

## **Committee: Council**

**Date: 13 September 2023**

Wards: All

## **Subject: Strategic Theme: Nurturing Civic Pride**

Lead officer: Polly Cziok, Executive Director: Innovation and Change

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Contact officer: Keith Burns, Interim Assistant Director, Customers, Policy and Improvement

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### **Recommendations:**

A. That the Council note and consider the content of this report.

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## **1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1.1. The Council, at its meeting on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March 2023, approved 'Building a Better Merton Together', the Council Plan for 2023 – 2026, which sets out three strategic priorities for the Council. In accordance with the Council's Constitution, delivery against these priorities is monitored by the Council. To facilitate this monitoring role, each meeting of the Council receives a report providing an update on performance against one of the three strategic priorities.

Building a Better Merton Together sets out how the Council will deliver its ambition with three strategic priorities that shape and guide delivery:

- i. Nurturing Civic Pride
- ii. Building a sustainable future
- iii. Creating a borough of sport

1.2. The achievement of these strategic priorities will require extensive engagement with residents, voluntary groups, and businesses, building on partnerships and alliances to reach a common goal.

1.3. This report provides the Council with an opportunity to consider progress against the Nurturing Civic Pride strategic priority, with a particular focus on:

- (i) Reducing deprivation in the borough.
- (ii) Improving understanding of the borough's diversity and fostering better understanding between communities.

- (iii) Inclusion – including meeting the needs of disabled people.
- (iv) Increasing the involvement of under-represented groups in Council decisions.
- (v) Better reflecting the borough’s diversity in Merton’s employees.
- (vi) Measuring the accessibility of Council services.

1.4. For each of the above three areas of focus this report provides:

- (i) An overview of the Council’s long-term ambitions.
- (ii) Progress to date against those ambitions, including any specific decisions made since the Council last met in April 2023 as well as performance against key performance indicators where relevant.
- (iii) Key deliverables and commitments over the life of the new Council Plan (2023 to 2026) and any identified risks or issues relating to these deliverables and commitments.

## **2 DETAILS**

### **REDUCING DEPRIVATION IN THE BOROUGH**

#### **OVERVIEW OF AMBITIONS**

2.1. The Council Plan, Building a Better Merton Together, includes the following priorities directly related to reducing deprivation in the borough:

- More residents will be able to access secure and well-paid employment in a local economy that is fairer and more inclusive.
- Residents across Merton will be supported through the cost of living emergency.

2.2. In addition to the priorities that speak directly to reducing deprivation there are a broad range of other priorities and initiatives set out in Building a Better Merton Together that aim to mitigate the impact of deprivation. These include priorities relating to attracting new businesses and inward investment; improving educational outcomes and access to training for employment; increasing the supply of quality affordable housing; and broadening access to sport and physical activities with a particular focus on children under 16 and adults over 65.

#### **PROGRESS TO DATE**

2.3. In February 2023, the Council achieved accreditation as a London Living Wage Employer from the Living Wage Foundation. To achieve this accreditation, the Council is required to ensure that all directly employed employees are paid at least the London Living Wage (LLW), currently £11.95 per hour, as well as ensuring that all employees of organisations with whom the Council holds contracts are paid LLW (or the Real Living Wage if based outside of London) or that there is a plan in place to deliver this. The requirement to pay LLW within the re-commissioning of the Council’s Home

Care contracts during 2023, with new contracts scheduled to commence on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 2023, is an early example of the positive impact LLW will have on a large group of employees who historically have been low paid, many of whom will be residents of the borough.

