

Merton Council Council

19 April 2023

Supplementary agenda

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From Cllr Neaverson to the Cabinet Member for Transport

How is the Council supporting people who live and work in Merton to be able to rent, own or share an electric vehicle?

Reply

Merton will soon become the best-equipped area for on-street charging in Outer London.

Of the 90,000 households in the borough, an estimated 37,000 cannot access off-street electric vehicle (EV) charge points at home. Officers are finalising the roll-out of 530 lamp column charge points within the next six weeks, having reached the halfway mark on 30 March.

The project will triple the number of public charge points available to Merton residents from 259 at the start of January to 789. Once completed, 78,000 Merton homes will have at least one charge point within a two-minute walk of their home.

In addition to the current roll-out of lamp-column chargers, the Council is also in the process of bidding for LEVI (Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure) funding announced recently which will further increase EV charging infrastructure for our residents and businesses.

The Council's Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel have established an EV Charging Task Group which has met over the past three months and is due to report back to Cabinet a set of recommendations to shape the borough's EV charging strategy which officers will commence this spring.

We have also written to every large supermarket operator, retail park owner and petrol forecourt operators in the borough to encourage greater provision of rapid EV charging in these locations to support residents to charge cars as part of shopping trips and also to contribute to the borough's carbon reduction goals. The Council is also encouraging petrol station operators to convert sites to local EV charging hubs.

Merton also has a number of car-club operators in the borough including Enterprise and Zip-Car. Zip-Car already offer a number of EV vehicles to members in the borough. In discussion with ZipCar, we understand that they intend to have a fully electric fleet by 2025.

We want Merton to be one of the best places in London to own or drive an electric vehicle and we are making significant progress.

Supplementary

Thank you very much for the answer, and it's been fantastic to see just the amount of progress that has been made to make Merton one of the best boroughs in London to own an electric vehicle, so my congratulations go to the Cabinet Member and the officers on the speed with which they have managed to do that. On the subject of speed, can I ask the Cabinet Member what is happening to bring more rapid charging options to the borough.

Reply

I thank Cllr Neaverson for his original question and for the brilliant timing of his supplementary because this very afternoon, the Leader and I, with officers met at a fast charging station run by a fast charging company with a network of such stations abroad and in the UK. Their stations can take just fifteen minutes to add 300km and for those who prefer the British Imperial Unit, the distance in terms of miles is 15 minutes to add 186.4113576, do you want me to continue 71.

From Cllr Hall to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

AELTC are making various claims about the feedback received on their plans, could the Cabinet Member please detail what agreements have been made between cabinet members, officers, and representatives of AELTC regarding the Club's planning application for developing the former golf course regarding publicising and sharing the results of informal and formal consultations with residents?

Reply

Officers have been negotiating with the agent for the planning application around matters of planning judgement and potential heads of terms for a Section 106 legal agreement for planning obligations, but their views and recommendation have not been finalised and will not be confirmed until the report to the Planning Applications Committee has been completed, signed off and published for public consumption.

It is not a legal requirement of the national Development Management Procedure Order 2015 for details of informal consultations between applicants and the Council to be published on the planning register. All comments from statutory advisors and formal responses to them by applicants are displayed online at the Council's website. The analysis of these by the Planning Case Officer, together with all material planning considerations, will be published in the report to the Planning Applications Committee in due course.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you very much for the answer to my question which was regarding the All England Tennis Club. I am asking whether there can be published the details of any formal or informal discussions held with representatives of the AELTC to date, regarding their planning application, which is 21/P2900, and also are you aware of any misleading statements being made by their representatives on their many interactions with our residents and residents of Wandsworth, if not I can supply you with relevant information and I'm asking this because they are making some claims about people and organisations which are supposedly supporting their plans, when this is simply not true, and I have documentary evidence of this, so I would like to make an opportunity to talk to the relevant Cabinet Member in the future about this, thank you.

Reply

Thank you very much Cllr Hall for your original question which you received a response and thanks for the supplementary. Yes, I'll be willing to sit with you and discuss anything that you may want to discuss in the future, but as this is still a live application, there is not much that we can say about it. Also you'll be aware that any representation that is made will come in planning report in due course, but yes we can discuss afterwards, thank you.

From Cllr Macauley to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

What are the Council's plans to mark the Coronation of His Majesty King Charles?

Reply

The Coronation of King Charles III will be one of the country's biggest celebrations in decades – and we're working hard to ensure the borough can mark the occasion appropriately. We've taken an approach of enabling our communities to celebrate the way they want to and applied this across the key themes of Street Parties, Big Lunches, and the Big Help Out on Monday May 8.

For street parties - as with the Queen's Jubilee celebrations, we are again waiving the fees associated with street closures and supplying party packs to make it easy for people to hold street parties. We have more than 100 street parties booked, which is more than the Jubilee celebrations in 2022.

For Big Lunches – larger-scale events – we opted to use our resource to offer money to local community groups and organisations to help them run their own parties, in the way they want to. £350 grants are being awarded to all organisations holding a Big Lunch.

This has been a very popular offer. We have more than 40 Big Lunch events booked, ranging from 100 to 500 people per event. Successful applicants include Age UK Merton, Wimbledon & Putney Common Conservators, the Commonsides Trust and Morden Little League.

Our grants are helping to pay for things like speakers, food and gazebos, while the council is also providing tables and chairs for those events that require them, at no additional cost for residents.

A big screen will also be installed for the weekend at Fair Green in Mitcham, as there are community events booked there for both Saturday and Sunday.

The Mayor is holding a special Big Lunch for our fantastic local charity contacts, and myself and the Leader will be attending another special Big Lunch for our community and voluntary partners, to be held at Merton College.

For the Big Help Out – the volunteering-themed day – we are running a ticketed volunteering event at Three Kings Piece in Mitcham, where residents can come along to help us plant wild flowers and share a bite to eat. We're also working with

Merton Connected to support a sustained push to encourage even more residents to volunteer in their communities regularly.

And we're promoting our brilliant staff volunteering policy internally, which allows every colleague at the council to take two paid days off for community volunteering every year.

Finally, we will be making sure the borough looks the part. 150 Coronation lamp-post banners will be installed in our high streets, and our libraries and other central areas will be planted with flowers to mark the occasion.

Supplementary

Madame Mayor, I would like to thank the Cabinet Member for her response. And I would like to ask her a supplementary question. Can she tell us tonight, how many residents are we expecting to attend the weekend event.

