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COUNCIL

1 MARCH 2023

(7.15 pm - 10.05 pm)

PRESENT

(in the Chair), Councillor Joan Henry,
Councillor Agatha Mary Akyigyina,
Councillor Stephen Alambritis, Councillor Laxmi Attawar,
Councillor Thomas Barlow, Councillor Hina Bokhari,
Councillor Michael Brunt, Councillor Billy Christie,
Councillor Caroline Cooper-Marbiah,
Councillor Anthony Fairclough, Councillor Edward Foley,
Councillor Brenda Fraser, Councillor Jenifer Gould,
Councillor Joan Henry, Councillor Daniel Holden,
Councillor Andrew Howard, Councillor Natasha Irons, Councillor
Sally Kenny, Councillor Linda Kirby, Councillor Paul Kohler,
Councillor Edith Macauley, Councillor Peter McCabe,
Councillor Simon McGrath, Councillor Nick McLean,
Councillor Aidan Mundy, Councillor Marsie Skeete,
Councillor Eleanor Stringer, Councillor Martin Whelton,
Councillor Helena Dollimore, Councillor James Williscroft,
Councillor Sheri-Ann Bhim, Councillor John Braithwaite,
Councillor Michael Butcher, Councillor Caroline Charles,
Councillor Eleanor Cox, Councillor Klaar Dresselaers,
Councillor Chessie Flack, Councillor Kirsten Galea,
Councillor Ross Garrod, Councillor Jil Hall,
Councillor Billy Hayes, Councillor Susie Hicks,
Councillor Dan Johnston, Councillor Andrew Judge,
Councillor Usaama Kaweesa, Councillor Samantha MacArthur,
Councillor Gill Manly, Councillor Stephen Mercer,
Councillor Stuart Neaverson, Councillor John Oliver,
Councillor Robert Page, Councillor Michael Paterson,
Councillor Tony Reiss, Councillor Slawek Szczepanski,
Councillor Matthew Willis, Councillor Max Austin and
Councillor Victoria Wilson

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Agenda Item 1)

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Pearce.

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 1 February 2023 are agreed as an accurate record.

4 BUSINESS PLAN 2023-27 (Agenda Item 4)

The Mayor opened the meeting and outlined the procedure for the Budget Council meeting. She 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 Interim Executive Director Finance and Digital presented the Business Plan 2023-27. The Director then responded to questions from Councillors Charles, Dresselaers, Skeete, Barlow, Szczepanski, MacArthur, Bhim, Cox, Dollimore, Galea and Neaverson.

The Leader of the Council presented the Business Plan 2023-2027 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 Christie 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 Liberal Democrat Group, Councillor Fairclough addressed the meeting and his speech is attached to the minutes, as Appendix B. The Leader of the Conservative Group, Councillor McLean, 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 Foley, 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, Judge, Irons, Alambritis, Fraser, Kenny, Cooper-Marbiah and McCabe.

The Mayor then invited members to move proposed amendments to the Business Plan. Councillor Fairclough formally moved the four Liberal Democrat amendments which were formally seconded by Councillor Kohler who reserved his right to speak. Councillor McLean formally moved the Conservative amendment and this was formally seconded by Councillor Paterson.

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 Manly, Oliver, Hayes, Gould, Bhim, Paterson, Butcher, Hicks, Macauley, Wilson, Kaweesa, Foley, Kirby, Holden, Mundy, Reiss, Akyigyina, Braithwaite, Williscroft, Willis, Attawar, Flack, Johnston, Austin, Brunt, Hall, Dollimore, McGrath, Neaveson, Page, Whelton, Kohler and Christie.

At the conclusion of the debate, Councillor Garrod exercised his right of reply and the Mayor then called for a roll-call vote on the Liberal Democrat Amendments to the Business Plan 2023-27. Voting was as follows.

