

# **Merton Council**

## **Cabinet**

**12 December 2016**

### **Third Supplementary agenda**

6 Council tax and council spending consultation results  
(tabled at the meeting)

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## **Committee: Cabinet**

**Date: 12 December 2016**

Wards: All

## **Subject: Council tax and Council spending consultation**

Lead officer: Ged Curran, Chief Executive

Contact officer: Kris Witherington, Consultation and Community Engagement Manager

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### **Recommendations:**

- A. That Cabinet note the results of the Council tax and council spending consultation and the feedback that the Council has received.
  - B That Cabinet agrees to take the Council consultation and feedback into account in developing a budget strategy for 2017/18 and the medium term financial strategy. The strategies to be informed by: the financial position of the council; the consultation results; the administration's manifesto; the pressure on services and the impact of decisions on residents.
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## **1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1. The report sets out the results from the consultation on future arrangements for setting council tax levels and the priorities for council spending.
- 1.2. The consultation took place between 9 September and 4 November 2016 and involved a survey included in the autumn edition of My Merton and available online. 2,203 responses were received although this included 230 with no information provided by respondents in addition to their postcode.
- 1.3. The results show a clear majority support the July Principles as agreed by Cabinet in July 2011 and a clear majority of respondents favoured an increase in Council Tax with 22% supporting a continued freeze.

## **2 DETAILS**

- 2.1. A questionnaire and covering information was included in the September edition of My Merton and distributed to more than 80,000 homes in Merton. This is included in Appendix 1. The survey was available on the Council's online consultation database and promoted on the Council website and social media channels. The consultation was also highlighted at the autumn meetings of the five Community Forums.
- 2.2. In total 2,203 valid responses were received to the consultation; a response was counted as invalid if it failed to include a valid postcode. 1,435 (65%) were completed online and 768 (35%) paper copies were received. Of the online responses 230 included no information other than the postcode so should be considered a nil response.

- 2.3. An additional 13 returns were received without a valid postcode and so were excluded from the results. To date four responses have been received more than a week after the deadline and therefore have not been included.
- 2.4. A detailed analysis of these results is set out in Appendix 2 with the main findings listed in this report.
- 2.5. The first question asked to what extent respondents agreed with the set of principles agreed by the Council in July 2011. There was a clear majority in support of these principles with 24% strongly agreeing and 55% agreeing. Only 13% disagreed with the principles. There were 842 comments on the priorities and these are analysed in Appendix 2.
- 2.6. Respondents were asked to select up to three service areas that they felt should be protected most of all. There were 1782 responses to this question and three service areas emerged as the highest priority:
- Care services for older or disabled people including homecare and residential care 81%
  - Protecting vulnerable children and young people including support for children with disabilities 65%
  - Rubbish collections, street sweeping, litter and fly-tip removal 55%
  - All other services areas received less than 22% of responses
- 2.7. Respondents were asked to select up to three service areas that they felt needed protecting least of all. There were 1393 responses to this question and the five remaining service areas received the highest proportion:
- Activities for young people 49%
  - Leisure centres, playgrounds and sports facilities 39%
  - Repairs and improvements to roads and pavements 39%
  - Libraries 34%
  - Parks and open spaces 25%
- 2.8. There was also an opportunity to suggest ways the council could either reduce spending or increase income. There were 830 responses to this question and a detailed analysis can be found in Appendix 2.
- 2.9. Respondents were asked to select what they felt would be the best choice for Merton's Council tax in 2017/18 and 2018/19 from the four options available. There were 1870 valid responses to this question and the results were:
- Continue to freeze 22%
  - 1.99% increase 12%
  - 2% increase 17%
  - 3.99% increase 48%
- 2.10. In addition there were 27 paper responses where more than one option was selected and could therefore not be considered alongside the other results. Of these 14 selected all three options to increase council tax, 10 selected two of the options to increase council tax and three selected the option to freeze Council as well as one of the options to increase it.
- 2.11. Respondents were also asked if they had any comments about what should happen to council tax. There were 783 responses to this question and a detailed analysis is available in Appendix 2.



## **Demographic Profile**

- 2.12. Respondents were asked to provide their gender, age, ethnicity and if they consider themselves to have a disability. These questions were voluntary and completed by 75%-80% of respondents. With a more complete dataset it would be possible to apply a weighting scheme to improve the statistical validity of the results but with the data available this would not be sufficiently reliable.
- 2.13. We are able to compare the demographic profile of the respondents to the population estimates for Merton. From this we can conclude that the respondents are more likely to be female (54% female to 46% male), more likely to be over 65 (30%) and more likely to be White British (79%) than the population at large. They are also less likely to report they have a disability (10%). More detail is provided in Appendix 2 including a comparison against the Merton population.
- 2.14. We are also able to analyse the responses by different groups to assess what impact the overrepresentation of some groups would have on the results. From this we can conclude that male respondents were more likely to prefer a freeze in council tax; respondents aged 25-44 were more likely to prefer a freeze; and disabled respondents were more likely to prefer a freeze and less likely to want to see a 3.99% increase. Due to the low base for the different ethnic groups it is not possible to assess the impact of different ethnicity on the responses. More detail is available in Appendix 2.
- 2.15. An analysis of the postcodes provided by respondents shows that more responses were received from SW19 postcodes than would be proportionate for the borough as a whole whilst fewer than would be expected were received from CR4 postcodes. This is also reflected in the responses from each electoral ward. Levels of response were lower in the eastern wards, particularly Pollards Hill, Lavender Fields and Longthornton. In comparison responses were much higher from Merton Park ward than anywhere else. More detail is available in Appendix 2.
- 2.16. There was some variation in responses by post code with CR4 and SM4 more likely to prefer a continuing freeze than in other areas; and SW19 and SW20 more likely to prefer a 3.99% increase than in other areas. The responses by ward also showed four wards saw the option to freeze council tax preferred by more than one third of respondents: Ravensbury, St Helier, Pollards Hill and Lavender Fields. The 3.99% increase option was selected by 60% or more of respondents in Abbey, Hillside, and Raynes Park wards. In all wards, there was a majority in favour of increasing council tax in some form. More detail is available in Appendix 2.
- 2.17. There was some evidence of small numbers of multiple responses from single individuals and evidence of structured responses with groups of individuals completing the survey in exactly the same fashion. In both cases these activities were not sufficient to have had an impact on the overall results.

## **Organisational responses**

- 2.18. Although not specifically invited there were five responses received from organisations, one through the online survey from the RNIB, three in the

form of statements from Merton Centre for Independent Living, Merton Clinical Commissioning Group and Merton Lib Dems. These are included in Appendix 3.

- 2.19. The fifth response was from Mitcham and Morden Labour Party and included the results of their own survey of residents in that constituency. They received 2,760 responses to the survey with 1,943 (73%) agreeing there should be no increase in council tax. Of the 645 (24%) who said their should be an increase in council tax 185 said this should be 1.99%; 268 said it should be 2%; 192 said it should be 3.99%. A letter from Mitcham and Morden Labour Party detailing these results can be found in Appendix 3. In it the Leader states: "On an issue such as Council Tax – a regressive form of taxation that impacts more heavily on the less well-off – I felt that it was important that the voices of all residents were heard. I believe that the results of the Labour Party consultation will be helpful as we seek to represent all the residents of the borough, and will go some way towards balancing the Council's consultation."
- 2.20. In recommending the budget for 2017/18 and in settling the medium term financial strategy for future years the Cabinet has a duty to take into account all relevant matters and to exclude irrelevant considerations. These matters will include the financial position of the council; the consultation results; the administration's manifesto; the pressure on services and the impact of decisions on residents.

### **3 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

- 3.1. The results are to note and consider as part of the decision setting council tax for 2017/18, therefore there are no alternative options.

### **4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED**

- 4.1. The report sets out the consultation that was undertaken.

### **5 TIMETABLE**

- 5.1. The consultation took place between 9 September and 4 November 2016.
- 5.2. The decision on Council Tax levels for 2017/18 will be recommended at Cabinet on the 13 February for full Council on the 1 March 2017.
- 5.3. The Overview and Scrutiny Commission has asked to receive the results of this consultation at a future meeting to be agreed.

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

- 6.1. The administration of the consultation involved significant officer time but limited costs. Including the survey in My Merton and posting it online did not incur any additional costs, whilst the postage cost for the responses returned currently stands at £313. This will be met through Departmental budgets.