Reply

I'd like to thank the Councillor for her question and her supplementary. As we heard from the Leader we are expecting around 100 street parties, so more than we had for the jubilee and over forty big lunches this time as well, so we are providing grants. So we estimate there are going to be around 10,000 people attending those, so there'll be lots of things going on in your area. On top of the volunteering opportunities that Cllr Garrod outlined on Three Kings Piece on Monday, there are also events like the big Womble Clean Up on Wimbledon Common and there'll be lots of other ways to get involved. Given Cllr Macauley's commitment and affection for the Royal Family, I am particularly keen to see what amazing outfit she puts on and how she celebrates the weekend.

From Cllr Mercer to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

We are all enjoying the daffodils which are visible in lots of the Borough. We all love the green spaces in Merton and we know that bulbs are cheap when bought in bulk. Would the Council consider making an annual grant available to provide supporters of our parks (such as Friends groups) and residents groups with bulbs for planting each year?

Reply

Thank you for your comments about the bulb drifts in Parks and Amenity Locations across Merton we are very pleased with the outcomes so far, which this year has totalled some 250,000 spring bulbs including standard Daffodil mixes seen primarily on Merton Amenity Grass Verges as well as more floristically diverse Bee and Butterfly Biodiversity Mixes which includes more Pollen and Nectar rich bulbs which you will see in Merton Park as part of a Pollinator Parks Program set to launch in 2023. Many of the flowers you see were planted by local volunteers, and I'd like to thank everyone

who has given up their time and put on their gardening gloves to help to add colour to our greenspaces.

You are correct that bulk purchases are a cheaper way to add visual interest and colour and if suitable mixes chosen can also provide much needed early nectar sources for pollinating insects and this year we have been using a Machine Bulb Planting technique that sees circa 100-150 bulbs planted per square meter by machine and creates a much denser carpet of colour in spring. We will obviously continue to promote community bulb planting events for smaller area in tandem also.

The councils will soon re-launch its Ward Allocation Scheme April 2023- March 2026 with £15K allocated per ward that community groups can request funding for. This year LBM Greenspaces have been working closely with colleagues in Planning to provide a catalogue of options that will include Machine Bulb Planting and Community Bulb Planting as priced options and the mixes that could be offered and the benefit they hold from colour and visual interest as well as more those richer in early nectar for foraging insects. Watch this space for the launch package that will go out to ward councillors and community groups alike.

Supplementary

I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for her response which is good news with regard to Ward funds, I support wholeheartedly her enthusiasm, if she needed any, for the flowers, the colourful demonstrations across the borough, which lots of people have contributed to. I just wanted to mention my experience in relation to planting which has taken place in Merton Park, 2 years ago when I was but a humble street representative in daffodil planting. The ward allocation provided the funding for all the bulbs purchased in Merton Park, there was an enthusiastic response from the local residents, but a year later the same residents were raring to go and the ward funds were no longer available. The John Innes Society and others chipped in a saved the day and the recent glorious display is the result. You have suggested a prospect of future funding that should enable momentum to be maintained rather than lost, and I can only say please can we go forward with as much certainty as possible.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, and thank you Cllr Mercer for all your efforts you put into your local community before you were a councillor, and many of us here have been busy digging up ground and laying bulbs. So we are really excited about the ward allocation scheme, we have put lots of effort in to trying to make it as straightforward and as easy possible to fund a whole range of different types of projects, so for the next couple of months, councillors across the chamber will be hearing from officers to have dedicated meetings to explain the process to them and we hope to get the money out and funding some great projects across all of our wards over the next few years

From Cllr Barlow to the Cabinet Member for Transport

Could the Cabinet Member for Transport please provide an update on the Council's plans for data collection in and around the proposed East Hillside Low Traffic Neighbourhood.

Reply

Council officers are finalising positions for the cameras, including those for the East Hillside area as a priority in the programme. Electrical connections are due this month. Officers have engaged local groups and have received some suggestions for further camera locations on the periphery of the neighbourhood. These locations are being assessed prior to the installation of sensors which we anticipate will be in the coming weeks (April - early May)

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, thank you to the Cabinet Member for his answer. Does he agree that the only way to assess if one area's traffic is worse than another's is to have data to compare those areas, and if he does will he commit to the same level of data collection across Village Ward and the wider area as is planned for East Hillside?

Reply

I'm happy to meet Councillor Barlow to discuss this further.

From Cllr MacArthur to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Following the recent opening of the Toynbee water fountain, could the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride please advise as to the administration's policy regarding the installation of further water fountains across the Borough and outline any specific plans they may have?

Reply

The Council is proud to have partnered with the Heritage of London Trust (HOLT) to restore the Victorian Toynbee Fountain, not only for its historic value, but as a working water bottle refill station.

The Council is in discussion with HOLT regarding restoration of the Hanbury Fountain as a future project.

Elsewhere in the borough, the Council has worked with Thames Water and the Mayor of London to install new water refill stations in Colliers Wood, Mitcham, Raynes Park, Morden and Wimbledon town centres.

The installation was carried out by Thames Water; under a programme led by the Mayor of London and co-ordinated by the FutureMerton team.

<https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/environment-and-climate-change/waste-and-recycling/single-use-plastic-bottles/drinking-fountains-london?ac-50764=160301>

The Mayor / Thames Water's programme has now ended. There isn't at present any new programme for installing water fountains. If there are any suggested locations; it may be suitable as a candidate project via Civic Pride – Investing in Neighbourhoods funding, and the next round will open in the autumn.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and the Cabinet Member for her response. While I am of course pleased to see the restoration of the Toynbee fountain and the others mentioned, I am surprised that there are no plans to install more water fountains across our borough, especially in our parks and green spaces given that we are trying to encourage sustainability and move away from single use plastics. I understand from a letter in The Guardian that the Cabinet Member disputed Polly Toynbee's assertion that local councils are unhelpful with regard to water fountains because of health and safety concerns or costs, and I wondered therefore what are the reasons for not having a more proactive plan for installing water fountains in Merton?

Reply

I'd like to thank Cllr MacArthur for her question and this is an issue that we feel very strongly about, reducing plastic use and encouraging people to use water fountains which is why we have put our money into restoring the fountain she is talking about and why we have secured funds to install new water fountains that did not exist only 18 months ago across our town centres, so we have been leading the way and we would love to, when we have more resources, to put more of these and we would encourage all of our residents, when they are out and about to take a reusable water bottle and use the water fountains that exist.

From Cllr Hayes to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Greenspaces and Climate Change

What is the Council doing to increase the borough's tree canopy?

Reply

We know from a recent study that Merton's total tree canopy (including trees on private land) covers an area of 1,040 hectares) . This is equivalent to approximately 28% of the borough.

