

**Councillor Nick McLean
Leader of the Opposition
Budget Speech – 03 March 2021**

Thank you, Madam Mayor,

May I begin by thanking Director Holland and her team for their efforts in what has been a difficult and protracted budget process.

A pandemic that most people expected would last a few months – has now lasted 12.

And in those 12 months - sadly over 400 of our fellow residents have succumbed to this dreadful virus and I would like to extend our deepest condolences to those that have lost loved ones.

Our borough's resilience has been tested and the response has been filled with compassion, determination, and professionalism.

Compassion from residents in coming to the aid of the most vulnerable as they shielded.

A determination to ensure that no-one was forgotten.

And a professionalism from frontline workers as they continued with their duties in the most trying of circumstances.

We would like to make a special mention of thanks to the hard work of Merton Council staff during the pandemic, especially frontline staff working with the most vulnerable.

But we must also focus on the many Merton residents who will be facing an uncertain financial future.

and the local businesses that are struggling to survive and who will be so vital to our economic recovery.

And that is why it was so disappointing to see Labour members of the Commission vote against a Conservative reference to Cabinet for further support for local businesses to aid Merton's economic recovery.

An opportunity to show that we are all in this together – an opportunity to protect jobs.

Well tonight members have the chance to demonstrate they care about our the recovery of our high streets and the financial pressure Merton residents face.

Our amendment seeks to establish a £500,000 high street recovery and improvement fund and to remove the emission base parking charge.

A fund to seed our local economic-recovery and the removal on an ill-judged tax on motorist.

A parking charge policy that will fail in its stated primary objective of improving air quality.

A policy designed to make driving more expensive and that will hinder our recovery?

People drive because it is the only practical way of getting around for many as they go about their daily lives.

This policy is part of the anti-car agenda. Some like Labour do not try to hide it, others prefer to talk from both sides of the same mouth.

Madam Mayor - I suspect we will hear Labour Cllrs speak tonight and claim that the financial position of the Council is all the fault of the Government.

I accept that the DSG settlement needs to be addressed – but the Labour Administration cannot just run from its decisions.

They have been the Administration for 11 years and they made political decisions that have had a direct effect on the financial position of the Council.

Labour decisions taken at time of calm, which now means that our residents are facing a 4.99% increase in the council tax and adult care precept,

With a further 9.5% increase in the GLA precept from a Labour Mayor.

Labour decisions taken in previous years resulting in Labour tax rises at the very time when Merton residents can least afford them.

A misguided belief that Merton Labour's political priorities should simply be funded by central government.

Complaints at the Government that are just pure deflection – a ruse to hide the decisions that they have made over the last decade.

We will hear a playlist of their golden oldie excuses – austerity, Brexit, or mis-representing comments made at the start of the pandemic – comments relating to direct Covid costs only.

Comments made without knowledge of how long the crisis would last.

There will be no mention of the extra grants that have been promised and delivered since – in particular the 75% compensation of lost income.

Or that further grants are expected in the new financial year.

And lets welcome the Chancellors combination of business rate reductions, investment incentives and other measures, including the high street restart grant, that were announce today to help business and the economy rebound powerfully.

What we will hear will be puerile sound bites – and economic illiteracy.

We have a Leader of the Council who was Cabinet member for Finance for 10 years and at a recent OSC meeting did not even know the Council's financial position at the end of the last financial year!

This basic information that the Cabinet Member for Finance should know - definitely not very business like.

Tonight, with their 68 minutes of debate time, Labour will demonstrate that those who speak the most, often say the least.

Madam Mayor – we must now look to the future and the roadmap to recovery.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought sharply into focus how vital our homes, our neighbourhoods, and our local green spaces are to our physical and mental well-being.

We must encourage developers to not just build greener, more beautiful homes but also to create greener, more beautiful neighbourhoods.

And that is why the failure of the Merantun Development company is so depressing.

Here was an opportunity for this Labour administration to demonstrate that they can lead in the delivery of housing – and they failed.

They failed because.

- the administration took too long to obtain planning.
- the fees accumulated were too great – nearly 10% of the gross development value – against a commercial norm of 5% - a difference of £1m.

Three years, £2.1m of council taxpayer money and not a single house built.

Once again dither and delay has allowed this Labour Administration to be overtaken by events and at a cost to the Merton taxpayer.

How can residents have any confidence that this Labour-led Council can deliver a regenerated Morden?

Or a regenerated Mitcham, or a vastly improved Wimbledon Town Centre?

To deliver on the aspirations of Merton residents.

The answer is they cannot - how can they?

Madam Mayor it was also delay that was the Conservative Group's greatest concern for the future of St Helier Hospital.

As stated in our consultation submissions we preferred the site for the state-of-the-art acute emergency hospital to be at St Helier.

But the health professionals made a different choice – and we had always said that we would accept their decision.

Our overriding belief was that if the £500m investment did not progress this time – then events – just like with other regeneration projects in Merton – may overtake any possibility of the investment ever happening.

This issue has been ongoing for two decades and we acknowledge the intense emotion that it generates. But no more delay.

Now is the time to come together and acknowledge the massive benefits to clinical outcome that the £500m investment will bring to Merton's local healthcare provision.

State-of-the art care – the right care, in the right place, at the right time.

And Madam Mayor it is also our desire to ensure that the right care, is in the right place at the right time that we seek to defer the closures of the day care centres – we agree with the need for a review – but this must be undertaken without the threat of closure.

Madam Mayor – our focus must now be on the recovery and the strong leadership needed to deliver it.

Strong leadership and vision.

But instead, we have a Council Leader who barely has the support of half the Labour group.

And most damning of all a deeply divided Cabinet. Unable to deliver the reforms the borough needs.

This is not the leadership Merton residents deserve at this precarious time.

A Wizard of Oz leader – draw back the curtain and all you find is the MP for Mitcham & Morden - someone who is not even a member of this Council - weak leadership and no vision.

Merton needs a road map to recovery, instead this Labour Administration provides a roadmap to nowhere.