

Merton Council Council

13 September 2023

Supplementary Agenda

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| 6 | Councillors' ordinary priority questions to cabinet members
The questions and written responses will be circulated at the meeting | 1 - 8 |
| 7b | Strategic theme: Councillors' questions to cabinet members
The questions and written responses will be circulated at the meeting. | 9 - 16 |

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From Councillor Macauley to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

I was pleased to see Merton announce free swimming for under-16s in our leisure centres over the summer, what has uptake of this offer been?

Reply

Due to the reporting cycle, the usage figures for free swimming for August will not be available until week commencing 11/9/23. July's attendance are as follows:

- Canons LC - 138 total visits
- Morden LC - 209 total visits
- Wimbledon - 74 total visits

There is an expectation that August's figures will far exceed July's. Further detail will be forthcoming. Discussions are currently taking place to extend this offer in the future.

From Councillor Kohler to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Would the Cabinet Member please confirm, when the Cabinet approved a capital expenditure of £2.75m on building a new running track in Morden Park, it was done:

- without a feasibility study;
- without any discussion with Hercules, the Borough's pre-eminent athletics club or any other local athletics group; and
- without reference to senior officers' previous assurances that the existing athletics stadium in Wimbledon Park would be refurbished and the running track renewed in the next 5 years, following recent measures to make the existing track useable in the short-term?

Reply

The inclusion of £2.75m in the capital budget, was a placeholder for the potential replacement for the existing running track on the border with Wandsworth in Wimbledon Park. No expenditure has been made against this capital budget.

At the time of the decision the track at Wimbledon was in a poor state and it was a senior officer's recommendation, based on initial discussions with England Athletics, to consider relocating the track to a more central site in the borough to make athletics more accessible to a larger number of Merton residents.

Since then, in consultation with the Hercules running club, the track had been refurbished and in April this year further discussions have been had with England Athletics about the feasibility of a replacement or additional track in the borough.

In addition, through the engagement with the sporting community in Merton as part of the development of the Borough of Sport Blueprint, it is evident there is demand from

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several sports for increased provision of facilities, including hockey, football and rugby pitches.

Therefore, before any decision is made on a new running track or additional or replacement sports pitches in the borough, officers are starting the process to commission a borough wide strategic facilities review of the sporting facilities to have updated information of the local need and facilities available to support our Borough of Sport ambitions. Morden Park will be a major part of this review and will involve consultation with governing bodies and other key stakeholders, such as the Friends of Morden Park, Hercules Wimbledon, and many other relevant stakeholders.

From Councillor Barlow to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Please can the Cabinet Member provide the costs for:

- Total cost of new council pigeonholes?
- Total cost of refurbishing the Labour offices?
- Total increase in the staffing budget for the Labour group office?
- Total cost of the proposed card access system to the 12 doors on the first floor group offices?

Reply

1. The costs for the pigeonholes installed is £1,497. They were installed by the in-house maintenance team, following the recommendation by the facilities team for councillors' post to move to being delivered in this way – which was offered to all political groups.
2. This information has been provided at previous Full Council meetings this year.
3. This information has been provided at previous Full Council meetings this year.
4. The estimated costs for the proposed card access system to the doors on the first floor is £19,500. This is based on 9 doors not 12; these being one for the Labour Group Office, one for the Leader's Office, and one for the Cabinet Meeting Room, one for the Leader of the Opposition's Office, two for the Liberal Democrat offices, one for the Conservative office and two for the Merton Park Independent Residents Office.

From Councillor Kaweesa to the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

It was great to see the joy and excitement of Merton students receiving their GCSEs and A-level results. How did Merton do as a borough?

Reply

Students in Merton schools who took their GCSE, A Level, BTech and other exams this year can be extremely proud of their achievements. Their education was significantly disrupted by the pandemic and they have shown remarkable emotional, personal and academic resilience to overcome the impact of lockdowns and remote

learning. They were excellently supported by teachers, leaders and support staff in their schools to ensure they were well prepared.