Liberal Democrat Amendment 1

Votes in favour: Councillors Austin, Barlow, Bokhari, Braithwaite, Cox, Dresselaers, Fairclough, Flack, Foley, Galea, Gould, Hall, Hicks, Holden, Howard, Kohler, MacArthur, McGrath, McLean, Mercer, Oliver, Page, Paterson, Reiss, Willis, Wilson (26)

Votes against: Councillors Alambritis, Attawar, Bhim, Brunt, Butcher, Charles, Christie, Cooper-Marbiah, Dollimore, Fraser, Garrod, Hayes, Irons, Johnston, Judge, Kaweesa, Kenny, Kirby, Macauley, Manly, McCabe, Mundy, Neaverson, Skeete, Stringer, Szczepanski, Whelton, Williscroft, Deputy Mayor Akyigyina and the Mayor Councillor Henry. (30)

Not Voting: None (0).

The Mayor declared the amendment to be lost.

Liberal Democrat Amendment 2

Votes in favour: Councillors Austin, Barlow, Bokhari, Braithwaite, Cox, Dresselaers, Fairclough, Flack, Foley, Galea, Gould, Hall, Hicks, Holden, Howard, Kohler, MacArthur, McGrath, McLean, Mercer, Oliver, Page, Paterson, Reiss, Willis, Wilson (26)

Votes against: Councillors Alambritis, Attawar, Bhim, Brunt, Butcher, Charles, Christie, Cooper-Marbiah, Dollimore, Fraser, Garrod, Hayes, Irons, Johnston, Judge, Kaweesa, Kenny, Kirby, Macauley, Manly, McCabe, Mundy, Neaverson, Skeete, Stringer, Szczepanski, Whelton, Williscroft, Deputy Mayor Akyigyina and the Mayor Councillor Henry. (30)

Not Voting: None (0).

The Mayor declared the amendment to be lost.

Liberal Democrat Amendment 3

Votes in favour: Councillors Austin, Barlow, Bokhari, Braithwaite, Cox, Dresselaers, Fairclough, Flack, Foley, Galea, Gould, Hall, Hicks, Holden, Howard, Kohler, MacArthur, McGrath, McLean, Mercer, Oliver, Page, Paterson, Reiss, Willis, Wilson (26)

Votes against: Councillors Alambritis, Attawar, Bhim, Brunt, Butcher, Charles, Christie, Cooper-Marbiah, Dollimore, Fraser, Garrod, Hayes, Irons, Johnston, Judge, Kaweesa, Kenny, Kirby, Macauley, Manly, McCabe, Mundy, Neaverson, Skeete, Stringer, Szczepanski, Whelton, Williscroft, Deputy Mayor Akyigyina and the Mayor Councillor Henry. (30)

Not Voting: None (0).

The Mayor declared the amendment to be lost.

Liberal Democrat Amendment 4

Votes in favour: Councillors Austin, Barlow, Bokhari, Braithwaite, Cox, Dresselaers, Fairclough, Flack, Foley, Galea, Gould, Hall, Hicks, Holden, Howard, Kohler, MacArthur, McGrath, McLean, Mercer, Oliver, Page, Paterson, Reiss, Willis, Wilson (26)

Votes against: Councillors Alambritis, Attawar, Bhim, Brunt, Butcher, Charles, Christie, Cooper-Marbiah, Dollimore, Fraser, Garrod, Hayes, Irons, Johnston, Judge, Kaweesa, Kenny, Kirby, Macauley, Manly, McCabe, Mundy, Neaverson, Skeete, Stringer, Szczepanski, Whelton, Williscroft, Deputy Mayor Akyigyina and the Mayor Councillor Henry. (30)

Not Voting: None (0).

The Mayor declared the amendment to be lost.

