

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

6: Councillors Ordinary Priority Questions to Cabinet Members

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.

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.

Supplementary

I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for his detailed and very helpful response to my initial question. And I'd like to also ask that, given the ongoing disgracefully led chaos caused by the Conservative Government, is the Cabinet Member considering providing any further support to the residents in the forthcoming council budget? Thank you.

Reply

Thank you Cllr Manly for your supplementary question and you'll note of course the significant steps the council has already taken to support local residents during the cost of living emergency as detailed in my written answer. But, I am pleased to confirm that, yes, we will be bringing a cost of living budget to full council next month which amongst other things to support residents includes an expansion of our exceedingly generous council tax support scheme to low income households, it includes £7 million of investment over the next five years to fund paying the London living wage to, as the Leader said, not only our staff but to our contractors' staff and as announced in January, we will be bringing a proposal for a special one off, 1% cost of living discount to the majority of residents in Merton on their council tax bills in the next year, Madame Mayor, because this Labour administration is supporting residents during the cost of living emergency.

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:

On the first floor; and

On the seventh floor

Of the Civic Centre,

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

for rooms on the first floor; and

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'.

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

6: Councillors Ordinary Priority Questions to Cabinet Members

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 £149,771

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.

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

Supplementary

6: Councillors Ordinary Priority Questions to Cabinet Members

Thank you Madame Mayor, just to be clear Madame Mayor, the answer talks repeatedly about the first floor, but this is actually about the Leader's office and the Labour Group Offices. Last month the Cabinet Member had to defend moving the Council Leader's parking space, this time it's a lot more indefensible. £230,000 including £10,000 of new carpets, £5000 for a tea point with a kitchen just down the corridor and £10,000 for new chairs, some of them £640 each. Will the Cabinet Member come with me to Cllr Garrod's ward and knock on a few doors and ask people whether they think when their electricity's going up, their gas is going up, their food is going up, their council tax is going up, that they think spending £230,000 on the Labour Group Offices and the Leader's Office is a good use of their money.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, thank you Cllr McGrath for that interesting question. I would say to him, first of all, I've spent a lot of time with the Leader knocking on residents doors in his ward already, so I have a pretty good understanding of what residents across Mitcham feel. And I know that they feel, like I do, that Merton Council should be run professionally, it should have a proper professional operation as we deliver services to 200,000 residents with a £500 million annual gross budget and I think that they would expect that our staff are able to operate in a modern, professional office. So I think that this kind of LibDem whataboutery about spending money on our professional operations is actually irrelevant. And I am sure that residents in the Leaders' Ward and across the borough would agree with me.

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.

Supplementary

6: Councillors Ordinary Priority Questions to Cabinet Members

Can the Cabinet Member give an indication of how many residents are using our libraries as warm spaces during this cost of living emergency?

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor. Our libraries continue to flourish. We just had a recent survey that shows that our residents continue to enjoy the services and benefit from the services in our libraries. We have now launched all of our libraries as warm spaces, I've said before, in fact we've seen that our library use has gone up by 24% compared to previously. We also have 140,000 residents who are library members in Merton, and I just want to put a call out there actually that, if you live in Merton and you are not a library user, please contact your local library and become a member because there are so many services in there that you can benefit from.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and can I thank the Cabinet Member for his answer. Clearly it was disappointing that we were unsuccessful in gaining our bid for the Living Up fund, yet again, but I think that does show the importance of ensuring that funds from the sale of CHAS are ring-fenced in order to fulfil the need for town centre regeneration. So I would welcome if Cllr Christie could confirm that indeed the funds will be ring fenced for capital projects.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, thank you Cllr McLean for your question. I would say that we will do what we always do with regard to our budgetary decisions, which is that we will bring forward ambitious proposals to invest in the borough and that we will do that in an open and transparent way as we always do, so I won't commit ring-

6: Councillors Ordinary Priority Questions to Cabinet Members

fencing things in a particular way at this point, but I'll say that we will commit to investing in our borough.

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 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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, and thank you to the Cabinet Member for the response to my question. I am pleased to see that there is a plan to improve the reception area at the Civic Centre and to include the Changing Places toilet in due course, but why is the council prioritising spending money as we have heard from Cllr McGrath, filling two Labour Group offices with nearly £8,000 of new furniture when the existing furniture was more than just fine, with the Changing Places toilet in the public area of the civic centre would better encourage Civic Pride.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, thank you Cllr Galea for your question. I would repeat what I said to Cllr McGrath, which is that this LibDem whataboutery, trying to suggest that spending money our professional operations is not a good thing to do, is just nonsense. I've provided a written answer in which I've said that we will be bringing forward plans to deliver a Changing Places toilet in the reception of the Civic Centre

6: Councillors Ordinary Priority Questions to Cabinet Members

and I stand by that, and I think that is completely irrelevant to the council doing what all professional modern organisations do, which is investing in their facilities.

