

Executive Summary: Working Better with Communities in Merton

1. Introduction

This report sets out the learning and recommendations from a year of work in Merton. We worked closely with a core team from Merton Borough Council and many stakeholders inside and outside.

We started with a large and wide brief and worked our way towards a solution - a new Framework for 'Working Better with Communities' (WBWC) in Merton.

What you asked for was:

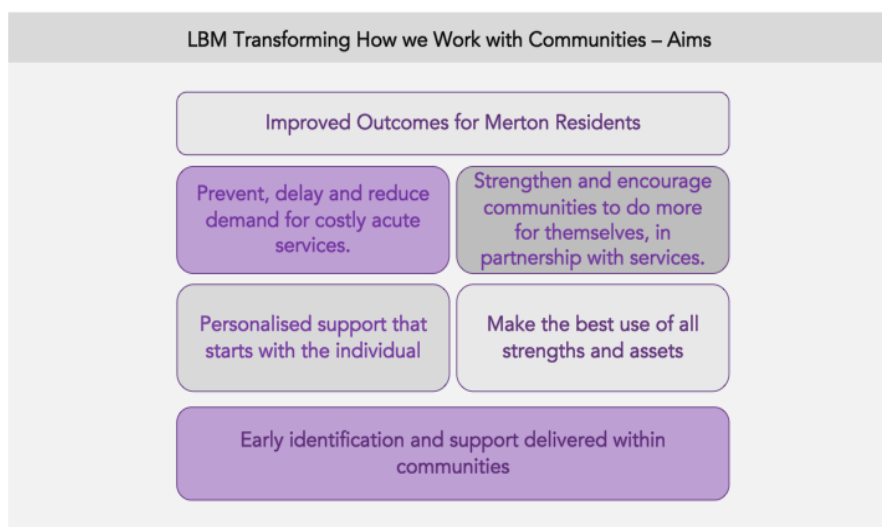
A methodology and plan for how we will move towards a more holistic approach to integrated early identification and support services and... how we can best configure our resources to fully utilise the strengths and assets within the Borough to support this approach.

You also described it as:

A more integrated and empowering approach to working with and supporting communities in Merton:

- Supporting community resilience so people can support each other;
- Building on the experience of working with many different partners in our community during the pandemic and before;
- Going upstream to prevent the need for services where possible; and
- Looking at opportunities for improvements in ways of working, services and investment.

We summarised the aims like this for the purpose of workshops:



In this report, we have boiled these aims and aspirations down to an overall purpose of 'community prevention and resilience'. In the end we dropped the use of both terms in the final output, as we found other language resonated more.

The methodology and plan we developed for you is a 'Framework for Working Better with Communities' in Merton and a set of recommendations and 'levers' for how to adopt and integrate the Framework across your work.

The way we approached the work mirrored the Framework we developed. This was very much a co-production approach, and we 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. We had to understand how Merton works, how change might happen in Merton and where are the opportunities and levers for change.

- We listened to staff, partners, and community groups
- We learnt through many conversations and through pilot work
- We co-produced the new approach and iterated it constantly
- We prioritised inequalities as an essential part of the approach
- We identified and built on the strengths and good practices we found in Merton
- We worked across sectors and Council boundaries - with different departments and services, with business, the VCS and with statutory partners
- We started to empower individuals to take the approach - working with different groups of people through the pilot and testing phase

The report describes the details of how we approached the project, what we learnt and our recommendations for taking the work forward. We explain the different phases of the project, the work we did, what we learnt from each phase and strand of work, the approach, the Framework we developed, and finally, our recommendations for how you should take the work forward and embed the Framework across the Council and Merton to achieve your aims.

We identify a set of 'levers' that you can push, to give you the best chance possible to integrate and use the Framework to change practices and ways of working across the Council - recognising that this is not a single project or programme but an organisational culture change and transformational process - and that change takes time and needs support throughout the organisation, from senior leadership and corporate services out to public facing workers and partners. Most importantly, introducing a new cross-cutting approach requires adopting a learning approach - to enable you to understand how the Framework is being used, what enables this way of working and what change is happening as a result.

Alongside the report we have developed a toolkit for staff and partners - to guide anyone wanting to implement the Framework in their work, so that you can get started right away with this change process.

2. The Framework

During the Covid pandemic, you were reminded as a Council about how important it is to work closely with all your communities in Merton – with all faith and ethnic minority communities, with neighbourhood groups, the business community, and with many great charities and voluntary organisations. You also worked more closely with your key partners in the NHS, the police and other services. You all collaborated to ensure that people were supported and protected, safeguarding those close to falling through the safety net. Without that work, you could not have achieved the result, and the impact of the pandemic on the people of Merton would have been much worse.