The major concentrations of canopy cover are in Wimbledon and Mitcham Commons and Morden Park. From the study we also know that of the total tree canopy:

- 26% consists of woodlands contained within parks and public open spaces (266.12ha).
- 1.5% consists of individual woodlands (15.2ha).
- 11.2% consists of street trees (116.7ha).
- 61.3% is in private gardens, cemeteries and institutional grounds (641.98)

But as you will see from (Figure 2 Map) showing tree canopy distribution and (Figure 3 Graph) showing % Tree Canopy cover in Merton by Ward shows that nearly all wards in Merton have a tree canopy cover below the London average of 21%

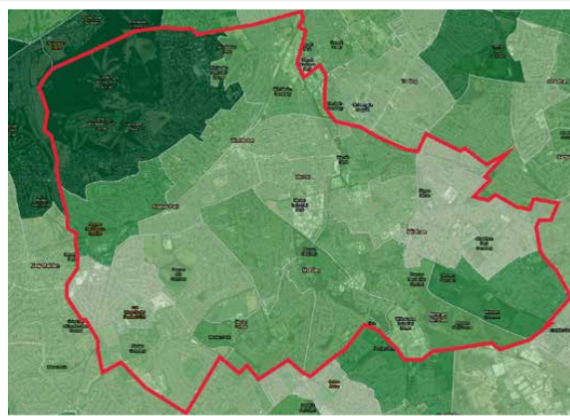


Figure 2 – Tree canopy cover distribution in Merton by Ward (pre-2022 Merton Ward boundary changes 2022). Darker green indicates more tree cover (Source UK Ward Canopy Cover Map. Forest Research)

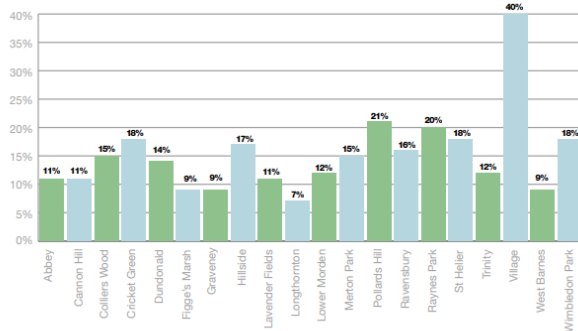


Figure 3 – Percentage tree canopy cover in Merton by ward (pre-2022 Merton Ward boundary changes 2022). (Source: UK Ward Canopy Cover Map. Forest Research)

The above knowledge and insight is helpful, but only goes so far. This is because we still need a much more detailed understanding about the composition of our urban forest and the value of its benefits, so that we can target effective improvements and benchmark our strategic progress. The Phase 2 of Merton's Tree Strategy which is currently in scoping phase will see a more detailed I-Tree survey of Merton's Urban Forest in both Council Owned and Private Land

This will all enable us to focus our tree planning resource towards areas of greater need. Councillors would have noted our 10,000 tree commitment in 2022-23 which has been funded from a mixture of council funded tree replacement and new planting as well as a variety of external funding initiative that the council's tree team has

pursued including Urban Tree Challenge / Queens Green Canopy / Trees for Cities Urban Community Woodland Projects and Trees for Streets Street Tree Sponsorship program seeking targeted funding to expand our tree canopy in most needed wards. As well as the borough proactively managing its existing canopy and veteran trees.

Supplementary

Thanks Madame Mayor and thanks to the Cabinet Member for his response. I must say when reading this, it was quite an uplifting piece of information and I was tempted to break into the famous Joyce Kilmer poem, I will never see anything as lovely as tree, but I won't. How are we supporting people, who live in Merton, to be part of ambitions to increase the tree canopy.

Reply

Thank you Cllr Hayes and thank you for your supplementary and for not reciting a poem. You're right is an ambitious target, our target is to increase our canopy by 10% by 2050 and we can't do that alone. As we've said many many times in this place and other places, we've planted 10,000 trees this year, which is our biggest tree planting year ever, but 3000 of those trees were planted on a community planting day over in Cranmer Green in partnership with Trees for Cities, in honour of Dave Lofthouse, who was one of our longest serving arboriculture managers and is a fitting legacy to a man with such passion and dedication to the trees of this borough. So community planting days to involve people and get them to understand their impact and what they can do, but also we've recently partnered with Trees for Streets which is an amazing online platform which allows residents business groups to plant trees that they sponsor in locations near to their homes or businesses and it's really easy to use and it's a great thing to have here available in Merton. And finally we're just about to wrap up on our first phase of our tree strategy and phase two will look at planting on private property and how we can support residents to look after their trees on their property, so lots of ways to get involved and lots more work to do, thank you for your question.

From Cllr Galea to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

What plans does the Council have to further develop the Council's ED&I agenda/strategy and support managers and staff at all levels to develop, monitor and review public facing policies, strategies and procedures to enable inclusive and accessible services to the residents of Merton?

Reply

Our new Council Plan, Building a Better Merton Together, includes a number of priorities that are aimed at improving inclusion and accessibility. These include:

- Launching a new Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy – including street safety, White Ribbon Accreditation, awareness campaigns and a new initiative for young women.
- Developing our support for Black businesses, including introducing a new Best Black Business Award in the Merton Business Awards.
- Developing our apprenticeship scheme to increase opportunities with a focus on disadvantaged young people.
- Engaging with event companies to attract cultural events to the borough.
- Working with our communities to relaunch the LGBTQ+ forum.
- Celebrating the 75th Windrush anniversary in partnership with local groups and communities, for which planning is well advanced.

We have also committed to launching and delivering on a new Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy. Officers are preparing a draft of this strategy now, which will come to Cabinet in draft form in July. It will then be the subject of broad public consultation before a final version is recommended for adoption by Council later this year.

