



Merton CIL's response to Stage 2a Draft Local Plan

January 2021

Background

About Merton CIL

Merton CIL is a pan-Disability user-led Deaf and Disabled People's Organisation which has been supporting Deaf and Disabled People in the borough since 2008. We work with people with all types of impairment including physical impairments, sensory impairments, mental health service users, people with learning difficulties and people with chronic illness or long term ill-health. Many of our service users have more than one impairment, and many are also carers and/or parents. Deaf and Disabled People do not have to be members to use our services but we do have an ever-growing membership who shape our direction and focus as an organisation. At the end 2020 Merton CIL had 362 members.

In 2020 our advice and advocacy service worked with 265, providing just over 1,000 sessions of advice on a range of issues including social care, benefits, and hate crime. Many of the service users we support experience problems with a range of issues that are often interlinked. We also reached over 1,000 people through events and outreach, and just over 3,000 people followed us across our social media platforms.

While Merton CIL's main role is to provide advice and advocacy support for individuals, we also engage with local consultation and co-production by responding to initiatives like the Local Plan.

Deaf and Disabled people in Merton

The London Borough of Merton has a population of 209,421 people¹. According to the 2011 census, 25,232 residents felt their day to day activities were limited a little or a lot, about 12% of the population.

The Greater London Authority (GLA) estimates that by 2020 Merton's population had increased by just over 1% to 211,787, which would bring the number of Deaf and Disabled people to approximately 25,484. ²The GLA projects that Merton's population will increase to 225,157 people by 2031. If the proportion of Deaf and Disabled people remains at 12%, this would mean there will be 27,018 Deaf and Disabled people in

¹<https://data.merton.gov.uk/>

² <https://maps.london.gov.uk/population-projections/>

Merton in 2031. The likelihood is that the aging population will mean the proportion of Deaf and Disabled people will increase.

The Council's disability profile gives the following figures about different types of impairment/disability in 2018: ³

- 27,300 Deaf people/people with hearing loss
- 2,400 people with visual impairments
- 13,000 people with physical impairments aged 18 – 65
- 4,800 people over 65 with mobility impairments
- 3,900 people with learning difficulties.

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<https://www.merton.gov.uk/assets/Documents/www2/Merton%20Disability%20Health%20and%20Care%20Profile%20October%202018%20V4.pdf>

General comments about stage 2a of the Local Plan

This seems to be a wide-ranging plan that addresses the key development challenges for Merton in the next 10 years, although we are by no means experts on all the issues covered. Merton CIL's comments focus on how the Plan relates to Deaf and Disabled people.

The Plan is crucially important to Deaf and Disabled people who live and work in Merton and it is essential that it addresses the issues of concern that are covered by the Plan. At the core of this are issues around accessibility in the built environment, streetscape, green spaces and leisure facilities and perhaps, most importantly, in housing.

Accessibility is not just a disability issue, and this is recognised in the Plan with many references to access for everyone. But we believe there needs to be an explicit recognition that full access means access for Deaf and Disabled people and this is absent from most of the Plan.

We believe that full accessibility for everyone including Deaf and Disabled people needs to be included a 'golden thread' that runs through all relevant parts of the plan, in the same way that the need to address climate change runs through the whole Plan. The two principles on climate change that seem to run through all the policies that make up the Plan is to work to improve the environment and not to do anything that damages it. Likewise, Merton CIL believes the Plan should support work to improve access and not do anything that damages or reduces it.

Much of this can be done by working to the existing standards that exist around building and development. But there is recognition, starting in this consultation itself, that the community must be involved in the development process. We recommend that co-production with the community should also be recognised as a key principle in how the Plan is implemented within all the policies.

Merton CIL is aware of numerous examples of buildings, developments and facilities that have met access standards but are not fully accessible to Deaf and Disabled people. Co-production and consultation are essential to ensuring full access and meeting all the needs of the community.

Merton CIL would also want to encourage understanding that access is not something that can just be planned for, achieved and left. It is an ongoing process and needs to be maintained and developed.

