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Appendix A - Budget Council – Leader of the Council, Councillor Ross Garrod

Madam Mayor, it's been almost two years since I had the honour of becoming the Leader of this great borough. As someone who grew up in Mitcham, as someone who has been shaped by this borough, its culture and our community - tonight, it gives me great pleasure to be able to present a budget that invests in Merton and secures a brighter future for the borough.

But Madam Mayor, I must be honest with colleagues in this chamber: these are deeply challenging times.

Labour's budget tonight stands against a backdrop of 14 years of austerity and underfunding, soaring inflation, Conservative economic chaos, a recession, and a cost of living crisis that is not going away any time soon.

Councils across the country are being forced to effectively declare bankruptcy, and residents in every corner of the borough are facing a horrible concoction of rising mortgage rates, high rents, and soaring food and energy costs. All whilst having to deal with the highest tax burden since the Second World War.

And with these challenges on residents, councils across the country are seeing demand rise as more people need support. Despite this, Merton Council will receive over £17m less from the Conservatives in 2024 than we did under the last Labour government.

Instead of providing councils the funding we need, the government has chosen once again to force hard-working people to pay the price for Conservative cuts and economic mismanagement.

But, Madam Mayor, it is against this backdrop that this administration has demonstrated what Labour in power can deliver.

Tonight, we present another balanced budget. A balanced budget that not only supports our residents through the cost of living crisis but one that also safeguards frontline services and makes essential investments for the long-term sustainability of the Council and borough.

Through the prudent management of council finances by this Labour administration, we have been able to protect what matters to our residents, from our high-quality Adult Social Care to our fantastic local libraries and our beautiful parks and green spaces.

We have achieved this whilst retaining a lower Council Tax Bill than our neighbours in Lib Dem Kingston, Lib Dem Sutton, Lib Dem Richmond, and Conservative Croydon.

Madam Mayor, the record is clear. Residents can trust Labour to manage council finances with precision and care.

Our careful management of the council's finances also means that we are still able to shield our residents from the biggest issue affecting people in Merton right now: the cost of living crisis.

That's why, Labour's budget will retain our generous council tax support scheme, lifting thousands of families out of paying Council Tax.

We will continue our cost of living events that were attended by more than 2,500 residents last year, ensuring all residents have local access to free, expert advice on debt, benefits, energy.

We will also add an extra £1million to our cost of living fund – so that we can continue to provide practical help that makes a real difference to people's lives during this time of hardship.

Madam Mayor, in this Labour administration's budget, helping residents through the cost of living crisis will remain a top priority, just as it was last year.

The Leader of the Opposition had a political awakening at the last Council meeting when he said: "If you support something: vote in favour of it. If you vote against it, you're against it"

So, if that is the case, will he and his party, like they did last year, vote to deny 10,000 Merton families and households from receiving help with their Council Tax bill? Or will they vote for this Labour budget that stands up for people in Merton?

The truth is, Madam Mayor, the Lib Dems helped their Conservative friends to scrap Council Tax Support in government, and now in Merton, they and their Tory partners oppose the cost of living support this administration provides to residents in their hour of need.

Madam Mayor, this coalition of opposition can pretend to be outraged all they like, but the record is clear: the Lib Dems and Tories have voted together 77 times in this chamber over the last four years. If the opposition members disagree with the Tories, I would like to remind them again of their Leader's words:

"If you support something vote in favour of it, if you vote against it, you're against it"

So, for just one time only, I would urge members from all parties to take the advice of the Leader of the Opposition (you can put this on your leaflet): If you support Labour's balanced budget, a budget that invests in Merton's future and delivers one of the generous cost of living packages in the country – then vote for it.

Vote for building the first new Council homes in Merton in a generation.

Vote for becoming London's Borough of Sport.

Vote for breathing new life into our town centres and high streets.

Vote for upgrading our 24 hour CCTV network, so we can continue keeping Merton as one of the safest boroughs in London.

And vote for safeguarding our Adult Social Care and Children's Services for the most vulnerable in our community.

Madam Mayor, this is the difference that Labour in power makes.

This is an administration which has turned Labour values and principles into action and outcomes.

This is what an administration which is laser focused on delivering on the priorities of our residents looks like.

We are not, Madam Mayor, a party that pretends the last 14 years didn't happen, or a certain 5 years within those 14 years.

Instead, this is a Labour administration that stands proudly on our record of delivery, proud of the financial integrity of the Council, and proud of our budget tonight.

But Madam Mayor, we have not achieved this alone.

My administration has made it our mission to work in active partnership with our borough's brilliant voluntary and community organisations, and the private sector, to spread the reach of our impact and investment, and maximise value for money for taxpayers.

I would also like to give a special thanks to our Council Officers. Not only for their work on this budget, but for the skill, dedication, and compassion that they demonstrate every day in their work here in Merton.

