

Thank you Madam Mayor.

This is my first budget speech as Leader of the Council and it comes at one of the most challenging times in the history of the borough.

This time last year we met in the council chamber to debate a budget that looked to the future.

It was the last time we were all together in the chamber.

Since then, everything that we were used to has changed. Over 120,000 people in the UK have died with Covid-19, including more than 400 people here in Merton.

There is no higher priority for me than keeping our residents safe.

And the challenges of Covid have come to the fore over the past month.

The government have informed us of two entirely separate cases where Merton residents had been tested a month before and found to have the South African variant.

Thankfully those involved are now okay, but in order to ensure that the variant had not spread, this council agreed with the government that we would test everyone in the neighbourhoods affected, Pollards Hill and Wimbledon Park.

Those cases were entirely unrelated, but they have tested this council's capacity and we have shown that we were ready.

Merton genuinely is a great place, and a great community, and because we have complied with the rules infection rates have fallen by more than three quarters.

And I want to use this opportunity in public, to say I have been really impressed by the way the council has led our efforts, mobilising a huge team of our own staff, community groups like Commonsides, and volunteers, to set up testing centres in both wards, with the help of the health service and local charities.

Because of our sensitivity and knowledge of the area, 10,000 people were offered tests in Pollards Hill, and we are on track to test 5,000 people in Wimbledon Park by the end of this week.

Our priority is to keep our residents safe.

We will do whatever it takes.

But I also have to say, the events of this year have thrown up wider issues that are at the heart of my administration's priorities.

It has become clear that the people most affected by Covid-19 are the poor, the disadvantaged, the vulnerable – including ethnic minorities.

And those communities feel let down.

If you are poor, or from an ethnic minority, you are more likely to have lost your job.

You are more likely to have lost income.

Your children are more likely to have fallen behind at school because you don't have a laptop or access to data, and to have lost free school meals when they were cut.

And of course you are more likely to get ill, or to suffer a bereavement.

And yes, we've done well here in Merton in getting vaccines to those in need, but across the country if you are poor or from an ethnic minority you are less likely to have been vaccinated.

So what we have learned this year is clear.

The gap is widening.

And if we do not act to help those who are disadvantaged, they will continue to suffer.

This health emergency has shown, we in the administration have concluded, that now is not the time to close our nearest accident and emergency.

Closing that service will only widen inequalities and I urge the government to reconsider its plans to downgrade St Helier and move services to a very affluent area in Belmont, Surrey.

But this health emergency has also shown the importance of properly funding local authorities if our communities are to recover from this pandemic.

Merton is a great place, a great community.

And thankfully, I have taken over a good council.

I pay tribute to Stephen Alambritis. Together we helped give Merton a real identity as businesslike, pragmatic, moderate, flexible.

The kind of council that will work in partnership with others, collaborate, share.

We've been transformed from a council where schools were failing, to one where every secondary school is good or outstanding.

And we're regularly in the top five in the country for the progress our children make.

We built a new library, a new leisure centre.

We found money to protect adult social care and children's services.

This year, when the government cut free school meals we ensured we funded food for local children.

And not those awful boxes of half a tomato and some slices of cheese that we saw on the news – real vouchers that will actually help families.

We delivered 10 balanced budgets, during the worst period of austerity this council has ever seen.

And not only did they have our values running through them,  
They've led to record satisfaction levels in resident surveys, year after year.  
Well ahead of the rest of the country.

And yes,  
while the government forced the rest of the country to end rebates on council tax for the low paid,

here in Merton we've kept low council tax for those on low pay.

And this budget continues in that tradition.

Because ultimately, while there is a lot we all want to do, three things are going to dominate the council's agenda for some time.

Covid, how we pay for it, and how we recover from it.

When the pandemic started the government said do "whatever it takes" and they would make sure we were funded.

Well, unfortunately, that hasn't materialised.

We did "whatever it takes", but they have not funded us for it.

So we are being forced to make further cuts tonight.

AND they have told us we can only have the spending power even they say we need if we raise council tax by another 5%.

These are the Government's covid cuts and the Government's covid tax rises.

But we are businesslike, and we need to get on with the business of running this council.

Yes, we have to deliver covid cuts and increase covid taxes, but we will use our values to do so in a fair way.

I'm grateful to our amazing staff and officers for helping put this budget together, led by Caroline Holland, an incredible Director who has kept the show on the road when other councils have struggled.

And I am grateful to have an outstanding cabinet, who have shown they can make difficult decisions and take a lead.

My Deputies, Ellie working to keep children safe and ensure they get a good education, and Owen ensuring we are in a position to rebuild once this is all over.

My cabinet member for finance, Tobin – I had ten budgets but his first has been ten times harder than any of mine.

Tonight is his night, and he has done a great job leading this budget through scrutiny.

Marsie ensuring we consider the equalities implications of the budget,  
Caroline protecting Culture, Leisure and Skills,  
Rebecca protecting social care,  
Martin looking after housing and regeneration and tackling the climate emergency,  
Agatha protecting public safety,  
and of course my two colleagues who have been safeguarding our environment and green spaces, Natasha and, during her maternity leave, Mike.

We have made a fantastic team, working together to protect our services at a difficult time.

And yes, that means we have to make these covid cuts and raise these covid taxes.

But I want to assure our residents that here in Merton we are already looking at recovery.

Everybody knows Merton is a great community and a great place for families.

The community has come together when we have needed it during the pandemic.

And now we want to take advantage of our great community to help us grow back again.

And there are so many good things going on in Merton.

Mutual Aid, the Dons Local Action Group, MVSC, all our fantastic charities.

Since becoming Leader I've seen so many examples of people coming together to help.

One of the first things I did as leader was launch Merton Together – a campaign with partners and charities to support our residents.

Merton is a great place for families, but it's at its greatest when it's Merton Together.

And if we are to come out the other side of this awful pandemic, it will be because we have done so together.

A strong council, with strong values. Helping those who need it.

Merton Together.

This is a good budget.

A fair budget.

I thank all councillors for their role in bringing it together, and I commend it to our residents.

Thank you.