Ofqual confirmed a return to pre-pandemic grading for GCSEs and A Levels in 2023, and it is most meaningful, therefore, to compare results to 2019.

At GCSE level, in English and maths, provisional outcomes show that 76% of Merton students achieved a 'standard pass' (grade 4 or above). This is ten percentage points better than the early national average, and also seven percent better than Merton outcomes in 2019. This performance is in line with 2022 outcomes, when Ofqual put in place a package of support for examination students who had experienced significant disruption as a result of public health restrictions, something that students this year did not benefit from.

Provisional 2023 outcomes for A Levels show that at A* - C the performance of Merton students is above the national average and, again, above performance prior to the pandemic in 2019. The picture is similar for Applied General and T Level outcomes as well.

From Councillor Reiss to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

What does the Cabinet Member consider to be their top priority challenges to improving our Open Spaces?

Reply

Merton residents and visitors have access to some of the best parks and open spaces in London and we are fortunate to have many volunteers and Friends Groups in the borough who work tirelessly with our dedicated Parks team to provide safe and accessible open spaces across the borough.

This year, in partnership with the LTA, an investment of £1m has seen the refurbishment of 47 tennis courts in 11 parks, with a further investment into playgrounds, splash pads and Multi Use Games areas enabling greater access to sporting and physical activity for young and old.

There are a number of key challenges that the sector faces as a whole that is London centric, which is supporting Merton council in prioritising its actions for sustained improvement of the boroughs parks and open spaces for the next 10 year and beyond.

Strategic Direction: Merton Council requires a Parks and Open Spaces Strategy, harnessing the progress made on the Merton Local Plan and associated Climate Action Plan and Green Blue Strategy to ensure a strategic plan for future Management, Maintenance and Development of our wonderful parks and open spaces. The boroughs Greenspaces team are currently scoping out the Merton Parks and Open Space Strategy requirements and would hope to tender the strategy development in 2024-25.

The recent adopted Merton Tree Strategy (20th June 2023) [Tree Strategy 2023-2029 | Merton Council](#) and associated Action Plan for the next 7 year is helping the service design the future management and maintenance of the boroughs 56,000 trees, with the councils newly procured Arboriculture service contractor Barkland Tree Specialists which commenced in November 2022.

Asset Management: In 2022-23 the Greenspaces Team have conducted an extensive inspection and recording exercise of the boroughs 56,000 Highway and Street trees linked to the adoption of the recent Tree Strategy. This data set means the council has 2023 data for all its Highways and Park Tree that can be used for the ordering of management and maintenance activities on the council's tree stock.

The team are now working on recording all its Parks and Open Spaces Assets across its 67 Parks and Open Spaces including paths, fence lines, playgrounds, sports pitches, horticulture elements, amenity and conservation grass, buildings, structures to ensure we have a clear what we have, its current conditions and future management maintenance and upgrade. Once this data is logged and mapped the council will have a clearer picture of what we have and the necessary investment required for the future.

Biodiversity Net Gain: Biodiversity net gain (BNG) is a way to contribute to the recovery of nature while developing land. It is making sure the habitat for wildlife is in a better state than it was before development. This will apply from November 2023 for developments in the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. In preparation for this process the Greenspaces Team are working closely with colleagues in Planning to ensure Merton's Nature Reserves and Parks have appropriate Habitat types recorded using the approved Metric database and have an appropriate 10-year management and maintenance plans to ensure we are able to improve Nature Recovery in Merton's Parks and Open spaces in line with development activity expected in Merton.

Harnessing Community Action: Merton Council is lucky to be blessed with a diverse range of community volunteers from its network of Friends of Parks, Residents Associations, Clubs and Societies that all contribute massively to the development of parks and open spaces in Merton. The Greenspaces team record and manage these community volunteer's relationships and use the National Green Flag Award benchmark for quality greenspaces as a tool to generated sustained improvement in the borough's parks and open spaces. The recent restructure of Public Spaces has meant the community engagement function has been limited in the last 2 years 2021-23, but current recruitment is in progress to develop the community engagement function, and this combined with a specific Greenspaces Communications Officer will see these community engagement opportunities to expand.

