

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.

Supplementary

I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for her response. Can she confirm whether we will support Colliers Wood parents who are delighted about the School; they are asking Harris to include Colliers Wood as one of the recommend nodal points for applications.

Reply

I'd like to thank Councillor Attawar for her supplementary question. As Cabinet Member for Education my responsibility is for all our children to have access to good schools and to help them to achieve their full potential. The shortage of Primacy School places in Primary Schools was met by expanding schools by one form of entry area in the most local area possible. Singlegate Primary School is an outstanding Ofsted rated school in Colliers Wood with no secondary school anywhere near it. We've therefore made a strong case for pupils from Colliers Wood to gain admissions toward the new School. So yes, as Councillor Attawar has said,

parents and ordinary residents are very excited about the new school and have shouted a lot about it; they came up with a campaign “speak up for Colliers Wood” which was very popular not only with parents but with neighbours and everyone in Colliers Wood encouraging them to go and vote for it, so we hope that will help.

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.

Supplementary

I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for his response. Firstly, can he categorically confirm that it was he who took the decision to abolish concessions for the Garden Waste Service. Secondly, why does he think it is acceptable to increase the charge by 40% for retirees and residents on benefits. Thirdly, how does he intend to ensure that residents don't have their bins stolen or lost, given that if they do, they will be charged yet again by the Council?

Reply

I'd like to thank Councillor Lewis-Lavender for his supplementary. In these challenging financial times we are having to look to deliver a service that meets expectations of residents whilst also keeping Council Tax affordable; so there will be changes to the service and we will see the full implementation in October 2018.

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.

Supplementary

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I'd like to thank the Leader for his response. I was just wondering whether he is as appalled as I am that he has not received a response from the Government in relation to this sweetheart deal with Surrey County Council, and whether he expects Merton to be offered a similar deal?

Reply

I thank Councillor Uddin for his original question, raising a very important issue on sweetheart deals between the Government and their Tory chums in Tory Councils, and the possibility of sweetheart deals for other Councils. I doubt whether we will get any sweetheart deals; the only answer I see is from BBC Surrey about the Leader of Surrey Council David Hodge and the fact that he is pleased that he will be getting from this government £21 million, plus fast tracking into for a pilot for business retention, whereas here in the London Borough of Merton we may get a tenth of that and no way through any kind of sweetheart deal. Absolutely appalling stuff from the Tory Government in favour of a Tory Council.

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

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placed to ensure that we have the reporting and controls in place to ensure the highest quality of financial management in the organisation.

Supplementary

I understand that amongst other things, a number of Council contractors and Local Businesses haven't been paid or in full. Given the administrations' claims to run a business friendly council, can the Cabinet Member tell me who is going to take responsibility for all these delays in our functions, and will there be an enquiry as to how on earth the debacle has happened?

Reply

Thank you for the follow up. Of course when new systems are introduced it is quite common for there to be teething problems, this not being without problems in this particular case. We all have some responsibility for that because we all as an organisation recognise it is important to make changes to systems that are not working. When you replace one system that is not working and try and implement a new one, most organisations find that there is a transition period. As a Business Like organisation we could not possibly carry on with a system that was liable to breakdown and we felt therefore that it was important therefore to replace it with the new one. There has been a transitional problem, we are working on that, things are getting better, and we will do our best to ensure that our Contractors and our Residents get the sort of service that they should expect. Making no decision and making no changes would be worse than doing what we are doing now and I think it is important to recognise the great work of our Officers, our staff and the Councillors who scrutinise them, for looking at things like this and making sure that when you need to introduce new systems you do and then you learn from the mistakes that are made with the introduction.

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.

Supplementary

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I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for his response and ask him if he is surprised that the NHS did not mention that their meeting on the 25th April is about the STP and planned possible Services Closure?

Reply

I thank Councillor Sally Kenny for her original question on a very important issue regarding the NHS and our Local Hospital and for her supplementary. The answer is no, I am not at all surprised that the local NHS did not mention their meeting of the 25th April, which I shall be attending, is all about the STP and plans for Hospital Service Closures especially to do with St Helier Hospital. And it is this side of the Chamber that will do all it can to advertise that meeting, to encourage residents to go to that meeting, to support St Helier Hospital and to do all it can to make sure there is no downgrading of any services at St Helier Hospital and I urge the others on the other side to be there, arguing the same arguments, which they've not done for the last 8 years.

