

# **Merton Council Council**

**20 November 2024**

## **Supplementary Agenda Item 1**

7a Strategic theme: Main report

1 - 24

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<b>Name of decision-maker</b> COUNCIL	<b>DATE</b> 20 November 2024
<b>REPORT/DECISION TITLE</b> STRATEGIC THEME REPORT: NURTURING CIVIC PRIDE	<b>WARD(S)</b> ALL
<b>CHIEF OFFICER</b> Polly Cziok Executive Director for Innovation and Change James McGinlay Interim Executive Director for Housing and Sustainable Development	<b>CABINET/LEAD MEMBER</b> Cllr Eleanor Stringer Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride Cllr Billy Christie Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services
<b>DECISION CLASSIFICATION</b> Non Key	<b>IS THE FINAL DECISION ON THE                  RECOMMENDATIONS IN THIS                  REPORT TO BE MADE AT THIS                  MEETING?</b> Yes

1. **Recommendations:**

A. That the Council note and consider the content of this report.

2. **Purpose of Report and Executive Summary**

- 2.1 The Council, at its meeting on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March 2023, approved ‘Building a Better Merton Together’, the Council Plan for 2023 – 2026, which sets out three strategic priorities for the Council. In accordance with the Council’s Constitution, delivery against these priorities is monitored by the Council. To facilitate this monitoring role, each meeting of the Council receives a report providing an update on performance against specific elements of one of the three strategic priorities.
- 2.2 Building a Better Merton Together sets out how the Council will deliver its ambition with three strategic priorities that shape and guide delivery:
- i. Nurturing Civic Pride

- ii. Building a sustainable future
  - iii. Creating a borough of sport
- 2.3 The achievement of these strategic priorities requires extensive engagement with residents, voluntary groups, and businesses, building on partnerships and alliances to reach a common goal.
- 2.4 This report provides the Council with an opportunity to consider progress against the Nurturing Civic Pride strategic priority, with a particular focus on the following priorities:
- We will put residents at the heart of everything we do, and be responsive and resident-centric in our approach to customer service, communication, and engagement; and
  - More residents will be able to access secure and well-paid employment in a local economy that is fairer and more inclusive
- 2.5.1 For the selected priorities this report provides:
- An overview of the Council’s long-term ambitions relating to the chosen priority.
  - Progress to date against those ambitions, including any specific decisions made since the Council last met in March 2024 as well as performance against key performance indicators where relevant.
  - Key deliverables and commitments over the life of the new Council Plan (2023 to 2026) and any identified risks or issues relating to these deliverables and commitments.
3. **Links to the Merton Priorities (Borough of Sport/Civic Pride/Sustainable Futures)**
- 3.1 This report relates specifically to the Nurturing Civic Pride strategic priority and in particular the following priorities:
- We will put residents at the heart of everything we do, and be responsive and resident-centric in our approach to customer service, communication, and engagement; and
  - More residents will be able to access secure and well-paid employment in a local economy that is fairer and more inclusive
4. **Introduction and Background**
- 4.1 This report provides a focus on the Nurturing Civic Pride strategic priority and covers the following areas of focus:
- The Council’s approach to communicating with our residents; partners, including the Voluntary and Community Sector; businesses; and other stakeholders including potential future employees;
  - The Council’s approach to engaging with residents, partners, businesses and other stakeholders.

- The Council's approach to promoting inward investment; and supporting residents to access employment as well as accessing better employment opportunities.

### **The Council's approach to communication**

- 4.2 Over the past 12 months, the council has upskilled its communications team; modernised and professionalised its output; diversified its channels; grown its audiences; and become more targeted in how it operates in order to improve the quality of its communications; reach more people than ever; and ensure a more diverse range of residents receive more information that is relevant to them.
- 4.3 The council's communications team has been reorganised over the past year to ensure they offer strategic communications support across all the council's directorates. They are now communicating the priorities of the council and telling its story more effectively using clear narratives; ensuring more residents are accessing the services they need; and undertaking more targeted behaviour change campaigns.
- 4.4 The communications team has taken a digital-first approach that prioritises visual storytelling - putting resident, partner and stakeholder voice at the centre of this - to help better connect with audiences in a way that resonates with them.
- 4.5 The communications service has built a set of strategic narratives - founded on the council's three priorities - to provide a cohesive, compelling story that describes the council's purpose, goals and values while providing a roadmap for its future direction.
- 4.6 The strategic narratives incorporate the council's achievements, challenges and aspirations, and are articulated in a way designed to resonate with audiences; foster unity and build trust.
- 4.7 The team is delivering a strong set of active campaigns linked to the council's strategic priorities and rooted in what the community have told us matters most to them - and all aimed at improving the lives the people of Merton, and helping make the borough a better place to live, work and visit:
- Putting Merton on the map
  - Cost of Living
  - Recruitment
  - Learn in Merton (including the mini-musicians project)
  - Community Safety
  - Town centre regeneration (Remaking Morden and Mitcham Matters)
  - Merton housebuilding
  - Cleaner Greener (including recycling)
  - Borough of Sport
- 4.8 Merton Council was behind the curve when it came to its social media presence. Now the council uses a wider range of social channels, with

audience growth strategies, and a channel specific approach for each to make sure content is relevant and more likely to be seen by residents. Today our socials reach an average of 600,000 accounts every month, up from an average of 200,000 compared to the same time last year. And this follows an overall follower/subscriber increase of 11,000 across our digital channels over the same period.