As you started to emerge from the pandemic, you did not want to lose all the learning and new ways of working. You recognise that all these communities and partners are important all the time. Working more closely with them can help you to tackle many of the challenges you face in Merton, making better use of our resources and generating more solutions that work. You also recognise that people can receive help and are able to live a good life due to the support they get within the community, not just from our services as a Council. You know you need to work together with communities to create the best outcomes for people. The 'Your Merton' engagement work also highlighted that Merton residents wanted community action and ownership to be part of the future of Merton.

You embarked on this work with the question, what is the best model or service or funding stream to support community resilience and partnership working with communities? Where are your resources best spent to build on the work that was started in the pandemic? Our findings are clear: there is no single service or funding model that would meet all your objectives. This is not deliverable by a single department and cannot be outsourced to the voluntary sector. This is work, or ways of working, that needs to be done right across the Council, in every department. Different priorities will fall to different Council services and teams. Equally, this is not about focusing on only services, or only community development. People get help in many ways and often in many places at once. So, this requires working across these different places, or domains. It requires a holistic approach.

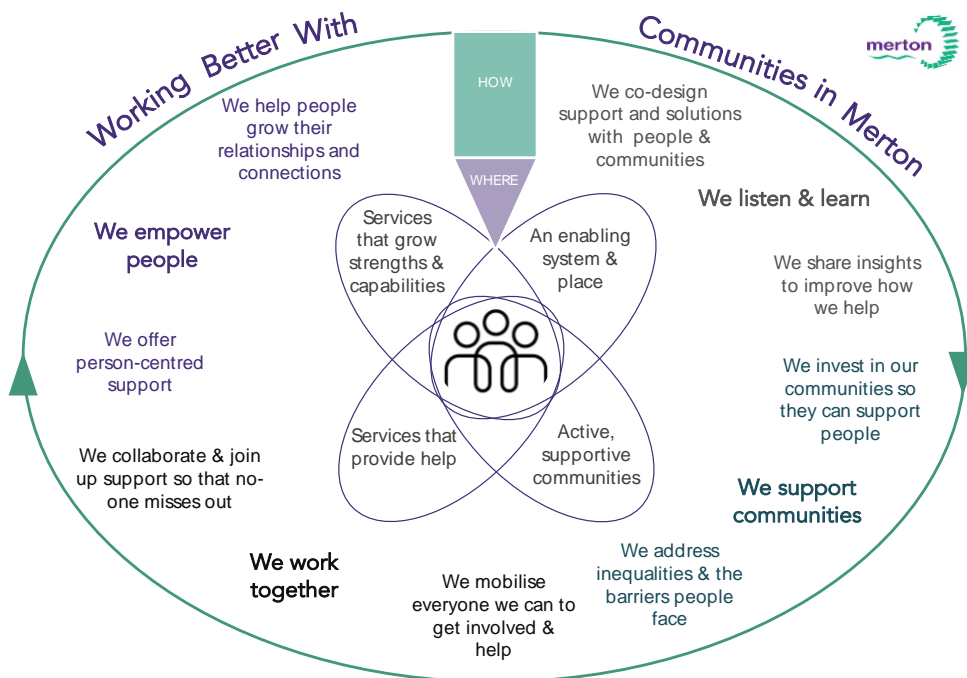
That is why we developed a Framework for Working Better with Communities in Merton: to provide a guide to how and where to work differently to achieve your vision.

We listened to a lot of people in developing the Framework and asked them what supports community partnership and helps people thrive. We also looked at the evidence from other places and at what was already strong in Merton. All that work is captured in the Framework.

The Framework provides a set of principles and practical ways of working - some new, some building on existing good practice. We don't expect everyone to adopt it all at once, but we hope it provides inspiration and guidance for everyone in the Council to work differently. We believe, and we have seen, 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.

We want Merton to be a place to be proud of, where everyone can thrive, and where we embrace the strength and diversity of our communities and businesses.