In 2021 Merton Council ranked [Good Parks for London 2021 edition 2.pdf \(parksforlondon.org.uk\)](#) 26th in London for their parks. In 2022, Merton council improved its ranking moving up to 18th in [Good Parks for London 2022](#)

From Councillor McLean to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

FOI requests show that Merton has the second highest number of requests granted for staff to work from abroad at 251 requests. Can the Cabinet Member tell me how staff are monitored to ensure taxpayers are getting value for money?

Reply

The staff at Merton Council do an excellent job of delivering quality services to local residents in increasingly challenging circumstances after 13 years of austerity. The council's comprehensive cyber-security measures mean that any member of staff or councillor must register to access any LBM system from abroad, including their emails.

Many of these requests are for very short periods of time, on many occasions accessed on phones rather than laptops, and do not necessarily mean that staff are spending their paid worktime abroad. In a sign of their dedication to the organisation, many staff, particularly senior leaders, often request access whilst on annual leave, in case of emergencies and to stay in touch with their teams for support.

All requests are subject to line management review & approval. There are also a range of other reasons staff may need support to work from abroad at short notice, including personal/ or family issues, which we do try to support where reasonable.

From Councillor Szczepanski to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

It has been sixth months since this Administration's cost of living budget, how have the measures we introduced helped local people?

Reply

Following the government's mismanagement of the economy nationally, Merton Council declared a Cost of Living Emergency in July 2022. Subsequently, a £2mil Cost-of-Living Support Fund was agreed by Cabinet in September 2022, as well as allocations for the first £1 million. Allocations for the second £1 million were agreed by Cabinet in March 2023.

Funding from both tranches has been allocated to various initiatives aligned with Merton's Cost of Living Strategy and Action Plan 2023-25.

Measures to help local people in the last six months and beyond that have been funded through the Cost-of-Living Support Fund have included:

- Over 1,800 residents attended Merton's Cost of Living events held across the borough (nine events since July 2022).
- Through funding to the Community Fridge Network (Sustainable Merton, Commonsides Community Development Trust, Polish Family Association) and groups funded through Emergency Assistance Fund, a greater number of

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residents were able to access food provision. The Community Fridge Network distributed 57,169 kg of food between October 2022 – June 2023.

- In the seven months to the end of July 2023 just under 500 Merton based individuals engaging with Citizens Advice Merton and Lambeth's Merton Cost of Living team and 166 individuals receiving cost of living advice support for over 550 advice issues. Outreach support commenced in January at the following venues: Mondays - Colliers Wood Library, Tuesdays – Wide Way Medical Centre, Thursdays – Wimbledon Library; Fridays – Pollards Hill Library.
- Through the first quarter of 2023-24 (April 23-June 23) Thinking Works and Merton's Warm and Well partners (Wimbledon Guild and Age UK Merton and the LBM handyperson service) have already distributed 184 fuel vouchers, completed 169 energy efficiency visits, carried out 33 heating checks, 21 residents were supported with small energy measures installed by the handyperson service and there was £101,000 in benefits uptake.
- From May 2023, Merton's Holiday Activities and Food Programme have been extended to half term holidays.
- Funding allocated from July 2023 has enabled Merton to retain one Towards Employment Team project manager and one project officer following DWP funding coming to an end. Since July there have been 4 job/apprenticeship offers and 8 job/apprenticeship starts for Merton residents with various employers through this scheme. This is in addition to the job clubs hosted and attended and numerous hours of employability support provided to residents.

From Councillor Flack to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

At its meeting on 5 December 2022, the Cabinet adopted a report highlighting the need for a "dedicated officer/contracted support" to carry out its Tenants' champion service, which should "have knowledge of landlord and tenant law", further noting that there would be "a form for tenants to complete to detail their concerns. And that "this should come in the first instance to the officer/contracted support to handle." Would the Cabinet Member state when this Cabinet decision will be followed through?

