

From Councillor Whelton to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

What impact has the mini-budget of 23 September, and the subsequent financial and economic turmoil, had on the Council's finances?

Reply

The mini-budget had a major initial impact on the bond market and therefore interest rates. The impact on Bond markets had a knock-on effect on Pension fund valuations. Given the major u-turns since then the effect has been largely reversed and the market is waiting for this week's Autumn Statement.

There is currently a black hole in the government's finances, rumoured to be c. £55 billion and it is said that there will be cuts in government department spending which in turn will have a detrimental impact on grant allocations. The government may have to loosen Council Tax referendum limits allowing councils to increase council taxes by more than initially planned but allowing the government to pass the burden on to council tax payers. There is also likely to be a restraint on council pay awards etc.

Although the Council is benefiting from its investment returns in light of increases in interest rates (following recent Bank of England base rate increases – currently 3%) it is expected that the additional demands on Council services from the Cost of Living crisis will more than offset any interest gains that may accrue.

So probably the fallout from the mini budget in September has not yet been felt but will hit home when the Provisional LGF Settlement is announced, and through the continued increase in demand for council services, temporary accommodation, and financial support.

Supplementary

I do have a supplementary Madame Mayor, I would like to take this opportunity of thanking the Cabinet Member for his response. Does the Cabinet Member believe it is right that Merton residents and working people should not have to pay the bill for the incompetence and economic mismanagement of the Conservative Government over the past twelve years, and that our community should not have to cover the cost of their repeated failures?

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, and thank you Councillor Whelton for that question. I am sure that you Madame Mayor will know and Councillor Whelton will, that here we are, full council on the eve of yet another budget, just as we were at our last full council meeting, on the eve of a disastrous mini-budget from Tory one-time Prime Minister Liz Truss and one-time Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, and we all wait with baited breath to see what they've cooked up for us tomorrow. But clearly Madame Mayor, I agree with him that it's not right that local residents should foot the bill for the mismanagement that the Conservatives have wrought on the economy, but I do hope that everyone in Merton is clear that whatever damaging cuts the Chancellor brings tomorrow, everyone in Merton understands that it is the Conservatives that have brought this economy to its knees but that this Labour administration will do

everything that it can to protect residents from the damage that they are doing to this country. Thank you Madame Mayor.

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

Could the Cabinet Member please outline any changes made in the Civic Centre Car Park since May 2022, the cost of any such changes, the reasons for making such changes and whether specific representations were made to the Council for any such changes.

Reply

Since May there has been a reassignment of parking spaces within the Civic Centre car park after concerns were raised. These works occurred in August and involved removing and remarking parking spaces by the Council's contractors FM Conway. The total cost of this was £152.32. Alternative options would have significantly added to the cost of the works.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, I am just a bit confused by the answer here, I do have a supplementary. I am a bit confused, what I was hoping to hear about was the decision, at a cost of £182.78, according to the documents I've been sent to move the Leader of the Council's parking space to be right next to the entrance to the Council, which doesn't strike me as something particularly necessary or a good use of public money. So my question to the Cabinet Member is first of all, will he issue a corrected answer to this with the right figures in, and secondly does he think that spending £182.78 on moving the Leader of the Council's parking space so that it's right next to the entrance to the Council was a good use of Merton's money. Thank you.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, and I suppose thank you, Councillor McGrath for that question. I'm more than happy to go back and check the accuracy of the figure, the figure was the one that I was provided with and hence it was in my answer, but I don't quite understand why he doesn't appreciate what I wrote in my answer, which is that maintenance to the car park is undertaken and following concerns that were raised lines have been repainted. But what I would gently suggest to Councillor McGrath, Madame Mayor, is that instead of worrying about the cost of painting lines in the car park, he should be worrying about the cost of the austerity measures that his coalition government brought about from 2010 and all of the damage that that has done to the economy since then, Madame Mayor, so I suggest that he should have big worries than worrying about the cost of painting lines in the council car park.

From Councillor Hayes to the Cabinet Member for Sport and Heritage

Can the Cabinet Member outline the role that Merton's libraries can play as hubs in our communities?

Reply

Merton's seven public libraries are the high street presence of the Council and provide an invaluable range of services to our communities. Beyond the usual things you would expect to see in libraries such as a range of materials for borrowing, study space, information and free computer access our libraries deliver a huge range of services working in collaboration with partners. Over 60 community organisations deliver services via our libraries and over 450 events are delivered each month.

