

7a – Strategic Theme: Councillors Questions

**From Councillor David Chung to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency:**

What are the numbers of people in temporary accommodation in Merton, how does this compare to other London Boroughs, and how are you addressing this issue?

**Reply**

As at the end of March 2021 there were 197 Households living in temporary accommodation which is the lowest numbers of households in temporary accommodation of any London Borough (save the City of London) .

**From Councillor Nick McLean to the leader of the Council:**

Do you agree with me that cabinet members who have turned parts of Mitcham into 21<sup>st</sup> century slums should resign?

**Reply**

If Cllr McLean is referring to reports about poor maintenance and servicing of formerly council-owned properties, the cabinet member in the previous Conservative administration who led on the decision to hand over Merton's homes to a housing association, and for agreeing the terms of the transfer, is no longer a councillor. I congratulate the Labour cabinet members who have worked so hard to overcome the issues that have arisen as a result of that decision, and as a result of cuts to council funding and funding for social housing since 2010. We will continue to press the current provider of former council-owned properties, Clarion, to keep to its promises to maintain these homes to decent standards, and to regenerate their estates to ensure new homes, including affordable homes, are provided for Merton residents.

**From Councillor Geraldine Stanford to the Cabinet Member for Housing, regeneration and the Climate Emergency:**

What actions have you taken with Clarion following the terrible reports of conditions on the Eastfield estate?

**Reply**

I was very disappointed and alarmed at the poor housing conditions for the residents of the Eastfields Estate and acted immediately just as soon as the seriousness of the matter was brought to my attention. These actions included the dispatch of a number of the Councils housing Enforcement officers onto the site, attending a public meeting attended by residents, officers of the Council and the local MP. I have also lead on performance review meetings with Senior Clarion Housing colleagues and Council Officers to discuss Eastfields Estate as well as all other Clarion Merton estates. I have also spoken to colleagues of the residents associations group as well as individual tenants.. I can provide my assurances that these actions do not stop here and I will continue to work for our residents until I am satisfied that the

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dwellings are improved and suitable and reasonable for the tenants continued occupation.

### **From Councillor Ed Gretton to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency:**

Does the cabinet member feel a sense of shame that he has failed to protect West Barnes and the wider borough from predatory development due to his administration's failure to demonstrate a five year housing land supply?

#### **Reply**

No. This application was refused by the Merton Council planning applications committee. Government's planning rules make it increasingly difficult for local authorities to defend Planning Application Committee refusals. The National Planning Policy Framework, London Plan and Merton's Local Plan are all pro-growth to address the ongoing housing crisis which recognises the need to deliver more homes, nationally and in London given the housing shortage. The Government's inspector concluded that the scheme in West Barnes did not, in their view demonstrate significant harm to the character of the area.

The comment is also dismissive of the hard work and determination officers have invested in preparing the local plan, borough character study, small sites tool kit and other supplementary planning documents to ensure Merton develops and grows appropriately whilst delivering much needed housing.

### **From Councillor Paul Kohler to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency**

Given the shortage of affordable housing in Merton, and the apparent lack of progress, since my previous question asking what the Council was proposing to do with the vacant Virgin Active site, will the Cabinet Member please provide an update detailing whether anything has been achieved in the last 3 years beyond the recent commitment to include the site in the local plan?

#### **Reply**

As a council, the pandemic has had an impact on the market which confirmed it would have been unwise to market the site until matters had returned to a condition suitable for marketing. The Council is still working to dispose of the site with housing likely to be preferred use of the site. We hope to be able to provide a further update shortly on future options for the site.

### **From Councillor Joan Henry to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency:**

Can you update us on the council's Housing Strategy?

#### **Reply**

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The council's draft housing delivery strategy will be recommended to Cabinet at their meeting on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2021 for public consultation. Should Cabinet agree, we will publish the draft strategy for at least six weeks and the feedback from residents, landowners, social housing providers and others will be used to inform the draft strategy.

### **From Councillor Daniel Holden to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency:**

The Labour administration has failed the residents of the Eastfields estate for years; is this down to the negligence of this Labour administration or the cabinet member's personal incompetence?

### **Reply**

I absolutely reject the suggestion that the Labour administration and myself have failed Eastfields Estate residents for years. The circumstances where the Council has control over any housing association is limited, it is the social housing regulator which has the overall powers relating to the regulation of the housing association sector. The ability of the Council to interfere with housing association business is limited to its statutory duties. Where issues of disrepair have been raised with either myself, fellow ward councillors or the relevant MP they have been raised with the Clarion Housing Group and its predecessors Merton Priory Homes and Circle.

### **From Councillor David Dean to the the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency:**

Why have you let down the people of Eastfields?

### **Reply**

I absolutely reject the suggestion that I have let down the people of Eastfields Estate. The overall responsibility for ensuring that the homes on the Estate are properly maintained and do not fall into disrepair is the Clarion Housing Group. This is their responsibility as Landlord and not elected members. The circumstances where the Council has control over any housing association is limited, it is the social housing regulator which has the overall powers relating to the regulation of the housing association sector. The ability of the Council to interfere with housing association business is limited to its statutory duties. Where issues of disrepair have been raised with myself I raised these with the Clarion Housing Group.

We have heard from Michelle Reynolds, Chief Operating Officer at Clarion who admits that their service to the Eastfields tenants was not what they would have hoped for and that they have developed robust actions plans to resolve matters. I can assure you that I will be holding Clarion to their word on this and will monitoring closely their performance across not just Eastfields Estate but across all Merton Estates.

**From Councillor Carl Quilliam to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment and Green Spaces:**

Can the Cabinet member tell us how recent issues around refuse collection on estates being tackled?