Reply

The Tenants Champion is directly supported by the Head of Housing Needs and Strategy via a dedicated two weekly meeting where individual cases are raised and discussed. Further direct support is provided by the Housing Enforcement Manager. There has also been liaison with South-West London Law centre to ensure that where cases require specialist legal advice there is a referral process.

The Council has developed an online form for residents to raise their cases with the tenant's champion and this has recently completed the testing process and will shortly go live on the Council's website alongside a revised web page. Administrative support with the logging of cases will be provided by the Housing needs team.

From Councillor Cox to the Cabinet Member for Transport

Providing better access to amenities will boost local business trade. An important project which can achieve this in Merton is completing the Missing Link bridges. Will the Cabinet Member please provide an update on progress on completing the Missing Link bridges, across the Wandle at Wimbledon Park to Earlsfield, and the other at Ravensbury Terrace footbridge, and confirm that the council is fully committed to the completion of these bridges within the next 12 months?

Reply

Merton Council supports the creation of the Wandle 'missing links' and we, alongside Labour-run Wandsworth Council, have sought developer contributions from neighbouring developments to realise this local opportunity.

The project consists of completion of the Wandle Trail under the rail bridge approaching Earlsfield (the Wandle missing link) and a footbridge from Ravensbury Terrace in Merton to Groton Rd in Wandsworth.

Merton Council has taken the lead on this cross-borough project and appointed consultants, The Project Centre, to undertake technical feasibility studies for the Wandle links which include engineering, hydrology and flood modelling including input from stakeholders such as the Environment Agency, Network Rail and the borough's. The appointment commenced in May and we're expecting the final report in October.

The Project Centre are carrying out stakeholder engagement and various site surveys to put together a list of site constraints and design criteria. Once this has been completed, a feasibility report will be prepared with the most feasible options for the missing links. Once the Council has reviewed and selected a preferred option, the Consultant will undertake detail design and costings.

As the planning contributions being used for the work is for feasibility only, there is not yet any funding in place (from either borough) to fully deliver the bridges which will be multi-million pound infrastructure projects. Once the designs and costing is understood, each borough will need to consider funding mechanisms and seek planning permissions for the structures. Therefore it will not be possible to commit to the completion of the bridges within 12 months.

From Councillor Attawar to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Greenspaces and Climate Change

It is great to see the council has approved plans to refurbish play parks in the borough, which will benefit Merton residents. Could the Cabinet Member update us on where we are with the year one sites?

Reply

Year 1 Sites Proposed for the Capital Growth Priority Parks Playground Programme are outlined in the below link for the council's website and sites along with designs for

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Rowan Rec and Miles Road Rec Playgrounds. Sites were chosen based on prioritised findings from the Merton Council Annual ROSPA Inspection 2023

[Playground and paddling pool upgrades | Merton Council](#)

- **Rowan Rec Playground** (Longthornton Ward) Consultation Event Held on Thursday 31st August (Currently reviewing findings and updates will be reported on council website w/c 11th Sept)
- **Miles Road Playground** (Cricket Green Ward) Consultation Event Held on Friday 1st September (Currently reviewing findings and updates will be reported on council website w/c 11th Sept)
- **Lewis Road Playground** (Cricket Green Ward) Awaiting revised design ready for consultation event proposed for October 2023 Half Term.

From Councillor Dollimore to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

It is good to hear that the council are consulting on the new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, can you explain more about the four additional groups chosen to be included along the nine protected characteristics and the challenges they face?

Reply

The four additional characteristics / groups that are being included in the Council's Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Strategy are:

- Care experienced young people
- Armed forces veterans
- One-parent households
- Socio-economic status

We have been listening to the voices of representatives working with all of these groups, who have presented strong evidence about the additional barriers that they face.

We are passionate about making sure that children and young people in our care and young people with care experience lead safe, healthy and happy lives and that they can achieve their full potential. As corporate parents, we are firmly committed in ensuring care experienced young people are afforded the same care, security, stability, and sense of being loved as any parent would want for their child.