The Mayor then called for a roll-call vote on the Conservative amendment to the Business Plan 2023 – 27. Voting was as follows:

Votes in favour: Councillors Austin, Barlow, Bokhari, Braithwaite, Cox, Dresselaers, Fairclough, Flack, Foley, Galea, Gould, Hall, Hicks, Holden, Howard, Kohler, MacArthur, McGrath, McLean, Mercer, Oliver, Page, Paterson, Reiss, Willis, Wilson (26)

Votes against: Councillors Alambritis, Attawar, Bhim, Brunt, Butcher, Charles, Christie, Cooper-Marbiah, Dollimore, Fraser, Garrod, Hayes, Irons, Johnston, Judge, Kaweesa, Kenny, Kirby, Macauley, Manly, McCabe, Mundy, Neaverson, Skeete, Stringer, Szczepanski, Whelton, Williscroft, Deputy Mayor Akyigyina and the Mayor Councillor Henry. (30)

Not Voting: None (0).

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 2023-27. The voting was as follows:

Votes in favour: Councillors Austin, Barlow, Bokhari, Braithwaite, Cox, Dresselaers, Fairclough, Flack, Galea, Gould, Hall, Hicks, Holden, Howard, Kohler, MacArthur, McGrath, McLean, Oliver, Page, Paterson, Reiss, Willis, Wilson (24)

Votes against: Councillors Alambritis, Attawar, Bhim, Brunt, Butcher, Charles, Christie, Cooper-Marbiah, Dollimore, Foley, Fraser, Garrod, Hayes, Irons, Johnston, Judge, Kaweesa, Kenny, Kirby, Macauley, Manly, McCabe, Mercer, Mundy, Neaverson, Skeete, Stringer, Szczepanski, Whelton, Williscroft, Deputy Mayor Akyigyina and the Mayor Councillor Henry. (32)

Not Voting: None (0)

RESOLVED:

That the Council agreed the Budget 2023/24 including:-

A) the General Fund Budget 2023/24;

B) the Council Tax Strategy for 2023/24 equating to a Band D Council Tax of £1,449.68, which is an increase of below 5%, inclusive of 2% Adult Social Care flexibility;

C) the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for 2023-27;

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

E) the Capital Strategy (Section 2)

F) the Treasury Management Strategy (Section 2), 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.

Appendix A – Leader of the Council – Cllr Ross Garrod

Madam Mayor, it's almost a year since I became leader of this great borough. I grew up in Mitcham, and have been shaped by this borough and the community. It's truly an honour to be able to stand here tonight and present this Labour administration's first budget.

A cost-of-living budget aimed first and foremost at supporting our residents during the current emergency. A budget to nurture pride in our borough. A budget that will create a sustainable Merton for the future, and a budget that will deliver London's first Borough of Sport, delivering excellent facilities & opportunities for our future sporting stars.

To set the context, I must stress that it has been – as always for the council – an incredibly challenging budget to set - one caused by political chaos and economic mismanagement in Westminster, and against a backdrop of 13 years of cuts to local councils, caused by a government that crashed the economy, and crashed public confidence.

Thanks to successive governments since the coalition, public funding for services in this borough have now been cut by almost 50%. Our residents now face the highest inflation rates, bills and energy costs in decades. And once again the buck has been passed to local taxpayers.

But in Merton, this Labour administration has shown sound financial judgement and this year we've delivered a budget that both helps our residents, and maintains vital services. I'd like to thank Cabinet Members for their leadership in this and every member involved in scrutinising the budget.

It's a balanced budget; not just for this year, but for the next two years, as we start a long-term journey of ambitious improvement. This is the first step in a long-term strategy that will help build a better Merton - for today's residents and for future generations.

And it's a budget rooted in Labour values. In the past year, we've already shown those values. We funded winter payments to 10,000 families on low incomes. We gave out supermarket vouchers to help people avoid the choice between heating and eating. We funded free school meals for children over the holidays. We created warm spaces for those worrying about the cost of turning on their radiators. And we created a £2 million cost-of-living fund dedicated to supporting those hit hardest by this Government's incompetency.

This is a balanced budget, despite the funding challenges we face every year. Hundreds of millions of pounds for vital day to day services to support the most vulnerable in our communities. More on adult social care, children's services, and education and schools. Yes, we're investing in services, but we're also reforming how we deliver them, around the needs of residents.

I'll start tonight's budget with that over-riding priority – finding money to support our residents with the cost of living.