This borough has experienced two horrific tragedies in the last two years; the explosion at Galpins Road and the incident at the Study Prep School in Wimbledon. These terrible events have devastated our communities and continue to affect many residents across the borough.

Without our Council Officers, our immediate and empathetic response would not have been possible, and neither would the protection of this Council's essential everyday services.

So to all our Council officers, I say: thank you.

Madam Mayor, when I stood here last year, I told members that we were at the beginning of a journey to transform this borough, and this Council, and I challenged my Cabinet to get to work on delivery.

Tonight, I am proud to say we are making significant progress, just one year into our long term plan.

Despite the many challenges this Council and this borough have faced, this administration stands here today resolute with an ambitious and balanced budget, rooted in Labour values. It protects essential services for all residents, supports the borough's most vulnerable groups and invests in the needs of today's residents and of Merton's future generations.

Madam Mayor, our budget is the next step forward in building a better Merton, and I am proud to move it.

Appendix B - Budget Council – Leader of the Opposition Councillor Anthony Fairclough

Madame Mayor

I too thank officers for their work on this budget. It's not an easy job, we know.

Although I must admit to being a little surprised there's need for a budget meeting this year.

Madame Mayor, last March, weren't we told that the Cabinet member for Finance had balanced the budget for two years?

As we said at the time, this didn't seem feasible nor sensible.

Odd that!

As we have heard, in the financial year 2023-24, there's been at least an £8m overspend.

Speaking of 'balancing the books' - Madame Mayor, more than half of local councils have recently told the LGA that they're unlikely to be able to do that in the next 5 years.

Now we all know that the Government is to blame for the continuing cuts to local government funding.

We do need the Government to change in the way things are done.

Single year settlements are unhelpful to say the least, and local authorities face significant real terms cuts since 2010.

But it would be lazy and complacent, Madame Mayor to simply expect the next Government to step in and splash out on Councils.

Madame Mayor, we should always listen to what politicians tell us about themselves.

In right-wing newspapers, Kier Starmer promises that Labour will govern "as the real Conservatives".

And there's no comfort in Rachel Reeves' words – there is no money left.

They do not intend to make substantial change to the cosy consensus.

So it's clear that Merton can only play the hand it's dealt.

And that it makes its own luck

This administration must accept responsibility for the choices it makes.

Now, a budget should set out a path to the future the administration wants to see.

Madame Mayor - since 2022 it's been clear that this administration feels under threat.

The election result was hardly a ringing endorsement of their leadership and saw their then Council leader fail to win a seat.

And the real test, Madame Mayor, is how an administration responds to the challenge.

This administration regularly fails to set out any analysis of how it's meeting its objectives, and won't consider alternatives.

Instead, it gaslights, twisting both words and logic.

As we hear at every Full Council, opposition proposals are met with a chorus of "we're already doing it", even though there's no evidence given.

They treat proposals for change as if they are criticisms of the borough, its people or officers – rather than recognising we're all in this fight to make our area better, for everyone.

Madame Mayor, they fail to understand that we get better decisions where there is strong opposition and detailed scrutiny.

And Full Council is where the electorate – through its elected representatives - asks the Cabinet to take action and prioritise certain things.

If councillors are voting against proposals it means they are asking Cabinet not to do those things.

The Leader claims we voted with the Conservatives 77 times, but how many times was that actually the Conservatives voting on our proposals – if even the Conservatives can see the sense in our ideas, why can't Labour councillors?

Now, at the last budget meeting I think we heard from a brittle and scared administration.

Every Labour councillor had been given two instructions for their budget speech:

First - attack the Liberal Democrats at all costs – no matter how foolish or petty that attack appears to be.

Madame Mayor, some councillors even took the opportunity to use that platform to compare us to 'ginger ferrets'!

The second instruction was - bolster the confidence of the administration by praising the budget – no matter how little understanding such praise appears to show.

As I've already referred to, there was the con trick of a "two year balanced budget" - intended to show Cllr Christie as some kind of financial wunderkind.

Madame Mayor – it did not!

It was a bizarre claim that's never been mentioned again.

Madame Mayor - when the narrative becomes more important than the delivery, there is a problem.

When there's more effort in 'claim and blame' than effecting change, why are you even here?

Madame Mayor, an effective budget explicitly reflects the administration's priorities and anticipates the challenges.

We were told that last year's budget was "*A cost-of-living budget.... A budget to nurture pride in our borough. A budget that will create a sustainable Merton for the future, and a budget that will deliver London's first Borough of Sport*".

And did that budget result in those things?

