

Merton Council Council

15 November 2023

Supplementary agenda

21 All Public and Member Questions, Supplementaries and
Replies

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Public Questions

From Gary Hammocks

To the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

We can access over £100k tomorrow to help us continue improving MSG. We can't access it as you won't sign a two page agreement. Are you hesitating to do so because you want to kick us out after we have spent hundreds of thousands bringing the site back into use?

Reply

Thank you for your enquiry. As you know from our discussions, there are plans to undertake a strategic assessment of all pitches within the Borough, starting with a feasibility study of Morden Park which will commence shortly, following advice from the football foundation and Surrey FA. Once completed, this will allow us to make longer term decisions in relation to leases and usage of the spaces in the borough. We are committed to providing accessible, good quality facilities for everyone in the borough and therefore need to consider the needs and wants of all not just a few. We appreciate all you have done for grassroots football in the last 12 months on Morden Park – however, it is important to make clear that use of Morden Park was only offered on a temporary basis whilst works at Sir Joseph Hood took place. Longer term decisions relating to usage of green spaces in the borough will be considered after the completion of the strategic assessment.

From Matthew Cottee

To the Cabinet Member for Transport

Why is LSOA data, which does not reflect an individual household's circumstances, being used in the scrappage scheme? The LSOA is a postcode average therefore band A to D homes are excluded while band H homes, including a deprived £16.5m home on Wimbledon Common, are included.

Reply

The criteria applied to Merton's ULEZ scrappage scheme is set out and agreed by Cabinet on 10th August 2023 and detailed in the following report.

<https://democracy.merton.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CIId=146&MIId=4507>

LSOA (Lower Super Output Areas) are defined geographic areas identified and used by the National Office of Statistics and typically provide for a range of data more detailed than at ward level; but not at individual house levels.

Whilst LSOAs define geographic areas; the Scrappage Scheme criteria applies the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) to provide an overview of relative deprivation levels across Merton.

The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) isn't solely focussed on income, current house prices or council tax bands as a measure of financial standing.

The IMD at LSOA level draws together various data sets to produce an overall relative measure of deprivation. The domains are combined using the following weights:

- Income Deprivation (22.5%)
- Employment Deprivation (22.5%)
- Education, Skills and Training Deprivation (13.5%)
- Health Deprivation and Disability (13.5%)
- Crime (9.3%)
- Barriers to Housing and Services (9.3%)
- Living Environment Deprivation (9.3%)

The Index of Multiple Deprivation is a useful tool for targeting services and provides a means of identifying the most and least deprived areas (LSOAs) in Merton.

Eligibility areas are those which are within the top 90% of the Index of Multiple Deprivation and mid-low Public Transport Access Level (PTAL) areas 1-4. The grant has also been made available to this borough's hard-working carers, irrespective of their location within Merton.

As a London borough with a broad range of incomes and demographics, there is always a possibility that within each LSOA, there may be a household, or households, with higher or lower household incomes than the average of its LSOA. That is why Merton Council kept this portion of the eligibility broad.

Supplementary

My question relates to LSO, which is to do with scrappage scheme. The LSO is based on 7 main factors, I'm sure we're all aware, the scheme is purely financial and has no direct educational skills or crime benefit. Using the data it has excluded thousands of properties based on the score, while over 500 properties, in excess of £1.5million are considered deprived, the map itself has flaws and includes PTL level 5 and 6a properties. Are the Cabinet going to rectify the inequalities in the scheme with an appeals process or a cross party review?

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and I want to thank Matthew Cottee for his original question for which there is a written answer and now for his supplementary. What I wanted to say is the Cabinet is tasked with rectifying the poor state of air quality in Merton and will continue to see what it can do to take away polluting cars in this borough.

From Marguerite Blackett

To the Cabinet Member for Transport

At each elections residents were promised step free access to the train stations (like Wimbledon Chase or Raynes Park). When will the Council honour these promises?

Reply

Within the last year the Council has worked with both South-Western Railway and Govia Thameslink to support the submission of bids for Wimbledon Chase and Raynes Park Stations for the next round of Government funding for step free access schemes. We wait to hear the outcomes of these bids, and will continue working towards securing step free access at stations in Merton. The Council has been successful in securing and contributing financially to step free access schemes currently under construction at Motspur Park and Tooting Thameslink stations.

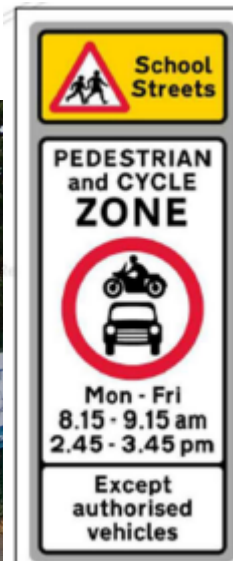
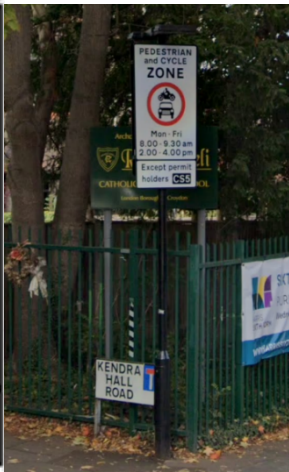
From Khalid Majid

To the Cabinet Member for Transport

What plans are in place to bring the quality of School Streets Zone Signage in Merton up to the standard evident in other London Boroughs e.g. Croydon?

Reply

All school street signs in Merton are designed in line with Department for Transport regulations and are enforceable.



From Rosemary Butt

To the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

Why fell mature valuable trees (without public consultation) when we are told to grow trees to refresh the air NOW? Young saplings cannot refresh the air NOW like the destroyed mature trees. You should plant saplings near mature trees so we don't sacrifice valuable, carbon-dioxide-reducing trees. Climate emergency is NOW.

Reply

I agree that action is needed now to tackle the climate emergency – and that trees are a key part of taking climate action. That's why I was especially proud that this administration planted 10,000 trees in our first year.

However, it is the case that we will inevitably have to fell mature trees on occasion – and this can be for a number of reasons. Whilst all trees have a value, the location and condition of any tree has to be quantified against the benefits they provide and the risk they pose, while also considering the species and lifespan of the tree. The council tree team use information and national guidance, such as the National Joint Utilities Guidance, and our own tree strategy to determine how best to manage existing trees and plant new trees for future generations.

Over the last year, Arboriculture Officers inspected 23,794 trees across the Borough to ensure the safety of the people who live, work and visit the Borough. The condition of the trees inspected are recorded on a central database and works planned dependant on the outcome of the inspection.

It may not be apparent why a tree is removed due to non-visible factors and the multiple conditions trees have to endure in droughts or storms. Felling a tree is always a last resort. Public consultation is not always achievable, due to the large number of trees in the Borough, or suitable, particularly where immediate action is required for public safety or insurance resolution. I can assure you that the removal of any tree is taken as the last step and often many interventions, including tree maintenance works, are undertaken to minimise the risk a tree may pose or to promote new growth.

From Lee Walker

To the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Dundonald recreation ground suffers from having only tennis courts instead of a MUGA. Given the drive for Merton to be the Borough of Sport (and not just tennis),

what's the process for Dundonald obtaining additional sporting facilities, such as basketball hoops, cricket stumps or goals, like other rec's with MUGAs?

Reply

Thank you for your question regarding the provision of diverse sporting facilities at Dundonald Recreation Ground. We are proud of the broad array of activities currently available at the ground, as well as our recent improvements which have been part of Merton's Borough of Sport ambition.

Dundonald Recreation Ground is equipped with facilities that cater to various sports, reflecting our commitment to supporting a wide range of recreational activities. The amenities include:

- Artificial cricket and cricket pitches (two)
- Football pitches (three)
- A bowling green
- A playground
- Pavilion available for hire
- Tennis courts (recently refurbished through a joint investment with the LTA and the Council)

In addition to the above, we have ensured that the tennis courts' refurbishment includes markings for multi-sport use, further enhancing the versatility of the space. This multi-sport functionality allows for various activities beyond tennis, accommodating sports such as netball and mini-football within the existing infrastructure. The shared use with Dundonald Primary School, established through a Community Use Agreement, exemplifies our approach to maximising the use of Merton's sporting facilities for both the school and the wider community.

