

06: Non ST Questions

From Cllr Laxmi Attawar to the Cabinet Member for Education

Could the Cabinet Member update us on progress with the new secondary school planned for South Wimbledon?

Reply

I'm delighted we are on track to open a brand new comprehensive state secondary school in the borough and I know that it is welcomed by many parents who are worried when they look at how other London boroughs are struggling to accommodate increasing numbers of secondary aged children. Luckily in Merton the administration planned for this increase well in advance and is working with Harris, a great local provider who have turned around previously failing schools in Mitcham and are now keen to open a new school in South Wimbledon so that parents and young people at the heart of the borough can also benefit.

With regard to the overall project, the council and the EFA have now agreed terms to acquire and develop a site in the High Path area next door to Merton Abbey Primary School. The building on this site will not be completed until Summer 2020. For the first two years, from September 2018, the academy will operate from Whatley Avenue in the redeveloped adult education centre.

In February and March, the Harris Federation consulted residents in the Wimbledon area on admissions and curriculum issues in respect of their planned new secondary Academy. In advance of signing a funding agreement for the school, the EFA expects the sponsor to provide details of proposed admissions arrangements and sufficient interest in the school from prospective pupils. The Federation has consulted on a proposal to admit pupils from three 'nodal points' at Merton Abbey, and Wimbledon Chase and Park stations. To date over two hundred parents/carers have attended meetings and views on the admissions arrangements have been invited. The council has submitted a response to the consultation with a preference for the school to recruit students from communities close to the site.

From Councillor Brian Lewis-Lavender to the Cabinet Member for Street Cleanliness and Parking:

What measures is the Cabinet Member taking to increase the use of the garden waste collection service?

Reply

Under our new contractual agreement Veolia provide a dedicated education and engagement team who will promote the garden waste service to ensure residents are aware of the scheme, encourage take up and minimise the impact on other services. Veolia will work closely with the Borough to increase the take up rate by an estimated 5% over the next two years. In addition, the cost of the garden waste scheme is being kept as low as possible to cover the costs of the service whilst keeping it at a rate that still retains existing customers and attracts new ones.

From Cllr Imran Uddin to the Leader of the Council

What response has the Leader had to his letter to the government about Surrey's social care funding arrangement?

Reply

I am not aware of any reply from government to this joint letter from council Leaders which I was happy to put my name to.

From Councillor Oonagh Moulton the Cabinet Member for Finance:

Please can the Cabinet Member provide an update on the plethora of problems that have followed the launch of the long awaited new e5 Financial Information System, and in particular the impact of these difficulties on the ability of Merton Council to close its accounts at the end of the 2016-17 financial year?

Reply

Teething problems are often experienced when implementing a new system, along with changes in procedures. Whilst there were problems with the implementation of the new finance system, these are now being resolved and the system is working far better now than it was eight weeks ago.

Problems with the implementation included a fault that meant that the organisation was unable to order stationery from our supplier Office Depot, some of our suppliers being paid later than they, or we, would expect, some issues with direct debit payments from some of the council's customers, and it being harder than we would like for the organisation to carry out purchasing and debt collection related tasks.

Thanks to the hard work of the team involved, in terms of closing the accounts, the processes and reports that we need to run have all been carried out as planned and as expected and we are working through the closing process in the normal way. So far, there doesn't seem to be any cause for concern. In addition, our external auditors EY have done testing which provides additional assurance, as they have 'identified no significant issues to date'.

There are still a number of issues to work through but once this process is completed the Council will have a far better financial system than it did previously and be better placed to ensure that we have the reporting and controls in place to ensure the highest quality of financial management in the organisation.

Cllr Sally Kenny to the Leader of the Council

What work is the council doing to protect services at St Helier hospital?

Reply

The Council is fully committed to protecting services at St Helier hospital and has taken all opportunities to remind the local NHS about this commitment. In line with the recently agreed motion to full council,, we are currently publicising the meeting the NHS is holding to discuss the STP and we are encouraging residents to turn up at that meeting and to make their voices heard and make clear that we will not countenance any downgrade of services at our local hospital.

