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Merton Council

Council

21 September 2022

Supplementary agenda

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8 From Cllr Slawek Szczepanski

To the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Would the Cabinet Member provide an update on Ukrainian refugees being supported in the borough?

Reply

In March Merton set up a team to manage locally the Homes for Ukraine Scheme set up by UK Government. Since then, we have supported 221 sponsors who are currently hosting 222 adults and 96 children. Sponsors have helped their guests to settle in, enrol with GPs, register children at local schools (Merton has successfully enrolled every applicant) and apply for benefits. A number of the Ukrainians have found employment and some families are moving on to their own accommodation. We have had seven placements where people have moved on, and our team have at times intervened to resolve issues. For the most part the scheme has been a success but as we are reaching the six month point we are working with sponsors and guests to ensure that they can stay together, or agree a managed move on from the scheme.

In addition to the individuals and households who have arrived via the Homes for Ukraine Scheme the Council is aware of around a further 500 adults and children who have arrived via the Friends and Families visa route.

The Council has commissioned the Polish Family Association and Commonsense Trust to provide a support service, based at the New Horizon centre in Pollards Hill, to all Ukrainian guests irrespective of the visa route by which they have arrived. The service is providing valued and valuable support advice on a broad range of issues including access to benefits, housing advice, support with learning English and support to access employment.

9 From Cllr Samantha MacArthur

To the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Prior to the May elections, the current administration stated that they would “boost the local economy and encourage businesses that support our community”. Would the Cabinet Member please confirm what support the Council is planning to give small businesses facing unaffordable increases in their energy bills that threaten their survival with severe consequences for jobs and business rates revenue within the borough?

Reply

Since the start of the Covid pandemic, the council has been amongst the quickest in the country to distribute government funding to businesses. We have also taken significant steps – through the development and promotion of the ‘Merton Local’ app – to encourage the use of local businesses by residents in the borough. But businesses are now facing a further crisis due to the increased cost of goods and energy bills. Despite this, to date, the council has not received any funding from government to support businesses with increased energy bills. If we are provided funding and required to distribute through the business rates system we will ensure that grants are paid quickly and efficiently as we did during the pandemic. In the meantime we are joining other London Councils to lobby the government for further urgent funding to support our business community.

In addition, the business rates team will help businesses by deferring payments or providing longer payment terms to pay business rates if requests for assistance are received.

The Future Merton team will continue to provide information, advice and guidance to businesses.

10 From Cllr Caroline Charles

To the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Would the Cabinet Member provide an update on the Council’s support for Merton residents and businesses during this cost of living crisis?

Reply

One of the first actions taken by this administration was to create a £2 million cost of living fund to go towards helping residents throughout this difficult winter. We also anticipate receiving £1.18 million Household Support fund from government. The council will provide a range of support to help residents and proposals will be considered at Cabinet this week, including free school meal vouchers in school holidays, direct grants to residents in receipt of council tax support, an application or referral-based process for grants/support, funding to voluntary sector groups to provide help with reducing heating costs and funding for additional debt advisors.

The council has also held 3 Cost of Living support events in Libraries across the borough so far this year, which were all well attended, and we intend to hold further events into the Autumn.

The business rates team will help businesses by deferring payments or providing longer payment terms to pay business rates if requests for assistance are received.

11 From Cllr Michael Paterson

To the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Many residents consider low traffic neighbourhoods to be a money-making scheme, are they right?

Reply

Low Traffic Neighbourhoods have been a feature of Merton since the 1970s. Over decades, the Council has closed off many residential roads to stop through traffic, or what was colloquially known as 'rat-running'. The physical measures now better known as Low Traffic Neighbourhoods.

Many of Merton's residents already live in the legacy LTNs such as parts of South Wimbledon, Colliers Wood, Raynes Park and Mitcham. About 1/3 of Merton could be classed as an LTN; whereby through traffic is restricted on residential roads. LTNs help to make streets easier to walk and cycle on by stopping cars, vans and other vehicles from using quiet roads as shortcuts. Since 2020, there has been greater emphasis on promoting LTNs as part of the Mayor's Transport Strategy and DFT guidance during the pandemic to create quieter streets which are safer for walking and cycling; as well as creating a more harmonious environment for residents.