Alongside the new strategy we are also putting together a report that provides data on a range of council services and how these are experienced by people with protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010. This report will then be updated on an annual basis both with data for the most recent year available and with narrative explaining what we are doing to address any issues of accessibility highlighted by that data.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and I thank you to the Cabinet Member for his response. I am pleased to learn that the council is working on a new equality diversity and inclusion strategy and I look forward to reviewing it when it's available. I was also pleased to learn last week that the council now has a workforce equality diversity and inclusion lead. It's good to know that we have an experienced professional looking at making sure the working environment at the Council is somewhere where everyone is comfortable to bring their whole self. It's a good start, but the council urgently needs and EDI role with a focus to develop and monitor and review public facing policies, strategies and procedures in order to enable inclusive and accessible services to the residents of Merton with a focus obviously on disabled members of the community because apparently we're not meeting everyone's needs, of all our residents, especially when they require adjustments. One resident, a carer for their teenage daughter, both describing as neurodiverse, therefore does the Cabinet Member agree with me that our new Equality Diversity and Inclusion lead and their team should look into how we can improve the accessibility of our services, policy work, communications and accessibility both to our buildings, public spaces and services. Thank you.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, thank you Cllr Galea for your question. I do agree with you that the Council needs to ensure that we are focusing on how our services and our buildings can be accessible and welcoming to all our residents. And indeed, you may not have been aware, we do have a head of equalities position on our staff, whose role is to do exactly that, so that work is already under way, and as I set out in my written answer, we will be bringing forward a new EDI strategy that will be coming to Cabinet in July and that will set out how we are continuing to progress that work. Thank you.

From Cllr Andrew Howard to the Cabinet Member for Education and Lifelong Learning

Please can the Cabinet Member tell me how many children failed to return to school in Merton after the Covid19 lockdowns, excluding children who are receiving elective home education?

Reply

Attendance is measured at various points in the school year. The data covering four half terms (up until Easter 2022) has been published and national comparators exist for this data set. Ofsted use the four half term data to judge attendance when they are inspecting schools. Rates of attendance in Merton have dropped during this period, as they have done nationally, demonstrating the impact of the pandemic as schools have moved back to normal expectations of attendance. Anxiety on the part of both children and their parents is affecting attendance levels. Merton continues to be above the national average for attendance and Merton's rate of Persistent Absence is also better than the national average. Improving attendance will be a significant priority for Merton in 2022/23, as it is nationally, and in line with newly issued guidance from the Government. Attendance is 2% below pre – pandemic levels and Persistence Absence is running at double the pre pandemic level based on 2 term data.

	Merton	National
Attendance	93.6%	92.7%
Absence	6.4%	7.3%
Persistent Absence	18.9%	22.0%

Date for 2 terms, Autumn 2021 and Spring 2022

Severe Absence is a new attendance category brought in as part of the Government's new approach to attendance. Merton Schools and the Local Authority have been working in partnership to support and challenge families to ensure the attendance of their children. There have been briefings for schools, governors, community champions.

Significant input from young inspectors told us many of the issues for young people that lead to severe absence. A key element of this is anxiety and mental health support. All Merton Schools have access to Mental Health in Schools Teams in Merton. We are working on drilling down of severe absence planning in Merton and are doing some baseline work which we intend to lead to a pilot with a couple of schools after Easter.

Supplementary

I thank the Cabinet Member for their response, and just have to cycle back to the question which was how many children returned to school, because of course that question wasn't answered, it was rather an obfuscatory response which talked about the method of collecting data and then simply gave me percentages of children not attending, and of course percentages can hide rather scary numbers. So frankly I would like the Cabinet Member to return to the question and actually conjure the actual numerical figure of children who are not in school in Merton or receiving elective home education and indeed what do they intend to do about it.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, and I thank Cllr Howard for his question and his supplementary. Data is often returned in percentages and it gives you a clear indication that in every area, such as attendance, absence and persistent absence, Merton consistently performs above the national average, but as you want specific figures for the borough, I don't have them to hand, but I will look into it and see if I can get them to you, if that is recorded. Thank you.

From Cllr Kaweesa to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

How is the Council continuing to support people through the cost of living crisis?

Reply

Since the council declared a cost of living emergency in July 2022, it has continued to work with its partners to identify and support people in need.

A Cost of Living Emergency Support Fund of £2million was agreed by Cabinet in September 2022. Cabinet agreed allocations for the first £1million, focusing on crisis support and addressing immediate challenges and an update on this first tranche of funding was presented to January Cabinet.

Ongoing mechanisms are in place for engaging with voluntary sector and other key partners, including the Community Response Steering Group made up of the Council and partners, sharing ideas and best practice, determining volunteering and neighbourhood support and oversight of local demand and emerging themes and its Fuel Poverty Subgroup, plus the Food Response Network.

A cross-council Cost of Living Working Group was also established in November 2022 which draws together and builds on the various strands of work being

undertaken to address the cost of living crisis by sharing knowledge on the changing scale and nature of residents' cost of living needs, both short and long term. This working group has developed and overseen the implementation of the draft Cost of Living Strategy and Action Plan setting out activities, timescales and ownership. The group has also taken the lead on collating and considering proposals for the second tranche of the £2million Cost of Living Support Fund. Alongside the £2million Cost of Living Support Funding, the Cost of Living Working Group is also keeping track of other pots of funding we can potentially draw upon, to maximise our available resources, as well as developing an approach to encouraging businesses in Merton to become London Living Wage employers.

The Cost of Living Strategy and Action Plan 2023-2025 – A cross-council boroughwide approach to supporting people living in Merton, sets out a two-year plan to ensure the council is responding to the cost of living crisis in the most effective and collaborative way possible by identifying and fully utilising means of support and funding across different areas, and by identifying and responding to the real needs of our residents. The priorities and actions set out in the Action Plan will be aligned going forward with those set out in the new Council Plan and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.

Proposed allocations of the second tranche were considered and agreed at March Cabinet.

A portion of the second tranche of funding (just under £25,000) is set aside as contingency as different priorities emerge, such as additional winter pressures in 2023/4 and any potential gaps in other related funding streams for example at present we do not know whether the household support fund will continue beyond March 2024.

£154,113.33 is allocated from the second tranche to extend funding to the end of March 2025 for Sustainable Merton and partners to support the Community Fridge Network and £42,000 is allocated to the Wimbledon Dons and the Trussell Trust to help them meet additional need over winter 2023/24.

To support arrangements in the voluntary and community sector for delivering emergency assistance to residents, an additional £100,000 is set aside for a further round of funding in 2023/24.

Provision has been made for £40,000 to top up the Discretionary Housing Payment fund to cover the April 2023 to March 2024 period.

Funding of £150,000 will extend to half terms the Holiday Activities and Food Programme which provides food and activities across school holidays for children on free school meals.

The Council's Communications team is working with partners to develop a new combined Cost of Living Communications Campaign to promote cost of living advice and support to residents, particularly reaching those who are digitally excluded. The campaign, called 'Cost Of Living Action', features a refreshed [cost of living webpage](#) with signposted support organised by topic and community groups, plus a range of

campaign resources. £35,000 of the second tranche of funding is allocated to the cost of living communications campaign.

