

Speech by Cllr Stephen Alambritis the Leader of Merton to the Council Budget Meeting on Wednesday 04 March 2020 at 7:15pm and in the Council Chamber at the London Borough of Merton being situate at the Civic Centre on the London Road in Morden Surrey SM4 5DX

Madam Mayor,

Tonight, I report on our sound financial management during a period of continued government austerity

Tonight, I present a budget that means money will be made available to invest in services for Merton's Families

Tonight, I confirm Labour in Merton is avoiding damaging cuts and able to spend more on priority services

Tonight, I want to say a big thank to our staff

Madam Mayor,

Labour Merton is stronger because we do not seek short term fixes but pursue a medium term financial strategy

This budget also illustrates that however strong the austerity pressures, we have held to our **July Principles** set out in our 2010 administration

Madam Mayor,

You may have noticed that I have just gone back a decade

And that reminds me of our late dear colleague, Cllr Danny Connellan

Danny had this ability to provide history lessons to the chagrine of the opposition benches during budget meetings

So here goes, a history lesson from me

In 2010 we started our term of office with a £70m budget gap
Since then we have faced further government cuts every year
But we have consistently maintained our top objectives since 2010 namely:

Making Merton a great place for families and bridging the gap between the East and the West of the borough

So, to the History Exam Question: Describe the achievements of the London Borough of Merton since 2010

The model answer would include the following:

Since 2010 Merton council has:

Maintained council tax rebates for low income households

Opened a new library in Colliers Wood

Opened a new leisure centre in Morden

Exempted care leavers from paying council tax

Provided an extra 4,500 school places

Achieved record school results

Has lowest number of households in temporary accommodation in London

Frozen the council tax for 6 consecutive years

There endeth the history lesson

Madam Mayor,

In addition to speaking about the past one must needs talk about the present

And the Budget presented before us today will mean:

Nearly £4m a year extra for Children's services

Almost £1m extra a year for the borough's refuse service

More money to tackle the national and growing scourge of fly-tipping

Around £150K a year for emergency planning, ahead of Grenfell

A saving of £2.4m on the cost of council pensions

Madam Mayor,

The budget before us tonight must be balanced

However, the effect of the Tory Government's austerity and funding cuts, aided and abetted by their one time Liberal friends

Means, that we need:

An increase of 1.99% on the council tax

Plus 2% for the Adult Social Care precept

We also need to find £16m a year in savings by 2023

With a further gap of £9m a year after that

It does not end there Madam Mayor

I have to report to this meeting tonight

A shortfall in government funding for the most deserving in our community

Our children with special needs look to us for support

We have set aside a further £37m for them but the cost could rise to £65m

Madam Mayor,

I can assure you that we will, despite all the difficulties imposed on us, continue to look to the future for our residents

For our EU residents seeking settled status

For our Windrush residents seeking justice from a dysfunctional Home Office

For our residents wanting the council to support St Helier Hospital with now 95% of residents on side with our position

For our residents wanting us to enforce against fly tippers, bad landlords, rogue traders and those engaged in anti-social behaviour

For our residents looking forward to a new town centre in Morden, a new masterplan in Wimbledon and investment in Colliers Wood and in Mitcham

For our residents needing their small corner shop that is helped by Merton Council with automatic rate relief

For our residents and all AFC Wimbledon fans looking forward to football at Plough Lane this coming August

For our residents in the voluntary sector where funding has increased for the second year in a row – now over £10 million

For our residents seeking action from us on climate change following our Climate Emergency Motion passed unanimously

Friends of the Earth say we are joint second in London for being Climate Friendly

Residents also want action to tackle air pollution and to improve air quality

On that score Madam Mayor,

I am pleased to report that:

The Local Government Chronicle, has shortlisted Merton for our ground breaking work on construction site pollution

And we have been approached by the MET office to work with them to develop new approaches to modelling and forecasting air pollution

We are also tackling air pollution around schools with our anti-idling campaign

Madam Mayor,

We must also look to the future that lies with Merton's children

And for them,

Our School Improvement Team continues to work miracles

We have good and outstanding Schools

We have the opening of a brand new building for our new secondary school in South Wimbledon this September

We have record numbers of parents getting their first preference in their choice of school

And we are 3rd in the country for the progress our school children make...not 3rd in London or the South of England but I repeat...3rd in the country!!

But there also needs to be a future for all in education

Therefore we do not forget the good marks we have got for adult education from Ofsted

As we provide opportunities for everyone to experience the joy of life-long learning

Let us not forget Merton's Children Services as it continues to look after some of our most vulnerable in our society

And we have Kept all children's centres open

Madam Mayor

I now move to formally present Labour's 10th budget in a row

I therefore move the business plan and the budget proposals as set out in Recommendation 1 with particular reference to the formal Resolutions as set out in Appendix 1 to the Report before us tonight

In doing so I want to single out a few people for special thanks

Cllr Mark Allison my deputy leader

All councillors who chair and who sit on our scrutiny panels

Thanks also go to **Cllr Peter Southgate** the chair of scrutiny

To all my cabinet members and to all my councillors

To the leader of the Opposition, **Cllr Nick McLean** and to all his councillors

And can I also thank **Cllr Anthony Fairclough** and his Liberal colleagues

Finally a really big thank you to our Director of Corporate Services **Caroline Holland**

Madam Mayor,

We always take action for those residents facing difficult times in every budget we have given

But action for our residents will not happen without our excellent hard working staff and it is to them that I turn

I want to thank staff in our Libraries for their work in installing seven stunning sensory places for children

We need to thank staff in our Elections Department for carrying out three unscheduled elections

We need to thank staff for Car Free Day, for the Rainbow Crossing, for Film Merton and for the record recycling rates we are achieving

We need to thank Dr Dagmar Zeuner, our Director of Public Health, for her guidance on the Coronavirus outbreak

Guidance has gone to us, to local MPs, to residents, to businesses and to council staff

Our staff, led by our Chief Executive Ged Curran and his Directors, are showing great resilience in very challenging times with increasing demand for our services

And they are still producing great results and providing a great service to residents and this is reflected in our independent resident surveys

But let me share with you some individual cases and the thoughts from residents themselves about our staff

From Adult Social Care: **“The Occupational Therapy department at Merton have never failed to give exceptional support. The service to date has enabled me to care for my mother in law in her own home.”**

From Libraries: **“My son loves the new circus-themed West Barnes Library, he asks to visit every day after school. We are planning on doing a tour of all the Merton libraries to see the different themes, equipment and books they all have.”**

From Children, Schools and Families: **“I am writing to say a big thank you to you as a social worker who has really helped so much in our journey raising our son who is very very special. You are always there when we need support...instead of judging me you have put many things in place to help me through this very difficult time”.**

I want to express my pride in the entire workforce for the work they do for our residents and for our community

In conclusion Madam Mayor,

A rare first edition copy of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone was found by an 11-year-old reader in Wimbledon Library during this financial year

The book is of high value and is being safely kept somewhere in this building

I have however Madam Mayor,

Been making inquiries as to the books actual worth but sadly the value of the book is not so high as to wipe out the cuts we are facing from the Government

Perhaps Harry Potters Magic Wand may come in useful but as we know such magic, including Magic Money Trees, are the preserve of Tory Prime Ministers

And so to reality and to the real world, Madam Mayor

Our Budget this year is:

A Budget for families

A business-like Budget

A budget that bridges the gap

A budget for Safety

And a budget for Equalities

I commend to this Budget from London's Best Council

ENDS

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