The objectives of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods are related to good traffic management and the associated environmental benefits, they are not a money-making scheme. The only people who receive fines are those who choose not to adhere to the rules of the highway.

12 From Cllr Jenifer Gould

To the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

Caroline Abrahams, Charity Director at Age UK, said the unprecedented increase in energy bills is "a disaster in the making" for small and medium-sized businesses, including care homes." Would the Cabinet Member please set out what help Care Homes in Merton are being offered to help them through the energy price rise emergency and what plans are in place if they are forced to close?

Reply

All care homes requesting an inflationary uplift for 2022/23 have been offered up to 5.9% to take account of increases in wage and utility costs and other inflationary pressures. This compares favourably with the increases offered by other boroughs. In recent weeks Officers have been approached by a small number of care home providers in the borough who are reporting difficulty with utility costs and officers are working with those homes on an individual basis to understand the extent of the cost pressures and to explore solutions. The Council has also received additional social care provider funding from the Government for 2022/23 and we are considering making one-off payments to providers from this funding.

The recent announcement by the Government of a freeze on utility costs for businesses until March 2023 will give care home providers more certainty about utility costs over the remainder of this financial year and enable more detailed planning to take place.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities maintains contingency plans to be enacted in the event of a social care provider failing and the exact nature of the response would depend on the circumstances at the time. If any home were forced to close support would be provided to all residents of the home including privately funded residents.

However, I hope Government will make additional support available for care homes at the end of this period.

13 From Cllr Helena Dollimore

To the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Would the Cabinet Member provide an update on the Council's work with partners to ensure safer streets for women and girls?

Reply

Merton Council works closely with partners to tackle all forms of Violence Against Women and Girls. This includes working to ensure our streets are as safe as possible for women and girls.

As part of this, Merton has been successful in its bid for Home Office Safer Streets funding of £183,300 (shared between Merton, Kingston, Wandsworth, and Richmond). This will fund work including:

- Communications campaigns around women and girls' safety

- Training staff in the night time economy so they can support women's safety
- Training for our male residents so they can understand their role in keeping women and girls safe
- Focus groups with women and girls so we can better understand women and girls concerns about their safety.

We have also:

- Signed the Mayor of London's Women's Night Safety Charter to ensure our economy is safe for women
- Applied for White Ribbon accreditation, supporting the campaign to end male violence towards women and girls. Work to recruit White Ribbon Ambassadors and Champions within the Council is underway.

This is in addition to our wider work on tackling violence against women and girls, including our work to:

- Support domestic abuse victims and survivors
- Support sexual violence victims and survivors
- Support forced marriage and so-called honour based violence victims and survivors.

Merton's new Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy 2022-25 was developed in partnership with partners from the VAWG Board, including the police, health colleagues, and other council services such as Housing and Children's Services. It will be presented at Cabinet on 19th September 2022 and includes a partnership objective to improve the safety of women and girls.

We are working closely with residents, survivors, and multi-agency partners to develop an action plan to deliver on the strategic objectives.

14 From Cllr Paul Kohler

To the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

We are all aware of the importance of a balanced diet for children's development and education. Given the cost of living crisis, are there any plans to expand free school meals, for example, by giving children on free school meals guaranteed and free access to breakfast clubs, or introducing 'dinner clubs'?

Reply

The administration is aware of the importance of a balanced diet for children's development and education and therefore continues to support central school meals contracts that have good quality, nutritious and affordable meals at their heart. The council also has sound systems for making it as easy as possible to ensure any family that is eligible for Free School Meals is identified, with automatic enrolment checked on a fortnightly basis. Merton has also been coordinating the delivery of Governments Holidays Activities and Food (HAF) programme over school holidays. We have supported over 1,000 children on free school meals and other vulnerable children to access holiday provision that includes a free meal for 4 days a week in school holidays. We will continue to have some provision at half term and again over the Christmas break. We are also continuing to organise supermarket vouchers for children on school meals during the school holidays.

