

From: Councillor Brenda Fraser to the Cabinet Member for Children and Education:

Can the Cabinet member update the council on the extension of SEN provision to the Whatley Road site?

Reply

Following an extremely positive meeting with Kids First (the representative group for parents with children with SEND) Cabinet agreed a fortnight ago (22 June) to start a statutory consultation to expand Melrose School to provide the additional SEN provision at Whatley Avenue, which had long been an education facility, most recently been used as a temporary site of the new Harris Wimbledon Academy. This consultation started last week and runs for the 4 weeks required by statute to 29 July. Subject to the outcome of the consultation a decision will then be made to proceed. We are on target to open the expanded new provision in September 2022, providing 80 additional places for the growing number of children with special educational needs, with a focus on ASD.

Supplementary

Thank you Mr Mayor I'd like to thank the cabinet member for her reply but also to just find out what are the financial implications of the increasing pupils special educational needs and disabilities and what additional funding has the government provided to deal with this increase? Thank you

Reply: Cllr Stringer

Thank you for your question and supplementary. The headline is that we've been having a huge increase in numbers and the government's given an increase in the expectations of the support that we provide to children and young people and their families with special educational needs with nowhere near enough additional funding. So this is costing the council millions of pounds every year it has to come out of our school's budget and therefore effects that the funding that we have available for other educational schools. Thank you

From: Councillor Adam Bush to the Cabinet Member for Performance, Recovery and the Local Economy:

What steps has the council taken to support local businesses as we move out of the pandemic?

Reply

The last 18 months has had a devastating effect on the economy, with some businesses feeling the brunt of the crisis far more than others. And although we may be moving out of the worst period of the pandemic, it remains likely that we remain amid a prolonged economic downturn.

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In anticipation of the impact the pandemic would have on local businesses, in April 2020 the council formed a COVID-19 Business Tasks Group. Chaired by James McGinlay, Head of Sustainable Communities, the task group included representatives from Future Merton, Property Management, Business Rates, Regulatory Services Partnership and Communications. It also included Diana Sterck from the Merton Chamber of Commerce.

Initially meeting every week, and now every fortnight, the task group has built on the council's already strong relationship with the business community, the task group enabled the council to take a community informed and fully integrated approach to its support of local businesses.

Complimented the task group, the council has worked closely with partners including the Chamber of Commerce, Business Improvement Districts, the Department for Work and Pensions, Merton Connected, and several local training providers to understand and respond to local business needs as and when they developed.

Furthermore, a weekly business bulletin is sent to business rates payers (who have opted in) inform businesses of the support available and enable them to work with us as they responded to pandemic and prepare to the recover. This includes guidance on latest legislation, business support available including grants and public health messages.

In 2020, the Council's Business Rates team was quick to recognise the immediacy of the financial challenges that many local businesses faced and were in the top three quickest London Boroughs to pay the small business, retail, hospitality, and leisure grants.

In 2021, the Future Merton team, the Business Rates team and the Communication team worked together to both facilitate the reopening of the high streets in spring. There was also the awarding of the Additional Restrictions Grants payments with the support of MVSC and the Merton Chamber of Commerce to eligible businesses by the end of June, which should hopefully trigger the award of a further £1.9m.

Accompanying the direct payments to businesses, the Future Merton team has also procured parklet spaces – to promote Al Fresco dining and so support the badly hit dining sector – and is now working with retailers to adapt their forecourts and shop fronts, and procuring both a market management programme to support outside trading and an e-trading platform to promote the shop and stay local offer in Merton.

