

6: Councillors Ordinary Priority Questions to Cabinet Members

From Cllr Manly to the Cabinet Member for Finance & Corporate Services

To date, what support has the Council provided to residents to support them during the Cost of Living Emergency?

Reply

In July 2022, Merton Council was one of the first in London to declare a Cost of Living Emergency. Since then, measures have been undertaken by the Council and its partners to identify and support people in need.

A Cost-of-Living Support Fund of £2 million was agreed by Cabinet on 22nd September 2022. Allocations were agreed for the first tranche of £1 million:

- Provision for individual payments of £60 by Post Office voucher to residents in receipt of Council Tax Support was agreed.
- Cabinet agreed to commit £630,000 of the Household Support Fund to free school meal vouchers for the period October 2022 to March 2023.
- £100,000 was agreed to support arrangements in the voluntary and community sector for delivering emergency assistance to residents.
- £100,000 was allocated to Sustainable Merton and partners to support the Community Fridge Network in order to grow capacity in accordance with increasing need.
- An allocation of £400,000 to initiatives that reduce heating costs was agreed, including expansion of the Warm and Well Programme.
- An allocation of £200,000 was agreed for Citizens Advice Merton and Lambeth to expand its debt advice service for Merton residents, with a focus on in-person advice given in a community setting.

There are strong mechanisms in place for engaging with voluntary sector and other key partners, including the Community Response Steering Group and its Fuel Poverty sub-group, plus the Food Response Network and the Cost-of-Living Communications Campaign Working Group. These provide an opportunity for discussions on key issues affecting residents.

The Council has run a series of free Cost of Living events for residents in Merton's libraries and the Civic Centre, attended by more than 1,200 people. Five Cost of Living events have taken place since July in Morden, Mitcham, Wimbledon, Colliers Wood and Pollards Hill, with a further dedicated energy saving event taking place in Morden in November. Feedback from residents has been very positive. Two Cost of Living events were also held for Council employees in October and November.

All of Merton's libraries have been set up as Warm Spaces and are available to all residents. A web page on the council website has been set up to promote all of the warm spaces in Merton along with the resources available at them including those set up by community and faith groups. The continuing promotion of warm spaces encourages more organisations to sign up and promote their offer.

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A Cost-of-Living webpage has been set up at www.merton.gov.uk/costofliving, providing up to date information and advice for residents, including details of forthcoming events. It is widely shared by partners and regularly updated.

The Merton Community Hub, set up during the Covid-19 pandemic by the Council working in partnership with Merton Age UK, Wimbledon Guild and Merton Connected, has pivoted to providing assistance and support to residents in response to the Cost-of-Living emergency. Residents are able to get in touch either online, or, crucially, by phone.

We are working on the development and implementation of a Cost-of-Living Action Plan setting out activities, timescales and ownership for the next two years. The Action Plan, along with proposals for the second tranche of £1 million of the Cost-of-Living Support Fund, will be taken to Cabinet in March.

From Cllr Simon McGrath to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Could the Cabinet member please tell me the total of the cost of works planned under the recent Workplace Design Property Infrastructure Procurement decision:

- a. On the first floor; and
- b. On the seventh floor

Of the Civic Centre,

And similarly, the cost of new furniture planned under the recent Workplace Design Furniture Procurement decision:

- c. for rooms on the first floor; and
- d. for rooms on the seventh floor

Of the Civic Centre?

Reply

In answering this question, I think it would be helpful to set out the context in which these works are being carried out. The current Civic Centre office accommodation is tired and in urgent need of refurbishment. Specifically, the toilets, kitchens, internal decorations, carpets and furniture are now all past their normal operational life expectancy and are overdue replacement.

In July 2021 a report was presented to the Council's corporate management team setting out the findings of a cross Council survey of departmental heads of service to understand their operational readiness to adopt new hybrid working arrangements, and also seeking CMT's agreement to go live with the new Merton SMART working arrangements.

The report also sought approval to allocate funding to commission a specialist design consultancy to work with officers to develop proposals for redesigning our office space and create the 'Merton Office of the future'.

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In July 2022 CMT reaffirmed its commitment to adopting the principles of hybrid working as the Council's future operating model, which included a radical approach to office accommodation. The purpose of the 'Merton Office of the Future' project is to provide fit for purpose, modern office accommodation at the Civic Centre, which in property terms will then allow the Council to use its office space more efficiently and support new hybrid ways of working. The Covid pandemic has brought the need to work in a more agile way sharply into focus and many organisations are reviewing the way space is used as a result.

Completion of the pilot on the 7th and 1st floors will provide a 'showcase' for the Merton Office of the Future which managers and staff can 'road test' before deciding the configuration and layout for each department as the refurbishment works are then rolled out on other floors of the building.