We are continuously evaluating the community's needs and exploring opportunities to expand and improve our recreational offerings. In regard to the addition of new facilities, such as basketball hoops, cricket stumps, or goals, the process typically involves assessment of demand, evidence of community interest and need for additional or specific facilities.

From Philippa Woolley

To the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

For many months, the Cottenham Park playground has been in a very depressing state. Wimbledon Park benefitted from extensive refurbishment and the residents of SW20 have very much been forgotten. Outdoor space is so important for young families and young children, please could the playground be repaired.

Reply

Thank you for raising your concerns regarding the play facilities at Cottenham Park.

Cottenham Park offers great play value for children and families visiting the park – however there are issues with the park as you have identified in your question that we are working to resolve.

One of the many projects we have carried out at Cottenham Park, in conjunction with the Friends of the Park, involved extending the existing playground down towards the Cambridge Road end of the site, with the introduction of lots of play items offering further play opportunities. Later and in addition to this, we piloted the first use of a special rubber mulch safety surface for these items that offers improved permeability and impact absorbency so that children can safely enjoy the play facilities in the wetter months.

The large multi-play unit at the North end of the play area has unfortunately reached the end of its serviceable life having offered more than 25 years of faithful service. This unit is inspected routinely by our service delivery partners and independently by The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA) and upon one of these inspections it was noted that structural integrity of the unit was compromised. In the interest of not wanting anyone to suffer an injury on the unit the decision was made to close the it down.

However, we have been working with suppliers to come up with alternative options for the next financial year to ensure that this section of the play area can be enjoyed once again. Once we are in a position to do so, we will share these options with local residents and stakeholders.

Regarding the roundabout, this unit has been removed as part of the routine inspection process, as it was noted it wasn't functioning properly. It has now been taken back to their depot for repair. New parts are required due to wear and tear, and these are sourced from the continent, so this is taking longer than desired. We

recognise how popular the roundabout is with families and we will ensure its reinstated as soon as practicably possible.

We of course thank you for your patience and understanding in the interim whilst we work to address these issues.

From Thomas Gibbons

To the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

Prince George's Avenue SW20 trees have not been pollarded in years. Pedestrians trip and hit heads, street lights are blocked and people walk in the street at night to see the way. Some trees damage property. When will the trees be pollarded or removed?

Reply

Our last inspection of the trees on Prince George's Avenue took place earlier this year – and following that inspection we have scheduled maintenance works to be carried out. Work for the pollarding of trees on the road shall be undertaken this season and I expect the work to begin before the end of December.

In the broader context of our urban tree management, we have 42 trees being managed on Prince George's Avenue, with 17 of those due for their regular three-year pollarding cycle. These maintenance cycles are determined by a risk assessment approach, based on location, age, species type and maintenance work, ensuring we prioritise our interventions where the need is greatest, in line with our Tree Strategy to optimise the efficacy of the council's budget allocations.

Beyond these scheduled operations, our officers are also proactively engaging in allocating ad hoc tasks such as tree crown reductions and trimming low-hanging branches to maintain clear pavements. These efforts are in direct response to ensuring pedestrian safety and accessibility but are balanced with the needs of the trees to ensure that they are maintained to provide maximum benefit.

We encourage residents to report any instances where the trees may obstruct public pathways, as this will alert the tree team to take the necessary action promptly. Regarding concerns of property damage, please report this to us via the Council website so that we can investigate this further: <https://www.merton.gov.uk/planning-and-buildings/regeneration-urban-design/trees/street-trees>

From Charlie Gallannaugh

To the Cabinet Member for Transport

At the July 2023 Council meeting he stated that funding was in place, contracts let, and locations decided for traffic sensors to be installed in East Hillside, and that works would take place over the summer months: why has this commitment not been delivered?

Reply

The Council has agreed to install traffic monitoring sensors in East Hillside to build a base-case for any future traffic calming interventions –and this commitment still stands. This has involved, as the question recognises, identifying funding sources and additional contracts. Unfortunately, there has been a delay due to electricity connections on the selected lamp columns. This work forms part of the highways team’s work programme and is undertaken within the resources available. We are grateful to residents who are in support of the scheme, and we remain committed to delivering the sensors as soon as practicably possible.

From Sanjeev Patel

To the Cabinet Member for Transport

Can the criteria for dropped kerbs be amended as the government’s announcement and pledge highlights the increase of Electric car ownership? Charging from home is more cost effective and safer especially if there is a driveway in place currently but does not meet the depth criteria.

Reply

The Council’s current criteria on driveway applications including on depth, is intended to protect pedestrians, particularly those with disabilities, from obstruction from overhanging vehicles. This was reviewed in 2018 supported by Merton’s Scrutiny process. There are no plans to amend the criteria.

The Council is currently developing an EV charging infrastructure strategy which will include consideration of policies to support safe EV charging from home for residents that do not have private off-street parking. The strategy will take into account guidance that is due to be produced by Government in the coming months on the use of cross pavement charging solutions, as set out in their recent “Plan for Drivers”.

From Sandra Vogel

To the Cabinet Member for Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

During a summer site meeting at Mitcham Bridge, Merton Council's officer expressed surprise at the Canons Leisure Centre/Better banners displayed on lampposts. He was to investigate if planning / other had been granted, but never contacted me with an answer. Was permission granted? If so what income is derived?

Reply

Better Leisure have installed several lamp-post banners in the borough to publicise the range of leisure facilities available to residents. The banners were authorised by the Council via a highways licence and planning permission is not required. Better Leisure are a partner of the Council and a not-for-profit organisation; therefore, there is no fee charged for the banners.

From Kevin Clarke

To the Cabinet Member for Transport

Merton is proposing a CO2 based permit scheme for otherwise ULEZ compliant vehicles. Are there plans for an accompanying CO2 based scrappage scheme?

Reply

There are currently no plans to introduce a vehicle scrappage scheme related to the proposed changes to parking permit fees which are currently subject to consultation.

From Jackie Schneider

To the Leader of the Council

On the 10th October the Leader of the Council publicly expressed sympathy with those suffering from the conflict in Israel and Palestine.

Would he now take the opportunity to support the call by the UN Secretary-General for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire?

Reply

Merton is proud to be a borough of many faiths and communities, and we know the terrible events of recent weeks in Israel and Gaza will resonate with many. The thoughts of myself and everyone at Merton Council are will all those who have been affected by the shocking events and violence that has taken place.

As the Leader of a local council, my primary focus and responsibility is to the communities who have been affected by these events here in Merton. I have been deeply concerned by the reports of the rise in antisemitic and Islamophobic hate crimes in the UK in recent weeks.

It is of the utmost importance therefore that our Jewish and Muslim communities are supported and reassured during this difficult time. The Deputy Leader and I recently visited the Wimbledon Synagogue to reaffirm our commitment to working alongside the police and the Jewish community to tackle anti-Jewish hatred wherever it is found. I also visited the Baitul Futuh Mosque with the Chief Executive as part of National Hate Crime Awareness Week, to show our support for the Muslim community and restate our commitment to work with the police to tackle Islamophobia wherever it exists.

This is a concerning and challenging time for all of us, and Merton Council will do everything we can to support residents and stamp out hatred.

Supplementary

Thank you. I'm going to repeat my question, because I don't think I got an answer. In the light of the deaths of over 11,000 civilians and 4,500 children, please will the leader of this council publicly support the request by the Secretary General of the United Nations for an immediate ceasefire, we would be joining the majority of United Nation agencies, we'd be joining 700 NGOs, 250 British lawyers.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you Jackie Schneider for your original question and your supplementary. I want to take everyone back in this Chamber back to 6

October, when Hamas, a proscribed terrorist organisation broke the ceasefire between Palestine and Israel and I think I speak for everybody in this chamber at the shock and horror not only of those events in Israel, on the 7 October that saw the killing of over 1000 Jewish people, the biggest killing in a single day since the holocaust. Look on in shock and horror and I think I also speak for this chamber looking on in shock and horror at the number of innocent civilians in Gaza that have been killed since that attack and would urge restraint but also as much humanitarian assistance to be provided to those people of Gaza as possible. And I'm not sure it's helpful for me as leader of a local council to add my voice to how this conflict should be brought to an end, but I do find myself in agreement with the leaders of our national parties and as I laid out in my written answer, my primary concern remains in supporting residents here in Merton to feel safe and secure and we will continue to work closely with our faith communities and the police to tackle hatred wherever it is found.