- 4.9 The council is also now putting targeted spend behind a lot of its digital content which allows us to reach far greater numbers of residents compared to organic content and allows us to target our work.
- 4.10 To improve our social media communications, we will ensure staff have regular training opportunities to keep ahead of the social media landscape and trends; invest in video training; commission a new social media scheduling and analytics platform that will allow us to sharpen our targeting; explore new and opportunity social media channels to find and reach a wider demography; and refine our channel-specific strategies that make sure our approach continues to reach and resonate with residents.
- 4.11 The communications service set up a design studio to ensure better grip of Merton Council's new corporate brand and to modernise and unify all of the council's design output - ensuring accessibility and diversity approach is applied. We will now aim to rationalise the council's sub-brands, tying them clearly to our organisational priorities, and with each having a clear rationale and strategy, to better tell the council's story and ensure they connect with residents.
- 4.12 Email marketing is the council's most popular digital channel - in terms of audience recognition, size and engagement. The council operates a series of newsletters, and these have expanded in both focus and frequency in the past 12 months.
- Libraries InMerton reaches nearly 30,000
  - News InMerton, our core weekly title, reaches more than 26,000 accounts
  - What's On InMerton has moved from a bi-monthly mailout to a weekly mailout and reaches more than 25,000 accounts
  - Our Cost of Living enews continues to provide information on the help and support available for residents most in need and has more than 5,000 subscribers
  - Business InMerton launched as a weekly mailout recently and is aimed at businesses owners and has already accrued nearly 2,000 subscribers

There are also several subsidiary bulletins, dedicated to specific audiences or services.

- 4.13 Merton has a strong direct mail platform to build on, with a 71% subscriber engagement rate. The council has been working hard to grow these audiences with an evergreen marketing campaign and through better integration with other communications channels – particularly InMerton magazine and social media.

- 4.14 A new public affairs function will provide a central resource to lobby and influence national and regional decision-makers on the council's priorities and missions, ensuring that residents' voices are heard in the country's policy debate. The function will launch several campaigns on key issues, positioning Merton as a 'campaigning council', and coordinate and centralise the council's parliamentary engagement. And importantly, the function will also work to strengthen relationships with local and regional government funders and influencers, at a time of significant political change, to make sure the council is in the best possible position to access opportunities, such as funding pots.
- 4.15 The communications team has allocated an officer to communicate with businesses and on businesses related issues, for the first time, and they are working on a strategic plan to spotlight, engage with and communicate more effectively with our business community. This is to ensure the council can support local businesses; work collegiately with them on shared issues, and to help unlock the potential of business opportunity in the borough. This role brings additional communications capacity to support the regular business engagement work undertaken by the Regeneration and Economy team who work closely with the borough's Business Improvement Districts, Chamber of Commerce, local Business Associations and more recently with the Council's investment in town centre managers for Mitcham and Morden.
- 4.16 The council's InMerton magazine is distributed to more than 80,000 homes and other community locations every quarter. It is the council's primary communications channel and vital to reach those that are digitally excluded and our most recent residents' survey showed it was one of our most popular channels.
- 4.17 The magazine was relaunched this year under a new look-and-feel, to reflect the council's modernisation drive, and has put the community voice at its centre. The magazine contains a mix of council news, community features and case studies, and local information and events. Additionally, relaunching under an advertising model, represents much better value for money, with the latest edition breaking even on print and distribution costs for the first time.
- 4.18 Feedback from the most recent residents survey has shown that the magazine is one of the council's more popular communications channels. The council is undertaking consultation on the magazine throughout the next 12 months to gather feedback about the channel and what its priorities should be. Feedback already gathered has led to changes, including listings and council services pages.
- 4.19 While financial pressures and an increasingly digital world mean we will continue to prioritise digital channels and marketing, physical marketing collateral and paid advertising will continue to have an important place in our strategy. The council uses a third-party company, JC Decaux, for outdoor, digital advertising. This is a free-to-use and a key channel to making sure all residents can connect with our services and campaigns.

### **The Council's approach to engagement**

- 4.20 The council is working to build a better Merton for everyone through actively listening to our communities. We already have incredibly strong partnerships and work closely with many organisations, groups and stakeholders to help craft policies and build services.
- 4.21 The council has undertaken significant engagement projects that has led to resident-informed service design. For example, thousands of residents were consulted on the council's current waste services – and they told us they wanted to see better street cleaning. The council used this to hold its waste contractor to account to bring immediate improvements - seeing a 12.5% increase in resident satisfaction. And now the council is working to bring street cleaning inhouse so it can make sure the service is even better.
- 4.22 More than 800 residents and stakeholders were engaged in Mitcham to influence town centre improvements over the past year, including a new monthly market; free exercise classes; and a pop-up youth club; the installation of new bins, extra greening and improved CCTV and community safety. The council also facilitated free advice surgeries for local businesses.
- 4.23 And most recently, hundreds of residents, visitors and businesses took part in consultation and workshops to inform the council's 'meanwhile strategy' in Morden town centre, with new seating already installed in Abbotsbury Road as a result, and more improvements planned over the next few months.
- 4.24 The council is currently engaging on its groundbreaking Merton Legacy Fund; a process through which residents will be able to directly influence how a £15m tranche of CHAS funding will be spent – one of the highest levels of public spending influence in local government today.
- 4.25 The engagement work outlined above is best practice, but all engagement across the council needs binding under a clear vision, consistency and framework. To that end a new engagement strategy is in the final stages of draft - and it sets out this new approach, which is outlined in the following paragraphs.
- 4.26 Establishment of a new-look corporate Engagement and Consultation Service that leads all priority and high-profile community engagement projects, engages with seldom-heard groups effectively, supports the workforce to develop their knowledge and skills, and helps coordinate community engagement across the council.
- 4.27 Development of a central calendar setting out details and timeframes for all community engagement activity. Providing a proliferation of opportunities to involve communities in decisions that affect the borough, making sure our methods offer a mix of options that are accessible for our communities.
- 4.28 Bringing face-to-face events into community settings on a more regular basis rather than expecting residents and communities to come to us.