It's our view Madame Mayor, that residents were provided with a mediocre, muddle-through-the-middle budget, focussed more on the message than the actual management:

During the course of the 2023-2024 budget we've seen:

- Ideas about how to expand and develop the Council Tax support scheme blocked multiple times;
- Politics played with the families of those who use Eastways. They were put through the mill by a closure threat so that there was a good headline in the budget press release before Christmas;
- Fancy furniture for Labour councillors – that doesn't make me proud;
- Half the climate emergency workstreams have a rag-rating of "red" – by Merton's own assessment – what are we doing about that?
- And when we sought the prioritisation of toilet facilities at sports pitches as part of a strategy to encourage more women and girls into team sports, it was voted down.

Last year we spoke about taking the chance to help develop an open, competent and caring Council that works for everyone, no matter where in the borough they live.

What do we want from this year's budget?

Well, we want to see an administration that is competent.

We know there are huge recurrent under and overspends in Merton's budgets and these need to be rationalised to support better spending control and budget understanding.

The administration's current approach means cuts are made that probably don't need to be made – just because the money is piled up in the wrong place.

We have also seen that somewhere between a third and a half of the proposed 'savings' we agonise over never get realised

We want to see a Council that is compassionate in the way it treats people.

We believe that the charges for blue badge applications are both unnecessary and unfair.

And that care services are not political footballs.

We want an administration that champions the local area through exciting local projects, standing up for all residents, addressing its aims and progress with candour.

Tonight Madame Mayor, Liberal Democrat speakers will address our 4 amendments.

Looking to the future and helping to mitigate the climate emergency, supporting our schools' budgets and sorting out fairer parking charges is something that a competent Council needs to do. And that's our amendment 1.

A compassionate Council would seek to take as much action as possible to cut child poverty caused by the two-child benefit cap.

It would seek to ensure that the core budget for social care is as well-funded as possible, and that people applying for blue badges don't pay for the privilege.

It would keep our branch libraries open as hubs more days of the week.

And it would put a focus on children and the importance of play - ensuring paddling pools are open earlier during summer.

And that's our amendments 2 and 3.

A Council guided by candour would publicly recognise that it needs as much transparency as possible in its key investment projects – its capital programme.

These projects are at the core of Merton's success – plans for new homes. Schemes to help make our stations step-free, projects to ensure we get the best sports facilities locally.

Shining the light on the progress of our capital programme is our amendment 4.

Madame Mayor, the Council has just announced new corporate values.

Two of the five are collaboration and creating new things – where questions are actively encouraged.

They require the administration to work with others.

I would ask Labour councillors if they think that really reflects the approach we see from this Labour administration?

But over the years we have managed to find some common ground on prioritising certain things and backing some good ideas – from the 2021 budget amendment on the London Living

Wage for contractors, the Tenants' Champion Service and new 'pop up' waste and recycling collections.

We know that we need to give room for officers to look at ideas and establish how they could work, so our amendments are drafted to avoid tying their hands.

So, will the administration work with us to look at what can be done in the areas we have highlighted?

Madame Mayor, tonight we make a plea for competence, compassion and candour.

Thank you

Appendix C - Budget Council – Leader of the Conservative Group, Councillor Nick McLean

Thank you, Madam Mayor,

Can I begin by thanking the Executive Director and his officer team for their work in preparing this budget.

I would also like to thank all Merton Council employees for their dedication to our borough – it is greatly appreciated.

Madam Mayor we understand the cost-of-living challenges that have faced Merton residents since the pandemic.

A pandemic that cost the country £400bn - money which now needs to be paid back.

A huge debt created as a result of the lockdown policies that all parties supported.

But it was the Conservative Government - in the face of stiff opposition from the Labour Party that finally said enough.

If that decision had not been taken - then lockdown would have been far longer – the damage to our society far greater, the national debt far higher.

It may suit Labour in a desperate attempt for economic credibility to ignore the cost of the pandemic, Putin's Ukraine invasion and global inflation.

But these things did happen and have had a massive impact on public and council finances.

And as the Government has grappled to bring the national finances under control local government has had single year financial settlements.

Of course, multi-year settlements are preferable.

But to advance multi-year settlements without a strong financial foundation would be reckless and counterproductive.

Well Madam Mayor – the public accounts are recovering due the good work of this Government – and that is why on January the 10th they announced a consultation to move to multi-year settlements.

If the Government had listened to Labour we would have been in lockdown for longer, the finances in a worst state, thereby delaying the move to multi-year settlements.

On the economy Labour always get it wrong.

1976 – a Labour Prime Minister goes cap in hand to the IMF

2008 – Financial crisis caused by Labour's failed regulatory framework

2010 – a sarcastic note admitting that there's no money left after 13 years of Labour

Never leaving office with unemployment lower than we they took office.

That's Labours record in Government.

And the Labour Mayor of London's record - Keir Starmer's blueprint for the UK.

The Metropolitan Police in special measures – presiding over ever-increasing levels of crime.