From Sheila White

To the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

We at Hercules Wimbledon AC have heard of plans for another track to be built in Morden. What would the impact be on the facility at Wimbledon Park? Can we have reassurance about the future of our base and that the proposed further development of the stadium will take place?

Reply

Thank you for your question regarding the future of athletic facilities in the borough, particularly in light of the discussions around a potential new track in Morden.

First and foremost, it is important to clarify that at this stage, no final decisions have been made regarding any new athletics facilities within the borough. Such decisions will only be approached after a review of our outdoor sports facilities, which is expected to begin in 2024. This review will be carried out in partnership with key stakeholders, including Sport England and national governing bodies.

The recent refurbishment undertaken on the Wimbledon Park running track, which now holds Track Mark certification for the coming five years, demonstrates our commitment to providing quality athletic facilities on this site. This enhancement ensures that our athletes have a secure and upgraded base for training and competitions in the short to medium term.

Looking ahead, we will engage in a collaborative process with Hercules Wimbledon AC and England Athletics. The purpose of this partnership will be to evaluate and make informed decisions on the long-term prospects of athletic provisions in our community.

The concerns of Hercules Wimbledon AC and the future of your club are of great significance to us. We promise to maintain clear and open communication as we move forward, valuing your input as an integral part of this process.

Thank you for your ongoing commitment to athletics in Merton. We share a common goal in fostering a strong and vibrant sporting community, and we look forward to working together towards a bright future for athletics in the borough.

From John Davis

To the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

Merton Council's frequent announcements of 10,000 trees planted this year has provoked many queries asked of Tree Warden Group Merton. To answer these please provide us with a list numbering every planting site, a full breakdown of species per site, and % success rates at each.

Reply

In response to your question and to assist the Tree Warden Group Merton regarding our achievement of the planting of 10,000 trees, I have asked officers to compile a detailed report of this information. This will include a site-by-site breakdown of planted trees, a record of species planted at the locations, and the preliminary success rates. It is important to note that trees planted in 2022 and 2023 are in the establishment phase, and accurate survival rates will be more ascertainable by 2024-2025. Our approach recognises the natural process of succession, which includes the thinning of whip tree plantings to allow stronger species to thrive.

Our commitment to trees and the increased number planted is reflected in various projects such as the Inter Faith Week Tree Planting, Street tree planting, Trees for Streets, Ward Tree Planting for the Queen's Green Canopy 75th Anniversary, the London Road Playing Fields Growing Together Orchard Project, and others. These initiatives are integral to our Merton Tree Strategy 2023, which guides our efforts to enhance the urban canopy while ensuring responsible management of existing trees.

We welcome the community's interest in our greening efforts and will provide the Tree Warden Group Merton with the requested information as soon as it is fully collated.

From Lesley Sorrell

To the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

Despite frequent requests to Greenspaces I have not been given a list of prospected replacement trees for those lost both in parks and on streets. As the planting season for 2023/24 is now here, can you please provide a full checklist?

Reply

Thank you for your question regarding the replacement of trees within our parks and streets. As we approach the 2023/24 planting season, officers have been delayed by the unusually dry autumn, resulting in a slight postponement of our planting program. The tree team are finishing the planting schedules, which will encompass various projects, including Trees for Streets and requests by Merton residents for specific tree locations.

The comprehensive checklist you've requested is extensive, reflecting the scope of our planned work. Given the breadth of data, these documents will be provided under separate cover once completed.

I assure you that the enhancement of our parks and streets through thoughtful and sustainable tree planting remains a priority.

From Pippa Maslin

To the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Of the 400 homes that the Council is aiming to build on Council-owned land, how many will be M4(2) units (i.e. accessible and adaptable dwellings) and how many will be M4(3) units (i.e. wheelchair user dwellings)?

Reply

The designs for the homes are still being finalised, so we are not able to give numbers for these units at present. However, all schemes will be designed to be London Plan compliant in terms of the number of accessible and adaptable dwellings and wheelchair user dwellings.

From Alexander Forbes

I wish to ask the full council meeting whether the council will look at Knowsley Council's experience and consider Empty Dwelling Management Orders to re-occupy any of the alleged 2,000 empty homes in Merton possibly for people on the council's 10,000-person Social Housing Waiting List?

Reply

The Council has recently allocated capital funding to an empty homes scheme to help bring back empty properties into use for those on the Council's housing waiting list. We are currently investigating which homes are truly unused. Of those 2000 homes, it is likely the majority of them were only empty for a short period of time prior to sale or reuse. We will aim to work collaboratively with the owners, which is the fastest and most cost effectively way of bringing these properties back into use. However, if this is not possible, for those properties which meet the Empty Dwellings Management Orders requirements, we may then consider this route.

Councillor Priority Questions to Cabinet Members

From Cllr Mike Brunt to the Cabinet Member for Transport

Can the Cabinet Member advise on the progress being made in marking out bays for charging electric vehicles in Wimbledon?

Reply

We have introduced 22 EV parking bays in Wimbledon with a further 28 to be installed over the next few weeks. There are 12 locations currently under consultation, with a further 11 sites programmed for consultation starting 16th November 2023. Further bays are being progressed in batches on a three-week basis. All the information on current the consultations is available online at [Consultation on electric vehicle-only parking bays | Merton Council](#)

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for his answer. My supplementary is, how else are we as a local authority looking to improve and support residents to access more sustainable travel options.

Reply

I thank Cllr Brunt for his original question and now for his supplementary question and the Council is actively delivering a range of measures to provide Merton's

residents with access to more sustainable travel choices. We are working with TfL funding that allows the Council to deliver walking and cycling improvements throughout the borough. We've got the tax on developers called the CIL funding the Council's delivered segregated cycle lanes in Plough Lane, Merton High Street and through the Wandle Valley Green Corridor and the council has made a financial contribution to step free access at Motspur Park Station and at Tooting Station and so on and so on Madame Mayor. Thank you.

From Cllr Simon McGrath to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Can the Cabinet Member please outline the responsibilities of the Safer Neighbourhood Board?

Reply

Safer Neighbourhood Boards have an important role to play in supporting engagement at a local level, promoting trust and confidence in the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and helping to ensure transparency and accountability of MPS delivery. The board sits on a quarterly basis and is chaired by Maureen Bailey from Inner Strength Network and comprises of local Cllrs, partners, and community organisations. Attendance and engagement from Board members is high, and I'd like to thank those – particularly volunteers from Neighbourhood Watch and community organisations – who give up their time to attend, and all they do to help keep Merton safe.

The key responsibilities/aims of the Safer Neighbourhood Board are;

- enable local engagement with the police;
- enable local scrutiny and accountability of the police;
- focus on the Police and Crime Plan key principles and priorities;
- monitor crime performance and public perceptions (community confidence);
- inform the development of policing priorities in the borough;
- monitor MPS support for the delivery of ward panels; and
- engage with Borough Independent Advisory Groups and other local mechanisms (e.g. Neighbourhood Watch and stop and search community monitoring groups) to support and inform their work across the borough.

The Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) provide Safer Neighbourhood Board funding, for communities to apply for community led projects to be delivered over 12 months. The projects must meet the criteria set by MOPAC. The criteria this year was;

- Reducing and preventing violence

- Increasing trust and confidence.
- Better supporting victims.
- Protecting people from being exploited or harmed.

Merton Safer Neighbourhood board submitted 4 projects to MOPAC, all were successful at receiving funding.

Supplementary

Thank you very much, and thank you to the Cabinet Member for the response. As they will know, it came out recently that one of the Conservative representatives on this Board had not attended three meetings consecutively without sending any apologies, which I think brings home how important this committee is. I wonder if the Cabinet Member could do some more to make sure that our residents are aware of the good work of this Board and the need for everybody to participate in it.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and I'd like to thank Cllr McGrath for his question and for his supplementary. As I say in my answer, the attendance and engagement from many representative groups is very high and I think it's quite petty to start picking on individual personalities for attendance at meetings and in fact I remember when we've done that before on our side, we've been accused of all manner of different discriminatory behaviours. But I'd like to publicly thank those who do attend the Safer Neighbourhood Board for all the work that they do.