- 4.29 Constantly exploring innovative engagement tools and methods, including identifying residents and partners who are well-connected and can promote council communications.
- 4.30 Making sure the Leader and Cabinet are open and accessible to residents and our communities. Holding partnership events on important issues to consult a wider range of local partners and residents on key council priorities. Reviewing our engagement partnerships and making sure voluntary and community sector organisations and the main social landlords in the borough are properly represented in them.
- 4.31 Creating more opportunities for staff to share good practice and identify opportunities for working in partnership with other organisations and groups. Also Providing training opportunities to ensure we are always applying a best-practice approach.
- 4.32 Work has already begun on much of this. We have committed to delivering all consultation and engagement inhouse, offering a central Consultation and Engagement team providing oversight and expertise.
- 4.33 The Communication and Engagement Team have drafted a new set of engagement principles to help guide this work, which are:
- Inclusive – we will ensure that everyone has chance to have their say on the issues that affect them, their families, and their neighbourhoods.
  - Direct – where possible and appropriate, we will speak to and listen to our residents directly, rather than relying on outsourcing engagement to consultants, to voluntary groups, or to other third parties. We must ensure that engagement is part of everyone’s role.
  - High-quality – all our consultation and engagement projects will be delivered to a set of legally robust corporately agreed standards, well designed, and well publicised to promote participation.
  - Well-planned – we will develop a forward plan for consultation and engagement, ensuring that there is sufficient time allocated for meaningful activities.
  - Builds trust – we will only consult when the resident/stakeholder voice can have a genuine impact on shaping decision making, and never as just a tick-box exercise. When the council’s options are genuinely limited, we will communicate that honestly, and we will always communicate how feedback has been used.
- 4.34 The Communication and Engagement Team have also set up a new engagement network that brings together officers from different council services who regularly engage with residents and external partners, stakeholders, the VCS and businesses to share work, best practice networks and knowledge - and help reach even more people than ever.
- 4.35 A respected external engagement charity has been commissioned to upskill staff from across the council on the most modern, up-to-date engagement

principles and practices. The service has also employed a new senior engagement officer on a fixed-term basis to offer immediate resource and expert skills to help lead the changes.

- 4.36 The team has begun procurement on a new engagement platform that will provide a huge technological boost to our engagement capability with citizens' panel, mapping tool, social listening functions, and greater analytical and data-capture ability.
- 4.37 A new, dedicated engagement section has been added to the InMerton magazine which lists live consultations; spotlights high-profile engagement activity, publicises what residents have told us - and demonstrates what has happened or what we intend to do as a result of what residents have told us.
- 4.38 We have recently held the borough's first 'Conversations with the Leader' - a Question Time-style event which saw residents and businesses talk to the council Leader on challenges and issues that matter most to them. These will be held twice a year and will be supported throughout the year with pop-up 'Meet the Leader' stalls at community events across the borough. These events build on the Leader's monthly advice surgeries and estate visits, which give residents regular opportunities to meet the Leader and raise issues directly with them in spaces and places convenient to them.
- 4.39 Linking specifically to the remaining content of this report, there are a number of specific communication and engagement activities focused on businesses and employers and led by our Regeneration and Economy team and sub-regional partners.

## **Community engagement in Mitcham and Morden town centres**

### **Mitcham Matters**

- 4.40 As part of the Council's ongoing commitment to promoting civic pride in our town centres we have ran the Mitcham Matters engagement series. Over a 12-month period we have sought the views of residents on the future of Mitcham town centre and an action plan to be taken forward by our town centre manager and regeneration team. Feedback will be published soon, and a summary has already been presented to Mitcham Community Forum and can be viewed online at:
- <https://democracy.merton.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=138&MId=4613&Ver=4>
- 4.41 Our shared objectives for Mitcham Town Centre are:
- Putting people first
  - Building positive partnerships
  - Enhancing the experience
- 4.42 700 residents were engaged in the process with a focussed study with under 25s led to another 100 young people participating in the conversation. The

Council's Detached Youth Work Team collaborated with the Regeneration and Economy team on a pop-up youth club, in partnership with the salvation army which has grown with 30-50 young people engaged in the latest sessions.

- 4.43 Part of our approach to engagement is using activities to enhance Mitcham town centre as a way of hearing people's views and building a rapport with local groups. Students from St Marks Primary School and members of the Mitcham Society worked with Councillors and officers to re-plant planters in Sibthorpe Road Car Park as one of our early actions to enhance Mitcham.



- 4.44 We also used our face-to-face engagement events in Mitcham Market Square to co-design new banners for the market square. These were created by local design studio POoR Collective with local residents. The banners are now installed, and not only do they brighten up the market square, the banners also name and celebrate all the community participants who created the designs.



## **Remaking Morden**

4.45 Morden town centre regeneration is a priority for the Council and spans all strategic themes from creating a sustainable future, becoming a borough of sport and promoting civic pride. The Remaking Morden project has three strategic workstreams, short, medium and long term;

- Placemaking and ‘meanwhile’ action plan
- Public Realm and Healthy Streets
- Development and Housing Delivery

4.46 Whilst the longer-term development plans progress alongside the Council’s new Local Plan, the Council has begun what is the start of an ongoing conversation about Morden town centre by engaging residents and businesses on the Placemaking workstream.