A list of the grant schemes and financial support is detailed below:

Extended retail, hospitality and leisure relief	£44.5 million	Business rates relief
Nursery relief	£0.779 million	Business rates relief
Business Support Grants – small business grants	£29.318 million	Direct grants

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and retail, hospitality and leisure grants		
Discretionary Grants	£1,312,750	Discretionary grants (own scheme)
Local Restrictions Grants – Addendum – (lockdown 5 November to 2 December)	£3,099,762	Grants for business rate payers mandated to close in national lockdown
Local Restrictions Grants – Open (17 October to 4 November)	£360,853	Grants for business rate payers affected by tier 2 restrictions
Local Restrictions Grant – ARG (Discretionary Grants (5 November to 31 March 22)	£4,130,960	Discretionary grants (own scheme) – phase one being administered
Local Restrictions Grants – Open (2 December to 19 December)	£305,984	Grants for business rate payers affected by tier 2 restrictions
Local Restrictions Grants – Closed (2 December to 19 December)	£13,924	Grants for business rate payers affected by tier 3 restrictions
Local Restrictions Grants – tier 4 (20 December to 4 January)	Not notified yet	Grants for business rate payers affected by tier 4 restrictions
Christmas Support Package for Pubs	£38,400	Grants for wet led pubs
Local Restrictions Grants – Addendum – (lockdown 5 January to 15 February)	£4,649,643	Grants for business rate payers mandated to close in national lockdown
Closedown Business Grants	£9,297,000	One off grants for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses
Top up to Local Restrictions Grant – ARG (Discretionary Grants (5 November to 31 March 22)	£1,834,777	Additional funding for Discretionary grants (own scheme)

Supplementary

Thank you Mr Mayor can I start by thanking the Cabinet Member for his response. Sadiq Khan's said proposal to tax travel into Greater London will be a hammer blow to many local businesses, does the cabinet member recognise this danger that it poses to local businesses and will he join me tonight in condemning this attack to our local economy recovering. Thank you

Reply: Councillor Pritchard

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Thank you for your question Councillor Bush. As some of you will be aware over that last sort of 18 months' national government has borrowed £299 billion simultaneously the Bank of England has through quantitative easing created £340 billion of which 330 have gone into buying that debt that's effectively creating money. Until the London shilling or the Merton shilling the GLA and Merton will both have to work in a business like way using the resources they have in balancing their books. The only way that we can offset the costs and encourage support and support our businesses through direct support from national government and therefore if as I believe is an honest question he wants to support businesses, I suggest that he speaks the national government or through his local MP speak to national government to encourage further resources go to both Sadiq Khan and Merton to help them. Thank you

From: Councillor Sally Kenny to the Cabinet Member for Women and Equalities:

As once again women in Westminster struggle for equality, with Stella Creasy MP being denied maternity cover, can the Cabinet member please let us know what she is doing to improve workplace conditions for women at Merton Council?

Reply

In addition to a range of flexible working benefits that Merton provides to all our staff Merton is one of the few London Councils that provides up to 10 days leave additional paid leave for woman and their partners who suffer Stillbirth or Miscarriage. We also provide up to 10 days additional paid leave for the parents of a premature baby (a baby born before 36 weeks) in order to recognise the fact that these premature babies are likely to have ongoing medical problems. Merton have also done a lot of awareness raising with staff on how women can suffer from the menopause and are currently in the process of adding this as one of our absence reasons on our HR self-service system.

Merton also provide a range of tools, training and information to support mental health and all employees, Members and their families have access to our employee assistance programme.

Merton have recently had a Member on maternity leave, with maternity cover provided for their role in the Cabinet.

Supplementary

Thank you, Mr Mayor can I thank Councillor Skeete, for her reply. It is fantastic we have introduced so many measures here in Merton to improve working conditions for women including introducing maternity cover for Councillors. Does Councillor Skeete agree with me that it is terrible that parliament does not do what Merton does. Will she write to Stella Creasy the MP who has been denied maternity cover by parliament to show that this council supports her on this important issue?

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Reply: Councillor Skeete

Thank you Sally Kenny for your kind words. Yes, I am happy to write to Stella Creasy to say that I'm 100% behind her. Thank you

From: Councillor Hina Bokhari to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Regeneration

Other than simply including them in the Local Plan, what plans do the council have for the sites identified for use by Merantun Development Ltd?

Reply:

The council is current looking at options for those sites and hope to decide imminently on their use. Information is currently being gathered on relevant matters [including ground conditions and title for example] and the sites all have planning permission for housing which is their preferred use.