### **7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1. Members are asked to consider responses from residents and other groups to the Council's consultation on council tax and council spending. Members should be satisfied that the Council's consultation was undertaken at an early stage of the decision making process and ensure that the views

expressed are conscientiously taken into account when making decisions on the Business Plan for 2017/18. Members should also be satisfied that the Council consulted persons considered likely to have an interest in and affected by the proposals; that there was ample time and means for consultees to express their views; that there was sufficient information made available to enable consultees to make informed comments and that the consultation was carried out effectively.

- 7.2. Members have also been provided with submissions from organisations, which are provided as additional information received by the council. The material expresses the views of organisations and results of exercises undertaken by them and should be noted in that context
- 7.3. The individual responses to the survey will not be made available publicly without ensuring anything that could identify individuals is removed in order to assure compliance with the Data Protection Act.

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

- 8.1. Appendix 2 includes a detailed analysis by demographic factors to address equalities considerations.

## **9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1. There are no crime and disorder implications

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

- 10.1. There are no risk management and health and safety implications

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

- Appendix 1 Copy of the survey published in My Merton
- Appendix 2 Analysis of the responses received to the consultation
- Appendix 3 Responses received from RNIB, MCIL, Merton Lib Dems, Merton CCG and Mitcham and Morden Labour Party.

## **12 BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 12.1. None

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# Have your say on council tax and council spending





## Have your say on council tax and council spending

Merton Council has frozen your council tax since 2010 and has promised to do so until March 2019.

However, council services are coming under increasing financial pressure. The funding we receive from the government to provide local services has been cut significantly, while demand has increased.

This means that on top of the savings we've been forced to make so far, we are now facing an additional £20m of cuts over the next few years.

The local NHS also has a number of funding issues and have told us they will not be able to sustain the funding they give us if we do not raise council tax. Although we would still need to make cuts, increasing your council tax by 2% could reduce the estimated £20m of cuts to around £18m, for example.

Up until now, the council has ensured that adult social care and children's services have received less of a share of the cuts than other areas.

We want to know what you think. Would you be willing to pay extra council tax in 2017/18 and 2018/19? If so, how much extra? Would you prefer any additional council tax to help reduce the cuts to just one council service (adult social care), or all areas?

These are all questions we want answers to from you.

We hope as many residents as possible will fill in and return the survey overleaf by the deadline of November 4. We want to hear what council taxpayers think so that the important decisions we make about your council tax and your services are based on what you want.

You can also fill in the survey online at [www.merton.gov.uk/consultation](http://www.merton.gov.uk/consultation).



## Living within our means

Since 2010 the government funding received by councils has reduced by more than 40%. In Merton we have tightened our belts and reduced our spending in all service areas so that we can live within our means. We have also raised charges where we can, and will continue to use our reserves where available to slow down some of the impact of the cuts.

We have frozen council tax since 2010, and promise to do so until March 2019. However by 2020 we will need to make further savings of £20million, each and every year.

Last year the government allowed councils to increase council tax by up to 1.99% without a referendum of local residents, and in addition to increase council tax by up to another 2%, that can only be used to fund social care for adults. Increasing council tax by 2% would raise an additional £1.5million, so it would not remove the need for cuts, but it would mean fewer cuts than the £20million we are facing.

We want to know what you think about the challenge we face and what choices we should be making.

## Section 1 Priorities

In July 2011 we agreed a set of principles that we use to guide the decisions we make about our services despite reduced funding. These were

- Continue to provide everything that is statutory.
- Maintain services - within limits - to the vulnerable and elderly.
- Maintain clean streets and keep council tax low.
- Keep Merton as a good place for young people to go to school and grow up.
- Be the best it can for the local environment.
- All the rest should be open for discussion.

### Q1 Please tell us to what extent you agree or disagree with our priorities

- Strongly Agree  
 Agree  
 Disagree  
 Strongly Disagree  
 Don't Know

### Q2 Please tell us if you think there are any other priorities we should consider

### Q3 We provide a wide range of services that cost us money to provide. From the list below please tell us which areas you think we should protect MOST of all.

Please select up to three areas:

- Care services for older or disabled people including homecare and residential care  
 Rubbish collections, street sweeping, litter and fly-tip removal  
 Protecting vulnerable children and young people including support for children with disabilities  
 Parks and open spaces  
 Libraries  
 Leisure centres, playgrounds and sports facilities  
 Activities for young people  
 Repairs and improvements to roads and pavements

### Q4 Which services do you think we should protect LEAST of all?

Please select up to three areas:

- Care services for older or disabled people including homecare and residential care  
 Rubbish collections, street sweeping, litter and fly-tip removal

- Protecting vulnerable children and young people including support for children with disabilities  
 Parks and open spaces  
 Libraries  
 Leisure centres, playgrounds and sports facilities  
 Activities for young people  
 Repairs and improvements to roads and pavements

### Q5 Do you have any suggestions for how we can reduce spending and/or increase income across our services?

## Section 2 Council tax

### Q6 What do you think would be the best choice for Merton's overall council tax in 2017/18 and 2018/19?

- Continue to freeze my council tax so I pay Merton the same as last year  
 Increase my council tax by 1.99%  
 Increase my council tax by 2% to spend on adult social care only  
 Increase my council tax by 3.99%

### Q7 Please tell us if you have any comments about what should happen with council tax in Merton

Please tell us your postcode (without a valid postcode we will not be able to consider your response).

**Postcode:**

You do not have to answer the following questions but doing so helps us see how representative the responses to the survey are. What you tell us is strictly confidential and will not be used for any purpose other than analysing this survey.

Are you Male  Female

Please tell us your age

How would you describe your ethnicity

Do you consider yourself to have a disability Yes  No



To give us your views, complete the questions overleaf and return to us for free - no stamp is required. Fold along the lines, as per the instructions below and put it in the post.

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Business Reply  
Licence Number  
RTHA-BRBJ-CKXE



Council Tax & Council Spending  
Consultation Team  
7th Floor  
Merton Civic Centre  
London Road  
MORDEN  
SM4 5DX

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# Appendix 2 Analysis of the responses to the Council tax and council spending consultation

## Question 1: Please tell us to what extent you agree or disagree with our priorities

This question was completed by 1900 respondents

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Strongly agree	454	23.89%
Agree	1046	55.05%
Disagree	175	9.21%
Strongly disagree	72	3.79%
Don't know	153	8.05%

There was no noticeable variation in responses by gender

Older people were more likely to agree strongly

Age	All ages	25 - 34	35 - 44	45 - 54	55 - 64	65 - 74	75 or over
Strongly agree	26%	19%	16%	24%	25%	30%	47%
Agree	55%	63%	65%	52%	54%	51%	43%

Disabled respondents were slightly less likely to agree with 18% disagreeing compared to 12% of non-disabled respondents.

## Question 2: Please tell us if you think there are any other priorities we should consider

Coding analysis to follow

## Question 3: We provide a wide range of services that cost us money to provide. From the list below please tell us which areas you think we should protect MOST of all.

This was completed by 1782 respondents with up to three choices each.

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
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Care services for older or disabled people including homecare and residential care	1452	81.48%
Rubbish collections, street sweeping, litter and fly-tip removal	899	50.45%
Protecting vulnerable children and young people including support for children with disabilities	1159	65.04%
Parks and open spaces	387	21.72%
Libraries	222	12.46%
Leisure centres, playgrounds and sports facilities	237	13.3%
Activities for young people	247	13.86%
Repairs and improvements to roads and pavements	372	20.88%

Female respondents were more likely to select care services (84% compared to 79%) and protecting vulnerable children (68% to 62%); male respondents were more likely to select rubbish and litter (54% to 49%).

Respondents aged over 55 were more likely to select care services for older or disabled people.

Age	All ages	25 - 34	35 - 44	45 - 54	55 - 64	65 - 74	75 or over
% Care services		71%	71%	79%	90%	87%	89%

Disabled respondents were less likely to select protecting vulnerable young people, and more likely to select repairs to roads and pavements.

#### Question 4: Which services do you think we should protect LEAST of all?

This question was answered by 1393 respondents with up to three choices

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Care services for older or disabled people including homecare and residential care	90	6.46%
Rubbish collections, street sweeping, litter and fly-tip removal	154	11.06%
Protecting vulnerable children and young people including support for	104	7.47%

children with disabilities		
Parks and open spaces	347	24.91%
Libraries	468	33.6%
Leisure centres, playgrounds and sports facilities	549	39.41%
Activities for young people	678	48.67%
Repairs and improvements to roads and pavements	538	38.62%

There was no significant variation in responses by gender.

