

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 16 January 2023

Wards: All

Subject: Working Better With Communities Framework and Approach

Lead Director: Jane McSherry, Executive Director of Children, Lifelong Learning and Families and Louise Round, Executive Director of Innovation and Change

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

Contact officer: Keith Shipman, Social Inclusion Manager and Anthony Hopkins, Head of Library, Heritage & Adult Education Service

Recommendations:

That Cabinet:

- A. Formally adopt the 'Working Better with Communities' Framework and ways of working.
- B. Note the proposed process for embedding the Framework into the way in which the council operates.

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose of report

- 1.1. This report sets out the approach to developing and implementing a new bespoke 'Working Better with Communities' Framework and approach within all of Merton Council's service planning. This Framework provides a toolkit for services to use to work collaboratively with communities. Cabinet is requested to formally adopt the 'Working Better with Communities' Framework for Merton Council.
- 1.2. Having the ability to understand how and where our residents need support, including through working collaboratively with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), reflects our commitment to putting Civic Pride at the heart of our borough. The new framework aligns with the overarching aim of the council to 'build a better Merton together' and the core value of being a council embedded in the community.
- 1.3. With Nurturing Civic Pride being one of the new administration's key priorities, this report also outlines the proposed next steps to successfully embed the new 'Working Better with Communities' framework and ways of working into Merton Council's standards and service planning, to further enhance how connected the council is to its local communities.

- 1.4. This framework will also sit alongside proposals for a more resident-facing approach to community engagement, which are due to be presented at a future Cabinet meeting.

Executive Summary

- 1.5. This Framework was born out of our experience during the Pandemic and the desire to harness and build on the community spirit that brought the borough together.
- 1.6. The Framework was co-designed with local partners, including the VCS. It is unique to Merton and reflects the approach that residents want to see us take to developing community partnerships. It provides a toolkit for services to use to work collaboratively with communities.
- 1.7. It provides a set of principles and practical ways of working - some new, some building on existing good practice. We have gathered from our learning to date, that working in this way can help people to think and act differently, and that this can build trust and relationships, unlock resources and create better solutions.
- 1.8. It also 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.
- 1.9. Merton Council already has a strong track record of working collaboratively with the VCS and its local communities. This Framework intends to formalise the processes to ensure that this way of working is encouraged across a wider variety of projects in the council. The positive response from working in this way can already be seen through feedback from partners below.
- Covid Community Champions - “It worked because it was done with partners and we had all parts of the system in the room. It wasn’t Council champions, it was Merton champions.”
 - Detached youth work - “Working closely with other Council teams has improved information sharing and removed barriers to joint working.”
 - Covid health inequalities - “The organisations involved had a fabulous reach and were trusted by their communities. It improved the Council’s relationship with these communities and it has begun to build trust.”
 - Covid Community Response Hub - “We have a long history of working with the VCS in Merton, but this rapid mobilisation took the relationship to a new level. VCS partners were front and centre of the offer and they were recognised as equal partners who are able to bring specialist knowledge and expertise.”
 - Ofsted Children’s Services report – “A critical aspect of mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been that of effective proactive action, working together with key partners to keep children safe and to support all staff in their work with children and families”
- 1.10. Early testing of this Framework and ways of working has involved two pilot projects and utilising the Framework to reconfigure the council’s new Civic

Pride Fund: Supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector, as outlined in this report.

- 1.11. A further update will be provided to a future Cabinet meeting on the future progress in embedding this new approach for Merton.

