

Merton Council Complaints Team/Monitoring Officer  
London Borough of Merton  
Merton Civic Centre

  
Mrs Jeanette Townley

[REDACTED]  
Morden, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

18<sup>th</sup> October 2016

Dear Complaints Team/Monitoring Officer,

I am writing to lodge a formal complaint about the conduct of my Ward Councillors, Dennis Pearce, Jerome Neil and Imran Uddin. I am also lodging a formal complaint about the conduct of Stephen Alambritis, Leader of the Council.

This relates to a letter I received (delivered by hand through my door) on Saturday 8th October 2016 re consultation currently underway about council priorities and council tax. This consultation ends on 4th November 2016.

The letter is from Stephen Alambritis and my ward councillors; it is entitled Urgent: consultation of Council Tax increases - please read now, and is enclosed. The letter is clear in stating their view that they are 'strongly minded' not to increase council tax for the next two years; they then go on to ask people if that's what they want.

I feel there are very serious shortcomings in conduct of all parties, which is why I need to lodge this complaint.

#### **Ward Councillors**

My ward councillors obviously wanted to share information about the current consultation; that is fair enough and helpful for local people within my ward (St Helier). However, I feel that, taking into account we are in a period of public consultation, the information they sent round should have been presented in a fair, impartial and objective way. All this letter does is construct specific information towards the purpose of highlighting their view, that council tax should not be increased. The letter is also offensive and discriminatory towards disabled people, by not including a mention in the letter, even though they found it right to mention poverty, food banks etc.

I accept that councillors may hold a personal view (as councillors), but publicly, during a period of consultation, they should not be so decisive and should remain impartial to a fixed view; how can they form an opinion when the consultation is not yet finished. Public consultation means the council is asking people for their views and I have seen nothing within consultation documents (My Merton/Merton's website) that states a specific view of not increasing council tax, with consultation being done to see if people agree with that view. I was under the impression that legal precedents worked in this regard, ie, that councillors must adhere to certain rules.

I believe they are using fear (Brexit, possible recession and increased debt) to make people see their view, and also an incentive to sway opinion (ie, offering a two year c/tax freeze).

I feel my ward councillors have acted far below what would be considered good conduct, during a period of public consultation about the issues they write about. I feel they have made it look like something they need to win, rather than a very sensitive issue and part of public consultation process. I think they have caused potential to skew public opinion.

#### Stephen Alambritis - Leader of the Council

Mr Alambritis agreed to the consultation; this was as a result for solid campaigning to raise council tax by the 2% adult social care precept, which didn't happen (it was frozen for a further year). The consultation was not forced upon him. I accept that he has his own local ward, where he may contact people, but as leader he should be objective and impartial. I don't think he has been any of these and believe he has acted far below what would be considered good conduct, during a period of public consultation about the issues written about (he signed the 'yours sincerely' part of the letter, which shows full involvement on his part; the term 'we' is used in the letter, which includes him).

I feel that, as Leader, he had no place imposing his presence/view in my ward, at this time. I feel he was using his power/influence as Leader (and Cabinet Member) to influence public opinion to what views he (and the councillors) hold. I also feel it is an abuse of power, working with local ward councillors at such a time (how can they say no to him when he is the Leader).

As Leader, he should have known better. I don't know who decided to write the letter but he should have ensured it was balanced in its information and non-definitive in view - because it is still an open debate. He should have ensured it was non-discriminatory to disabled people but there is virtually nothing in the letter about them, even though there is a large population of disabled people in my ward, and also the council as a whole.

I worry that Mr Alambritis is still angry at the campaigning last year and intends to do what he can to gather views to agree with him. My ward is a very strong Labour majority, with a lot of social housing. It is the perfect place to get views to agree with his belief that council tax should be frozen for a further two years.

Thank you in advance for your co-operation, I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,

Jeanette Townley

P.S. I have read My Merton and the details of the consultation. This is in the centre pages (enclosed). From this, it is clear that my Ward Councillors and Stephen Alambritis, have acted not in accordance with the agreed way of working. This is true for the letter and voting slip.