4.47 Working with Sustrans, Lugadero and Firecracker Works were appointed to deliver a Meanwhile-use Strategy to brighten and refresh Morden Town Centre.

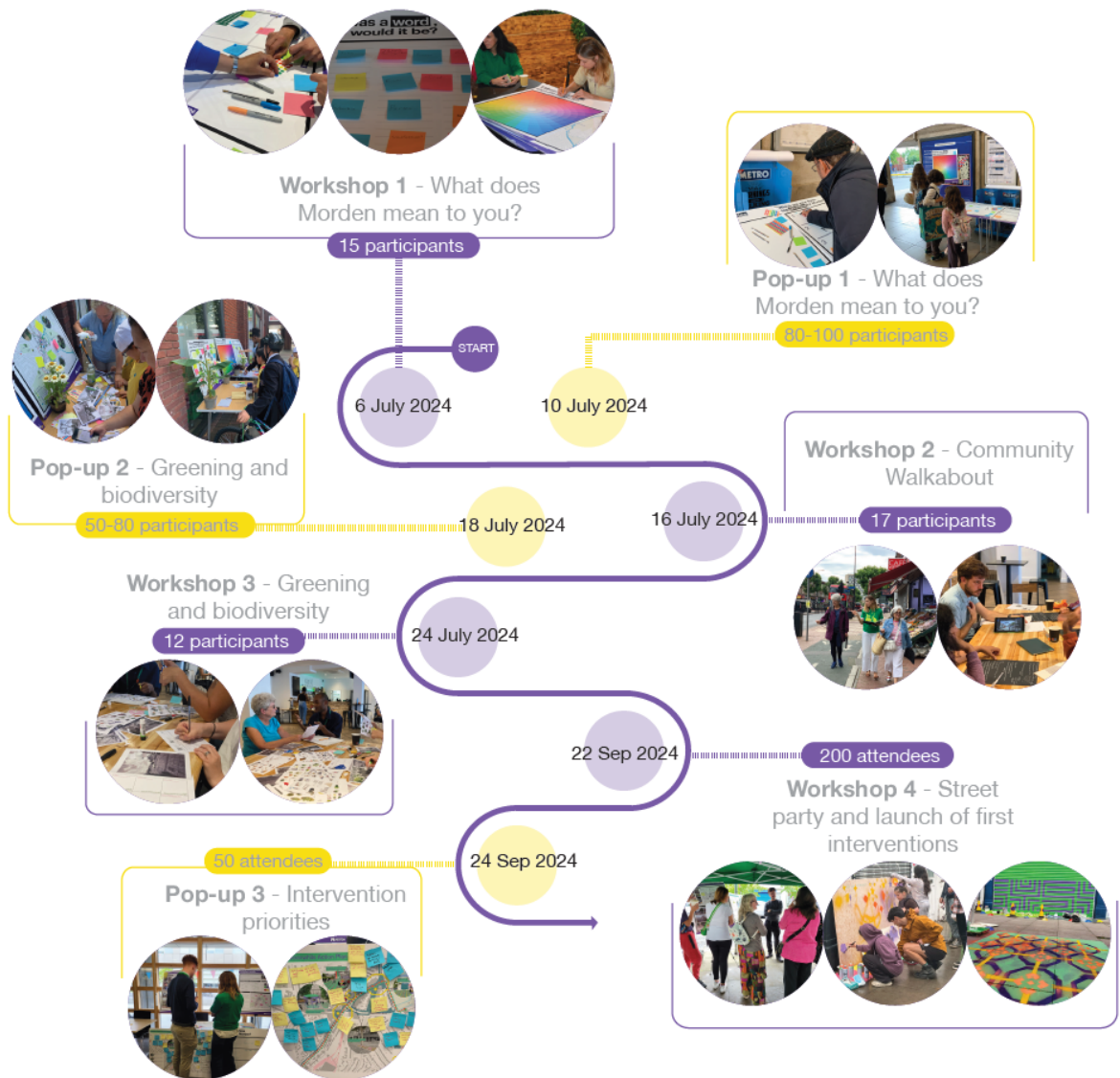
[Sustrans](#) - a UK wide charity, who since 1977 works with communities to ensure that the benefits of walking, wheeling and cycling are enjoyed by everyone.

[Lugadero](#) – engagement, place branding and urban design specialists.

[Firecracker Works](#) - a Merton based design, production and fabrication studio, ensuring that our work supports local jobs.

4.48 We have delivered 4 thematic face-to-face workshops, pop-up events, a community walkabout and a street festival coinciding with World Car Free day to not only hear people's views and ideas for Morden’s public spaces, but to also implement these ideas, with the first phase of new seating and community planting now in Abbotsbury Rd.





4.49 Our engagement workshops have attracted over 450 residents over the four sessions and have delivered new planters, seating, community notice board and a pilot of the Morden branding applied to shopfront shutters. The next phase of community projects will commence in Spring 2025. A full report of the Remaking Morden placemaking and meanwhile engagement will be presented to Cabinet in December and published online.

**Promoting inward investment; and supporting residents to access employment and better employment opportunities.**

4.50 This section of the report is structured to highlight strategic partnership activities in Merton and across the South London Partnership (SLP) and then highlights some local Merton based programmes that support employment opportunities.

