

# NEWSLETTER




Merton Citizens is the local expression of the nationwide organisation Citizens UK that aims to bring together and strengthen civil society, empower communities to have their voices and needs considered by decision-makers. Our goals are:

- To develop leaders
- To strengthen institutions
- To create change

The Merton Citizens Alliance is made up of 15 member organisations from across the borough, including schools, religious institutions and non-profit organisations that work together to make Merton a better place to live and work.

## Connect with us!

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 @MertonCitizens

 <https://www.citizensuk.org>

## Since our Accountability Assembly in April 2022, we have:

- ✓ Launched 10 active Be Well Hubs, equipping local people to listen, signpost and take action on mental health.
- ✓ Worked with the council to begin the Borough of Sanctuary process – establishing a working group and joining the local authorities network.
- ✓ Campaigned Merton Council to accredit as a Living Wage employer, uplifting local residents and setting an example for business across the borough.
- ✓ Worked with Merton Council on an empathy-first training designed by YMCA residents, to improve the relationships between council staff and those experiencing homelessness.
- ✓ Built and strengthened our relationship with key decision-makers in the borough, including council officers, cabinet members, MPs, and NHS decision-makers.



## Cost of Living and Living Wage

Higher than the legally-mandated Minimum Wage, the Real London Living Wage is calculated to ensure that people have enough money to get by with London's fast-rising living costs. Merton currently has 50 accredited Living Wage employers in the area. However, nearly one-quarter of jobs in our borough, or 16 000 people, are still being paid below the Living Wage.

We are happy to say that in January 2023, after months of meetings and campaigning to get the council to become a Living Wage employer and hold them accountable, **the council became an accredited Living Wage Employer!** This will uplift hundreds of workers out of low pay. We look forward now to working with the council to encourage other employers in the borough to do the same.



## Mental Health

Mental health has been a priority for Merton Citizens since we were founded in 2018 when students at Wimbledon College and St Mark's Academy led the work to improve the wellbeing of young people. Since then, we have had many wins – getting local authorities and NHS decision-makers to make some ground-breaking commitments around access to services, community-embedded workers and services for young people.

At Merton, our institutions are leading by example and becoming “Be Well Hubs” – spaces where communities can come together to discuss, listen and take action around mental health. If you want to learn more about Be Well Hubs and get involved, get in touch!



## Housing

Merton clearly has a housing crisis – our listening has shown that housing affordability and standards are driving people out of Merton, separating families and, in some cases, leading to homelessness. Working with people from across Merton with different levels of housing needs, the following priorities emerged:

1. Raising housing standards by using enforcement procedures effectively for rented properties and introducing landlord licensing for private sector rented homes.
2. More affordable housing: new developments on council-owned land to consist of social and affordable housing at rents that reflect local incomes.
3. Have more and better accommodation solutions for homeless people, and improve the relationships between the council's housing team and those in housing need.

In recent meetings with housing officers and authorities in Merton, we managed to secure a commitment from the council to have their housing officers receive training delivered by YMCA residents based on their experience of homelessness. This is a major win that will empower YMCA residents as well and improve relationships between the council's housing team and those in housing need.

After delivery of this training, we aim to continue pursuing more genuinely affordable and social housing in the borough, and working with the local authority to achieve that.



## Welcome

Merton Citizens is committed to supporting migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Merton was a pioneering borough in Community Sponsorship as Raynes Park Community Church (the Salvation Army) became the first group in London to welcome a refugee family through the scheme. We have also campaigned successfully for Merton Council to become a member of the Lift the Ban coalition, and have set up a Welcome Network which meets regularly with local organisations supporting asylum seekers and refugees.

Over a six-month period, we conducted a listening campaign to better understand the issues affecting refugees and asylum seekers and inform our Sanctuary Strategy. Since then, we have met with the Deputy Leader of the Council, Cllr. Eleanor Stringer, and have pushed the council to become a Council of Sanctuary and begin the Borough of Sanctuary process – joining the local authorities network and setting up a Sanctuary working group. We will continue to work with the council to complete this process and have Merton become a sanctuary for those seeking asylum.

If you would like to find out any more information please contact Tom Underwood at [tomunderwood@hotmail.com](mailto:tomunderwood@hotmail.com).

