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COUNCIL

2 MARCH 2022

(7.15 pm - 10.17 pm)

PRESENT (in the Chair), Councillor Michael Brunt, Councillor Edith Macauley, Councillor Agatha Mary Akyigyina, Councillor Stephen Alambritis, Councillor Mark Allison, Councillor Stan Anderson, Councillor Laxmi Attawar, Councillor Eloise Bailey, Councillor Thomas Barlow, Councillor Nigel Benbow, Councillor Hina Bokhari, Councillor Michael Brunt, Councillor Adam Bush, Councillor Omar Bush, Councillor Ben Butler, Councillor Billy Christie, Councillor Caroline Cooper-Marbiah, Councillor Pauline Cowper, Councillor Stephen Crowe, Councillor David Dean, Councillor John Dehaney, Councillor Nick Draper, Councillor Anthony Fairclough, Councillor Edward Foley, Councillor Brenda Fraser, Councillor Jenifer Gould, Councillor Edward Gretton, Councillor Joan Henry, Councillor Daniel Holden, Councillor James Holmes, Councillor Andrew Howard, Councillor Janice Howard, Councillor Natasha Irons, Councillor Sally Kenny, Councillor Linda Kirby, Councillor Paul Kohler, Councillor Rebecca Lanning, Councillor Najeeb Latif, Councillor Edith Macauley, Councillor Russell Makin, Councillor Peter McCabe, Councillor Simon McGrath, Councillor Nick McLean, Councillor Oonagh Moulton, Councillor Aidan Mundy, Councillor Hayley Ormrod, Councillor Dennis Pearce, Councillor Owen Pritchard, Councillor Carl Quilliam, Councillor David Simpson, Councillor Peter Southgate, Councillor Geraldine Stanford, Councillor Eleanor Stringer, Councillor Dave Ward, Councillor Martin Whelton, Councillor Dickie Wilkinson, Councillor David Williams and Councillor Helena Dollimore

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

No apologies for absence were received. Councillors Chung, Curtin and Skeete attended remotely.

2 DECLARATIONS OF PECUNIARY INTEREST (Agenda Item 2)

There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING (Agenda Item 3)

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 2 February 2022 are agreed as an accurate record.

4 BUSINESS PLAN 2022-26 (Agenda Item 4)

The Mayor opened the meeting and spoke on the situation in Ukraine.

The Mayor then outlined the procedure for the Budget Council meeting. He also reminded the Council that all budget related decisions, including proposed amendments, were required to be recorded within the minutes with a list of the names of those who voted for or against the decision or who abstained from voting and a roll call vote would be taken for the substantive budget motion and any amendments to it.

At the invitation of the Mayor, the Director of Corporate Services presented the Business Plan 2022-2026. The Director then responded to questions from Councillors Ward, Crowe, Kenny, McGrath, Alambritis, Southgate, Latif, Quilliam, Fairclough, Simpson, Cowper and Henry.

The Leader of the Council presented the Business Plan 2022-2026 and formally moved the recommendations in the report whilst making his budget speech to Council, a copy of which is appended to the minutes as Appendix A. Councillor Pritchard formally seconded the recommendations, and reserved his right to speak. The Mayor then invited the opposition Group Leaders in turn to respond to the Budget proposal and the Business Plan. The Leader of the Conservative Group, Councillor McLean addressed the meeting and his speech is attached to the minutes, as Appendix B. The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, Councillor Fairclough, addressed the meeting, and his speech is attached to the minutes, as Appendix C. The Leader of the Merton Park Ward Independent Residents Group, Councillor Southgate, addressed the meeting and his speech is attached to the minutes, as Appendix D.

The following members of the Cabinet addressed the meeting: Councillors Stringer and Skeete.

The Mayor then invited members to move proposed amendments to the Business Plan. Councillor McLean formally moved the Conservative amendment which was seconded by Councillor Adam Bush. Councillor Fairclough formally moved the Liberal Democrat amendments 1 to 3, in turn, which were formally seconded by Councillor Bailey, in turn.

The Mayor then opened up the general debate on the proposed amendments and on the proposed substantive Business Plan. The following members spoke in the debate: Councillors Alambritis, Gretton, Lanning, Mundy, Ormrod, Fraser, Barlow, Dehaney, Bokhari, Butler, Holden, Kenny, Janice Howard, Makin, Southgate, Stanford, Omar Bush, Akyigyina, Dean, Curtin, Gould, Moulton, Draper, Andrew Howard, Williams, Whelton, Holmes, Kohler, Irons and Pritchard.

