

**Committee: Council**

**Date: 16 November 2022**

Wards: All

**Subject: Strategic Theme Report: Promote a dynamic connected and inclusive community specific focus on supporting our diverse community by working with Merton's Voluntary and Community Sector.**

Lead member: Councillor Eleanor Stringer, Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

Lead officer: Louise Round, Interim Executive Director of Innovation and Change

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

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## **Recommendations:**

A. That the Council review and consider the contents of this report.

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## **1. PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1.1 Council, at its meeting on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2022, approved the new Business Plan 2022 - 2026. The Business Plan sets out five strategic priorities and each meeting of the Council receives a report updating against one of the council's strategic themes.

The Business Plan sets out how the council will deliver its ambition with five strategic priorities to shape and guide delivery:

- Maintaining excellent education and skills for all ages and needs;
- Promote a dynamic, connected and inclusive community and economy with safe, vibrant high streets and jobs for our residents;
- Support residents who are most in need and promote the safety and wellbeing of all our communities;
- Ensure a clean and environmentally sustainable borough with inclusive open spaces where people can come together and enjoy a variety of natural life;
- Work to make Merton a fairer, more equal borough and support those on lower income by tackling poverty and fighting for quality affordable housing.

1.2 Performance against these priorities is monitored by Council. Each meeting of Council receives a report updating on progress against one of these priorities. This report gives Council an opportunity to consider progress on the priority to promote a dynamic connected and inclusive community; with a specific focus on supporting our diverse community by working with Merton's Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)

## **2. INTRODUCTION**

2.1 Merton has an exceptional track record of working in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, supporting it with a well-established, far-reaching and substantial funding programme. Now, more than ever, we are aware of the importance of a dynamic, connected and inclusive community, and it is a key

component in the strategic priority of nurturing and restoring Civic Pride. By working in partnership with Merton's voluntary and community sector, including through financial support for frontline organisations, the Council is directly investing in our communities and supporting residents from a diverse range of backgrounds and with a range of needs. SEE SECTION 3

2.2 The strength of our partnership working has been a key component in the council being able to respond quickly to helping people in Merton to survive and to thrive. In recent years, Merton Council and Merton's VCS have worked together weathering the Covid pandemic, welcoming Ukrainian refugees and responding to the Galpin's Road tragedy. Key to the council's role in meeting these challenges has been its strong relationship with the borough's large and diverse voluntary and community sector. SEE SECTION 4

2.4 By working in partnership with Merton's voluntary and community sector, we have found and will continue to find ways to help residents tackle the cost-of-living crisis – a crisis which threatens to drive a divide between our communities. SEE SECTION 5

2.5 Vital in all this work is an emphasis on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). SEE SECTION 6

### **3. CIVIC PRIDE – WORKING WITH AND SUPPORTING MERTON'S VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR**

3.1 Civic Pride is one of the new administration's key priorities for Merton. We want Merton to be a place where people are proud to live, work and study: where everyone can thrive, and where we embrace the strength and diversity of our communities. The work the Council does in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, and the substantial funding programme that goes towards supporting the sector, is a vital component in giving our diverse communities a sense of civic pride.

3.2 The voluntary and community sector is the fifth largest employer in the borough, and is supported by the council, alongside other key funders such as the Wimbledon Foundation, Clarion Futures, Merton Chamber of Commerce and Merton Giving.

3.3 Merton has a thriving community of volunteers. Based on the 2021 Merton Residents Survey around 70,000 residents did some form of unpaid volunteering work in their community over the past year, from helping out at food banks and taking part in litter-picking, through to offering up more specialised help such as accounting.

3.4 Merton Connected runs a volunteer brokerage service funded by the council which covers formal ongoing volunteering opportunities rather than on-offs. Their registration figure for the last year (2021/22) was 254, whilst this year to date (2022/23) the total number of individuals registering through our online portal or through our outreach activities, is 428.

