

## **Committee: Cabinet**

**Date: 12 October 2020**

Agenda item:

Wards: All

## **Subject: Merton's response to Black Lives Matter (BLM)**

Lead officer: Rachael Wardell, Director of Children, Schools and Families

Lead member: Councillor Edith Macauley, Cabinet Member for Voluntary Sector, Partnerships & Community Safety and Councillor Laxmi Attawar, Cabinet Member for Women and Equalities

Contact officer: John Dimmer, Interim Head of Corporate Policy and Improvement

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### **Recommendations:**

A. To note and agree on the Council's response to Black Lives Matter (BLM).

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### **1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1. The disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and the issues emerging from the death of George Floyd have highlighted the inequality still present in our society.
- 1.2. As a result of these concerns the council has been challenged by the community to set out what measures it can put in place to prevent BAME residents and staff facing further inequality and discrimination.
- 1.3. An initial meeting was held with senior officers and Councillor Edith Macauley and Councillor Laxmi Attawar (joint leads for Black Lives Matter). This was then followed by a series of meetings with officers to discuss the issues affecting the community and our staff and identify possible improvement measures. Consultation has taken place with the Joint Consultative Committee with Ethnic Minorities on the council's response to BLM. Our response also reflects issues raised by the staff as part of the consultation on establishing a BAME staff forum.
- 1.4. This report sets out the issues around BLM in Merton and the proposed response.

### **2 DETAILS**

- 2.1. The disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on BAME communities and the horrific death of George Floyd in the United States have prompted a resurgence in the Black Lives Matter movement across the world. Both events have underlined the ongoing issues of structural inequalities and racism that affect BAME communities in the UK.
- 2.2. Merton Council has a longstanding commitment to reduce social and economic inequalities through its 'Bridging the Gap' strategy working constantly to improve inequalities in the Borough. This is woven into the work of the entire council and in particular services to ensure that children from disadvantaged communities get the best start in life, our major

regeneration programmes to improve and increase affordable housing and improve the physical infrastructure of the borough. The results of Merton schools in the last 9 years have been encouraging, judging by the success of the schools year on year in the east of the Borough.

- 2.3. The council's Corporate Equality Steering Group (CESG) is constantly looking at inequalities within the organisation
- 2.4. Merton is the only borough to have a Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) with Ethnic Minorities, (made up of voluntary sector organisations representing the BAME communities), with the primary objective to address the inequalities impacting on BAME communities and building their social capital.
- 2.5. The council is proud to have established the JCC many years ago and its important role in monitoring and highlighting the issues of interest and concern to the borough's BAME communities. The discussion of the Windrush scandal and issues affecting residents in Merton led to the creation of a dedicated webpage offering information and advice to local people. We have always celebrated Black History Month and more recently, the celebration of Windrush Day has become a fixture in the Civic calendar organised by BAME Voice and West Indian Families and Friends Association (WIFFA).
- 2.6. The council has supported the development of BAME Voice (the umbrella organisation for BAME voluntary groups) and has provided funding to enable the organisation to represent the interests of the borough's BAME communities.
- 2.7. Merton is a cohesive borough where people of different backgrounds get on well together. Much of the good race relations in the Borough is because we have listened to what our residents tell us and worked in partnership to bringing people of different backgrounds together.
- 2.8. For many years Merton Council has had Equality within the portfolio of a Cabinet Member. As a Council, we have always considered equality as an important issue. This is illustrated by the creation of a dedicated Cabinet position in 2019 to address and promote women's and general equalities issues, making equalities one of the Council's top priorities.
- 2.9. There has always been issues of inequality and disadvantage affecting BAME communities. Over the years, we have sought to address these issues through our 'Bridging the Gap' strategy to reduce the difference in outcomes for residents in the east of the borough compared to residents in the west.
- 2.10. The issues highlighted by Covid-19 and the death of George Floyd have quite rightly led to a challenge from our own BAME staff and residents to ask whether we could do more to tackle the injustices and racism that they see in their everyday lives.
- 2.11. The Council is committed to supporting Black Lives Matter and has taken some immediate steps to demonstrate this including:

- published a statement from all the borough's political leaders condemning the killing of George Floyd and stating the Council's support for the Black Lives Matter movement;
  - lit up the Civic Centre in purple in tribute to George Floyd and members of the council joined the community to 'take a knee' outside the Civic Centre;
  - developed an individual risk assessment for staff which specifically addresses the Covid risk for BAME colleagues;
  - prepared the Employee Assistance Programme to respond well to staff whose concerns encompassed structural injustice and racism;
  - reminded all staff that Equality and Diversity training is mandatory for all staff;
  - worked to re-establish a BAME staff forum, which had operated in the past, but which had ceased to function several years previously.
- 2.12. This does not mean the Council should be complacent because though the infrastructure within the Council is there and demonstrating the will is there, the Council acknowledges there is still more that needs to be done and swiftly, as residents' patience is fast running out and they need to see effective change quickly.
- 2.13. The Council is committed to going further and taking practical steps to reduce inequalities and to continue the fight against racism within the council itself and in the communities we serve. To do this, we want to move forward based on an understanding of the issues that affect our staff and residents and to engage them in the practical steps we can take.
- 2.14. Our approach to responding to BLM focuses on two themes, namely Merton as a *place* and Merton as an *employer*.
- 2.15. The approach we are taking means engaging meaningfully with our own BAME residents and staff. We are working closely with the newly established BAME Staff Forum to develop a medium term strategy and in particular, how we improve the diversity of our senior management team and develop our own BAME staff as future leaders in the sector.
- 2.16. We have also commissioned BAME Voice, to understand the lived experience of BAME communities in relation to Covid-19 and to develop a Community Resilience Programme to help reduce the risk of infection and improve health outcomes for BAME communities.
- 2.17. The disproportionate impact of Covid-19 underlines the importance of small community led voluntary groups in Merton to support and engage with more marginalised communities. These groups have consistently told us that our criteria for awarding grant funding does not always recognise the benefits that these smaller grass roots organisations can offer. As part of our response to Black Lives Matter, we commit ourselves to recognising the contribution of these groups to tackling inequalities and that we will undertake a review of the way that we award funding through the Strategic Partner Grant Programme to ensure a fair and balanced distribution of resources.

Appendix 1 sets out in more detail Merton's initial response and approach to BLM.

- 2.18. The Cabinet Member for Women and Equalities has overall responsibility for the Council's Equality Strategy. The JCC will have oversight of the development and implementation of the Council's response to BLM. The Corporate Equalities Steering Group working in partnership with the BAME Staff Forum will develop the Medium Term Strategy. The BAME Staff Forum will also have a direct line into CMT.

### **3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

- 3.1. No other options have been considered as the Council recognises the importance of addressing the issues raised by Black Lives Matter.

### **4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED**

- 4.1. BLM was discussed at the JCC on 30 June 2020 and 8 September 2020. At the latter meeting, the JCC membership was encouraged by the Council's approach to addressing the issues raised by BLM and endorsed the proposed measures presented.
- 4.2. The JCC asked for the implementation of the BLM measures to be monitored by the JCC through regular updates presented by senior staff.

### **5 TIMETABLE**

- 5.1. A report outlining the Council's response to BLM will be discussed at the Joint Consultative Committee(JCC) with Ethnic Minorities on 2 December 2020.

### **6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1. The BAME Staff forum will be given an annual budget of £5,000. Also as part of our response to BLM, we are committed to change the way that we award funding through the Strategic Partner Grant Programme to ensure a fair and balanced distribution of resources.

### **7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1. On 5 April 2011 the Equality Act 2010 introduced the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) which requires the Local Authority, when exercising its functions, to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between persons who share a "protected characteristic" and those who do not. "Protected characteristics" are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
- 7.2. Implementing measures to respond to Black Lives Matter contributes to the council delivering the Equality Duty.

### **8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS**

8.1. Implementing measures to respond to Black Lives Matter contributes to Bridging the Gap and tackling inequality in the borough.

**9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**

9.1. None.

**10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

10.1. None.

**11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT**

1. Appendix 1 – Initial Response to Black Lives Matter

**12 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

12.1. None.

## **Appendix 1: Initial response and approach to Black Lives Matter**

### **Merton as an employer**

In order to re-establish Merton's staff BAME Forum, expressions of interest were invited from all BAME staff across the council. More than 50 expressions of interest were received. Colleagues who expressed an interest in being involved were then invited to one of three initial discussions about the design/development of the forum, scheduled on 19 June. A fourth date of 30 June was made available for those colleagues who had not been able to participate in any of the previous sessions. Between 15 and 20 colleagues attended each of these sessions, demonstrating a significant commitment to the establishment of the forum following on from the initial expressions of interest. Based on these discussions a proposal was put forward to the Council's Corporate Management Team on 14 July with three recommendations that were all agreed. The detail is set out below.

Establishment of a permanent BAME Forum. CMT confirmed the establishment of a BAME Forum and will support it through resourcing and funding to enable it to be sustainable and effective including an annual budget of £5k. Members of the forum will determine the Terms of Reference. There will be an opportunity for direct communication between the Forum and CMT, with BAME voices heard at CMT.

Cross-council anti-racist education and action. CMT will demonstrate their commitment to anti-racism by leading a programme of corporate education and change and will be accountable to the BAME Forum for the impact of that programme.

The Council has also agreed to adopt a suggestion from the BAME Forum that the NHS's Workforce Race Equality Standards (WRES) offer a set of objective measures which can be adapted and adopted for the Council to measure and monitor. CMT will be asked to consider adopting a Race Equality Charter which would be supported by the monitoring of these standards.

Development of a Medium term strategy. To ensure that there is ongoing commitment to this agenda and that the council builds the confidence and trust of its BAME staff, there will be a medium term strategy (3-5 years) to address the structural inequalities and racism experienced by BAME staff, supported by an annual plan, to meet specific objectives for change which are identified by the BAME Forum. The medium term strategy will be developed by the Council's Corporate Equality Steering Group (CESG) working with the BAME Forum. In addition, CMT has agreed that the BAME forum are engaged in an equality review of policies that are being reviewed on a rolling basis but in particular that we bring forward for review the recruitment policy.