### **Merton Partnership**

- 4.51 As part of the Sustainable Communities and Transport Partnership (SCTP) thematic group of Merton Partnership, The Regeneration and Economy team service regular six weekly meeting with local partners. The meeting informs on topics such as Employment & Skills, recruitment drives in various sectors including Health & Social Care, retail, admin, green jobs and the emphasis on London Living Wage paid jobs and upskilling opportunities with our Merton based partners and providers to support residents in work looking to progress to better paid work and those of entry level. The minutes and updates between meetings are shared to the group and a report submitted to SCTP as part of the standing agenda. Merton's dedicated Business Comms Officer receives input from the Regeneration and Economy team to send out a weekly business e-bulletin that provides business-based updates and opportunities to businesses, residents and partners who sign up to the newsletter. The Economy Business Groups updates are now included in the wider circulated newsletter as part of the streamlining of comms around business and employment support. We are also reviewing our broader partnerships to ensure the voluntary sector and local employers are better represented. Currently SCTP has representatives from Merton Chamber of Commerce, our Business Improvement Districts, MVSC and Job Centre Plus.

### **South London Partnership**

- 4.52 Merton is one of the five south London boroughs of the South London Partnership (SLP) regional alliance; a sub-regional collaboration of five London boroughs: Croydon, Kingston upon Thames, Merton, Richmond upon Thames and Sutton. The boroughs fund the SLP to deliver sub-regional activities that support the economy, health and care, infrastructure, place making and skills & Jobs. Partnership relationships with the SLP are included in this report as they form work delivered through the Economy team within the priorities shown under 2.4 above.
- 4.53 The South London Partnership offers a range of programmes to support engagement with residents into jobs and have regular newsletters, careers fairs and insight sessions showcasing vacancies available through;
- **Green Skills Academy** – A service designed to equip south Londoners with the skills they need to harness current and future jobs that will support the national target of carbon net zero by 2050. By collaborating with training providers and employers across south London we are working to ensure that the supply of green skills meets the demand of our employers. A Merton Retrofit Skills Summit was held in February 2024 at AFC Wimbledon's ground and over 100 Merton school children and 100 local residents attended to meet training providers and employers. Further events will be held in 2025.
  - **South London Careers and Health & Social Care Hub** provides residents with support on accessing jobs, training and careers in social care. These jobs range from entry level admin roles, Occupational Therapists, Care Support Workers to Social Workers. These opportunities showcase a range of sector specific roles in the industry at competitive

rates that attract new audiences to an industry that has recruitment challenges as well as debunking the myths associated with the industry.

- **No Wrong Doors (NWD) Integration** Hub Is a service to help residents overcome the barriers that make it hard to find their way around the skills system. Getting the information, they need to support them into training or employment and helping employers find the information they need to support their inclusive and changing workforce.

4.54 A new service to coordinate employer engagement has been introduced for the sub region as part of the NWD programme. This is to increase employer participation and investment in skills. The service has a dedicated SLP resource with four workstreams:

- **Employer Engagement Mapping:** this work is to communicate with all SLP Hubs and Local Authorities skills and employment teams, to have consistent knowledge of employer engagement activity across the sub region.
- **System:** Scope and deliver a CRM system to track engagement with stakeholders.
- **Employer resources:** which will provide mini toolkits for employers to support business training needs and recruitment.
- **Employer Engagement:** to connect new employers to events, business networks, chambers and follow up on leads.

4.55 Lunch & Learn Sessions inviting residents and organisations alike to learn about a range of work-based topics for further development. These are online to reach more businesses and are very popular events covering subjects such Introduction to British Sign Language and Being an Inclusive Employer. These sessions are aimed at both employers and partners to add value to their workforce and culture in the working environment.

4.56 We also have the collaborative sub-regional for employer events, themed summits with speakers, and training opportunities. For example, the sustainability masterclasses and the Business Innovation Growth annual summit is themed each year to employer's needs. The next summit will be held on 27<sup>th</sup> November in Croydon Electric House focussing on health innovations.

4.57 On a more local level, Merton's bespoke employment focused engagement with residents is conducted locally through the Councils in-house Towards Employment Team who provide a holistic recruitment service to residents by enabling employability support for jobs where they have strong relationships with employers in the borough.

4.58 The Council has also been successful in securing funding from the GLA under the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) where we have procured services to Support Local Business including offers to support entrepreneurs setting up self-employed businesses and equipping new and existing Merton business owners with a "How to Podcast" course enabling them to upskill existing staff members and learn how to better promote their business through the medium of podcasting.

- 3 courses have been delivered

- 20 local businesses supported
- 36 local entrepreneurs supported

4.59 Finally, the forthcoming consultation on Merton's Nighttime Economy Strategy will include a range of surveys to collate resident, visitors and night workers views to form quantitative and qualitative feedback to shape the actions for the upcoming strategy. This stage of engagement follows on from a series of night-time walkabouts with stakeholders, supported by the GLA and 1:1 engagement with local business, the police and BIDs to help focus the Nighttime Strategy not only on evening entertainment, but the experience of night-workers in our communities. We hope to have two surveys published in November. One will be aimed at residents and visitors and a separate survey of night workers in Merton (post 6pm and pre 6am). Engagement with our businesses and key stakeholders will be carried out via workshops and using existing business engagement methods, such as through our BID's and Merton Partnership. We intend to have roundtable discussions with businesses based on sector need and borough locations/town centres.