- 2.4. More work is required to develop an approach to applying LLW to residential care contracts, however, the Living Wage Foundation recognise this as a national issue that individual local authorities can have a limited impact on given the way the care home market is structured and the often multiple purchasers of care in a single home. Nevertheless, the Council has made a clear commitment to work with the Living Wage Foundation to explore solutions to this complex problem.
- 2.5. In response to the cost of living emergency the Council launched a £2million Cost of Living Fund, with the first tranche of spend totalling £1million being agreed by Cabinet in September 2022 and the second tranche of a further £1million of spend being agreed in March 2023.
- 2.6. Highlights from the projects and initiatives funded through both tranches of the Cost of Living Support Fund include the following:
  - Over 1,800 residents have attended Merton's Cost of Living events held across the borough so far.
  - Through funding to the Community Fridge Network and groups funded through Emergency Assistance Fund, a greater number of residents were able to access food provision. The Community Fridge Network distributed 57,169 kg of food between October 2022 – June 2023.
  - In the seven months to the end of July 2023 just under 500 Merton based individuals engaging with Citizens Advice Merton and Lambeth's Merton Cost of Living team and 166 individuals receiving cost of living advice support for over 550 advice issues.
  - Through the first quarter of 2023-24 (April 23-June 23) Thinking Works and Warm and Well partners have already distributed 184 fuel vouchers, completed 169 energy efficiency visits, carried out 33 heating checks, 21 residents were supported with small energy measures installed by the handyman service, and there was £101,000 in benefits uptake.
  - From May 2023 and for the whole 2023-24 academic year, Merton's Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme have been extended to half term holidays. These half term arrangements are entirely funded from the Council's Cost of living fund as Government funding for the HAF Programme does not cover these periods.
  - Through combined funding from the Household Support Fund and Cost of Living Fund, £60 post office vouchers were made available to Council Tax Support claimants in 2022-23.
- 2.7. Other initiatives that help to mitigate the impact of deprivation include the local Scrappage Scheme announced in August 2023; 'The Library of Things' lending scheme via the borough's libraries; the Summer 2023 'Kids Swim for Free' offer; and work currently underway to provide period products in publicly accessible council buildings. Through the 2023/24 financial year, Merton Council continues to have a comprehensive council tax support

scheme that ensures assistance for low income households. In addition, those living in Band A-D homes have received a one per cent reduction to their council tax bills. £11million will be spent on council tax support, lifting 7,000 residents out of paying any council tax. The administration is committed to supporting residents through these challenging times and will continue to provide additional resources when available to a range of practical cost of living support measures.

#### **KEY DELIVERABLES AND COMMITMENTS 2023 TO 2026:**

- 2.8. As noted at 2.1 and 2.2 above, the Council Plan, Building a Better Merton Together, includes a number of priorities that relate directly to reducing deprivation in the borough, with a number of other priorities that aim to mitigate the impacts of deprivation.
- 2.9. At the same time as agreeing the second £1million tranche of expenditure from the Cost of Living Fund, in March 2023, the Cabinet also agreed a Cost of Living Strategy and Action Plan covering the period 2023-25. This Strategy and Action Plan sets out a cross-council, boroughwide approach to supporting residents in need in Merton. This encompasses the initiatives funded via the Cost of Living Fund and a number of Government grants as well as detailing the broader action the Council is taking to support residents through the cost of living emergency.
- 2.10. The Cost of Living Strategy and Action Plan has two main aims: to address and mitigate the immediate impacts of the cost of living emergency; and to help build sustainability and resilience for the longer term.
- 2.11. The Council has submitted an Expression of Interest to be involved in Phase 2 of the Pan-London Pension Credit Campaign, which is funded by the GLA and delivered by Policy in Practice in partnership with London Councils. Phase 1 of the campaign has now completed and resulted in 1,696 successful claims across 18 boroughs with an annual benefit of more than £6million.
- 2.12. The Council Plan commitment to delivering 400 affordable homes in the borough, along with the introduction of a number of initiatives to improve quality in the Private Rented Sector, is a further example of the wide range of initiatives that are helping to mitigate the impacts of deprivation across the borough.

#### **IMPROVING UNDERSTANDING OF THE BOROUGH'S DIVERSITY AND FOSTERING BETTER UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN COMMUNITIES**

##### **OVERVIEW OF AMBITIONS**

- 2.13. The Equality Act 2010 requires the council to publish equality objectives every four years to demonstrate how it intends remaining compliant with the Public Sector Equality Duty. The requirement to publish every four years was introduced from April 2018.
- 2.14. The Council is currently consulting on a new Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy to cover the period January 2024 to March 2026. This

strategy forms part of the Council's Policy Framework and as such is scheduled to come before full Council in November 2023 for adoption.

2.15. The draft Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion strategy, which Cabinet agreed to consult on in July 2023, outlines the following four Equality Objectives:

- Tackling poverty, the structural differences in social circumstances, and the resulting differences in access and outcomes.
- Promoting community engagement to empower our residents, improve understanding of the issues faced by local people, and develop services to meet the differing needs.
- Promoting a safe, healthy, and cohesive borough where communities get on well together.
- Improving our evidence base to inform our decision making.

