

Merton Council Council

19 April 2023

Supplementary Agenda 5 – Councillor Non-Priority Questions

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From Cllr Oliver to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Would the Cabinet Member please set out how much and for what Merton council has received from central government since the Homes for Ukraine scheme was launched in March 2022 and detail what the funding has been spent on?

Response

To date the Council has received £5.934m of grant funding from the Government under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. This funding has been used in line with the grant conditions to cover the cost of the Council team that has been liaising with hosts and their guests. It has also covered the cost of the welcome payments to our Ukrainian guests as they have arrived, as well as the cost of the monthly thank you payments to hosts, including the additional £100 per month the Council has chosen to pay hosts from month 7 onwards to encourage hosts to continue their hosting arrangement.

The Council also moved very quickly last year to commission a support service for guests and hosts from our voluntary sector partners Commonsense Trust, the Polish Family Association and Wimbledon Guild. We should be rightly proud of the support our partners have provided, and continue to provide, to our Ukrainian guests and hosts.

A number of one-off payments have also been made to support individuals and families with interim accommodation in situations where a hosting arrangement has unfortunately broken down.

We are very aware that the terrible situation in Ukraine could carry on for a considerable period and that our Ukrainian guests and their hosts are likely to continue requiring support and assistance for a similarly extended period. The Government have reduced by half the amount of grant paid for new arrivals under the Homes for Ukraine scheme since January 2023 and it is not clear what the future funding situation will be.

We have been mindful of this from the outset of the invasion and have been careful therefore not to fully commit the available funding. This prudent approach means that we have been able to confirm the continuation of the support services provided by our voluntary sector partners for 2023/24 as well as the Council team that liaises with hosts and guests.

During 2023/24 we are also likely to need to increase expenditure on supporting housing move on options and officers are currently looking at options around this.

Separately the Department for Education has also provided funding totalling £849,695 to support pupils who arrived in the UK under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. The money is passported to schools to use as they see fit, but under DfE funding rules it can only be used for HfU pupils. Unfortunately, in Merton this represents only 22% of Ukrainian school age arrivals, leaving 150 pupils in our schools with no additional funding. Schools receive normal capita-based funding for all pupils and are very experienced in working with pupils for whom English is not their first language, but it

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would have been helpful and more equitable if the funding could be used to support all school age Ukrainian refugees.

From Cllr McLean to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Sadly for Londoners, Sadiq Khan's time as Mayor has seen crime surge across London. Whilst Merton has been spared much of the rise in violent crime in inner London, car thefts and catalytic convert theft has risen in Merton. What action has the administration taken to stop this and what more can be done to stop our residents being the victims of these types of crimes?

Response

It is unsurprising to hear the same old Conservative attack lines, shifting the blame for the decimation of police services and policing across this country onto anyone other than those responsible: The Conservative Party. Since 2010, Conservatives in Westminster have axed 21,000 police officers and seen crime in the UK rise to its highest recorded rate in 20 years.

This Labour Council is serious about being a part of tackling crime – rather than just shifting the blame onto others. Safer Merton works in partnership with the Police on initiatives to help prevent these types of crime. Merton has a large network of Neighbourhood Watch members to which Safer Merton circulate crime prevention advice and crime figures for local areas on a regular basis, with the aim of assisting residents to take action to prevent themselves from becoming victims of these types of crime where possible, and to encourage them to share this information with their neighbours.

Merton Neighbourhood Watch also successfully applied for funding from MOPAC (Mayor's Office of Policing and Crime) during 2022-23 to run a series of catalytic convertor marking events in partnership with local Police Safer Neighbourhood Teams. The first of these events ran successfully in Raynes Park in January 2023, where 37 vehicles were marked. Officers from the Mitcham and Morden areas are now trained so the next events will be focused in those areas in the coming months.