At the conclusion of the debate, the Mayor called for a roll-call vote on the Conservative amendment to the Business Plan 2022-2026. Voting was as follows:

Votes in favour: Councillors Barlow, Benbow, Adam Bush, Omar Bush, Crowe, Dean, Foley, Gretton, Holden, Holmes, Andrew Howard, Janice Howard, Latif, McLean, Moulton, Ormrod, Simpson, Southgate, Wilkinson and Williams (20)

Votes against: Councillors Akyigyina, Alambritis, Allison, Anderson, Attawar, Butler, Christie, Cooper-Marbiah, Cowper, Dehaney, Dollimore, Draper, Fraser, Henry, Irons, Kenny, Kirby, Lanning, Makin, McCabe, Mundy, Pearce, Pritchard, Quilliam, Stanford, Stringer, Ward, Whelton and the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Macauley (29)

Not voting: Councillors Bailey, Bokhari, Fairclough, Gould, Kohler, McGrath and the Mayor, Councillor Brunt (7)

The Mayor declared the amendment to be lost.

The Mayor then called for a roll-call vote on the Liberal Democrat amendment 1 to the Business Plan 2022-2026. Voting was as follows:

Votes in favour:

Votes in favour: Councillors Bailey, Barlow, Benbow, Bokhari, Adam Bush, Omar Bush, Crowe, Dean, Fairclough, Gould, Gretton, Holden, Holmes, Andrew Howard, Janice Howard, Kohler, Latif, McGrath, McLean, Moulton, Ormrod, Simpson and Williams (23)

Votes against: Councillors Akyigyina, Alambritis, Allison, Anderson, Attawar, Butler, Christie, Cooper-Marbiah, Cowper, Dehaney, Dollimore, Draper, Fraser, Henry, Irons, Kenny, Kirby, Lanning, Makin, McCabe, Mundy, Pearce, Pritchard, Quilliam, Stanford, Stringer, Ward, Whelton and the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Macauley (29)

Not voting: Councillors Foley, Southgate, Wilkinson and the Mayor, Councillor Brunt (4)

The Mayor declared the amendment to be lost.

The Mayor then called for a roll-call vote on the Liberal Democrat amendment 2 to the Business Plan 2022-2026. Voting was as follows:

Votes in favour:

Votes in favour: Councillors Bailey, Barlow, Benbow, Bokhari, Adam Bush, Omar Bush, Crowe, Dean, Fairclough, Foley, Gould, Gretton, Holden, Holmes, Andrew Howard, Janice Howard, Kohler, Latif, McGrath, McLean, Moulton, Ormrod, Simpson, Southgate, Wilkinson and Williams (26)

Votes against: Councillors Akyigyina, Alambritis, Allison, Anderson, Attawar, Butler, Christie, Cooper-Marbiah, Cowper, Dehaney, Dollimore, Draper, Fraser, Henry, Irons, Kenny, Kirby, Lanning, Makin, McCabe, Mundy, Pearce, Pritchard, Quilliam, Stanford, Stringer, Ward, Whelton and the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Macauley and the Mayor Councillor Brunt (30)

Not voting: 0)

The Mayor declared the amendment to be lost.

The Mayor then called for a roll-call vote on the Liberal Democrat amendment 3 to the Business Plan 2022-2026. Voting was as follows:

Votes in favour: Councillors Bailey, Barlow, Benbow, Bokhari, Adam Bush, Omar Bush, Crowe, Dean, Fairclough, Gould, Gretton, Holden, Holmes, Andrew Howard, Janice Howard, Kohler, Latif, McGrath, McLean, Moulton, Ormrod, Simpson and Williams (23)

Votes against: Councillors Akyigyina, Alambritis, Allison, Anderson, Attawar, Butler, Christie, Cooper-Marbiah, Cowper, Dehaney, Dollimore, Draper, Fraser, Foley, Henry, Irons, Kenny, Kirby, Lanning, Makin, McCabe, Mundy, Pearce, Pritchard, Quilliam, Southgate, Stanford, Stringer, Ward, Whelton, Wilkinson and the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Macauley (32)

Not voting: The Mayor, Councillor Brunt (1)

The Mayor declared the amendment to be lost.