### **Inclusive growth, inward investment and support to access employment**

#### **Inward Investment**

- 4.60 The council also works with partners such as the Merton Chamber of Commerce and our Business Improvement Districts to promote inward investment opportunities and local employment offers.
- 4.61 We recently collaborated with both Merton and Kingston Chambers of Commerce to support the Business to Business Expo in October; the event was attended by 200 businesses from both boroughs and hosted a breakfast talk attended by the Deputy Leader and Head of Regeneration and Economy to hear first-hand, the challenges businesses are facing and the opportunities available in both boroughs.
- 4.62 Merton Council was also a headline sponsor of the Evolving Wimbledon Conference, held at the Polka Theatre in October. The event connected businesses and developers and was a well-attended event to promote the Council's strategic vision, development opportunities and to share recent data highlighting the performance of Wimbledon town centre.
- 4.63 Merton Council, Wimbledon Quarter and Love Wimbledon Business Improvement District (BID) recently carried out research on Wimbledon town centre's economy. The study found that people are spending more time and money in the town centre compared to 2019, which has created new community and business opportunities.
- 4.64 The footfall in Wimbledon high street has been rising steadily since 2020, with the 2023 and 2024 footfall hitting new records and regularly exceeding 2019 levels (Figure 1). Existing and new businesses are capitalising on the increased local spend with research showing Mastercard transactions after



inflation to have risen rapidly since 2020 and now are 25% higher than before the pandemic (Figure 2). The opening of new cafes, shops and restaurants in the town centre such as Gail's, as well as new uses including experiential and leisure experiences, like Third Space, giving rise to what is locally known as "Gymbledon", are evidence of our collaborative working and support.

### **Access to Employment**

4.65 To support residents of Merton, we have developed a comprehensive suite of strategies and funded employment programs spanning local, regional, and national levels. These initiatives are designed to expand opportunities for residents through targeted skills development, employability support, and direct engagement with employers across various sectors.

4.66 The key objectives of these programs include:

- **Addressing Workforce Gaps:** By aligning training with the needs of industries facing application shortages, we aim to fill critical job vacancies through brokerage and reduce skills mismatches.
- **Enhancing Job Retention:** Programs focus on equipping residents with the skills needed for long-term employment success, helping both individuals and employers maintain stable, productive workplaces.
- **Creating Meaningful, Well-Paid Employment:** We are committed to helping residents access jobs that offer financial stability, career progression, and personal satisfaction.
- **Fostering Entrepreneurship:** For aspiring entrepreneurs, we provide support to help them bring their business ideas to life, contributing to Merton's economic vitality and job creation.

4.67 Through these initiatives we aim not only to improve individual employability and career growth but also to support the broader economic development of Merton by building a skilled, engaged, and thriving workforce.

### **London Living Wage**

4.68 Merton Council was proud to celebrate Living Wage Week earlier this month, creating awareness of the Living Wage movement and highlighting local businesses in Merton who are going a step beyond to pay wages that reflect the cost of living.

4.69 The London Living Wage rate has risen to £13.85 per hour, benefiting employees at accredited businesses who will be uplifted with a boost in pay.

4.70 Merton is home to 90 Living Wage accredited employers, and we are working towards increasing the number of accredited businesses in our borough. One way we are supporting local organisations to become accredited is through our [London Living Wage Business Rates Grant scheme](#), which seeks to ensure that our local economy is fairer and more inclusive. Since the scheme launched, 11 grants have been paid and a further 3 applications are currently being processed.

## **Local Skills Improvement Plan**

- 4.71 **Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs)** are an employer-led initiative funded by the Department for Education. London's LSIP was published in August 2023. The plan sets out a blueprint to get Londoners into better paid jobs by better matching training provision to employer demand. There are four key sectors, and four cross cutting themes that are set out in the London Skills Improvement Plan as London's priority sectors. They are the construction, creative, health and social care and hospitality sectors and themes of digital, green skills, transferable skills and labour market inclusion. The plan was developed sub-regionally and now includes annexes for Central London Forward, London Local, West London and for Merton, the South London Partnership (SLP). The SLP annexe of the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) is in place to ensure that businesses in South London can navigate the skills systems and sets out the actions needed at a sub-regional level. The SLP LSIP highlighted a more local need to support five targeted sectors of, construction and built environment, health and social care, information and communications, hospitality and retail and education. The cross-cutting themes were also adapted to incorporate green skills, digital skills, transferrable skills, inclusion and entrepreneurialism. The Economy team work with the SLP to progress the actions, particularly supporting delivery of:
- The Grow London Local support hub being made available to Merton businesses to access the support available
  - More businesses working with training providers
  - The SLP LSIP progress report was published in June 2024 featuring case studies to showcase the actions delivered. In summary these are; Increasing skills and training provision in the health and care sector
  - Retrofit skills – building awareness and knowledge around green skills roles and pathways
  - Boosting learner demand for key sectors including creatives
  - Promoting inclusion and diversity into the workforce
  - Strengthening relationships between employers and training providers to upskill existing employees and to recruit and train additional qualified staff
- 4.72 LSIP Phase 2 will be published in November which sets out proposals for legacy governance, promotion and business engagement. To monitor progress in delivering against the SLP LSIP Merton officers and partners sit on the South London Skills Employment Alliance created to ensure governance and strategic discussions with key stakeholders and employers, and to promote opportunities to further support the sectors that have skills gaps and recruitment needs. The funded programme concludes in March 2025, but the Board intends to continue as part of the legacy planning.
- 4.73 With a range of previously national and regional offers now delivered through the Better Futures **Work & Health Programme**, Pioneer and the existing Towards Employment UKSPF People & Skills funding we provide a range of access to employment offers across sectors including Adult Social Care, as well as links to schools for future employment and skills education. The WHP concluded this year, but the government recently announced a new national

programme “**Connect to Work**” which is influenced by the Get Britain Working White Paper. This will run for three years plus two contract and the SLP boroughs will be procuring a service provider in January 2025 for commencement in April 2025.