Older people (65+) were more likely to select parks and leisure services, and less likely to select repairs of roads and pavements. Disabled respondents were similarly more likely to select parks, libraries, and leisure services and less likely to select repairs to roads and pavements.

### Question 5: Do you have any suggestions for how we can reduce spending and/or increase income across our services?

Coding analysis to follow

### Question 6: What do you think would be the best choice for Merton's overall council tax in 2017/18 and 2018/19?

This question was answered by 1870 respondents.

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Continue to freeze my council tax so I pay Merton the same as last year	411	21.98%
Increase my council tax by 1.99%	233	12.46%
Increase my council tax by 2% to spend on adult social care only	320	17.11%
Increase my council tax by 3.99%	906	48.45%

There were 27 paper responses where more than one option was selected and could therefore not be considered alongside the other results. Of these 14 selected all three options to increase council tax, 10 selected two of the options to increase council tax and three selected the option to freeze Council as well as one of the options to increase it.

Male respondents were more likely to select a freeze in council tax (26% compared to 18%) whilst female respondents were more likely to select an increase of 1.99% or 3.99% (15% to 10% and 50% to 47% respectively).

Younger respondents were more likely to select a freeze in council take whilst older respondents were more likely to select the option of a 2% increase. The full breakdown by age group is set out below.

Age	All ages (base 1676)	25 - 34	35 - 44	45 - 54	55 - 64	65 - 74	75 or over
Freeze	22%	34%	32%	22%	17%	15%	18%
1.99% increase	13%	14%	14%	11%	12%	13%	16%
2% increase	17%	11%	7%	17%	19%	22%	27%
3.99% increase	49%	41%	47%	50%	53%	50%	38%

Disabled respondents were more likely to select either a freeze or a 2% increase than non-disabled respondents as set out below.

	Total (base 1687)	Disabled (base 173)	Non-disabled (base 1514)
Freeze	22%	30%	21%
1.99% increase	13%	13%	13%
2% increase	17%	24%	16%
3.99% increase	48%	33%	50%

Respondents who completed a paper questionnaire were more likely to select a council tax freeze compared to online respondents (30% to 17%) and less likely to select a 3.99% increase (42% to 52%).

There was some variation in responses by post code with CR4 and SM4 more likely to prefer a continuing freeze than in other areas; and SW19 and SW20 more likely to prefer a 3.99% increase than in other areas. The detail is set out below.

Post code	Freeze		1.99		2		3.99	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
CR4	49	28%	29	17%	42	24%	55	31%
KT3	13	22%	12	21%	8	14%	24	42%
SM4	96	34%	40	14%	49	17%	93	33%
SW19	177	19%	92	10%	143	16%	475	54%
SW20	56	13%	49	12%	70	17%	244	58%
All	411	22%	233	12%	320	17%	906	48%

The variations by area are further evidenced when postcodes are allocated to council wards. This shows a variation in those wanting council tax to remain frozen from a high of 43% in Ravensbury to a low of 13% in Raynes Park. Four wards saw this option preferred by more than one third of respondents: Ravensbury, St Helier, Pollards Hill and Lavender Fields.

The 3.99% option was selected by 60% or more of respondents in Abbey, Hillside, and Raynes Park wards.

Ward	Total responses	Freeze		1.99		2		3.99	
		Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Abbey	129	25	19%	10	8%	17	13%	77	60%
Cannon Hill	133	26	20%	15	11%	29	21%	63	47%
Colliers Wood	52	13	25%	6	11%	6	11%	27	52%
Cricket Green	41	8	20%	7	17%	8	20%	18	43%
Dundonald	127	21	17%	15	12%	22	17%	69	54%
Figges Marsh	41	11	27%	5	12%	10	24%	15	37%
Graveney	42	12	29%	6	14%	13	31%	11	26%
Hillside	126	21	17%	13	10%	16	13%	76	60%
Lavender Fields	29	11	38%	2	7%	10	34%	6	21%
Longthornton	29	8	28%	7	24%	7	24%	7	24%
Lower Morden	60	19	32%	12	20%	7	12%	22	37%
Merton Park	265	53	20%	26	10%	68	26%	118	45%
Pollards Hill	27	11	40%	7	26%	1	4%	8	30%
Ravensbury	51	22	43%	11	22%	8	17%	10	20%
Raynes Park	150	19	13%	21	14%	17	11%	93	62%
St Helier	50	21	42%	2	4%	7	14%	20	40%
Trinity	150	36	24%	22	15%	21	14%	71	47%
Village	106	23	22%	15	14%	13	12%	55	52%
West Barnes	113	21	19%	17	15%	14	12%	61	54%
Wimbledon Park	120	25	21%	10	8%	19	16%	66	55%
Outside borough	19	3	16%	2	11	3	16%	11	58%
Not listed	10	2	20%	2	20%	4	40%	2	20%
All responses	1870	411	22%	233	12%	320	17%	906	48%

## Question 7: Please tell us if you have any comments about what should happen with council tax in Merton

Coding analysis to follow

## Demographics

### Age and gender

The gender and age profile of the sample has been compared to the GLA 2015 Round SHLAA-based Capped Household Size Model Population Projections for 2016 (released July 2016). This shows that respondents were more likely to be female and over 45 than the wider population.

Gender	% Respondents	% GLA
Male	46.2	49.6
Female	53.8	50.4

Age group	% Respondents	% GLA (adults only)
16 - 24	1	11
25 - 34	9	24
35 - 44	17	21
45 - 54	21	17
55 - 64	23	12
65 - 74	21	8
75 or over	9	7

## Disability

The 2011 census estimated disabled residents to make up 12.6% of the population. This compares to 10.2% of those respondents who answered the question stating that they felt they had a disability. Disabled respondents were more likely to be over 75 than non-disabled respondents (26% compared to 7%) but less likely to be in all other age groups.

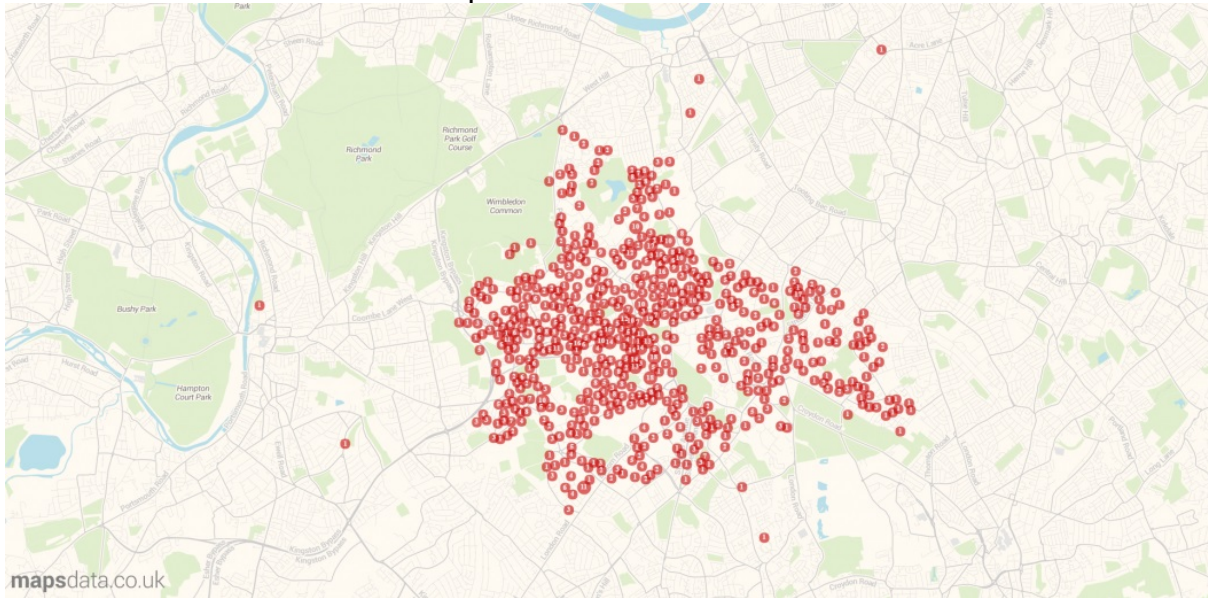
## Geography

The postcode areas provided by respondents have been compared to the proportion of total postcodes in the borough to give an indication of representation across the borough. This appears to show a skew towards SW19, and mainly away from CR4.