Maintenance is a particularly important issue for Deaf and Disabled people, with issues around poorly maintained pavements and streetscapes causing barriers and sometimes hazards. These issues are outside the standard format of Local Plans but Merton CIL sees it as important to give this recognition.

Responses to the Council's questions about specific areas of the Plan

Important Note:

Section numbers below refer to the numbers of the specific plans and policies that make up the local plan and the consultation questionnaire, so they are not consistent within this document.

We have not answered all questions in consultation questionnaire, so again the questions numbers are not consistent. The rate after each question is the number for how far we agree with statement that the policy is complete (a score of 5) or that more work needs to be done (going down to a score of 1).

3. Urban Development Objectives and Good Growth Strategy

Question 1. Urban development objectives and good growth strategy

Rate: 3.

The growth strategy appears to be good overall but as noted in the general comments about the plan, it lacks the recognition that is needed to ensure that all aspects of the plan meet access.

This is particularly important in the noted priority for securing more homes, 'including genuinely affordable homes which meet the actual needs of our diverse communities.' Policy 2, strategic objective 1 on supporting resilience, also refers to well-designed, affordable housing.

While these cover suitable and accessible housing for Deaf and Disabled people, Merton CIL believes there needs to be a strong and explicit recognition of what the Equality and Human Rights Commission has called the hidden housing crisis for Disabled people. ⁴

⁴ <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/our-work/news/disabled-people-housing-crisis>

There is also a priority to ensure that the infrastructure meets the needs of residents, workers and visitors to Merton. Again, we believe that providing access should include an explicit recognition that infrastructure will be accessible to everyone including Deaf and Disabled people.

Housing density

The Good Growth strategy document refers to the need to develop high density housing, including new tower blocks.

This is something that Merton CIL expressed concerns about in its response to the first draft of the Local Plan. While recognising the urgent need for more housing, we remain concerned about the prospect of high density housing developments where accessible housing standards may not be applied and aspects of the infrastructure, such as pavement size, might be restricted. Tower block housing is a particular concern as it is often unsuitable and inaccessible.

20-minute neighbourhoods

There is not a question about the concept and plan for '20 minute neighbourhoods,' which is surprising as it seems to be a crucial part of the Plan.

We agree with this idea and the intention to reduce environment by enabling people to do as much as possible within 20 minutes of their home but we believe this needs to be explored much more with Deaf and Disabled people to be clear about how this is achievable. A 20 minute trip for people with a mobility impairment/disability may be of more limited scope compared with a non-Disabled person. We do not want to discount but believe it needs further investigation before it is enshrined in the plan.

4. Neighbourhoods

We have not had capacity to review each of the neighbourhood policies.

5. Housing Provision

Question 19: Housing mix: Policy H4.3 Do you agree that this policy ensures existing and future residents have a choice of different types, sizes and costs of homes?

Rate: 2

We welcome the more specific commitments in the housing policy about meeting the building regulations on accessible housing (Part M) in the housing policy (H4) and the targets of 10% of new housing being wheelchair accessible and the remaining 90% meeting general accessibility and adaptability standards.

However, Merton CIL's specific response to council 19 - Do you agree that this policy ensures existing and future residents have a choice of different types, sizes and costs of homes? – would have to be no.

We need to point out the targets are not always met. For example, in 2016 – 2017 only 3% of new housing met the wheelchair access standards.⁵

We believe the approach to increasing the amount of accessible housing needs to be supported by a specific policy, which should be part of the local plan. This policy should address all the considerations and recommendations for local authorities made in the Equality and Human Rights Commission's (EHRC) report on housing for Disabled people.

We believe consideration to how these targets are implemented, and whether steps such as increasing the targets to make up for shortfalls in the previous year would be appropriate so that if only 3% of new housing was wheelchair accessible in 2016 – 2017, the target for the following year would carry over the outstanding 7% to give a target of 17%.