- 4.74 The opening of the **BIG Knowledge Exchange Workspaces** across Merton have provided affordable spaces for start-up businesses to engage with employability support programmes and create cross sectional ways of working through employing staff themselves in addition to businesses within the workspaces growing their workforce to support demand. These are found at the following locations:
- **The Vault**, 106-109 London Rd, Morden, SM4 5AX
  - **Vestry Hall**, 338 London Rd, Mitcham, CR4 3UD
  - **Canons House**, Madeira Rd, Mitcham CR4 4HD
  - **The Workary**, Mitcham Library, 157 London Rd, Mitcham, CR4 2YR
  - **Wimbletech**, Wimbledon Library, Wimbledon Hill Rd, SW19 7NB
- 4.75 The spaces were funded through a Business Rates Strategic Investment Programme (BRSIP) won following a sub-regional bid to deliver a total of ten workspaces across five south London boroughs. The intent is to offer local workspace to start-ups and micro businesses. The benefit in using these spaces is that they come with the support of the BIG programme which helps businesses to innovate and partner with the local authority, local providers and Higher Education Institutes. Merton provided match funding for the Vault to create a high street hospitality offer that would support skills and employment opportunities specialising in hospitality and music. The space is available to rent rooms, has a podcast studio and a green room. We hope to encourage residents to walk in and use the spaces available.
- 4.76 Canons House had a significant sum of Heritage Lottery funding and with the BRSIP fund enabled a proportion of the house to be offered for business use and to deliver events/meetings/teaching spaces.
- 4.77 Vestry Hall and the two library spaces already existed but the BR SIP funding supported the refurbishment and upgrade of space to enable additional commercial appeal, including more pod casting spaces, meeting rooms as well as dedicated rooms for rent.
- 4.78 The South London Partnership also promote a range of resources as part of the Retrofit Taskforce They have launched the Retrofit **Careers House** to promote retrofit skills and career pathways alongside the brand-new **RetrofitSkills.org** website.
- 4.79 The **South London Careers Hub** is funded through the GLA engaging with 95 schools and colleges across South London to help them to achieve their Gatsby Benchmarks and enhancing their careers programmes to support the upcoming pipeline of job and sector education of apprenticeships and employment pathways post-16 employment pathways and opportunities. Gatsby Benchmarks are the framework that school leaders, headteachers and careers advisors use to assess the development of their pupils in employability skills. These also help students track their own progress and identify areas in which they may need to develop their skills.

- 4.80 The **Health and social care workforce strategy** has been coordinated and funded by the South London Partnership and the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) to support the recruitment and retention of social care staff into a sector with the aims to:
- Improve recruitment into the sector.
  - Improving retention levels.
  - Ensuring consistent, accessible local training offers.
  - Providing local career development and progression opportunities.
  - The SLP acting as a facilitator for joint work across six participating authorities to create more positive conditions for the building of a sustainable social care workforce.
- 4.81 For those residents further from the labour market, there is the wider UKSPF funded People & Skills programme which commenced in April of this year This enables residents to get:
- A one-to-one support worker.
  - Access to specialist skills and training courses.
  - Holistic, specialist support to overcome a wide range of barriers to work, delivered via Ingeus Employment Services - Supporting Individuals Back Into Work: <https://ingeus.co.uk/services/employment/people-and-skills-south-london-partnership-programme> to date 46 Merton residents have commenced the programme with 8 entering employment 8 taking training courses and 22 actively seeking employment and receiving employability support.
- 4.82 To date (April-Oct 2024) 56 residents have been supported and 8 moved into jobs working with employers such as the London Fire Brigade and supporting 3 cohorts to apply for jobs. One Merton resident (K) passed out with flying colours and was awarded the Lyn Juby Award for his dedication to training.

### **Employ Merton service**

- 4.83 To further develop the Council's ambition to enable residents both to find work if seeking it, and to support those in employment into better work, the Council is preparing to pilot a flagship 'Employ Merton' service, with £500k of funding allocated to support the development of the pilot. The pilot is aligned with the new government's proposals to support people into work, as outlined by the Work and Pensions Secretary on 11 July 2024. In this speech it was outlined that the following will be key cornerstones in the new government's 'Back to Work' initiative':
- A new national jobs and career service to help get more people into work, and on in their work.
  - New work, health and skills plans for the economically inactive, led by Mayors and local areas.

- A youth guarantee for all young people aged 18 to 21.
- 4.84 The Work and Pensions Secretary, in her speech, referenced a report titled 'Pathways to Work' which reviewed the local employment context in Barnsley and the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority. Within this report were several recommendations and next steps to take, both locally and nationally to support people into work. Analysis of this report has been carried out by the Policy, Strategy and Partnership Team, particularly how it is positioned in relation to the new governments policy proposals outlined in its manifesto and it has been concluded that there is likely to be strong alignment with future government policy and the recommendations and next steps that arise from the commission report.
- 4.85 In particular, the report notes that a local proof-of-concept employment support model has been developed within Barnsley and South Yorkshire. This model effectively seeks to facilitate a whole system response to supporting people into work, with 5 key pillars:
- 1) Capacity building at the regional level and local level to address fragmentation issues.
  - 2) Working with local businesses to address training needs and to ensure vacancies for people out of work.
  - 3) Focussing on supporting people with their journey to employment and accessing other services where a need arises
  - 4) Investing in prevention through partnership working and mission-alignment with things such as a youth guarantee and a good employer charter
  - 5) Investment in data to ensure that data can be used more effectively to support people into work.
- 4.86 The Employ Merton proposal is being designed to follow the proof-of-concept model in the Barnsley report. Further clarification is required on the role of the GLA and South London Partnership in the implementation of any new government initiatives, however the development stage of the Employ Merton scheme will ensure that there is flexibility to adapt to the developing national and regional approach.
- 4.87 In addition to this, as outlined in the Work and Pensions Secretary's speech, it is understood that there will be an expectation for Metropolitan Mayors and Local Authorities to take a role in supporting residents into employment and as such, taking forward Employ Merton allows for the council to get ahead and ensure that mechanisms are in-place ahead of further guidance and direction from government.
- 4.88 Good progress is being made in developing the pilot, with a Lead Officer who has significant experience of developing employment support services appointed and scheduled to start in role in December 2024. It is envisaged that the development of the pilot will incorporate four main phases as set out below. The key tasks that will be delivered in each of these phases are also described. It is important to note that the phases will not run sequentially –

activity will be progressed against each of the phases from the point at which the Lead Officer commences in post.

