Committee: Cabinet

Date: 17 January 2022

Wards: ALL

Subject: Merton 2030 Strategic Framework and approach to delivery

Lead officer: Chris Lee, Director of Environment and Regeneration

Lead member: Cllr Owen Pritchard, Joint Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for

Performance, Recovery and the Local Economy

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Recommendations:

A. To approve the Strategic Framework comprising an ambition for Merton, strategic priorities, guiding principles and delivery objectives as set out in Appendix 1.

- B. To note our immediate response to the key themes emerging from the Your Merton engagement as set out in Appendix 2.
- C. To note that further work will take place within the council and with partners on the delivery objectives and the plans to deliver on these objectives and that an update will be provided to Cabinet in June 2022.
- D. To agree that an annual update will be provided to Full Council on progress and updated plans.
- E. To agree that the Strategic Framework set out in Appendix 1 will be communicated to residents, businesses and partners, with content, design and communication channels adjusted to reflect the different audiences through the appropriate channels in January 2022.

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The pandemic has had, and continues to have, a profound impact on the people and businesses of Merton. Many people have spent more time locally as a result of the lockdowns. They have come to appreciate more than ever the assets that the borough has, in particular its green spaces, community spirit and local high streets. However, this has also pinpointed some of the frustrations people have with the things that negatively impact on what people enjoy most about the borough such as litter, traffic congestion and anti-social behaviour in some parts of the borough.
- 1.2 In September 2020 Cabinet asked officers to develop an ambition for the future of Merton as part of our recovery planning from the pandemic. They asked for this ambition to be co-designed with residents, businesses and partners.
- 1.3 Beginning in April 2021 we have undertaken one of the most extensive listening exercises in recent times to understand the impact of the pandemic and what people want their borough to look like in the future. Thousands have taken part in this engagement across a range of different platforms statistical survey, community groups, open access website and focus groups.

- 1.4 Using this insight alongside other recent engagement activities and data and intelligence about the borough we have developed an ambition for the borough rooted in the views and aspirations of residents. Alongside this ambition, we have developed a strategic framework for delivery which includes 5 priorities, 10 principles and a range of delivery objectives for each of the priorities.
- 1.5 This strategic framework is intended to shape and guide the future delivery of the council, how it invests its resources and its approach to working with partners. To deliver the ambition that residents have set out will require all of us the council, residents, businesses, voluntary and community sector and public sector bodies to work collaboratively and cooperatively together.
- 1.6 Once agreed by Cabinet the Strategic Framework will be communicated to residents, businesses and partners, with content, design and communication channels adjusted to reflect the different audiences through the appropriate channels in January 2022.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1. Cabinet identified the need for an outward facing strand of the Recovery and Modernisation programme in September 2020 to support the borough's recovery from the pandemic and to deliver on recommendations from the LGA Peer Challenge. It was agreed the Council would go ahead with developing a long-term place-based strategic ambition and future priorities in collaboration with our partners. At this stage, the scale of the challenge ahead for post-pandemic recovery was becoming apparent, with emerging evidence of the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on our communities, challenges facing households across the borough and high numbers of residents on financial support with further uncertainty ahead. ¹
- 2.2 To this end, we have undertaken the largest borough-wide engagement programme in recent times to understand what matters most to our residents, how the pandemic has affected them and to find out their ambition for the future of the borough. We recognised that any ambition for the future and post-pandemic recovery needed to be evidence-led from the outset and rooted in the insight from those who live, work and spend time in the borough. Insight from this engagement has provided a robust evidence base about what matters most to residents in Merton, their experiences of the pandemic and what they want for the future.