The Armed Forces Covenant, signed by the Leader of the Council on 19th June 2023, sets out a number of pledges to support the Armed Forces community, and to recognise the skills and experience that armed forces veterans can bring to the Council and the borough. We will achieve this by working in partnership with charities like SSAFA, Haig Homes and the Royal British Legion, who have called for public institutions to recognise the needs of this community.

It is vital that the Council considers the impact of policies and service changes on one-parent households and with regard to socio-economic status, particularly with the challenges posed by the rise in the cost of living. Several organisations and research institutions have made the evidence-based case for this, including Single Parent Rights.

From Councillor Fairclough to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

What conclusions does the Cabinet Member draw from the key findings of the Workforce Equality, Diversity and Inclusion survey set out at para 2.73 of the Report, and what action has she taken in response to these?

Reply

Listening to our staff's real experiences and views is critical to understanding the scale of the challenge we face in achieving full equality, diversity and inclusion. We have

gained valuable insights from the Workforce Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) survey, which highlighted both strengths and areas for improvement. Firstly, we had a 37% response rate, the goal is to increase participation in future surveys to ensure we have a better understanding of the staff's views. A significant 66% of staff who responded feel that the council respects their individual differences, indicating a positive perception of Merton's commitment to EDI. Encouragingly, 46% of ethnically diverse staff who responded consider the Race Equality Network a safe space, while 52% of those who responded are comfortable discussing race at work. Addressing concerns, 21% reported experiencing or witnessing bullying, harassment, or discrimination, highlighting the need for proactive measures.

In response, concrete actions have been taken, including the procurement of EDI training with input from our staff network groups, the development of an Inclusive Language Guide, and the introduction of a zero-tolerance approach against bullying and harassment. Ethnically diverse staff are now invited to recruitment panels, fostering diversity in hiring decisions. In order to keep staff informed we have created regular EDI communication through quarterly EDI updates and several Corporate Management Team (CMT) members have also taken the initiative to have internal EDI focused live streamed interviews. These interviews provide an opportunity for staff to gain deeper insights into the views and backgrounds of our CMT members and also gives staff the chance to ask any EDI related questions directly to CMT.

Upcoming initiatives include an Aspiring Leaders Program, EDI training rollout, mandatory E-Learning courses, and continued senior leadership engagement. We are also focusing more on supporting our staff networks and introducing a new Women's Network and Muslim Faith Network. Finally, "Conversation Cafes" will be introduced as dedicated safe spaces for meaningful discussions. In conclusion, significant strides have been made in response to the survey's findings, with a commitment to ongoing improvement.

From Councillor Johnston to the Cabinet Member for Transport

TFL have provided a small budget to Merton within the Local Implementation Plan. How will this money feed into our walking and cycling strategy?

Reply

The TFL Local implementation plan is an annual allocation to the borough to implement the mayor's transport strategy locally. LIP funding, supported by direct investment from Merton Capital and CIL delivers a range of road safety and traffic management projects.

We have already delivered walking and cycling enhancements to the Wandle Trail and Wimbledon Hill Road as well as major cycling schemes at Plough Lane, Merton High Street and Mitcham Bridge. LIP also contributes to our cycle hanger parking programme.

The walking and cycling strategy will set the long-term vision for promoting active travel in Merton. This will influence future years LIP bids and the delivery of cycle infrastructure.

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

Would the Cabinet Member please provide the following data:

1) For each category the current number of recipients (households) and annual cost (ie value of discount in 2023/24) of Council Tax Support

Under retirement age

100% discount

80-99% discount

60-79% discount

40-59% discount

20-39% discount

0-19% discount

Above retirement age

100% discount

80-99% discount

60-79% discount

40-59% discount

20-39% discount

0-19% discount

2) The number of beneficiaries (households) and cost (for the financial year 2023/4) of the reduction in the increase in Council Tax from 5% to 4%

Reply

The number of recipients (households) and annual costs from those who received a discount for Council Tax Support in 2023/24 are shown as:

Under retirement age:

