

Thank you, Madame Mayor

And I'd also like to thank officers for their work on the budget.

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

So far it has failed to do anything like reverse the spending cuts of the last decade.

Despite talking of vision, courage and energy – and not really displaying any – there's not really any mention of that, Madame Mayor, from the Conservative group.

Their amendment at least aims to reflect some priorities, albeit not ones often associated with our Conservative colleagues.

But it just simply drains down the reserves – what about the longer-term?

It's funny that he should speak about 'lack of integrity' and 'virtue signalling' – because that's what their amendment displays. No thought has been given to how these priorities could really be sustained by the administration over time.

In 2018, the Conservative group ran on a manifesto to “make things a little bit better”. And their amendment fails to meet even this limited threshold.

But this is a politician's amendment: written to look good on a leaflet written to be voted down.

Like I said last year, we demand more and better from the official opposition.

Nonetheless, the administration still bears responsibility for the choices it makes in this budget.

We know that Merton's weakness is: lack of follow-through – taking measured risks, setting targets measuring performance, and telling a story about the Council and what it is trying to achieve.

During last year's LGA peer review, councillors and officers from other authorities highlighted to these gaps.

It echoes that this administration didn't put forward a manifesto at the last local elections.

It's about political leadership.

Merton needs to listen, be bold, creative, take responsibility for its actions.

Instead we get the scrutiny process, hundreds of pages to wade through to understand what's being done.

But this gives us no sense of what the point of the administration is and what they stand for,

And we get told from both the administration and the opposition is that Merton should be "business-like".

Madame Mayor – whether we believe it's true or not, does that inspire anyone?

Is it what we came into politics for?

Does "business-like" explain what you're trying to do, which services you want to protect, and what you want to transform?

Many of the challenges we face – the climate emergency, the funding crisis, racism and intolerance in our communities – need people to come together to take action.

And as a Council we must do what we can to create the best environment to help our communities come together.

But if you're not paid enough, or don't get enough hours;

If your housing is insecure, or badly maintained;

If you don't get the support you need as a carer or parent,

Then some days, things just take way too much energy.

You have fewer choices. No peace. You are not free to live how you choose.

So we're challenging the administration to look at ways to help give people more support; give them more room to breathe.

More control in their lives,

And more opportunities to increase and develop their stake in the area,

Madame Mayor, tonight we're bringing forward 3 amendments that we think would help bring a fresh start.

We're not going to fall into the same trap as the Conservatives, we recognise the need for evidence before big changes can be made, but we also know that change needs to be sustainable.

On our amendment 1 – which Cllr McLean spent so much time talking about – primary school breakfast clubs bring many advantages. The evidence shows extra opportunities for socialising, varied food, less hunger and so better concentration, plus some safe and reliable childcare for working parents.

So this amendment establishes a limited pilot scheme to properly understand how we might develop a sustainable scheme for the children from the lowest income families.

We know that the overall financial position doesn't offer much room for unpicking the cuts.

But with our amendment 2, we're hoping the administration will think again about some of the cuts proposed.

Charging applicants for blue badges, not replacing youth worker vacancies and cutting safeguarding training. Expecting the procurement team to negotiate contracts better to make millions of savings, at the same time as cutting staff. These are not things we should be quick to do.

And yes to help pay for this we've had to make some difficult choices – cutting *My Merton* and reducing the number of full time trade union staff, and using available reserves to help balance the budget until the position becomes clearer. As a former trade union rep in the private sector I completely understand the positive role of a trade union, but as the number of Merton's staff has fallen in the last five years, reducing paid for facilities time is not unreasonable.

Lastly, amendment 3 is about setting a new course for the Council. Giving people that peace and space to feel more involved in their community.

But we recognise that change doesn't come quickly or easily, so this amendment presents series of actions that help to build the evidence base for change. To help us understand how best to do it.

That's about looking at: how paying the London Living Wage will impact contracts and workers, how to make things better for those on zero hours, and helping renters by applying for a full landlord licensing scheme.

And if we take climate change seriously, we need to identify money to help make the borough net carbon neutral.

Madame Mayor we urge colleagues to give these ideas a fair hearing – Merton's officers have worked with us to ensure they are financially and legally sound: don't hide behind partisanship.