With regards to the Health & Wellbeing Offer in our libraries we host weekly events delivered by our health partners including Merton Uplift and One You Merton that promote a range of preventative services such as smoking cessation, weight management and wellbeing. Launching on 24 November at Morden Library new Health & Wellbeing Zones have been established at all of our libraries and will provide a range of digital services to support residents including health monitors and massage chairs along with information and events. A partnership with Nuffield Health will mean that residents will have access to free exercise classes in our libraries along with health advice.

Regarding Culture & Creativity we have two dedicated Arts Spaces at Wimbledon and Mitcham libraries that host a range of arts and cultural events in locations that have professional equipment such as staging, lighting and sound systems. All of our libraries work with cultural partners to deliver theatre, music and arts events in our libraries and we have recently been successful in applying to Arts Council England to become a National Portfolio Organisation (NPO). The Council will receive £357,000 of NPO funding over the next 3 years to invest in cultural opportunities via our libraries. The funding will ensure that a high quality cultural offer will be delivered utilising high quality artists and performers. A particular emphasis is on enriching arts and cultural opportunities in the east of the borough and ensuring that all residents have access to high quality activities and events.

With regards to Employability & Skills support our libraries host a range of job clubs and CV writing sessions working with partners such as Job Centre Plus. They also host a range of adult learning courses supporting residents into better work and developing their career opportunities. Business start up centres are also located at Wimbledon and Mitcham libraries that have supported hundreds of residents to set up their own businesses and get advice leading to greater inward investment in the borough.

Our libraries provide quality information and digital support. With regards to our information services we have a set of skilled staff who can support residents with a range of Council and other services and in particular to support residents to access services online. All our libraries are Citizens Advice Bureau information points and a range of partners deliver legal and money management advice for residents. In terms of digital support beyond the free computers and Wi-Fi our libraries provide one to one and group IT training sessions from beginners through to intermediate levels. Our pioneering Connecting Merton scheme loans high quality computer equipment and broadband to residents along with providing a dedicated support and training programme for any resident who is socially or digitally excluded. This

scheme has been nationally recognised and is being promoted as a good practice example by the London Office of Technology and Innovation (LOTI) and has so far supported over 200 residents to get online.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, my supplementary, before I ask a direct question, I just want to mention that we need to be a bit more aware of the culture of this community that we serve. Sandy Denny, does anyone remember Sandy Denny, born in Wimbledon, Michael Moorcock, the writer, was born in Mitcham, but what role does the Cabinet Member believe libraries can play in supporting residents, particularly the most vulnerable, during this cost of living emergency. We have taken a decision as a borough to make libraries one of the centres of our culture. What role do you think libraries can play in supporting our culture.

Reply

Thank you very much Madame Mayor, and thank you Councillor Hayes for your supplementary question. I can say that drawing from a range of community services, the library services have delivered several cost of living events in the library over the last few months, they have served up to 1000 residents, attending those cost of living events across the borough. Advice on hand were housing, legal advice, money management and can I also say you can still receive those services in the library, so can I encourage you all to please point your residents towards the library so that they can benefit from those services. I am also proud to announce that all our libraries across the borough are now warm spaces for residents who are concerned about their living expenses, so please again make sure you tell your residents about that. And whilst residents are there enjoying the warmth, there are activities as well for them to take part in, so it's not just about sitting there. So please, thank you very much for your question.

From Councillor Nick McLean to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change:

After the recent traveller incursion on Cannon Hill Common, can the Cabinet Member update me on the current status of the council's 'Persons Unknown' injunction?

Reply

The Council had obtained an injunction covering the borough however following a Court decision this is no longer available to us. An appeal against the decision of the Courts means that whilst the Council can no longer obtain a borough wide injunction it could now apply for a new injunction relating to a smaller number of specific sites.

In relation to Merton, on the information available, legal advice is that it is unlikely that we would be able to satisfy the Court of a sufficient urgent need to proceed with an injunction unless we have evidence of substantial and serious risk to particular identified sites, based on a recent history of unlawful encampments. The advice is to keep this under review over the next 12-24 months.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, and can I thank the Cabinet Member for her answer. The residents of Canon Hill are rightly concerned at the recent traveller incursion and once again on Canon Hill Common, and Councillor Paterson and myself strongly agree with their concerns. As such would the Cabinet Member agree to meet with us on Canon Hill Common to discuss how we can better protect this wonderful green space. Thank you.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and I thank Councillor Maclean for his supplementary. I would be more than happy to come and meet with you and Councillor Paterson. One of the things we have trialled, well have installed over in Figges Marsh where we had some incursions over the summer is a bunding system which we have overseeded with wild flowers, so hopefully come the summer we have got a nice natural defence to unwanted vehicles on the green space and perhaps that's a solution we can look to over in Canon Hill. Thank you.