3 OVERVIEW OF ENGAGEMENT

- 3.1. Early in 2021 the council commissioned Traverse to work with us on developing and delivering a borough wide engagement programme Your Merton. The engagement took place from April to August 2021. It was made up of four distinct but complementary strands:
 - Residents Perception survey;
 - Open access digital platform Commonplace;
 - Focus groups delivered on our behalf by local VCS groups;

¹ Council response to the Covid-19 pandemic report to Full Council, August 2020

- In-depth deliberative workshops with residents.
- 3.2. The focus of the engagement was to understand three key areas:
 - 1. the impact of the pandemic;
 - 2. how people felt about their local area;
 - 3. what people wanted for the future both in the short to long term.
- 3.3. The full report has now been published and can be viewed online here. Key findings are outlined below and the public document for Merton 2030 will include a short summary of the engagement findings to set the context for the ambition and strategic priorities.
- 3.4. At the same time as the Your Merton engagement programme, a dedicated youth survey of young residents in Merton was commissioned by the Children's Trust specifically to hear from young residents about the impact of Covid-19 and what they want in future. This has enabled us to take account of these emerging findings from the research to ensure the voice of young residents' is reflected. Over 2,200 young residents participated in this research, which is due to be published in January 2022. Emerging insights from the draft report are referred to below.
- 3.5. Research undertaken by BAME Voice, Mencap and Age UK in 2021, commissioned through the Health and Wellbeing Board, has also provided valuable insight into the lived experience of those hit hardest by the pandemic. All these engagement findings have informed our evidence base and our understanding of what our communities want for the future.

4 INSIGHT FROM THE ENGAGEMENT

- 4.1. The findings from the Your Merton engagement broadly fall into three areas:
 - Assets
 - Frustrations
 - Ambitions for the future

4.2. Our assets

- 4.3. **Green spaces** emerge as a highly valued asset of Merton and part of the borough's unique identity. People reported valuing parks and green spaces across the borough much more during the pandemic. This is echoed in the early findings of the Youth Survey research commissioned by the Children's Trust.
- 4.4. People also spoke positively about their communities and valued the **community feel** in their local area during the pandemic. They wanted to hold onto this and see shared spaces in the borough such as high streets and green spaces where people can come together.

4.5. Frustrations

- 4.6. **Litter and cleanliness** came out as a big frustration for our residents and featured frequently on the open-access website. It was a common theme across all strands of the engagement and respondent groups. Your Merton community group respondents spoke negatively about dirty streets and young residents highlighted litter as one of the top problems in the borough
- 4.7. **Traffic and transport** also emerged as a significant source of frustration, although this was felt differently by respondents from frustration about parking and traffic management to lack of safe active travel. Young people cited pollution as one of their top concerns.
- 4.8. **Anti-social behaviour and safety** concerns were expressed by residents in parts of the borough in particular the eastern side of Merton and Mitcham. This was often connected with public spaces and issues such as public alcohol consumption. Young people consider safety to be an important issue for the future and have raised this through the Youth Survey.
- 4.9. **Isolation** emerged strongly in the feedback from the community groups. People spoke about loneliness, isolation and depression and missing their everyday activities. This is echoed in the early findings from the Children's Trust commissioned research almost two in five young people reported concerns about their mental health during lockdown.
- 4.10. **Declining high streets** were commented on as a source of frustration across all forms of the engagement. In the community groups, the less mobile and digitally excluded wanted to see a wider range of local independent shops and leisure facilities.

4.11. Ambitions for the future

- 4.12. **Revitalised high streets** emerged as a top ambition for the future people wanted to see a community hub high street where people could connect and high streets which were a source of pride and identity and a destination in themselves. When asked to think towards 2030, respondents on the open access platform Commonplace had ambitions for redesigned, revitalised high streets with a mix of uses spaces for people to socialise, mix of independent shops and more pedestrianised.
- 4.13. Maximising Merton's green assets was important to residents for the future, and they wanted to see them serve a range of uses in future. They wanted their parks to support wellbeing and act as shared spaces for community activity, but also generate visitors and income as well as protecting the environment and biodiversity. It was felt that Merton has sufficient range and diversity of green spaces to accommodate a variety of uses.
- 4.14. When asked to look ahead towards 2030, as well as a vibrant high street, respondents wanted to see measures which protected the environment, such as increased active travel and green transport. This includes electric cars, better buses, green infrastructure and less pollution. Residents saw active travel forming part of their vision for future high streets as well as a range of other green initiatives. Addressing pollution and climate change was a top concern for young people in the resident's survey.