Following a series of well-attended cost of living events for residents in Merton's libraries and the Civic Centre during the latter half of 2022 and early 2023, a schedule of events is being finalised for the remainder of 2023. £10,000 is allocated towards the cost of running this future programme of events.

Finally £199,621 of the tranche two funding has been earmarked to fund the continued operation of the Merton Community Hub from 1 June 2024 to end May 2025.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and you be pleased to know my question will be short and to the point and I thank the Cabinet Member for his response and can I ask as well as supporting families through the cost of living crisis now, we need to help them prepare for the future, especially as we continue to live under this Conservative Government where we can't expect things to get better any time soon, so can I ask the Cabinet Member, how is the Council doing that? Thank you.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, thank you Councillor Kaweesa for your question. You are absolutely right as well, as the very many measures the council has taken to help our residents of all ages through the cost of living crisis. And I would say many of which were voted against by the opposition party at our last budget meeting. We are particularly excited, or I am particularly excited about our plans to foster greater financial security for our younger residents and I particularly want to highlight our plan for working together with the Croydon and Sutton Credit Union, where we intend to give £20 to every year 7 child in the borough in September this year that sets up a young savers account with the Credit Union as well as ten pounds to every responsible adult that acts as a trustee for each child's account and to encourage them develop a healthy and sustainable savings habit. That money can only be accessed once they turn 17, so truly encouraging the young people of the borough to set up a healthy savings habit and secure greater levels of financial security for our next generation. Thank you Madame Mayor.

From Cllr Attawar to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

How is the Administration's commitment to upgrade Merton's CCTV network progressing?

Reply

As referenced in the main report, Merton is investing £1.3m in updating its CCTV systems to help tackle crime and anti social behaviour. Merton CCTV and IT are currently working on finalising the contract with the fibre supplier. We expect this contract to be signed before the end of April. The fibre is going to connect most of Merton CCTV cameras and will be the backbone for the new CCTV network and the new High Definition cameras, but it will take several months before it is installed. As soon as fibre is installed in an area, the upgraded cameras will follow.

In the meantime, we are using existing infrastructure to upgrade the cameras in Wimbledon Town Centre and the Civic Centre. These upgrades are expected to finish by the end of June.

Overall, the upgrade is progressing according to plan. Merton CCTV appointed a consultant who has done similar upgrades in other boroughs, and who has produced the specification, and the design for the upgrade. If everything goes according to plan, most of the cameras in Merton will be upgraded by April 2024.

Supplementary

I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for her response, and I do have a supplementary. How is Merton using CCTV to prevent crime in addition to bringing people to justice when they have committed it, and making people, in particular women, feel safe walking in our green spaces?

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and I'd like to thank Cllr Attawar for her question and for her supplementary. And as I said in my speech, this is a really important aspect of our service. So we work really closely with the police, so we actually have access to the police radio in our CCTV operative room, so that they can coordinate with the police when there is an ongoing incident and share information. And recently we have signed an information sharing agreement between the police and Merton which is absolutely vital for joint operation, for example against gang violence, and we can share that evidence that they can use in their prosecutions. Our system is being upgraded and this includes additional cameras in hotspot locations where we know that women and girls have reported feeling unsafe, including in our parks. So we are working with park colleagues to survey the sites where additional cameras are particularly needed to deter crime and prevent antisocial behaviour. Thank you.

From Cllr Flack to the Leader of the Council

Could the Leader of the Council outline what he stated as his reason for becoming a White Ribbon Ambassador, when he applied to become one?

Reply

I was pleased to become a White Ribbon Ambassador last year, as part of Merton's accreditation to the campaign – demonstrating Merton's commitment to helping our employees and residents in combatting violence against women and girls. The reason I became an ambassador and have supported this campaign is that I believe all men can make a difference in tackling violence against women and girls by thinking about their own behaviour, and being prepared to call harassment and misogynistic behaviour when they see it.

By working with men and boys and helping them not to repeat the patterns of behaviour of previous generation, we will hopefully one day make violence against women and girls a thing of the past.

Supplementary

Thank you and thank you to Cllr Garrod for your response and acknowledging how important it is to treat women with respect and taking action against violence against women and girls. As part of the pledge to become an ambassador, the White Ribbon Association asks its ambassadors to reflect on their own behaviour, and look positively towards influencing other men and as you say it's so important to tackle those patterns of behaviour. Following this, I was wondering if you had chance to reflect on your behaviour towards me when completely unprovoked, criticised me and called me a part time councillor during a full council meeting. Would you like to take this opportunity to apologise?

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you Cllr Flack for your question and your supplementary. I am proud to be a White Ribbon Ambassador and I take my responsibilities extremely seriously in this regard and I'm extremely privileged to lead a Borough that is doing fantastic work with the police, with other neighbouring boroughs in trying to tackle the scourge of violence against women and girls and at this point I'd like to pay tribute to Cllr Stringer and the team of officers in the council who have been doing a lot of work on this area. But I'm also hugely privileged to be a councillor and I take those responsibilities extremely seriously, including turning up to meetings and furthering on case work enquiries and I feel the best way to support residents is being present and being that voice for them in the chamber. Thank you.

From Cllr Holden to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

What action has the council taken to improve the built environment so that it is less intimidating to women and girls?

Reply

Safer Merton has a Violence Against Women and Girls strategy that includes women's safety, and as part of this work Safer Merton work with other teams within the Council to ensure that women and girls feel safe in the borough.

Over recent months, Safer Merton have been working on a Home Office funded 'Safer Streets' project to improve the safety of women and girls in public spaces. Alongside work to train staff working in our businesses and members of our community on how to intervene safely if an incident occurs, this work has included an audit of the Night Time economy in Merton, where officers from several teams undertook a walk around the borough at night and noted any potential areas for improvement. The recommendations from this will be shared with colleagues in Future Merton in terms of the built environment and how this can be improved.

In addition, Merton's CCTV system is currently being upgraded and this includes additional cameras being installed in hotspot locations where women and girls feel vulnerable.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you to the Cabinet Member for their answer. Large parts of the borough are rather poorly lit by street lights and can feel intimidating such as alleyways and the London railway path at certain times of night. Will the Cabinet Member consider placing brighter street lights and cctv in dark pinch points on such alleyways and in particular the railway path.