The Mayor then called for a roll-call vote on the substantive motion for the Business Plan 2022-2026. The Voting was as follows:

Votes in favour: Councillors Akyigyina, Alambritis, Allison, Anderson, Attawar, Butler, Christie, Cooper-Marbiah, Cowper, Dehaney, Dollimore, Draper, Fraser, Foley, Henry, Irons, Kenny, Kirby, Lanning, Makin, McCabe, Mundy, Pearce, Pritchard, Quilliam, Southgate, Stanford, Stringer, Ward, Whelton, Wilkinson and the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Macauley and the Mayor Councillor Brunt (33)

Votes Against: Councillors Bailey, Barlow, Benbow, Bokhari, Adam Bush, Omar Bush, Crowe, Dean, Fairclough, Gould, Gretton, Holden, Holmes, Andrew Howard, Janice Howard, Kohler, Latif, McGrath, McLean, Moulton, Ormrod, Simpson and Williams (23)

Not voting: (0)

The Mayor closed the meeting and thanked all Councillors who would be standing down.

RESOLVED:

1. That the Council agreed the Business Plan 2022-26 including:-

A) the General Fund Budget;

B) the Council Tax Strategy for 2022/23 equating to a Band D Council Tax of £1,380.87, which is an increase of below 3%, inclusive of 1% Adult Social Care flexibility;

C) the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for 2022-26;

D) the Capital Investment Programme (as detailed in Annex 1 to the Capital Strategy);

E) the Capital Strategy (Section 1, A)

F) the Treasury Management Strategy (Section 1, A), including the detailed recommendations in that Section, incorporating the Prudential Indicators as set out in this report; and agrees the formal resolutions as set out in Appendix 1 to this report.

2. That the Council agreed the recommendation of the Standards and General Purposes Committee to delegate authority to the Director of Corporate Services to respond to the invitation to take the necessary steps to finalise the appointment for

the future selection of our External Auditors for a five year period starting 1 April 2023 following the PSAA procurement process.(Appendix 11 refers)

3. That the 2022/23 Council Tax Support Scheme (the CTSS) is revised to disregard any payment made under the Energy Rebate Scheme 2022 in determining entitlement to a reduction under the CTSS, or the amount of any reduction as per paragraph 4.3 of this report.

Appendix A – Budget Speech – Leader of the Council – Cllr Mark Allison

Thank you Mister Mayor.

Before I begin, I extend our sincere thoughts as a Council to the people of Ukraine.

This invasion by a cowardly dictator is obscene.

We want to see tough sanctions against Putin and his network of oligarchs.

In particular, today I am calling on the government to help councils like ours who want to do more.

When we procured our energy contract, the only lawful bid was from Gazprom, and we had to accept it.

I am determined to break that contract, but the government treat Gazprom as a British company, despite its obvious connection to Russia.

So I want to take this opportunity to urge the government to blacklist Gazprom or at least allow us to.

I am also calling for government to help pension funds divest.

Merton's fund - which is managed by the pension committee not me, and is constrained by pension law - has only a small investment in Russian firms, less than a quarter of a percent.

But small is still too much.

The government should change rules to allow funds to divest.

I want to reassure our residents: Merton will play our part in support of Ukraine.

We are backing groups like the Polish Family Association and the Dons Local Action Group, and so many Merton residents who have shown they stand side by side with Ukraine.

And on behalf of the Merton Labour Group I have signed the LGA statement of support and solidarity with Ukraine, and I call on all of us here to sign too.

* * *

Tonight, I am proud to deliver the twelfth budget of this Labour administration.

When Labour took control in Merton, the council's finances were a mess.

We faced an immediate budget gap of £70m.

Then the Lib Dem and Tory coalition took away half our grant.

And, shockingly, the Lib Dems and Tories also cut funding for low-income households, forcing councils to charge the low-paid thousands of pounds – something we refuse to do.

Then, after years of austerity, we faced the challenge of Covid-19, the costs of which we will continue to have to bear for years to come.

I just want to pause here to thank the staff and residents of Merton for their fortitude and efforts to keep each other safe over the past two years.

More than 160,000 people in the UK have died with Covid-19, enough to fill Wembley Stadium twice over.

There has been no higher priority for me than our residents' health.