- 4.15. In the findings from the Children's Trust commissioned Youth Survey, when asked about what they wanted to see for the future in Merton, four specific themes are emerging from young residents:
 - (i) The environment (e.g. cleaner streets and less pollution)
 - (ii) Space and places (e.g. parks and youth clubs to go to, things to do)
 - (iii) More of a say (e.g. involved in decision-making and having a say)
 - (iv) To feel safe (e.g. better relationship with police, more street lighting)

Over and above this, however, they wanted the same kinds of improvements in common with other residents of Merton – such as improved services, better transport and more support for those in need.

5 INSIGHT FROM DATA AND INTELLIGENCE.

- 5.1. Covid-19 is known to have affected parts of our communities differently, in common with other local authority areas, and exacerbated existing inequalities and disadvantage. The economic impact of the pandemic and lockdown restrictions has had a harder hit on lower income households and placed our local business sectors and high streets under severe strain and continued uncertainty.
- 5.2. Pre-pandemic, Merton has worked with partners to address the challenges in existing inequalities in the borough and bridge the gap in outcomes across different wards. This is reflected in key strategies such as the Community Plan, Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Equality and Community Cohesion strategy.
- 5.3. We have drawn on the most recent data and intelligence to inform the ambition and the priorities which comprise the strategic framework. A more detailed data 'snapshot' will be published alongside the ambition as a summary of the data evidence base. The current evidence shows the scale of the challenge in the wake of Covid-19 and points to the need to work urgently with our partners to address the ongoing financial, social and health impact of the pandemic and tackle inequalities in the borough.
- 5.4. The published public-facing Merton2030 document will include a short, visual snapshot of key statistics and data about the borough infographic, in particular what we know the impact of Covid -19 so far.
- 5.5. Some of the key statistics are set out below:

Health and wellbeing

- 514 deaths in total from Covid-19 as of December 2021 the east of the borough saw a higher rate of COVID-19 deaths over 2020 (131.1 per 100,000), than those in the west (120.7 per 100,000)
- 13,680 residents (6.6% of the population) were on the shielding patients list (SPL), predominantly in the east of the borough
- 11.2% of residents aged 16+ reported often or always feeling lonely during the pandemic.

• 3 in 10 referrals to social prescribers between Oct 2019 and March 2021 were for social isolation. Of these nearly 30% were aged 65+.

Impact on low-income households.

- 5.2% of working age residents on Universal credit. This remains significantly higher than 2.7% pre-pandemic and equates to 7,115 working age residents.
- 317% increase was seen in emergency food provision during the pandemic, which was mostly provided to households in the east of the borough.
- The number of school pupils eligible for free school meals rose during the pandemic from 17.5% to 22.1% (an extra 1,220) in 2020/21.
- 5,195 (13.1%) children in Merton under 16 years live in low-income families

Impact on children and young people

- (73.1%) of young people in Merton were worried about falling behind or less confident about their learning because of Covid-19 and lockdown.
- 55% of children in the east of the borough meet school readiness expectations, this compares to 68% in the west of the borough; the London Average is 62%. there is a risk that this gap could wider further due to the impact on disadvantaged pupils.
- 12.6% (4,131) of Merton school pupils received Special Educational Needs (SEN) support – an extra 120 children in 2020/21. Of these 4.8% (1,583) had an Education Health and Care Plan in 2020/21 – mostly living in the East of the borough.

Economy and employments

- 38,200 people were furloughed in Merton during the pandemic topping a height of 18.6% as a proportion of the age working population. Merton has consistently had the highest rate of jobs furloughed during the pandemic out of the SLP borough.
- In June 2021, the proportion of the working age population claiming selfemployment funding support (SEISS) was 7.8% down from 9.8% in July 2020.
 Merton has had the highest rate of SEISS claims out of the SLP boroughs and higher than the London average
- 3,500 jobs were lost in Merton in 2020 and a further 1,800 in 2021, as estimated by Oxford Economics.
- Over £55m of financial support was provided to Merton businesses in rates relief and grants.
- Current shop vacancy rate for the borough on street inspections is estimated at 12.6%, with highest vacancy rates in Raynes Park and Mitcham.
- 5.6. With significant uncertainty still ahead, strategic use of our data and intelligence
 and that of our partners will be crucial to understand the needs of our
 communities on a local level.