From Cllr Stephen Mercer to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green spaces and Climate Change

What level of expenditure does the Cabinet believe is reasonable in support of a decent level of toilet provision in Merton? If a Community Toilet Scheme is the most cost effective way of achieving decent provision, has the Council considered how much is spent by neighbouring councils in funding the same sort of schemes?

Reply

As part of our ambitions to support our local town centres to be great places for residents to shop and socialise, we are keen to ensure access to toilets, and welcomed the work of the Scrutiny Task Group on this topic. Following agreement by Cabinet that a Community Toilet Scheme is the most beneficial way to provide facilities, the Council has allocated Civic Pride funding towards re-launching Merton's Community toilet scheme.

An initial £30,000 has been allocated over three years. Whilst this may be sufficient to keep the project running, it is likely to require additional start-up costs in the first year which are being scoped by officers in liaison with other boroughs, and if required further funding sources will be identified.

Supplementary

Thank you Mayor and I thank the Cabinet Member for her answer. I'd also like to thank Cllr Stringer and Cllr Alambritis for the letter to TfL supporting the restoration of toilets at Morden Station which we have got a sort of answer to. I know the figure of £30,000 mentioned to fund the community toilet scheme and I believe it's on the low side compared to other boroughs. I suggest we touch base with our neighbours to help us judge the level of spend that will work, I fear a poorly funded and supported scheme will not be sustainable as we've seen in Richmond and it will soon fail and the energy of an officer to drive it is essential. I agree with your points. Given the report of the Scrutiny Task Force was presented in mid-September, can you give us any idea when Cabinet will be ready to give its formal response to the report.

Reply

Thank you very much Madame Mayor. I'd like to publicly again thank Cllr Mercer for his work on the Task Group on this item. So the Task Group reported to Cabinet where we gave verbal feedback and my understanding of the process is that we will be giving a written response in due course, but I'd like to reassure him that as he knows from my keeping him updated that we are continuing with, for example, the lobbying around Morden toilets and we are continuing the work with officers around making sure that the toilets, particularly within public buildings in Merton are as accessible as possible, this does not prevent that work from happening.

From Cllr Stuart Neaverson to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

It's been fantastic to see the progress the Council has made on climate action, especially with the planting of 10,000 trees over the last year. How does Merton compare with other councils on climate action?

Reply

We're delighted to report that Merton recently came 4th in the country on climate action in an independent assessment of all councils in England who had declared a climate emergency [Council Climate Action Scorecards | Climate Emergency UK \(councilclimatescorecards.uk\)](https://www.councilclimatescorecards.org.uk/)

Climate Emergency UK undertake an assessment every year of the progress of all councils, to hold them to account on the climate action they have taken since their declaration of a climate emergency. In 2021, we came 72nd and this year we came 4th – a testament to the focus this administration and our fantastic officers have placed on this strand of work.

We scored particularly highly on:

- collaboration and engagement, at 89%, thanks also to Merton's Climate Action Group of resident volunteers and all community groups, resident associations and business organisations who've worked with us and spread the message.
- planning and land use, at 78%.

This is the first time the assessment is based on actual progress towards addressing the climate emergency; previously the scorecards were based on the contents of the Climate Action Plans, so we are especially pleased to have placed so highly as the score represents how Merton's residents, businesses, communities and the Council are working together on tangible actions.

Supplementary

Thank you. Thank you very much for detailing the work that we are doing on climate change, and I would like to say a huge thank you to Natasha, the Cabinet and the many officers, Paul McGarry, Tara Butler who have done a wonderful job making Merton one of the best councils in the country tackling climate change. My question is what are we doing to make sure the whole community can play a role in tackling climate change in the Borough of Merton.

Reply

I'd like to thank Cllr Neaverson for his question and his supplementary and his kind words. I think it's testament to the work of this council to see us move up the climate scorecard as the original question points to. We did particularly well around engagement and reaching out to members of this community who don't necessarily think that climate change is for them and some of the things we have been doing is working in our libraries to have resources there that people can use and having Dr Bike come into our libraries and making that sort of thing accessible. We are also doing a lot of tree planting and wild flower planting across the borough and we've started our Green Schools Network which is all about teaching children about carbon literacy and reaching out to their parents so that they have got access to advice and guidance around energy saving tips. And we've recently launched our community climate action fund and we'll be going through those bids soon which is very exciting and we're soon to launch our business grant scheme to retrofit their businesses and save money on their bills because we can save the planet and put money back in

their pockets. And it was great to attend BAME Voices events a few weeks ago which was focussed on climate change and its impact on certain communities in our borough and it's really exciting to see us talking in those terms for all communities across Merton. Thank you.

From Cllr Hina Bokhari to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Would the Cabinet Member set out how we are supporting asylum seekers who could be at risk of becoming homeless in Merton?

Reply

Merton Council is working with Merton Citizens and other community organisations to achieve "Borough of Sanctuary" status, and is very concerned about the rise in the numbers of asylum seekers and refugees across the country that are finding themselves homeless thanks to the Home Office's decision to move on people from asylum accommodation rapidly and without support. Their actions are putting the welfare of vulnerable asylum seekers at risk, and placing additional burdens on local councils.

The Council has a legal duty under homeless persons legislation to take homeless applications from former asylum seekers with refugee status if they are homeless or threatened with homelessness within 56 days. This places a duty on the Council to assess their housing needs and provide a personalised housing plan (PHP) that sets out the 'reasonable steps' the applicant and the Council will take to prevent or relieve their homelessness.

Examples of this would be assisting people to rent privately local, and referrals to local supported housing vacancies and hostels.

Where the applicant has a 'priority need' for housing as defined in law, such as those with dependent children or who are 'vulnerable' in line with the legal test, the Council would provide temporary accommodation pending further steps to relieve their homelessness.

The Council also works with local agencies and charities to provide holistic support to applicants alongside our housing.

Supplementary

Thank you to the Cabinet Member for their answer. I was just looking for clearer actions. Refugees get six days notice by the Home Office to leave their hotels, risking single people becoming homeless. In fact at least three people have become

homeless in Merton. Will hotel accommodation for asylum seekers be closing in Merton and if so what will you be doing to support those refugees affected? Will the council produce a guide/guidance for them to receive help from private landlords, will there be a rent deposit scheme, will you support asylum seekers who are desperately trying to find work and to avoid homelessness by urging your current labour leadership to change their position, support the Lift the Ban coalition?

Reply

Thank you very much and thank you Cllr Bokhari for her question and for her supplementary. She is implying that I have many more powers than I do, and as I have made clear in the answer we agree that the Home Office's shift on removing asylum seekers from their accommodation almost the minute that they receive their refugee status is a terrible, terrible policy, just as we should be welcoming them into our communities, we are instantly removing any security from their lives and at the same time, ending up posting additional burdens on local councils. So as you know we are working towards being a borough of sanctuary and the Head of Housing is very involved in those meetings, we working with the local charities who are supporting groups who are in hotels. I have no further knowledge than my colleague has about if that hotel is going to be closed because the Home Office is led by people who seem to be willing to make decisions without communicating to local authorities. We can hope that the new Home Secretary might take a different approach, but I'm not going to lose any sleep waiting for that.

From Cllr Usaama Kaweesa to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

It's great to see the brilliant work being done to Vestry Hall through the Civic Pride Fund, can the cabinet member highlight other successes we have had through the fund?

Reply

Merton's Civic Pride reserves fund was approved by Cabinet on 19th June 2023.
[Subject: title typed in the document. \(merton.gov.uk\)](#)

The full programme is available to view in the report appendix.

The fund provides three years of funding for a range of civic pride projects. To date the fund has contributed towards improvements at Vestry Hall as well as providing funding support for;

- Mitcham Carnival
- Tennis Big Screen events
- Restoration of the Toynbee Fountain

- Raynes Park Rain Garden
- Christmas Light Switch-On event, in Morden for 2023
- Mitcham Town Centre management and associated activities such as the upcoming Mitcham Winter Weekend market events
- Mitcham Market Management tender and contract
- Town Centre business support offer and the development of a Night-Time Economy Strategy for Merton
- Resource to re-launch Merton's Community Toilet scheme
- Resource to prepare Merton's bid to be London Borough of Culture

Supplementary

I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for their initial answer, it's great to hear how much progress we are making through the Civic Pride Fund, it's an absolutely fantastic initiative. Can the Cabinet Member tell us how many applications we have received this year and what the next steps are now for successful applicants.