An additional benefit of these works is that they will facilitate the relocation of SLLP from Gifford House and release that building for disposal or redevelopment as housing.

As part of the second stage of the refurbishment programme, officers will determine what improvement works are necessary in other group offices. In the meantime, we are taking action to upgrade the technology in the publicly accessible committee rooms on the first floor to improve the quality of hybrid and webcast meetings.

Turning to your specific questions:

The cost of the works to the relevant part of the 1st floor is £83,492

The works to the 7th floor will cost £341,570.50

The furniture on the first floor will cost £79,790 and the cost of furniture on 7th floor is £393,083. These costs are net of VAT.

The furniture has been procured through a number of specialist commercial suppliers via a competitive tender process against a very comprehensive performance and quality specification, that includes compliance with British Furniture Standards for elements such as foam and fabric, together with a typical five-year manufacturer's warranty and an anticipated lifespan of approximately 15 years.

It should be noted that the figures quoted include £56,515.50 for the costs of 7th floor toilet refurbishment and for the lighting elements of the schemes at £90,212. These works were already planned to be undertaken throughout the building, but there are economies of scale in combining them with the office refurbishments.

Whilst the works have been competitively tendered, general inflationary pressures and a significant increase in the cost of raw materials, utilities and labour rates have had an adverse affect on construction costs. As an example, construction materials prices rose by 8.0% in quarter 2 of 2022 compared with the previous quarter, and by 22.3% compared with a year earlier.

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It is not possible at this stage to say what the costs for the remainder of the Civic Centre will be.

From Cllr Bhim to the Cabinet Member for Sport & Heritage

What were the results from the recent Libraries Customer Satisfaction Survey?

Reply

We are delighted with the results from the recent Libraries Customer Satisfaction Survey that showed that overall library customers are 100% satisfied with the service with 96% of respondents rating the library service as very good or good. Our extended opening hours offer assisted with improvements in satisfaction with our opening hours, with 94% of customers rating them as very good and good.

Other notable improvements since the last survey include, 98% of customers would recommend their library to someone else and 97% rated their local library as very good or good. 70% of respondents said the libraries have made a difference to them and there were significant improvements in satisfaction with our online resources and the use of our free e-books offer.

From Cllr Nick McLean to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services:

The Conservative Group congratulate the management of CHAS for their expertise in establishing the company as a market leader, evidenced by the sale price achieved for the company. Please can the Cabinet Member provide an update on what the administration proposes to do with the proceeds of the sale?

Reply

The Council is keen to ensure the proceeds of sale benefit not only present but also future residents of Merton. We are currently developing plans to utilise the proceeds to both invest in some legacy projects for Merton and to support the Council's finances going forward as part of our Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

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

I was grateful for the opportunity to tour the Civic Centre with Officers recently to see how we might be able to make improvements to accessibility for our residents and visitors. Would the Cabinet Member please set out his plans and associated timelines for refurbishing the reception, including installing a Changing Places Toilet?

Reply

The redesign and refurbishment of the main reception and ground floor customer services areas within the Civic Centre form part of a wider review and update of the Council's Customer Contact Strategy.

At present, this work has temporarily been paused pending appointment of the new Executive Directors, who will lead a review of the Council's Customer Contact and

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Digital Strategies and also undertake an assessment of the operational buildings to develop the concept of delivering services locally utilising community hubs.

Once this review has been completed, a redesign of the main reception will then be undertaken incorporating 'Changing Places' toilet facilities that currently cannot be provided due to space limitations.

From Cllr Brunt to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride

How many organisations will benefit from the Merton Civic Pride Fund: Supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector, and how will this funding support capacity, particularly among smaller VCS organisations?

Reply

Eighteen local organisations will benefit from the Merton Civic Pride Fund: Supporting the Voluntary and Community Sector. This funding invests in and supports Merton's local voluntary and community infrastructure.

Out of the 18 organisations, three organisations have not received this funding previously and 28% of the overall funding will be going to smaller VCS organisations. This provides both stability for the sector and the ability to continue supporting our residents, and also creates opportunities to explore new projects.

The fund will enable local organisations to continue to provide preventative services that provide information, advice and support and nurture a strong sense of community as well as contributing to reducing inequalities.

For example, Merton and Morden Guild (a smaller VCS organisation) currently provides a range of activities for older people and with the new Civic Pride Fund will have the capacity to continue to deliver activities for the next three years. Merton and Morden Guild provides preventative activities for older people in a welcoming environment that increases self-esteem, confidence and mobility, and encourages more participation in our local community. The activities provided also help to reduce the effects of isolation and has a positive impact on individuals' physical, social and emotional wellbeing and resilience.

