

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

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

Reply

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

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

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

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

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

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

Supplementary

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

Reply

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

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

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

Reply

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

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

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

Supplementary

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

Reply

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

From Councillor Johnston to the Cabinet Member for Transport

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

Reply

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

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

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

Supplementary

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

Reply

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

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

Would the Cabinet Member please provide the following data:

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

Under retirement age

100% discount

80-99% discount

60-79% discount

40-59% discount

20-39% discount

0-19% discount

Above retirement age

100% discount

80-99% discount

60-79% discount

40-59% discount

20-39% discount

0-19% discount

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

Reply

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

Under retirement age:

- 100% discount 4588 households @ £6,430,309.42
- 80-99% discount 416 households @ £596,513.07
- 60-79% discount 343 households @ £398,538.97
- 40-59% discount 401 households @ £334,469.62

- 20-39% discount 465 households @ £220,669.24
- 0-19% discount 481 households @ £85,131.24

Above retirement age:

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

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

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

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

Supplementary

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

Reply

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

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

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

Reply

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Supplementary

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

Reply

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

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

From Councillor Wilson to the Leader of the Council

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

Reply

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

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

funding contribution of 10% towards the Motspur Park scheme, which is likely to have contributed to the bid being successful.

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

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

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

Supplementary

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

Reply

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

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

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

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

Reply

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

Supplementary

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

Reply

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

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

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

Reply

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

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

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

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

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

Further to this, we have held several events to nurture and strengthen the partnerships with the voluntary and community sector, ensuring that duplication is minimised and cross-working is maximised. This includes a very well-attended Merton Partnership conference, and a "marketplace" event held in the Civic Centre

to allow council staff to meet with charities from across the borough. We are in discussions about future opportunities.

Supplementary

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

Reply

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

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