

Reply

I want to begin by reiterating my previous statement that Merton Council staff do an excellent job of delivering quality services to local residents in increasingly challenging circumstances after 13 years of austerity, and that it is a sign of their dedication that many staff often request access whilst on annual leave, in case of emergencies and to stay in touch with their teams for support. There are also a range of other reasons staff may need support to work from abroad at short notice, including personal/ or family issues, which we do try to support where reasonable.

The question requests statistics on the length of time staff work from abroad. Whilst the premise of the question appears simple, the answer is more complex as we do not collect information on how long staff are working for during their working from abroad request, rather just when they need access from and until – and so this could range from working abroad for an agreed period due to personal or family issues, or it could be only occasionally checking emails whilst being on annual leave. For example, in September there were 16 requests submitted for remote working, with

an average duration of 14 days, and in October there were 21 requests, with an average duration of 20 days.

Regarding where requests have been rejected, over the same period of September through October, five requests were rejected for the following reasons:

- Applications had not been made by the employee's line manager
- Applications were rejected on the basis of geographic risk (i.e.) the country represents a cyber security risk
- Applications didn't provide sufficient information that is required to properly assess the risk.

From Cllr Tony Reiss to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Residents are wondering why we haven't had a cafe operating in Wimbledon Park for the last 6 months and would also like to know from the Cabinet Member what due diligence has been carried out on the new caterer?

Reply

The parks team, working with our colleagues in property, took a thorough approach in choosing a new caterer. We reached out widely for bids and, with help from an independent advisor, got 21 offers for the café contract. This shows our effort to choose the best operator.

Environmental and social responsibility were important in this process. We asked caterers to explain how they would work towards being eco-friendly, use sustainable products and packaging, reduce carbon emissions, support recycling, and contribute to society and workplace wellbeing. In addition, financial checks and evaluation against similar work that the bidders have undertaken was assessed.

Unfortunately, the process of reopening the café has faced unexpected setbacks. The main reason for the delay is additional work that was required inside the building. These responsibilities lie with the Council and during our preparations to open the new café, we discovered that more extensive renovations were needed than initially expected. This included both structural and aesthetic updates to ensure that the café meets our standards for safety, functionality, and customer experience.

Additionally, we've met some delays with the contractors assigned to these renovations. Coordinating the necessary work has proven more challenging than expected, leading to a longer timeline for completion. We understand that this has been an inconvenience for park visitors and residents who miss the full café offer, but we have taken proactive steps to supply an alternative solution through a mobile café during this interim period. We're committed to minimising the disruption and look forward to welcoming everyone back to the newly refurbished café as soon as possible.

From Cllr Max Austin to the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

At the April council meeting we asked the Cabinet Member what was the number of children that did not return to school following the Covid19 lockdowns. Whilst the Cabinet Member provided statistics that shows LB Merton being better than the national average in terms of attendance and absence, the numerical figure was not provided. Please can the Cabinet Member provide the numerical figure?

Reply

The census figures for schools are released to local authorities several months after their collection. We now have the census data to be able to identify individual children in Merton schools who have not attended school since the pandemic. There are five children - all of whom are known to a range of Merton and partnership services and are being supported. Their progress towards returning to school is tracked through the Council's Children Missing Education panel.

From Cllr Susie Hicks to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

As part of their Biodiversity action plan the London Borough of Kingston have designated swifts as a flagship species and created a policy and a detailed plan in consultation with local experts to promote their survival. Swifts are a beautiful but endangered species. Will the Cabinet Member talk to Kingston Council with a view to introducing similar protection in Merton?

Reply

The Greenspaces Team, in collaboration with our service delivery partners, idverde, actively works with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) to evaluate the biodiversity in key areas across the borough. This assessment includes a focus on ornithology to ensure a comprehensive understanding of local wildlife. Based on this integrated approach, we are open to engaging in discussions with our neighboring borough, Kingston, specifically concerning the conservation and support of Swifts.

From Cllr Andrew Howard to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

In relation to Morden regeneration, the Cabinet Member said the following in response to a nonpriority question at the September council meeting:

“The Council has commissioned new research, and we are currently assessing the viability of the Morden Town Centre regeneration scheme and the different options open to the Council to deliver an ambitious vision in what is a challenging

development market. Merton's new Local Plan provides an updated vision for the town centre regeneration. The Council will agree a direction of travel in due course and intend to provide an update as part of the Scrutiny work programme in the new year."