From Councillor Jenifer Gould to the Cabinet Member for Local Environment, Green Spaces and Climate Change

According to a study undertaken by the Natural History Museum, the UK is one of the world's most nature-depleted countries on Earth, this decline is projected to worsen with business-as-usual scenarios. So, can the Cabinet member explain why, over the past twelve years, the Council has failed to update the maintenance plans including ecology reports for Merton's 15 nature reserves and will she commit to doing so now? Would she also include what actions the Council is taking for climate change mitigation in relation to Merton's Nature Reserves?

Reply

It was nice to meet you at Cherry Wood Nature Reserve on 4 November along with the Council's Head of Parks Andrew Kauffman and Tree Officers Chris Rayner Rix.

As discussed while on site, the majority of Reserve Management Plans are out of date and do require updating. Since taking over the head of parks service role in February 2022 Andrew and his team have been reviewing both the Nature Reserve and Park management plans (see list below of sites under review).

In line with wider discussions while on site relating to tree planting, please be aware that linked to the Phase 1 Tree Strategy recommendations that the borough will also be reviewing tree species planted and ensure that plant species with Climate adaption in mind, choosing appropriate and native species that have greater drought tolerance.

Site	Management Plan Date
Bennett's Hole	No Plan
Beverley Meads/Fishpond Woods	(2001-2010)
Cannon Hill Common	(2001-2010)
Cherry Wood	(1998)
Merton Green Walk	(1998) Now forms part of the Abbey Recreation Ground Green Flag Management Plan
Morden Park	(2000)
Myrna Close	(2007-12)

Sir Joseph Hood Memorial Woods	(2007-12) Now forms part of the Abbey Recreation Ground Green Flag Management Plan
Oakleigh Way Railway Sidings	(No plan)
Wandle Meadow Nature Park	(1997)
Cramner Green	(2001) Working with Trees for cities on a community woodland proposal.
Lower Wandle	(2001)
Ravensbury Park	(2001)
Pyle Brook Nature Reserve	(2001-10)
Fishponds Wood and Beverley Mead	(2001-2010)

1. Abbey Recreation Ground (2012-2022) Action Plan annually reviewed linked to Annual Green Flag visits
2. Colliers Wood Recreation Ground (2012-2022) Action Plan annually reviewed linked to Annual Green Flag visits
3. Dundonald Recreation Ground (2012-2022) Action Plan annually reviewed linked to Annual Green Flag visits
4. John Inness Park (2012-2022) Action Plan annually reviewed linked to Annual Green Flag visits
5. South Park Gardens (2012-2022) Action Plan annually reviewed linked to Annual Green Flag visits
6. Sir Joseph Hood Memorial Playing Fields (2012-2022) Action Plan annually reviewed linked to Annual Green Flag visits
7. Cannizaro Park (2023-33) New 10-year plan developing with Friends of Cannizaro
8. Haydon's Road Recreation Ground (2023-32) New 10-year plan developing with Friends of Haydon's Rd
9. The Canons House and Grounds (2022-32) New 10-year plan developing with Friends of Canons House and Grounds linked to recent National Heritage Lottery upgrade

The Greenspaces Team (including borough ecologist and tree officer) are currently working with service provider at idverde UK and other conservation partner organisations - including Woodland Trust and RSPB - to review the current plans and source the necessary funding to update them, and prepare a prioritised programme for updating the plans

Once we have sourced the funding to update the plans we will communicate with the Friends of Nature Reserves and Parks and work with the community to develop the future management plan and associated action plan for each site using the Green Flag Award management and maintenance plan methodology.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, and thank you for your reply. I was very please to see the Council would give priority to nature reserves that they now deserve after many years of neglect. At the beginning of December the world will gather for the Global

BioDiversity Conference, COP15, it's a chance to stop extinctions to save the life on earth, we need the Council to lead the conversation in Merton and drive ambitious action and commit to halting further biodiversity loss. When will the Council consult on a biodiversity strategy to be attached to the climate action plan? Thank you

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, and thank you Councillor Gould for your supplementary. We have done a range of measures already to look at biodiversity in the borough, so things like wild ways which we trialled over the spring and we are now expanding to other sites in the borough, and it's something that we thought was quite important because it's something that Kingston does and we have got a kind of biodiversity corridor now really, biodiversity doesn't stop at the borough boundaries. In terms of an overarching strategy for the entire borough, I think it will actually come under our Green Spaces Strategy which is something that we are processing of pulling together because the biodiversity that we will get through things like having reduced mowing around the driplines of trees are kind of things where we will get real gains from this, so that is probably where we will see that biodiversity strategy come along within our Green Spaces Strategy that Andrew Kauffman our great Head of Parks, and his team are starting to work on, so I'm happy to feed that information back to you once we get that work under way.