4.89 **Service Proposal Refinement:** Following the appointment and start of the appointed officer to lead the work it is envisioned that the appointed individual will begin refining the service model, with a key objective being to ensure the operational focuses are defined and key requirements in administration, operations, communications, marketing, and resource are set out. It is intended that the full proposal is returned to CMT for deliberation and final sign-off in early January 2025. This will include decision making about where the pilot is managed from within the Council once it is up and running.

4.90 Key Tasks for this phase:

- Focus on ensuring the brokerage offering is contextually relevant to Merton.
- Consideration as to how existing services can complement the proposed brokerage and act as a pipeline for clients, ensuring value for money to avoid offer duplication and ensuring that clients are able to access any additional support they may need prior to seeking employment.
- Define operational systems requirements.
- Ensure implications across procurement, digital, information governance and risk management are considered and addressed.

4.91 **Brand Identity and Corporate Messaging:** This step, running concurrently with step 4, will look to ensure that a brand identity is created for the service and that consistent corporate messaging is implemented.

4.92 Key tasks for this phase:

- Developing a strong brand identity, with internal buy-in
- Logical incorporation of services and service areas that fall within brand scope – this is not, in the initial stages, considered to be a restructure exercise.
- Consistent messaging across the council internally, ensuring that the operational focus is clearly defined and how signposting to the service can be considered across the various services the council provides.
- Consideration of external audience and ensuring brand identity relevance with operational focus.

4.93 **Partnership Development:** The key focus of this step is to explore meaningful and constructive partnership opportunities which can support the achievement of service aims and objectives.

4.94 Key tasks for this phase:

- Engagement with council service partners on opportunities for mutual benefit

- Transparency regarding offering, what the brokerage service is and is not.
- Leveraging of council presence and communications reach to highlight the benefits of utilising the council brokerage service to fill vacancies.
- Exploration on how brokerage service can be utilised to drive forward take-up of London Living Wage

4.95 **Service Operational Set-up:** The focus of this step is to take the service from concept and proposal to being operational for the initial pilot period.

4.96 Key tasks for this phase:

- Secure Council leadership support for the finalised operational model
- Resource requirements defined and recruited to, subject to budget.
- Partnership goals finalised and agreed, with incorporation into finalised operational model.
- Long-term financial modelling completed, with options to be provided as to potential way forward to keep service financially viable post-pilot period (e.g. viability of S106/CIL utilisation / council funding, derived as general growth or against forecasting reduction in council tax support scheme utilisation).

## 5. **Available Options & Preferred Option**

5.1 This report is for noting and discussing only, so alternative options are not being presented.

## 6. **Reasons for Recommendations**

6.1 This report is for noting only.

## 7. **Consultation Results**

7.1 Prior to the Council Plan 2023 to 2026 being developed extensive engagement with residents, businesses, the voluntary and community sector and key partners was undertaken. Where relevant, consultation relating specifically to the subject of this report is referenced in the body of the report.

## 8. **Next Steps & Timetable: Communication and Implementation of the Decision**

8.1 This report is for noting only.

## 9. **Report Appendices**

9.1 The following documents are to be published with and form part of the report:



- None

10. **Background Papers**

11. **Cross-Cutting Issues and Implications and Sign-Off**

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Implications</b>	<b>Sign-off</b>
<b>Legal</b> including Human Rights Act	This report has been prepared as required by part 4A, paragraph 2.3 (g) of the Constitution and there are no detailed legal implications arising out of the report.	Fabiola Hickson Head of Law, Procurement & Information Governance 11/11/2024
<b>Finance</b> and other resources	The cost implications for the initiatives outlined in this report are covered within the current MTFs. Any further spending required beyond existing budgets will be reported to Cabinet.	Roger Kershaw Director of Finance 11.11.24
<b>Equalities</b>	This report is for noting only and does not introduce any new matters that need to be tested for relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. Any potential equality impact on end users arising from individual initiatives referenced in this report have been, or will be, subject to an assessment of their impact.	Keith Burns Director of Policy, Strategy and Innovation 08.11.24
<b>Climate change</b>	This report is for noting only and does not introduce any new matters that need to be tested for their impact on climate change. Any potential climate impacts arising from individual initiatives referenced in this report have been, or will be, subject to an assessment of their climate impact.	Keith Burns Director of Policy, Strategy and Innovation 08.11.24
<b>Community safety</b>	This report is for noting only and does not introduce any new matters that need to be tested for their impact in relation to community safety. Any potential community safety impacts	Keith Burns Director of Policy, Strategy and Innovation



	arising from individual initiatives referenced in this report have been, or will be, subject to an assessment of their impact.	08.11.24
<b>Executive Director</b>	Report approval	James McGinlay Interim Executive Director for Housing and Sustainable Development 12.11.24
<b>Cabinet Member/s</b>		Cllr Eleanor Stringer Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Nurturing Civic Pride 12.11.24
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