3.5 Merton's libraries have a pioneering volunteering scheme that last year saw 560 residents contribute 34,950 hours. The success of the project has been nationally publicised and is a Volunteering England good practice example. Volunteering has been a great way to get people back into work or to give something back to the community and our volunteers make our libraries more reflective of the communities they serve.

3.6 In spite of financial challenges faced by the Council, we have been increasing funding towards Merton's VCS in recognition of the scale of their support for the community.

3.7 Funding for the VCS in 2018/19 totalled £9.929m, and in 2019/20 funding increased to £10.041m.

3.8 Funding to the VCS for 2021/22 was £10.55m, an increase of 5%.

Commissioned services make up the largest part of the money allocated to the voluntary sector (64%) compared to grants (31%), notional funding (3%) and discretionary rate relief (2%). £1.5m went towards the Strategic Partner Programme which provides grants to VCS organisations on advice, wellbeing and support to the sector including volunteer brokerage. £220k rate relief went to 79 charities and voluntary organisations, and £286k notional funding to community associations including premises. In terms of funding by department:

- Environment & Regeneration provided £825k to the VCS including grants for crime prevention and neighbourhood social infrastructure.
- Children, Schools & Families provided funding of £778k including funding for substance misuse services and support for young carers.
- Community & Housing provided funding for £7.4m to the VCS including funding for housing related support services, supported living services for people with disabilities, homelessness prevention and preventative services to enable people to live independently and well.
- Corporate Services provided funding of £1.5m including grants for advice organisations such as Citizens Advice, law centres and organisations such as Merton Connected and BAME Voice.

3.9 With Civic Pride being one of the priorities, we are further expanding our core funding of the sector through our Civic Pride Fund.

3.10 Firstly, a Civic Pride 'Supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector' fund has been established to reflect our commitment to investing in the local VCS infrastructure to support our local communities. The Supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector fund brings together multiple funding pots under one single grants process. Despite the ongoing financial challenges facing councils, Merton Council have committed to invest in this refreshed programme, with a 35% increase in overall funding for 2023/26 (an increase of £1.3m, or £441,259 pa on the 2019/22 fund). The budget for the 2023-26 programme is £5,067,279 (£1,689,093 pa).

3.11 Secondly, the Civic Pride 'Investing in Neighbourhoods' which uses Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding with a focus on projects that support demands that developments such as new homes and commercial buildings place on our neighbourhoods, which has included funding public realm and shopfront improvements to our high streets. The current bidding round value of this fund is £750,000 to share between successful bidders. We have invested over £5m Neighbourhood CIL funding since 2018 across a wide variety of projects.

3.12 The proposed aims of the new 2023-26 Civic Pride Fund: Supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector are to:

- invest in and support Merton's local voluntary and community infrastructure;
- nurture a strong sense of community and reduce inequalities;
- bring together preventative services that provide information, advice and support in the community to strengthen Merton resident's physical, social, emotional, and economic resilience.

3.13 In order to achieve these aims, the Fund is divided into four themes specifically focused around areas where people may need help and support in Merton. Organisations will be able to apply for funding against one or more of the following themes:

**Theme 1: Services that provide help:** the services that provide emergency assistance to people in crisis and direct help to adults in need.

**Theme 2: Services that grow strengths and capabilities:** the services that provide good quality information, support and non-accredited advice, accredited advice and casework and specialist and/or legal representation where necessary.

**Theme 3: Active, supportive communities:** the services that co-design support and solutions with people and communities to help grow their relationships and connections and increase their level of activity. This will include low level preventative activities and Healthwatch Merton.

**Theme 4: An enabling system and place:** the services that help to support an enabling system and place. This will include voluntary and community sector infrastructure support and the provision of small grants.