Reply

Thank you, I'd like to thank Cllr Kaweesa for his question and his supplementary. And yes, this year we opened the Civic Pride Fund investing in neighbourhoods again and this year we added to it, in collaboration with Cllr Irons' colleagues to join up the new Community Climate Action Funds which she has already referenced. We tried to make it as easy as possible for the community, so we've had one front door, we've received nearly 40 applications to that pot of funding which is just astounding, which shows just how much interest and activity there is going on in our borough both to improve our civic pride and to tackle climate action. We are now going to be detail assessing those bids. It is unlikely, given the amounts requested, that we will sadly be able to afford to fund all of them, so we will be prioritising those that are adding the most to our borough, that are doing things that otherwise wouldn't be funded and that are really making a difference to our residents' lives and to our local environment.

From Cllr Robert Page to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Only 37% of employees responded to the Council's Workforce Equality, Diversity and Inclusion survey in 2022. Would the Cabinet Member agree with me that the main driver of low survey turnouts is staff feeling that their voice doesn't make a difference, and that this is a situation that develops over time? Would she also agree

with me that the only way to combat this is to build trust through regular, insight-driven staff communications, through taking action on staff concerns and proactively feeding back on this and if so, set out what she is doing to address this?

Reply

Let me first say that I am incredibly proud of the staff at Merton Council. They do a fantastic job, delivering for residents in incredibly difficult circumstances after 13 years of Conservative and Liberal Democrat austerity. Merton staff are some of the hardest-working people I have ever met, and I am incredibly grateful for everything that they do to make Merton a brilliant place to live, work and raise a family. I do agree that regular staff engagement and two-way staff communications that show staff concerns being acted on are the best way to build trust. As outlined to you in your correspondence with the Executive Director for Innovation and Change, on 28th October, Colleagues in OD and communications have developed a year-round staff engagement calendar to create regular opportunities for information sharing, for celebrating success, and for listening to staff concerns. Officers are preparing to launch a procurement exercise to find a digital solution to creating more regular staff surveys, alongside online performance appraisals, 360 reviews, and exit interviews. This will provide a financially sustainable way to carry out regular staff insight, as externally commissioned surveys are very expensive. To address these concerns and continue to build trust within the workforce to increase our future survey participation rates, several concrete actions have been taken, including the procurement of EDI training with input from our staff network groups, the development of an Inclusive Language Guide, and the introduction of a zero-tolerance approach against bullying and harassment.

Ethnically diverse staff are now invited to recruitment panels, fostering diversity in hiring decisions. In order to keep staff informed we have created regular EDI communication through quarterly EDI updates and several CMT members have also taken the initiative to have internal EDI focused live streamed interviews. These interviews provide an opportunity for staff to gain deeper insights into the views and backgrounds of our CMT members and also gives staff the chance to ask any EDI related questions directly to CMT. Upcoming initiatives include an Aspiring Leaders Program, EDI training rollout, mandatory E-Learning courses, and continued senior leadership engagement. We are also focusing more on supporting our staff networks and introducing a new Women's Network and Muslim Faith Network. Finally, "Conversation Cafes" have been introduced as dedicated safe spaces for meaningful discussions. In conclusion, significant strides have been made in response to the survey's findings, with a commitment to ongoing improvement.

Supplementary

Thank you, I thank the Cabinet Member for the answer, but it is disappointing that in 2023 after a decade of Labour administration that the Cabinet Member does not take any responsibility for staff welfare. The Cabinet Member will note from reading my correspondence that many of the council's people policies are totally out of date, including the staff Code of Conduct, last properly updated in 2008. Would the Cabinet Member agree that the administration bears responsibility for this situation developing, why has staff welfare not been a priority for him and his colleagues?

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, I would say I thank him for his frankly bizarre question, but I'm not sure that I do. I would say, I said it in my written answer, I will say it again, I am absolutely proud of the work that Merton council staff do, they are some of the hardest working people that I know and they deliver amazing services and do an amazing job for our communities even in the face of 13 years of Conservative and Liberal Democrat austerity. So as I set out in the written answer, we are absolutely committed to listening, engaging with and ensuring that the fantastic staff that work here are proud to work here and a big part of that does mean having the honest and meaningful engagement with staff which is exactly what we are doing and will continue to do as I've set out in my answer, thank you.

From Cllr Nick McLean to the Cabinet Member for Finance

In a recent video the Cabinet Member said he was 'excited' to launch the Merton Young Savers accounts with the credit union Croydon Plus. Please can the Cabinet Member tell me:

- How much money has been allocated to fund the Merton Young Savers accounts and the additional £10 for a parent or guardian to open an account?
- What is the rate of interest that is paid on the Merton Young Savers accounts?
- What is the interest rate charged by Croydon Plus on their Saver Loan and Family Plus Loan?
- Did the Cabinet Member know that at the 2023 AGM the Croydon Plus Treasurer reported that "there was an overall deficit for £21k which has resulted from charging £25k for the payment of a dividend in 2020/21"?
- What due diligence was done on the decision to partner with Croydon Plus and what alternate options were considered? Please provide all reports, correspondence and officer emails.

Reply

A recent report from the Children's Society has shown that future financial stability is the issue most troubling children aged 10 to 17, with more than one in three worrying

about having enough money in their future. The time is now to help our children and young people by providing them with an opportunity to start their savings career. The Cost of Living Strategy and Action Plan highlighted the need to develop some work specifically aimed at “The Next Generation” to ensure that young people’s futures are not defined by the cost of living emergency.

As outlined in the Cabinet report from March 2023, part of the second tranche of the Council’s £2million Cost of Living Fund has been allocated to working with the Merton, Sutton and Croydon Credit Union (which operates as CroydonPlus) to develop a pilot scheme for all year 7 children resident in Merton in 2023-24. £50,000 has been allocated which includes the setting up costs of the technical and administrative resources, and funds to cover the initial deposit for accounts that are set up. We are also currently developing the education side of this scheme which will involve the Credit Union engaging with schools in the borough on opportunities for young people across age groups to learn about money management. Credit unions are community-based financial co-operatives, owned by members, that offer fairer financial services for their members. They put people before profit and are not driven to make money for external shareholders, and they must make decisions in the best interest of their members. Credit unions are an ethical home for people’s savings and the place where accessible and affordable loans are available for people struggling to make ends meet, or to make a larger one-off purchase eg a replacement washing machine. To support them as the substitute to unscrupulous lenders and illegal loan sharks in our communities, there is a need to help credit unions grow as a viable alternative in the marketplace. According to Fair4All Finance, over a million people in the UK are in debt to illegal money lenders. Offering these Merton Young Saver Accounts through CroydonPlus will help it grow its savings base, its engagement with residents and in turn boost its short and long-term sustainability. Our decision to work with a local Credit Union on this scheme was driven by these wider considerations.

The interest rates enquired about are:

Family Loan Plus – 34.5 APR;

Saver Loan is Tiered – 26.8% 0 to £2999 or 19.6% £3000 and over.

Credit unions are ethical lenders who build relationships with their clients, and will always ensure that loans are only given in circumstances where people are able to manage repayments. Often their lending relates to unexpected household expenditure and as already noted, gives people in need an alternative to illegal money lending. CroydonPlus does not pay credit interest. Subject to making a sufficient surplus it can pay a dividend, but this will be subject to a vote by the members at the Annual AGM.

If applicable Savers through this scheme would become eligible to access their first

dividend in March/April 2025. Savers are encouraged to open their accounts as early as possible to benefit from a higher percentage of their first annual dividend.