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.

Supplementary

I'm surprised you haven't heard the work accurate, having said that given that you seem to be unable to calculate the difference between 2010 and now; it doesn't take a lot of working out that obviously nowadays it is going to be a lot more expensive. Having said that, will the Cabinet Member, I do thank him for his reply; does he now regret the administration not pressing ahead with the Conservative plans for a new Leisure Centre in Morden, and will he apologise to Merton tax payers for depriving them of valuable use of facilities for keeping fit and healthy?

Reply

I'd like to thank Councillor Lewis-Lavender for her further question and I look forward to joining in the debate later on this evening. No, I have no apologies to make. In 2010, first of all I was told that because of the building construction costs at the time it would cost more than it would cost us now to do so. But more to the point, we had, as you will remember, we had a crisis in our Primary Schools at that time, and we were involved in heavy building at the time and I wanted to make sure that the reserves that we had were going to be used towards that in preference to anything

else. We found later on in 2013/14 that we did have the money to spare so we used it. But going back to her question, if a Tardis were actually invented, I am sure that she and her colleagues would much prefer not back to 2010 back to before 2010 when you had 4 years in which to do this building yourself. You didn't, you put money aside, that's all you did. You could have built it, you didn't build it; there is no point in telling us now that we were wrong not to do what you didn't do.

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.

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.

Supplementary

I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for his response. Does the Cabinet Member think we do enough to tackle the challenge of homelessness?

Reply

I'd like to thank Councillor Neil for his supplementary question. I think it is very concerning in terms of Government and Homelessness. We have 190 people in temporary accommodation in Merton, although this is the lowest, it is 190 too many. As a Council the government does need to act, because across London, more and more people are actually being priced out, with benefit caps but also as well the lack

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of generally affordable supply of housing, so it does take us as a Council to work collectively to ensure that there is more of a supply and I am working closely with Housing Associations identifying areas for further temporary housing accommodation. But it also takes the Government to act. It is unacceptable that communities are being broken up, that many people are being forced to move outside of London and people who have jobs here, people who have their children here, people who have grown up in the Borough; I find that absolutely heart-breaking. Whilst the Council can do something, it is also a crisis across London and it does take the Government as well to act upon the matter.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you to the Cabinet Member for his answer. The fact is, there has been a 39% reduction in street cleaners since April 2014, with Veolia proposing to cut another 5 posts. Residents already complain that they hardly ever see street cleaners or sweeping machines at work. What assurances can the cabinet member give me that under Veolia the cleanliness of residential streets will be any better with fewer staff and what will the service reductions in his Phase C contract as its disguised as efficiencies?

Reply

I'd like to thank Councillor Daniel Holden for his supplementary, I think most of it is going to be covered in a later debate, but what I will say to you, and what I've already said tonight, is that we are having to battle against these financial challenges that have come from Central Government and to provide a service that is both

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affordable and will deliver a great service to residents is what we are delivering here at Merton and you'll see that in October 2018.

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 shop fronts, including an interactive toolkit. With the support of the GLA, we are improving the shop fronts 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 start ups 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.

Supplementary

Could I congratulate you on again winning the Best Small Business Friendly Borough and could he comment on the pressure facing the Local Businesses facing an increase in their Business rates?

Reply

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I want to thank Councillor Pauline Cowper for her very important question on small businesses and for her equally excellent supplementary. As a former football referee, I didn't see many hat tricks on the pitch, but here in the London Borough of Merton we do have a hat trick; a hat trick of awards for the Small Business Friendly Borough, awarded by London Councils. London Councils is made up of 32 boroughs, including a 33rd that is the City of London Local Authority non party organisation that recognises the excellent work of this Business Like Council led by Labour in Merton. Business rates are set by the Government of the day, they call it uniform business rates, it is uniform throughout the country, set by the national government; we are simply collectors of this tax. It is a Labour government that introduced the Small Business Rate Relief that we are doing our level best to help small businesses in this borough including a discount scheme. In terms of the recent evaluation, that is all down to this tory government applying more pressure on small businesses and we are seeing an increase in the number of empty shops purely down to the government's business rates system. Thank you madam mayor.

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