From Councillor Attawar to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care

What discussions has he had with NHS partners about their plans to relocate health services from St Helier Hospital to Belmont?

Reply

As an administration we remain deeply concerned that the decision to relocate services from the current site at St Helier to the site in Belmont will reduce access to essential health provision for residents of the borough, particularly those in the East of the borough. With the developing cost of living crisis and the impact this will have on household finances, the potential future impact of travel costs to get to the new site only increases this concern.

With the Leader I have, since very early in the life of the new administration been seeking answers from the senior leadership of the new Integrated Care Board as well as from the Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust, both on whether there is an opportunity to further review previous decisions and whether the proposed new hospital remains affordable. I regret to report that the responses received from NHS colleagues thus far have been both incomplete and disappointing in their content. It is particularly concerning to be told that the Outline Business Case for the new hospital has not yet been approved by NHS England and that there appears to be no clear timetable for this decision making.

Members will be aware that there is much speculation in the media about whether the New Hospital Programme is properly funded and as an administration we will be continuing to press hard for clarity on this point. We will also continue to stress the need for an alternative plan that protects and enhances the buildings and services at the current St Helier site so that should, as appears increasingly likely, the national New Hospital Programme be delayed or discontinued there is a plan B in place that

ensures our residents can continue to access the high quality services they have a right to expect from the NHS.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, yes, I do have a supplementary and I'd like to thank the Cabinet Member for his response. Does he agree that the decision to relocate health services from St Helier demonstrates bad judgement and will result in longer ambulance journeys, greater pressure on neighbouring hospitals and will impact residents in our most deprived wards the worst. Can he remind us who made that decision, and where is he now?

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you Councillor Attawar for the supplementary question. The decision to move the A&E department, maternity services and other vital services to Belmont was made by a number of people, but in the final analysis, I on behalf of this council wrote to the then Secretary of State, Matt Hancock and I have to say that I felt that the decision that had been made by a government that claims to be interested in leveling up, to rip the heart out of a local hospital and take it to one of the most affluent parts of Surrey was perverse and as for the issue of judgement, well I think that this particular politician has been completely discredited, at the time, I felt it was a perverse decision and I questioned his judgement, I think many of us are now questioning his judgement and my understanding that he's still eating various parts of kangaroos and other critters at the expense of his constituents. At the time he made this decision, I wondered what was going through his mind and it became clearer at a later stage that he had a great deal on his hands and in his hands and he was distracted from what he should be doing and I think it's appalling that this decision has been made because it will damage our local community. And he should be sticking for his constituents, just as we have done for ours.

From Councillor Max Austin to the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Civic Pride:

Please can the Deputy Leader tell me whether Merton's Winter Night Shelter, organised by Faith in Action, will operate this Winter with the Council's support?

Reply

Faith in Action (FIAMHP), which does so much good work, operating two drop in sessions for the homeless and insecurely housed every week, will decide upon their own night shelter provision this winter. Faith in Action are independent and do not depend on Council funding to run the winter night shelter.

As a statutory organisation the Council follows the Government's guidance 'Operating principles for Night Shelters' which requires us to provide single room accommodation. The guidance indicates that communal night shelters should only be used if there is significant demand and there are no alternatives. The GLA follows the same guidance. The Council will be providing 6 further single rooms of accommodation which allows the rough sleepers to use the rooms day and night.

Faith in Action wants to run a communal night shelter for 12 -14 people for overnight stays. Merton Council has offered Faith in Action the use of the 'six bed' self-contained accommodation, but this was not accepted, so the Council will run its own provision.

If Faith in Action operate a communal shelter, Public Health and Housing officers will work with them to mitigate any risks of infection. Council officers met with a representative from government on 8 November who affirmed Merton's approach was correct. Merton officers will aim to assist rough sleepers to move into more settled housing and have opportunities to develop new skills and open doors for meaningful employment.

