

Merton Liberal Democrat councillors
The local team you can trust to get things done

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Dear Ged/Stephen,

19 May 2020

We would like to place on record Merton Liberal Democrat Group's heartfelt thanks to all staff across the Council, partner agencies/outside organisations and volunteers who have worked tirelessly to help residents and businesses during this stressful and worrying time.

We particularly appreciate the Council's and voluntary groups' work to establish the COVID-19 Community Response Hub supporting residents, and to quickly distribute Government grants to local businesses.

The way that everyone has pulled together and worked above and beyond what could have been expected is incredible. Thank you.

We see our role as an opposition group to act as a critical friend to ensure that the administration's actions are tested from every angle in the support of Merton's residents and businesses, and therefore can be the best they can be. We feel this is important in both the immediate and the longer-term, to help improve the decisions taken and the services Merton runs or commissions.

Whilst recognising and certainly never forgetting the tragic losses endured across our communities, along with the financial distress suffered by many, we also acknowledge some of the positive things to have come out of this. We don't want to lose the spirit of this time and want to capture it in the way that influences how we all live our future lives. We're challenging the administration to look at ways to help give people more support; give them more room to breathe and more control in their lives. Ultimately, more opportunities to increase and develop their stake in the area.

And so, with the Prime Minister's announcement of a roadmap out of lockdown, we wanted to encourage the administration to set out a vision for a future Merton. Collectively, as a Council, we need to lead the development of that vision.

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In the annex to this letter we have listed a number of priorities and questions that we believe would be helpful for the administration to reflect on, and respond to, as we begin to move into “the new normal”. Some of this may seem obvious, or be what the administration believes it articulates, but it’s our joint experience as a council group.

In the interests of transparency and as this is our formal request to the administration, we are sending this as an open letter. We hope that it will be received in the constructive spirit in which it is intended – it is often said that relations between the political groups in Merton are ‘collegiate’, so we hope our suggestions can be considered and implemented as soon as possible. We would welcome the opportunity to expand on any of our suggestions and look forward to working with you and other colleagues.

We have also copied this letter to the borough’s MPs. Local government funding remains a key issue. Sadly, it is not entirely clear that the Government will reimburse Merton for all the costs of responding to the pandemic, much less lost income. We hope and ask that they will put pressure on the Government on this front.

With best wishes



Councillor Anthony Fairclough
On behalf of the Merton Liberal Democrat Council group

Cllr Anthony Fairclough (Leader), Cllr Eloise Bailey (Deputy Leader), Cllr Simon McGrath (Group Secretary & Whip), Cllr Hina Bokhari, Cllr Jenifer Gould, Cllr Paul Kohler, Cllr Carl Quilliam

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ANNEX

Recommendation 1: Overall approach

Merton needs to be bold, imaginative and not afraid to occasionally fall short of its ambitions – because to do so means to learn and then improve. We need to show courage and energy, and be willing to do things differently. We will need to learn by doing. We will need to encourage feedback, and review work without being afraid to say we didn't get it quite right. Our local communities need to be able to trust us to work out what needs to be done, but to be open about the challenges, and why things don't work sometimes.

Merton's LGA Peer Review identified an aversion to risks that could result in an approach that is too conservative. We must challenge that.

One thing that has been brought into stark relief is the way in which local communities and organisations work better when given the freedom to work together without over-prescription. Merton's Mutual Aid groups organised effectively to meet the needs of their local communities – neighbours helping neighbours. Merton Volunteer Service Council's COVID-19 Community Response Hub – itself a partnership – worked with those groups, the Council and the voluntary sector to ensure support for those with the most significant needs, enabling the Council to focus its resources on shielded individuals.

We recommend a new vision is developed by the Council: engaging residents, strengthening local decision-making, building resilience in our communities, rebuilding the local economy; and maximising safety in public spaces.