This budget will – yet again – allow us to have one of the highest levels of Council Tax Support in the country. That £11 million investment will lift nearly 10,000 Merton families out of tax poverty, with almost 7,000 lifted out of Council Tax altogether. A policy that, after being scrapped by the coalition, wouldn't even exist today without Labour running Merton.

This budget also invests almost £1 million more into funding a 1% discount off of the 5% rise we've been forced to set by Government. That will mean the vast majority of residents will be paying one of the lowest rates in outer south west London. Lower than Richmond, Kingston, Sutton and Croydon.

A further £8 million is being invested into ensuring that thousands of vital frontline staff, including home-carers, are paid a London Living Wage. Money funded by this council, that literally puts more pounds in people's pockets, every single month; in the year when the council became an accredited London Living Wage employer.

This investment is how this Labour administration will prioritise support to those who need our help during this cost-of-living emergency. But that isn't where this cost-of-living budget stops. We're investing in our three key, long-term priorities to build a better Merton. Nurturing civic pride. Building a sustainable future, and creating a borough of sport.

To build pride in the local area, this budget not only maintains current funding for services such as open spaces, sports & leisure facilities, recycling, libraries and others. It goes further; investing in this borough we are all proud of.

This budget maintains our investment into cleaner streets, and will fund further improvements this year such as the pilot mobile Garth Road recycling service and improved collection services for flats above shopping parades and high streets.

Following the success of our six Green Flag winning parks, we'll invest nearly £1 million into our much-loved parks and open spaces to maintain and improve them as places we're all proud of.

It will also invest more than £1.5 million this year into improving our local shopping parades and high streets, to make them better places to shop and spend time. And we'll invest over £2 million this year into keeping our local roads safe as part of a £7 million longer-term road maintenance and improvement plan.

We'll also continue support for vital local organisations in our community and voluntary sector, increasing their current four-year funding arrangement with almost £5 million.

The second long-term theme of this budget is to create a truly sustainable Merton. The council has already committed to being carbon-neutral by 2030, and becoming a carbon-neutral borough by 2050. More than £2 million will be invested over the next four years into improving infrastructure for cycling, including cycle paths and bike hangars. We'll install 500 new on-street EV charging points, as we work to make Merton the most EV-friendly borough in greater London, and we'll fund the rollout of e-bikes to give residents even more choice. And we'll plant 3,000 trees, following on from the record 10,000 we expect to plant this year.

But one of our biggest investments will be the delivery of the sustainable, affordable housing this borough so desperately needs. This budget will create a £29 million housing delivery fund to start work on 400 sustainable, low-energy homes for Merton residents, built on council-owned land. The first such homes in this borough in my lifetime. And we'll also be continuing to take action to hold landlords in the borough to account for the frankly appalling conditions and poor service that sadly too many residents experience on a day-to-day basis.

Our third strategic priority is to create a borough of sport; to build on Merton's sporting heritage and create a place where everyone has access to physical activity and excellent sporting facilities. A place where our future talent is supported and nurtured.

We have already brought in experts from Sport England to work with us on a Blueprint for Sport - to create a legacy of improvement for decades to come. This year, we'll kickstart that commitment with an £11 million, long-term investment in sports facilities in the borough. We'll refurbish and improve all of our multi-use games areas this year. We'll also refurbish and improve sports pitches across the borough. And as the home of tennis, we'll maintain free tennis lessons and court access for residents.

And after refurbishing the running track at Wimbledon last year, we'll develop plans for a new one in the east of the borough - ensuring access for all to first-class training facilities.

This is just the beginning in our journey to transform the Council and the borough. We want to be ambitious for this borough, and this is just the first step in a long-term strategy. The challenges we face are complex, and our ambitions are more extensive than ever. The way we work has to change, and be built more closely around partnership and community collaboration; and that means creating an organisation that's up to that challenge.