2.16. The requirement to publish equality objectives every four years encompasses the nine 'Protected Characteristics' covered by the Equality Act 2010. It is proposed in the draft Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Strategy, that the scope be broadened to include, in addition to the nine protected characteristics, a further four groups / characteristics when considering the equality impacts of policies and service changes. These four additional groups are:

- Care experienced young people;
- Armed forces veterans;
- One-parent households;
- Socio-economic status.

2.17. It should be noted here that socio-economic status is already incorporated as a characteristic into the Councils Equality Impact Assessment template. Incorporating it into the Strategy as an additional characteristic is intended to ensure that socio-economic status has a more explicit profile as part of the Council's broader work to address inequality. The first objective listed at 2.15 above explicitly recognises the need to tackle poverty as a key means of reducing inequality. As part of the broader refresh of the Equality Impact Assessment process referred to at 2.24 below, more detailed guidance will be developed on how officers can take socio-economic status into account when considering the equalities impacts of policy or service changes.

2.18. There are a number of factors that have informed the proposal that the new Strategy cover the period January 2024 to March 2026. As noted at 2.13 above, the Equality and Human Rights Commission require local authorities to publish equality objectives every four years. As this requirement came into effect in 2018, April 2026 is the next point at which this four-year cycle is due to renew. March 2026 also coincides with the end date of the current Council Pla, and it is sensible to develop the next iteration of an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy at the same time as developing the next Council Plan as tackling inequality is likely to remain a central theme of the new Council Plan.

- 2.19. It is also recognised, and the fourth objective set out above explicitly addresses this, that while the Council has a good understanding of many of the protected characteristics in the context of the population of the borough there is more work to do to develop a full understanding of the issues and priorities facing all residents with protected characteristics (including the cumulative impact related to multiple characteristics). Undertaking research to better understand these issues in the round is a key element of the draft strategy with a view to ensuring that the next iteration of the Strategy, covering the period beyond 2026, is built from a more fully formed evidence base than is currently available.
- 2.20. The Joint Consultative Committee with Ethnic Minority Communities (JCC) is a key means by which the Council engages with community representatives to improve our understanding of, and relationship with these communities and to identify ways in which we can foster better community relations. The Faith and Belief Forum plays a similar role in relation to religious and faith groups across the borough.

## **PROGRESS TO DATE**

### **Draft Equality Diversity and Inclusion Strategy**

- 2.21. As noted above, the draft Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy is out to public consultation now and is due to be presented to full Council for adoption in November 2023.
- 2.22. The most recent strategy covered the period 2017 to 2021, but as a result of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has remained current pending the development of the new Strategy outlined above.
- 2.23. As noted in the report to Cabinet seeking agreement to consult on the draft Strategy, this iteration of the strategy has been informed by:
1. Evidence of existing inequalities in the borough and opportunities to continue to narrow the gap in outcomes for disadvantaged residents and communities.
  2. The findings from extensive community engagement to support the development of the new Council Plan that provided analysis of residents' experience of life in Merton, their experience of the pandemic and their aspirations for the future.
  3. Learning from the Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living emergency that has highlighted issues such as:
    - a. Health inequalities
    - b. Digital exclusion
    - c. Food poverty
  4. Findings from the research commissioned by the Health and Wellbeing Board looking at the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on protected groups, in particular ethnicity, age, and disability.
  5. The Councils' response to the Cost of Living crisis
  6. Issues raised through the Black Lives Matter protests.
  7. Implementing the Local Outbreak Management Plan.