Merton is a great community, and because we complied with the rules we kept each other safe.

Those rules were not easy but we stuck to them.

And so I'm sorry to say this, but we will never forget those who broke them.

And nor will we forgive those who stayed quiet about those who broke them.

The rule breakers are still in place, and I know I speak for almost all Merton's residents in calling again for them to go.

It is only Merton's Tories who think they should stay and, as I'm sure they know from their canvassing, local residents won't forgive them for that.

I also have to warn colleagues that the government may have ended Covid-19 rules.

But Covid-19, like Boris Johnson, does not stick to the rules.

We are likely to face more outbreaks, and repercussions for years to come.

Trust me, I am a fit man in good health, but the past two weeks have not been good.

I may no longer be contagious, and I have had all my vaccines, but I am still short of breath.

So for the sake of the many people in our community who are not in good health, we need to continue to take care.

In particular, this health emergency has shown it would be wrong to close our nearest accident and emergency.

Downgrading St Helier will only widen inequalities and the government needs to urgently reconsider its determination to take health services away to affluent areas in Surrey.

* * *

Here in Merton, Covid-19 has changed most people's lives.

We are spending more time locally, working from home, using local parks and open spaces, shopping in our town centres.

And of course the government's cost of living crisis has hit residents hard.

That's why I asked Cllr Pritchard to conduct the biggest interactive exercise in the council's history, to find out how residents' lives have changed, and how what they want from the council has changed too.

And the result is Merton 2030, the council's first new statement of priorities since the July principles a decade ago.

Those principles served us well.

Under my good friend Cllr Alambritis we made Merton businesslike, moderate, pragmatic, imbued with the values of Blair and Starmer, rather than Corbyn or Johnson.

We transformed our schools.

We built a new library, a new leisure centre.

AFC Wimbledon came home, and we built new homes.

And yes, here in Merton we kept council tax low for those on low pay.

Merton 2030 maintains those values.

It identifies five new key areas of work, reflecting the changed priorities of our residents, and these are at the heart of this budget.

1, Maintaining excellent education for all ages and needs

We will continue to ensure all our young people achieve the best outcomes, and will open a new special needs school, to reduce the number of students who have to travel long distances for a good education.

We will also sort out the mess the government has left us in by failing to pay the DSG.

2, Promoting a dynamic and inclusive economy

We will continue to back businesses that support our community, and help make our town centres and high streets the focus of our borough.

3, Supporting those most in need

We will continue to protect social care, and to ensure crime is among the lowest in London, including by upgrading our CCTV service.

4, Providing a clean and sustainable environment

By continuing to tackle the climate emergency and to ensure our residents enjoy fantastic parks and open spaces,

By planting more than 5,000 new trees, modernising our playgrounds

And by continuing to take tough action against those who litter or dump rubbish.

And I should say at this point I was proud to see that – while litter and fly-tipping is a national problem that affects others even more than us – according to The Sun, Merton fines more people for litter than any other council in the country.

And finally, 5, making Merton fairer and more equal

We know how much the government's cost of living crisis is hurting those who can afford it the least, so we will continue to offer generous council tax rebates and a council tax below our neighbouring outer London boroughs.

And we will continue to approve more affordable homes.

Conservative and Lib Dem councillors have repeatedly voted against hundreds of affordable homes.

But I am proud that our funding will ensure the regeneration of South Wimbledon, Eastfields and Ravensbury goes ahead.

And I am proud that we have used council funds to deliver planning permission for nearly 100 homes, and that we are now offering them to affordable home providers.

The value of that land is greater with planning permission than without, and those new affordable homes are closer to being built as a result, so our funding will improve the lives of scores of local families.

* * *

I am proud of Merton 2030, and proud of this budget.

I pay tribute to our amazing staff and officers for putting them together.

Thank you to Caroline Holland and her team.

Thank you also to my incredible cabinet, including our former colleague, Tobin Byers, whose stamp on them remains.

Thank you Ellie for keeping our children safe and protecting free school meals, and Owen for Your Merton and getting financial support to businesses.

Thank you Marsie for keeping equalities at the heart of this administration,

Rebecca for protecting the health of our most vulnerable residents,

Agatha for maintaining public safety and low crime rates,

Brenda for keeping our leisure centres and libraries open,

Martin for fighting for the affordable homes we need,

and Natasha for ensuring we have such amazing parks, launching Fix My Streets and agreeing with me to take on Veolia and consult the public on the future of our waste services.