In addition, BAME Voice has a significant increase on the amount of funding previously received. Commonsense Development Trust and the Association of Polish Families have also seen a large increase in their grants. This recognises the important work they have done with the council both during the Covid pandemic and more recently on the cost of living crisis.

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To further 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. This will be administered via Merton Giving to the value of £50,000pa for the next three years starting in April 2023.

From Cllr John Oliver to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development

Can the Cabinet Member advise how many homes are expected to be insulated in Merton during the next financial year as a result of the Warmer Homes programme?

Reply

The Mayor of London's Warmer Homes programme, which commenced on 1 April 2022, is expected to run until 31 March 2023 and is currently well into the delivery phase. The programme is open to low-income households and administered, via the Greater London Authority, to 20 London boroughs participating in the GLA-led consortium.

To ensure Merton's lower income households can easily and efficiently access this funding, the FutureMerton and Public Health teams have written directly to low-income households to inform them about the programme and how they can apply. The Council also secured Warmer Homes funding for "Thinking Works", an award-winning South London non-profit fuel poverty and energy advice organisation, to support Merton residents, particularly vulnerable residents, through the journey from their application to installation.

Feedback from the GLA indicates our outreach has been effective in increasing the number of Merton households engaging in the programme. Merton's outreach programme to encourage low-income residents to apply for the funding was the first to be implemented and formed engagement best practice; Merton officers were asked to present their engagement best practice to other participating councils.

Currently there are 461 applications to the GLA from households in Merton to date, which is the third highest in London; however not all applicants may be eligible or choose to progress to installation. The programme is still running, so some households are mid application or arranging installation. Delivery of installations started three months ago (mid October 2022) and 21 properties are already complete. We will update councillors at the end of the programme when all installations have been complete.

From Cllr Paul Kohler to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

Residents have expressed their distress to us about the proposed closure of the Dementia Hub at the Eastways Centre as it provides a much needed and valued service to residents and their carers. Would the Cabinet Member please reassure residents and their carers that respite services will continue to be provided, where they will be and how they will be accessed?

Reply:

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Eastway is an older people's day centre in Morden serving people from across the borough run by Merton Council and open Monday to Friday: 9am-3.30pm. The Dementia Hub in Mitcham is a recognised centre of excellence for people with dementia or alzheimers operated by the Alzheimer's Society.

The Dementia Hub opened in 2014 and is accessible to Merton residents diagnosed with dementia. The services provided are delivered through a partnership between Merton Council, Alzheimer's Society, South West London and St George's Mental Health Trust, Merton ICB, and other voluntary and charity organisations. It provides support and information for people living with or caring for someone with dementia and carers. It provides a calming environment specifically designed around people with dementia and is open Monday-Friday 9am to 5pm.

The Council has worked with the Dementia Hub over the last year to develop a building based and outreach model and this has created capacity within the Dementia Hub. This capacity can provide an enhanced service to current users of the Eastway service who are living with dementia, be replicated in homes and libraries and community spaces, and therefore can spread this approach across the borough. Not everyone is well enough to travel to current services. The Dementia Hub is at the heart of the partnership with health and other voluntary and charity organisations and is therefore able to facilitate access to the range of specialist dementia support and services they offer to people and their carers. The Dementia Hub provide Carers and Relatives Information Support Programmes and the Strategies for Relatives 1-1 support programme in the persons home in addition to their peer support groups for carers.

The Council and the Alzheimers Society wish to work together to build on the work of the Hub and offer a wider range of support to people with dementia and their families, provide an excellent service for the future, and to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of people who are frail.

A consultation on the proposed replacement of the Eastway day centre will provide an opportunity for residents and carers to express their views, ask questions and to help shape the existing and new opportunities and services offered by the Dementia Hub that would replace it.

Each user of Eastway, together with their families and carers will have a Care Act assessment and a new care plan that considers their individual needs and circumstances including the need for respite care, and each carer would be offered a carers assessment.

During the care and support planning with service users and carers, the Council will provide support to access other services to meet their needs if they do not wish to make use of the excellent services offered by the Dementia Hub.

From Cllr Mundy to the Cabinet Member for Housing & Sustainable Development

How many responses were received to the consultation on landlord licensing and HMO planning controls?

Reply

The Council's consultation on landlord licensing and additional planning controls ran for 12 weeks from 14th November 2022 until 22nd January 2023. As well as publicising the consultation widely through the Council's communications channels, we employed a specialist communications consultant, Opinion Research Services, to organise the consultation and facilitate three workshops for landlords – two online and one in Merton in the civic centre 2023.

419 responses were received to the consultation (as at 26th January). Officers and ORS are reviewing all responses and there may be some remaining duplicates:

- 176 from landlords
- 22 from Letting agents
- Others from residents/ businesses
- 12 direct responses specifically on HMO planning controls