We recognise that there are many wonderful volunteers who work with Faith in Action, and we will aim to work with them as part of a response in future years.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and I thank the Deputy Leader for such a full response. The Council and Mayoralty have worked with Faith in Action for years, we have developed a tried and tested model and Councillor Kirby deserves much credit for this, but what the response omits, is that the Council's offer of self contained accommodation was met with concerns from Faith in Action on the grounds of suitability, safety and what research shows is in the guests own interests, could I ask the Deputy Leader what her analysis was of these concerns and how they will be taken into account when planning future provision next year?

Reply

I haven't looked at the concerns in detail, I would be very glad to do so. But whatever the Council provision is, it should not affect Faith in Action's decision making and view as to what its activities will be. It has an excellent range of volunteers, who put themselves out in winter to help the homeless and those desperately in need and we're not going to do anything to prevent them acting as they wish to do in that charitable purpose.

From Councillor Robert Page to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services

Could the Cabinet Member set out:

- a) the approach taken by the Council to collect Council Tax arrears;
- b) the number of overdue accounts pursued in each of the last 5 years; and
- c) the number of overdue accounts resolved in each of the last 5 years by use of bailiffs/bailiff services?

Reply

- a. The Council follows the collection and recovery procedures as prescribed by the Council Tax (Administration and Enforcement) Regulations 1992 and Council Tax (Demand Notices) (England) Regulations 2011 (as amended).

Specifically, this involves the issue of a reminder notice, or final notice, when an amount payable becomes overdue. If the amount remains unpaid after 14 days, any right to pay by instalments is cancelled, and a court summons is issued in respect of the full amount payable to the end of a financial year, for a hearing at the Magistrates' court.

If the council tax amount remains unpaid at the date of the court hearing the council makes application for a liability order. A liability order gives the council a number of options by which to collect the debt. This includes passing the debt to enforcement agents (bailiffs) for collection, or making an attachment to a person's earnings or benefits.

- b. The number of accounts where a court summons has been issued, and a liability order obtained are as follows:

	Summons	Liability orders
2022/23	2,907	2,100 (from 1 April – 31 October 2022)
2021/22	11,744	8,152
2020/21	1,624	1,401
2019/20	8,675	6,538
2018/19	10,011	7,424

- c. Number of accounts paid in full following the use of the enforcement agents:

2022/23	798 (from 1 April – 31 October 2022)
2021/22	1,596
2020/21	687
2019/20	2,262
2018/19	3,016

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and I thank the Cabinet Minister for the answer and also note the significant use of bailiffs. I understand from officers that the bailiff knocking on the door is the first contact the council has with many in council tax arrears. To me that suggests a fear of contact from the council and of bill letters landing on the door. My question is what can the Cabinet Member do to consider how the Council can be more compassionate to people in council tax arrears in the cost of living emergency

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you Councillor Page for your question. I hesitate to say that you have been misinformed, because it's simply not true that residents who are in arrears on their council tax, the first contact they have from the council is a bailiff knocking on their door. There's several outreach steps that the council officers do to make contact with residents who are in arrears, offer support plans and we absolutely only take action bailiffs as a last resort, when all those other

steps have been exhausted. I would say we, as with many other councils, do use bailiffs as a last resort, and he will have seen from the numbers I have provided in my answer that indeed during the height of the pandemic we were even more lenient and more understanding with residents that were falling behind in their council tax payments through no fault of their own during the pandemic. But unfortunately, as councils across the country are doing, we are now having to resort to ensuring that council tax is paid by residents, and unfortunately in some cases that means use of a bailiff service, but that is certainly not the first resort or the first step that we take in those instances.

From Councillor Daniel Holden to the Cabinet Member for Transport

Please can the Cabinet Member tell me how many EV charging points have been installed since May 1st?

Reply

The Council installed 90 extra chargers in 2021. However, no EV charging points have been installed since May 2022. However, the Council has concluded a procurement exercise in this time and appointed an operator to provide 500 lamp column charge points across Merton by March 2023. Our contractors have begun work on structural/ electrical surveys. The installations will happen in batches with the first batch due to commence this month.

Residents can find out more about EV charging on the Council's website, including a live map of available chargers. The new installations between now and March 2023 will be added to Zap-Map as they go live.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you to the Cabinet Member for his answer. If the Mayor of London does bring in ULEZ next year, do you think zero additional EV charge points is sufficient to help people switch to cleaner cars?

