

This is the formal response from the Merton Conservative Group reference the Draft Statement of Community Involvement

Involving Community: Residents engagement is a Priority !

The Council needs to do a lot more to prioritise and listen to the voice of residents on local planning matters. In particular:

1. Accessible Consultation, Transparency & Integrity:

Online Access to Planning Representations

The Council's position on not allowing Merton residents to have online access to planning applications' local representations is neither acceptable nor tenable; the Council's planning officer states that residents wishing to view objections must now *travel across* the Borough and view them in person at the Civic Centre.

It is hard to see how such a statement is compatible with the need to give our residents quick online access and reduce the transport burden on our roads, with its associated air quality and climate change impacts. The position of the Council's planning policy in this regard would seem to take us back more than a decade, is impossible to reconcile with the Council's stated aim to be London's Best Council and compromises the transparency and integrity of the Borough's planning processes. GDPR should not be used as an excuse for terminating the provision of online access for residents; the Council has the legal and IT resource to put in place a secure online process that is convenient for residents and also compatible with GDPR.

The Conservative Group is happy to support this by engaging directly with the Information Commissioner to ensure the ICO understands the unintended effect of their potential sanctions and avoids any overzealous approach with regard to local authorities.

The Planning Officer has not resolved online access for councillors to date, but in any event it is not merely councillors who need online access: it is a lot more important that our residents have online access to representations and this must be restored with immediate effect. Without online access for residents to view planning representations, it is impossible for residents to understand the dynamics of an application. It is not feasible to expect residents to travel to the Civic Centre. The position taken by the Planning Department represents an unacceptable shortfall in the Council's provision of services and transparency for its residents and this misguided decision must be rectified with immediate effect.

The position of the Council at paragraph 8.29 is therefore not acceptable.

New software functionality for planning alerts

The Conservative Group advises the IT and Planning directors to review and implement as soon as possible a new planning alerts functionality to help residents and local community groups. Residents and community groups would be able to enter their own postcode (or another postcode in the Borough) into an online portal and then receive automated alerts of applications, decisions and appeals with a chosen radius.

We understand the Conservative group in Wandsworth has implemented such a system and we advise Merton to look at bringing in the same helpful system for our Borough residents as soon as possible, in order to better service our residents and improve community involvement.

Procedure at the PAC

The Council must recognise that having Residents at the PAC is of the highest importance through our planning processes. The work of Planning Officers in supporting such processes is vital. The support given at the PAC must be objective, impartial and consistent. Where residents and committee members come to a decision regarding an application, the planning officers' help in ensuring the recording of a suitable rationale in the correct technical terms is valued and needed.

Use of online communications and social media

The Conservative group very much supports the use of digital interfaces and social media to support planning processes and consultations, in particular with regard to changes in Borough plans and policies.

Communication with ward councillors

To better facilitate the opportunity for engagement with community, planning officers should reach out to ward councillors to inform them of more significant applications in their wards at the earliest opportunity. Planning officers should encourage applicants to do this as well, ideally at the pre application stage, but planning officers must also take the opportunity to proactively notify ward councillors to help seek the views of the local community and improve involvement.

Enforcement of Conditions

The trust and confidence of the local community is sometimes challenged by applicants not complying with planning conditions during and post build. To facilitate a better level of trust from the community and lessen the need for more challenging community engagement post build, the Council's planning department would benefit from applying a more rigorous approach to enforcement of conditions immediately post-build. Where

conditions require plantings, trees, beds and shrubs, such conditions and final inspections must become a priority for the Council's enforcement policy in order to assist better air quality outcomes and improved amenity and urban greening.

Planning notices

A review of the Council's processes to serve the required notices on local residents and interested parties who may have responded to applications, must be undertaken. Too many residents and affected groups do not receive the required notices and letters, compromising stakeholder trust and confidence and creating inefficiency as planning periods have to be recommenced as notices are served afresh.

Design Review Panel

The Design Review Panel needs to become more transparent and accountable in its work such that residents achieve a greater degree of confidence in the work it is doing to achieve better quality designs for new developments. The ability for the community and residents to attend or monitor the DRP should be clarified, along with the Panel's constitution.

2. General Objectives and Outcomes after more successful community engagement

In general, the Conservative Group believes that ensuring a more successful degree of community and resident engagement will be more likely to result in better outcomes in relation to the matters listed below, all of which the Conservative Group very much believes should be among our Borough's priority planning objectives:

- a. The delivery of a more successful and ambitious housing program, that ensures increased supply of all forms of housing and in particular that provides significantly better outcomes for affordable / social housing in our Borough, ensuring that all housing is well-designed and fosters better local amenity, urban greening and community cohesion
- b. The delivery of more sustainable, low carbon, low energy housing and developments, in order to support and deliver the Borough's own contribution to helping to address climate change
- c. The delivery of development that ensures all new building 'gives back' to the community in terms of design, local amenity, the provision of community infrastructure for local residents and families, and the facilitation of community cohesion
- d. The continuing provision of green spaces, new plantings and a proper and ambitious Tree Strategy for our Borough; every planning application should present an opportunity to enhance the delivery of green infrastructure across our Borough
- e. The delivery of sustainable transport infrastructure, be it for ambitious plans for new protected cycling routes, the expedited introduction of low emission bus zones, or the provision of electric vehicle infrastructure

- f. The delivery of investment in better designed, redeveloped town centres across our Borough, that provide ambitious and successful centres for our communities, and that prioritise amenity and cohesion for our residents

The Conservative Group believes that Merton should be bold and ambitious and must aim to lead London in all of these respects, in order to deliver far better outcomes for our residents and Borough.

Alan Gibbs / EAG
Merton Conservative Group
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