

Merton Council Council

13 September 2023

Supplementary agenda 5

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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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you to the Cabinet Member for her answers. It is great to hear of young people taking advantage of Kids Swim Free, are there any plans to extend the offer?

Reply

Thank you Councillor Macaulay for your original question and for the supplementary question. I am proud to say that during the summer months, kids were swimming free, and we had for example in July, 421 takers for that. In August, that figure went up to 2703, so it's remarkable. And therefore I am pleased to announce that we are now making timetable sessions for kids free permanently. We are doing so because we know the cost of living crisis and so therefore funds will be barrier and so we are funding this because of that. So kids will be able to swim free at all of our leisure centres. So that's the Canon's, Wimbledon, and Morden Park and will be able to swim free during the evenings, after school and extending that time during the school holidays. The other thing to say is that because our Borough of Sport ambition to Merton London's Borough of Sport, we think this will put us in the fast lane and will be able to get to making ourselves London's Borough Sport quicker. Thank you very much Madame Mayor.

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

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- 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 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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you to the Cabinet Member for your answer. I'd like to explore your answer. You say that the inclusion of almost a £3million amount in the budget is a placeholder for decisions yet to be made on Wimbledon running track. Can I refer you to the bid that was submitted and agreed by Cabinet entitled, A Running Track for Morden Park, in which contents clearly describe replacing the running track in Wimbledon Park with one in Morden Park. Why if it was just a placeholder, you hadn't made decision, why does this document and what was said at Sustainable Communities as well, why do they give clear impression that you've already made the decision.

Reply

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Thank you very much Cllr Kohler for your original question and for your supplementary question. I think that Morden Park is one of the parks that so many people have asked me about, it's a huge park and people think it's just there and it needs to be used. But whether it's the running track or any other sports pitches in the borough, we are not doing anything about them at the moment, because we want to just have a strategic review of what we have and what we need and then we will be able to put the two together to be able to have an overall view on how to use our assets, so it may have happened before the Borough of Sport, but now we are looking at it from a more strategic point of view, so thank you very much.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor. Could the Cabinet Member confirm if the Council has enough money and if it doesn't, as we have often been told, could he explain to residents how they are managing to find the funds for offices and doors, Labour Office staff, pigeon holes and not to mention the not insignificant financial matter we are voting on later in the agenda.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor. Thank you to the Councillor for his question. I've done it before, I'm always happy to stand here and defend us modernising our facilities

and professionalising our operation given the size of the organisation and the importance of the services we deliver for our residents. But I say to him, that if he has concerns about public sector organisations spending money on their facilities, perhaps he could ask his own party's Education Secretary why she signed off on an eye-watering £34 million to be spent on her own office whilst schools are crumbling at the start of term.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and firstly can I thank the Cabinet Member for her response on the fantastic GCSE and A-Level results we saw in the borough. There is no doubt that Merton's students work extremely hard to get these results. Now can I turn her attention to the concerning recent stories regarding the RAAC in school buildings, that Cllr Christie just referred to, and can the Cabinet Member confirm whether there are any Merton Schools that are affected.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you Councillor Kaweesa for your original question and your supplementary. I am very happy to say and very pleased that no Merton school has any RAAC in its buildings. They were all inspected in the autumn term, the schools have annual inspections with the site manager and outside inspectors to check that the schools are safe and we are very fortunate and I feel very very strongly and sorry for other authorities who are suffering at the expense of this. And there was the money put forward to build new schools and deal with this, but unfortunately that funding was scrapped in 2010 with the coalition government.

