

Response from Liberal Democratic Party

23 March 2018

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On behalf of Merton Liberal Democrats

If, following the coming Local Elections, your party is in control of Merton Council, or is working in an agreement with another Party:

1. How will you protect all the open spaces, parks and green areas in the Borough, including back gardens, from built development, and improve their character? Will you bring in a 'Tree Years' Policy that requires enough new trees to match the age of trees lost by development?

The best opportunity to promote and protect the Borough's open spaces (including private gardens) is through a strong planning framework. Our representations to the original Local Development Framework consultation sought to protect and develop open spaces. We pushed for a restriction on any developments close to any open space that were likely to result in an adverse effect on its use, management or enjoyment. And we are doing so again in the new Local Plan. We would be keen to place public open space into Trust so that the community would have control of the land. Should the Council wish to use the land in another way, it would have to negotiate with the Trust, and would be prevented from simply appropriating land. We would work with local groups to attract funding to develop and support our open spaces and parks. Communal space should be provided in significant new developments – open space is a 'green lung' as well as a place for neighbours to come together. We would also seek to provide Council-backed information (leaflets to homeowners) about tree preservation and management.

A "Tree Years" measure seems like an interesting idea that we would explore; replacement trees are often much smaller than any lost during development.

2. How will you protect Conservation Areas from inappropriate development? Will you consider introducing Article 4 Directions in some Conservation areas? Will you introduce positive enhancement and management plans in these areas? Will you increase the resources and staffing of the overstretched Development Control and Enforcement Team?

We should both preserve and improve our local environment. It links into so many other issues – such as perceptions of safety. Conservation areas are critical to this, and therefore their improvement and management is a key issue for us. We feel that strong and clear planning rules are the best way forward and that within such a framework, the type of development that would be acceptable would be clear – both for developers, but also for local residents. We don't feel that Article 4 Directions should be made lightly, although obviously they have a place and a role. We have direct experience of trying to support residents with issues over use of land, where the fact that the Development Control and Enforcement team is so overstretched is causing further problems and stress for people, as it's not able to provide the support needed. We would certainly consider any proposals to increase resources and staffing, and assess such against wider Council spending commitments.

3. How will you significantly reduce the amount of energy and water now being used in the Borough?

Back at the April 2014 Council meeting Liberal Democrat councillors successfully passed a motion adopting a “One Planet Merton” framework. This requires Council decisions and policies to be assessed on their environmental impact (if everyone in the world lived as we do in the UK we would need three planets to support us; we need to reduce our ecological footprint by two thirds in order to establish a fairer use of global resources). The “One Planet” initiative, developed by local eco-organisation BioRegional and WWF, could bring environmental considerations to the heart of Merton Council activity and provide an opportunity to develop environmental partnerships with organisations, businesses and residents across the Borough. However, despite being passed by the full Council, neither the administration or the opposition have taken any interest in this. As part of such a scheme, we would like to see better information about the use of energy and water in public buildings in the borough and how Merton is trying to reduce consumption and how the users of the facilities can assist. This information should be readily available on the internet as well as clearly displayed at these buildings. In addition, the borough should be much more open and seek public advice about energy/water reduction strategies. Our “One Planet Merton” motion called on the Council Cabinet to investigate the opportunity and to report back by the end of 2014, which we don’t believe ever happened. It does however, give an insight into how a Liberal Democrat administration would deal with this issue.

We would seek to accelerate the switching of Merton’s street lights to super-efficient LEDs; and similarly, install public drinking fountains across the borough’s parks, stations and public areas. We want Merton to become a “Single Use Plastic Free” area, and would support local businesses and organisations to reduce their use of single-use plastics. We would like to see a clear strategy in place to increase recycling.

4. Will you press developers of significant developments to have creative pre-application discussions with the public before they submit their planning applications?

Will you publish all pre-app discussions between developers and planning officers as they happen? The best developers do this already. But it’s also about having strong enough planning policies. The public should be engaged in how they would like to see areas developed through Neighbourhood Plans (created under the Localism Act). This will turn people’s views into planning rules. One of our campaigners is working with residents to set up the Wimbledon town centre neighbourhood forum and develop the plan. Our group pushed for a stronger policy on public engagement over large developments to be inserted into the Sites & Policies DPD in 2012 – but this suggestion was ignored by the administration. We have made similar proposals in relation to the new Local Plan.