Reply

Thank you to Councillor Daniel Holden for his original question, thank you to the officers for their written answer to that original question and thank you to the Councillor for his supplementary which has nothing to do with the original written answer, but I will answer it. So we have put in our response to the consultation by the Mayor of London on ULEZ, we have urged a generous scrappage scheme to be funded hopefully by the government, a retrofit scheme to allow people to rejig their car and keep it, but to make it compliant and given the cost of living crisis as a result of his government's antics and tactics that would the lead in time be longer. I think those three points are strong enough and I will take on board any other points he asks and I will encourage him to come on a tour with me on our EV charging points, EV chargers on lampposts and I'd be happy to visit the 8 service stations that we have within the borough to see what their plans are. Thank you .

From Councillor Williscroft to the Cabinet Member for Transport

Can the Cabinet Member provide an update on the administration's plans to provide 500 additional EV charging points across the borough by March 2023?

Reply

The Council has concluded the procurement exercise to appoint an operator with the contract in place since August 2022. The contractor has been conducting extensive survey work to assess the electrical and structural suitability of lamp columns and has now identified viable locations to proceed with for just under 150 sites. Details of these locations have been published on the website and a Section 17 notice has been placed on the lamp column giving residents 28 days to comment. The first batch of site installations is due to commence towards the end of November. A significant number of columns tested so far, either require additional tests or have been assessed to be unsuitable for the installation of a chargepoint, so additional survey work is ongoing to find alternative viable locations for the remaining sites to deliver the 500 additional chargers.

Residents can find out more about lamp column chargers roll-out on the Council's website at [Electric vehicle charging : Plans for new lamp charging points | Merton Council](#).

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, I have a supplementary question for the Cabinet Member for Transport. I'd like to ask how can we expand on the very excellent and welcome progress of 500 additional EV charging points so that we can support residents who want to switch to electric cars and make Merton the most electric car friendly borough?

Reply

I want to thank the Councillor for his original question, officers for their written answer, and thank the member for sticking to his original question subject topic matter in his supplementary. Yes, we have a range of strategies to make sure that we are EV friendly. We encourage residents to move to electronic vehicle cars. These can be expensive as a first time buy, especially for new, and so we have a range of other policies and strategies to make sure not only that we speed up lamp post charging, especially on roads without off-street parking, but also that we do EV charging bays throughout the borough and that we talk to the service stations in their new found freedom to encourage residents to stick around for 25 minutes while their car is rapidly charged. Thank you.

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

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.

Supplementary

Thank you very much Madame Mayor, and may I also begin by thanking the Cabinet Member for her written response. May I ask a supplementary question, and this on behalf of someone who's had the great privilege of endorsing quite a few local applications in Cricket Green for the Civic Pride Fund, and on behalf of some of those organisations, can I ask the Cabinet Member to provide an update on applications to the Civic Pride Fund, in particular the bids received and a timetable for making decisions on those funding bids.

Reply

I'd like to thank the Councillor for his question and his supplementary. We have been delighted by the response to both pillars of the civic pride funds. So the Investing in Neighbourhood funds that he has mentioned, the annual funds where we invest the money from new developments has had 40 applications, which is brilliant, totalling over £2.2million. Sadly we don't have £2.2million to give away because there hasn't been as much development over the last couple of years, so what we are doing at the moment is working through the assessments, checking those that we think are really top priority options, officers will be getting in touch with applicants over the coming months if there are any questions to discuss ahead of decision making and then final approval will be made in Cabinet in February. And as it happens the other pillar, the Investing in the Voluntary and Community sector also received 40 applications but they were more from charities and charity groups applying for multi-year funding and similarly they will be informed towards the end of the year with formal decision making early in the new year. Thank you.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, and thank you Cabinet Member for your response to my question. In your response you've said that you'll have Principal Planners in place by the end of November and will train them and as a consequence reduce waiting times for planning applications by the end of the year. Is this six weeks a realistic timeline for reducing waiting times for these minor planning applications?

Reply

I thank Councillor Flack for the supplementary question. I think it is because we are increasing the complement of Principal Planners which will allow that training and the signing off of minor applications. Of course we are already ahead of the national targets by, I think, 3.15%. National target is 70%, we are already at 73.15% of minor planning applications determined within the statutory determination time and it can get better from there and we feel confident that with the changes in development control and the officers that we are bringing in that that will be the case.

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.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, and thank you to the Cabinet Member for her response. I'd like to ask what steps can the council take to ensure Merton families who support Ukrainian guests receive ongoing support for their generosity.