Free School meals are paid for as part of the Dedicated Schools grant and it is a national responsibility to expand the programme, which the administration would fully support in addition to funding other cost pressures on schools such as the cost of energy.

15 From Cllr Max Austin

To the Cabinet Member for Children's Services

The Wimbledon Times has reported that Merton Council has paid compensation of £3,500 for the 'distress and hardship' experienced by a Merton teenager after the council failed to find her temporary accommodation after she became homeless. Why did the council fail this vulnerable teenager?

Reply

The council has apologised again for errors on its part in this case and any undue stress caused the young person in question. This case was dealt with via the Local Authority Ombudsman and the council accepted the Ombudsman's findings and has put in place the agreed actions and responses to recommendations.

16 From Cllr Michael Butcher

To the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

Would the Cabinet Member provide an update on the Council's ambitions for public health in the borough and the important role that sport can play in achieving this?

Reply

Sport and physical activity is good for our physical health, mental health and importantly also helps bring people together. The renewed focus to increase activity levels across Merton will contribute to improving the health of residents and reducing health inequalities, as physical inactivity is one of the key four public health risk factors (alongside smoking, poor diet and excessive alcohol use) that we are working to address, all underpinned by good mental health and wellbeing.

Complementing the leisure centres, good parks and open spaces in Merton and the voluntary and community sector provision e.g. sports clubs, dance groups and exercise classes, Public Health commission a number of targeted physical activity programs for priority groups including older people such as

- Get Up and Go: a programme with a focus on strength and balance, in East Merton and Morden PCN's and is working with older adult community and faith organisations, such as the Morden Islamic Centre.
- Merton Moves: a physical activity programme that helps 'coach' older adults and increase their confidence to take part in activity.
- Motiview Exercise Bikes: where 3 bikes across 3 care homes in Merton, increase physical activity for older people in care homes whilst providing reminiscence for people with dementia (through video whilst cycling)

Approved by the Health and Wellbeing Board, Health in All Policies (HiAP) is a collaborative approach focusing on health, equity and sustainability. By putting health, equity and environmental sustainability at the centre of all policy decisions, HiAP can deliver benefits for a wide range of stakeholders – and most importantly can reduce inequalities while improving residents' lives. As part of the refreshed HiAP action plan a small number of exemplars are being identified for collaborative action and shared learning.

The first of these exemplars is Actively Merton, that will support residents to be more physically active and socially active, in the way that they want it (giving agency/control to residents). Led by Merton Health and Care Together, working closely with the Health and Wellbeing Board, the approach will increase activity levels by

- raising awareness of existing activities and our sporting assets through a menu of activity, plus some additional highly visible evidence based interventions including a Live Longer Better programme for older people and exploring bringing ‘beat the street’ to Merton; an exciting activity programme for children and young people (and their families) to create a social norm around walking and cycling through the ‘gamification’ of the local area.
- connecting residents to activities through the development of a movement and building on existing connectors in the community e.g. front-line staff such as primary care, social prescribers, adult social care staff and health visitors.
- a communication plan across all partners to promote the benefits and opportunities to be more physically and socially active in Merton.

17 From Cllr Sheri-Ann Bhim

To the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Can the Cabinet Member provide an update on progress towards the administration’s ambition of delivering 400 new genuinely affordable homes by 2026 by utilising surplus council land?

Reply

The administration recognises the immense pressure our residents face, not only from the ongoing housing crisis but also the cost-of-living crisis. In Merton, we are fortunate to have one of the lowest levels of residents in temporary accommodation compared to other London Authorities. However, we have over 9000 people on the housing waiting list and we need to deliver more homes of all tenures and in particular, our strategic priority is to deliver genuinely affordable housing.

Merton Council is undertaking a review of its surplus property assets and an options appraisal will be presented to Cabinet in October outlining the Council’s capacity to develop homes on surplus land and mechanisms to increase the delivery of affordable housing in Merton.

Utilising existing council-owned-land, the sites have capacity to deliver up to 400 new homes by 2026; with many sites already allocated in Merton’s new Local Plan for residential use.