Supplementary

Thank your Mayor and thank you for your answer, considering that in the last five years Merton only achieved 13% affordable housing and that you learned that building on small sites were too difficult to build on as section 2.24 in the report states, what are your plans to ensure that future sites will allow for more affordable housing to be built?

Reply: Councillor Whelton

I'd like to thank Councillor Bokhari for her supplementary question. In terms of the overall figures it has to be remembered that 90% of the sites have been ten or less in Merton which has come before planning and as a council we do lack large sites here in Merton. As a council we are doing a housing supply strategy the draft of which is going to cabinet next Monday and will also as well be looking at all council sites within the borough and identify them for housing. Now clearly they do have to have 50% if their council sites but we will be looking at all of them and there will be a discussion we do need to provide more housing here in Merton and there are decisions which are imminent for this council. Thank you

From: Councillor Mary Curtin to the cabinet member for Adult Social Care and Public Health:

Can the Cabinet member update us on the status of Merton's Dementia Hub and the services it provides to our residents?

Reply

The Dementia Hub has continued to operate as best they can in line with government guidance during the pandemic. If the current restrictions are lifted later in July, then we expect them to be re-opening for face to face support and activities in August.

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Thanks to an additional health funding, I am pleased to be able to confirm that the service will continue to operate from the Hub building in Mitcham. However, it has always been an ambition that the Hub does outreach work and is not just focussed in one place, but is accessible to all. We have already engaged in discussion with stakeholders through various forums. We will also be running two online events on the 6th and 14th July for customers and carers of the Hub. An online survey will also be going live shortly. Once we are able to do so we will be organising face to face events as well. We will be seeking views on what is important to them and how they like to access services.

We are in the process of renewing the contract with the Alzheimer's Society to commence October 2021.

Supplementary

Can the cabinet member update me on the work the council are doing to support carers in Merton?

Reply Councillor Lanning

Thank you Councillor Carson for your question and your supplementary. I think you raise a really important point in terms of contribution of carers in Merton, including those who also rely on the services provided by the dementia hub as per your original question. I am delighted to tell you that we recently launched the carers strategy, the Mayor launched that event and at that meeting we had two immediate announcements. The first is that we are increasing the discretionary grant for carers and the second is that we're launching an emergency card for carers, which seeks to provide peace of mind should they be an accident or fall ill. We are also working with local businesses to provide discounts to carers in a similar way that we do for all key workers. Thank you

From: Councillor John Dehaney to the Cabinet Member for Finance:

Can the Cabinet member tell us how many of our very welcome citizens originally from the EU have applied for settled status here, and what can be done for those that may have missed the deadline?

Reply

As of 31st March 2021 there had been 43,820* recorded applications of EU citizens living in Merton to the EU Settlement Scheme. The council undertook a comprehensive communications campaign to raise awareness of the 30th June deadline, highlighting key points of support within the community such as Citizens Advice Merton and Lambeth and the Polish Families Associations.

The deadline for applications has now passed. However, we are continuing to work closely with local providers to ensure the provision of advisory and specialist immigration support to those members of our community who continue to need it, as there may be extensions to the deadline, but the criteria is not clear at this stage.

*statistics are published quarterly; next update due August 2021

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Supplementary:

Thank you Mr Mayor can I thank the cabinet member for his response but does he agree with me given all that has been going on in people's lives during pandemic and how incompetent the home office usually is it is unfair of the government to put our residents at risk of losing their status in this country despite five years of working here and does he agree it risks becoming a new windrush scandal

Reply Councillor Byers

Can I thank him for his question and his supplementary question. I think he's absolutely right, we know that there's a backlog of some 300,000 cases that are yet to be processed. But we also know that many more people are likely to have not applied due to the issues with the pandemic in the past year. It has been estimated that there are around 130,000 people in receipt of benefits who haven't yet applied and face losing those benefits. Around 2000 children in care or care leavers who haven't had applications done for them. So the written response to the original question made clear, the Council will continue to support the voluntary sector and residents in Merton and ensure that they have the support they need. But I really would urge the government to extend the deadline and ensure nobody loses their right to settled status due to the pandemic.