We also believe the approach to increasing the availability or accessible housing needs to be underpinned by data about the

⁵ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/amr_14_final_20180927.pdf

accessible social housing stock in the borough, as recommended by the EHRC. Our understanding is that neither the council nor the main social housing provider in the borough, Clarion Housing, do this at present.

Question 21: Supported care housing for vulnerable people or secure residential institutions for people housed as part of the criminal justice system: Policy H4.4 -Do you agree that this policy ensures clearly sets out the requirements for proposals for supported care housing? – we would also have to say no.

Rate: 3

While the specific plans about such housing appear reasonable, there does not appear to be any proposal around how the levels of need for such housing will be identified. This is recommended in the Mayor's New London Plan and should be included in the Local Plan to mirror this. ⁶

⁶ <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/planning/london-plan/new-london-plan> Policy H14

6. Places and spaces in a growing borough

This policy has some good consideration of access for Disabled people. In many ways it is the strongest section of the Plan for disability access as it goes some way to showing the type of consistent thread about access that Merton CIL would have liked to have seen through the whole of the Plan. Unfortunately, it is not entirely consistent with several points not addressing access issues.

Question 29: Place Making and Design: Policy D5.1 -Do you agree that this policy clearly sets out the strategic requirements of good design.

Rate: 4.

We note that the key introduction section (a) for all developments includes:

ix. That the design and management of buildings, streets and spaces provide for the access needs of all of Merton's communities, including the particular needs of people with disabilities.'

We welcome this strong, explicit commitment. The reference to the management of buildings and streets is particularly welcome as this would address Merton CIL's concerns about ongoing maintenance being a key part of ensuring access for Deaf and Disabled people.

Question 31: Urban design and the public realm: Policy D5.2 - Do you agree that this policy ensures the creation of sustainable, efficient and high quality design and layout of the urban environment?

Rate: 3.

The discussion of urban design and public realm does not include specific consideration of disability access. Interestingly, there are references to creating dementia friendly environment. Merton CIL has not done a lot of work in the area but we would take the view that dementia is a form of impairment/disability and that creating a

dementia friendly environment is about creating an accessible, inclusive environment for all Deaf and Disabled people. We would in no way want to detract from the important work being done make Merton more an inclusive borough for people with dementia but we believe it would be helpful for everyone if this is included in the context of access for everyone.

**Question 33: Design considerations in all developments:
Policy D5.3 - Do you agree that this policy will achieve high quality design and protection of amenity within the borough for new buildings?**

Rate: 4.

We welcome the commitment to:

'v. Ensure the highest practical standards of access and inclusion and be accessible to people with disabilities.'

We would want to ensure that Deaf and Disabled people are part of the process of judging the 'highest practical standards', in line with the co-production approach advocated in our introduction.

'Practical' concerns' can be used as an excuse for not providing disability access and Disabled people must be part of the decision-making process about this. Similarly, Disabled people must be part of deciding what the 'highest standards' are.

**Question 35: Alterations and extensions to existing buildings:
Policy D5.4 - This policy aims to achieve high quality design and protection of amenity within the borough for alterations and extensions to existing buildings?**

Rate: 2

This policy does not have any recognition of disability. We believe these criteria should include at least maintaining existing access and, where practical and appropriate, improving it.

Question 37: Managing Heritage Assets: Policy D5.5- Do you agree that this policy will conserve and where appropriate enhance Merton's heritage assets and distinctive character?

Rate: 3

There is one brief mention of accessibility in the justification for this policy, but we believe there should be a clear recommendation that enhancing heritage should mean increasing access, and disability access in particular. This policy needs more work to address these issues.

Question 39: Advertisements: Policy D5.6 - Do you agree that this policy will achieve high quality design and protection of amenity within the borough through appropriate control of advertisements?

Rate: 4

We welcome the requirement that advertisement should not impede movement on public highways, including any impediment to Disabled people.

Question 41: Telecommunications: Policy D5.7 Do you agree that this policy will encourage high quality design and protection of amenities within the borough through appropriate design of telecommunications equipment?