With regard the incomplete and edited extract from the Treasurer's report to the 2023 AGM that you have included, there was a deficit of £21k for financial year 2021/22 (ended 30 September 2022) but this was after charging for a dividend paid in respect of 2020/21 (not in 2020/21). It is incorrect to conclude that the deficit 'resulted' from this. This is the unedited text of what was reported to the AGM: There was an overall deficit for the year of £21k but this is after charging £25k for the payment of a dividend in respect of 2020/21 agreed by last year's AGM. It is also after charging £37k for exceptional items which are non-recurrent. These relate to historic reconciliation differences which were written off in the year. Before these items there was a surplus of about £41k.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, I thank the Cabinet Member for his response which has confirmed that Croydon Plus will pay no interest on the Merton Young Saver's accounts, and if any of the young savers are unfortunate enough to have to borrow from Croydon Plus, they will pay interest rates far higher than they would at a high street bank. The Credit Union is strongly supported by the Cooperative Party and we know that the Labour Party have close links. Can the Cabinet Member confirm that there is no link between Croydon Plus and the Merton Labour Party and will he commit to providing the information requested regarding the due diligence which he did not address in his first answer?

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and I thank him for his question as well. I absolutely reject his attack on the Croydon Plus Credit Union who do a fantastic job working with and providing an ethical alternative to unscrupulous lenders for people who struggle to access finance and may not have good money management. But his attack doesn't surprise me, Madame Mayor, particularly in light of the Conservatives kicking the Credit Union out of their premises, with nowhere else to go. Which frankly given the service and support that they provide to many Merton residents is shameful. But, talking of people who struggle with good money management, I haven't yet heard him condemn the Conservative Government for wasting £140million on the now unlawful Rwanda policy, Madame Mayor. I know he was a big fan of the disgraced former Home Secretary, so I suppose my commiserations to him on her removal, and even worse the return of David Cameron to the Conservative government. But I suppose on that note I would congratulate the Liberal Democrats, I'm sure they are delighted to see the return of the Prime Minister they put into power and enabled for 5 years. Thank you Madame Mayor.

From Cllr Matthew Willis to the Cabinet Member for Transport

We have heard that the Mayor's ULEZ scrappage scheme has now paid out £121 million or 75% of the funds available. Could the Cabinet Member please state what the equivalent is for Merton's scrappage scheme in £ and % terms?

Reply

Merton's scrappage scheme was launched on 11th September 2023. In the first two months of the scheme's operation, we have processed a total of 447 application forms. As it's a two-stage application process, this comprises of;

- 252 Stage 1 applications approved (grant reserved)
- 195 Stage 2 applications approved (vehicle scrapped, payments made or payments currently being processed)

There is a time lag between stage 1 approvals and stage 2 submission of proof of scrappage to allow residents time to scrap their vehicles and/or apply to the TFL scheme.

Budget-wise, Merton Council have paid out £195,000 (out of £252,000 committed so far) Therefore in the first 2 months of the scheme's operation, we have committed 25.2% of the £1m allocation.

The scheme to date has enabled 195 higher polluting vehicles to be removed from Merton's streets, contributing to better air quality and our climate action plan.

Supplementary

Thank you, I checked what Mr Cottee was saying, and my block of flats isn't eligible for Merton's scrappage scheme, but abuts a house in Raynes Park that is, such is the confusion that residents face if they don't live in a Labour Ward. As only a quarter of the fund has been used, can the Cabinet Member commit to removing the inconsistent qualifiers for people to apply for this scrappage scheme and if funds remain unused to invest them into active travel instead?

Reply

I want to thank Cllr Willis for his original question and now for his supplementary. The answer though that I am going to give him is the same answer that I gave to the Member of the Public, Mr Cottee. And that is that the aim of the Cabinet at this moment in time is to remove from Merton's streets, higher polluting cars, that is our aim.

From Cllr Helena Dollimore to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

The St Helier Hospital impact assessment shows that there will be a huge increased pressure on local hospitals' maternity, A&E and paediatric services if St Helier's services are closed. Can the cabinet member outline how waiting times for local people might be impacted?

Reply

The Council has been very clear through this process that it does not support the decision to close Maternity, Paediatrics and Accident & Emergency services at St Helier Hospital. Our view is this will have a severe and detrimental impact on the residents of Merton, in particular residents in some of the most deprived areas of our borough. The impact assessment and recently commissioned, independent analysis by Newton Europe, demonstrated the potential change in what would be considered resident's nearest hospital. It demonstrated a significant potential increase in attendances at other Acute Hospitals locally, in particular St Georges Tooting, Kingston, and Croydon Hospitals.

We are all too aware, through national and local news headlines, that NHS trusts and Acute Hospitals are experiencing extremely high demand and pressure, heading into their most demanding period of the year –winter.

It is therefore possible to draw the conclusion that, any change of attendance pattern by residents of Merton, or others who would have previously attended St Helier, could potentially overwhelm neighbouring hospitals.

Supplementary

I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for his answer and his tireless campaigning on this issue which is of such importance to our local NHS. And I'd like to ask him whether he thinks that our local hospitals will be able to cope with the additional demand.

Reply

Well I'd like to thank my friend and colleague Cllr Dollimore who represents a ward which will be most affected by these proposals, and the answer is probably best illustrated by the occasion when I had to leave the Council Chamber to find that my son had been taken to hospital, to St Georges, in ambulance, having collapsed in the street with a perforated bowel. When he was there it took three hours, even though he was transported to St George's by an ambulance, to be seen by a doctor, he was in excruciating pain and was not given any pain relief for all that time. And I think

most people in this chamber when they have visited Emergency Departments will have similar stories. He was seen eventually, he had a perforated bowel, the contents of which were spilling out into his abdomen and we all know how dangerous that is and was operated at 2am in the morning. I really need to emphasise that I'm not criticising the staff at that hospital, they saved his life, but can you imagine what that will be like when 50,000 Merton residents are dispersed to St George's to Kingston and to Croydon, they are not coping now, and I believe they will be overwhelmed if this proposal goes ahead and that's why we should all fight it and that's why I welcome the support of the Liberal Democrats and I am astonished that the Tories are still, despite the Audit Commission Report recently are sticking to the breakdown of the agreement, the cross party agreement, that existed in this chamber for about 25 years.

Strategic Theme Priority Questions

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

How are we engaging with community groups as well sports clubs to ensure we have a whole borough approach to creating the Borough of Sport?

Reply

From its inception, Borough of Sport has engaged both sports and non-sports community groups to help shape and guide the plans. This approach, led by London Sport consultants, involved discussions with over 100 local groups and individuals, highlighting a commitment to diverse community engagement. Key non-sports groups such as Age UK (Merton), Baitul Futuh Mosque, Wimbledon Guild, Merton Connected, and Merton Dementia Hub played a significant role in these early stages.

The stakeholder advisory group, central to the initiative, includes both sports and non-sports representatives. Members such as BAME Voice, Merton Mencap, Youth Inspectors, and NHS Southwest London ensure a balanced perspective in decision-making, reflecting the varied interests of the community.

Additionally, the participation of non-sports groups in events such as the first Borough of Sport Online Forum, held on 14th November 2023, demonstrates their ongoing involvement and influence in shaping the initiative.

Overall, the Borough of Sport exemplifies a collaborative and inclusive approach to community engagement, where diverse voices from across the community spectrum contribute to creating a dynamic and comprehensive sports initiative.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor. It has been fantastic to hear that an Advisory Board and Forum have been created. Could the Cabinet Member confirm whether these groups include organisations supporting people living with additional needs.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you to Cllr Butcher for his original question and his supplementary question. I can confirm that, yes, we have organisations on the Advisory Board that meet the needs for people with disabilities, for example we have Mencap on our Advisory Board, Mencap is a large organisation and I'm sure everyone here knows about Mencap. But we also have smaller organisations like We Make Footballers and they deal with children with additional needs, so that's fantastic to have them on our Board. Yesterday at the Forum, our first London Borough of Sport Forum, we put a call out for three people from the Forum to be part of our Advisory Board so that we have that connection between the two Boards and we are reserving a space for one of these people/organisation to be relating to people with a disability. So yes, thank you very much for your question.

From Cllr Paul Kohler to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

The running track in Wimbledon Park is no longer fit for purpose. Given the urgency of the situation can the Cabinet Member please confirm what plans the Council has to reinstate both the track and spectator facilities in the Wimbledon Park stadium and what enhancements are planned in respect of disabled access for both athletes and spectators?

Reply

Contrary to the suggestion in the question that the Wimbledon Park running track is no longer fit for purpose, Merton has made extensive improvements to the track in 2023 which have enabled the facility to obtain a level 2 competition license which meets the current needs of the site. Following the renovations, a thorough professional evaluation was conducted, ensuring that the track and its accompanying facilities meet the high standards required for TrackMark accreditation. These improvements have enabled the current users to both hold competitive events at a district level and ensure that the facility can be used as a high-quality training facility.

