

### **From Councillor Kaweesa to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride**

Can the Cabinet Member explain what role Merton's voluntary and community sector can play in creating civic pride in the borough and how the Council is supporting them in their important work?

### **Reply**

The Your Merton engagement findings showed that Merton residents felt a strong sense of pride in the community spirit that exists in the borough. Merton's large and diverse voluntary and community sector (VCS) is key to this sense of community spirit. It plays a pivotal role in creating civic pride throughout the borough. Working in partnership with the Council, the VCS in Merton provide a range of services on the ground, reaching residents in need of help and support, and delivering improvements in our communities that lead to a greater sense of pride and wellbeing for all. Engendering a feeling of pride requires fostering a more equal and inclusive society and the VCS is a highly valued partner in taking forward this priority.

The Council has a long and highly-valued track record of working in partnership with the borough's VCS. This is reflected in the increase in funding towards the sector that the Council has made in recent years. Funding for the VCS in 2018/19 totalled £9.929m, and in 2019/20 funding increased to £10.041m. Funding to the VCS for 2021/22 was £10.55m, an increase of 5%.

The Council's Civic Pride Fund is divided into two areas which together meet these aims: Supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector and Investing in Neighbourhoods. In both cases, the eligibility criteria required for strategic partners in VCS organisations to demonstrate during the application process are focussed on restoring, nurturing and embedding civic pride.

### Civic Pride Fund: Supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector

This funding programme looks to support services which variously:

- address inequalities by targeting resource and valuing community insight
- learn together and share insights openly to improve trust, relationships and quality of information
- invest time in relationships, collaborate across professions and join up support
- connect local communities, grow relationships and encourage social action
- help earlier in empowering, accessible and person-centred ways
- support people to take further action themselves and to improve their own circumstances
- work in partnership with other VCS organisations to mobilise citizen and community efforts to improve services that support people
- recruit, induct and train volunteers
- build on the strengths of people and communities

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### Civic Pride Fund: Investing in Neighbourhoods

This funding programme which uses Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding has 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.

Over £5m of Neighbourhood CIL funding since 2018 has gone to a wide variety of projects across the borough, including new playgrounds on estates and tree planting, all of which contribute to a sense of civic pride. Applications for this funding are usually made by and on behalf of local communities wanting to improve the spaces they live and work and bring up their families in.

#### **From Councillor Flack to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride**

We want to encourage a more vibrant high street, but our local businesses are hampered by long waiting times for relatively minor changes. What is the average waiting time for planning applications?

#### **Reply**

In the year to date 73.15% of minor planning applications have been decided within the statutory determination period of 8 weeks or by a deadline agreed with applicants and agents. This exceeds the nationally set target of 70%. By the end of November there will be a full complement of 4 Principal Planners in the new higher level of the staff structure. They will coach junior members of staff and sign off minor application decisions so it is anticipated that this performance figure will be improved further before the end of the year.

#### **From Councillor Charles to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride**

Can the Cabinet Member set out how the Council and Merton's voluntary and community sector are working together to support Ukrainian refugees and their host families?

#### **Reply**

At the outset of the conflict in Ukraine we moved quickly to commission the Polish Family Association, Commonsense Trust and Wimbledon Guild to provide a range of face to face, online and telephone support to Ukrainians arriving in the Borough and to those providing them with accommodation.

I am particularly proud of the way in which our partner organisations were able to rapidly mobilise that support and the way in which they have maintained and built on it since March. For the Commonsense Trust this has included maintaining the provision of face to face support at the New Horizon centre while also hosting the Galpin's Road rest centre – a significant achievement.

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While the Government has only provided funding to support Ukrainians arriving under the Homes for Ukraine visa scheme we have always been clear that the support we have commissioned from our voluntary sector partners should be equally available to all Ukrainian guests arriving in the borough, and that commitment continues.

The support offered varies depending on individual need but typically will include assistance with finding employment, access to English language learning, welfare benefits advice, access to health services and, increasingly, support in coming to terms with the traumas that individuals have and are experiencing.

At the current time we have some 260 hosts providing accommodation and support via the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Those hosts are supporting approximately 370 individuals, 110 of whom are children

In addition to this, the Polish Family Association and Commonsense Trust are providing support to around 200 households – around 500 adults and children – who have arrived via Friends and Families visas. Our partners estimate that there may be another 70 Ukrainian households who have arrived in Merton and who are not currently accessing the available support. A range of social media and word of mouth communication channels are being used to make sure that all are aware of the support available.

### **From Councillor Kohler to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services**

The cabinet member has previously reported on the number of times the Merton Local App has been downloaded and the number of businesses that have signed up to it. However as neither of these metrics are reliable indicators of the success of an App please can he confirm what other metrics are being recorded in relation to the app and the details of what they reveal?