Reply

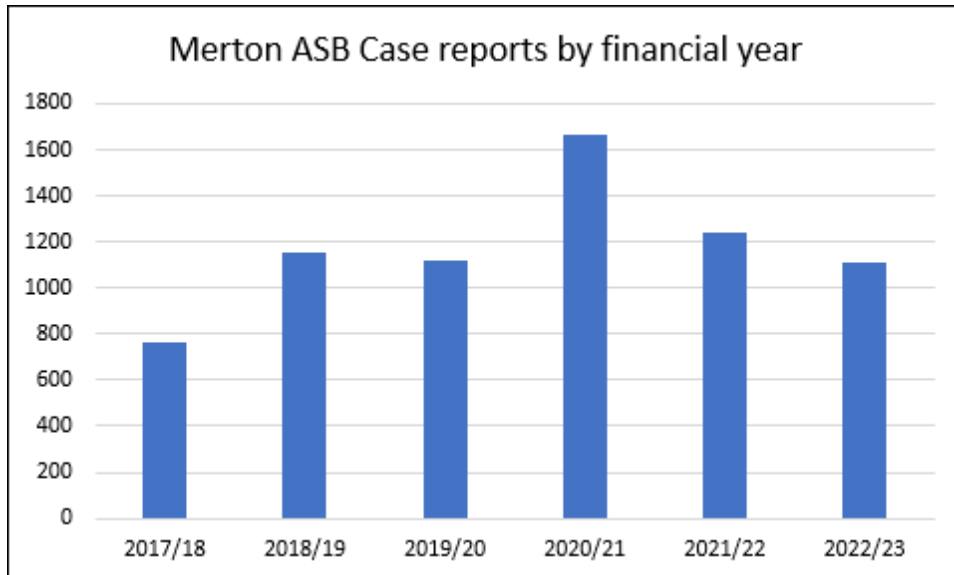
Thank you very much Cllr Holden for your question. This is one of those issues that definitely fits across multiple people's portfolio, but as the person ultimately responsible for the safety of women and girls I'm very happy to lead on this. And as we said, we've been doing a lot of work on safer streets, we have had our officers out in our town centres at night spotting exactly the type of issue and where the areas are and I will always be happy to take specific suggestions from colleagues about areas where they think there are needs for improvements to keep women and girls as safe as possible.

From Cllr Kohler to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Anti-Social Behaviour is a pernicious and growing ill in our society. In addition to the valuable data in paragraphs 4.2-4.4 of the Strategic Theme Report can the cabinet member please provide quantitative information concerning long-term trends, current outcomes and how the success of the Council's current ASB processes & procedures are monitored and evaluated?

Reply

The number of reports to the Council's Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Team are detailed below. There was an increase in reports during the Covid-19 pandemic which have now stabilised back to previous levels.



The wards with the highest number of reports to the Council's ASB team in 2022-23 were Cannon Hill, Lower Morden and Lavender Fields. It should be noted that Cannon Hill and Lower Morden wards rank 19th and 18th lowest out of the total 20 wards in terms of overall crime during 2022-23 however there have been a number of complex neighbour disputes being dealt with in these wards, which has led to an increase in reports to the ASB Team.

In terms of evaluation, the ASB team conduct customer satisfaction surveys on victim led reports to assimilate how residents feel their cases were dealt with and to take feedback on how the service can be improved.

The team are also making improvements to the use of the case management system to make full use of its capabilities in collecting ASB data and its breakdown.

We know that residents want the situations addressed quickly. Therefore, an important Key Performance Indicator is monitoring the time it takes to respond to reports from residents, with 97.7% of complaints responded to within the correct timeframe in quarter 4 of 2022-23.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and I'd like to thank Cllr Stringer for her answer, and I am pleased ASBs going down in the borough after the pandemic peak. I'm pleased that the council takes its seriously. I am also pleased that you do customer satisfaction surveys and KPIs but you've not told us the results of customer satisfaction surveys or any results of KPIs apart from one quarter of one KPI. I don't expect you to have that information now at your fingertips obviously. But can you agree to come back to

us with details, results of customer satisfaction surveys and the various KPIs and how they are looking?

From Cllr Bhim to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

It is good to see that Merton has formally responded to the Metropolitan Police Service Turnaround Plan. How will we support the implementation of the plan, and help the Met to learn from the excellent examples of local community policing we have here in Merton?

Reply

We broadly welcome the Turnaround Plan, and appreciate the recognition of the significant challenges that the Metropolitan Police face regarding public trust and addressing the appalling failings that have been uncovered in Baroness Casey's investigations. We strongly agree the plan will have a positive impact on policing in London. It sets out a series of commitments for an inclusive and diverse workforce and a stronger neighbourhood policing model.

Our experience of working with the Met in Merton is that a strong relationship already exists at a local level. This relationship is built on the foundation of partnership working. As detailed in the report, key examples of this are a weekly meeting between Safer Merton and Police Neighbourhoods Inspector to highlight key issues and areas requiring joint intervention. Problem solving takes place via the monthly Partnership Tasking meeting co-chaired by Safer Merton and the Police to collaborate to identify locations that are hotspots for ASB and crime. A weekly Violence Communication Strategy meeting discusses violent crimes of note on borough and how to safeguard those involved.

On behalf of those who live in Merton, our key priorities are to build strong neighbourhood policing links to reduce local crime and ASB, and to work with our young people to keep them from becoming victims or perpetrators of crime. We have sought assurances that both the Police stations in the borough will remain open to continue providing these services to the community. And we will continue to campaign to keep them open. Even with both stations, we recognise that the ambition to increase Police numbers and keep ward officers based locally may present problems in identifying suitable accommodation. Therefore, we have made clear we would welcome exploring opportunities for co-location with Council services.

We embrace strong local leadership and the return of a Merton based Superintendent and hope this will enable local officers to be kept focused on local issues. The new Superintendent is linked in closely with Safer Merton and will act as a co-chair of Merton's Community Safety Partnership Board, which sets our local priorities for reducing crime and ASB.

Via regional partnership forums, Merton are sharing the good practice and learning we have from our local community policing. We are also feeding this into regional consultations and discussions. Merton have offered to meet with the Commander for

Neighbourhood Policing and Community Engagement to further share the excellent examples of local policing in Merton.

We are contributing at a local and BCU level to police plans on how to improve confidence and trust. Initiatives such as the 'Street a Week' (where local ward officers door knock a road to introduce themselves to residents and offer support) began in Merton and are now being rolled out in the other boroughs in the south west BCU.

Merton also works in partnership with the Police to run the Merton Neighbourhood Watch scheme which aims to reduce crime and the fear of crime and build stronger relationships between communities. Merton's scheme is recognised as a model of good practice in the BCU, and as such we have shared our resources and experience with the Police Partnership and Engagement team.

In terms of reaching out to our residents, we continue to share our community contacts and take part in joint communications to ensure Police are linked in with our communities to make reach and representation as diverse as possible.