In addition, TrackMark accreditation is a rigorous process that assesses a facility's management, maintenance, and accessibility. It ensures that a venue adheres to the minimum standards set by the National Governing Body for Athletics in the UK, which includes provisions for disabled access. This accreditation confirms that our facilities meet England Athletics' requirements for disability access, both for the track and the ancillary facilities.

Regarding spectator facilities, we acknowledge the previous damage to the grandstand due to arson. However, restorative efforts have been undertaken to make these facilities operational and improve them. We are committed to further enhancing accessibility and will conduct a review with our Facilities team and Idverde colleagues.

This will help us identify and address any ongoing issues and ensure that our facilities are accessible and welcoming to all visitors.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, I thank the Cabinet Member for her response. Although I am a bit bemused by it. If the track is now fit for purpose and doing so well as you describe it. Why was it described in the grant form that was submitted to Cabinet when there was an attempt to build a running track in Morden Park, why was it described at that point as 'no longer fit for purpose despite the interim investment of £100,000'. Nothing has changed since that grant form was put in. Could you explain why in this grant form, it's not fit for purpose, but you're telling me it is. Could you explain the disjuncture please?

Reply

Thank you to Cllr Kohler for his original question and for his supplementary question. For the track, the deciding factor there is that he has received Trackmark accreditation. That is a rigorous process that assess maintenance, accessibility and management. So if they have that accreditation and it is for five years, so I don't understand on what basis you think it is not fit for purpose. But maybe that is since 2019, and now we are moving forward. We have spent more money on the track recently as well, so it is fit for purpose. Thank you very much.

From Cllr Eleanor Cox to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Why does Merton charge £12.60 for an hour's tennis in Wimbledon Park at peak times. How is this supporting Merton as a 'borough of sport' when the costs of hiring public tennis court are so high, thus prohibiting those that cannot afford it to play?

Reply

The charge for tennis at Wimbledon Park during can be justified by several factors, reflecting a fair pricing strategy. Firstly, the costs are in line with the high demand for these courts, especially given Wimbledon Park's renown in the tennis world. High demand often necessitates a pricing model that balances accessibility with the need

to manage and maintain these popular facilities effectively.

Additionally, the fee structure in Wimbledon Park can be considered reasonable when viewed in the context of alternative options available in the area. Merton residents have access to free tennis courts in other local parks, offering a no-cost option for those who find Wimbledon Park's fees prohibitive. This alternative provision ensures that tennis remains accessible to a broader section of the community, aligning with Merton's vision as a 'borough of sport.'

Overall, while the charges at Wimbledon Park might seem high at a glance, they are justified by the need to manage a high-demand facility and are balanced by the availability of free alternatives within the borough. This approach demonstrates a commitment to maintaining quality sports facilities while also ensuring that sport remains accessible to all residents of Merton.

Supplementary

I thank the Cabinet Member for her answer, however it doesn't add up that people who want to use the Wimbledon Park Tennis Courts must pay up to £12.60 per hour while every other tennis court in the borough is available free of charge. Would the Cabinet Member agree with me that this is another example of the administration treating Wimbledon as a cash cow. Thank you.

Reply

Can I thank Cllr Cox for her original question and for her supplementary question, and actually I think that the answer were provided in the original question have all the facts, all the information there. But in order to give additional response I'll say that we do have other tennis courts that are free to play so that people can use them without having to pay and we also have tennis courts across the borough, not just in Wimbledon, but across the borough that are also free to use and we also have other things like free swimming and other activities, so for example when I mention in my speech where schools now have funding to open up their sports facilities, we will be working with those schools also to provide free facilities for public, so there are many free activities for people to have, and if they want tennis free, it is also available. So thank you very much.

From Cllr Joan Henry to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Given the cost-of-living crisis, Merton residents are facing financial challenges. Could the Cabinet Member detail how she has factored this into her borough of Sports plan?

Reply

The Borough of Sport plans have a particular focus on free and low-cost activities in order to help residents find affordable ways to get active during the current cost of living crisis. These have been brought together in a single place - a new Borough of Sport Activity Finder - which helps residents find what is on offer and helps clubs and community groups promote what they are doing.

Free swimming for under 16s was made permanent in the run up to Merton's Big Sports Day in September, with expanded hours. In November the Council launched free swimming for 65s and over providing regular free swimming slots at all three of the borough's leisure centres.

Merton's Big Sports Day gave residents a great day out and a chance to try out a range of sports and physical activities for free. Around 5000 residents of all ages attended the day. Just over 73% of those who attended and provided feedback on the day said they, or a family member, were either very likely or somewhat likely to take up a new sport or activity as a result of the Big Sports Day.

In addition, all of the Borough of Sport exemplar projects provide free opportunities to get active and play sport. This includes Walking Netball at Morden Park and Our Parks exercise classes at Fair Green in Mitcham. Further exemplar projects are in development including a new ParkRun in Morden and bringing ParkPlay to sites across Merton.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor. First of all I would like to say, I am so proud to be living in the Borough of Sport. The Cabinet Member mentioned the Big Sports Day which was a fantastic event that thousands of people attended. Can you tell us about any future plans for Borough of Sport events in Mitcham

Reply

Thank you very much to Cllr Henry for her original question and her supplementary question. Can I also just say thanks to all Councillors who volunteered on the Big Sports Day, we had Councillors from across the Chamber who volunteer and I'd just like to say thank you very much for coming. We had Executive Directors, we had the Leader of the Council, we had the Chief Executive, all there, so it was well supported, it shows commitment towards the Borough of Sport. Since the Big Sports Day we now have Our Park, so the boot camp has started on Fir Green, so is there very Saturday Morning, it's free for all, please join in, and we are planning on having another one coming up soon and that will be open in Mitcham as well, so that will be advertised when it comes, that will be BoxFit. We have free swimming for under 16s

and over 65s in Mitcham as across the borough in all of our leisure centres. We have many other free activities in our Libraries, but then we also have the Junior Park Run in Mitcham. Big shout out to all the volunteers, because it is hard work, Sunday after Sunday they are there, so thanks to them and thanks to Cllr Lynda Kirby who started that up. But also as I said earlier, we launched the activity finder, so there will be many activities on there that are free for the people in Mitcham, so please ask your residents to look on there and they will find activities free. Thank you very much.

From Cllr Samantha MacArthur to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Could the Cabinet Member please advise us of the cost of the recent Borough Sports Day?

Reply

The total cost for the Borough of Sport Big Sports Day was £131,867.79. We secured contributions for more than half of the event cost totalling £67,500 from Cappagh Public Works Ltd, Chas 2013 Limited, AELTC (Championships) Ltd, FM Conway, Clarion, GLL, and Veolia. A further £30,000 was contributed by Public Health, and the remaining £34,367.79 was allocated from within budget.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, and thank you to the Cabinet Member for her response. Does the Cabinet Member think it was responsible to accept a donation from AELTC, as listed in her reply, and to accept their sponsorship of the 5000 cups given out, just before the determination of their planning application? Those involved in that decision could not accept entry to the Championships Ballot this year to prevent any impression of bias, could the Cabinet Member confirm a different section of the Council was involved in those negotiations that who will be making a decision on the enforcement of the covenant?

Reply

Can I thank Cllr MacArthur for her original question and for the supplementary question. The AELTC contribution towards our Borough of Sport Big Sport Day, we look for contribution from all of our partners and supporters and they made that contribution. It had absolutely nothing to do with planning application as you know the planning application is a cross party committee that deal with that, so nothing to do with the Borough of Sport.

From Cllr Daniel Holden to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Over recent years the council has made efforts to use their leisure and heritage assets to bring in income. What criteria are used to determine if an event is suitable to be held in/on our assets?

Reply

When determining the suitability of events in our leisure and heritage assets, it's important to clarify that our approach is not solely driven by financial considerations. While generating income is a factor, our primary goal is to enrich our parks and green spaces with a variety of cultural and leisure activities. These events are carefully selected to appeal to and benefit our wider community.

We actively seek opportunities to host diverse events, ranging from outdoor cinema and food festivals to cultural celebrations and funfairs. These activities are chosen to cater to residents of all ages, enhancing the community's cultural and leisure experiences. Our focus is on bringing vibrant, inclusive events that contribute to the social and cultural fabric of our community.