Pre-application discussions need to be structured in a way to positively encourage open debate. It sometimes seems that only limited groups get access to the early proposals. Our ward councillors would work to assist residents to feed their comments and complaints back to the Council (explaining how to influence planning and licensing decisions for example).

We would seek to improve the clarity of the language used in standard form letters about planning applications, to encourage people to have their say. We want to see an end to the culture of holding statutory consultations for appearances sake, while ignoring residents’ actual views.

5. How will you improve facilities for pedestrians, for cyclists and for buses?

How will you re-balance the pedestrian and vehicular spaces in the Town Centre, and improve its character and safety? Will you introduce more 20 mph zones, with proper enforcement, and if so, where?

Merton has a piecemeal mish-mash of 20mph zones and limits that just causes confusion. As a result they're often ignored by drivers. Our proposal would be for 20mph speed limits as a default on residential roads. These schemes have been shown to reduce traffic speeds, pollution and damage and injury from accidents in the towns and cities where they have been implemented. They also make streets more pleasant places to cycle, walk and play. Rather like seatbelts and crash helmets, over time these limits would come to be accepted as a cultural norm. Unfortunately, Merton's Labour and Conservative councillors rejected this idea when our councillors proposed it in November 2012. In the past, our councillors successfully lobbied Merton to agree to open negotiations with the Mayor on the expansion of the cycle hire scheme to the Borough, but no progress seems to have been made on this by the administration. We think Merton needs a clearer set of comprehensive strategic cycling routes. These should be identified by the community as well as experts in cycling design, and the feasibility of implementing safe (pedestrian/cycle) facilities should be assessed. The main 'travel desire' routes across the Borough should be covered: these routes should be offered as much protection as practical to cyclists as well as other pedestrians. We want to encourage more active streets - our councillors will support "play streets" and residents who want to hold community events in their roads.

6. Will you use the Council's own Hartfield Road site to facilitate the provision of a new Civic Hall?

We recognise that a new Wimbledon Civic Hall would make a valuable contribution to Wimbledon's communities - the former Wimbledon Civic Hall was used by a variety of local groups and schools. When it was demolished, the Council promised to replace it - and never did. The plan by administrations in recent years has been to use the sale/development of the (Hartfield Road) P3 site to develop the P4 site for a Community centre/hall (although we note that there has been the suggestion that the P4 site is too small to sustain a viable venue, and that this scheme does not appear to have moved forward).

7. If Council-owned sites are to be developed, will you ensure that this is done by Leasehold sale, retaining the Freehold?

In broad terms, we feel that the Council should ideally retain the freehold of key sites for the benefit of all of Merton's residents.

8. What will you do to improve the links between Social Services and the NHS?

A key aspect of this is properly funding care services, so that people are not forced to seek help from the NHS. We have consistently opposed cuts to Council care services – people's independence is at risk if they're not properly funded. See http://www.mertonlibdems.org.uk/stop_social_care_cuts for more details.

Last November, we proposed that the Council commit to paying home care workers the London Living Wage, but this was voted down by the Council administration. Care workers play a vital role - not only in the safety and dignity of the people they care for, but also in their independence; we should value that work.

Merton is supposed to be a living wage borough, but we proposed it specifically because:

- Recruitment of home care workers will be easier and a lower staff turnover will benefit residents and providers;

- Residents will be able to live independently in their own homes for longer;

- Our residents will spend less time in costly care homes – a big saving for the Council;

- Better quality home care may lead to fewer hospital admissions, thus relieving some pressure on the NHS and more savings.

In addition, we have campaigned for a new “walk-in” doctors surgery to replace the one closed in Mitcham. Again, this is about providing people with easy access to healthcare and other organisations, and reducing the number of unnecessary pressures on A&E.