From Cllr Reiss to Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Acknowledging the generosity and hard work of the many residents of Merton hosting displaced families from Ukraine and noting the inadequacies of the statutory framework provided by the government, many of Merton's Ukrainian residents, although able to work from arrival, are poorly paid, on zero hours contracts or working part time because of childcare responsibilities, and have no savings, credit rating or family or friends in the UK to provide financial guarantees. Therefore, although they have permission to stay for 3 years and to work, when they wish to move on to private rented accommodation in the Merton where they have found work, established links and sent their children to school, they find themselves unable to enter the private rental market. Neither they nor their hosts are able to move on, and there is a real risk that some will end up homeless, and people are becoming reluctant to come forward as hosts. In this unusual and deplorable situation would the Cabinet Member commit to examining ways to act as a guarantor of last resort for Ukrainian refugees, even if limited in time or amount?

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Response

The Council acknowledges the hard work and generosity of Merton residents who have opened their homes to help people fleeing the war in Ukraine. The Council also recognises that there are significant challenges for people from Ukraine whose stays in borough host homes are coming to an end. The Council is working with such cases in advance of them having to leave and is devising personalised housing plans (PHPs) for each case in accordance with the council duties to take steps to prevent homelessness.

This includes payments for deposits and rent in advance to assist them in finding private sector homes. In addition, the Council is working with a number of providers, most notably Capital Letters, who procure private sector housing in London at local housing allowance rates without the need for a guarantor. We have also had a number of successes of working with people from Ukraine and third sector organisations to source private sector tenancies outside of this.

During 2023/24 we are likely to need to increase expenditure on supporting housing move on options and officers are currently looking into this.

From Cllr Austin to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Following on from the submission of the petition to save the Flower Stall in Wimbledon Village, what date will the council give for the issuing of new permissions to preserve this much-loved family business?

Response

Following a complaint made by a member of the public, the Licensing Team have been working closely with the trader concerned to ensure they are complying with one of the conditions of their licence, i.e., that the stall is moved daily from the highway as it does not have planning permission to remain. We are pleased to say that the trader is now operating within conditions once they were made aware that they were non-compliant. Submission of planning permission is expected, which would allow the placing of a permanent kiosk/trailer at the site and could be permitted under a licence variation. Whilst we have worked with the trader to achieve compliance on this issue, it is important to note that the trader in question has never been prevented from trading. The Licensing team has not received a copy of the petition, but in any case this situation is one of compliance of a condition of a licence that is not subject to alteration due to opinions expressed in a petition.

From Cllr Gould to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Could the Cabinet Member provide an update on progress with ensuring all staff delivering statutory council services, including agency care workers, are paid the London Living Wage and how many are yet to be paid at this level and by when?

Response

I am pleased to be able to confirm that other than specific social care staff, all staff delivering statutory council services, that are within scope for London Living Wage (LLW), are being paid LLW.

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With regards to social care there are two main groups of care staff that are not yet paid London Living Wage – home care workers and care home staff. As Cllr Gould will be aware, the Council is in the process of recommissioning our home care services and Cabinet agreed that as part of this there will be a requirement that all staff wholly or substantively engaged in delivering services under this contract are paid the London Living Wage as a minimum. The new contracts are scheduled to be in place from the beginning of October 2023 and around 900 home care workers will benefit from being paid the London Living Wage from that date.

The situation for care homes is more complex as the commissioning of care home placements is a demand driven activity with the choice of home driven by a combination of customer choice and availability of placements. In a lot of instances, Merton is the minority purchaser of placements in a care home and many care homes accommodate provision for several different boroughs at any given time as well as private funders. Staff working in care homes are typically paid on a weekly or monthly basis and it is not possible for the provider to distinguish when they are providing care to a resident in a placement commissioned by the Council as distinct from a privately funded resident for example. There are approximately 1200 staff employed in care homes in Merton, although some of these staff will already be paid at or above the London Living Wage.

For the reasons I have just explained, the Living Wage Foundation accept that any Council on their own cannot realistically implement a London Living Wage requirement for care homes. What we can do however, is strongly encourage and support care home providers to become London Living Wage employers and in becoming accredited as a London Live Wage council we have agreed to do this as part of our ongoing engagement with care homes.