Reply

Thank you, I'd like to thank the Councillor for her question and for her supplementary, Madame Mayor. I'm so proud of the many residents who have welcomed Ukrainian guests into their homes including some in this room. Proving how warm and generous Merton residents are. They stepped up at short notice for an initial six month arrangement. And as you heard from Councillor Szczepanski our charity sector really stepped up as well. Sadly that war continues, and we need to continue to support those that are able to continue housing Ukrainian families, so we have increased the funding to hosts if they continue past 6 months with an additional £100 on top of the £350 per month, so we know that doesn't cover everything that they do, but we really wanted to signify the value that we place on the civic duty that they are undertaking. Alongside that, we know that this won't be an option for all hosts to continue beyond the six months, so we are also calling for any other residents who have spare rooms to continue to come forward. We're doing a big push on this at the moment, you'll see more comms going out in My Merton and other channels over the next few days. If you have any residents who are able to offer their rooms up to Ukrainian families, please do come forward. Thank you.

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.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, and thank you Councillor Christie for your answer, although I'm not sure you know the meaning of subject as an app expert will confirm, you judge apps not on the number of downloads but on a range of metrics, including retention rate, churn rate, monthly active users, daily active users, average session length, etc. You even implicitly acknowledge the value of some of these metrics in your answer. So, it's a simple request, can you please commit to publishing the results of all the metrics used to assess the success of an app and not just the number of people who have downloaded it.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, thank you Councillor Kohler for your question. I never tire of you questioning my knowledge of the English vocabulary, but thank you for continuing that tradition. I would say that the written answer that I have provided, Councillor Kohler, Madame Mayor, was in response to a question suggesting that the number of downloads by residents and the number of business being advertised on the Merton Local app was not a reliable indicator of success. And I simply would disagree with that Madame Mayor. I think although obviously we have detailed technical analysis that looks into all the various measures that he suggested and

we'd be happy to share them, but if he really wants to see that kind of technical detail behind the app. But the point of the app was to bring local residents and local business together and so to suggest that the use of the app by local residents and local business is irrelevant seems sort of nonsense. But regardless of that Madame Mayor, we want to support local businesses and local high streets and local town centres and with small business Saturday approaching, Madame Mayor, I and we, would urge everyone in this chamber and in the borough to support local businesses, shop local on Saturday 3 December, Small Business Saturday.

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, Commonsense 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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor. I thank the Cabinet Member for the answer to my question, about support and clarity with our plans with our nearly 300 Ukrainian refugee families, I also thank Councillor Charles for her supplementary question and for the Cabinet response to that which is relevant. I have spoken today to officer Elliot Brunton and he tells me that an updated webpage will soon provide clearer information for refugees regarding their accommodation options which sounds very positive in terms of helping the refugees. I welcome the proposal to increase the monthly grant to hosts from £350 to £450 though I cannot see any particular adjustment has been made for increased living costs and I do have a fear that by paying less than some other councils we might end up losing hosts and it costing the borough more for private accommodation instead. Is it possible as I think you have suggested you have inclination to do already, to both put more focus on maintaining existing hosting arrangements and for those coming to an end for whatever reason on finding new hosts to replace them?

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you Councillor Mercer, and Councillor Mercer is indeed one of the residents we should be thanking for opening his doors to a Ukrainian family. And as you say, we are very committed here, and my understanding from speaking to those involved in other local authorities is that the system here has been pretty slick compared to many other local authorities. We have to make the approval very quickly, get people into host houses very quickly and as we have heard about provide lots of additional support. What we need is a long term plan and the government has never given a long term plan, everything has been about emergency planning, so we are as you've heard from your conversations with officers, Councillor Mercer, trying to develop our own strategies, anticipate any of the challenges that are coming down the road, make sure that we are already trying to seek new homes for any breakdowns in relationships that may be coming, which again compared to other local authorities are not that bad in Merton and we are trying to be on the front foot here, what we need is a long term plan from government so that these Ukrainian refugees can feel settled, that the children can stay in the same schools and that they can have no further disruption to what has been a very difficult year for them.

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 26th 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 3rd 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 26th November will focus on energy efficiency.

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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, I thank the Cabinet Member for her answer, and for the work and administration to tackle the cost of living crisis in partnership with the voluntary sector. Can the Cabinet Member provide an update on the outcomes from the recent Merton Partnership Summit and how the Council and partners will take these forward please?