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.

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

6: Councillors Ordinary Priority Questions to Cabinet Members

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

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, I'd like to thank the Deputy Leader for her response and ask a supplementary. How will this funding help Merton's incredible voluntary and community sector organisations support our residents during the cost of living emergency.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, and thank you Councillor Blunt for his question and his supplementary. And indeed a number of grants made through the Civic Pride Fund will be supporting directly projects that will be helping residents through the cost of living crisis, for example, supporting South West London Law Centre and Springfield Law Centre that provide Benefit and Debt and Welfare Law Advice, the Power Centre Church in Mitcham, a new grantee is extending its food bank for those in need. And a common side here that we all know very well will be continuing to provide their crucial support. But more fundamentally by providing these multi-year grants to our excellent voluntary community sector, as he says, gives them the kind of sustainability and stability that they can be there for our residents and be there on the front line when people need them, thank you.

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

6: Councillors Ordinary Priority Questions to Cabinet Members

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for the answer to my question about the Warmer Home Programme. Does the Cabinet Member agree with me that funding some of the applications that may miss the criteria for the Warmer Home Programme might be a better use of money than the extravagant refurbishment of the Leader's and Labour Group Offices on Floor 1?

Reply

I'm not sure that I thank Councillor Oliver for his supplementary question, I think this just points to the triviality of his group, they can't make serious points about this borough, they play politics and they waste the time, actually, of this council.

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:

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

6: Councillors Ordinary Priority Questions to Cabinet Members

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.

Supplementary

6: Councillors Ordinary Priority Questions to Cabinet Members

Thank you Councillor McCabe for your answer. Eastways Centre provides valuable respite care for carers, you know that, I know that and they are not happy that it's been closed. We've heard the others, I've seen your face in this debate. Are you happy saving £180,000 closing Eastways when you're spending almost a quarter of a million pounds on new carpets, a new table for him and nothing for officers there, just for Labour Group Officers, are you happy with that when you're closing Eastways?

Reply

I thank you for your supplementary, which is nothing to do with the original question, and I understand why you are trying to do that, but my concern is actually improving services to dementia. I speak as somebody who cared for his father in his final years, you know that, because I've already shared that with you. There is nothing that I would do to harm people with dementia or their carers and what is proposed here is that we make use of the excellent Centre of Excellence that we have in the Dementia Hub which is partnered by our Health Partners and provides an excellent service. And instead of worrying about the furniture today, I went down to the Dementia Hub to refresh my understanding of the services that they provide and I am really impressed by what they do for people with dementia and their carers and that is my first concern in this role.

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

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for his answer, and clearly Article in HMO Licencing is a vital tool in the Housing Department's arsenal and it's a credit to him and his leadership in the action taken in this area. Could he outline the next step and how he sees these tools will improve the conditions for those living in the private rented sector please?

Reply

Thank you Councillor Mundy and I thank him for his supplementary question. My original response suggested that there had been 176 responses from landlords. The updated information is 190, that we had 22 from Letting Agents, it's now 25. We also had 263 other responses. The way forward is that the responses and representations are currently being analysed. For an immediate Article 4 direction, requiring planning permission for HMOs in the wards identified, the immediate Article 4 direction was introduced on 17 November, a report will follow to the March Cabinet and the final consultation report and responses will be available in late March and also we will have a report to the June Cabinet on Landlord Licensing. There has been a legal challenge to the immediate Article 4 direction and we've engaged counsel to advise. Subject to analysis of the consultation responses and legal advice, the intention is to confirm the Article 4 direction at this April Council. That should improve the quality of conversions of houses to flats in the borough in the context of HMOs in this borough so that people in the future will have adequate room sizes, adequate amenity spaces, adequate sound proofing, adequate energy efficiency, these are really important factors and off course they will be determined by planning officers and the Planning Committee. The work on the preparation for the introduction of Landlord Licencing, both selective and additional licencing, is ongoing with the intention subject to consultation responses of introducing it in Septembers. That will give us Housing Officers to inspect houses in the selected wards to make sure that there are not category 1 and category 2 hazards existing for tenants in those wards. Those wards have been selected after inspecting the data across the borough as being the wards with the largest incidence of issues arising. So that will give us a Housing Officer capacity we simply have not had before to uphold standards on behalf of residents.

This page is intentionally left blank