From Cllr Cox to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

Can the Cabinet Member please provide an update on Merton's handling of complaints and the actions that have been taken since the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman revealed that Merton Council's handling of complaints was a big concern, noting the Council was slow to implement the recommendations made by the Ombudsman?

Response

Formal or corporate complaints about the Council's services are managed by the Corporate Complaints Team, The Complaints Team sits within the Communications Team. The recently appointed head of service and team manager have undertaken a review of the entire process. This review produced five main recommendations designed to bring Merton into alignment with the expectations of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and the guidance issued in 2020.

Five main recommendations were:

1. A revision of the Complaints, Comments and Compliments Policy should be carried out
2. Improve access to the Complaint Service

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3. Introduce a case management System
4. Additional staff resource for the Complaints Team
5. Support culture change in attitudes to complaints

All these recommendations have been progressed, with work taking place across the Council.

The Complaints Team are working with the IT team to develop a comprehensive case management system. This project includes creating webforms for submitting complaints, helping us to capture the information required to fully investigate a complaint at the first point of contact. The complaints form will be accessible across a range of devices making it easy for residents to submit. The case management system will also enable improved reporting and tracking of complaints and resolution and the ability to link complaints to gain a fuller picture of individual issues.

Performance is strong In Adult Social Care and complaints are consistently responded to within the required timeframes in over 70% of cases. c Complexities to the case may lead to complaints not being answered within the required time frame but, in such circumstances, a holding response will be sent to keep complainants informed. There have been only a small number of Ombudsman rulings, in adult social care, in recent years that have found fault with the Council and recommendations are implemented in full and in a timely way when this has been the case.

Officers have checked correspondence with the Ombudsman and have been unable to find a reference to Merton Council's handling of complaints a big concern. It would be helpful if you could provide the source of this statement so that we can undertake further investigations.

From Cllr McGrath to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Would the Cabinet Member confirm that it is possible to move money between budget categories during the year, subject to appropriate approvals?

Response

It is possible under certain circumstances to vire budget provision between budget categories.

From Cllr Paterson to the Cabinet Member for Sports and Heritage

In July 2022, I asked the Cabinet Member to explain why the council has allowed 16 tennis courts and numerous cricket nets in Morden Park to become dilapidated. The Cabinet Member answered that the council is working with the Lawn Tennis Association Infrastructure Fund to improve 'strategic priority hard surface courts across Merton'. Please can the Cabinet Member tell me:

- 1) How much money has been received from this fund;
- 2) Please list the dates that the Cabinet Member or council officers have met with the LTA regarding funding since July 2022;

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3) When will the tennis courts and cricket nets in Morden Park finally be repurposed for the use of our community in Morden and the wider borough?

Response

The council will be imminently announcing a significant funding agreement with the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA). The funding is for maintenance or repair options for over 40 of the boroughs tennis courts and associated infrastructure such as court fencing and gate access systems.

To ensure the success of this project, the LTA and the council are putting in significant funding. The project is expected to commence shortly and be completed (weather permitting) by the end of the summer. The 4 tennis courts near Links Avenue at Morden Park will be a part of the project.

Officers have met LTA officers 9 times on Microsoft Teams since July 2022, plus several phone conversations.

From Cllr Page to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

Could the cabinet member provide an update on how many residents are being impacted by the (temporary) closure of the birth centre and homebirth services at St George's Hospital? In particular whether anything has been done, and if not could be done, to support pregnant women without private cars to reach hospital where they expected a homebirth service, or to reach alternative Birth centres at St Heliers or Kingston where that is their preference? Would the Cabinet Member commit to work with health colleagues to have these services restored as soon as possible so pregnant women in Merton can have the type of birth they wish at their hospital of choice?

Response

We have liaised with Colleagues from St Georges Hospital to receive an update on the current situation and received the following answer from Natalie Henry, Chief Nurse, St George's University Hospital Foundation Trust.

