

From: Tristan Wood

Sent: 03 November 2016 16:52

To: complaints

Cc: Councillor Edward Foley; Councillor Peter Southgate; Councillor John Sargeant

Subject: For the attention of the Monitoring Officer

Complaint about actions taken by Councillor Stephen Alambritis during the consultation period on Council Tax and adult social care funding

As a Merton resident concerned about the living conditions of the borough's most vulnerable residents, I am writing to complain about the actions of Councillor and Council Leader Stephen Alambritis during the current public consultation on future levels of Council Tax and the key question as to whether additional Council Tax funding should be raised towards social care costs.

Following the budget-setting meeting last March, when the Labour Group refused an option to increase Council Tax by 2% a year to raise £1.7 million for adult social care, Councillor Alambritis said a public consultation would be held to decide whether Merton residents would agree to pay more Council Tax ahead of the 2017/18 budget. That consultation was launched in September and closes tomorrow, 4th November. The impression given when announcing there would be a public consultation was that the outcome of this consultation would be the determining factor in whether or not additional Council Tax funds would be raised towards meeting social care costs.

However, during the consultation period, Councillor Alambritis, together with three other councillors - Imran Uddin, Jerome Neil and Dennis Pearce – has circulated a letter that appears to pre-empt this decision. In it, he and the other councillors state, "We are therefore strongly minded not to increase your council tax for the next two years, especially whilst Brexit is being negotiated."

To make matters worse, after recommending that residents vote against an increase in Council Tax, the letter also contains a questionnaire on Council Tax which describes itself as a consultation, and includes a Freepost envelope to return to the Consultation Team in Merton Council. It is highly likely that (whatever their views) residents returning this questionnaire will think they have taken part in the public consultation, when in fact they have not – the design and content of this 'consultation' is quite different from the official version appearing in *My Merton* and the Council website.

According to the *Wimbledon Guardian*, Merton Council has confirmed responses to the councillors' letter will not be regarded as part of the formal consultation, are not being counted, and that all such responses will be forwarded to the Labour Party. If this is the case, I would also hope that the Council can confirm that all the costs involved in this exercise by the four councillors are being met either by the councillors themselves or the Labour Party, and not by the Council.

My complaint about Councillor Alambritis (and I am singling him out from the other councillors because he also holds the influential position of Council Leader) is that:

- a) His comments in the letter, and their timing, arguably negate the Council's consultation by showing he has already made his mind up about the eventual decision; and
- b) He has further undermined the public consultation procedure by being party to another consultative exercise that has failed to distinguish itself from the Council's official consultation; and
- c) By these actions he has brought local democracy into disrepute and deserves public sanction.

One wonders if Councillor Alambritis's actions are deliberately designed to sow confusion and muddy the official consultation waters sufficiently so that, should the official consultation outcome be in favour of increases in Council Tax, he will feel able to ignore it and leave vulnerable people in the borough in a worse position than if the increase had gone ahead.

I look forward to your confirmation that Councillor Alambritis's actions have demeaned the role of Council Leader and damaged local democracy and, as such, merit public sanction, and also that the Council is bearing none of the cost of the 'consultation' embarked upon by the four councillors.

Tristan Wood