The council is prioritising the delivery of the first four sites at Elm Nursey Mitcham, Canons Mitcham, Raleigh Gardens Mitcham and Farm Road Morden to deliver 93 homes where the sites already benefit from having planning permission.

18 From Cllr Anthony Fairclough

To the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Could the Cabinet Member please outline:

- The outcome of the year's trial of a tenants' champion service, following the Lib Dem motion passed at full Council in July 2021.
- Any discussions officers or the Cabinet member have had with Richmond Council about their similar and successful tenants' champion scheme above and beyond the former tenants' champion's minuted assertion that "Learning from Richmond took place by looking at their website" at the February 2022 Sustainable Communities Panel meeting, item 10
- The Cabinet's response to recommendations A and B, passed at the February 2022 Sustainable Communities Panel meeting as part of item 10.

Reply

I am still seeking to gauge the effectiveness of this role, as currently constituted, since I took it up at the invitation of the Leader following the May election. As a Cabinet we value the important work of scrutiny committees. A formal Cabinet response will be made to the committee in due course regarding the outcome of the year's trial of the tenants' champion. I look forward to contributing to scrutiny deliberations and to receiving and considering their recommendations.

19 From Cllr Marsie Skeete

To the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Can the Cabinet Member provide an update on the Council's work with partners to reduce the number of people rough sleeping in the borough?

Reply

The council has received government funding (£2.5m to date) to develop and deliver a range of services specifically for rough sleepers. We run an in-house outreach service that makes street contacts with rough sleepers, but rely on our partners such

as the Police, Love Wimbledon, faith and community organisations, housing providers and council teams such as CCTV, ASB, Public Spaces, Waste Management, Parks & Parking services, to report locations of rough sleepers to us.

We have also commissioned Thamesreach to undertake night-time outreach in Merton.

Rough sleepers with a connection to Merton are placed into emergency accommodation. As Merton only had 4 designated bed spaces for rough sleepers up until 2019, we lacked move-on accommodation for clients in TA, so we commissioned small housing providers to procure new supply of accommodation for our client group.

To date, we have 27 bed spaces in shared houses and 24 supported housing units available to clients before they move on to independent tenancies.

We work very closely with support organisations such as Enabling Assessment Service London (EASL) and the Westminster Drug Project (WDP) and refer clients to them for mental health assessments and substance misuse support including detox and rehab programme. Our in-house team also provides tenancy sustainment support, and some of our clients with high needs have additional support from St.Mungo's or Crisis, to help ensure that clients do not return to rough sleeping.

Our success in securing supported housing played a huge part in keeping our very entrenched rough sleepers in accommodation, which helped bring down the number of rough sleepers in Merton.

Our annual one-night count has dropped from the peak of 23 in November 2018, to 5 in November 2021, and our month-end snapshots since February 2022 showed no more than 2 rough sleepers at any one time, therefore we are on track to meet the government's objective to reduce rough sleeping.

20 From Cllr Eleanor Cox

To the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

It is now more than a year since ITV News exposed the shocking living conditions on the Eastfields Estate due to the indifference of Clarion Housing and the inaction of Merton Labour councillors and the Labour MP for Mitcham and Morden.

Can the Cabinet Member tell me how many homes on the Eastfields Estate currently comply with the Decent Homes Standard?

Reply

Full Council decisions made on (July 2014, Feb 2018 and Cabinet / Scrutiny in Sept / Oct 2021) supported providing new homes for existing residents across the three estates via estate regeneration, as this is higher than the Decent Homes standards and provides other key benefits such as:

- Better quality homes for existing and new residents, including greater sustainability and improved comfort within the new homes
- The provision of new homes to meet the needs of tenants and help address overcrowding
- Improved external areas, landscaping and open spaces, which are particularly important in a post Covid19 world
- Contributions towards local infrastructure and travel which helps access to local amenities
- Contributes to Merton's share of London's housing needs, which is for targets of 918 new homes in Merton per year for the next 10 years.