"I can confirm that the Birth Centre has been temporarily closed on the 23rd March 2023, and the care of women who had planned to use the birth centre has been temporarily diverted to our main delivery suite. We continue to provide midwifery led care, and can adapt the environment on the delivery suite to meet the needs of women by creating a similar environment to that which is available in the [birth centre](#), although we acknowledge that a birthing pool is not available. There are, however, plans to install a fixed birthing pool on delivery suite within the next couple of months in order to support safe staffing across all maternity areas, our homebirth service was also temporarily suspended though we committed to support women booked for a homebirth in April. The home birthing service is being reviewed on a weekly basis to ensure we have an up to date and accurate picture in order to support our women. We do not take these decisions lightly, with the redeployment of resources in response to staffing challenges to ensure safety is maximised for all women. All women are equally important and 30-35% of our women have their labour induced and almost 25-30% will have a Caesarean section which involves 1:1 Delivery suite

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care. Less than 10% of our women had been opting for the Birth Centre pre-pandemic and less than 1.5% opting for homebirth. We weigh up staffing capacity, and dynamically move staff to support all areas within the service. By taking this approach, we continue to provide safe care for all women during Labour and in the postnatal period. Although it is understandably not what we would want for women in our care, none of the women to date have asked to transfer their care as a result of the temporary closure of the birth centre. Should they wish to, we would support their choice in opting for an alternate hospital/maternity unit to give birth. Staffing and capacity are not uncommon challenges in many other London maternity units. When any maternity service seeks to divert care due to high acuity or staffing pressures (or both) it will never physically close. We continue to provide care for all women who are onsite and any that present independently. The unit will seek support in diverting any patient transferring in via London Ambulance services, those who call for advice before presenting or planned procedures we cannot accommodate or start safely. Transport is not routinely provided as part of maternity care. Women, including those giving birth at home are asked to make their own transport arrangements. However, if a woman needs to be transferred for care either to or from St Georges, we would support with the patient transport service or an ambulance in the case of an emergency. “

I can confirm that officers from the Council are liaising with our health colleagues to ensure that these services are restored as soon as possible.

From Cllr Dresselaers to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Will the Cabinet Member commit to examine where problem areas are for street lighting across the whole borough with a view to making rapid improvements to safety, particularly women’s safety?

Response

All roads that are maintained by The London Borough of Merton and have associated street lighting are lit to the required standards as outlined in BS5489-1:2020. The minimum lighting class that is acceptable in Merton under this British Standard is P3.

In addition, as part of Merton Council maintenance regime for street lighting, the borough is split into 8 areas and a night scout of each of these areas are undertaken once a month by our term maintenance street lighting contractor and Merton’s street lighting team; where any lighting defects are reported to our contractor for repair. The Highways team will of course work with partners on any improvements identified in the VAWG strategy.

Safer Merton’s Violence Against Women and Girls strategy working with other teams within the Council to ensure that women and girls feel safe in the borough.

Over recent months, Safer Merton have been working on a Home Office funded ‘Safer Streets’ project to improve the safety of women and girls in public spaces. Alongside work to train staff working in our businesses and members of our community on how to intervene safely if an incident occurs, this work has included an audit of the Night Time economy in Merton, the recommendations from this will be shared with

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colleagues in Future Merton in terms of the built environment and how this can be improved.

In addition, Merton's CCTV system is currently being upgraded and this includes additional cameras being installed in hotspot locations where women and girls feel vulnerable.

From Cllr Willis to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

I welcome the plan to upgrade all CCTV within Merton to High-Definition and work to monitor Clarion Housing sites from the control room in the Civic Centre. There has however been an increase in ASB on Carter's Estate in Raynes Park and reports of men in balaclavas around Raynes Park Town Centre. Can the Cabinet Member commit to the use of deployable cameras as soon as possible in this area to help our residents feel safe and hopefully identify the perpetrators?