5.7. Development and delivery of the Merton 2030 ambition should be evidence-led across the piece – setting baselines, monitoring our progress, targeting implementation, and identifying emerging issues. This presents an opportunity for the council and its partners to address gaps in our intelligence and transform how we use data and intelligence as a borough. This will be critical for navigating the uncertainties and emerging challenges ahead – such as increasing mental health problems, food and fuel insecurity and resilience of our local businesses.

6. THE MERTON 2030 STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

- 6.1 Appendix 1 sets out the draft strategic framework that comprises our ambition for the borough, strategic priorities, guiding principles and delivery objectives. The ambition and strategic priorities are informed by the findings from engagement and the data analysis. This strategic framework is intended to shape and guide the strategic direction and delivery of the council and its partners.
- 6.2 To deliver an ambition which is rooted in the community, residents need to see their voice and their concerns reflected back to them. Our priorities and delivery objectives are grounded by what people have told us matters most to them, their lived experience and in our intelligence about the borough and its needs. The ambition and strategic priorities respond to the immediate challenges facing the borough in the wake of the pandemic in particular, tackling inequalities and disadvantage and acting to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on the most vulnerable.
- 6.3 This speaks to the importance of listening to insight from community groups and those who we tend to hear from less often in our usual engagement especially those who have been hardest hit during Covid-19. This includes people from our BAME communities, older people, disabled people and young people who were all disproportionately affected by the pandemic. It will be important that we hear and respond to their experiences during, and prior to, the pandemic and continue to listen.
- 6.4 While the Council has an important role to play in shaping and taking forward the ambition as a leader of place, it should be a collaborative enterprise and partnership response working hand in hand with our partners on a local level but also with our communities, aligning our collective resources and efforts towards a shared ambition for the borough

Our Ambition for Merton

6.5 Looking back over the last decade, there is much that Merton can be proud of in what the council and its partners have delivered for its residents and communities. The recent experience of the pandemic has imposed huge strains on the borough's residents, but it has also reinforced the value and importance of the council's role in leading the response to this unique event. We have shown the strength and effectiveness of our local partnerships and what we can achieve when we work cooperatively with our communities and partners.

- Our residents have described a set of aspirations for the future of the borough and its communities which provides the bedrock for our ambition. Our ambition, set out in Appendix 1, very much reflects what residents have told us they want the borough to look and feel like in the future. It builds on the strengths of the borough and what makes Merton unique, while not shying away from the big challenges ahead. Merton has a huge amount to offer but not everyone has been able to benefit from this to the same degree and we have not shouted loud enough about what makes Merton and its communities great.
- 6.7 People have also told us how important community is to them and want to see a vision for the future which brings people together. They value the diversity in our communities, want to hold onto the community spirit from the pandemic and see more places in their local area where people can come together. Residents recognised the importance of fairness and that strong communities support those in need and that people need to have a stake in the borough and can afford the basics in life including somewhere decent to live. Young people want to have say in the future of the borough. Merton has a wealth of assets in its community infrastructure, especially our voluntary and community groups our ambition must reinforce and build on these.
- 6.8 High street regeneration was a shared ambition for residents across the borough. They emphasised a high street that delivered a place to meet up with family and friends, with things to do and which gave them a sense of pride in their local neighbourhood.
- 6.9 As Merton's main asset, residents wanted well-maintained parks, waterways and green space to be central to the future ambition. They wanted parks to support individual wellbeing, foster a sense of community, generate income and help tackle climate.
- 6.10 Residents told us how much community, high streets and green spaces matter to them as a source of both pride and a feeling of belonging. Therefore they want to contribute to delivering this ambition with the council and its partners. Also, they want to be actively engaged in shaping the future of these assets including being involved in discussing any trade-offs of possible futures. We have tried to reflect all of the above in the draft ambition.