We have been a fantastic team, and have fought to defend our residents' services at a difficult time.

Merton is a great place.

This is a great budget for Merton.

I move.

Thank you.

Appendix B - Leader of the Opposition – Budget Speech – Cllr Nick McLean

Introduction

Thank you Mr Mayor,

And may I begin by thanking Director Holland and her team for the work on this budget.

May I also take this opportunity to thank all Merton Council staff for their efforts not - just over the last year - but throughout this municipal term.

Mr Mayor - I know I can speak for all in this borough when I say that we have been outraged and sickened by the murder and violence that Russian forces have inflicted upon the people of Ukraine.

And that we have been deeply inspired by the heroic efforts of the Ukrainian armed forces, their president and people to defend their country from tyranny.

Merton stands with the people of Ukraine and all those fighting to defend freedom.

Slava Ukraini

Heroiam slava

Glory to Ukraine

Glory to the heroes

Budget Amendment –

Mr Mayor - our budget amendment sets the direction for the first years of a Conservative administration.

A vision that will build Merton back better from the pandemic and support those in our community who have been let down the most by Labour.

My colleagues will speak further to our amendment and to our Community and High Street Safety Recovery fund that will lead the recovery of our high streets and protect our environment.

And our Youth and Children Recovery Fund brings a new focus on to the lives of young people in Merton.

Reversing the damaging and unnecessary cuts to Little Leagues, Merton Music Foundation and Deen City Farm.

A commitment that includes youth clubs, children's playgrounds and children's sporting organisations.

A multiyear funding package, not a sticking plaster as other groups have suggested.

Labour - A Failed Administration

Mr Mayor - all successful administrations are alike, but all unsuccessful ones fail in their own particular way.

Successful administrations explain their objectives, adopt policies they can achieve, recruit skilled people to deliver them – and connect with the instincts and wishes of their voters – that’s an administration I will lead.

Unsuccessful administrations fail to do some or all of these things.

As a result, they lose the confidence of the electorate long before they actually lose office - And that describes the Merton Labour Administration today.

An administration led by a Leader with a strong grip on the wrong end of the stick.

Merton 2030 – Financial Mismanagement

Mr Mayor, the Merton 2030 strategy is as much an admission of failure as it is a vision for the future.

Let’s look at some of the “Guiding principles”

“Engage, involve and communicate with our community” – an admission that they have not been listening

or

“Ensuring financial stability and value for money” – should this not have been a “guiding principle” for the last 12 years!

And the Your Merton survey – Labour ever so please with themselves that they asked the residents what they want for their borough.

The answer - value for money, clean streets, vibrant town centres a sense of community.

How did Labour not know – because the Conservative Group have been telling them for years.

And now they expect Merton residents to just accept their years of failure,

- the filthy roads,
- high streets in decline,
- poor street and park lighting,
- dangerous pavements,
- a shambolic planning department with damaging policy,
- council tax going up, but services not getting any better

As ever, pay more, get less under labour.

And Merton residents don’t have to look far to see what an efficiently run Council looks like.

Well managed finances, better services, lower Council Tax – that’s 44 years of Conservative Wandsworth.

What a stark contrast to decades of Labour-run-Merton.

£2.1m spent on a development company that never laid a brick, let alone built a single home;

£37m deficit created in the dedicated schools grant;

£72m put at risk because they failed to negotiate a robust contract with Clarion to protect Merton taxpayers.

£111M wasted, mismanaged or put at risk – more than an entire years council tax.

Money that should be spent on better services or reducing the council tax burden on Merton residents.

St Helier

And – how disappointing to see once again Labour misleading residents over the £500 million investment into the St Helier Trust.

To be clear, as the Cllr Leader seems very confused, the decision to go for a three hospital model was taken by the NHS, the Conservative Government is providing the funding.

Investment that will see the right care, in the right place, at the right time. A decision taken by clinical experts – not politicians walking up and down with a placard.

As Director Holden confirmed, there is no planned Council funding for legal challenges or campaigns.

Climate Opportunity

Mr Mayor – the borough faces challenges not least around climate.

Technology, innovation and enterprise are already leading the way in reducing carbon emissions.