From Cllr Gilli Lewis-Lavender to the Cabinet Member for Community and Culture:

How much would it have cost if the new Morden leisure centre previously approved by the Council back in 2010 had been built in 2014 to the same full specification?

Reply

It is impossible to calculate the costs retrospectively since the specification we have for the new Morden Leisure Centre was not put out to the market at any time between 2010 and 2014. Pricing would have been dependent on a number of factors including the contemporary market forces, labour markets and material prices as well as improved, cheaper construction methods.

From Cllr Jerome Neil to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Environment and Housing

Given the rising concern about the growing numbers in temporary housing, what action is the cabinet member taking to address the issue?

Reply

The Council is well aware of the growing issue of homelessness and is aware that currently there are 74,000 households in temporary accommodation in England with over 50,000 of those in the London area.

The Council has for many years managed to maintain its position of having the lowest number of homeless households in temporary accommodation in London and this have been achieved by having a robust homelessness assessment process and being committed to homeless prevention. As at the end of February 2017 there were 188 households in temporary accommodation being accommodated by the Council under the provisions of the Housing Act 1996, Part 7.

Homeless Prevention Activities assist households avoid the trauma that a homelessness episode brings. These activities include, working with excluders and private Landlords to prevent homelessness, providing legal advice on housing issues including security of tenure and debt advice. Where homelessness cannot be avoided officers work with households to identify an alternative housing solution so that a planned move, wherever possible, can be achieved.

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Additionally the Council continues to explore the how it can improve its offer to homeless households and will of course need to consider and adopt any changes that might flow from the Homeless Reduction Bill which is currently awaiting Royal Assent.

From Councillor Daniel Holden to the Cabinet Member for Street Cleanliness and Parking:

Since 2014 how many street cleaners' jobs have been cut in Merton?

Reply

Between April 2014 – March 2016 the street cleansing service operated with 57FTE for manual litter picking. This was reduced in 2016/17 by 7FTE following the introduction of 5 electric Glutton sweeping machines. This was part of the budget setting / MTFS process.

Veolia will implement a Neighbourhood Approach to deliver the street cleaning operations which will allow the needs of local areas to be understood and addressed and ensure our staff becomes an integrated part of the local community. As well as utilising the operatives for manual litter picking and sweeping, Veolia will be introducing 2 new large mechanical sweepers and 4 small mechanical sweepers.

It is important to note that the contract is an output based specification and as such the inputs and staffing numbers are the responsibility and risk of the contractor.

From Cllr Pauline Cowper to the Leader of the Council

How is the council supporting businesses in the borough?

Reply

The council is support businesses in a wide variety of ways. We have just won an award for being “small business friendly” by making it much easier for local companies to bid for council contracts. This is the third “Small Business Friendly borough” award that Merton has won in the past four years.

Over the past two years over 70 businesses in Merton have benefitted from our “Brighter Business” programme, helping to reduce running costs for local businesses www.merton.gov.uk/what-businesses-can-do We have recently published advice for small shops on improving their shopfronts, including an interactive toolkit. With the support of the GLA, we are improving the shopfronts and investing in signage, lighting and the overall appearance of Morden Court parade.

We continue to work closely with Merton Chamber of Commerce on a range of programmes, including The Generator business centre, home to 23 startups

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employing over 150 people. We are also working with Business Improvement Districts in LoveWimbledon; Willow Lane and the emerging South Wimbledon Business Area. www.merton.gov.uk/business/businesssupport

For business rates, Merton Council has a local business rate discount scheme. At present this scheme is designed to encourage businesses to occupy empty business premises in our area. It is run in addition to government's statutory business rates relief programme. A hardship relief scheme is also available for struggling businesses.

We have recently worked closely with South Wimbledon Business Association to support the Business Improvement District and with Wimbledon Village B.A. to fund the feasibility of a BID in that area.

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