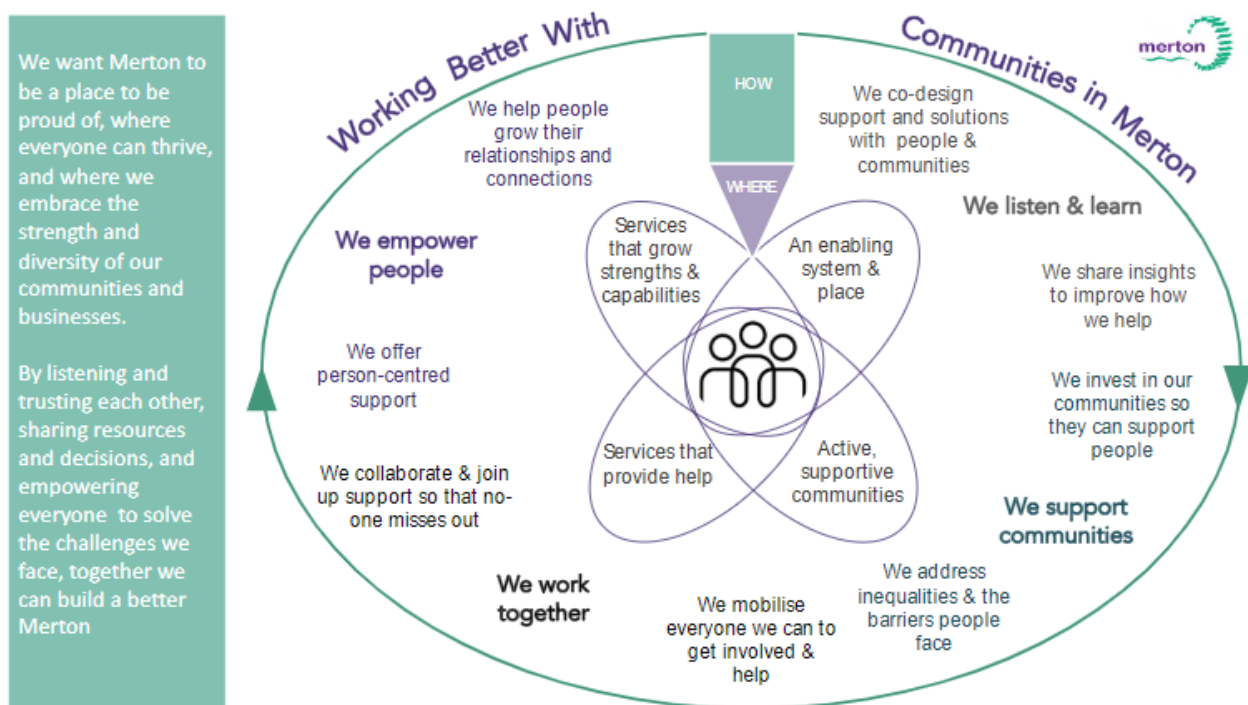
2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. The way Merton pulled together during the Pandemic proved that by working collaboratively and at pace both the Council and its communities could work together to deliver better outcomes for residents. The council worked closely with voluntary organisations to mobilise volunteers to support our most vulnerable residents. Many of our voluntary groups have commented that the level of trust and partnership working was a scale different to other London boroughs they worked in.
- 2.2. In recent years we have seen a clear shift from a traditional 'paternalistic' relationship to a genuine partnership approach with the voluntary and community sector in Merton, as evidenced through the last Strategic Partner Programme, models such as Social Prescribing and through the creation of the Merton Community Hub as part of the wider Covid response. We have been able to draw on these resources to support the local Ukraine response.
- 2.3. In addition, the Your Merton engagement findings evidenced how much residents value and take pride in Merton's community spirit and a desire to be engaged at a micro level on the development of initiatives and decisions that affect the things that matter to them e.g. high streets and green spaces.
- 2.4. Building on the experience we have had working with many different partners in our community during the Pandemic and before, we intended to develop a longer-term strategic approach to community support that would be delivered within communities. Working in this way can help people to think and act differently, and can build trust and relationships, unlock resources and create better solutions.
- 2.5. We wanted to capture all this learning to transform how the council works with communities going forward. In early May 2021 we commissioned Collaborate CIC to support us in our new 'Transforming How we Work with Communities' (THWWWC) project. Collaborate are experts in supporting services, systems and places that want to collaborate to deliver better outcomes for residents and they worked with us on this project through to end of June 2022.
- 2.6. Having previously worked with other council's including Brent, Oldham and Kirklees, Collaborate have extensive practical experience supporting collaboration between people, organisations and systems for the public good. Their focus is to enable councils to realise the potential of place, and working through all the local assets – residents, the community and voluntary sector, anchor institutions such as places of worship, and all parts of the public sector.
- 2.7. As part of the initial 'discovery' phase, 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.