We will continue to work on supporting the plan from a local authority perspective, and hope that if well implemented, the plan will lead to improvements in trust in the Police and a reduction in crime.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for her response and I'd like to ask a supplementary question. Over the last decade the Conservatives have slashed police funding and the numbers of police officers and PCSOs have fallen dramatically and our local police stations are being threatened with closure. What are we doing to protect local policing in our borough?

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and I'd like to thank the Councillor for her question and her supplementary. I completely agree that we cannot ignore that Tory austerity has slashed police funding and this is not a party political point, Baroness Casey in her independent review said, I quote, "the cost of maintaining officer numbers has been significant reductions in PCSOs, civilian staff, Special Constables and closure of police stations." We have fewer staff and fewer police stations. Thankfully here in Merton we have fought to protect both of our stations, and both the Leader and I are completely committed to continuing to demand that we have two fully operational stations in our estate. But also that we have the officers that we need locally to keep people safe. And we have repeatedly reiterated this call in meetings with the Deputy Mayor for Policing in London, with senior officers locally and in writing directly to the Commissioner Mark Rowley.

From Cllr Hicks to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

We note at paragraphs 5.21-5.22 of the strategic theme report that Cabinet has recently approved the extension of Community Dementia Services, and to keep the Alzheimers Hub in Mitcham open for another 2.5 years. The report does not mention the decision made at the Council Budget meeting in March, to close the Eastway Day Centre. This will end whole day respite care within Merton and diminish accessible dementia support for families in the West of the borough. What specific plans does the council have to replace the services lost through the closure of Eastway Day Centre, in order to provide support for the carers of people with advanced dementia, and to provide accessible support for families looking after relatives with dementia in the West of the Borough?

Reply

The dementia hub is a centre of excellence for people with dementia in Merton and we have worked with the Alzheimer's society of the past few years to improve and extend this service to focus an outreach model into people's homes and the communities as well as a building-based model and we have extended this contract. The decision at the Council Budget meeting in March was to include a savings proposal to support balancing the budget. The proposal relates to the closure of Eastway Day Centre. This proposal and its implementation will be facilitated by extending and expanding the community offer of support to people with advanced dementia. The expanded community model will support people at an earlier stage in their dementia journey and will also focus on providing outreach support to people in their own homes and communities across the borough, not just from the physical hub in Mitcham. There are numerous other providers of day opportunities for people with dementia within and across the borough boundaries and in near neighboring boroughs, some of which will often be closer to where a person lives than the travelling distance from home to Eastway.

We are now beginning a process of engagement with all those directly affected by the proposal to close the centre and this engagement and formal consultation will inform the decision-making process for taking the proposal forward to implementation. We are aware of our statutory responsibilities to those who have identified eligible needs under the Care Act and where necessary a review of their individual support plan, in view of not being able to use Eastway, will identify suitable alternative ways to continue to meet those needs.

We also recognize the importance of providing respite to carers of people with dementia in order that they can continue their caring responsibilities. We recognize the reassurance that centre based activities and sessions can provide for a carer and the benefit they provide to people with dementia and intend that this forms part of the offer in the future model, albeit not directly provided by the local authority.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and I thank the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care for his detailed reply. And I also if I may completely endorse his statement that helping maintain independence is a key objective of adult social care. Back in March, a month ago, this year, the administration voted unanimously against a

costed amendment to keep open the Eastway Dementia Care Centre. So I am absolutely delighted to see the commitment in this reply to identifying suitable alternative ways to continue to meet the complex care needs of people who at the moment rely on the Eastway Dementia Centre and also the recognition of the need to provide respite to carers of people with advanced dementia. In those circumstances will the Cabinet Member for Health commit to ensuring alternative provision both for people with complex advance dementia and for carers who are supporting them at home, will be in place before the council closes Eastway? Thank you.

Reply

Can I thank Cllr Hicks for her question, can I also thank her for attending the dementia friend training with some of her colleagues last night. I think that demonstrates our commitment to this particular issue and I think she will recognise that there were a good number of my colleagues attending as well. It's a really important issue. When I was looking at your question, I felt that the idea that you replace a service wasn't appropriate, for me what we want to do is provide a service that meets of the needs of both the people with dementia and their carers. What we are doing, we have already commenced the informal engagement phase with those directly impacted, including families, staff to understand their personal perspectives. We are also gathering information on current available alternative services, it doesn't have to be like for like and it doesn't necessarily have to be run by the Council. And I think the Dementia Hub in the borough is a demonstration of how good services can be when provided by the voluntary sector. At the end of that period, that process, we will pull together a report which will provide the information we have gathered from this exercise and that will inform the way forward in terms of implementing the proposal. And once we have formal plans for the closure of the service we will formally consult as you would expect us to and individual reviews and reassessments will inform how we continue to meet the needs of people who are eligible under the care act and where necessary a support plan and individual budgets will be applicable. Savings that we have proposed and voted to support are based on the running costs of the current service, the building running costs and the staff team transport costs are not included in these services and there is provision to meet the needs of this really important group and at the risk of repeating myself my father suffered from vascular dementia, I know what a strain that it is on families and I want to do the right thing for the sufferers of dementia and their families.

From Cllr Williscroft to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

How are our local NHS trusts performing in relation to discharging patients from hospital, and how are we as a Council supporting them to help people get back to their homes?

Reply

A number of key metrics demonstrate an NHS Trusts performance on discharge and these can be benchmarked relative to the South West London (SWL) sub-region and London as a whole region. The main hospitals that require London Borough of Merton support to discharge patients are; St Georges Hospital, Tooting; Epsom & St Helier and; Kingston.

One measure is the percentage of the overall bed base of a hospital, discharged by 5pm daily. The SWL average performance is 5.6% and the London average performance 6.1%. Both St Georges (6.8%) and Epsom & Helier (6%) are above the SWL average and in the case of St Georges, above the London Average. Kingston (4.7%) is currently below both the SWL and London average. Measuring the percentage of total discharges against the total bed base St Georges (12.8%) performs better than the SWL (10.1%) and London (10.5%) averages. Both Epsom (9.6%) and Kingston (8.9%) are performing below these averages.

Further measures include the percentage of patients in a bed who have no Criteria to Reside in hospital and are therefore ready for discharge. This is measured as a percentage of the total bed base. Latest data shows Epsom & St Helier (17.5%) and Kingston (16.2%) are below the SWL average of 11.4%. St Georges is performing better than the average at 6.1% and on current data, best performing in London.