Our Strategic Priorities

- 6.11 To achieve our ambition we have developed 5 strategic priorities to shape and guide delivery. In no particular order these are:
 - Maintaining excellent education and skills for all ages and needs;
 - Promote a dynamic, connected and inclusive community and economy with safe, vibrant high streets and jobs for our residents;
 - Support residents who are most in need and promote the safety and wellbeing of all our communities;
 - Ensure a clean and environmentally sustainable borough with inclusive open spaces where people can come together and enjoy a variety of natural life;
 - Work to make Merton a fairer, more equal borough and support those on lower income by tackling poverty and fighting for quality affordable housing.

- 6.12 Each strategic priority has a number of delivery objectives sitting beneath it. These are set out in detail in Appendix 1. Delivery objectives are set out by timescale:
 - Short term delivered in the next 12 months.
 - Medium term delivered over 1 to 4 years
 - Longer term delivered within 4 to 8 years

Further work to develop delivery objectives with departments and partners is planned for the next six months.

Our Guiding Principles

- 6.13 We have developed 10 guiding principles to inform how we implement the strategic priorities and related delivery objectives. These are the things that matter to this council and also act as enablers for delivery. Our guiding principles are:
 - Engage, involve and communicate effectively with our community;
 - Actively promote equality, representation and inclusion;
 - Aim to keep council tax at or below the south London average;
 - Ensuring financial stability and value for money;
 - Invest in the efficient and secure use of digital technology and & data;
 - Work with and learn from national, regional and local partners;
 - Consider the environmental and social impact of all that we do;
 - Monitor our progress from local to global;
 - Put Merton first in all economic and financial decisions;
 - Look to the long term.

7. PLANNING FOR DELIVERY

- 7.1 CMT has agreed that there should be an overarching delivery framework for each strategic priority. Given the broad nature of the priorities, Directors and DMTs have developed a series of more specific objectives for each (Appendix 1), which will form the basis for more detailed delivery plans.
- 7.2 Planning for delivery will need to be ongoing over the coming months. While some of the delivery objectives are fully funded, with an implementation plan already in place, others require work to more clearly define the objectives and develop the related plans, including consideration of any investment required to support delivery. Officers therefore intend to bring back to Cabinet an updated list of delivery objectives in June 2022.
- 7.3 Some of this can be developed at departmental level, but the more complex and cross-cutting issues e.g. high streets, community spirit, economy and employment, etc. will require different approaches. These will need to include active engagement from other organisations across the public, voluntary and

- business sectors, as well as managers and staff across the organisation. Most importantly, they will need to engage with residents and their communities.
- 7.4 There are already several mechanisms in place either well-established or recently set up to support this work, e.g. the joint Merton Partnership and its thematic boards; AD/CMT meetings; innovation lab approach to service redesign².
- 7.5 The delivery of this ambition will clearly not be a short-term action but will require it being worked through the Council's annual business planning process for several years to ensure that our business and resource is directed to the appropriate actions.
- 7.6 There is already a significant amount of work underway across the council and with partners that aligns with these strategic priorities. As we plan for delivery, we will consider existing commitments and potential development or extension of additional projects or services. Key dependencies to consider will be the levers at the disposal of the Council and its partners, planning across the short to long term and resources required to deliver.
- 7.7 A 'Your Merton' fund of £1m was set up in reserves during 2020/21 to support our initial response to what residents have told us. We have set out in Appendix 2 a list of delivery objectives that will be implemented in the short term, including those projects being supported by investment from the 'Your Merton' fund.
- 7.8 In September CMT agreed a new approach to service planning starting in April 2022. The new approach is focused on translating the strategic priorities and delivery objectives into operational delivery at a team level with staff engagement at the heart of the process. It allows for the service delivery planning process to be more effectively used internally to engage with staff about how they think we should deliver the priorities and delivery objectives into the future. It allows time to share plans across directorates and with other relevant teams.
- 7.9 The new timetable provides DMTs with early identification of resourcing issues that can feed into the budget planning process and where services need to be redesigned / recommissioned. It gives teams and individuals the chance to contribute to how priorities are delivered and that they see how their work contributes to the achievement of the strategic priorities.
- 7.10 Further resourcing implications will be considered through the process for developing the MTFS as part of the council's delivery planning process. We would also look to leverage external investment to support delivery for example accessing grants from regional or central government and work with our partners to make use of all the levers, assets and investment at our disposal at a local level.
- 7.11 Members will have important and sometimes difficult decisions concerning how the Council funds its strategic priorities and at the same time ensures it achieves a balanced annual budget. This will include consideration of investment to ensure Departments have the necessary expertise and capacity

