

Cllr Anthony Fairclough, Liberal Democrat group leader, budget speech 6 Mar 2019

Madame Mayor, we were told that austerity was over.

But on all sides of the chamber, we must realise that's not true.

The current and future cuts that Merton needs to make go way beyond what can be delivered through efficiency savings.

So we on the Liberal Democrat benches join others in calling on the Government to reverse its continued underfunding of local government.

And whilst we do not agree with a significant number of the planned cuts in this budget, the constraints of the budget don't offer much in the way of opportunities.

Nonetheless, Madame Mayor, while difficult choices need to be made, the administration can set its priorities within that framework

And so we will propose amendments that reflect clear priorities.

But first I want to turn to the plans of the administration and of the opposition, as Councillor McLean has just so eloquently outlined.

It is regrettable, we think, that some of the situation we find ourselves in has been exacerbated by the administration, sometimes with 'short term fixes'.

The Conservative majority Government didn't continue Coalition policy of giving Merton extra cash to "freeze" the Council Tax, so there are now bigger and faster jumps in Council Tax rises to make up that gap and worse cuts to services.

A lesson for us all there.

There is quite a lot of vagueness in the savings pack. Many of the longer-term savings are "reviews" – meaning future cuts to services that we are being asked take it on trust that the detail can be sorted out later.

Madame Mayor, I think we should ask ourselves whether that's good enough, for us and for our constituents. And then whether there might be a better way?

Looking now to the opposition benches, I have sometimes wondered whether the Conservative group wants its plans implemented.

Their 2018 manifesto would have cost local taxpayers millions extra: often expecting residents to pick up the tab where the Conservative Government rolled back the state.

For example, whatever the Opposition's position on the waste contract and weekly bin collections, breaking the Veolia contract – whether now or in six years – will cost residents dearly.

But they have been really clear about one thing – continuously trying to push cuts onto the most financially vulnerable in the borough, most recently last November in the debate on the Council Tax support scheme when they tried to take away essential Council tax benefits for those on the lowest incomes.

With respect, we demand more and better from the official opposition.

Although we are pleased to see several of our campaign themes reflected in the Conservative budget amendment, looking at the detail they're just kicking the can down the road until next year by draining the reserves. It's quite ironic to hear that our amendment didn't make a business case, when your entire business case is draining down the reserves. As we've already heard, the *Balancing the Budget reserve* will be fully utilised already by 2021, and your plans simply drain that more quickly.

This is not the budget amendment of a Conservative group looking to become the administration.

As we favour open debate, last night I sent all the Group leaders copies of the Liberal Democrat amendments, so hopefully all have had a chance to think about our proposals.

And I welcome that the Conservative group, also shared the text of their proposals this morning.

Cllrs Quilliam, Bokhari and Kohler will talk to our amendments in more detail, but I will outline them briefly here.

Amendments 1 and 2 seek to mitigate some of the worst aspects of cuts to social care.

We would keep two vital support workers for children and their families at the Bond Road Centre.

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

Our new Wellbeing Innovation Fund will help establish new ways to continue vital services and promote independence.

Amendment 3 looks at developing some new and interesting ideas around revenue growth, and pushing the Council to rethink previous short-term decisions.

We can learn from other Councils.

Like Stockport, we could create a Strategic Roads Fund to invest in improving our roads now, to save in the long run.

It might not come as any surprise that a Lib Dems group is proposing fixing potholes!

We could look to Westminster or Kensington & Chelsea to set up a voluntary Council Tax donation scheme. Here in Merton we want an Education Innovation Fund from that.

Continuing to let Merton's Little League football charities use local parks for free maintains the fantastic work open to all.

Amendment four is about stepping in to protect community policing. And despite what a former Merton councillor – currently, I think, the Prime Minister, may say about there being no link between police cuts and knife crime, we prefer to stick with evidence.

Together, our four amendments help residents during uncertain times, whilst recognising the difficult financial environment for the Council.

Surely by working together across the chamber, things can only get better ...

Thank you, Madame Mayor

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