From: Councillor Nick McLean to the Cabinet Member for Children and Education:

The repurposing of Lavender nursery will help the most vulnerable children in the borough. Does the cabinet member agree with me that this issue is beyond politics and must be urgently delivered?

Reply

The administration has the difficult job of managing the requirements of our vulnerable children with medical needs and ensuring that there are sufficient nursery places for families in the east of the borough. We always intended to balance these needs, and provide education and childcare for the most vulnerable children. We take consultation seriously, and the extensive feedback received in our consultation earlier this year generated further ideas which we have therefore needed to look into. Cabinet a fortnight ago (22 June) agreed to engage with stakeholders on these updated options, and we are now speaking with affected parents and staff to discuss best options that will ensure we can provide for children with medical needs and provide nursery provision existing parents, those on a low income, and SEND children. The administration is clear that its priority is to provide for the most vulnerable children in the borough.

Supplementary

Thank you Mr Mayor and I thank the cabinet member for their response. Mr Mayor I recently visited Mulberry college and learnt first-hand from the head teacher, as other members have to just how vulnerable these young people are with debilitating and in some cases life threatening illnesses. How unsuitable the current premises

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are with a range of issues including damp. I have read that Officers believe that this is by far the best site and that alternative places already exist for the nursery children. This is one of those decisions that shows why we give up our time to be Councillors and it must be delivered for the sake of the children. So I ask the cabinet member whether she will seek a vote at the next full Council so members across the chamber can unite to ensure this decision is delivered. We can do the right thing for these kids in our medical education service who need us to support them now. You will certainly have the conservative groups support. Thank you

Reply: Councillor Stringer

Thank you Mr Mayor, thank you councillor for your question and follow up. We are 100% committed to finding a suitable long term homes for the most vulnerable young people in Merton who are currently at medical education. We are very grateful for the feedback that we have had of the consultation, we take the consultation seriously, we listen to what people and say and we do the work off the back of that. That is the work we have been doing, is trying to find a solution as you say does, support these often teenagers with severe mental health problems to be somewhere that makes them feel to respected loved and allows them to recover. At the same time ensuring that we are fulfilling our duties of ensuring this provision of earliest education particularly to those who are those income, so I'm delighted that we're doing the work to relocate the service and ensure that no service has to close. We are able to do that ourselves I don't think that needs to go to full Council thank you very much for that idea.

From: Councillor Stan Anderson to the Cabinet Member for Women and Equalities:

Can the Cabinet Member please update us on what funding support is being offered to the voluntary sector, particularly as it continues to recover from the effects of Covid?

Reply

Council funding to the voluntary sector in 2020/21 was £10.5 million. This is an increase of 5% over the previous year and the third year in a row that council support to the voluntary sector has increased. Over the past year the council has allocated £900k to the voluntary sector to support the sector during this challenging time and to meet the substantial increase in demand the sector has experienced as a result of the pandemic. The additional funding has resulted in the continuation of the Community Response Hub, provision of emergency assistance particularly around food and supporting smaller grass roots organisation supporting communities particularly impacted by the pandemic e.g. older people, people with disabilities and BAME communities. The council has also worked closely with MVSC and the Chamber of Commerce to grow Merton's highly successful community giving scheme – Merton Giving. With support from the council and other partners Merton Giving has distributed over £340k over the last year to small voluntary sector groups and has recently announced a further funding round of £150k.

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Supplementary:

Thank you, councillor Mr Mayor. I thank Councillor Skeete for her reply to my question. It is very impressive to increase the amount of money going to the voluntary sector in spite of Covid cuts. Does she agree that the pandemic has shown more than ever the importance of local charities and will she pass on our thanks to them for all that they do?

Reply: Councillor Skeete

Thank you, Councillor Anderson. Yes, I will pass on everyone's thank you to our amazing charities. They have done so much good during the pandemic especially for vulnerable residents and I'm very proud there are receiving an increase in funding from the Council next year.

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