In the same reports, if Clarion were to stop or delay providing new homes for existing residents (i.e. higher than Decent Homes standards) on the three estates via estate regeneration then they would have to revert to providing Decent Homes as they do for the rest of their homes across the borough. In the meantime, there is a moral responsibility upon Clarion to continue to provide homes in good repair on those estates. I would also remind Cllr Cox that the Council has no direct organisational, financial or management responsibility for maintaining Clarion properties.

Nonetheless, since the May elections this administration, and in particular the Leader and ward councillors, have been relentless in seeking to hold Clarion to account, instituting regular visits to estates to knock on doors and sample local residents' concerns: seeking cases of disrepair to pursue on their behalf.

I am surprised by the attempt in this question to seek to make party political capital out of the very difficult experience of tenants of Clarion in the Eastfields Estate. It suggests that Councillor Cox may not be familiar with the background. The reason the Council is not able to manage or repair the homes on the Eastfields is because the last Conservative administration transferred all Merton's housing to an independent housing association in probably the most disastrous decision in the Borough's history. The attitude to social housing of the then Conservative administration was demonstrated in the response to a freedom of information request at the time that evidenced that Merton's Conservatives tried to stop every scheme to provide new social housing across the Borough.

The national picture has been no better. Conservative governments have sought to promote right to buy with huge discounts whilst being determined not to provide the finance to replace them, so that more than 2m good council homes have been lost across the country. Conservative governments have also hobbled the ability of councils to provide new homes, leading to an acute shortage of genuinely affordable homes with the consequence being that the finance that used to be provided to build new homes is now spent in huge amounts in subsidising private landlords through housing benefit.

There is one party that is entirely indifferent to the need for decent affordable housing in this country and whether locally or nationally it is not the Labour Party.

21 From Cllr Klaar Dressealaers

To the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Could the Cabinet Member please outline Cabinet response to the following recommendations passed at the February 2022 Sustainable Communities Panel meeting, as part of item 10:

- Recommendation C, to review and update as required Merton's Housing Enforcement Policy 2019-2024 with regards to Merton's responsibility to inspect and audit repairs reported by tenants of registered providers;
- Recommendations E and F on options for engaging with the housing sector on supply and enforcement, and its housing enforcement communications strategies.

Reply

Cabinet values the important work of scrutiny committees and looks forward to receiving and considering their recommendations. A formal Cabinet response will be made to the committee in due course regarding their recommendations.

22 From Cllr Dan Johnston

To the Leader of the Council

Can the Leader provide an update on his engagement with residents in Clarion Housing properties in the borough about the standard of repairs and quality of customer service they are receiving?

Reply

In April the Housing Ombudsman found severe maladministration in Clarion's repeated failure to respond to residents' complaints. In response I visited residents of three Clarion blocks in Sadler Close (Chart House, Gladstone House and Fountain House) on 26 May accompanied by the ward Councillors and officers from the Council's Housing Needs and Strategy Service, and was shocked by the conditions that I witnessed and the issues that residents raised with me.

Following my visit I wrote to Claire Miller, Chief Executive of Clarion, with my concerns. I have also written to the Clarion Area Director and the Council's Head of Housing regarding specific issues raised with me during my visit, including identified hazards under the Housing Health and Rating Safety System (HHSRS) under the Housing Act 2004.

I have subsequently visited other housing estates in the borough - including estates owned by other housing associations, such as Moat and Notting Hill Genesis. I am pleased that representatives from all the housing associations have engaged with these visits with staff attending to hear directly from residents about issues and concerns. I have raised all issues raised with me by residents on the visits with the relevant housing association for them to take action and provide an urgent response, with Council officers monitoring replies and action taken.

I will continue to visit estates in the borough to meet residents and to assure myself that progress is being made by the housing associations in tackling the issues residents have raised and that residents feel they are receiving the standard of service they have a right to expect.

23 From Cllr Tony Reiss

To the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Can the Cabinet Member set out progress being made on decarbonising homes across Merton?