8. The learning and recommendations of the Workforce Race Equality Standards pilot.
  9. The work of the Transforming How We Work With Communities project to increase community resilience and delay / prevent demand for acute services.
- 2.24. The Council will continue to work with the JCC, the Faith and Belief Forum, the developing LGBTQ+ network and other organisations representing communities with protected characteristics to continuously develop and strengthen the commitments in the draft Strategy over its lifetime.
- Broader support to the VCS sector and vulnerable communities.**
- 2.25. Cabinet, in January 2023, agreed the award of £4.9m of Civic Pride grant funding for the period 2023 to 2026 to support the VCS sector across the borough. This represented a 35% increase on the previous Strategic Partner Programme funds, with grants being awarded to a total of 20 organisations, which included 3 organisations who had not previously been funded. Increasing the diversity of organisations supported was a key aim of the programme. 28% of the funding was awarded to small VCS organisations and over £500k awarded to organisations supporting people with disabilities.
- 2.26. Following the approval of the Council Motion to seek Borough of Sanctuary status the Council has worked in partnership with Merton Citizens; people with lived experience of seeking asylum / with refugee status; and with a broad range of local organisations to take forward a programme of work that will lead to an application for accreditation as a Borough of Sanctuary. The multi-agency group expect to submit this application around June 2024.
- 2.27. Since the invasion of the Ukraine by Russia in early 2022, the Council has worked with the Polish Family Association, Commonsense Trust, Wimbledon Guild and a number of other organisations to provide support to guests arriving from the Ukraine. This has been achieved without any community tensions being experienced.
- 2.28. The Safer Merton Partnership's Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, agreed in 2022, sets out a broad range of objectives designed to enable better early intervention and prevention as well as to provide better support to women and girls experiencing violence.

#### **KEY DELIVERABLES AND COMMITMENTS 2023 TO 2026**

- 2.29. The draft Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2024 to 2026 is supported by a delivery plan that covers each of the four equalities objectives. Further work is being undertaken during the period of the public consultation to refine this delivery plan prior to it being presented to Council in November for adoption. This process of refining the delivery plan will include responding to comments and feedback received during the consultation.
- 2.30. The draft Strategy also notes a commitment to review and update the Equality Impact Assessment process and guidance. This work is commencing now and will be complete by the end of 2023. It is intended that revisions to the process will allow for more tailored approaches to specific types of decision in response to recent case law. The making of Traffic

Regulation Orders is one such example of where a tailored approach may be beneficial. The overall aims of this work are to provide more clarity for officers on how to complete robust assessments, cover the expanded scope of protected characteristics proposed in the draft Strategy, and provide more tailored approaches where it is beneficial to do so.

## **INCLUSION – INCLUDING MEETING THE NEEDS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

### **OVERVIEW OF AMBITIONS**

- 2.31. The Council Plan, Building a Better Merton Together, includes the following priorities directly related to promoting inclusion
- We will continue to embrace diversity across the borough.
  - Equal access to local health services in Merton
- 2.32. As with deprivation, there are a number of other priorities and initiatives in the Council Plan that promote inclusion including those relating to the promotion of Black and underrepresented businesses; tackling violence against women and girls; the introduction of the Civic Pride Awards; the building of a new special school in the borough; and work to increase access to sports and physical activities for children and adults over 65 in particular.
- 2.33. The newly renamed ‘Merton Partnership Civic Pride Volunteer Awards’ is an annual celebration which recognises the tremendous contribution that local volunteers make to the life of the borough. On Friday 2 June 2023, Merton Connected (Merton Voluntary Service Council) held its 8<sup>th</sup> awards ceremony, with sponsorship from the Council. This year there were fourteen award categories including the Chris Frost Volunteer of the Year Award and the Cllr Maxi Martin Young Volunteer of the Year Award, plus a special Coronation Award for 2023. Many of the volunteers celebrated at the award ceremony are working with communities with protected characteristics.
- 2.34. The Adult Social Care, Integrated Care and Public Health Directorate Plan for 2023/24 identifies a number of other priorities specifically related to meeting the needs of disabled people. These include increasing independence and dignity by using equipment and technology to reduce the need for two carers to provide physical care; promoting independence by increasing the take up of the Mascot Telecare service; increasing the take up of Direct Payments (increasing choice and control); and modernising the community support offer to people with learning disabilities.
- 2.35. Public realm accessibility is a key inclusion priority, including for people with disabilities, and this is covered in more detail in the section below.

### **PROGRESS TO DATE**

- 2.36. There have been a number of events and activities during 2023 that have been led or supported by the Council which have demonstrated the Council’s ongoing commitment to diversity and inclusion, including; the events to mark the Windrush 75 anniversary; Holocaust Memorial Day;



Refugee Week; and the re-signing of the Armed Forces Community Covenant.

- 2.37. Officers are also continuing to work closely with colleagues in the NHS and a range of voluntary sector organisations to improve access to health care.

### **Public Realm Accessibility**

- 2.38. As noted at 2.26 above, public realm accessibility is a key inclusion priority, including for people with disabilities.