The Council supports the discharge of Merton residents from hospital and in an average week, 45 residents are discharged from hospitals across SWL and England. The majority (33) are supported to return to their own home through our in-house reablement service. On average 10 people will be discharged to a temporary, bed-based, service until they are well enough to return to their own home. This short stay intervention is typically in a residential or nursing home setting. A further 2-3 people each week will be discharged to a residential or nursing home setting on a permanent basis. This is normally due to the person experiencing a fundamental change in their support needs following illness and a period of time in hospital.

Through the winter period of 2022/23 the Council worked with local NHS colleagues and the voluntary and community sector to implement their Adult Social Care Discharge plan. This was funding first announced in September 2022, confirmed in December 2022 and forms part of the Council's Better Care Fund plan, agreed through the Health & Wellbeing Board. Further funding has been made available for the whole of 2023/24 and we are currently finalising the plan for this fund. The successes of the winter period will inform this plan.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, my question is to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Health. In the light of the proposed downgrading of St Helier hospital can we anticipate these pressures getting better or worse in the future?

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and can I thank Cllr Williscroft for his original question and supplementary. Sadly, I think things can only get worse and I sadly have had to spend too much time in Emergency Departments just lately and I have been really disturbed by what I have seen. My local hospital is St Georges and members of this council will be aware that at the last meeting I had to rush out because an ambulance had been called to my son who had collapsed and can I, if I may, Madame Mayor, thank members of this Council, both members on this side and the opposition for their concern, for their enquiry, my son is making a really good recovery. Sadly I've had to go to St Georges a few times since, so we are making good use of the NHS and when you do, you find yourself saying thank god for the NHS and really matters to me and it matters to the people of Merton and what's going on in St Helier hospital is going to make the whole thing worse, because the people who live closest to St Helier, when it's moved further south will go towards Croydon University Hospital and mainly St Georges, some will go to Kingston, but the pressures that are unbearable there on their staff will just get worse and I really do fear for what we are going to see while that situation continues.

From Cllr Bokhari to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

How many complaints about mould and damp have the Council and tenants champion received from private renters and housing association tenants?

Reply

A total of 109 complaints regarding damp and mould have been received during 2022/23 by the Council and the tenants champion. In line with the Housing Enforcement policy all complaints are followed up with the tenant or landlord and assessed to determine appropriate advice, guidance or action. This will often involve a Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) assessment and can also lead to informal or formal action against the landlord to remedy the defects.

Following the tragic death of Awaab Ishak who died at two years of age as a direct result of mould in his family home, the Council has taken a number of actions. We have written to every registered provider (Housing Association) in the borough asking them to provide information on their approach to assessing the extent of damp and mould in their properties and the action they are taking. The Council has also arranged up to date training sessions on damp and mould for housing enforcement staff and is looking to provide wider training on awareness for other Council staff.

A Landlord forum was held on the 12th January 2023 which included a training session for Landlords on damp and mould awareness and their responsibilities to maintain and improve their properties. There is also an ongoing series of visits by the Leader, housing enforcement staff, and housing association representatives to social housing estates in the borough to talk to residents first hand.

Supplementary

Thank you very much for the answer and it was a very full answer. And I really appreciate the fact that there is a mention of Awaab Ishak who actually died of mould and this is the reason for the question. Will the Council adopt the Housing Ombudsman's recommendation from his report Spotlight on Damp and Mould, supporting the idea that lifestyle is not the prime cause of damp and mould for the landlords and housing associations to have zero tolerance approach to mould and damp. The fact that there are 109 complaints is pretty shocking in itself and it really shouldn't be that high. And will the Cabinet Member report back the full feedback that they are getting back from enforcement officers on tackling poor housing providing services and will they also agree that landlords need to tackle damp and mould within a specified timescale.

Reply

Thank you Cllr Bokhari, this is a really important issue. There should never be an assumption that lifestyle is behind damp and mould, exceptional cases it may be the case, but the assumption should be that there is something wrong with the maintenance, with the disrepair of the dwelling and it should be approached on that basis. In terms of other matters, we want to focus on this as much as we can. I think it's a cross party cross council endeavour, all of us as councillors have these reports coming through from both private and public housing stock in the borough about damp and mould, we have to take it very seriously, I have to say that 109 properties is a considerable underestimate of the amount of damp and mould in this borough and in all boroughs, it needs to be taken more seriously or there will be more deaths wherever they occur from this condition. But thank you for your question.

From Cllr Charles to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

How is the Council using our MASCOT Service to provide assistance to vulnerable and elderly residents to keep their homes safe and comfortable to live in?

Reply

Mascot has over 1400 customers who gain reassurance from the service and which helps them to continue living independently in their own home. Customers are provided with a range of equipment to suit their needs, starting with an alarm, pendant and smoke alarm as a basic package and increasing to having fall sensors and door exit sensors included as required. Most customers opt to have mobile response attached to their package, meaning that a member of the Mascot team will go to their home in the event of a fall or similar situation. Mascot liaises with family members, emergency services and other relevant agencies as required. Staff will contact family members or social workers if they have concerns for a customer's wellbeing. Families often refer to the peace of mind they get from having Mascot in their loved one's home.

All customers are given a full safety assessment of their property when they sign up and subsequently an annual visit and check is made. This appointment follows a call made on the customer's birthday. There are also regular calls to test the equipment and the connection between each device and the control room.

Mascot has a Handy Person service as part of the package, enabling customers to have a trusted person carry out repairs in their homes.

Since December Merton has been trialling a free four-week installation of Mascot telecare for suitable people being discharged from hospital. At present 41 people have been or are going through this trial. Of the 24 people who completed the trial, 14 have decided to take the service up on a permanent basis, a retention rate of 58.33%.

Supplementary

Thank you madame Mayor and I'd like to thank Cabinet Member McCabe for his response. I'd like to ask him to tell us what impressed the most when he spent time working with the MASCOT team recently.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and can I thank my ward councillor for her question and her supplementary question. I was really impressed by the team we have working for us. We should all be proud of the MASCOT team. The care, the concern, the time, that they give to people is really impressive. The range of equipment is also all about meeting individual needs of somebody, so if somebody liable to have a fall they can have sensors to respond to that. I think for families the most important thing is reassurance, they know that if somebody that they love is in difficulty and the alarm sounds, that even if they can't get there quickly, somebody will. And the emergency services will be called and the appropriate action taken. So it's an incredibly impressive set up providing reassurance and enabling people to continue to live independently. And I met one very elderly woman who made it quite clear that she wanted to remain in her own and home and that the MASCOT system enabled her to do that and that is great to hear.