

Thank you, Madame Mayor

And I'd also like to thank officers for their work on the budget.

Despite the Covid funding the Government has given, it's clear that local authorities - which have endured central government funding cuts of nearly 50% since 2010 - still need to bridge hefty budget gaps.

So it's yet another year of cuts and Council tax increases.

The 2019 LGA survey of council finances found that 1 in 3 councils feared they would run out of money to provide even their statutory duties by 2022/23. This rose to almost two thirds of councils by 2024/2025 or later.

That was pre-Covid.

So Croydon is unlikely to be the only casualty.

But even within that framework, the administration makes its own choices. And its own luck.

The new leader tells us this is 'Merton together'.

But we don't get a sense of that from this budget.

I don't know about 'businesslike' but it's certainly business-as-usual.

The Conservative amendment talks about 'embracing an ambitious vision'.

But a vision isn't just a vague brain-dump of ideas stuck on the front of the budget.

Madame Mayor – Merton needs to be bold and creative. The budget should set out ways to help capture the best of the public's response to the pandemic, and focus on the future we want to see.

2020 saw people come together to support their neighbours.

From Merton Mutual Aid, the Dons Trust, to the many individual acts of kindness and charity.

The local voluntary sector has never worked more closely or cohesively to support residents.

We saw residents and businesses donate to help cover free school meals during holidays.

Madame Mayor as a Council we must do what we can to create the best environment to help our communities come together to meet the challenges we face, head on.

And it's easy to praise residents' choices but -

If you're not paid enough;

If your housing is insecure, or badly maintained;

If you don't get the support you need as a carer, a young person, an older person or if you have a disability,

Then you are not free to live how you choose.

The mental health implications of the Covid pandemic are being increasingly understood.

ONS data indicates a doubling of adults experiencing some form of depression from 9.7 per cent before the pandemic to 19.2 per cent in June 2020. And mental health inequalities have got wider.

So our amendments are about tweaking the budget to focus on increasing freedom.

Our amendment 1 supports those care workers on the frontline. Long fought for.

Our amendment 2 looks to better resource Merton's climate emergency response, and to mitigate some – but not all – of the worst in the Council's parking charges increases.

Our amendment 3 reflects people's generosity in 2020, and is a trial of a new school breakfast club scheme that would support a number of families.

Our amendments 4 and 5 are to give some clarity and focus on issues affecting young people, older people and people with disabilities.

Let's retain the good from the pandemic, keep in mind those often forgotten and build a brighter future for our young people.

Thank you, Madame Mayor