### **Highways, pedestrians and cycling**

- 2.39. There is a small Transport for London (TfL) budget within the Local Implementation Plan for the borough that allows the Council to consider and introduce small schemes that would improve pedestrian and cycle access. Many of these schemes are developed in response to requests and concerns received from residents / road users / local business, other Council departments such as Waste and at times schools.

- 2.40. Due to changes in TfL criteria and approval procedures, larger / more expensive schemes must first be approved and meet their criteria. This includes the introduction of formal crossings such as zebra crossings. Schemes not funded by TfL or partially funded are usually delivered as part of the Council's Capital Programme. All measures are tested to ensure that they are Disability Discrimination Act and Equality Act compliant.

- 2.41. Schemes that support public realm accessibility have included:

- Pram ramps.
- Tactile paving.
- New footways or an extension of, where there are grassed verge or steps.
- Preventative measures to address obstructions such as obstructive parking or driving over the footway.
- Preventative measures along Public Rights of Way where cyclists are not permitted but frequently are in contravention.
- Informal crossings such as pedestrian islands
- Formal crossings such as zebra crossings
- Introduction of a pedestrians phase within signalised crossing – although driven and funded by the Council, these must be approved and implemented by TfL signals.
- Upgrading of existing substandard pedestrian islands.
- Narrowing of junctions to reduce speed and reduce distance for pedestrians crossing the road with improved sightlines.
- Junction entry treatments to reduce speed and to make it easier for pedestrians to cross particularly for those with mobility issues.
- Speed tables and formal or informal crossings on speed tables – to reduce speed of traffic and highlight pedestrians crossing the road.
- Introduction of yellow line restrictions to prevent footway parking; where crossovers particularly shared crossovers are impeded by obstructive parking; along narrow roads that would impede flow of traffic particularly access for emergency services; and where sightlines are obstructed.

- 2.42. Footway parking is illegal in London unless an exemption Order is made to allow either full or partial footway parking. These are permitted where footway is wide enough and are identified by marked bays and signage. As per the Highway Code, it is unlawful to park within 10 meters of a junction but due to lack of compliance, more often than not, the Council is compelled to reinforce this contravention by means of double yellow lines.
- 2.43. Across the borough there are many roads where there is extensive illegal footway parking. The main reason is that for the most part, the road is too narrow to accommodate parking and many residents do not have off street parking. Multivehicle ownership also exacerbates the situation. As a result, motorists park on the footway which then narrows the footway for pedestrians particularly for those with pushchairs, wheelchairs and mobility scooters. The bumper-to-bumper parking also affects pedestrians' ability to cross the road safely and at times to get back on to the footway. Reports of obstructive footway parking, which is of great concern, include those wheelchair users who cannot get in or out of their front gates and those who cannot be picked up and dropped off by the ambulance service or community transport.
- 2.44. There have been a number of requests from TfL and Councillors for the Council to undertake a full review and address the ongoing footway parking issues. Currently each road is assessed on a case-by-case basis in response to complaints and localised problems.
- 2.45. The borough is committed to promote and improve cycling including the provision of secure cycle parking; cycle hire parking and cycle lanes preferably segregated. In many instances, these features need to be on the carriageway which means loss of parking which often results in strong objections from residents. When making a decision, the Council must, therefore, be mindful of its objectives in ensuring that access to such infrastructure is given priority.
- 2.46. The Council has commissioned consultants to develop a deliverable Walking and cycling Strategy and an Electric Vehicle strategy, which will include the repurposing of kerbside space to facilitate the necessary infrastructure.

#### **Bus travel and accessibility**

- 2.47. With regard to buses, TfL have carried out a review of bus journey times and bus stop accessibility throughout the borough.
- 2.48. TfL in partnership with London Boroughs has an objective to ensure that 95% of all bus stops on the network are improved in line with accessibility standards and the Equality Act. The review of bus stop accessibility identified that across the borough there are 152 bus stops that do not meet the accessibility requirements.
- 2.49. TfL's Accessible Bus Stop Design Guidance (2017) requires a bus stop to meet three key requirements to be fully accessible:
- Clearway markings to discourage parking in the bus stop by vehicles other than buses.
  - A minimum kerb upstand of 100mm with an ideal range of 125mm-140mm to enable ramps to be easily deployed.

- Access free of obstructions. This access relates to access of bus patrons as well as buses getting in and out of bus stops. The one factor in terms of accessibility for passengers and buses involves parking.