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| • 100% discount | 4588 households @ £6,430,309.42 |
| • 80-99% discount | 416 households @ £596,513.07 |
| • 60-79% discount | 343 households @ £398,538.97 |
| • 40-59% discount | 401 households @ £334,469.62 |
| • 20-39% discount | 465 households @ £220,669.24 |
| • 0-19% discount | 481 households @ £85,131.24 |

Above retirement age:

• 100% discount	2288 households	@ £3,362,149.72
• 80-99% discount	384 households	@ £544,516.50
• 60-79% discount	243 households	@ £279,254.34
• 40-59% discount	179 households	@ £143,188.09
• 20-39% discount	137 households	@ £64,519.00
• 0-19% discount	70 households	@ £14,988.22

Please note that these figures reflect the number and amount of Council Tax Support discount as at 31/08/2023. These figures change on a daily basis depending on the starting and ending of liability, starting and ending of claims and recalculations of Council Tax Support due to updates in DWP benefits.

And the number of beneficiaries (households) and annual cost from those who received a reduction in their increase of Council tax is shown as 60,788 households and total cost £729,598.20.

It should be noted that this is a snapshot of cases and costs as at today's date. The total spend will not be known until 31 March 2024. Depending on occupation of properties eligible for the discount, this figure could go up or down.

From Councillor Akyigyina to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

Can the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care outline what progress this Council has made in supporting our carers and improving local services?

Reply

Within Merton we have an estimated 5500 carers providing care to their loved ones and I am sure we would all pay tribute to the heroic work they undertake day and night. Caring places a considerable burden on these extraordinary people and it is right that the Borough prioritises appropriate support to them.

The borough's Carers Strategy (2021-26) is in the third year of implementation and remains focused on 4 key priorities:

- Identification and Recognition of Carers
- Health and Wellbeing of Carers
- Realise and Release potential of Carers
- A life alongside Caring

The Adult Social Care Department, together with Children and Lifelong Learning department are imminently going out to tender to renew their respective carers services. These services aim to maximise the preventative nature of working with carers so that they feel able and willing to continue in their role and allow them to sustain this whilst also providing essential support to people who otherwise may require further support from the local authority. Adult Social Care are also looking to engage a sector partner to deliver 'trusted' statutory Care Act assessments for Carers.

The Carers Service will link to the Council 3 key priorities of nurturing Civic Pride, building Sustainable Communities by improving carers resilience and to support carers to be more active to improve their wellbeing as part of making Merton a Borough of Sport.

Merton has seen a growth in demand for carers and young carers support over the last 10 years and the Covid 19 pandemic has adversely impacted many carers in our communities. The Council recognises the importance of working closely with its partners and the community and voluntary sector in responding to the needs of carers to ensure that we are appropriately supporting carers to maintain their health and wellbeing whilst continuing in their caring role.

We have worked with other partners in the health and care system, including primary care and acute hospital services to invest in recognising and supporting carers at the point of contact and we are currently engaging with carers and their representative organisations on implementing a Carers Card for Merton's carers. Giving them consistent recognition in their role and access to a range of other offers, benefits and discounts that can support them physically, emotionally and financially. We have invested available one of grant, such as the Adult Social Care Discharge Grant into further voluntary and community support for carers.

From Councillor Wilson to the Leader of the Council

Would the Leader please explain why he felt compelled to personally write an additional letter to the DfT in February 2023 about Wimbledon Chase Station? There are a number of other stations within the borough that aren't yet step free, has he written similar personal letters about these stations?

Reply

Improving both the accessibility and the range of available transport options for Merton residents is a key priority for this Council.

As outlined in correspondence with the Minister of State for Rail and HS2, Wimbledon Chase station is one of a number of stations within the borough that is not step-free and as a Council we are keen to promote step-free access at all of the stations in the borough. This is not the first time the Council have sought to lobby the Government for step free access at stations for our residents through Network Rail's Access for All scheme (AfA). In 2019, Motspur Park Station and Tooting Station had been successful for the AfA scheme - both of which have started on site and are due to be completed by mid-2024. Merton Council agreed to make a significant SCIL funding contribution of 10% towards the Motspur Park scheme, which is likely to have contributed to the bid being successful.