3.14 Learning from reports such as the State of the Sector Report (produced by Merton Connected in 2021) and the BAME Impact Report (on the impact of Covid on BAME communities in Merton published in June 2021 and funded by LBM), and listening to our active Joint Consultative Committee with Ethnic Minority Organisations, we know that smaller organisations can struggle to compete with the larger local organisations when applying for funding. To support and develop Merton's small, volunteer and community led organisations, including diversity-led groups, the Civic Pride Fund: Supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector, will allocate funding for smaller groups to build in opportunities and address challenges around infrastructure and capacity.

3.15 Details of grant funding allocations for 2022/23, now including the Civic Pride Fund, will be available in the new year.

#### **4. RECENT WORK WITH MERTON'S VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR FOR A DYNAMIC AND CONNECTED COMMUNITY**

4.1 The council is committed to providing high quality and sustainable adult learning to improve the social, economic, health and wellbeing outcomes of our residents. This is delivered through a strategic investment approach: commissioning provision from the best providers in the field and developing sophisticated evidence-based approaches to what we deliver. We aim to reduce inequalities across the borough by focussing a significant proportion of our investment on those most socially and / or economically disadvantaged whilst providing a broad range of learning opportunities to develop all of our residents' skills.

4.2 Merton's library service works in a collaborative way with several organisations to increase the service offer it provides and further work is being undertaken to establish libraries as community hubs. The service has over 60 partnerships in place with organisations such as Wimbletech and the Citizens Advic. Partnerships are focussed on developing the health & wellbeing, learning & employability, digital inclusion, and culture & creativity offers. New services launched recently include the Library of Things, Barclays Community Banking Service, Connecting Merton and Project Sense (sensory libraries service).

4.3 Approximately 450 events are delivered each month covering subjects such as health and wellbeing, culture and creativity, reading and employability. This programme continues to expand.

4.4 On 24 November 2022 the library service will launch its enhanced health & wellbeing offer at Morden Library. The event will officially launch new services in all of our libraries including designated Health & Wellbeing zones so that residents have access to high quality information on how to live well along with digital equipment such as health monitors and a range of high quality digital services provided via our Public Health and NHS colleagues. The enhanced offer will also include a number of health and wellbeing events being held monthly delivered via a new partnership with Nuffield Health. The council is also promoting its libraries as 'warm spaces' – warm, accessible places for people to come to save money on their heating bills during the cost-of-living crisis.

4.5 The Merton Community Hub was rapidly set up by the Council working with the Merton Voluntary Services Council (now Merton Connected), Wimbledon Guild, Age UK Merton, Commonsense Trust, Merton and Morden Guild and Friends in St Helier during the Covid-19 pandemic. Adult Social Care commissioned the service in June 2020 to provide a one-stop shop for people requesting support for a range of needs and the help people connect to support in the community. As the pandemic has eased, this vital service has continued to be regularly used by residents (nearly 3000 contacts since June 2021), but has pivoted to supporting residents on the cost of living. As highlighted by problems of isolation and inaccessibility of services during the pandemic, to truly serve the whole of Merton's diverse community and meet a range of needs, information that might have traditionally been available on a high street must also be made available online and at the end of the telephone. The Hub is due to be recommissioned in 2023.

4.6 The Community Champions Network was set up in September 2020 in response to two community engagement events held in August 2020, where the Public Health team heard that people found information about Covid-19 confusing and often conflicting, they also wanted to support the NHS and Public Health in reducing the transmission of the virus. The Community Champions network was set up to provide Champions with up to date, clear and concise information from the NHS and Public Health. Two years on the Champions network has evolved to discuss wider topics that impact our communities and consists of 230+ Champions who continue to meet every other Wednesday.