By listening and trusting each other, sharing resources and decisions, and empowering everyone to solve the challenges we face, together we can build a better Merton



3. What we learnt

There was an enormous amount of learning generated throughout the project, but this is what we believe the key takeaways to consider if you want to be successful in building this work:

- Times of crisis, such as the pandemic, can serve as a catalyst for people and services to do things differently, breaking down the barriers which can sometimes be perceived to exist between public services and local communities. The learning from these experiences presents an opportunity to think about how the Council might embed these new ways of working into their proactive rather than just reactive approaches.
- There is a lot of enthusiasm for involving communities – but also some fear about how to do this. It feels risky to some professionals and officers. We saw this even in the governance of the 'Transforming how we Work with Communities' project itself.
- Building relationships takes time and is an important foundational aspect of Working Better with Communities and across sectors and silos. Ensure organisational relationships aren't over-dependent on key – usually senior- individuals. Give people in public-facing roles time and opportunities to connect with other workers on their patch or in their field - it improves signposting and strengthens the safety net.
- Professionals find it hard to step out of their 'service first' lens. The Framework does help to stimulate different ways of thinking.
- Bringing together people from across the system and from different sectors to share perspectives on a challenge is valuable and new insights emerge. At the start of a pilot process, the diagnostic phase is important to understand the challenge from different perspectives.
- Setting up the pilots took time and lots of conversations - but collective buy-in from the people has been achieved. It was very important to get the voice of communities and users of services in the room right from the start of a process.
- All organisations and workers are increasingly feeling under pressure, and this is going to impact on their ability to collaborate and to work relationally. There will always be a tension - between wanting to engage early and often with the VCS, with organisations facing barriers to being able to take part in engagement and co-production opportunities. However, that is no reason not to continue opening those opportunities and looking for ways to value participation. We do not always have to rely on the same people and organisations, we should seek new voices and diverse perspectives.
- Where there are good cross-sector relationships these are often held only at the individual level and not organisational, and are therefore fragile. They need to be 'thickened' at different levels of organisations and there needs to be an organisational memory of these relationships.
- There is not much capacity for piloting new ways of working – people need the time to commit to it. This is equally true of the VCS and statutory sector.
- It is important not to get hung up on not having enough resources, there are never enough resources. However, it is equally important to be realistic about what you can do without new or freed up resources - and to start small and grow as you learn. Sharing resources better, across and within sectors and organisations, will free up resources and support collaboration.
- Merton does not have a systematic way of creating change. Change is ad-hoc and fragmented. This is not always a bad thing; it enables innovation and experimentation. However, there is a risk that new approaches get marooned or run out of steam before they can be embedded and learnt from.
- Equally, there is a danger that certain innovations receive more attention and as a result become inappropriately adopted into other contexts. For example, the proposal to develop a social prescribing model for young people and mental health, rather than co-producing a wellbeing model **with and for** young people from scratch.

- It is important to recognise that there isn't one way of doing things to achieve the vision of stronger communities, more preventative and enabling support and more joined-up solutions - let a thousand flowers bloom and learn from them!
- There is value in sharing and spreading some core approaches and practices that can be applied in different contexts, such as strengths-based working, community engagement methods, equalities practice, and co-production - so that more groups and workers across Merton know and understand and use these approaches and 'speak the same language'.
- Underpinning this is the need for more shared learning spaces - where peers can learn from each other and strengthen their practice together, and where you can all learn from each other, both what works well and what needs improvement. You already have some of these spaces, such as the Community Response Steering Group, but they should be built into all collaborative working and commissioning process.
- Other than learning, to adopt and spread new ways of working in the Council will involve using all the levers available to you, working top-down and bottom up, and nurturing the many champions for this way of working you already have. And communicating well and frequently.
- Governance and accountability matters - when it comes to sustaining new ways of working. People need to know that their efforts are valued and that there is real interest in what they are doing, so that they can invest their time and energy. They need to know who is listening and learning and that when they hit barriers, there will be efforts higher up to remove these.

4. Recommendations

Introduction

There is no single intervention or service model which will transform the way you work with communities, so instead we have developed a Framework which sets out the range of 'ways of working' which together can strengthen how you work with communities and how you can invest in communities so that they can support people to thrive.

The 'Working Better with Communities in Merton Framework' has been co-designed by many stakeholders in Merton. It has resonance and traction, and you should continue to disseminate it and test it throughout the Council. It can support you in delivering other priorities including the new political priorities based on the 'Your Merton' engagement work.

Disseminating and testing the Framework will require a set of actions and a governance and learning process. In trying to understand what that might look like in Merton, we have identified a set of 'levers' which can be 'pushed' to help this dissemination and testing process.