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

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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](#)

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you to the Cabinet Member for a comprehensive answer about the priorities for green spaces, all good stuff. My question is about the consultation and communication that is going on around our wonderful green spaces in Merton. In the answer, the Cabinet Member mentions that the council is blessed with a range of volunteers and their massive contributions. But I can tell you that Friends of Wimbledon Park don't feel that they are consulted, your Wimbledon Park Councillors don't feel consulted, would the Cabinet Member please commit to Green Spaces providing quarterly updates on ongoing and future projects affecting green spaces for councillors and other volunteer groups. Thank you Madame Mayor.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you for your supplementary Councillor Reiss. I am responding because Cllr Irons isn't able to attend the meeting this evening. What I would say is that we have got fantastic parks within our borough, a number of which have got green flags. We have got a growing number of Friends of Parks groups and a key component to getting a green flag is the strength in Friends of Parks. I'd like to pay tribute to those volunteers and as we do with any of our strategies, whether it's the tree strategy, whether it's any other strategy including green spaces, there is always a period for consultation, for discussion, for engagement from our wider residents. The consultations are on our website if you're struggling to find them, we can send them your way Councillor Reiss. Thank you.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, and I thank the Cabinet Member for his answer. I'd also like to take the opportunity, even for Cllr Christie, it's a bit of a stretch to say that austerity has somehow a connection for whether our staff are given permission to work abroad or not. The Cabinet Member claims that many of these requests are for a short period of time. Can he please tell me what the statistics are on the length of time that staff work from abroad and how many requests have been turned down?

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, thank you to the Councillor for his question. It probably won't surprise him to know that I don't have those statistics to hand. But I would say to him that rather than sort of breathing down the neck of our hard working council staff, monitoring where they are in a Jacob-Rees Mogg-esque way, I would suggest

that he should be thanking our hard working staff for keeping this show on the row, despite 13 brutal years of Conservative austerity.

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

It has been six 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, Commonsense Community Development Trust, Polish Family Association) and groups funded through Emergency Assistance Fund, a greater number of 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 handyman 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 handyman 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

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employers through this scheme. This is in addition to the job clubs hosted and attended and numerous hours of employability support provided to residents.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you Cabinet Member for his reply. It is great to hear how we are supporting people so far, but the cost of living crisis isn't going away. How are we planning to help people going forward.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, thank you Cllr Szccepanski for the question. He is absolutely right that we have been supporting residents through the cost of living crisis and that that continues to be this administration's no1 priority. As well as the measures that I set out in my written answer, I would highlight three further ways that we are continuing to support residents through the cost of living crisis:

- i) With our recently announced ULEZ local scrappage scheme, the first of its kind in London. Which offers the opportunity to residents who need to switch to a greener less polluting vehicle an additional £1000.
- ii) I would highlight the recently announced policy to expand and make permanent the kids swim free initiative
- iii) And I would highlight one of my personal favourite policies, our push to establish junior savers accounts, working with Croydon and Sutton Credit Union for every Y7 pupil starting secondary school this September to encourage them to start good savings habits and develop financial resilience into the future.

Thank you.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you for the written response. I'm really pleased that Council has taken steps to support private and social tenants, but how can we make sure that people are aware that these resources exist. I myself am a private tenant, I did not know that the role existed until I was a councillor. And so if it is properly advertised and the people who need it know about it and can access it, how do you intend to make sure we have the capacity to deal with the issues that are raised.

Reply

Thank you for the supplementary. I think it's really important we get our comms right on this, that we are able to direct people who've got an issue, tenants who've got an issue, can find the pages on the website, can complete them, can properly assess and summarise what their issues are and to get a ready response. We are looking to increase, for instance, our Housing Enforcement Officers in Housing, partly along with our selective licensing and additional licensing. So that will be a very significant increase in resource for the Housing Team, which at times will be available for issues as they arise of Housing Enforcement in terms of health and safety, for instance hazards that arise tenancy properties across the borough. So it's comms and it's making the best use of increased resources.

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.

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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.

Supplementary

I thank the Cabinet Member for his answer. However in a previous response to former councillor Gretton in February 2022, the former Cabinet Member said it was the Council's aim to procure consultants to deliver a brief for the feasibility study by the end of January 2022, however now the Cabinet Members says that the feasibility study from The Project Centre commenced in May 2023, can he tell me why there was such a long delay before the feasibility study started? Thank you

Reply

I thank Cllr Cox for her original and for her supplementary. The feasibility study is taking place by The Project Centre, it is to arrive at a decision on criteria, design constraints and planning applications. That does take time, we wanted to find the right consultation centre. The Project Centre is very very good. We now, and if she'd like to help us in this regard, we now need to consider funding mechanisms because the actual completion of the bridges does need a multi-million pound funding mechanism, so using our resources together, perhaps we can sit down and see where those funding mechanisms can come from. In the meantime in addition to doing all we can to complete those bridges. We are bridging the gap between the east and the west of the borough in this time of cost of living crisis.