### **Reply**

I do not agree with Cllr Kohler's subjective assertion that the level of downloads by both residents and businesses are unreliable indicators of success. These remain the two indicators reported to councilors as they are clear indicators of uptake and interest by the two primary groups that the Merton Local App aims to connect. In addition to these, there is an internal dashboard where officers can access metrics in more detail. This provides metrics by duration, by customers (new and repeat) and by businesses. It can identify the number of shares of the App, provides data on offers, events and products. It also provides basic statistics such as customers by area, current offers by community (town centre), businesses by industry and performance trends.

A fortnightly meeting takes place with the contractor, this includes a discussion around how we can encourage more onboarding and widen the reach. It has been planned that we publish some good news stories from businesses using the App. This will provide an additional means to understanding the impact of the App, if the businesses are experiencing any difference in, for example, sales and footfall.

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We also continue to use the App to send out messaging around local council led events to support reach to residents who may not have access to a PC. The onboarding and reach can be measured based on the release of the event. We can see from responses (views/shares/redemptions) that the release of an event spikes the response such as the Council's fireworks ticket sales.

### **From Councillor Mercer to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride**

The Council has put considerable support behind its provision for Ukrainian refugees. However, what was once an emergency provision for 6 months is now starting to look like uncertain and barely adequate provision some 9 months after the Russian invasion. In the interests of our Ukrainian guests, their hosts and of the various support services, what plans does the Council have for the next 9 months?

### **Reply**

As I have already said in response to an earlier question, I am proud of the way in which this Council and our partners have responded to the support needs of our Ukrainian guests and those providing them with a home and with support. We are acutely aware that there are a range of uncertainties about what will happen in the future, not the least of these being how long the conflict may continue and when those who wish to return to Ukraine will be able to do so. The absence of a clear longer-term plan from Government is also a concern.

Despite this lack of clarity from Government we are planning for the longer term. To help ensure that Homes for Ukraine hosts feel supported to continue providing a home to their guests beyond the first 6 months we have recently agreed to increase the £350 a month thank you payment by an additional £100 per month from month 7 onwards and this will be paid to all qualifying hosts from the beginning of December.

We know that finding longer term accommodation will be a major challenge for many Ukrainian households and we have recruited an additional specialist Housing Options Adviser to ensure that we can provide the right advice and support at the right time. We will increase this specialist resource as and when that becomes necessary.

Our schools have provided places for over 180 Ukrainian children and have provided those children with a whole spectrum of wrap around support and will continue to do so. Our Adult Education providers are offering a range of English language learning and again will continue to do so. We continue to work very closely with our local Department of Work and Pensions colleagues to ensure access to employment and training opportunities.

Subject to clarity about future funding from Government we will also maintain, and enhance where required, the support services being provided by our valued partners the Polish Family Association, Commonside Trust and Wimbledon Guild.

I am extremely proud of the way in which the residents of our borough have welcomed not just Ukrainians arriving in the borough but also refugees and asylum seekers from all over the world. As a council we will continue to promote and support that welcome.

**From Councillor Mundy to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride**

Can the Cabinet Member set out the role of the voluntary and community sector in supporting residents in the cost of living emergency?

**Reply**

Merton Council has an exceptional track record in partnership working, bringing together people from across sectors to support our residents. Just as the borough's VCS working in partnership with the Council has responded to all the crises of the past few years – the Covid 19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the Galpin's Road tragedy – so too is it pulling together to help residents through the cost-of-living emergency.

The Council has run five extremely well-attended resident events at borough libraries since July attended by over 1,300 residents (with a further event scheduled for 26<sup>th</sup> November) where VCS organisations have attended to give people information on a wide range of support available from debt advice and accessing benefits through to ways to keep warm in the winter months and keep energy bills down.

In addition to the Council's funding programme for the borough's VCS, in September it agreed a £2m Cost of Living Support Fund which is going towards VCS support and services, as set out in the report. From this fund, £100,000 makes up an immediate Cost of Living Assistance Grant Scheme for existing strategic partners and organisations to provide crisis support for Merton residents in need.

Organisations in Merton's dedicated voluntary and community sector came together with Council colleagues on 3<sup>rd</sup> November at the Merton Partnership Cost-of-Living Summit to examine ways in which to respond to the current and immediate crisis, and, crucially, to look at ways of working together to build resilience for the challenges of the future. The role, aims and ambitions of the VCS in supporting residents in the cost-of-living emergency can be demonstrated in some of the initial outcomes from the Summit's key areas of discussion, and some examples below.