4.7 Since the invasion of Ukraine on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022 the Government has set up two Visa schemes enabling Ukrainians to travel to the UK. Merton has welcomed more than 350 adults and children through the Homes for Ukraine Visa scheme, staying with 240 hosts in Merton, while there have been a further 243 families, comprising 265 adults and 172 children, that we know to have arrived through the Friends & Family Visa scheme. Support for our guests has come through work with our strategic partners Polish Family Association, Commonsense Trust and Wimbledon Guild who were commissioned in March 2022 to provide a support service hosted at the New Horizon community centre in Pollards Hill. The Council receives grant funding of £10,500 per person arriving via the Homes for Ukraine scheme but no additional funding for people arriving via the Friends and Families scheme. The New Horizons service has, nevertheless, been commissioned to provide support to all of our Ukrainian guests irrespective of which Visa scheme they have arrived via.

4.8 During the school summer holiday period the New Horizon centre hosted a Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF) scheme for Ukrainian children. The HAF funding for this programme was supplemented from the Homes for Ukraine grant funding so that the scheme could also cater for the parents of the children. This programme was very successful and the intention is that it be repeated during future school holiday periods.

4.9 The speed and quality of Merton's response to our Ukrainian guests has been commended by The Department of Levelling Up, Homes and Communities and we continue to evolve and adapt that response to ensure it continues to meet the changing needs of our guests. Most recently, for example, the Council has agreed to supplement the £350 per month thank you payment provided to Homes for Ukraine

hosts by an extra £100 per month, payable from month 7 of the hosting arrangement. This additional payment is a direct response to the increasing risk of hosts deciding that cost of living increases mean that they can no longer afford to continue hosting.

4.10 Merton was devastated by a fatal gas explosion in Galpin's Road at the beginning of August, which displaced more than 500 residents initially with 48 households staying in temporary accommodation for nearly 3 months. Merton called on its partners and local community to support, who responded quickly and without question, providing wrap around support and emergency assistance in partnership with the Council to all residents affected, initially at the rest centre at Commonside Trust New Horizon Centre. The Council and partners continue to provide support to these residents to support them with their wellbeing and provide financial support where required.

4.11 In early May 2021 we commissioned Collaborate CIC to support us in developing a new approach to working better with communities, the project running through to end of June 2022. As part of the initial phase of work Collaborate reviewed local evidence and intelligence, as well as key learning from other places. They also undertook diagnostic interviews and a series of workshops and focus groups with a range of stakeholders, including VCS colleagues, to gather partner insights and perspectives and scope out the potential for a holistic model. Drawing on this evidence and learning it was clear that there was scope for the council to be much more intentional and ambitious in the way it works in partnership with Merton's residents and communities.

4.12 As part of the project Collaborate CIC developed a 'Working Better with Communities' framework/approach, which was specifically designed for Merton. The framework sets out how the council can take action at different levels to mobilise all the assets in the borough and to create the connectivity and community resilience needed to ensure that everyone gets help when they need it. The current phase of the project continues to focus on piloting, spreading and embedding the approach already developed. Work since April has primarily focused on events to capture the learning to date from the project and finalising the end of project report, plus producing a detailed toolkit and roadmap to help embed the approach. This will be presented to Cabinet in 2023.

## **5. THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS – WORKING WITH MERTON'S VCS**

5.1 In June the council declared a 'Cost of Living Emergency' and consequently set up a £2m cost of living emergency support fund. In the first tranche of the fund, £1m has been allocated to a range of partners in the voluntary and community sector to tackle immediate problems presented by the rise in the cost of living. A new Cost of Living Emergency Assistance Grant Scheme (totalling £100,000) for existing strategic partners and organisations to provide crisis support for Merton residents in need has just closed, with funding decisions to be announced on 11<sup>th</sup> November. A further £100,000 is going to Sustainable Merton and their wider Community Fridge

partners to ensure surplus food supply is redistributed where needed across the borough. Conversations with Community Fridge are actively underway.

5.2 As well as addressing emergency needs, £400,000 of the Cost-of-Living fund will be used to fund organisations such as Thinking Works that support our Warm and Well initiatives to fund small home improvements which will help keep households warm and reduce their energy bills.