Reply

At the meeting of the Sustainable Communities Overview on Scrutiny Panel on 1st September, a detailed report and presentation was provided setting out the progress towards the delivery of Merton's Climate Strategy and Action Plan and net-zero-carbon commitments. The detailed report can be found at <https://democracy.merton.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=157&MId=4211&Ver=4> [Merton's Climate Strategy and Action Plan 2020](#) are updated every year by Climate Delivery Plans ([year 1: 2021](#) and [year 2: 2022](#)) which set out the council's progress to its net zero targets and what actions the council is taking each year towards achieving them. As set out in these plans, there are approximately 86,000 homes in Merton of which approximately 77,000 are privately owned and c15,000 are owned by social housing providers. As the council does not own any homes it is a particular challenge that the Council has little control over the physical fabric of the existing housing stock. We work hard to support and encourage homeowners to access funding to retrofit homes.

In June 2022, Cabinet allocated an additional £2million. Officers are working with the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green spaces and Climate Change and senior officers to allocate this towards further capacity building and programmes which help deliver Merton's Climate Strategy & Action Plan.

Given that >98% of emissions in Merton are outside the Council's direct control engaging with other stakeholders is key to achieving our borough-wide target. To promote wider climate action across the borough, officers support engagement with residents and a range of partners including the housing associations with properties in Merton.

The Council, across its Future Merton, Public Health and Housing teams is working with local and regional partners to promote national retrofit funding schemes to Merton's residents. These schemes include the Green Homes Grant Local Authority Delivery programmes, the GLA's Warmer Home scheme and group purchasing schemes such as the Mayor's Solar Together programme, to support the decarbonisation of homes in Merton. Working with Thinking Works, we have recently reached out to households on low incomes who may qualify for the GLA's Warmer Home Scheme to encourage residents to apply

Merton's Climate Action Group secured Neighbourhood CIL funding for three projects which are being delivered with partners, including the Centre for Sustainable Energy and Sustainable Merton. For example the 'Energy Matters' project aims to empower the younger generation with knowledge to drive behavioral change around energy use in their home and school, and to help their families save money and lower their carbon footprint.

We are also working with affordable housing providers, such as Clarion, Haig and Moat, who own about 15% of the homes in Merton. Clarion has accessed government's Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund to retrofit properties in Merton and we are working with them and other providers to support their access to Round 2 of the same funding.

24 From Cllr John Oliver

To the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Para 8.7 of the strategic theme report prepared for this council meeting states that LB Merton has the lowest number of people in Temporary Accommodation in London, could the Cabinet Member please set out how many people were placed in Temporary Accommodation outside the borough and how many outside London, in each of the past five years?

Reply

When the Council accommodates a homeless applicant, they are several different duties under which he can do so. There is an 'interim duty' pending further investigation, a longer term 'main duty', and lastly offers of accommodation where the duty comes to an end, typically in private or social housing. As a result individual applicants can have multiple placements, which may be in the borough or outside of Merton. Merton has the lowest number of households in temporary accommodation of any London borough, 230 compared to 844 in Sutton, 837 in Kingston upon Thames, and 314 in Richmond upon Thames.

The table below shows the location of placements as of the end of March for the previous 5 years. The number of out of borough placements is also lower compared to boroughs such as Sutton (148), Kingston upon Thames (232) and Richmond upon Thames (184).

Year End (March 31st)	2021/22	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18
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Households in Temporary Accommodation	230	197	199	174	165
• Housed in Merton	94	92	98	100	99
• Out of Merton	136	105	101	74	66
○ In London	133	100	99	71	59
○ Out of London	3	5	2	3	7

25 From Cllr Slawek Szczepanski

To the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Can the Cabinet Member update on the Council's proposals for its Council Tax Support scheme to support residents that need most help?

Reply

The council has one of the most generous council tax support schemes in London and the country with an estimated annual cost to Merton of approximately £12.3m. The council tax support scheme protects residents who cannot afford to pay council tax from having to pay it, and used to be funded by central government. However, under the coalition government in 2013, the funding for this support was abolished. Unlike the majority of councils across the country, Merton has not passed on the reduction of funding to its residents and has maintained the level of support to our most financially vulnerable residents. A consultation has commenced to retain the existing scheme for 2023/24. The scheme will be uprating in line with the Housing Benefit scheme to ensure that residents do not have to pay any more council tax if their government benefits increase. This will be presented to full Council in November for approval.

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