The VCS plays a fundamental part in ensuring people in Merton are not going hungry as the cost-of-living crisis pushes people and families to the brink and presents them with a "heating or eating" dilemma. £100,000 from the Cost-of-Living Support Fund is going to Sustainable Merton and their wider Community Fridge partners to ensure surplus food supply is redistributed where needed across the borough.

£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. There is an opportunity in this area for the council and VCS in Merton to work with residents to find longer term more sustainable solutions to reducing energy bills, through tailored intervention and provision of information. This has been a growing area of interest for residents at the council-run cost-of-living events. The event on the 26<sup>th</sup> November will focus on energy efficiency.

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There has been a huge increase in the numbers of people sliding into further debt in order to meet the costs of living, and a steady rise in the numbers of people getting into debt for the first time. VCS partners have first-hand experience of the numbers of people affected and the pressures on the services and support available. Citizens Advice Merton and Lambeth report a 42% increase in the number of enquiries about debt alone in just a three month period, August to October of this year. The council benefits from a close working relationship with VCS partners in order to have access to figures like this which paint a full picture of the scale of the crisis. Part of the council's Cost-of-Living Support Fund is going towards CAML's debt advice services.

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. Volunteering opportunities present people with ways to expand their experience, and it is an ambition to further grow the number of local private companies which encourage their workforce to take on volunteering opportunities.

### **From Councillor Samantha MacArthur to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage**

Could the Cabinet Member please tell us how many local amateur sporting clubs there are in the Borough and how many of these she has made contact with. Furthermore, could she advise what proposals she has identified to help develop and support them?

### **Reply**

In my capacity as Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage, I have taken the opportunity to meet with several local clubs and I meet on a regular basis with clubs as well as Governing Bodies and other strategic stakeholders.

I am aware that the Council's Playing Pitch Strategy 2019 states that there are:

- 149 football teams
- 100 cricket teams
- 44 rugby teams

Many of these teams are undertaken by our key amateur clubs such as Motspur Park F.C., Westside, Wimbledon Cricket Club, Old Ruts, Hercules Wimbledon and many more.

In order to support community sporting, we are due to complete work on Haydon's Road multi-use-sports-area (MUSA), which has seen us renovate an old space which was used for motorcycle training, into a state-of-the-art games area. In addition, both Colliers Wood and Morden Recreation Ground MUSAs are due to be renovated in the new year.

Further support that will be undertaken includes investment in our natural grass playing pitches at Sir Joseph Hood Memorial Recreation Ground where we will be

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undertaking improvements to the drainage of the pitch, allowing for more matches to be played and improving the pitch standards.

In addition, we have engaged London Sport to work with officers and stakeholders from this month to develop a blueprint for our sporting strategy that will contribute to supporting improved sporting outcomes and removing barriers for participation in these activities.

### **From Councillor Jil Hall to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services**

Would the Cabinet Member please set out the main Council funding streams for voluntary organisations in the last 6 years, giving the percentage changes. Can an estimate be given as to the impact of inflation on these figures?

#### **Reply**

The main Council funding streams for voluntary organisations for the last six years is set out in the table below. We are currently in the process of collating the figures for 2021/22. It is not possible to give an estimate of the impact of inflation as accounting for inflation differs for different types of funding e.g. grants are normally provided over a number of years as a block of funding that does not include an inflation uplift.

Year	Cash grants / commissioned services	Notional rents	Discretionary Rate Relief	Total	% change
2020/21	£10,048, 209	£286,400	£219,700	<b>£10,554,309</b>	5%
2019/20	£9,526,062	£290,859	£224,296	<b>£10,041,217</b>	1%
2018/19	£9,153,842	£251,189	£524,443	<b>£9,929,474</b>	2%
2017/18	£8,913,187	£257,418	£541,733	<b>£9,712,338</b>	-20%
2016/17	£11,787,812	£274,868	£153,674	<b>£12,216,353</b>	-13%
2015/16	£13,584,757	£272,804	£153,957	<b>£14,017,518</b>	N/A

### **From Councillor Macauley to the Cabinet Member for Civic Pride**

Following Black History Month, can the Cabinet Member provide an update on the Council's work with Merton's voluntary and community sector in developing a refreshed Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy for the Council?

#### **Reply**

The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategy is 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

The EDI strategy is being informed by:

- The outcome of extensive community engagement including the 2021 'Your Merton' engagement findings and the Working Better with Communities project;

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- Commissioned research such as the Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (B.A.M.E.) Voice, 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.

The approach to developing the strategy and draft objectives has been discussed at the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) with Ethnic Minorities. Extensive consultation will commence in January 2023 and the voluntary and community sector will be given an opportunity for further input into the strategy. The draft EDI strategy will be discussed at the Overview and Scrutiny Commission in January.