5.3 One of the growing areas of concern is people getting into debt, often for the first time. Citizens Advice has seen an extreme increase in the number of referrals for people seeking advice for getting out of debt, and increasingly for having taken on debt with payday lenders or loan sharks. £200,000 of the first tranche of the Cost-of-Living Support Fund is going towards initiatives identified by Citizens Advice Merton and Lambeth as being the best immediate course of action in giving people the help and support they need regarding debt advice.

5.4 The council has been running a series of free events in Merton libraries offering support and advice to residents. These well-attended events have brought information to residents at the heart of our high streets. As well as food vouchers, each event has had around 17 stalls staffed by council teams and our VCS partners. All the events have proved extremely popular with more than 1300 people attending in total. Feedback from residents has been incredibly positive with 93% of attendees saying the event was excellent / good. A further event on saving energy / saving money is planned for 26 November. VCS partners involved in these events include: The Polish Family Association, The Springfield Law Centre, Wimbledon Guild, Citizens Advice, Commonsense Trust, Sustainable Merton, Thinking Works, Age UK

5.5 The focus of this year's Merton Partnership Summit was 'The Cost-of-Living Crisis: Meeting Needs and Building Resilience'. Around 100 delegates from across the voluntary and community sector, business sector and council gathered to discuss a strategic way forward to work together to address the cost-of-living emergency, as well as formulating a longer-term vision for how to build Merton's resilience in the face of likely ongoing challenges.

5.6 Breakout discussions focussed on five key areas: Food poverty, energy efficiency and homes, jobs and skills, debt and finance, and, crucially, the next generation and making sure that today's young people are equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to better face the financial challenges of tomorrow.

5.7 Findings from the Summit will initially be brought to a meeting of the Merton Partnership Exec Board on 7<sup>th</sup> December.

## **6. EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION**

6.1 The responsibility for meeting the council's Public Sector Equality Duty rests primarily with the Corporate Management Team, senior managers and Cabinet. The Director of Children, Schools and Families (supported by the Equality and Community Cohesion Officer) is the Corporate Management Team's Equality

Champion and chairs the Corporate Equality Steering Group. The Overview and Scrutiny Commission (OSC) undertakes an annual review of the Council's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy.

6.2 The EDI strategy is currently being refreshed and will set out the council's equality objectives to meet the statutory requirements of the Equality Act 2010 to publish equality objectives every four years. It will address issues such as:

1. bridging the gap between the levels of deprivation and prosperity in the borough;
2. improving understanding of the borough's diversity and foster better understanding between communities;
3. improving understanding of 'hidden' disabilities and the challenges that disabled residents face in all aspects of their lives. We aim to work in a cross-cutting way and take a holistic approach to more effectively address the needs of disabled residents;
4. supporting those who do not usually get involved in decision-making to better understand how they can get involved and get their voices heard;
5. supporting residents to access on-line access services;
6. providing services that meet the needs of a changing population;
7. employing staff that reflect the borough's diversity.

6.3 Key achievements from the Equality and Community Cohesion Strategy 2017-21 to note include:

- Merton Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2019-2024 was agreed prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, with a key principle of tackling health inequalities – especially the East/West health divide in the borough that is driven by social inequality and the wider determinants of health.
- To support the growing number of people including families experiencing food poverty, Merton Community Fridge Network was set up in collaboration with local VCS organisations, Merton Council and London Food Alliance. Led by Merton Council, the Merton Community Fridge Network since the start of pandemic receives food from the London Food Alliance, via UK charity FareShare for redistribution across the borough. Sustainable Merton are now leading the Community Fridge Network.
- As part of winter grants programme of funding Public Health and Adult Social Care have funded energy efficiency work by Thinking Works, as part of the Borough's 'Warm and Well' scheme. Thinking Works helps vulnerable people save on their energy bills by helping them switch fuel supplier, make cost saving behavioural changes, access grants for heating and insulation, take up benefit checks and reduce debt. Prior to Covid-19 home visits targeted households in the East of the Borough and between February 2019 and December 2020 57% of Thinking Works home visits were in Mitcham.
- Public Health are working with SW London Sustainability and Transformation Plan and housing colleagues to improve the health of rough sleepers. Work has included working with housing to make sure all rough sleepers are registered with a GP practice and promoting awareness of and referral routes into commissioned health services such as healthy living, substance misuse and sexual health services.
- The Connecting Merton project was launched via Merton's libraries. The project loans ICT equipment and provides broadband connectivity along with