Led by our Chief Executive, our new senior leadership team brings the skills, experience and capacity that we need on our transformation journey. We're also investing in our staff. We want to attract the best, and to retain and grow our best. And yes we are investing in the Civic Centre, picking up the work that was started before Covid to create a modern working environment that responds to collaborative ways of working, and the new ways of hybrid working. This will eventually generate a revenue stream for the council, reducing the size of our estate and lowering our costs. I make no apologies for wanting an organisation that's fit for the challenges ahead, and ready to deliver for the future, for our residents.

This is a budget that invests in our future and in our priorities. Above all, this is a budget that helps us to start building a better Merton together. Now let's get to work, for the residents of Merton.

Madam Mayor, I move this Budget.

Appendix B – Leader of the Opposition – Budget Speech – Cllr Anthony Fairclough

An open, competent and caring Council

Thank you Madame Mayor

I too thank officers for their work on this budget.

Madame Mayor – in the early hours of 6th May – after nearly 48 hours awake I felt a mixture of things.

... Mainly tiredness.

But also happiness for my many colleagues whose hard work had been recognised.

Disappointment for those who narrowly missed out – they'll be brilliant councillors in due course.

And having only won at my fourth time of standing in 2018, I know what it's like to put your heart and soul into something and lose – whether you expect to win or not.

I often disagreed with them, but I do feel for them - those many sitting Labour and Conservative councillors who lost their seats.

But on 6th May, I also felt a trepidation – perhaps even an excitement – at what could be achieved now Merton had the fewest Conservative councillors it's ever had.

We could forge a way forward – for the first time a progressive opposition; Conservative voices reduced to bit-part players growling from the sidelines.

A real chance to help develop an open, competent and caring Council that works for everyone, no matter where in the borough they live.

And that's what I want to talk about tonight.

Now Madame Mayor, when I was first elected in 2018, the “local Conservatives” election slogan was to “make things a little bit better”.

And in 2022 it was about trying to turn communities against each other – whether drivers against pedestrians, cyclists and children, or the public against refugees.

It's a low energy contribution.

Nasty, brutish - but fortunately short.

We need more from elected representatives.

But let me be clear: Merton can only play the hand it's dealt.

It's hampered by the Government's approach to last minute settlements for local authorities.

Not to mention the huge damage done to our economy by its mismanagement.

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

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

And whilst there are bits of this budget that are perhaps a “little bit better” than those of the previous decade, there's also a brittleness here.

A keenness to boast that belies a fundamental lack of confidence by and in its leading lights.

They've something to prove.

And indeed, Madame Mayor they do – although perhaps not what they think.

Back in February, in their pre-budget trailer Cllr Christie told us all that only the Labour Party cares.

I've rarely heard a more ridiculous, or a more arrogant statement.

But if that's the approach at the heart of this administration we'll get nowhere.

If you believe it, you can justify all sorts.

But first, to the good stuff in this budget.

On housing:

We're pleased that the tenants' champion scheme will be resourced and developed;

We're pleased that selective and additional licensing will be introduced in part of the borough – even if our proposals to pave the way for selective licensing were twice voted down by Labour councillors in budget Councils.

Hopefully in due course, these schemes will be extended widely across the borough.

We're pleased to hear Cllr Judge's ambition to build more genuinely affordable homes - we've long pushed the administration on their 13% record.

And similarly, it's been not easy to ensure that Council's contracts are re-let at the London Living wage.

Nonetheless it took a change to Council policy to make this a priority - a Lib Dem amendment to a Strategic Theme Report was passed in 2020, after a decade long campaign.

And at budget Council in 2021, we convinced the administration to take small but practical steps to ensure that care workers – some of the lowest paid in our community – would receive the London Living wage.

Last April, we were disappointed that the then Labour Leader would not commit to seeking London Living Wage accreditation. Merton Citizens had asked him to do so, and it requires a plans for contractors.

Still... we are pleased to have played our part in ensuring that his reluctance is no longer Merton's problem.

I'm sure we'll hear a lot tonight about the administration's 1% Council Tax discount.

Last year, when challenged to prioritise discounts or generous rebates depending on the settlement, Cllr Christie shrugged it off.