The initial focus will be a proposal for the Corporate Management Team on practical measures to increase the diversity of the Council's senior leadership including CMT itself, which the CESG will develop in liaison with the BAME Forum. CMT has asked the Head of HR to develop proposals in the following areas:

- Improvements to equalities monitoring information to present a comprehensive picture in relation to all areas of employment including employee relations, training and development, recruitment, turnover, retention, pay, flexible working and promotions.
- Initiatives to increase the number of BAME applicants applying and being shortlisted for vacancies at senior management level. This will include

consideration of the 'Rooney Rule' and improvements to how we market the Council to potential BAME candidates.

- Increasing BAME representation on recruitment panels and practical proposals for how this can be achieved in Merton.
- Training and development for BAME staff and consideration of the following: reverse mentoring, leadership development programmes, talent management, succession planning, unconscious bias training. This is in addition to the Equalities and Diversity Training which has already been rolled out to all staff.

Joint work between the BAME Forum and Senior Leadership Team. Representatives from the BAME Forum attended the Council's Senior Leadership Team meeting on 14 July to present their proposals and to talk about the experience for BAME staff of working in Merton and some of the challenges they face. On the back of this discussion SLT were keen to invite the BAME Forum back to their next meeting to discuss the issues raised in more detail and how they could work with the BAME Forum to address them.

### **Merton as a Leader of Place**

The Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) Meeting with Ethnic Minorities took place virtually on 30 June. The meeting looked at the issues highlighted by the death of George Floyd, the re-emergence of Black Lives Matter and the impact of Covid-19 on BAME communities. This meeting had the highest attendance of any JCC since its inception. There was also a discussion on the council's progress to increase diversity in its senior leadership team. Cabinet Members Laxmi Attawar and Edith Macauley (joint leads for Black Lives Matter) were both in attendance along with the Chief Executive, Director of Children, Schools and Families who is the corporate equalities lead and Director of Public Health. There was a great deal of concern amongst attendees that the issues of Covid-19 and the death of George Floyd raised and how these related to their own personal experiences. There was also a feeling from participants that the BAME community should be empowered to develop and take forward initiatives, working in partnership with the Council and other statutory bodies.

Having reflected on this the Council has commissioned BAME Voice, the umbrella organisation for BAME voluntary groups, to develop a Community Resilience Programme to help reduce the risk of infection and improve health outcomes for BAME communities. As part of the borough's Local Outbreak Control Plan BAME Voice will work closely with the Council, CCG and BAME communities if there is a spike in infection levels in Merton. This project will specifically undertake the following actions.

Design and deliver a 'bottom-up' Community Resilience Programme for people of all ages, across Merton's BAME communities.

Target the following seven communities as they represent those most affected by COVID-19 - Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Caribbean, Sri Lankan/Tamil and communities from East, West and Southern Africa. The programme, though specifically targeting these communities, will not exclude other BAME communities who are experiencing high numbers of death and hospital admissions caused by COVID-19.

Understand the impact that COVID-19 has had, and build resilience among the communities in its different forms: physical, mental, financial, environmental and reduce the risks to these communities in terms of infection and health outcomes.

Identify any stigma or structural barriers experienced by the communities and help identify practical policy responses or local actions to address specific concerns, including opportunities to support and work with BAME communities on these responses.

Be an intervention in its own right, helping support building of trust, signposting to appropriate support programmes and to identify community leaders who could have a wider role in the approach.

Provide taster training and support for BAME key workers to tackle workplace bullying, racism and discrimination; to create environments that allow workers to express and address concerns about risk and other issues.

Work with partners across Merton to increase engagement with and the reach of communications to vulnerable and higher risk communities on key COVID-19 related issues e.g. symptoms, testing, NHST&T, self-isolation and available support e.g. the Community Hub.

Work with key health promotion and disease prevention services and programmes to understand barriers to accessing services, expand the reach of these services and increase the take up of prevention services to assist BAME communities to improve their health and wellbeing thereby improving their resistance to Covid-19 e.g. Healthy weight, flu, physical activity, smoking cessation, mental wellbeing and effective management of chronic conditions including diabetes, hypertension and asthma.

The disproportionate impact of Covid-19 underlines the importance of small community led voluntary groups in Merton both, to support and engage with more marginalised communities. These groups have consistently told us that our criteria for awarding grant funding does not always recognise the benefits that these smaller grass roots organisations can offer. As part of our response to Black Lives Matter we commit ourselves to recognising the contribution of these groups to tackling inequalities and that we will change the way that we award funding through the Strategic Partner Grant Programme to ensure a fair and balanced distribution of resources. We will work closely with the voluntary and community sector to create a more collaborative and cooperative VSC where larger organisations are working in partnership with smaller organisations to deliver better outcomes for our residents.