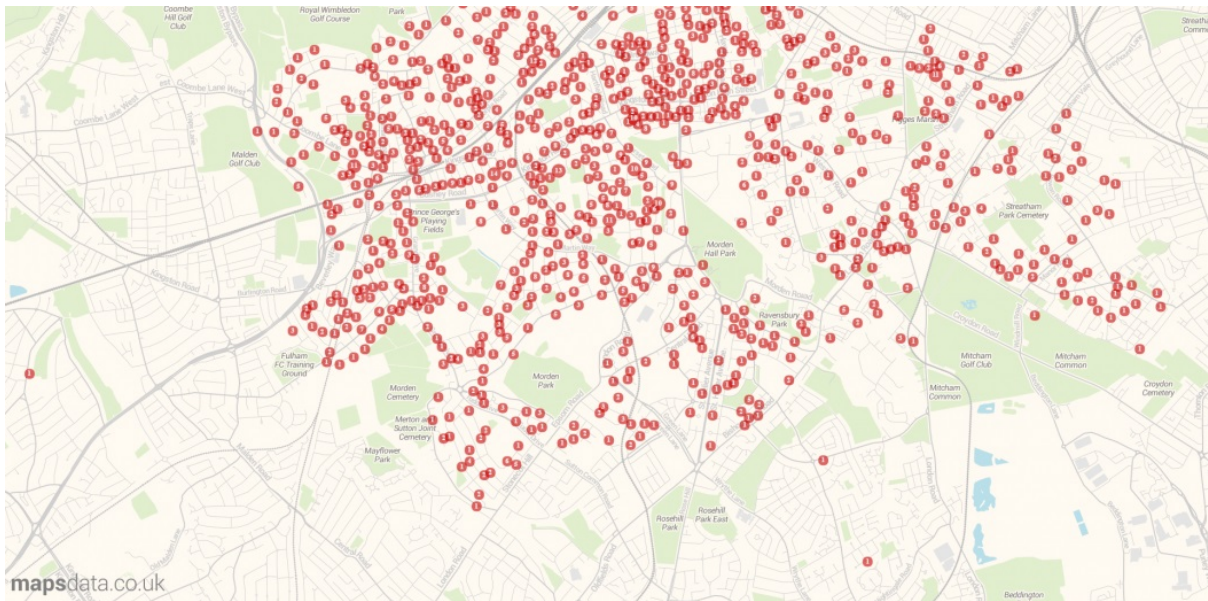
Postcode	Responses by postcode	% of total responses	% of total borough postcodes
CR4	211	9.6%	23.8%
CR7	1	-	0.3%
KT3	66	3%	3%
SM3	1	-	-
SM4	320	14.5%	14.5%
SW16	25	1.1%	2.6%
SW17	15	0.7%	2.1%
SW18	7	0.3%	0.3%
SW19	1039	47.2%	38.6%
SW20	503	22.8%	14.6%
Outside of borough	14	0.6%	NA
Unknown	2	-	NA



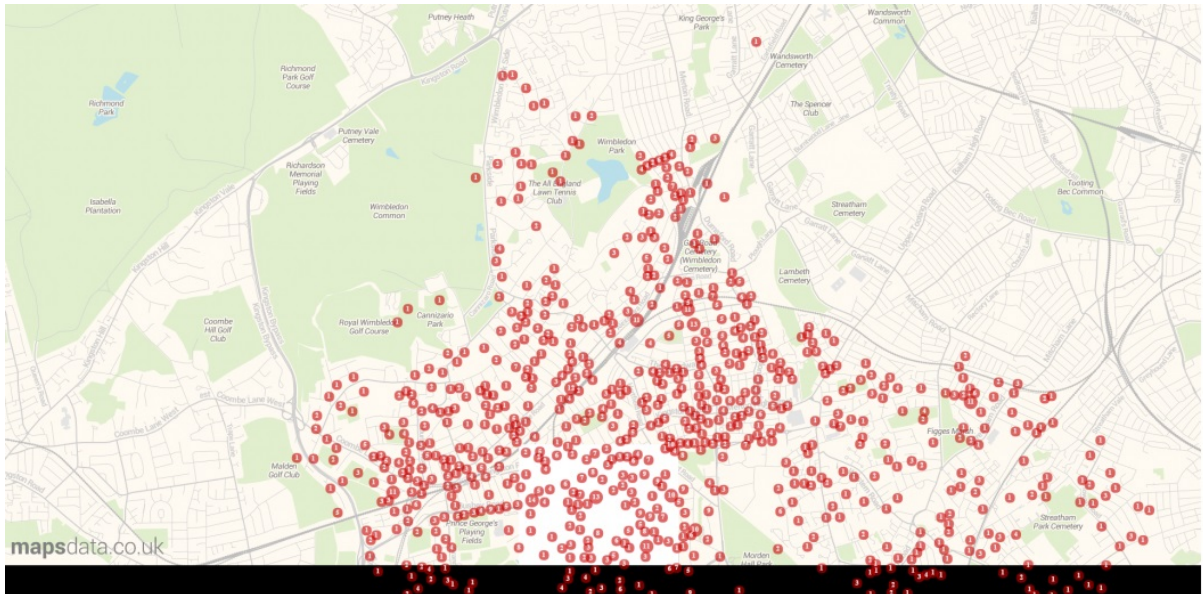
This can also be seen on the maps below.



Responses whole borough



Responses southern borough



### Responses northern borough

When responses are allocated to electoral wards this confirms lower response rates from area in the east of the borough, in particular Pollards Hill, Lavender Fields and Longthornton. In comparison responses were much higher from Merton Park ward.



# Appendix 3 Organisational Responses

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## RNIB

### Response to Question 2

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this consultation. We encourage you to consider the crucial role of the vision rehabilitation service delivered by the Merton Council; I hope that the below information is helpful in working towards the best possible outcomes for blind and partially sighted people. There is an urgent need to ensure that vision rehabilitation services get the right resources to 'See, plan and provide':

- See: everyone with a visual impairment receives a specialist face to face assessment.
- Plan: everyone has a plan in place, identifying the outcome of their assessment. The first two steps take place within 28 days of first contact with the council.
- Provide: any agreed vision rehabilitation support starts within 12 weeks of the person's initial contact with the council.

You will no doubt be aware that when vision rehabilitation services are properly resourced, the crucial training and advice they provide can make a huge difference to the daily lives of people experiencing sight loss. People can gain the skills and confidence to maximise their independence, participate in activities and access their community. By supporting blind and partially sighted people to live independently at home, it can also prevent, reduce or delay the need for expensive care packages whilst helping local authorities to meet their duty to provide preventative support under the Care Act. We understand that your council will soon be considering its budget for the coming year. During this process we urge you to consider the vital importance of vision rehabilitation. Given that numbers of blind and partially sighted people are increasing, we believe that ensuring the right resources now will prepare local services for the future. RNIB works with local authorities across the country to promote vision rehabilitation and share examples of best practice. For any support, feel free to contact us on [campaigns@rnib.org.uk](mailto:campaigns@rnib.org.uk) or visit

[www.rnib.org.uk/seeandplan](http://www.rnib.org.uk/seeandplan)

### Response to Question 5

Please see response to question 3 regarding preventative value of vision rehabilitation support. RNIB has commissioned new research (scheduled for release in December) to demonstrate the cost savings that can be achieved by effective vision rehabilitation services.

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## **“Council Tax and Council Spending”**

### **Consultation Response from Merton Centre for Independent Living**

**November 2016**

This is a formal consultation response on behalf of Merton Centre for Independent Living. We are a local user-led disabled people’s organisation providing a range of services such as advice and advocacy to local disabled people.

Through our work we have direct and first-hand knowledge of what disabled people are experiencing on a day-to-day basis as a result of cuts to support in Adult Social Care (ASC), and in other areas of disabled people’s lives. Our sound evidence base also allows us to extrapolate the likely impact of further cuts to services.

We will primarily refer to disabled people throughout this response, as our work is with disabled people, however, we recognise that older people also use ASC and will be facing very similar concerns as those described below.

In this response we will address the following:

- The current position of ASC following cuts
- The impact of future cuts to ASC
- The value and legitimacy of the consultation exercise
- Conclusions and recommended actions

In summary, disabled people in Merton are finding it extremely difficult to live independently due to cuts to ASC, particularly when combined with cuts in other areas of their lives too. Council plans for the year ahead, including further cuts, risk tipping disabled people into crisis. In addition, the consultation process has been divisive and undermines the relationship between disabled people and the Council.