The question for us is what steps the Council can play, in a supporting role, to ensure these new enterprises, technologies and markets are able to develop;

Creating new jobs, new wealth and, critically, supporting a just transition for our local economy.

As Conservatives, we take the world as we find it not as we might wish it to be.

It's easy to declare a "climate emergency" and run around waiving your hands in the air and shouting we're all doomed as many in this Chamber do!

When what we need to do is prioritise unlocking the "climate opportunity"?

The economic and social opportunity this affords is immense – and we must ensure that we create a nimble framework to attract these businesses to our borough.

But what is quite clear is that a lazy “tax and ban” strategy that is favoured by Merton Labour is a road to nowhere.

And that is why the attack on motorists that Labour, supported by the Liberal Democrats, is ill judged.

Motorists

As we saw at February Council Labour support the Mayor of London’s latest road pricing proposals

- a daily levy of £2 imposing an annual bill of more than £700.
- An extension of the ULEZ into Merton – a daily £12.50 that is a tax on the poorest of society.
- And a daily boundary charge of £5.50 on drivers who do not live in London - a tax that will hit our key workers and damage our high streets.

Their anti- car crusade - based on a flawed assumption: that driving is somehow a luxury – for most people in fact the opposite is true.

Does Labour or the Lib Dems really think a plumber can jump on a bike or cart his tools across the capital on Tube instead?

Hammering ordinary people in Merton as we get back on our feet is regressive and an act of profound self-harm.

Closing Remarks

Mr Mayor in just 9 weeks the residents of Merton will have the chance to pass a verdict on 12 years of this Labour Administration.

An their choice is clear –

4 more years of a Labour administration that does not listen

Or a Conservative Administration that has been demanding for years the very things that matter most to Merton residents – better services.

4 more years of a heavy handed Labour administration who revels in telling people how to lives their lives;

Or a Conservative administration that will focus on freeing residents to make their own choices - a relentless focus on making their lives easier.

4 more years of a Labour administration that has failed to bring the borough together – instead championing the woke identity politics of division that have failed to bridge the gap

Or a Conservative administration that believes bringing people together means creating an environment for everyone to flourish – creating a borough wide identity.

4 more years of labour promising town centre regeneration and failing.

Or a Conservative administration that deliver Morden regeneration, improve our high street and end the high rise vandalism of Wimbledon's skyline

4 more years of labours anti-car agenda;

Or a Conservative administration who understand that for the majority driving is a necessity whether it for getting around or work.

For more years of labour talking about value for money;

Or a Conservative administration that delivers value for money.

For more years of broken promises,

Or a Conservative Administration that get things done.

Appendix C Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group – Budget Speech – Cllr Anthony Fairclough

Thank you Mr Mayor. I too want to thank the officers for their work on the budget.

And thanks to all those councillors who are standing down for their service – and indeed to those who might not get re-elected.

Mr Mayor, Merton can only play the hand it's dealt – hampered by a Conservative Government that refuses to look beyond 1 year settlements and continued cuts, and as we've heard delay over resolving the deficit on the dedicated support grant for schools.

And whilst we do not agree with a significant number of the planned cuts in this budget, its constraints don't offer much in the way of opportunities.

But our communities need us to be bold and creative.

The budget should set out a path to the future we want to see.

Rather like our own streets, this pathway needs a clean sweep – getting rid of the cosy consensus of Labour and Tory that tells us what can't be done.

In just a few weeks' time our residents will have that opportunity.

Tonight Mr Mayor, our 3 amendments reflect the consistent threads of action that have run throughout my group's term of office.

Our role as councillors is to enable our communities to live as they choose, taking advantage of opportunities - safe in the knowledge that they will be paid fairly, can afford bills, and live in well maintained and safe housing in a healthy environment, enabled by reliable and accessible public transport.

The Council's budget and service plans must be aligned with its vision, and its vision must develop reflecting the key challenges that real people face - ensuring action is taken.

This is the nub of **Amendment 1**.

Mr Mayor, as a group we have pushed Labour hard:

1. **On housing standards and affordable housing**
2. **To ensure contractors – particularly care workers – are paid fairly**
3. **On more money for schools and services for children**
4. **A real focus on the climate emergency**
5. **And lastly 5, on accessible public transport**

In challenging the Council's record on housing, we've establishing a tenants' champion scheme in the face of reluctant opposition, pushed them on their 13% affordable housing record, and made two separate proposals to pave the way for selective licensing – which is now on the forward plan.