The London Fire Brigade in special measures.

Mismanagement of TFL finances - meaning delays, frustration, and gridlock across our city

Londoners abandoned to the disruption caused by endless protests and hate marches.

The proportion of houses built in London versus the UK the lowest since the financial crisis.

And the reward to Londoners for 8-years of Labour failure - a 70% increase in the Mayoral precept since he took office in 2016.

And where does this money go:

£151 million on beach parties, virtue signalling and self-promotion.

£30 million to tube strikers,

£6 million renaming train lines that already had names.

45% increase in City Hall staff

All the while raking in millions every month from pinching pennies from those who can't afford ULEZ-compliant cars.

A disgraceful attack, supported by Merton Labour, Merton Lib Dems and Merton Park Independents, on the poorest in our society.

Sadiq Khan – a Labour Mayor, presiding over a divided London, in decline.

We need a new Conservative Mayor – Susan Hall - and a determined new assembly member for Merton & Wandsworth – Cllr Ellie Cox

Madam Mayor, unlike so many in this chamber tonight, I am a politician that believes that more funding is not the answer to every problem.

That is the starting point of lazy group think, big on spin small on vision.

The easy answer to difficult problems – if only we had more of other people's money to spend.

Madam Mayor - nothing is free, someone, somewhere is paying for it.

We support the principle that all eligible Merton residents should contribute something to the services they consume and to this council's budget.

Labour, complain they lack government funding - and year after year as they like to say, "they grow the budget".

A level of spin that even Gordon Brown would be ashamed of – let's call the Labour policy for what it is – more spending!

Council tax is increase because of Labours policy decisions – not lack of government funding.

£2.1 million pounds spent on development company that never laid a single brick, let alone built a house.

£37 million pound overspend on the dedicated school grant – the Conservative Government having to bail them out.

A contract with Veolia that was never fit for purpose, badly implemented, poorly managed – now being scrapped at great costs to the taxpayer.

A failure to negotiate a robust contract with Clarion Housing putting in jeopardy £77m in clawback funds.

A failed recruitment policy that has led to extra-ordinary levels of agency staff for years costing millions.

Even faced with an obvious decision to save money and protect the most vulnerable kids in the borough – to repurpose the Lavender nursery - they struggled to eventually do the right thing.

Cllr Christie – that economic titan – resigning as Group whip in protest – a clear demonstration of weak financial and moral courage.

And now he sits on the front bench – does that not say all we need to know.

Madam Mayor - residents cannot afford ever increasing council tax rises – and that is why our amendment calls for 1% rebate to all band A – E properties to ease their financial strain.

We must recognise that vast increases in public spending cannot go on.

We must end the scourge of welfarism, collectivism and waste.

Residents have had enough of being asked to fund decisions from politicians addicted to spending other people's money.

Fightback against the metropolitan liberal elite group think and their unwanted and expensive social engineering.

I urge Cllrs to vote for our amendment tonight and in doing so send a message to our residents that we are on your side.

That individuals, families and communities are best placed to make decisions on their future – not the state.

That we residents should be able to keep more of their own money.

Madam Mayor – I so move this amendment.

Appendix D - Budget Council – Leader of the Merton Park Ward Independent Residents Group, Councillor Edward Foley

Madam Mayor,

As a dedicated councillor with nearly decade of service to our community, I stand before you today to address the pressing matters that shape our borough. Each year, the budget challenges we face grow more formidable, demanding our unwavering commitment and resourcefulness.

First and foremost, I commend the tireless efforts of our financial team in crafting a balanced budget. It is no small feat, especially in these trying times. The delicate balance between fiscal responsibility and meeting the needs of our residents is a tightrope we walk diligently.

I recognize that the proposed 5% increase in council tax may not be met with open arms by some of our residents. The current cost of living crisis weighs heavily on their shoulders. However, let us not lose sight of our duty—to safeguard essential frontline services. Our streets must remain clean, our adult social care services robust, and our libraries accessible havens of knowledge.

In an era where some local authorities teeter on the brink of bankruptcy, I take pride in our borough's resilience. Merton is not merely a geographical entity; it is a community that thrives on unity and shared purpose. We are not content with mediocrity; we aspire to greatness. And today, I am pleased to share that Merton is striving to be known as a borough for sport.

Sport—the heartbeat of physical and mental well-being. It unites us, transcending age, background, and circumstance. Our residents deserve the chance to participate, to find solace on the field, the track, or the court. Let us encourage them to embrace this opportunity, to reap the countless benefits that sport brings—strength, camaraderie, and resilience.

Madam Mayor, fellow councillors, let us continue our unwavering commitment to Merton. Together, we shall build a legacy—a borough where the pursuit of excellence knows no bounds, where the spirit of sport ignites our collective soul