² Design Council Framework for Innovation

- to develop and deliver the plans and programmes that will be critical to success and achieving outcomes for residents.
- 7.12 The strategic priorities and delivery objectives will be reflected in a refreshed Corporate Performance Framework for 2022/23 and a new Corporate Performance Framework will be in place for 2023/24.
- 7.13 It is proposed that Council receives an annual update on progress on implementing the delivery objectives over the last financial year and proposals for the forthcoming year in May/June. This update would also go to each of the scrutiny panels for review. This timeframe allows Scrutiny the opportunity to both scrutinise performance and to contribute to the future planning process and resourcing around delivery.

8. COMMUNICATING TO RESIDENTS AND PARTNERS

- 8.1 Articulating and communicating these ambitions to our residents, as well as how we propose to turn them into actions, is a critical next step in the development of the Merton 2030 ambition. The LGA Peer Challenge in 2020 stressed the importance of designing the ambition with residents, communicating it back to them and keeping them informed of progress.
- 8.2 Once agreed by Cabinet, the Merton 2030 strategic framework will be published in January 2022 and made available to residents, partners and staff, with content, design and communication channels adjusted to reflect the different audiences.

9 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

9.1. Cabinet have already agreed the development of an ambition that is based on comprehensive engagement with residents. The approach set out in the report above meets that requirement. One alternative option is to develop a different set of priorities. However, it should be noted that the draft priorities and delivery objectives set out in this report directly reflect the feedback from residents and are informed by the data analysis to identify the key issues and needs which was the approach agreed by LSG.

10 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 10.1. A borough-wide engagement programme was carried out to inform the development of strategic priorities. Further detail about the engagement undertaken is included above in Section 2 and covered in the appendix. There has been consultation with all DMTs regarding the findings and priority areas for delivery.
- 10.2. Briefings on the engagement and data analysis to inform the development of the ambition have been provided to: all councillors, the Overview and Scrutiny Commission, the Health and Wellbeing Board, the Sustainable Communities and Transport Board and the Merton Partnership.

11 TIMETABLE

	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1
Delivery planning										
Strategic Framework to Cabinet	A									
Strategic Framework published and communicated	A									
Updated Strategic Framework to Cabinet / Council with delivery plans			A							
New approach to service planning starts					\rightarrow				\rightarrow	
Growth, savings and recommissioning plans considered					→				→	
Annual review of performance and delivery objectives to Council / Scrutiny						A				A

12 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

12.1. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. As delivery plans are developed, resourcing implications will be considered through the process for developing the MTFS for 2023/26. £1m was allocated to the Your Merton reserve at the end of 2020/21 and has been used to further develop our immediate response to the issues raised through the engagement – see Appendix 2.

13 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

13.1. There are no legal implications at this stage.

14 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

14.1. The engagement and data analysis has been developed with these considerations to the fore. In particular the engagement with residents through the community groups has specifically focused on those residents who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. The priorities set out above and in particular priority 5 aim to promote human rights, equalities and community cohesion.

15 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

15.1. Priority 3 seeks to address the issues and concerns raised by residents about crime and anti-social behaviour.

16 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

16.1. There are no risk management and health and safety implications arising from this report.

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

- Appendix 1 Strategic Framework
- Appendix 2 List of short term delivery objectives

18 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 18.1. LGA Corporate Peer Challenge, report to Cabinet, 9 March 2020
- 18.2. Developing a place based strategic vision for Merton, report to LSG, 28 September 2020
- 18.3. Your Merton update to LSG 11 October 2021