## The current position of ASC following cuts in Merton

A report from Healthwatch Merton<sup>1</sup> showed that even before the dramatic cuts of £5 million planned for 2016/17 (the year we are currently in), the quality of existing services was reducing and that preventative work was made impossible by cuts to services. Disabled and older people felt that their wellbeing would be reduced and people's physical health would worsen. Families would be put under immense strain and social connections severed. Disabled and older people would be made vulnerable by these cuts and the ultimate consequence for some was that life was no longer worth living.

In addition, the Council's own Business Plan pointed out that the cuts to services which were being implemented for 2016/17 meant that Merton couldn't meet its statutory duties<sup>2</sup>.

At Merton CIL we have seen first-hand the multiple consequences of cuts to ASC through our work with local disabled people. This covers a diverse range of disabled people, reflective of our diverse society, and includes people with a support budget who are wanting to live a regular active life.

There are a number of problems with **assessments**, including difficulty accessing assessments, particularly for people who have a need, but don't have a formal diagnosis of impairment. There are long waits for assessments and the assessment process itself is lengthy. In some recent cases there has been a 2+ month wait between assessment and panel outcome. There is poor communication around how assessment decisions are made and the approach to reassessments is inconsistent with some people getting a full Care Act assessment and others getting a print out of a previous (non-Care Act) assessment and being asked to comment on it.

For people who receive a **personal budget**, these are not sufficient to meet people's needs and impose restrictions on people's lives such as fixed mealtimes, early bedtimes such as 8pm for a 40 year old man, and little provision for exercise, social lives or personal relationships. Reassessments are resulting in cuts to personal budgets with little justification of how this meets the Care Act.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.healthwatchmerton.co.uk/sites/default/files/hwm\\_asc\\_focus\\_groups\\_write\\_up\\_report.pdf](http://www.healthwatchmerton.co.uk/sites/default/files/hwm_asc_focus_groups_write_up_report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup><http://democracy.merton.gov.uk/documents/s6630/Budget%20and%20Business%20Plan%202015-19.pdf>

In one case, an active volunteer and community member was told he should consider cutting down on his activities - this is a breach of his rights.

Merton Council responded to a Freedom of Information request stating that nearly half of former ILF-users' care hours are being reduced<sup>3</sup>. As people's needs have not reduced, these cuts are not lawful. In addition, Merton received a £331,038 Former ILF Recipient grant in 2016/17 and another £320,137 is due from Central Government in 2017/18; where has this money gone? Why did the Council ringfence the ILF transition monies in 2015/16 but not in following years?

In one case we know of, there is a 20 per cent cut to someone's support, equivalent to nearly 2 days support a week. This is not uncommon and can be described as a life-limiting cut to support. Given that Merton CIL is in contact with only half of former ILF users, we are concerned for the wellbeing of those people who have not received advocacy support.

Now I have to pay extra if I wake up my carer to take me to the toilet in the night. If I am going out in the evening and having a drink, I have to decide if I should pay more money to get up in the night or if I should wear a [incontinence] pad instead  
(Merton CIL member)

For people whose support has been frozen following reassessment, increases in care costs mean that this is effectively a cut. We've also been made aware of a number of cases where people have been asked to pay more towards their care, even though they have not had an increase in their income; this is also effectively a cut.

In some cases this additional financial contribution, combined with higher care costs, has resulted in people being asked to pay more for their care than they receive in income such as benefits. This can lead to

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/InclusionLondon\\_ILF\\_Report\\_2016.pdf](https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/InclusionLondon_ILF_Report_2016.pdf)

debt, and anxiety, quite apart from being contrary to Care Act guidance on Charging.

In an example, we have seen a disabled person who was so worried about their reduced package and getting into debt that they became depressed and were referred to counselling. However, the counselling venue was not accessible.

**Direct payments** users are not receiving the support or budget required to meet their employment obligations, such as not having a high enough personal budget to pay living wage, workplace pensions or to have adequate insurance. This is contrary to Care Act guidance, and as a result, direct payments users are losing their personal assistants (PAs) and finding it difficult to replace them because hourly rates have been frozen by the council for the last five years. In fact, Merton is in the lowest 25% of authorities nationally and one of the lowest in London in terms of the average amount it pays per hour for home care for older and disabled people - and all our neighbouring boroughs pay more.<sup>4</sup>

It is also not possible for direct payment users to hold money in reserve to cover issues such as sickness cover, contingency for differing week patterns, redundancy, etc as money is regularly clawed back by Merton.

In fact, we are aware of several situations where people who have received their personal budget have been unable to spend it because of the near impossibility of finding staff, and as a result have had the money clawed back – rather than, for example, having support to address the issue.

Where personal budgets are cut, there is no provision for direct payments users to manage the change as employers of PAs, for whom there is then no proper redundancy process, contrary to employment law.

There have also been cuts to residential and nursing care providers leading to similar issues around staff retention and being able to deliver quality care to people. This has been highlighted in a recent CQC report.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.ukhca.co.uk/pdfs/ukhca\\_homecare\\_deficit\\_2016\\_final.pdf](http://www.ukhca.co.uk/pdfs/ukhca_homecare_deficit_2016_final.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cqc.org.uk/content/state-of-care>

In yet another example, we are supporting someone who was safeguarded into a nursing home on a temporary basis following abuse, but we then had to raise a second safeguarding alert against what was supposed to be a place of safety due to a range of concerns including deprivation of liberty and failure to give medication appropriately.

This home was known by Merton to be considered one of the worst in the borough following an independent visit by Merton Seniors Forum through their Dignity in Care work<sup>6</sup> and is rated as requiring improvement by CQC.

Cuts to services including **staffing cuts** at day centres, and cuts to mental health services among others are also having a negative impact.

We are aware of a situation in a day centre for people with learning disabilities where there was a fight between 2 disabled adults and there were no staff available to intervene. This hadn't happened before staffing was reduced.

There are also now fewer excursions and more large group sessions – a return to the days of day centres as “holding pens” rather than “community centres”. Additionally, High Path Community Centre is being closed and possibly relocated, again without consultation, as Merton is selling the land to Harris Academy. The Council promised to let centre users know where the new location would be by the end of October. It is now November, and still no news.

The cuts to adult social care have also seen the loss of good social work staff due the pressures of the system. Relationships and expertise are lost which impacts on the quality of service and the direct support disabled people receive.

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<sup>6</sup><https://mertonseniorsforum.com/dignity-in-care/>

In fact, earlier this year we had a call from a social worker alleging that the situation in Merton was dangerous and putting people at risk due to low staffing levels, high sickness absence, loss of senior expertise and use of inexperienced locums.

Any negative impact on the disabled person, impacts **family carers** too. Such poor support for carers means that when resources are cut, such as community centres or adult education, as has happened locally, carers are pushed to breaking point and disabled people either end up in respite, or may no longer be able to live at home with their family.

In one example, we are aware of a disabled person who repeatedly went to the doctor for stomach pains, which were ignored until the point of the person needing hospitalisation. This resulted in an invasive operation and intensive aftercare was required at home. This fell to the family carer, with limited support from district nurses. There was no reassessment of either of their needs, despite the carer repeatedly asking for this. Both the disabled person and the family carer ended up in crisis as a result.

## The impact of future cuts to ASC in Merton

Merton Council has cut the Adult Social Care budget by £23,908,000 (£24 million) between 2011/12 – 2016/17<sup>7</sup>. At the same time, as support is being cut, more people need support. In particular, older people, people with dementia, and older people with learning disabilities, are all increasing in number in Merton.<sup>8</sup> This reflects the national picture<sup>9</sup>, however, it is particularly problematic for Merton which is already a low-spending borough on ASC.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Merton has a large (and statistically significant) gap in how disabled people rate their wellbeing compared to how non-disabled people rate their wellbeing. This should be an area of concern for the Council given the Wellbeing Principle at the heart of the Care Act.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> ASC Budget Savings Consultation 2015-2019 (no online copy)

<sup>8</sup> ASC Budget Savings Consultation 2015-2019 (no online copy)

<sup>9</sup> <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/communities-and-local-government-committee/social-care/oral/42401.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> ASC Budget Savings Consultation 2015-2019 (no online copy)

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.merton.gov.uk/presentation\\_charts\\_merton\\_residents\\_2014\\_.pdf](http://www.merton.gov.uk/presentation_charts_merton_residents_2014_.pdf)



The current position is that there is a forecast overspend of over £7million<sup>12</sup> for ASC.

Given the already negative impact of cuts highlighted in the previous section, it is evident that this figure is better described not as an “overspend” but is rather as a reflection of the fact that the planned level of cuts to services to date were in fact totally unachievable when faced with the reality of statutory duties and what support people need. In fact, Merton CIL has on a number of occasions made the point that the planned level of cuts to ASC is not achievable.