**Reply**

Within the London Borough of Merton there are in excess of 84,000 household of which 19% of the properties are flats (16,000). The housing estates make up 40% of our flats across 40 separate developments which are managed by 17 separate Housing associations and Managing agents. The two largest housing associations are Clarion Housing Group and Moat.

It is important to note that it is the responsibility of the landlord - housing associations and managing agents to manage all waste on their respective sites and to provide the necessary infrastructure to ensure all waste is containerised to the approved specification outlined by the Council to facilitate regular collection.

Following the service review and changes in Oct 2018, the main operational challenge that has arisen is focused where housing estates have mixed property types, which utilise individual wheeled bin collections in conjunction with communal collections. It has proven, in practice that there is an over utilisation of the communal bins as opposed to using the individual wheelie bins provided. This has led to capacity issues with certain communal containers, which can be susceptible to increased fly tipping and disposal of bulky items.

To better understand the challenges being faced by our residents and the service provider, we have established a Stakeholder Forum with the housing associations along with setting up site specific 'task and finish' groups to assist in redesigning the service. This has been successful and, as example, the Watermeads Estate, managed by Clarion, has successfully worked in partnership with both the resident association and officers from the Council to ensure an optimal and sustainable services is delivered which encourages and supports residents to recycle. In addition, the service has been providing support, advice and guidance to Clarion to improve the waste collection arrangements at the Eastfields Estate. This has led to the installation of large waste bin storage areas and the service continues to work closely with Clarion, temporarily providing a weekly collection across the estate for both property types.

This partnership approach has been successful in Pollards Hill, working closely with Moat Housing, and we are in the process of finalising the last of the phased roll out of a new purpose-built waste stores across the estate.

**From Councillor Eloise Bailey to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency**

Since 2018 we have been asking for a private landlords licensing scheme to be introduced, as the council has been so slow in taking this work forward, and given the dreadful conditions faced by residents in homes provided by Clarion, could the Cabinet Member please commit to appointing a Tenants' Champion, along the lines of that in place in Richmond?

**Reply**

As Cabinet Member I have tasked officers to continue to explore all options to improve the housing conditions of all its residents, and this includes planning for a Selective Licensing Scheme. I would point out that a Selective Licensing Scheme would not improve the housing conditions of tenants living in Clarion housing stock as housing associations are exempt in accordance with the Selective Licensing of Houses Order 2004. Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic officers were carrying out due diligence as to the merits of a selective licensing scheme. This included the research of relevant legislation and guidance. Selective licence submissions were made by a range of Councils (accepted and rejected by MHCLG) and were reviewed to identify lessons learned and good practice., meetings were held with LB Waltham Forest and LB Enfield, and a data analytics company that assisted the successful introduction of schemes in England and extensive data analysis carried out on a wide range of Merton ward data relevant to the regulatory criteria. However, following the outbreak of the Covid19 pandemic and the disruption and challenges this has brought to our community further work has been delayed. We are also conscious that several councils including Brent, Croydon and Liverpool have also had their application for renewal of the schemes rejected by the Secretary of State due to the evidential base not being robust. Officers have been asked to continue reviewing the position as to the viability and effectiveness of such a scheme as the benefits of selective landlord licensing for improving the conditions of tenants in the private sector is widely recognised. As cabinet member I am aware of the Tenants Champion Scheme operating in Richmond, and whilst I am sure it offers benefits to Richmond residents, its roles and commitments mirrors the work already being undertaken by ward councillors and officers working in Merton. Importantly it points out to residents that it expects residents of housing association homes to take up issues of disrepair with their landlord in the first instance.

**From Councillor David Williams to the the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration and the Climate Emergency:**

Does the Cabinet Member think that forcing Eastfields residents to live in squalid, damp, rotting homes that are infested with rodents should be a resigning matter?

**Reply**

I absolutely reject the suggestion that I should be resigning regarding this matter, as I have worked tirelessly as Cabinet Member to improve the housing conditions and choices of our residents. As Cabinet member I have taken the lead on major housing challenges. During the Covid 19 pandemic I have ensured that officers

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delivered the everyone in principle for rough sleepers as well as ensuring that rogue Landlords have had criminal penalties imposed upon them , the most recent being in April 2021 when a fine of some £ 16k was imposed. I can offer my assurances that I will seek to improve the housing conditions on the Eastfeilds Housing Estate by approaching the matter with Clarion with the same degree of commitment and tenacity that I have used in other housing matters

### **From Councillor Laxmi Attawar to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment and Green Spaces:**

What is being done to help and support community engagement in the borough's green spaces?

### **Reply**

*The service, as part of its core principles, provides community engagement and support to active groups involved in the management and use of our Parks and Open Spaces. Typical engagement and support is provided on a site-specific nature or focused on the mutual objectives when working with a specific group, such as the Tree Wardens. Our work with specific Parks has been beneficial and six of our parks have achieved and maintained Green Flag status.*

Recent examples of work of support and engagement with community groups involves work at;

- Morden Park – working with key members of the Friends group about events and how we will work to mitigate negative impacts
- Wimbledon Park – significant engagement and consultation whilst designing the planned necessary works for the lake. While also providing engagement and responding to recommendations involving events.
- Canons HLF – Community Engagement Officer is employed to provide regular meetings with stakeholders and to steer the project based of agreed recommendations.
- Dundonald Recreation Ground – the installation of a concession kiosk was a response to stakeholders and the service worked to provide agreeable and sustained solutions to operate this activity in a site sensitive manner.

Further work is being planned by the service to develop a Green Spaces Strategy which draws on the work undertaken by the Merton Green Infrastructure Study (2020), the Playing Pitch Strategy (2019), the Climate Change Strategy and the developing Tree Strategy, which will further develop links with and support with the community and key stakeholders.