

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.