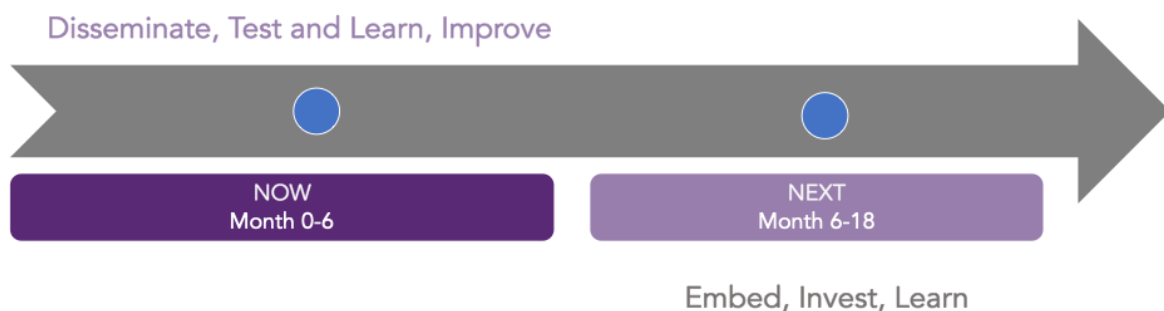
These 'levers' are existing processes and mechanisms which are already in place to support your work. We are not proposing a whole new process or mechanism to embed the Framework. We propose that you harness your existing process and mechanisms to do this work.

The roadmap we have developed is based on these 'levers'. Where appropriate we have signalled where the 'levers' intersect or 'speak' to elements of the Framework.

The final - and most important - element of the recommendations is that you need to adopt a learning approach to adopting the Framework and to measuring its impact. In situations of complexity, when outcomes are the result of multiple interactions and interventions, learning is the only management strategy.

The future governance of the work should be based on a learning approach, where learning from introducing and using the Framework is held by a learning stewardship group and shared across the Council with appropriate groups that can act on it, including CMT, Departmental management teams, operational staff, and elected representatives.

Adopting the 'Working Better with Communities' Framework: A Roadmap



What is the Lever?	How can it help?
Leadership, governance and learning	Culture setting, embedding the Framework, enabling improvement & adaptation in how we work with communities

Staff empowerment	Permission granting and growing capabilities for experimentation, engagement and collaboration
Engagement	Understanding what matters to people, trust-building with communities, co-design
Communications and Partnerships	Shared purpose and buy-in from public and partners
Equalities	Addressing internal and external inequalities through policy and practice
Service planning	Embedding Working with Communities every day in council services
Commissioning	Commissioning with and through communities
Data maturity	Gathering insight to support learning, planning and improvement
Resource allocation	Targeting resources towards prevention and community support and to address inequality

Recommendations for actions in the next 6 months

Leadership, governance, and learning

- Establish a Stewardship group
- Give someone a Coordinator role
- Adopting a learning as governance approach for the Framework
- Appoint a CMT champion or sponsor

Staff Empowerment

- Develop a network of champions
- Train more staff in listening & engagement
- Co-locate staff in VCS settings & vice versa
- Develop staff understanding of community-led work
- Agree shared principles for person-centred work

Engagement

- All Departments to develop and widen their VCS relationships and partnerships
- Engagement becomes a Council priority throughout everything
- Recognise, analyse and utilise qualitative data from all engagement activities
- Continue responding to 'Your Merton' engagement and using the findings to inform work

Communications and Partnerships

- Develop a clear and strong public narrative about partnering with communities
- Have a 'Working Better with Communities' section of the Newsletter, Website and Hub
- Adopt and communicate the vision & Framework internally
- Invite Partners to endorse the Framework
- Identify 1 or 2 cross-sector partnership projects to test the Framework on – probably sitting under the Merton Partnership or similar body

Equalities

- Identify equalities and inclusion priorities for each service
- Review and learn from work to Bridge the Gap between East and West Merton
- Move towards a consistent approach to data collection
- Involve the Departmental Equality Leads in the Framework learning and dissemination

Service Planning and Improvement

- Use Framework to inform service reviews
- Pilot the Framework in some service areas or Departments
- Review and learn from different approaches to working with volunteering within services

Commissioning

- Develop Commissioners' group as a community of practice and the commissioning guidance and share case studies and challenges
- Test framework on recommissioning of domiciliary care
- Develop an approach to collaborative commissioning

Data Maturity

- Understand better what data is held by different departments and teams
- Develop a more consistent approach to capturing data about equality of access, use and experience of services and differential needs and outcomes
- Start to develop more time and space for making sense of data collectively and learning from it

Resources

- Continue recommissioning of Strategic Partnerships
- Identify other opportunities to fund VCS & look at how to join up better
- Support new funding alliances like the Youth Partnership
- Look at opportunities for co-location

This report was developed by the London Borough of Merton and Collaborate CIC based on the Working Better With Communities in Merton Project (May 2021 - June 2022).

London Borough of Merton: Amanda Roberts, Grace Aldis, Keith Shipman, Richard Ellis, Anthony Hopkins

Collaborate CIC: Naomi Diamond, Amy Hurst, Ann-Sophie Freund, Elle Dodd