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 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](#)

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- **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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor. I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for her response and I do have a supplementary. Thank you for providing us with an update, could you explain how we have engaged with the community to involve them in these plans.

Reply

Thank you Cllr Attawar for your question and supplementary. Despite the jibes from the earlier question that we don't consult and engage with our residents, we are proud to put our residents at the heart of everything that we do. And we these three particular parks, Rowan Rec Playground, Miles Road Playground, Lewis Road Playground I am pleased that we are holding engagement events at each of those parks, that was held in the weeks previous, to hear from our community, what they want to see in the investment that we are providing in our much valued and much loved multi award winning parks and green spaces.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, I'd like to thank Cllr Stringer for her answer and I am proud to see our Labour administration championing equalities in this way, particularly paying attention to veterans in our borough, we know we have many at Haig Homes in St Helier. Could I ask her, is this an approach that other councils are following?

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, and thank you Cllr Dollimore for your insightful question, because as far as I am aware there are other councils who have taken on some elements of this, mostly Labour run councils have made decisions like expanding provisions to care experienced young people, as far as I am aware, we are one of the few who in one fell swoop are proposing to, because this is a consultation, proposing to recognise the additional needs faced by these four vulnerable groups.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, thank you to the Cabinet Member for her response. I must admit to being slightly surprised by the suggestion that it was in some way encouraging that 54% of ethnically diverse staff don't consider the Race Equality Network a safe space and I can only assume that this is because of a dramatic improvement from previous years' surveys, so I wonder if the Cabinet Member might update us on the changes in this metric over time

Reply

Thank you very much Madame Mayor and thank you Cllr Fairclough for your question. I don't have the exact numbers on those changes, but what I would say is that we recently had a new member of staff leading on EDI internally and she has already recognised that the REN is going from strength to strength and one her main roles is going to be pushing that even further to ensure that all of our staff feel valued and welcome and don't feel they face any additional barriers because of their ethnicity.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, can I also thank the Cabinet Member for his answer. And I welcome the fact that the money will be used to improve walking and cycling in the borough, there's no better way of getting around while staying fit and healthy. But can the Cabinet Member also confirm if it will be used to improve public realm accessibility?

Reply

I thank Cllr Johnston, my friend and colleague for his question and for his excellent supplementary. I can confirm, I am in a good position to confirm, that public realm accessibility will be included, I'll just give four examples to the meeting tonight: Pram ramps; tactile paving; new footways; and very important for all of us and for our residents, measures to address footway obstruction

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.

Supplementary

I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for his detailed response to my question, does he agree with me that by lowering the taper rate which is currently 20%, it would be a good way to increase the rebate for those who receive less than 100% council tax support and to include some people who do not qualify for any council tax support at all.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, his question asks if I agree that it would be a good idea to expand, essentially, the local council tax support scheme. I'm incredibly proud of the investment that we put into that scheme, and as he will have noted from written answer, we've lifted almost 7 million households out of paying council tax at all. But turning to his specific question, I wonder if he is aware that councils used to receive grant funding to enable and support them in providing council tax support to low income families, but tragically that support has now been cut, and perhaps he has three guesses as to which party was in government when that cut was made Madame Mayor. Nevermind, you only need two guesses, of course it was the Liberal Democrats and their Conservative bedfellows that cut this support that councils can give to low income families.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, I'd like to thank my colleague Cabinet Member for his response and I've got a supplementary. I would like to thank the Cabinet Member for his response, but could he explain how the whole care contract will benefit those who receive the service and the care workers who deliver care in their homes.