We have also previously highlighted the cumulative impact of not only cuts to social care but also cuts to other local services including education and housing, which combined with the national austerity agenda is resulting in disabled people facing significant disadvantage across all areas of their lives.

The welfare benefit reforms that the government brought in through the Welfare Reform Act 2012 are having a significant and disproportionate negative impact on Disabled people, which seriously jeopardises Disabled people’s standard of living and reduces the level of social protection.<sup>13</sup> Cuts to benefits and Local Government together bear 50% of planned cuts in the Treasury Spending Review. Recently, four<sup>14 15 16 17</sup> different reports have concluded that the cuts associated with Welfare Reform have disproportionately impacted on disabled people. One report demonstrates that Welfare Reform targets people in poverty and disabled people. Disabled people who need to access both benefits and social care are affected 6 times more than non-disabled people resulting in an annual reduction in income of over £6,000 per person<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> <http://democracy.merton.gov.uk/documents/s14554/Financial%20Monitoring.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Evidence of Breaches of Disabled People’s Rights Under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Inclusion London, 2015

<sup>14</sup> Wood C (2013) Destination Unknown: April 2013. London, Demos.

<sup>15</sup> Duffy S (2014) Counting the Cuts: what the Government doesn’t want the public to know. Sheffield, The Centre for Welfare Reform

<sup>16</sup> Reed H & Portes J (2014) Cumulative Impact Assessment: A Research Report by Landman Economics and the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) for the Equality and Human Rights Commission. London, Equality and Human Rights Commission.

<sup>17</sup> Young J (with Nolan A) (2014) (Dignity and Opportunity for All: securing the rights of disabled people in the austerity era. London, Just Fair.

<sup>18</sup> Duffy S (2014) Counting the Cuts: what the Government doesn’t want the public to know. Sheffield, The Centre for Welfare Reform

As a consequence, Disabled people are facing disadvantage across key areas of their lives<sup>19</sup>, and are experiencing significant health inequalities<sup>20</sup>. Barriers to employment, accessing the community, poverty and homelessness follow.<sup>21</sup>

Within this context of disadvantage and discrimination against disabled people, the failure of Merton Council to draw in all of the funds to which it is entitled, such as the 2% ASC Precept, is, at best, described as short-sighted.

It should be remembered that the precept, worth around £2 million, could have been added to people's Council Tax bills without any impact on people's pockets, because a GLA precept was ending at the same time. This was known to the Council but the decision was still made not to add the precept, against the advice of the voluntary sector and many local residents who responded to petitions and surveys early in 2016.

Merton need to seriously look at themselves because whatever they're doing they're not doing it well  
(Merton CIL member)

Instead of applying the precept, a Mitigation Fund was set up using funding allocated from elsewhere and which was sold in as a fund for Council officers and the voluntary sector to access to ensure that people weren't being disadvantaged by the cuts. Very quickly after the budget was set in March 2016, it was made clear that this Mitigation Fund was in fact a reserve pot to off-set failure to meet cuts in ASC. At just £1.3million, this was clearly inadequate for the purpose.

In addition to more people needing support, a failure to draw in all the money to which the local authority is entitled, and a £7million+ overspend, **a further £2 million cut is planned from the ASC 2017/18 budget.** Given the existing concerns and impact of cuts to date, the idea that more should be cut, seems irresponsible.

<sup>19</sup> The Equality Act 2010: The Impact on Disabled People, House of Lords Select Committee on the Equality Act 2010 and Disability, 2016

<sup>20</sup> Is Britain Fairer? Equalities and Human Rights Commission, 2015

<sup>21</sup> Evidence of Breaches of Disabled People's Rights Under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Inclusion London, 2015

The cuts currently planned in ASC for 2017/18 are<sup>22</sup>:

- £600,000 in "prevention" ie voluntary sector grants
- £100,000 in "staff savings"
- £456,000 in "commissioned services" including supporting people contracts
- £1,042,000 in "support packages" ie cuts of 5-15% on average per person

Although 2017/18 budget-setting is now taking place, none of these cuts are available for discussion or scrutiny in any of the papers, such as the latest business plan.<sup>23</sup> None of these £2million-worth of cuts for 2017/18 have undergone any consultation or scrutiny previously, as all of the discussions and consultation in the previous budget-setting process focussed on 2016/17 only, as was made extremely clear at the time.<sup>24</sup>

The Council's MTFS approach to budget-setting is creating a situation where only new, year-ahead cuts are being scrutinised. For cuts which were put in the budget in previous years, they were not discussed at the time and they don't come up for discussion again in Council papers. In this way, they Council can plan deep cuts 2 or 3 years ahead, and they never get discussed or scrutinised. It is exactly this process which is being used to hide £2 million worth of cuts to ASC next year. In a recent Judicial Review brought by a Merton CIL member, the Council insisted that cuts planned in previous years were provisional and not set in stone. This is clearly not the case given the way budgets are being set and scrutinised.

We have previously raised our concerns about the Councils failure to properly scrutinise cuts to services and the Council has failed to take any action on this matter. We are extremely concerned that cuts are going ahead without scrutiny or consultation, in particular as we appear to be nearing a tipping point in terms of the viability of services<sup>25</sup>. In short, everything we and our service users have experienced to date indicates that the Healthwatch Merton<sup>26</sup> report was an accurate predictor of the

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.merton.gov.uk/asc\\_budget\\_savings\\_consultation\\_2016-2019\\_easy\\_read\\_version\\_final.pdf](http://www.merton.gov.uk/asc_budget_savings_consultation_2016-2019_easy_read_version_final.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> <http://democracy.merton.gov.uk/documents/s14555/Business%20Plan.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.merton.gov.uk/health-social-care/adult-social-care/adult-social-care-consultation.htm>

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/communities-and-local-government-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/adult-social-care-16-17/>

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.healthwatchmerton.co.uk/sites/default/files/hwm\\_asc\\_focus\\_groups\\_write\\_up\\_report.pdf](http://www.healthwatchmerton.co.uk/sites/default/files/hwm_asc_focus_groups_write_up_report.pdf)

issues facing local older and disabled people following cuts to ASC. As cuts deepen, the wellbeing, dignity, independence and life chances of disabled people are being eroded in Merton.

## **The value and legitimacy of the consultation exercise**

People are saying to me on the streets that they would be happy for council tax to be increased if it means protecting care services with older and vulnerable people  
(Merton CIL member)

Merton Council is conducting what has been called a consultation on 'Council Tax and Council Spending'. We have already expressed our concerns about this process, and about the rival consultation promoted by the Leader of the Council, on several occasions<sup>27</sup>.

One of our concerns is that the official consultation risks encouraging people to opt for a Council Tax freeze because of the way in which information is presented; specifically that disabled people are invisible within it, and there is no clear information given on what ASC is for or why it is important - contrary to what was promised by the Leader.<sup>28</sup> The information that is available, is misleading and confusing.

Spontaneous reactions to the consultation from our members included people asking why they were being compared to rubbish collection, why the precept was even part of the consultation, why it wasn't properly explained. Some members refused to complete the form at all because they felt it was misleading or "morally vague"

(Merton CIL Members Group November 2016)

I don't understand the difference between the options [1.99%, 2%, 3.99%] (Merton CIL member)

<sup>27</sup> To the Leader, the Cabinet Member for ASC, and Director of Social Care and Housing; at the Health and Social Care Forum and Scrutiny; on our website <http://www.mertoncil.org.uk/news/news-2016/council-tax-consultation-row-u/>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.mertoncil.org.uk/news/news-2016/concerns-about-council-tax-con/>

I don't like this consultation. It makes me feel uncomfortable. I'm tired of seeing disabled people take the brunt of the cuts (Merton CIL member)

Quite apart from any moral argument and a breach of commitments made by the Council to have a fair debate, the appearance of a rival consultation<sup>29</sup> has additionally created significant confusion around the consultation process and the decision-making process. It is presented in such a way that a reasonable person would believe that this is a Merton Council publication, and therefore, official Merton Council view, and they are likely to believe that this is in fact the official consultation.

Despite being reassured<sup>30</sup> that the rival consultation responses won't be counted by the Council, we are very concerned that the distribution of this rival consultation has both undermined the official consultation, and created doubt around the findings of the official consultation; it may reduce responses overall, and residents may be influenced to respond asking for a freeze because they have been told that is what the Leader/Council wants. Certainly it appears that the outcome is pre-determined to not raise Council Tax given that the letter signed by the Leader refers is "strongly-minded not to increase your council tax"<sup>31</sup> and the official consultation says "we have frozen council tax since 2010 and promise to do so until March 2019".<sup>32</sup> It is extremely difficult to see the value of engaging in such a flawed process.