**Step-free access to rail, tram, and underground stations.**

- 2.50. All 8 of the London Trams stops in Merton, from Wimbledon to Mitcham Junction, are fully accessible from the street to the tram. Wimbledon and Morden Underground Stations are also fully accessible from street to train, providing step-free access to District and Northern underground Line services.
- 2.51. A recent scheme implemented at Wimbledon Park Underground Station provides step free access between the street and the platform via a lift, although assisted access from the platform to the train via a boarding ramp is still required. In addition, the Thameslink services at Wimbledon, Mitcham Junction and Mitcham Eastfields, all also have step-free access from the street to platform but require assisted boarding ramp access between the platform and the train.
- 2.52. In 2019 the Government announced stations that had been successful in securing funding under the current round of the Access for All (AfA) programme. This included Mostpur Park on the South Western Railway Network, and Tooting Station on the Thameslink Network, which is located in Merton, on the borough boundary with Wandsworth, and serves surrounding residential areas in north Mitcham. Network Rail are delivering the schemes, both of which have started on site and are due to be completed by mid-2024. Merton Council agreed to make a significant SCIL funding contribution of 10% towards the Motspur Park scheme, which is likely to have contributed to the bid being successful.
- 2.53. Haydon's Road Station already has step-free access to the eastbound platform (towards London). The Council successfully secured a level access route to the westbound platform (towards Wimbledon) through land at 1 Caxton Road as part of a planning application. This provides a significant opportunity to quickly, easily and cost effectively improve accessibility at Haydon's Road Station. The Council has agreed the allocated £100k of SCIL funding to contribute towards the necessary enabling works and is currently working with Network Rail and Thameslink to progress the scheme, which it is hoped will be delivered by the end of 2023.

**KEY DELIVERABLES AND COMMITMENTS 2023 TO 2026**

- 2.54. The draft Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy incorporates, as noted above, a delivery plan that will be further refined prior to the Strategy being presented to full Cabinet in November 2023. This delivery plan includes a range of measures designed to promote inclusion.
- 2.55. The current Health and Wellbeing Strategy also sets out a range of deliverables designed to have a positive impact on inclusion, including promoting the inclusion of people with disabilities.
- 2.56. As noted above, the Council has commissioned consultants to develop a deliverable Walking and cycling Strategy and an Electric Vehicle strategy,

which it is expected will include a number of recommendations that are relevant to the promotion of inclusion and accessibility.

- 2.57. As also noted above, TfL have undertaken a review of bus stop accessibility. Following on from this, TfL have commissioned consultants to prepare a full report detailing all the necessary improvements that are required at all failed bus stops. The Borough is required to implement the required improvements once the report is finalised.
- 2.58. In 2022 the Department for Transport opened a further round of funding for new Access for All (AfA) schemes to be delivered over the next 5 years and invited Train Operating Companies to submit bids for stations on their networks. The Council worked with South Western Railway and Thameslink to identify stations to prioritise in Merton. Access for All funding bids were submitted for step-free schemes for Raynes Park, Wimbledon Chase and St Helier Stations and the Council provided accompanying letters in support of all these bids in April 2022.
- 2.59. Following completion of the works at Motspur Park, Raynes Park Station will remain the only SWR service station in Merton that does not have step free access. After Wimbledon, Raynes Park station is the next busiest station in Merton by far, with 4 million annual entries and exits. Raynes Park Station serves a large residential catchment area and is also an important for sub-regional interchange which enables orbital connections within South West London. The Council would seek to allocate capital funding for a substantial financial contribution (up to 10%) to support any successful AfA scheme at Raynes Park Station, in accordance with South Western Railway's request that local authorities also make a funding contribution to AfA bids at stations on their network.
- 2.60. Wimbledon Chase Station is the 2<sup>nd</sup> busiest Thameslink station in Merton. The Station forms part of a potential development site which will provide 80+ new residential units and provide a new entrance to the station. As part of pre-application discussions, the potential applicant has developed a report into the feasibility and costs of various step free access options. Whilst, it may not be economically viable for a development to fully fund any of the scheme options, the design does allow passive provision for this to be added by Network Rail in future and the Council will seek to secure a financial contribution from the Developer towards the scheme as well as lobbying Network Rail for further investment. Securing AfA scheme funding for this station would therefore be particularly beneficial in delivering the scheme in tandem with the redevelopment. The Leader of the Council wrote again to the Department of Transport in February 2023, to urge consideration of the allocation of Access for All funding to Wimbledon Chase Station.
- 2.61. St Helier Station is located in a residential area that has otherwise poor public transport accessibility levels, so is very reliant on the Thameslink service, particularly for journeys into London. The station is also the nearest to St Helier hospital which can be reached by a short connecting bus journey, so an AfA scheme would improve access to Hospital services in the region. It is considered that an AfA scheme could potentially be delivered cost effectively at St Helier station due to the layout of the station access and platform.