To ensure the appropriateness and success of these events, we conduct a thorough review process. Each week during the peak event season, a meeting is held involving internal council officers from sport and leisure, greenspaces, licensing, and other relevant departments. We also involve external partners such as the police in these discussions. This collaborative approach allows us to assess each application comprehensively, considering factors like community benefit, safety, and the potential impact on the environment and local residents.

In summary, our criteria for hosting events in our leisure and heritage assets extend beyond financial gain. We aim to provide a range of activities that enrich our community's cultural and leisure options, ensuring our parks and green spaces are vibrant, inclusive, and enjoyable for residents of all ages.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, I thank the Cabinet Member for her answer. What will it take for the council to forego income by cancelling or stopping future events which have been known to cause harm to our parks and our libraries, including and in particular Wimbledon Library which has been used as a nightclub and it is harming the local residents.

Reply

Thank you to Cllr Holden for his original question and his supplementary question. I can see many colleagues with furrows on their face and wondering, and I can hear whispers of 'nightclub?'. But what it is, at Wimbledon Library, we have an activity going in there, once a month for youths and it's well received and I think there were a few residents who had concerns about it and they have contacted me along with a few others. We have spoken to the providers and we are very clear on what we will accept and what we will not accept. We have actually shut down an activity in that very same library before, and this particular one we have our eyes on them and as far as we are concerned whatever they have asked them to do, they have followed, we have had the police involved, nevertheless we are listening to what the residents are saying, we are investigating and if we find anything untoward, we will deal with that. Thank you very much.

From Cllr James Williscroft to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

How are we ensuring that the whole Borough can benefit from becoming London's Borough of Sport?

Reply

The new Borough of Sport Activity Finder brings together over one thousand ways to get active across the entire borough. Many are free or low cost. We are working with clubs and groups across the whole of Merton to encourage and help them to upload the activities to the portal. The activity finder includes lots of activities which are accessible for people with a range of disabilities and impairments, and you can filter the activities on the portal to find something that meets your individual needs. For example, FA Wildcats and Walk and Talk at Plough Lane sessions both run by the AFC Wimbledon Foundation that welcome all abilities and disabilities.

There are several initiatives which reach across the whole of the Borough for example the:

- free swimming offer for kids and the 65s and overs;
- refurbishment, with partner funding by the LTA, of 47 tennis courts at 12 sites;
- refurbishment of the beach volleyball court in Wimbledon; and
- Almost £300,000 from the Department of Education and London Sport secured for 23 Merton schools to help them open up their facilities beyond the school day for use by the local community, this includes Cricket Green and Perseid Special Schools.

In addition, 85 residents have redeemed/used their free 60 minutes Forest bike usage. Forest are impressed and pleased with this level of up take and we will look at how we can expand this offer in future.

We will also seek to ensure that exemplar projects are located across the entire borough and will be seeking advice and guidance from organisations who sit on the Borough of Sport Advisory group to make sure that interventions are as impactful as possible. We are also working to make sure these exemplar projects are, where possible, accessible to everyone – such as the Netball and the Our Parks classes, which both welcome and tailor their sessions to meet the needs of people with disabilities.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you to the Cabinet Member for her report and the hard work in these success stories. It's great to hear about the enduring working that is being done in Wimbledon. The Lower Morden Ward, that I represent, borders Morden Park a much loved outdoor space that is not being used to its full potential, what can we do in this beautiful outdoor space to further our ambition?

Reply

Thank you very much to Cllr Williscroft for original question and his supplementary question. And I will just jump in straight to say, that I've said it before and I'll say it again, that we have feasibility studies coming up next year and that will determine what we need to put in Morden Park, but in the meantime I'd like to tell you about some of the things that are currently going on since we started the Borough of Sport and I know that both Cllr Williscroft and Cllr Kenny have been talking to me about things happening in that particular park, and just last week I was talking to Cllr Kenny about the refurbishment of the outdoor gym, so that's there now and it's refurbished, so that's one thing. We are going to have frisbee golf sections that will be free, we have ongoing walking netball sessions exclusively for women, and from the Spring residents will be able to borrow balls from the leisure centre and I think Cllr Williscroft you were spearheading that. We are also looking forward to having park run, but that's still in progress and we have some fantastic volunteers there working hard to make that a reality, so there are a lot of things going on, we just have to wait for the feasibility study to have something more substantial if I can say. Thank you.

From Cllr Chessie Flack to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

The Playing Pitch Strategy back in 2019 gave some ambitions for female involvement in sport in the borough - Rugby moving from 2 to 7 teams, Football up 20% and an addition of projected female cricket demand requiring new cricket

facilities to be added in the area. Could the Cabinet Member please report on progress made with these targets over the past four years?

Reply

In addressing the progress on the ambitious targets for female involvement in sports as outlined in the 2019 Playing Pitch Strategy, it's important to consider the timing and subsequent challenges that have impacted implementation. The strategy was completed in August 2019, just a few months before the onset of COVID-19 restrictions, which significantly limited the opportunity for immediate action on its recommendations. This had a varied impact on sports participation. While some sports have experienced an increase in engagement, others, particularly adult team sports, have witnessed a decline. This shift in participation patterns necessitates a reassessment of our approach.

Regarding the specific targets you mentioned, such as the increase in female rugby teams, the growth in football participation, and the addition of cricket facilities, these have not been fully realised due to these challenges. Instead of relying on pre-pandemic data, we are committed to undertaking a comprehensive consultation process as part of the refresh of the Playing Pitch Strategy in 2024. This updated strategy will provide more relevant and current recommendations, taking into account the impacts of both the changes in sporting needs following the 2019 strategy and the ongoing cost of living crisis.

This reassessment will allow us to set more accurate and achievable ambitions for these sports within the borough, aligning with the latest participation trends and community needs. These efforts will be undertaken in collaboration with partners and other organisations, ensuring a holistic and community-informed approach.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you to the Cabinet Member for your response. It is disappointing to hear that women's participation in sport hasn't increased across the board and I know that Merton are doing what they can to make it easier for people to participate. One key limitation to people, women in particular, accessing sport is access to bathrooms. So do you agree that better access to bathrooms at sports facilities would improve women's participation in sport?

Reply

Can I thank Cllr Flack for her original question and for her supplementary question. In terms of bathrooms, I know that is a topic at the moment about bathroom in sports facilities and I'm just hoping that those providers of these activities will look properly to see how they can provide bathroom facilities for the people who take part in their

training, but as an administration at the moment, we don't have the funds to put bathrooms in the parks just yet, and so it is a difficult one at the moment and that's as best as I can answer that question.

From Cllr Agatha Akyigyina to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

People generally get less active as they age, which has a negative impact on their mental and physical health. Can the Cabinet member tell us how the Council is supporting older people to be physically active in Merton?

Reply

Providing opportunities for older people, particularly those aged over 65 is a key strand of the Borough of Sport ambition. We have recently launched free swimming sessions for over 65's at each of our leisure centres and introduced free walking netball sessions in Morden Rec. Organisations who work closely with older people such as Age UK and Wimbledon Guild are represented on the Borough of Sport Advisory group and we will take their advice as well as our colleagues in Public Health to not only introduce more activities for this age group where gaps are identified, but also to better promote the wide range of existing opportunities in Merton for older people to ensure we do everything we can to reverse the trend of decreasing activity levels as you get older.

Supplementary

Thank you very much Madame Mayor. I'd like to thank Cllr Cabinet Member Cooper-Marbiah for her response and I'd like to ask her why does she think it's important for our elderly or older generation to keep active.

Reply

I think it's time that Cllr Cooper-Marbiah got a bit of a rest, she's been fielding all those questions. Why do I think it's important for older people to keep active? Well I think I've already mentioned this in my seconding of the motion, but it's because as the population ages and as we see the pressure on our hospitals, we all as older people, I speak as one, have a responsibility to keep ourselves fit and healthy and independent and stay away from hospitals as far as possible and by taking part in the range of activities that have been developed as part of the Borough of Sport that's precisely what they can do and it will make them healthier, it will improve their mental health, it will reduce isolation, there are so many positive benefits to this and I am sure that we will all agree that we should encourage people to participate.