We would look to adopt the “enhanced health in care homes” framework, as has happened in Sutton. This would champion ways of “joining up” NHS and social care better to improve outcomes for care home residents. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/new-care-models/vanguards/care-models/care-homes-sites/><https://www.england.nhs.uk/new-care-models/vanguards/care-models/care-homes-sites/>

We will fight to fund the NHS properly. Only the Liberal Democrats are being upfront with people that to protect our NHS and care services, we may all need to pay a little more in tax (a penny on the pound in income tax) – ringfenced for these services.

9. Crossrail2: Will you press for all tunneling operations to be driven from the Thames end, to lessen the disruption to Wimbledon Town Centre and rail services?

In summary, our position on Crossrail 2 is as follows:

- **This is a major, long-lasting and enormously expensive scheme and it should only be delivered in a way that responds to the community's needs and concerns - the focus shouldn't just be minimising costs.** The proponents of CR2 need to make comprehensive efforts to address the considered comments of local residents and businesses for improvements to the scheme and to address their reasonable concerns.

- **Wimbledon town centre is the social heart and a major shopping and leisure location in our area.** The proposed works cannot only be considered in technical or engineering terms, but must also fully consider the social and economic impacts.

- **An alternative “deep tunnel” under Wimbledon that would avoid the widespread demolition of the town centre currently proposed.** This is our preferred alternative to the shallow tunnel, all else being equal, and we need to understand exactly what is currently preventing it from being proposed and how these issues could be dealt with.

- **The new Wimbledon station should be subject to an architectural competition.**

Merton Council needs strong, clear and appropriate planning policies and vision in place to guide and manage the significant development that is going to follow this major scheme. Issues that need to be considered include: the impacts of Crossrail 2, height and density of new buildings, the balance between commercial and residential, open space, affordable housing and support for smaller businesses. Current worrying trends in town centres have created sterile and private spaces, such as are seen at Westfield Stratford, which preclude independent small businesses and focus on premium retail offers.

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Existing stations must not be left in a state of disrepair - as this scheme will take years to complete. We need details of how station maintenance will be in the interim period prior to approval of the scheme. Specific concerns include installing a lift/step free access at Raynes Park and Motspur Park stations, as well as congestion management at Wimbledon station.

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We need specific assurances about the impact of more trains on the two level crossings in West Barnes ward - in Motspur Park by the shopping parade and library, and at the junction of West Barnes Lane and Burlington Road. Any further road closures by these level crossings will be severely disruptive to local people and the plans for Crossrail 2 need to include a solution which replaces the level crossings.

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Raynes Park station will become a major interchange and pick up/ drop off hub. The current station is in a poor state and, in particular, passenger pick up conditions are below standard for such a busy location. As part of a proposed rebuild of Raynes Park station, we call for a thorough redesign of access to the station access, drop off, as well as cycle access and parking to be developed, consulted upon and published. The station should be enabled to become the proud heart of the community.

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We would seek to set up a review panel to look at the impact Crossrail 2 will have on our town centres, including looking at other build options. We will also develop clear planning policies and a vision to guide and manage the significant development and building that is going to follow this major scheme.

10. Will you adopt a firm Policy to resist all buildings over 6 storeys in Wimbledon Town centre? Do you support the Society's planning strategy for Wimbledon Town Centre?

We've consistently pushed for the rules to have stronger and clearer policies on the height of buildings - the current vague rules do not assist anyone. This will make it clearer both for residents and developers as to what is appropriate and acceptable. We imagine that height and scale of buildings would be a key issue for residents to determine in Neighbourhood Plans. We would actively support residents, businesses and groups to make those plans and to help determine what's important and appropriate in an area.

11. Where would you envisage the siting of the numbers of new homes, required under the new London Plan, on both large and small sites and what is your attitude to small sites and infill? How will you explain to the public where all the new housing is to be located, and what effect it will have on local character?

There are a number of interlinked questions in this question. To take the last first, real support for Neighbourhood Plans will give residents, businesses and local groups a real say over planning rules, and can help mitigate, minimise and even direct the impact on local character (they can also be used pro-actively to help change local character of an area in a positive way).