Rate: 2

Much of this section is about the siting of telecommunications infrastructure equipment. While there are requirements about such equipment being placed appropriately, there does not seem to be one that mirrors the point above about not impeding movement. This should be added.

Question 43: Shop front design and signage: Policy D5.8 - Do you agree that this policy will achieve high quality design and protection of amenities within the borough through good quality shop front design and signage?

Rate: 3

We welcome the requirement for shop front design to include disability access, but this is let down by the wording that it should be 'satisfactory'. While this is open to interpretation, we believe the wording should be 'the highest practical standard of access', reflecting the requirements for new developments above.

Question 45: Dwelling Conversions: Policy D5.9 - Do you agree that this policy will protect the number of family-size dwellings in the borough whilst allowing appropriate dwelling conversions?

Rate:4

We welcome the requirement in this policy that conversions must meet with the standard for accessible housing.

7. Infrastructure

Question 51: Social and Community Infrastructure: Policy IN6.2 - Do you agree this policy supports the aim of providing and improving social and community infrastructure?

Rate 3

The requirements for changes to social and community infrastructure facilities do include a general requirement for them to be accessible but we believe there is a need for an explicit commitment to disability access.

8. Transport and Urban Mobility

Question 55: Improving travel choices: Policy T6.4 - Do you agree this policy supports the aim of making Merton a healthier, cleaner and inclusive place?

Rate: 2

While agreeing with much of what is set out in this and that much of this would benefit Deaf and Disabled people along with the wider community, the policy does not recognise that some people with mobility impairments will continue to need to use cars. We believe this needs to be recognised in this policy with a commitment to considerations such as permits for Disabled people travelling in private and public vehicles (taxis and minicabs) to enter areas where cars are to be excluded and facilities such as Blue Badge parking and accessible charging points for Disabled people who use electric cars and other mobility equipment.

Question 57: Prioritising Walking: Policy T6.5 - Do you agree this policy supports the aim of encouraging more people to walk?

Rate: 3

We agree with much of this policy, this point is not expressed well in the Council saying it will support:

'improvements that enable people to walk as part of their everyday lives no matter how limited their personal and physical abilities are.'

As well as re-phrasing this, it also needs to recognise that for some walking means the use of mobility equipment including self-propelled and powered wheelchairs and mobility scooters. The improvements to enable people to walk also need to ensure people can use such equipment without encountering access barriers.

Question 59: Prioritising Cycling: Policy T6.6 - Do you agree this policy supports the aim of encouraging more people to cycle?

Rate 3

We welcome the recognition of the use of non-standard cycles in this section. However, it needs to go much further than addressing parking and storage facilities, there are many obstacles for such cycles on paths, shared pavements and cycle lanes.

Question 61: Managing Transport Impacts: Policy T6.7 - Do you agree this policy supports the aim of mitigating the impacts of development?

Rate: 4

This policy includes a requirement for all new developments to deliver equal access for Disabled people, which we welcome.

Question 63: Parking, deliveries and servicing: Policy T6.8 -Do you agree this policy mitigates against parking and servicing impacts?

Rate: 3

We welcome the requirement that all new developments should include parking for Disabled people in their parking provision. However, we want to note that there may still be circumstances for on-street disabled parking bays, for example where it might necessary for parking to be away for the developments entrance/exit.

Question 65: Supporting Transport infrastructure: Policy T6.9 - Do you agree this policy supports the aim of protecting existing facilities and supporting new the provision of transport capacity?

Rate: 2

This policy needs a strong commitment to removing access barriers at existing facilities. We recognise there are technical difficulties with achieving this and it involves coordination with Transport for London and Network Rail, but there are some 'quick wins' that have not been addressed at stations in Merton, for example, the south side of Haydons Road where a planning requirement that would have delivered step-free access has not been enforced.

We would suggest the local plan should include a review of all stations with plans drawn for immediate and long-term action to improve disability access.