Response

The Safer Merton Team work closely with Clarion on all matters to keep residents safe. Merton CCTV has a number of deployable cameras that are used across the borough in ASB hot spots. There are moved regularly when a new hot spot is identified. The decision to relocate them is made via Safer Merton's monthly Partnership Tasking Meeting. This location will be added to the agenda to discuss at the next meeting and if appropriate, a camera will be deployed.

From Cllr Wilson to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Could the Cabinet Member share information on the level of demand for women's refuge provision in the borough and if demand outstrips supply, how often this occurs and what alternatives are provided when this happens?

Response

Merton's women's refuge has 17 units and they are always occupied. As a whole across the UK refuge is always in demand.

The National Domestic Violence Helpline (run by Refuge) operates 24 hours a day and also provides victims and survivors with information about where there is a space in a refuges across the UK.

All refuges are linked via an IT system so the helpline can see where there is a space available. Local refuges will get their allocations via this route, as well as referrals from organisations outside of Merton.

From Cllr Fairclough to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Paragraphs 3.1-3.22 of the Strategic Theme Report set out a list of activities carried out under the Council's VAWG workstream, but gives little insight into how the Partnership Objectives at paragraph 3.7 are measured nor of the progress currently made towards them. Therefore, please could the Cabinet Member explain its ultimate measures and the current measurable progress made towards them?

Response

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As part of the new VAWG strategy an action plan has been developed measuring and monitoring the work of the partnership objectives. This work is overseen by the VAWG Strategic Board and the action plan is a RAG rated standing item to ensure they can continue to monitor the outcomes of the objectives.

The action plan is being formally signed off by the VAWG Strategic Board on 20th April 2023, this follows from the launch of the overall VAWG strategy in December 2022. The action plan can be shared with Members once finalised.

As part of partnership objective 5, the 'Safer Streets' work (focusing on the safety of women and girls) will have its own working group and action plan to ensure it captures all the work currently being done across the Council and to help to coordinate future work.

From Cllr Braithwaite to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

At paragraph 5.6 of the Strategic Theme Report it is noted that only £70K of the £200,000 the administration put into the £60 Post Office scheme were redeemed. Surprisingly, the Report does not refer to any insight or lessons learned from this. Can the Cabinet Member tell me what uptake was expected and what lessons the administration has learned from the lack of take up of this scheme.

Response

The Post Office vouchers were part of a wider scheme of comprehensive support for people in Merton to help them through the cost of living crisis. This was partly funded through the Household Support Fund (£454,000) and partly funded by Merton (£200,000). The £70,000 was an estimate of the value of vouchers that would be redeemed by the end of the scheme on 31st March.

A total of 10,107 vouchers were sent to residents who met the criteria. 8,323 or 82% of vouchers to the value of £499,380 were redeemed. The Household Support fund element (£454k) was therefore fully spent and £45,380 of the Cost of Living element (£200k) was the final spend as at 31st March. In March when the vouchers expired and the balance of the vouchers was reviewed, it was impossible to know at that stage how many residents would contact us to find out about the vouchers. It was clear, however that not all vouchers would be redeemed by the end of the scheme and it was critical to ensure all funds were utilised. Therefore, the remaining funds were diverted to other areas and the balance of £154,620 was used to fund replacement vouchers, support residents with fuel vouchers, provide support with arrears in rent and for care leavers.

We have analysed the contacts we have had from residents regarding the vouchers and the failure to redeem the vouchers broadly falls into the following categories:

1. Did not receive the voucher.
2. Received the voucher but mislaid it or forgot to redeem it by the expiry date.

There may be other reasons that vouchers were not redeemed but for the next round of Household Support Fund vouchers, we will need to ensure wider publicity with a clearer message about what to do if you do not receive the voucher or run out of

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time to redeem the voucher and what support is available to redeem vouchers if residents are unable to do so.

It should be noted that these lessons learned have been taken on board. A more proactive approach has been used for Tranche 2 and 3 and this has improved take up.