We hear the Leader saying he wants to keep promises but what's one more broken promise if it means protecting people? (Merton CIL member)

At Merton CIL we have been particularly concerned by the way in which the Council focuses very narrowly on budgets, as opposed to looking at the impact of spending and budget cuts. As we have repeatedly pointed

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.mertoncil.org.uk/assets/documents/councillors-rival-survey>

<sup>30</sup> Email from LBM CEO Ged Curran 27/10/2016

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.mertoncil.org.uk/assets/documents/councillors-rival-survey>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.mertoncil.org.uk/assets/documents/review-of-council-tax-consulta>

out, pound for pound, a cut in support for disabled people has a far greater impact on people's lives, compared to a cut in street sweeping, for example. In fact, the way in which the Council's official consultation asks the public to rank services, as if rubbish collection was equivalent to supporting independence for disabled and older people, is deeply disturbing.

They are comparing disabled people's lives to bin collection. I can't tell you how that makes me feel (Merton CIL member)

Furthermore, the overt focus on cost perpetuates the very negative rhetoric that disabled people are costly; it puts a value equation on our lives which then feeds into discussions of worth. Very quickly this becomes a discourse around scrounging and cheating, and inflames hate crime, which has been seen in national level debates.

Given the inclusion of the precept in the consultation, in essence, this is a process which asks residents to decide whether or not disabled people should be supported to live independent lives. We cannot imagine any other context where it would be deemed acceptable to hand such power to one group over another, and we don't find it acceptable here.

The Council is asking my neighbours to decide whether or not I should live independently and with dignity. They don't have that right! (Merton CIL member)

There are numerous examples of disabled people being invisible within this consultation process and there are strong indications that this is not merely an accidental omission, but rather an active decision on the part of Merton Council. Libraries, parks, leisure centres, waste collections, children and older people are all featured. Given that the precept in particular primarily concerns support for disabled people and older people, why no images of disabled people? Disabled people are only mentioned in the survey itself, and then only in the rankings.

The rival consultation goes further, listing the council's statutory duties, but not mentioning disabled people. It even highlights the fact that the average person is over £1,000 less well off due to austerity, but failing to mention that a disabled social care user is actually over £6,000 less well off. Why are disabled people being erased from the debate in this way?

## Conclusions and recommended actions

Merton CIL has been putting significant effort into working together with Merton Council for a number of years and creating an environment where disabled people are able to speak up and be heard.

The instances where disabled people's voices have been pushed aside by Merton this year alone, culminating in this divisive consultation process, take us further apart and makes it increasingly difficult for us to represent the views of our members and service users. This year's consultation has been a retrograde step in terms of engagement compared to last year. This year we had a reasonable expectation that cuts to services would be consulted on with local disabled people, and yet have been told that the Council has taken legal advice and decided not to.

At Merton CIL we have begun to ask ourselves, at what point does poor service and lack of engagement become discrimination against disabled people?

The level of cuts to services, the breaches of the Care Act and failure to understand the wellbeing principle, breaches of people's rights by Merton, some of which are described above, are not inevitable. While we acknowledge the cuts imposed by Central Government, Merton has always had a choice about how it distributes the money it has. Merton has a choice about how it raises income too.

Taking all of the above on board, looking ahead to 2017/18 our recommendations are to:

- Improve scrutiny processes by ensuring the full scale of cuts to services is available to debate
- Improve consultation processes



- Implement the 2% precept
- Remove the £2 million cut from ASC for 2017/18
- Ringfence the Former ILF Recipient Grant for former ILF recipients, in line with previous council policy
- As requested by the Leader,<sup>33</sup> identify “pots” of funding which could be used to support ASC; for example the £2 million expected savings from the move to Wheelie Bins across the borough
- Look to best practice from other Councils who have made different choices, such as cancelling homecare charging and setting up a local disabled people’s commission<sup>34</sup>, or having strength-based conversations with people, rather than the deficit model<sup>35</sup>
- Write-off the £7 million overspend (cover from reserves of £101million<sup>36</sup>) in order to bring in some stability to ASC and enable planning from a realistic starting point
- Take responsibility for ensuring that independence and dignity is a “doorstep issue” in Merton

## Abbreviations

ASC	Adult Social Care
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CQC	Care Quality Commission
CIL	Centre for Independent Living
ILF	Independent Living Fund
GLA	Greater London Authority
LBM	London Borough of Merton
MTFS	Medium Term Financial Strategy
PA	Personal Assistant

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.mertoncil.org.uk/assets/documents/call-in-letter>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.lbhf.gov.uk/articles/news/2016/08/hf-council-launch-disabled-people-s-commission>

<sup>35</sup> <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/communities-and-local-government-committee/social-care/oral/42401.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> [http://www.merton.gov.uk/appendix\\_1\\_-\\_summary\\_accounts.pdf](http://www.merton.gov.uk/appendix_1_-_summary_accounts.pdf)



This is the response of the Merton Liberal Democrats to Merton Council's "Have your say on council tax and council spending".

Our views are as follows:

- A. We feel this consultation is poorly drafted, and we cannot be sure that the results will be representative (and therefore conclusive). The difficulties with the consultation are multitude – lack of information, unclear questions, lack of detail on weighting or demographic monitoring to ensure a representative response. [In an open letter](#) to Merton's leader and Chief Executive, Cllr Mary-Jane Jeanes highlighted a number of these issues and asked for specific assurances, but has so far not received a reply. Furthermore, it's clear that this consultation is merely to paper [over disagreements in the local Labour party](#). **As such, we have concerns about the results of this consultation being used to direct administration policy and the claims that will be made about the consultation.**
- B. *In response to Question 1:* our local address is FREEPOST RRZS-UZCX-BAGL, 35 Linkway, London, SW20 9AT.
- C. *In response to Question 2:* that we feel the failure to use the adult social care precept in the current financial year, when it wouldn't have cost residents a penny, was a failure to meet the administration's stated priority to "Maintain services – within limits – to the vulnerable and elderly" and has made it more difficult to do that in future years. We wonder what they consider "All the rest should be open for discussion" actually means in the context of such wide and vague priorities?
- D. *In response to Question 3:* Merton Liberal Democrats believe that radical thinking is needed about how we fund local services sustainably in the current environment – specifically adult care services and protecting vulnerable children. **This should be the administration's priority.** There is little-to-no evidence this is happening at the moment. Asking people which of 0%, 2% or 3.99% they prefer each year, for the next two years, isn't really the right question. Merton's administration is literally ticking boxes (or indeed, asking the public to do so). Merton Liberal Democrats have previously raised ideas like a "wellbeing innovation fund" – to try to test and develop new services that would increase wellbeing and resilience. We have also called for "budget open days" to increase public knowledge about, and engagement in, setting the budget.
- E. *In response to Question 4:* we believe that the administration should fully protect services that give people the opportunity to live their lives to their full potential. The three options we would tick from the list are:
  - Care services for older or disabled people including homecare and residential care
  - Protecting vulnerable children and young people including support for children with disabilities
  - Activities for young people
- F. *In response to Question 5:* How are we protecting these services at the moment? How would Merton "protect them least of all"? It actually looks like we're being asked which services should have less money spent on them than currently? If so, we need to know how much they've already been cut and what the impact would be of cutting them further, to make a decision.
- G. *In response to Question 6:* Merton Liberal Democrats would encourage work towards real participatory democracy on budgets, both to increase understanding of the decisions needed and their impacts, but also to increase democratic control and the possibility of innovation by getting more people involved.
- H. *In response to Question 7:* we reject the idea that we can answer this question as part of a box ticking exercise to cover the cracks in Labour's local leadership. The public deserve better than that, and some real political leadership and bravery. We believe that the adult

social care precept should have been levied in 2016/17 (when it wouldn't have resulted in residents paying more council tax); and that Merton Council should definitely levy it in 2017/18 to at least restore the council tax base to where it should have been this year. Probably it should be used in 2018/19 too, but it's a poorly worded question that expects us to tick one of four options to cover 2 years' worth of decisions.

- I. *In response to Question 8:* See our comments in paras A, D above. Further to the ideas outlined in these paragraphs, Merton Liberal Democrats feel that as part of the consultation, the administration should be working in partnership with the local NHS and should have an understanding of the impact of social care investment on NHS services i.e. if we don't spend additional money on social care services will it have an even bigger impact on the NHS? Could additional investment free up some NHS services and prevent 'bed blocking' etc? So far the consultation completely sidesteps any links between social care and healthcare more broadly.