- 2.8. As part of the project Collaborate CIC worked with the council and partners to co-design a new ‘Working Better with Communities’ framework/approach, which was specifically designed for Merton. This was very much a co-production approach and Collaborate spent time understanding not just how the Council might work better with communities but also, how a new approach might be introduced and embedded across the council.
- 2.9. The Framework can be found below in Figure 1 and further details are included in the Collaborate CIC Final Learning Report Executive Summary at Appendix I. This 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.

Figure 1 – the working better with communities framework



3. DETAILS

- 3.1. To initially test the Framework, collaborative pilot groups were set up across two focus areas which consisted of council officers, public health

and the VCS. These groups tested its resilience to the complex ways of working across the individual sectors and ability to support the delivery of services across the council.

- 3.2. Having partners in the room who may not usually work alongside one another proved useful when links were made between services and the full customer journey. From the pilots smaller projects developed, and new relationships were formed.
- 3.3. Building on the early work supporting the speech, language and communication pilot, the Early Years Service has recently been successful in two bids to the DfE: the Family Hubs Transformation Fund to facilitate the transition and transformation of Merton's approach to a Family Hub model and a smaller Family Hubs Behavioural Insights project which seeks to improve uptake of family services by vulnerable groups using a community development approach. The Working Better With Communities Framework was integral to these bids, and will be fully considered in the planned activity.
- 3.4. On completion of the piloting phase, it became evident that this new way of working could be applied to a wider variety of council led projects and initiatives.
- 3.5. The Framework has most recently been used to shape the approach for the 'Supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector' element of Merton's Civic Pride Fund: formerly the Strategic Partner Programme.
- 3.6. The recommissioning of this central voluntary and community sector grants funding programme had provided a valuable opportunity to put this Framework into practice. The fund was structured around the four key Framework themes, which are specifically focused around areas where people may find help and support in Merton. It is evident that if we want to enable people to thrive, we need to think about all of these places and ways in which people can be supported. Organisations in Merton were able to apply for funding against one or more of the themes.
- 3.7. In addition, officers also worked with a Collaborative Working Group of voluntary sector representatives and service commissioners to develop a set of commissioning requirements that form the basis of the draft Funding Prospectus that were used to invite bids for funding from the voluntary sector.
- 3.8. Working collaboratively enabled the funding programme to target the current issues faced by Merton's communities. The Collaborative Working Group were also able to work closely with the council officers to create solutions which would not only impact them directly as organisations but their direct service users who are in need.
- 3.9. Further to the pilots and development of the new Civic Pride Fund, the project team has convened a new Commissioning Group, to consider good practice in relation to this Framework. The group is developing new council commissioning guidance setting out best practice at different stages of the commissioning cycle, drawing on the Framework. Going forward, the group will continue to look at opportunities to embed the

Working Better with Communities approach in future commissioning opportunities.

- 3.10. Collaborate CIC produced a final report which outlined recommendations for the short term (next 6 months) as well detailing suggestions for the longer term (the next 12 – 18 months). The full list of recommendations can be found in the Executive Summary document at Appendix I.
- 3.11. Proposals for a more resident-facing approach to community engagement are also in development and will align with the wider approach to working with communities set out in this report. Following the findings from the Your Merton engagement programme there was a clear desire from participants to see improvements in how the Council engages with them on decisions that affect their community.

4. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 4.1. Cabinet can choose not to adopt this Framework and the council can continue to work as it currently does with communities. However, the evidence from this project and other community and resident engagement has told us that communities want to be more involved in the way that decisions affect them. The Framework would offer the opportunity for a more consistent approach to working with communities across different parts of the council. The risk of not following this approach is that we would continue to be a top-down organisation that doesn't get most out of its residents.

5. CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

- 5.1. We have taken a co-production approach to developing the framework and toolkit for Merton. A range of stakeholders, including staff, partners and community groups have been engaged in the early discovery phase and subsequent phases of the project.
- 5.2. All that work is captured in the Framework. 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 to gather partner insights and perspectives.
- 5.3. The workshops and focus groups included representatives from Merton's Mental Health Forum, Merton's Youth Partnership, The Community Response Steering group, Joint Consultative Committee - Equalities group, Frontline workers, Merton Partnership Executive Board and local businesses.
- 5.4. In addition to the initial diagnostic phase interviews pilot focus groups took place with workshops involving front line staff in public sector and VCS, organisations representing young people, seldom heard groups, business representatives and local commissioners and place-shapers.
- 5.5. A Commissioners Group was set up with those who Commission across the council. These meetings were to understand how the framework can be applied to assist with collaborative commissioning across the council.

- 5.6. A range of consultation and engagement has been undertaken as part of the Civic Pride Fund recommissioning, including an early engagement event co-designed with Collaborate CIC and subsequent Collaborative Working Group. We have taken a co-design approach to developing the draft funding Prospectus.
- 5.7. The Voluntary and Community Sector organisations involved in the Framework development and pilots actively contributed to joint learning on equalities issues. They brought stories of lived experience of inequalities to inform, challenge and influence the decisions being made for the framework.
- 5.8. As the project and pilots progress, it is imperative that we share our journey with wider stakeholders to keep them informed and up to date. For example, a newsletter was included in the last edition of the Merton Together partnership e-magazine outlining the journey of the project so far and the future direction and has been shared more widely with stakeholders.

6. TIMETABLE

- 6.1. To ensure the successful embedding of the Working Better with Communities Framework, project officers will work closely with council departments to identify and explore current initiatives which are taking place across the council which would benefit from a more collaborative approach.
- 6.2. Using the Framework and toolkit as guidance departments will be able to take the necessary steps to engage and involve communities in a wider range of projects. It is intended that through collaboration and earlier involvement in decision making, communities will feel pride in the work and changes taking place across the borough.
- 6.3. The end of project learning report produced by Collaborate recommends that to support the delivery and governance of this approach, the council should consider recruiting a Community Co-ordinator. The role of the Working with Communities Coordinator would be to gather and disseminate learning about how the Framework is being adopted, what is being learnt from using it and what the outcomes are, to further inform the approach. The council may wish to consider recruiting to this role once the Framework is fully embedded.

Outline next steps:

- Engaging individual DMTs – take the draft framework to each DMT and asking them to identify two or three ideas for how to use it
- A session with the council's Leadership Network to update them and ask them to identify opportunities to embed the framework.
- Set up new Stewardship Group to oversee future governance.
- Embedding framework – training, communications, service planning.
- Working with Merton Connected to increase the capacity in the voluntary sector to support the framework.

7. FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. The total allocation for this work to £179k across 2021/2022 and 2022/23, all funded via the Recovery and Modernisation programme fund (via OCPB reserves). Of this, £157,500 was spent in 2021-22 and the remaining £21,500 in 2022-23.
- 7.2. As part of this funding, CMT approved a budget of £50,000 for a Merton Connected transformational resource element of this work. This funding was paid to Merton Connected in March 2022 to assist with building the capacity within the voluntary sector to support the 'Transforming How We Work With Communities' way of working. Some of this resource was specifically allocated to help support bid writing for the Civic Pride Fund and for a longer-term resource to be created which groups can continue to utilise.

8. LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. None specific to this report.

9. HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. One of the key elements of the framework is focused on how we address inequality. The next steps outlined in this report aim to have a positive impact in terms of the council's statutory duties.

10. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1. None specific to this report.

11. RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1. Two of the council's key risks relate to equalities and to partnership working. The proposals set out in this report will mitigate risks in relation to both of these.
- 11.2. The proposals in this document work in conjunction with wider recovery plans for the council.

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

- 12.1. Appendix I – Collaborate CIC Final Learning Report – Executive Summary

13. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 13.1. [Your Merton Report](#)