**PRESS RELEASE: Council Tax Consultation Row Undermines Local Democracy**

As the Local Authority prepares to set Council budgets for next year, Councillors are locked in the middle of a bitter dispute about Council Tax which has left residents angry and local voluntary sector representatives deeply concerned about ongoing cuts to services for disabled people and older people.

Last year, Councils were given the opportunity to increase Council Tax by 2 % in order to protect Adult Social Care budgets, called the 2% Precept. This is important because Councils have a legal duty to support older and disabled people, but cuts to services are having a devastating impact on their health and wellbeing. A report from Healthwatch Merton[[1]](#footnote-1) showed that Disabled and older people felt that their wellbeing and physical health would be damaged by cuts to services. Families would be put under immense strain, and some people even asked whether their lives were worth living.

Because of a political election promise made in 2014, London Borough of Merton’s Labour administration decided that they would be one of the very few Councils in England not to apply the 2% precept for Social Care to Council Tax bills[[2]](#footnote-2). The end of an extra tax that Londoners have been paying to fund the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games meant that the council could have got this extra money for social care without anyone having to pay extra at all. So, extraordinarily, Merton Council Tax then ended up going down.

This year the Council are running a consultation with local residents, asking whether they would be willing to increase Council Tax. However, in a bizarre twist, the Leader of the Council, Stephen Alambritis, has published a rival consultation which claims that the Council is “strongly minded not to increase Council Tax”, essentially undermining the whole consultation process.

Sources say that a number of Labour Councillors have refused to send out the rival consultation to their constituents, although it has gone out in St Helier ward and Lower Morden ward.

Questions are now being asked whether the letter and survey, which is signed by the Leader and local ward Councillors, is actually a breach of the Councillors' code of conduct[[3]](#footnote-3). Certainly, the fact that Councillors sent out party-political information but included a pre-paid reply envelope paid for by Merton Council, is an unacceptable use of Council money.

Lyla Adwan-Kamara, CEO of Merton CIL said “this is a very concerning development. Disabled people aren’t even mentioned in the Leaders’ letter, and this is part of an ongoing pattern of disabled people being invisible and our views not being heard in Merton. The Leader’s letter to residents mentions that austerity is costing the average home £1,375; it fails to mention that disabled people are losing £6,354 per person[[4]](#footnote-4). It is incredible that political correspondence is being sent out to residents which directly undermines the Council’s own consultation process.”

Sources say that some residents have already lodged complaints but it is unclear what this all means for decision-making; concerns are that the decision not to increase Council Tax has already been made behind closed doors.

You can have your say on the consultation here until November 4th <https://news.merton.gov.uk/2016/09/06/have-your-say-on-council-tax-and-council-spending/>

**Notes for the Editor:**

Merton Centre for Independent Living is a user-led Disabled people’s organisation run by Disabled people, for Disabled people, across the full spectrum of disability. We deliver a range of services to disabled people in London Borough of Merton.

**For more information contact:**

Lyla Adwan-Kamara

Email: lyla@mertoncil.org

Telephone: 0203 397 3119

[www.mertoncil.org.uk](http://www.mertoncil.org.uk)

1. <http://www.healthwatchmerton.co.uk/sites/default/files/hwm_asc_focus_groups_write_up_report.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Only 8 out of 152 Councils in England decided not to take up the 2% Council Tax precept. Source: Local Government Association 26/08/2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [http://democracy.merton.gov.uk/documents/s12311/ConstitutionPart5A2016.pdf section 1.2](http://democracy.merton.gov.uk/documents/s12311/ConstitutionPart5A2016.pdf%20section%201.2) “I have a responsibility to represent the community and work constructively with our staff and partner organisations to secure better social, economic and environmental outcomes for all.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Duffy S (2014) Counting the Cuts: what the Government doesn’t want the public to know. Sheffield, The Centre for Welfare Reform [↑](#footnote-ref-4)