He said "I just don't think it would be honest to suggest that the rise may not happen – it unfortunately will have to happen".

So I wonder what changed?

Tonight, we want the Council to go further.

There's also much vagueness in the budget.

Many of the more significant items in the Medium Term Strategy are "reviews" or 'salami slicing' – moving budgets about, making future cuts to services.

We're asked to take on trust that the detail can be sorted out later.

We know there are huge 'systemic' under and overspends in Merton's budgets – a muddle through the middle.

We've already heard that only about half the savings we agree come to fruition.

This means many of the 400ish pages are an elaborate fiction.

And the important thing is to look at the actions not the words.

What this administration does, not just what it says.

How it can with a straight face justify plans to spend nearly ¼ of a million on fancy furniture for 2 rooms only Labour councillors use.

And over £100k more on extra support staff for the Labour group office.

Plans made in secret

At the last full Council, Cllr Christie suggested that because "we have a budget of £500 million" this was "actually irrelevant".

Well boasting about the size of his budget feels like over-compensation.

Madame Mayor, as of yesterday I am 43. It should be *me* having the mid-life crisis, not him.

And it's not his money – it's the public's money.

And like many things, it's not about the size of your budget but how you use it.

Every decision an administration makes – especially those it thinks will be unpopular - should be made transparently.

A Lib Dem administration would put openness at the heart of the budget process.

And Madame Mayor, as a Council we must do what we can to create opportunities for communities to come together to meet the challenges we face:

A Council must be caring.

But if you're not paid enough;

If your housing is insecure, or badly maintained;

If you don't get the support you need;

Then you are not free to live how you choose.

Our 4 amendments reflect the consistent themes that run throughout our work.

Our amendment 1 takes action to improve health and social care.

We want extra support for care workers now, whether they work in Merton or not, and whether they work in care homes or not.

We want to reverse the decision to charge people to make applications for blue badges.

We've proposed this before – voted down by Labour councillors. Will it be 3rd time lucky?

We want to see libraries open midweek, as hubs in the community.

And we want a commitment to stand firm against health cuts announced for South West London.

Our amendment 2 is on action: to improve air quality given new rules on air pollution to monitor fine particulates; to help the climate emergency response; and to mitigate some of the worst in the Council's "post code" parking charges scheme.

Where you live shouldn't determine how much you pay for parking.

Our amendments 3 and 4 take further action to support people through the cost of living emergency:

An additional Council Tax discount for those in Band A and B properties, and work on an enhanced Council Tax support scheme, to help those who fall just outside the current eligibility criteria.

Madame Mayor, we're not going to pretend our amendments will make a perfect budget or a perfect Merton

But they're clear steps towards an open, competent and caring council.

Thank you Madame Mayor

Appendix C – Leader of the Conservative Group

Thank you Madam Mayor and may I begin by thanking Director Roger Kershaw and his team for their work in preparing this budget.

However, this budget is increasing the cost of living burden, and our amendment seeks to defer the planned 16% parking charge increase.

We support the Administration goal of being a Borough of Support which is why we are proposing a fund to help deliver that aspiration for our young people.

And despite being the only party in this chamber to stand up for motorists, we understand the value of active travel, which is why we are proposing support to restore and enhance Merton's existing cycle paths.

My colleague Cllrs Paterson, Holden and Austin will be speaking to the amendment in more detail.

Madam Mayor – I welcome the restructuring of the senior officer positions and I would like to welcome the new Directors to our Borough and congratulate the Chief Executive for steering the process so well.

As we embark on this new chapter, I urge the Administration to find a boldness that has been so lacking in the past.

- A boldness that will finally deliver Town Centre Regeneration – in particular Morden Town Centre
- Value for money for our residents
- Better services and cleaner streets.

Because that is what Merton Residents deserve – a Council that delivers on its promises.

The Lib Dems say that they would be a fresh start – yet collude with Labour to force new taxes onto residents - ULEZ expansion being the latest example.

Calling for the expansion in 2019, Cllr Bokhari voting for the policy in the London Assembly.