Reply

I thank my friend and colleague, Agatha, for her supplementary. But before answering the supplementary I'd just like to draw attention to the first bit of my answer to the question, which is that there are an estimated 5500 carers providing care to their loved ones in Merton and I'm sure that everyone in this chamber would pay tribute to their heroic work that they undertake night and day.

But there are two sides to carers, there are those carers that care for their loved ones and some of us have been such a carer, there are also the home care workers who deliver care and all sorts of domiciliary care to those that need our support. And I'm proud that in the recent tendering exercise that we have required all the bidders to agree to pay the London Living Wage. It's all very well clapping for NHS workers and carers, but sometimes you actually have to pay them properly for the immensely important work that they do. What this is going to mean is that in excess of 2000 care workers will be paid the London Living Wage and the indirect benefit to those receiving that care is that recruitment and retention rates will improve and it gives providers stability and residents a more consistent service with regular and familiar people come in and out of their homes. And again anyone who's experienced that, knows just how important it is. And the final benefit is that having more than one provider in each area for this contract will mean that there is more choice for people when it comes to home care. So I'm really proud of this new contract and the money that we're putting into it, and I'm proud that it reflects Labour's values of valuing those that do this work.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and the Leader for your reply. Although you didn't answer my question, I appreciate you highlighting the importance of match funding which was agreed after Cllr Fairclough met the then leader of the council to request a financial contribution. The strategic theme report states, "after Wimbledon, Raynes Park Station is the next busiest station in Merton by far, with 4 million annual entries and exits. What additional steps are you taking to ensure that Raynes Park is made step-free?"

Reply

Thank you Councillor Wilson, and thank you for your supplementary question. I think I did answer the supplementary question when I said that 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 stations in the borough. And that's what compelled me to personally write to the Minister of State and I know that with my Cabinet Member, Cllr Stephen Alambritis, we are marching forward with providing step-free access and encouraging TfL, Network Rail to provide that at our stations, including, with funding, whether that's for with the works at Haydons Road and we're now seeing the works that are taking place at Tooting Station as well as those at Motspur Park as well. I mean, there doesn't seem to be a position on whether the LibDems actually support step-free access at Wimbledon Chase, but rather trying to hit the administration for actually trying to seek and get things done and that isn't surprising given the criticism we are receiving around ULEZ and trying to help our residents, helping our residents through a cost of living crisis and what

seems to happen is that the LibDems run behind decisions and when we are making those decisions. And I just read from a recent email that was sent to residents around that scrappage scheme, on the 12th September, "The scheme seems very rushed and it is not yet up and running" in relation to ULEZ, sent by the LibDems in Abbey, well I'd like to say the scheme was up and running, perhaps that newsletter emailed to your residents was a little rushed and should have been thought through. Thank you.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you for the answer Cabinet Member. I'd be keen to see whether Merton Council can extend their cleaning maintenance to Morden Tube Station if TfL do commit to toilet provision and I'm also interested to know about the failure of setting up a community toilet scheme here in Merton, something that Age UK and London Councils have been promoting, so how will you be incentivising businesses to take up on such a scheme, and will you maybe follow Lewisham's example of promoting a businesses' Borough Loo of the Year award?

Reply

I'd like to thank Cllr Bokhari for her question and also she refers to work by Cllr Mercer who is going to be speaking to us about this at Cabinet on Monday where we will be giving a response. But let me be clear that the toilets at Morden Station are the responsibility of TfL, we do have a role that we can play in lobbying them, and I'll be very happy to write to them with my colleague with responsibility for transport, Cllr Stephen Alambritis, to ask for there to be accessible toilets given at the 24 hours station now.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Cllr Stringer for your response. Can I also say a big thank you from NEMCA for the support we've received through the Civic Funds this year. But I'd be quite interested to know what other support there has been for other Community Centres in the area.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you Cllr Kirby for her question and her supplementary. Yes, beyond our charities we have a number of community centres across the borough that are absolutely vital to the life of our communities and firstly I'd like to thank the many volunteers who help to run those including Cllr Kirby. They provide a whole range of different services and the council supports them in many ways, including with rent relief and as she said additional grants for services and we will be looking at how we can improve the support over the coming years.

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