Merton Council are making progress in accessibility for all people, including groups that require step-free access, at other stations across the borough too. A recent scheme implemented at Wimbledon Park Underground Station provides step free access between the street and the platform via a lift. In addition, the Thameslink services at Wimbledon, Mitcham Junction and Mitcham Eastfields, all also have

step-free access from the street to platform but require assisted boarding ramp access between the platform and the train.

Haydon's Road Station already has step-free access to the eastbound platform. The Council successfully secured a level access route to the westbound platform through land at 1 Caxton Road as part of a planning application. This provides a significant opportunity to quickly, easily and cost effectively improve accessibility at Haydon's Road Station. This Labour administration has agreed the allocated £100k of SCIL funding to contribute towards the necessary enabling works and is currently working with Network Rail and Thameslink to progress the scheme, which it is hoped will be delivered by the end of 2023.

We will continue working hard to seek opportunities to bring step free access to the stations across our borough and hope that our aspirations to advocate accessibility improvements to stations in our borough are shared by opposition parties.

From Councillor Bokhari to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

What action has the Cabinet Member taken so far in response to the recommendation of the Sustainable Communities Panel in June 2023 to: "Maintain pressure at the highest level, using all levers available to ensure TfL honours its commitment to the feasibility study to restore toilets at Morden station, and press for the reintroduction of provision as a matter of urgency"?

Reply

The recommendations of the scrutiny panel on this topic are not yet agreed and will be presented to Cabinet on 18th September. We recognise the importance of local public toilet provision and will impress upon TFL to commit to the feasibility study for re-opening toilet provision in Morden Station. The issue has also been highlighted in the press, with the BBC further emphasising that the southern end of the Northern Line (Morden to Elephant & Castle) is the longest section of the Underground without toilet provision.

From Councillor Kirby to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

In Merton, we are fortunate to have some of London's best charities and voluntary organisations based in the borough, organisations who work tirelessly to improve the lives of Merton residents and vulnerable communities. What recent progress has the Council made in partnering with VCS organisations and what steps is this administration taking to support the future of Merton's VCS sector?

Reply

Merton Council has an excellent track record of working in partnership with the borough's voluntary organisations, a partnership that was strengthened through the hard work put into supporting our communities through the Covid pandemic, and the joint response on the cost-of-living crisis. Together we can ensure that help gets to where it is most needed and across all our communities.

This year saw the allocation of the Merton Civic Pride Fund: Supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector 2023/26, with a positive and significant increase of 35% more funding than the previous Strategic Partner Programme 2019-22.

With Nurturing Civic Pride being one of key priorities for Merton, the funding programme involved extensive engagement and collaborative working alongside the voluntary and community sector including benchmarking and researching into the national, regional and local context. Understanding how and where our residents need support reflects our commitment to restoring Civic Pride in our borough. We want people to feel proud to live, work and visit in Merton.

- At almost £5 million, this combined grant programme is the largest contribution to support the voluntary and community sector for many years.
- With 20 organisations being funded for 3 years, this is the largest number of organisations funded via grants.
- Out of the 20 organisations, 3 organisations haven't received this funding previously. This provides both stability within the sector, and opportunities to explore new projects
- 28% of the total funding available is going to smaller groups/organisations.
- Over £1 million to organisations that support older people.
- Over £500,000 to organisations that support people with disabilities and impairments.
- £203,962.00 to BAME Voice, a significant increase on the previous round of grant funding.

Other funding for our VCS is available through the Civic Pride: Investing in Neighbourhoods fund, for example, recently funding Uptown Youth Services and Sustainable Merton.

Further to this, we have held several events to nurture and strengthen the partnerships with the voluntary and community sector, ensuring that duplication is minimised and cross-working is maximised. This includes a very well-attended Merton Partnership conference, and a "marketplace" event held in the Civic Centre to allow council staff to meet with charities from across the borough. We are in discussions about future opportunities.

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