We know there's more to do to ensure the Council's contracts are re-let at the London Living wage, but that commitment was passed at the last Budget Council, after a decade long campaign. We're pleased to hear the Director talk about provision for this in answer to questions.

We have made several clear attempts to increase local schools' funding – with innovative ideas like the school's bonus from development or the free school breakfast clubs. We try again tonight.

And on that, for our Conservative friends: I note that Wandsworth Council is setting up its own charitable fund to accept donations from residents.

Cllr Gould will talk about our focus on the climate emergency, but suffice it to say it goes beyond Cllr Allison's "Tax on not voting Labour" parking charges.

We've had successes and setbacks, but this is what a real opposition does, and what a real alternative looks like.

Amendment 1 also mitigates some of the impact of Council Tax increases.

Despite there being no money left Mr Mayor, my group thinks it's important to do what we can.

In the answer to Cllr McGrath's question, you have already heard the impact this amendment will have – reducing the increases in council tax by around 30%.

Mr Mayor, you may ask why we did focus on a bigger rebate for fewer Council Tax bands, but we reflected on the fact that actually many who live in house and flat-shares do so in band D properties – and they're often those with the lowest incomes too.

Turning to our **Amendment 2** - the campaign to make our stations “step free” is close to my heart.

A real physical symbol of how far we go as a society to support people.

My group wants to ensure the building blocks are in place to take action quickly when opportunities arise - hence calling for 'shovel-ready' plans to be prepared.

During budget scrutiny I asked about preparations for the next round of the main DfT *Access for All* funding. In 2018/19 we worked with the then leader and officers to confirm that match funding could be possible were applications to be successful. This sustained campaign bore fruit when Motspur Park secured government funding in 2020, and we hear tonight that the Council will also support it too with match funding at Motspur Park and Haydons Road.

Rail companies and Network Rail tell us that the game changer here is having engineering plans putting us at the front of the queue. And that's the point of Amendment 2.

Mr Mayor – in brief, **Amendment 3** responds discussions with teachers and governors who tell us there simply isn't enough money for schools.

My gas and electricity bills have doubled since 2020 already. And for schools it is no different.

We can't just wait for the Government - Cllr Bokhari will pick this up in more detail.

Mr Mayor – Merton needs a fresh start.

Whatever happens tonight we're on the cusp of it.

Appendix D Leader of the Merton Park Ward Independent Residents Group – Budget Speech – Cllr Peter Southgate

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the budget for next year. Looking at the bigger picture, Merton will benefit from a 6.3% increase in its core spending power next year, only 3% of which will come from an increase in council tax on our residents. That's a more generous settlement than we've received for many

years, and after 10 years of austerity, it might mean we can afford to breathe just a little more easily, financially speaking. The prospect of a settlement of the DSG deficit from the DfE would be transformational – remember the cumulative deficit is set to reach £37.8 m at the end of this year.

So the opportunity is there to progress plans for Your Merton over the lives of the next two councils, to 2030. But before we run too far ahead with exciting regeneration proposals, let me urge a degree of caution. The most recent residents' survey (fieldwork in April/ May last year) shows that residents' opinions of the council have deteriorated significantly since the previous survey in 2019. The number who think the council provides value for money is down 16% to 40%. Those who are satisfied with the way the council runs things is down 9% to 61%, or believe the council responds quickly when asked for help is down 9% to 47%. This stacks up with our personal experiences as Ward councillors; my inbox is full of emails from residents complaining they just don't get an answer when they contact the council, or the problem they're reporting doesn't get fixed. We have some way to go to get these basic housekeeping issues right if we are to rebuild confidence in the council as an efficient provider of essential services.

And after the pandemic, our residents are hardly in a confident frame of mind. 20% tell us they felt anxious yesterday, that's up from 8% two years earlier. Conversely, the proportion who felt happy yesterday is down from 43% to 35%. They are less likely to say they feel satisfied with their lives, down from 44% to 26%, or even to feel the things they do in their lives are worthwhile, down from 49% to 38%.

Let's not underestimate how long lasting the effects of the pandemic may prove to be, mentally as well as physically. If we rebuild the council right, we can help people rebuild their lives. But it's an onerous responsibility, and it needs to be recognised in our plans through to 2030.