Recommendation 2: Strategic communication, driving engagement and participation

If the Council is going to act quickly in response to events, review and then adapt services, there must be clear channels for 'official' information. Capacity to share this information widely must be developed to help build consensus, and feedback loops used to review and monitor performance before adapting and improving services. Engagement will help build confidence in and buy-in for local decisions. *What plans does the administration have to develop and improve local engagement, taking advantage of people's focus on their local communities?*

Particularly, there seems to be little understanding of the potential support or value backbench councillors (of any group) could add for or to council services – or at least it is not clearly articulated. Currently 'all councillor' emails appear to be randomly sent (in that it's not clear which decisions or issues will attract them), and are usually 'after the event' following a particular decision. An example is the email on the closure of car parks in parks. It was not clear why the initial decision was publicised by email, but then the partial reversal of those decisions were not.

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Councillors are embedded in their communities and have access to local networks. We believe this is a currently under-utilised resource in three regards:

- A) Clear asks could be made of all councillors to share information about services. This could be done regularly by email and/or through group offices and then on an ad hoc basis for urgent information.
- B) The administration could make wider use of councillors from all groups as an informal sounding board for certain decisions. Again this could often be done quickly and easily by email, or through group offices, even if a decision is being considered under urgency procedures. It is not a weakness for the administration to reach out on difficult or controversial decisions. It would help build trust.
- C) Clear asks could be made of councillors with regards to engagement with key service issues. A really clear example is development of the new Transport Strategy. The plan refers to having made use of ideas contained in ad hoc comments and problems highlighted on social media. However, at no point during the weeks of development work were councillors asked their views nor to engage with residents on this. This seems a missed opportunity, especially as residents are now asked to submit their ideas for future phases.

Will the administration show leadership and help build trust in its decisions by using all councillors and their networks to share information and feed back on council services?

Recommendation 3: Strengthening local decision-making

The administration must accept that opposition councillors are not only motivated by political advantage. And opposition councillors should not just seek to caveat their proposals to make them impossible for the administration to back or deliver. We need to be better than this.

Equally, Merton should not be afraid of genuine differences of opinion. Recent events have brought this once again into focus. When it is necessary to act quickly on difficult issues, or where new risks are being considered, we need to examine decisions from all angles. Officers provide robust assessments of options, but in addition to that, opposition (indeed all backbench) councillors perform a vital function, which should be supported.

Part of this is about making better use of councillors' contacts and feedback, as described in Recommendation 2 above.

We are disappointed that Merton has moved relatively slowly to take advantage of the rules around virtual meetings, with most things remaining cancelled or slow to re-start. Equally, opportunities taken by other authorities to communicate directly with councillors and the public – eg through live briefings and Q&A with lead officers and lead councillors – haven't been taken up by Merton.

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In September full Council accepted a Liberal Democrat amendment requesting a review in to ways to make the role of councillor more accessible. We feel this review is an opportunity to make improvements. We shouldn't simply rush to return to the old way of doing things the moment all lockdown restrictions are removed. First, because that may not be for some time, and secondly because there are some positives and some good ideas. *Will the administration bring forward this review into accessibility, and as part of that will it examine how things like online participation can open up the role to more people?*

Scrutiny must be, and be seen to be, an independent process. We back the observations of the Centre for Public Scrutiny last year: "the administration needs to take steps to make clear its absolute commitment to scrutiny's independence, and to act on that commitment..." by "... open[ing] out leadership positions to a wider range of members, including newer councillors".

During a period of crisis, with numerous calls on the urgency procedures, the role of the Chair of Scrutiny is a critical one. It is simply not sustainable that the appointment of the chairs of Overview and Scrutiny Commission/the Scrutiny Panels is within the gift of the administration. There are a number of ways to resolve this issue. We don't automatically support the application of proportionality, rather we would prefer a genuine freedom for backbench councillors to make their own decisions, free of whip, ideally by secret ballot. *Will the administration commit to improving scrutiny in this way?*

Recommendation 4: Building resilience in our communities

Local government has delivered for the people during this crisis, and has been relied on to help people live their lives safely and healthily. Whilst the Council will have less available funding, now is our opportunity to do things differently and use the innovation and creativity found across the borough. Building resilience should be a real focus moving forward.