Many residents will be deeply dismayed by the lack of certainty this response provides. How does the Cabinet Member intend to reassure residents that Morden regeneration is a priority, if after 13 years of being in power, Labour are still seeking to agree a 'direction of travel'?

Reply

Morden town centre is an incredibly complex regeneration scheme. Like any major regeneration scheme across London, it takes time to develop the plan and procure a development partner. From 2018-2020 the Council was working collaboratively with Transport for London on a joint venture proposal. It has been well documented that TFL faced significant financial pressures as a result of the pandemic. This was also a period of uncertainty in the wider development industry and was not the right time for the Council to progress with the scheme.

As mentioned in September; the Council commissioned expert advice to re-frame the development costs and viability and to recommend options for the Council to take forward the regeneration project. This work has concluded, and the administration will be considering the options in the coming months.

The project, whilst ambitious in scope, remains one of the priorities for this administration. Not only do we want to see an improved public realm and town centre amenities, Morden, is a significant driver for housing growth and the delivery of affordable housing in the medium to long term. We are also mindful that the process of launching the scheme to the market, identifying a development partner, preparing planning applications and the financial underpinning required is a lengthy process. Our plans are now firmly embedded in Merton's new Local Plan which sets the vision for Morden and is the foundation of the project.

We are aware that residents are keen to see change in Morden and achieving our vision will take time and transcend multiple administration cycles. In the meantime, the Council has also commissioned a design team to undertake improvements to the public realm around the town centre. Working with key partners and stakeholders, we hope to engage residents and businesses next year, on ideas for improved seating, planting and public art installations that will brighten up Morden in the short to medium term. In addition, we continue to improve the spaces on the ground floor of the civic centre, and have now let all of the spaces. The final empty units are currently being fitted out. One of these will provide affordable workspace, with a new publicly available café during the day, and the space will also provide opportunities for evening events, helping to grow the night time economy in Morden.

From Cllr Jil Hall to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Would the Cabinet Member commit to investigating the steps required to make the Council a disability confident employer?

Reply

Merton Council is already a disability confident employer, and is committed to ensuring that our recruitment and selection process is inclusive and accessible for disabled people.

From Cllr Michael Paterson to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Please can the Cabinet Member provide an update on the status of Pickleball discussions with an interested party from the David Lloyd Club?

Reply

The Head of Sport and Leisure and I met members of the Dink Pickleball Club and this was followed up with a proposal to utilise a space within the borough which we are having further conversations about with our partners. We hope to provide an update to the club soon.

From Cllr Jenifer Gould to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Could the Cabinet Member set out details of the business plans for maintaining the free tennis courts including how the necessary funds will be raised and who will be responsible for the day to day and long term maintenance.

Reply

We are delighted to have been able to partner with the LTA to deliver one of the largest refurbishments of park tennis courts in the country – and protected free play where it already exists. We are now working towards identifying and contracting a provider to activate these courts. The requirement to undertake day to day cleaning and maintenance is contained within this contract and the income generated through coaching will contribute towards a sinking fund that will pay for full refurbishment of these courts when they get to the end of their useful life. All additional maintenance requirements are contained within the Idverde contract currently in place.

From Cllr John Oliver to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Can the Cabinet Member please supply the following data:

i) the budget for all activities that come under the heading of borough of sport for the year 2023/2024 including (but not limited to) costs of staff (including staff to be recruited during the year), costs of consultants, costs of branding, costs of

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communication activities including websites and social media, costs of grants to third parties and any other relevant costs

ii) the expenditure for all activities above at the end of quarter 2 compared with the budget for the same period

iii) the latest outturn expenditure for all activities above for the full year

The above to be in as much detail as is contained within the accounting systems.