training for vulnerable residents who have limited or no ICT access in their homes.

- The council has contributed nearly £400,000 since 2020 (some of this via Government Grants) to the Merton Giving Fund to provide small grants to small groups for COVID-19 support. Grants have been given for a range of projects tackling issues such as food poverty, isolation, mental health, digital exclusion and providing infrastructure support.
- Adult Social Care has continued to develop its performance reporting mechanisms to now include an analysis of safeguarding activity by ethnicity, which will be refreshed on a regular basis and used to inform future commissioning activity as well as helping us to understand where focused work with sectors or individual providers is needed
- As part of our response to the issues raised by the pandemic, we commissioned B.A.M.E. Voice to undertake research to understand the 'lived experience' of the borough's B.A.M.E. communities and build resilience and trust. The research findings and recommendations will inform the refresh of the EDI strategy.
- We have launched an online recruitment and selection course which we will ensure addresses how to avoid unconscious bias in the recruitment process. Managers will be required to refresh this training every 2 years.
- A pilot Mutual Mentoring programme was launched in April 2022 that paired Black Asian and Minority Ethnic staff with partners from the senior leadership team.
- Additionally, Merton has been a pilot site for the Workforce Race Equality Standard and recommendations and the learning from this piece of work will also contribute to the revised strategy.

6.4 The EDI strategy is being informed by:

- The new administration's priorities
- The outcome of extensive community engagement
- Commissioned research such as the Black Asian and Minority (B.A.M.E.) Ethnic Voices, Community Resilience COVID-19 report and Mencap report into the impact of the pandemic on residents living with a disability
- Black Lives Matter concerns
- Existing evidence of inequalities in the borough

6.5 The following draft Equality Objectives have been developed:

- Tackling poverty, the structural differences in social circumstances and the resulting differences in access and outcomes
- Encourage recruitment from all sections of the community, actively promote staff development and career progression opportunities
- Promoting a safe, healthy and cohesive borough where communities get on well together
- Promoting Community engagement to empower our residents, improve understanding of the issues faced by local people and develop services to meet the differing needs.
- Improving our evidence base to inform our decision making

6.6 The draft strategy will be brought to the OSC on 18 January 2023 as part of the consultation process with the aim of launching it in April 2023.

## **7. REPORTS OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION/PANELS**

7.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Commission praised the great work by the Council and Voluntary Sector during the pandemic in setting up the Community Response Hub. Following on from the pandemic, Members recognise the voluntary sector is often uniquely positioned to respond to local challenges and have focused their attention on the capacity, grants and infrastructure support available. The CEO of Merton Connected has provided information and answered members' questions openly and the Commission look forward to receiving an update at its January 2023 meeting on how exposure and publicity can be improved for voluntary groups.

## **8. CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED**

8.1 Ongoing consultation and engagement has taken place as set out in this report.

## **9. FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

## **10. LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS**

10.1 Any legal or statutory implications are addressed in the report and for the purposes of this report there are no further comment.

## **11. HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS**

11.1 Much of the work outlined in this report and commissioned by the council has a direct positive benefit in reducing inequalities and improving community cohesion.

## **12. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**

12.1 None for the purposes of this report.

## **13. RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

13.1 None for the purposes of this report.

## **14. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

14.1 None for the purposes of this report.

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