- 2.62. In November 2022, TfL published the results of a consultation undertaken about Step-Free Access at underground stations. TfL are now assessing how to select and prioritise the best stations for step-free access in line with feedback and are looking to develop an accessibility programme that will deliver improvements, dependent on long-term funding.

## **INCREASING THE INVOLVEMENT OF UNDER-REPRESENTED GROUPS IN COUNCIL DECISIONS**

### **OVERVIEW OF AMBITIONS**

- 2.63. The Council Plan, Building a Better Merton Together, includes the following priority:
- We will put residents at the heart of everything we do, and be responsive and resident-centric in our approach to customer service, communication, and engagement.
- 2.64. In July 2023, the Cabinet agreed proposals designed to modernise the Council's approach to community engagement. These proposals focus on reforming the Community Forums, strengthening face-to-face engagement, improving our digital offer, and strengthening our coordination of work across the organisation. How under-represented groups are supported and enabled to engage with the Council is a key element of these plans.
- 2.65. The draft Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy also sets out a number of ways in which the Council intends improving access by under-represented groups to Council decision making processes.

### **PROGRESS TO DATE**

- 2.66. The Council has several key mechanisms for increasing the involvement of under-represented groups in Council decisions. The Joint Consultative Committee with Ethnic Minority Communities meets quarterly and is a primary mechanism by which officers and partners can engage with representatives from Black and Minority Ethnic Communities on a range of policy and service developments.
- 2.67. The Faith and Belief Forum provides an equivalent function in relation to faith and belief groups. The Forum is Chaired by the Chief Executive and the next meeting is scheduled to take place on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October 2023.

### **KEY DELIVERABLES AND COMMITMENTS 2023 TO 2026**

- 2.68. Through the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2023 to 2027, increased resources to support resident and community engagement was agreed, and recruitment to these new roles is ongoing. The new posts include a Community Development Officer and additional Resident Engagement capacity. Successful recruitment to these positions will enable a greater focus on enabling access to Council decision making by under-represented groups. It is envisaged that the individuals in post will work closely with the Equality and Community Cohesion Lead and officers across the Council to identify ways in which engagement with all residents and communities can be enhanced.

- 2.69. Progress on this will be reported in future updates on the implementation of the new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.

## **BETTER REFLECTING THE BOROUGH'S DIVERSITY IN MERTON'S EMPLOYEES**

### **OVERVIEW OF AMBITIONS**

- 2.70. The development of a new People Strategy for the Council is ongoing and nearing completion. This strategy will include a number key aims that are directly relevant to ensuring that the Council's workforce reflects the community, and that this extends across all levels within the organisation. These include:
- Vision and values
  - Recruitment and retention
  - Training and Skills
  - Workforce planning
  - Workforce Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
  - Staff engagement
  - Employee experience
- 2.71. Further updates on the People Strategy will be reported to future meetings of the Council as appropriate.

### **PROGRESS TO DATE**

- 2.72. The Council undertook a Workforce Equality, Diversity and Inclusion survey in 2022 and an update on progress following on from the survey has recently been published on the Merton Hub.
- 2.73. **Key findings from the survey**
- 792 staff participated – a 37% response rate.
  - Over 600 comments were received.
  - 66% of staff felt the council respects their individual differences.
  - 46% of ethnically diverse colleagues consider the Race Equality Network as a safe space.
  - 52% feel comfortable discussing race at work.
  - 48% of staff believe the Corporate Management Team promote an inclusive work culture with a further 42% saying they neither agree nor disagree.
  - 21% reported experiencing or witnessing bullying, harassment, or discrimination
- 2.74. Since the survey was undertaken progress in responding to the issues identified has been made in a number of ways:
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Training: A comprehensive procurement exercise was undertaken to select suitable learning and development

training for leadership in response to survey feedback. The Race Equality Network contributed to determining what type of training should be procured.