Ged Curran  
Chief Executive  
London Borough of Merton

**By Email**

3 November 2016

Dear Ged,

**RE St Helier**

I was very disappointed to read the letter and questionnaire sent out to residents in St Helier ward that appeared to be signed off by the leader of the council. The opinion of our governing body is that the letter is misleading and fails to inform residents of all the key issues involved in the decision on whether to increase council tax and/or levy the social care precept.

The attached questionnaire seems to be a parallel survey to the official consultation survey and is so leading as to be meaningless if the intention is genuinely to engage with an informed population on this critical issue. Without some prior knowledge of the underlying issues, it would be very hard to imagine anyone responding to this questionnaire in any way other than to support the leader's recommendation to not increase council tax.

In our meetings when we discussed the consultation we had been led to believe that there would be an open and honest attempt to determine the views of the population on whether to raise the social care precept. This is only possible if the people of Merton are fairly presented with the facts and their views are tested with a well-designed and impartial survey. The letter sent out to St Helier residents obviously falls far short of what we had been led to expect.

Please could you explain how the council is going to deal with responses to the parallel questionnaire that was sent out to St Helier residents. We are firmly of the belief that these cannot be given the same weight as either responses to the official consultation

survey or considered written responses to the consultation. Please do treat this letter from me as an additional part of Merton CCG's response to the consultation (further to the letter that I previously sent setting out our organisation's position).

With best wishes,



**Dr Andrew Murray**  
**Clinical Chair**  
**Merton CCG**



**Merton**  
**Clinical Commissioning Group**

c/o 120 The Broadway  
5<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Wimbledon  
SW19 1RH  
Tel: 020 8668 8165

Councillor Stephen Alambritis, Leader of the Council  
Ged Curran, Chief Executive  
London Borough of Merton

BY EMAIL

11 October 2016

Dear Stephen and Ged

**Re: Better Care Fund and mandatory contribution towards social care funding**

Following our meeting on 21st September we agreed that I would write formally to you to be clear regarding Merton CCG's position related to the Better Care Fund (BCF) investment into 2017/18 and the interrelationship with the adult social care precept. This has been discussed with our Governing Body in detail and I have their full support in this approach.

A total of 144 out of 152 London boroughs, counties, metropolitan districts and unitaries in England will have deployed the adult social care precept over 2016-17, raising £382m. Government figures show average council tax will have climbed 3.1% on last year. The figure would have risen just 1.6% without the adult social care precept, which added 1.5% towards the rise. The Local Government Association has consistently warned the precept will fail to raise sufficient funding to cover social care costs.

The decision made by the London Borough Merton to freeze 2016/17 council tax, and not add on the Adult Social Care precept of 2%, has in our opinion, driven a significant variance to the financial position of adult social care. This has resulted in a challenging environment in which health and care commissioners are operating. We are supportive of the current consultation that is being undertaken by the London Borough of Merton and hope that following this consultation the council will take the positive decision to increase the amount of money it has available to spend on adult social care services.

Our position is therefore as follows:

- At our meeting we confirmed that Merton Clinical Commissioning Group (MCCG) is in a financially challenged position and has agreed a deficit plan with our regulator, NHS England (NHSE). We have produced a Financial Recovery Plan (FRP) to demonstrate a return to financial balance in 2017-18, which incorporates a complete review of all expenditure.
- During 2016/17 we invested £2m above the mandated amount into the BCF. As part of our financial turnaround plan we had considered not proceeding with this additional investment for 2016/17. However, owing to the late notice, our desire to build a constructive working partnership with Merton Council and following agreement on key deliverables for the extra investment, we did invest the extra £2m.
- As a result of this Merton CCG's actions were subject to considerable scrutiny by NHSE and it has been made clear that any investment made into the BCF for 2017/18 by Merton CCG will be subject to further intense scrutiny in the context of Merton Council's reduced funding of Adult Social Care.
- We noted that in 2016/17 the cost of delivering social care coupled with the increased demand for social care has, along with healthcare, risen nationally. For this reason the vast majority of local authorities raised their council tax, including the addition of the precept, to assist in covering these increases. We are disappointed that Merton Council did not do this opting instead to freeze council tax and reduce investment in social care. This was done at a time that Merton CCG invested £2m above the mandated amount. Despite our investment, during our meeting you described the negative impact you are experiencing. This is greatly troubling and I cannot see how this position is tenable.
- For 2017/18 we will not be in a position to provide any extra investment above the mandatory contribution towards social care funding.
- For 2017/18 we will also need to consider whether we can even invest the full mandated amount, especially in light of Richmond CCG's decision to reduce their investment below the mandated amount as part of their financial turnaround.
- Our view is that Merton Council should as a minimum deploy the Adult Social Care precept in 17/18.
- We would also encourage Merton Council to provide additional investment in Adult Social Care and note that raising council tax would facilitate this.
- We would consider extra joint investment into BCF projects with the Council only if we were satisfied that the Council was providing adequate funding for social care (including use of the precept for this purpose) and were confident that we could demonstrate savings for the wider health and social care system as a result of any investment.
- Merton CCG will respond to Merton Council's consultation on council tax.

Due to the timing of the consultation, we feel that Merton Council should plan on the basis of a maximum CCG transfer of the mandatory contribution towards social care funding into the BCF, which is currently £3,428K in 2017/18. This will be subject to review and may be increased (as stated above) if the Council takes the appropriate steps to raise council tax and the precept.

I would ask you, on behalf of Merton Council, to consider the concerns the CCG has raised and to respond in a constructive manner to enable us to continue to work together collaboratively.

With best wishes,



Dr Andrew Murray  
Clinical Chair  
Merton CCG

c.c. Karen Parsons - Chief Officer (Designate) and Director of Commissioning Operations, Merton CCG  
Andrew Hyslop – Chief Finance Officer, Merton CCG  
Simon Williams – Director of Communities and Housing, London Borough of Merton

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Ged Curran  
Chief Executive  
London Borough of Merton

**By e-mail**

**25 November 2016**

## **RE: Labour Party Council Tax Survey Results**

Dear Ged,

I am writing to advise you of the results of the consultation on Council Tax levels undertaken by myself and the Mitcham & Morden Labour Party.

Our consultation with residents was undertaken to complement the Council's own consultation, and to ensure that the voice of residents in the less affluent east of the borough was heard. Unfortunately, historically, consultations conducted by the Council do not have a very high response rate in this part of the borough, and more often than not the responses that are received come from residents and organisations based in the more affluent, western side of the borough.

This remained the case with regards to the Council's consultation on Council Tax, which saw most responses returned from postcodes primarily based in the Wimbledon constituency. Indeed, the top three postcodes in terms of responses received by the Council are all from Wimbledon, and are all over-represented in terms of the proportion of borough residents they represent. On the other hand, Mitcham – represented by the CR4 postcode – and statistically the less well-off part of our borough, was significantly under-represented in terms of responses received.

On an issue such as Council Tax – a regressive form of taxation that impacts more heavily on the less well-off – I felt that it was important that the voices of all residents were heard. I believe that the results of the Labour Party consultation will be helpful as we seek to represent all the residents of the borough, and will go some way towards balancing the Council's consultation.

You can find the detailed results of our consultation below, as at 24 November. Cabinet will need to take these in to account when making their decision, and they should be included in the report on the consultation.

### **Constituency Response Totals:**

Surveys distributed – c35,000

Total Responses - **2,670**

Response rate – 7.5%

- No increase in Council Tax (continue freeze) – **1,943 (73%)**
- In favour of Council Tax increase – **645 (24%)**
- Spoiled Ballots – **83 (3%)**

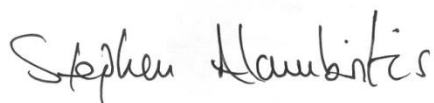
Of the 24% in favour of a Council Tax rise the breakdown was as follows:

- o In favour of Council Tax rise by 1.99% - **185 (7%)**
- o In favour of Council Tax rise by 2.00% for adult social care – **268 (10%)**
- o In favour of Council Tax rise by 3.99% – **192 (8%)**

### **Spoiled Ballots**

- No Address/Postcode Provided – **51**
- More than one option voted for – **18**
- No option voted for – **13**
- Return Form Shredded/Unreadable – **1**

Warm regards,



**Cllr Stephen Alambritis**  
**Leader of Merton Council**