Reply

Non
Priority
Questions Borough of Sport - Cost code 401175

	Budget £	Actual £	Variance £
i) Budget derived from income received and earmarked reserve contribution total*	306000	0	
ii) Total Borough of Sport expenditure as at Q2/P6	153,000	173,220	20,220
iii) Total Borough of Sport expenditure as at mid November 2023 incl Big Sport Day Event			
Big Sport Day Event		131,868	
Activity Finder		29,788	
Activity Sessions		3,850	
London Youth Games		24,500	
Printing and design		1,430	
Staff/consultancy		56,497	
		247,933	
*Funding for BoS 2023/24:		-306,000	
Sponsorship		-96,000	
Corporate contribution		-60,000	
Up to £150k from Public Health for costs that fit into the following categories:		-150,000	

From Cllr John Braithwaite to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Congratulations on a well-run Big Sports Day. My question is regarding ongoing participation in sport. I see that in the survey, 76% would be very likely to attend another event, but only 31% were very likely to take up a new sport or activity as a result. Would the Cabinet Member please set out what the reasons are for the relatively low take up and how are you planning to overcome this?

Reply

Thank you for your good wishes, we are very proud of how the Big Sports Day went. With regards to the survey, in addition to the 31% who said they would be very likely

to take up a new sport, 43% stated somewhat likely which is also a positive response and an overall positive intent for over 74% of respondents. In fact, less than 18% stated that they were somewhat unlikely or very unlikely to take up a new sport which is a very low number in our view, particularly given the fact that some of the reasons could be that they already do a lot of sport or do not have the capacity to take up a new sport themselves.

Nevertheless, the Big Sports Day is not the end of our work to encourage more people to get active and try new sports out. That's why we are bringing in new initiatives to help encourage people to get active including: free swimming for the u16's and over 65's at sessions in each of our leisure centres, the refurbishment of many of our tennis courts and the protection of free play where it already exists, on the pilot of Our Parks free exercise classes at Fair Green, and our recently launched customised Borough of Sport Activity Finder [Merton - Get Active](#), where residents can access hundreds of activities right across the borough.

We will also be seeking feedback from residents and stakeholders via the Borough of Sport Forum and Advisory Group and look to address gaps in activity provision when they are identified.

From Cllr Kirsten Galea to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

Playgrounds play an important role in child development, as play improves children's cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being. However, inaccessible playgrounds are stopping too many children with physical and neurological disabilities from playing in playgrounds. What is the Cabinet Member doing to improve inclusion in Merton's playgrounds?

Reply

Merton parks have 45 playgrounds with over 600 individual items of play equipment within the borough's parks and open spaces, and this does not include the sporting areas, such as the newly refurbished multi-use sports areas and tennis courts. These playgrounds and sporting areas offer a variety of play opportunities for children of all ages.

The Greenspaces Team have successfully secured a 3-year capital programme to extensively revitalise the play provision for sites most in need of attention. This process involves consultation with the community and offers them the opportunity to identify aspects they would like to see, this has recently occurred at Rowan Recreation Ground, Lewis Road Recreation Ground and Miles Road Play Area. As part of this process and through equipment selection, we consider a wide array of users, including those with disabilities, to ensure the 'best fit' is achieved for users.

An example of recent work that we have undertaken to provide facilities to a wide range of users is the paddling pool refurbishments. This involved improving access by adding ramps, while also using creative softer play surfacing in the design so it can be enjoyed by all groups.

Furthermore, where possible, we look to ensure that there is a well-rounded play facility in traditional play areas using these principles, this includes ensuring items such as sound play, tactile items and other items such as basket swings (which are easily accessible for both carers and those with disabilities) are integrated into future designs and improvements. This sort of consideration moves the emphasis from traditional setups such as swings, slide and climbing frame set-ups etc and ensures that there are more opportunities for those with limited mobility to interact, not only with the items themselves, but with their peers too.

An example of this approach recently is when we worked alongside a disability group representative and the local Friends of Morden Park to re-position existing equipment, install new equipment (including a DDA roundabout) and put in place a pathway network that can be easily navigated.

From Cllr Victoria Wilson to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Could the Cabinet Member please tell me:

1. How many times the footballs, netballs and basketballs have been borrowed from Merton's libraries since they were introduced?
2. How many publicly available netball and basketball courts are there available in the borough to use?

Reply

Since the introduction of equipment loaning services via Merton's libraries, there have been a total of 135 borrowings of footballs, netballs, and basketballs.

The borough's parks have a number of Multi Use Games Areas (MUGA's) within. These are spaces designed for the provision of various sports within a designated space. Eighteen of these MUGA's contain hoops and/or markings to accommodate basketball and indeed netball. By having these spaces marked out for various sports it enables users greater sporting opportunity and flexibility, rather than that of standalone facilities.

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