There is a clear need for more truly affordable homes and more development is going to be driven through the new London Plan, and other major infrastructure projects like Crossrail 2. In that context, Neighbourhood Planning must be a priority both to ensure development is directed in the right way but also to set the right expectations around the number of affordable homes. We believe we should be pushing for a minimum of 50% affordable housing in large developments, for example.

New housing can't be driven in a top down way or it will further undermine trust in new development among local people. There is more and more best practice out there about how neighbourhood planning can work to deliver new homes with real buy in from local people and we should be making more use of it.

12. What is your policy on buildings that are not being refurbished remaining empty and unoccupied, in excess of 1 year?

We will take action to investigate empty homes and where appropriate, use existing Council powers to bring them back into use. A recent freedom of information request we made revealed that around 300 homes in Merton have stood empty for 2 or more years, and that almost no action had been taken by the Council in regards to this. In addition, we will prosecute rogue landlords that fail to take action when tenants are in unsafe properties. The current administration has not brought any such prosecutions in a number of years, and yet nationally, it's suggested that up to 60% of tenants have problems getting landlords to carry out repairs.

13. Will you consider re-introducing the Committee system into the Council in place of the current 'Cabinet Member' system?

Yes, we would certainly investigate it. The diversity of opinion in our area is not best served by a cabinet model that, in effect, gives all power to the Council leader. Regardless of the format of the council we will seek to establish "Budget Open Days" so everyone can participate in financial decisions on local services. We will champion people's views to those providing services to our community and will seek to make outsourcing contracts accessible for public review. Neighbourhood Plans to give people real control over the development in their area, by turning residents' views into planning rules. People should have power over their own lives and how their country and local area is run, so the fight for fairer votes remains key. A fairer voting system would lead to fewer safe seats, and thereby a greater diversity of opinion

14 How would you implement improvements to the existing street cleaning and to the discouragement of the use of plastic bottles and take-away coffee cups which cannot be re-cycled?

On street cleaning and waste: we want a waste collection service that works for people, is good value for money and increases recycling. See http://www.mertonlibdems.org.uk/shock_flytipping_figures for our 5 point plan in this area. In brief, we would ensure real flexibility over wheellie bins to ensure people with less space can opt out. We will provide weekly collection of nappies and other sanitary waste. We will take strong action against flytippers, and want better contract management - ensuring Veolia are fined with proper penalties when services fail and bins are overflow. The contract needs examining to see what Merton has tied itself into and what the

costs of leaving the contract would be (worryingly, when we asked this at a Council meeting, we were told that the costs of even working this figure out were too much to undertake).

We would like to see the installation of public drinking fountains in the borough's parks, stations and public areas. We want Merton to become a "Single Use Plastic Free" area, and would support local businesses and organisations to reduce their use of single-use plastics. We would like to see a clear strategy in place to increase recycling.

Nationally the Liberal Democrats have been pushing for an additional charge on non-recyclable coffee cups, a bit like that imposed on plastic bags.

15. Is there anything else that you would like to comment on?

Merton Council is supposed to act in the interests of all residents in the decisions it takes. It's about an honest and open conversation with people about what's going on. We want a fresh start for Merton.

Many public services are now run by private companies – our parks and waste collection for example – further blurring accountability and transparency, making it harder for the public to get answers or to change practices.

Other organisations play a huge role in our local area – the Mayor of London, transport companies, the NHS and private developers.

As outlined above, but pulling it together in one place, our plan to help is:

- Establish "Budget Open Days" so everyone can participate in financial decisions on local services.

- Champion people's views to those providing services to our community. Outsourcing contracts should be made public.

- Create Neighbourhood plans to give people real control over the development in their area, by turning residents' views into planning rules.

- People should have power over their own lives and how their country and local area is run, so the fight for fairer votes remains key

Too often it seems that the Council doesn't properly consider the full impact of its actions – we want to end this. A prime example is the new "diesel levy", where the council doesn't seem to have any idea what they are trying to achieve and how they will measure if it is successful, beyond revenue generation.

Our full local election manifesto will shortly be available on our website

<http://www.mertonlibdems.org.uk>