The financial impacts of COVID-19 will be felt by many residents for years to come. We welcome the support the Council has already made available for those in receipt of Council Tax Support, but believe further support may be required. *Particularly, what could the administration do to support housing association and private sector tenants who have financial problems?*

The Council should play a role in increasing people's financial security – especially for those in low-paid but often key roles. We recognise that the Council's financial position will be weakened by the crisis. *However, we are again asking the administration to work with existing contractors to get the data needed to understand the impact of requiring the London Living Wage for employees and improved rates for those on zero hours contracts, in its new procurement exercises.*

From Merton's work with the shielded groups and MVSC's co-ordinating activities, we now know, better than we ever did, those people within our communities who need support, Perhaps more importantly, we have an even better understanding of their needs. *How will the administration work to maintain and increase the help people need, sustaining the community and voluntary sector support that has grown up? And, in particular, what is the likely future for local foodbanks, which have seen exponential rises in their use?*

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The situation has taken a toll on people's mental health: from key workers on the front line, those suffering domestic abuse, to those who are self-isolating alone at home. And it will continue to do so. *How will the administration ensure residents' safety and increase provision of mental health support?*

Nationally, appreciation of the concept of wellbeing has grown – and our environment plays an integral part in this, particularly the importance of air quality and the climate emergency. *This must not be lost in the rush as lockdown eases – how will the administration work to protect our local environment, particularly the Council's commitments in these two areas?*

Further, we ask again that the administration keep under review the assumptions made on the estimates of parking revenue raised (ie that there will be a 20% reduction in the sale of residents permits), so that if, as we expect, there is less than a 20% reduction, this could be used to bring forward proposals to support the Council's work on the climate emergency and improving air quality, subject to the legal requirements of what the monies can be spent on.

Recommendation 5: Rebuilding the local economy

The effects of an economic recession – or worse a depression – poses many challenges to our residents. Merton needs to be alert to what it can do to support local businesses in showing, as far as possible, flexibility to enable them to survive this period.

We recognise Merton's success in distributing Government support for businesses, but note that many companies could not benefit owing to eligibility rules. This includes many independent retail and leisure businesses in properties with a rateable value above the threshold, English Language Schools, and dental and medical practices that have all had to close during the lockdown. *What can the administration do to support such businesses as they come out of lockdown?*

Increases in working from home, plus the appeal of delivery and collection services, will likely be with us for some time. *How can the administration support these changes?*

The recovery will be tackled by government activity at various levels - national, regional and local, *how does the administration envisage effective collaboration?*

Recommendation 6: Safety in public spaces

The management of public space is going to be key in terms of safety, and also in improving the local environment. This must be done strategically, not on an ad hoc basis.

As the lockdown eases and retail and leisure businesses begin to re-open, social distancing in town centres and shopping parades will become increasingly important. Businesses may need support to identify appropriate queuing areas, and pedestrians will need to be able to pass safely. *What plans and powers has the administration to support this process?*

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We are hearing that some schools are facing difficulties with the Government's requirements for a phased re-opening from 1 June. *What support is being given to schools? Is it likely that any Merton schools will refuse to open? Are there sufficient health and safety resources available for schools to access? What support is being given to early years providers? How will schools be supported in managing the effects on those vulnerable children who may have been missed during lockdown? What plans are there for ensuring enough support is available for any surge in referrals?*

The administration's Transport strategy is a good start, but there's a wealth of community feedback and expertise on ways to make walking and cycling easier – and residents are very keen to participate. *How will the administration react to feedback on their transport schemes, to build community support? How will appropriate funding be established?*

Like many outer London boroughs, Merton benefits from and is reliant on public transport. With the Government advising driving and the capacity of public transport massively reduced, *how will the administration work to reduce private car use, improve sustainable transport and in due course, rebuild confidence in public transport use?* Given transport investment has often been driven by TfL, *how does the administration envisage it will need to react to the reduction in funding available from that source?*

The latest versions of the Local Plan, the Wimbledon SPD and the regeneration of Morden Town Centre will need to be revised in the light of the crisis. Particularly as town centre office space needs to be re-considered now more people are working from home, and likely to do so for some time. We would like to see a greater emphasis on the environment and sustainable transport, community-led planning, and real action on affordable housing. We want to ensure our communities stay with us, and therefore need to make that an attractive choice, avoiding swathes of people choosing to move away. *What is the plan and timetable for the development of the Local Plan and other supplementary planning documents?*

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