Madam Mayor – the ULEZ expansion is a bad policy that will hurt the poorest in our society the most and damage our local businesses - while not improving air quality.

Along with our two MP's we are calling for the expansion to be halted and I have written to the Councillor Leader demanding just that.

And as Cllr Garrod formulates his response – a word of advice - remember what happened to the last Merton Labour Leader that disobeyed the MP for Mitcham and Morden!

Madam Mayor along with other colleagues it was a pleasure to attend the recent openings of the both the Lavender Campus and the Whatley Campus.

Projects that the Conservative Group fully supported and I would like to congratulate all concerned for this excellent new provision.

Madam Mayor - as I have stated previously - Merton Labour seem to believe that they can make political choices and then expect central government to fund it.

Whether it is Cllr Alambritis decision to freeze council tax for 7 years – a decision I don't disagree with;

Or the council tax benefit scheme; generous – but expensive

Or the mishandling of the Dedicated School Grant.

These decisions were taken by Merton Labour and have impacted the Councils financial position.

Madam Mayor - Governments only get money from two main sources – taxation or they borrow it.

The taxation burden is the highest since the 1940's.

Government debt is currently running at 98.9% of GDP – the highest rate since the 1960s.

But despite these challenges – and as stated in the Budget, the core spending power is set to increase by 9.1%. Funding provided by the Government.

A 9.1% increase in Government funding to Merton Council that has enabled the Administration to balance the budget.

Not that the Administration will admit it – but this is a good settlement for the Borough – and I thank the Government.

Madam Mayor, when Cllr Christie speaks in this debate I hope to hear of a new era of ownership. Because from responsibility will come boldness.

We as a council need to embrace opportunities to increase revenue and productivity – I believe it can be done with a focus on innovation and delivery.

Strategies and plans are great – but worthless unless they are delivered.

We should begin the annual budget process from a position of not increasing council tax – it may not be possible – but that should be our starting point.

That is what the residents deserve – a council led by its politicians, delivering on their aspirations.

An administration that doesn't seek to pass failures off as successes.

or claims the credit for government support.

After 13-years Labour have no financial achievements of their own to talk about.

They now have the opportunity to change that – and I urge them to grasp it and in doing so improve the lives of Merton residents.

Appendix D – Leader of the Merton Park Ward Independent Residents Group

Thank you Madam Mayor and I'd like to start by thanking the Interim Director and his team for this budget that's put before us this evening.

In the almost nine years I've been a Councillor and now as Leader of the Merton Park Independents, I don't think there has ever been a year when we haven't been looking to save money somewhere. That process has become progressively harder over the years.

The pandemic touched all of us one way or another and brought considerable unexpected challenges for us in Merton. Many residents and businesses are still coming to terms and our high streets may never recover to what they were before.

Of course residents in our Borough will not want any increase in their Council Tax, especially with the ever increasing pressures in this cost of living crisis that we find ourselves in. Thankfully the increase in Merton Council Tax is nowhere near the proposed 15% increase that residents in Croydon face.

The proposed plans to provide 500 more electric charging points for vehicles is very welcome, although many many more will be needed as more of our residents make the transition to electric and hybrid vehicles and lets not forget the visitors to our fabulous Borough who will need to top up and charge for their return journey.

The overspends in neighbouring Boroughs of Sutton and also Croydon show how things can get out of control very quickly and I'm pleased this budget shows Merton in a much healthier position currently than some other Local Boroughs and as I said at the start, in my years as a Councillor. Thank you Madam Mayor.

5 PAY POLICY STATEMENT AND THE MEMBERS ALLOWANCES SCHEME (Agenda Item 5)

The report was formally moved by Councillor Stringer and formally seconded by Councillor Christie.

Councillor Fairclough also spoke on the item.

RESOLVED:

1. That Council approved publication of the Pay Policy Statement attached as Appendix A for 2023/24 and authorised the Monitoring Officer to make any consequential changes to the Constitution.
2. That Council approved the Members' Allowance Scheme attached as Appendix D for 2023/24