9. Economy

We do not have responses to any of the questions asked by the consultation questionnaire.

Employment and training

While Merton CIL does not carry out work around employment and Deaf and Disabled people at present, we would point to the disadvantages and discrimination Deaf and Disabled people face when seeking and when in employment. All measure to support employment and training must be generally accessible and meet the specific requirements of Deaf and Disabled people. Mainstream opportunities should be supported with specialist projects and support where appropriate.

Voluntary sector contribution to the economy

As a voluntary organisation Merton CIL is concerned that this policy does not take in the full range of the economy. We would like to see some recognition that voluntary organisations like Merton CIL can make significant contributions to the local economy. There is recognition of the need to support social and community infrastructure, but this needs to be linked to the plans for the local economy. The Council does have a strategy for the voluntary sector which should be part of this overall plan for the borough (though we recognise this might not fit the model that local plans follow.

10. Green and Blue Infrastructure

This section talks extensively about increasing access to green and blue but there is not any specific mention of disability access. This is particularly concerning as disability access to such infrastructure can be complex and can involve a balance between conflicting requirements. Recognition of these issues and how they will be addressed are essential for this section of the plan.

Question 87: Open Space and Green Infrastructure: Policy O8.2 - Do you agree this policy supports the aim of protecting and enhancing open spaces in Merton and improving accessibility to open space?

Rate: 2

This policy makes no specific reference to access for Deaf and Disabled people. In addressing this we would like to see a commitment to ensuring pathways in open spaces being given a smooth surface through paving or tarmac. Many pathways start of surfaced and then end and become muddy and even, making them difficult and sometimes impossible for people with mobility impairments, and the population in general.

We are also aware of some parks where bollards and barriers to maintain safety and prevent illegal entry by vehicles which also cause obstructions to wheelchair and mobility scooter users. We believe should be a specific commitment to solutions meet safety needs while maintaining access.

It is worth noting that it starts by referring to the importance of access to open spaces and green infrastructure to physical and mental health and wellbeing. Merton CIL would point out that many reports and surveys show that Deaf and Disabled people experience lower wellbeing compared with the general population, including the Council's own residents surveys. This further highlights the importance of giving specific consideration to disability access.

91. Protection of Trees: Policy O8.4: Do you agree this policy supports the aim of protecting trees and enhancing other features of the natural environment?

Rate: none

The only issue Merton CIL would want to make about trees (and this may be more appropriate in another section of the plan) but where trees are grown as part of the built environment it is essential that they are properly managed. At present there are countless trees on pavements that have not been managed and are overgrown, restricting the space and often damaging and deforming the pavements. This causes barriers and hazards for many, but particularly for people with mobility impairments.

Trees certainly need to be protected but part of this must be that where they are in the built environment, they must be managed. This probably also applies in green spaces where paths and access are provided.

93. Sport and Recreation: Policy O8.5 Do you agree this policy supports the aim of helping residents lead healthy and active lifestyles and improve mental well-being, through sport and recreation?

Rate 3

We welcome point 1.1.69 requiring facilities to use inclusive design standards but believe, again, that the policy needs stronger recognition of the importance of disability access. For example, point 1.1.62 could include the council being particularly supportive of facilities that are inclusive of and/or are aimed at Deaf and Disabled people.

11. Proposed Changes to Policy Maps

We have not had time to review the proposed changes to all the policy maps.

12. Climate Change

Merton CIL welcomes policies to address the climate emergency. The Plan rightly acknowledges the health impacts of pollution, which can have particular impacts on people with some types of impairment/disability.

This policy is largely about building practices and energy efficiency, for which we have no comments on the questionnaire.

However, we believe it is important to note that sustainable design should include accessibility and meeting access standards (Part M) for new buildings. Sustainable design will not bring the desired benefits if it creates barriers and/or is not useable by everyone including Deaf and Disabled people.

Meeting the requirements of Part M reduces the need for adaptations which cause waste and work that has a further impact on the environment.