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor and Councillor Mundy for your question and for your supplementary. The summit was an excellent day, it was opened by the Leader and the Chief Exec was also there, and we had over 70 people there and there was no point bringing all these people from all these organisations, often very senior people from their organisations all together if we don't then listen and if we don't then respond to what they said. So we are already working on some of the 'quick win' ideas that came out of the attendees. For example it was clear that the charities need better easy access information to what benefits and financial support is available to residents, so we are already working on this. All of the discussions are being digested into findings that the Merton Partnership Executive will consider and they will also be used to shape what further work the council does around cost of living, for example distributing any further funds that we have, so we are very much listening to the Partnership.

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 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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor and thank you to the Cabinet Member for your response. Now that I note that in your response to engagement with local sports groups there's no mention of swimming, netball, gymnastics, hockey or a number of other sports. Could the Cabinet Member commit to holding a sporting summit to which all interested local sports groups are invited and I would also ask the Cabinet Member whether she could confirm that a cross section of all party members will be involved in the development of the blue print for our sporting strategy that is being currently developed by London Sport, thereby ensuring a fully representative strategy is being produced.

Reply

Can I thank the Councillor for her supplementary question and thank you Madame Mayor. I am willing and happy to listen to everyone across the board, all clubs and individuals in fact, just today we met with BMX track in Mitcham, so that's a different sport, it's not a usual one that you would hear about and we will be supporting them and seeing what we can do to promote them. But we are open to listening to everyone and in fact we also have London Sport consultants who are coming to work with us to develop our strategy. So for the last five to six months, we have been connecting with these different organisations, whether they be grass roots or not and individuals or not, we are just connecting with them so that come now we can put things together, this is building the foundation on which we will be able to build our borough of sport. If I can just also mention an individual that I met just last week Lorna Boothe, she's a local hero, I'd never heard of her, but she grew up in Merton from a child, went to school in Merton, and she's now a double Olympian, she's also I think gold and silver medallist, Commonwealth, and she still lives in Merton and she reached out to us when she heard about the Borough of Sport and we working with

people like and we are working with her, so yes, we are on a route to building this Borough of Sport, it will take a while and we are yet to develop our strategies and we are going to be reaching out to as many people as possible in order to make sure we are serving everyone in the borough. So thank you very much.

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	£10,554,309	5%
2019/20	£9,526,062	£290,859	£224,296	£10,041,217	1%
2018/19	£9,153,842	£251,189	£524,443	£9,929,474	2%
2017/18	£8,913,187	£257,418	£541,733	£9,712,338	-20%
2016/17	£11,787,812	£274,868	£153,674	£12,216,353	-13%
2015/16	£13,584,757	£272,804	£153,957	£14,017,518	N/A

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, thank you for the response to my question, I'd like to ask a follow-up question which is regarding the Strategic Partner Programme, that's now being renamed, I think, Civic Pride Fund. 2019-2022, the total amount was £4,572,159 and for the three years 2023-26, it's going to be £5,067,279, now that appears to me to be an increase of 11%, over three years, but the increase is being quoted as 35%, so I just wondered if she could clarify those figures, and I should just state that the figures that I'm looking at, I'm taking from page 19 of the Cabinet Papers from September 22nd.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, thank you Councillor Hall for your question. I'm happy to look again at the figures, I obviously don't have them in front of me or know them off the top of my head, thank you. Happy to look at them and clarify the amounts, but what I would say is that clearly this administration, as we've heard from Councillor Stringer, values the role of the voluntary sector in our community and we are committed to supporting them financially in the years ahead.

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;
- 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.

Supplementary

Thank you Madame Mayor, first of all I would like to thank the Cabinet Member for the response to the question and I would like to ask a supplementary question. What work is being planned to mark the 75th anniversary of the Windrush on 22 June next year.

Reply

Thank you Madame Mayor, and thank you Councillor Macauley for your question and for your supplementary. Personally I'd like to thank Councillor Macauley for the excellent work that she does with our ethnic minorities across the borough, both in her role as chair of the JCC that I've mentioned, but also her wider work, using her skills as a magistrate to help people navigate the quagmire caused by the government's disastrous handling of the immigration status of the Windrush generation. So we are keen in Merton to fully recognise both the amazing contribution that the Windrush communities have made to our country and to our borough, but we also need to recognise the experience here hasn't always been positive, so what we are doing is bringing together a group of volunteers from across the communities to coordinate a whole range of activities, some celebratory and some more educational and understanding some of the difficulties. We are hosting activities throughout June next year to mark this really important milestone.

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