- Inclusive Language Guide: In collaboration with the staff networks, officers have developed an Inclusive Language Guide. One workshop has been held to discuss the terminology in more detail and there is a plan to have more sessions.
- Zero-Tolerance Approach: Bullying and harassment have no place here. The Council introduced a zero-tolerance approach against bullying and harassment to create a more respectful and inclusive environment. This has been added to the Councils Workforce EDI policy.
- Support for recruitment panels: Ethnically diverse staff are now invited to participate in all recruitment panels at posts MGA and above.

2.75. More broadly, the Council publishes an annual Equalities in Employment report. The report for 2022/23 is due to be published by the end of September and provides a comprehensive overview of a range of equalities measures. The data for 2022/23 shows that 38% of the overall Council workforce is from black and ethnic minority communities, which compares with a figure of 39.2% from black and minority ethnic communities across the population of the borough as a whole (Census 2021).

2.76. The report also shows that the proportion of the overall workforce that is from black and ethnic minority communities has increased in each of the last three years (from 35% in 2020/21). The report also, however, shows that only 18% of the top 5% of earners is from black and minority ethnic communities, demonstrating the work that still needs to be done to ensure that the workforce reflects the community at all levels.

2.77. The Council has an active Race Equality Network, and the inclusion of ethnically diverse staff on interview panels for posts at MGA and above was championed by this network. There is also an LGBTQ+ network, which is now becoming more active. There has in the past been a Disability Network, which is not currently active, and the Workforce Equality Lead is seeking to revitalise this during the latter part of 2023/24.

2.78. A Corporate Equalities Steering Group meets bi-monthly and includes representatives from the Race Equality and LGBTQ+ networks. This group is currently chaired by the Executive Director for Children, Lifelong Learning and Families.

#### **KEY DELIVERABLES AND COMMITMENTS 2023 TO 2026**

2.79. As noted at 2.52 above, the Council is in the process of completing a new People Strategy. Once completed, this will set out the key deliverables and commitments relating to ensuring that the Council has a workforce that reflects the community at all levels in the organisation. This will include further actions to address the issues raised in the Workforce Equality, Diversity and Inclusion survey and the findings from the annual Equalities in Employment data.

#### **MEASURING THE ACCESSIBILITY OF COUNCIL SERVICES**

## **OVERVIEW OF AMBITIONS**

- 2.80. The Equality Act 2010 and the associated Public Sector Equality Duty require the Council to report annually on the accessibility of council services to those individuals with protected characteristics. The Council is also required to demonstrate how improvements to accessibility are being made in response to the published accessibility data.

## **PROGRESS TO DATE**

- 2.81. As a result of resource constraints, the Council has made limited progress on this requirement to date. However, work is underway to address this, and to ensure that the requirement is fully met for 2022/23 and for subsequent years. The 2022/23 report is expected to be published by the end of December 2023 and will be further built on for future years.

## **KEY DELIVERABLES AND COMMITMENTS 2023 TO 2026**

- 2.82. As noted above, work is ongoing to develop a report to cover the 2022/23 year. The coverage of this report, and the report for 2023/24 will be limited by the availability of data. Work is also underway to ensure that for future years a broader set of service delivery accessibility data is collected, so that the reports for 2024/25 and subsequent years are comprehensive.

## **3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

- 3.1. This report is for noting and discussing only, so alternative options are not being presented.

## **4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED**

- 4.1. Any relevant consultation undertaken or proposed is referenced in the body of the report.

## **5 TIMETABLE**

- 5.1. The body of the report includes details on a range of planned deliverables and commitments over the period 2023 to 2026.

## **6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1. The cost implications for the initiatives outlined in this report are covered within the current MTFs. Any further spending required beyond existing budgets will be reported to Cabinet.

## **7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1. This report has been prepared as required by part 4A, paragraph 2.3 (g) of the Constitution and there are no legal implications arising out of this report.

## **8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1. None immediately arising beyond those covered in the body of the report.

## **9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1. None immediately arising.



**10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

10.1. A robust process for monitoring delivery of the Council Plan, including many of the commitments and deliverables referenced in this report, is being put in place to minimise the risk of non-delivery.

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

- None

**12 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

12.1. None

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