Supporting our High Streets

Merton Liberal Democrats' Consultation Response

Merton Liberal Democrats believe that our high streets are the heart of our communities and should be attractive, vibrant and welcoming spaces. Merton's town centres have significant potential to boost the local economy, but more can be done to ensure this is realised equally across the borough.

We have consistently advocated for high streets which are accessible and include the necessary provision for the community and tourists alike. Accessibility has a significant impact on footfall and if this is not guaranteed, high streets cannot survive.

We propose measures around:

1. Getting the basics right

2. Creating the best environment for businesses

3. Making our town centres great places to be

We welcome this opportunity for both residents and businesses to provide input on town centre design to ensure place-making is locally driven and endorsed.

1. Getting the basics right

People want to visit high streets that are well-kept and inviting. Routine street sweeping would ensure streets across the borough are consistently tidy and attractive, and in our town centres this would support encouraging investment and visitors alike. Yet residents tell us their streets haven't been swept for months, and fly tipping is common practice. In our 2026 Local Election Manifesto, we promised to introduce a 'Clean Sweep' routine street cleaning service. Therefore, **we urge the Council to adopt routine and fixed schedule sweeping.**

In addition, we were disappointed recently to find the administration's response when asked about jet washing in town centres:

> *"Pavement washing is not mandated, nor is it identified as a required technique or necessary for meeting Section 89 duties under the Environmental Protection Act."*

Civic pride means more than managing the minimum statutory grade. It means striving for excellence in the public realm across our busy town centres. Following this, we would like to see 1) **a plan for the ongoing maintenance and cleaning of pavements**

in high footfall town centres, including any role for jet washing beyond current trials, 2) **details of enforcement actions against commercial waste providers** that are responsible for staining pavements, and 3) **regular updates on the frequency of cleaning, methods used and outcomes delivered.**

2. Creating the best environment for businesses

To attract the best investment, our town centres must have the necessary provision for businesses and startups. We are pleased to see the Council making progress on shop front improvements, but there is much more to be done.

In our 2026 Local Elections Manifesto, we promised to embed Merton's rich history into our local economy, particularly focusing on creative industries.

We support measures to:

- Champion Merton's creative economy, culture and diversity, building on the historic legacy of William Morris and Merton Park's film studios;
- Create distinct local identities for our high streets and town centres;
- Explore better public transport links to the east of the borough, where poor connectivity has held back growth and opportunity;
- Strengthen the Nighttime Economy; and
- Take advantage of High Street Rental Auction Powers[1] to help fill empty units. In the short-term, the Council could look to mitigate the visual impact of empty units using creative solutions, like the visual boards used by Liberal Democrat-run Cheltenham Borough Council. To tackle the issue in the longer-term, Merton should explore schemes like those used by Lambeth Council who are set to trial a 'right to rent' initiative in high vacancy areas.

We have also received feedback from some businesses that inconsistent parking restrictions across town centres lead to confusion. **We encourage the Council to consult with businesses and business groups to ensure that parking controls support their purposes.**

Improving financial support

Low vacancy rates on high streets is a key determinant for investors when assessing the economic viability of an area, and without addressing wider systemic issues the driving factor for conversions of commercial units persists. The lasting impact of the Covid-19 lockdown has resulted in many vacant units as small businesses have struggled to survive. This has been exacerbated by a series of Labour and Conservative

[1] See Cllr Kohler's question to the Cabinet Member for Housing and Sustainable Development here.

governments who have increased the financial burden on local businesses. Increasing rents and Employer National Insurance Contributions (ENICs) have put budgets under further strain, with UK Hospitality reporting that 1 in 6 venues now risk closure.[2] We have seen this right here in Merton as we have lost 350 businesses since 2020.[3]

At last year's Budget Council, we proposed creating a Merton Enterprise Relief Fund to support businesses affected by the Government's business rates increase. The recent revaluation has pushed many businesses into paying business rates for the first time. To mitigate further devastation of our high streets, **we urge the Council to grant a one-year fee waiver** to those businesses not making a profit while they adjust to the new system.

We also encourage the administration to reverse the 400% increase to al-fresco dining charges which ultimately disincentivises businesses from creating a vibrant, bustling high street scene.

3. Making our town centres great places to be

Health on our high streets

Residents have raised concerns with us over the content of advertising boards in high streets which promote alcohol and gambling. The Liberal Democrats believe that gambling is a public health issue. **We urge the Council to lobby TfL to change their policy**, which at the time of writing does not restrict this type of advertising on their property, and to **update the Council's policy** in line with the principle that we need a public health approach to tackling these harms.

Commercial and office development

While we encourage commercial development in our town centres, this must preserve the area's local character. Liberal Democrat councillors have repeatedly called for the anticipated design guides for tall buildings, alongside existing Strategic Heights Diagrams to ensure new developments blend optimally into the streetscape. In November 2024, we tabled a Recommendation at the Development and Planning Applications Committee calling on the Council to produce a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) on tall buildings. This Recommendation was voted down by administration councillors. As a result, the administration failed to put in place an essential planning tool ahead of the adoption of the Merton Local Plan (2024) – and has

[2] UKHospitality, "One-in-Six Venues Risk Closure, as Sector Unites Behind VAT Cut," *UKHospitality*, 1st July 2026, https://www.ukhospitality.org.uk/one-in-six-venues-risk-closure-as-sector-unites-behind-vat-cut/.

[3] UK Office for National Statistics, *Nomis: UK Business Counts – IDBR Time Series*, Accessed 31st July 2026: https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lad/1778385183/subreports/idbr_time_series/report.aspx.

still not done so. **As a priority, we ask the administration to devise a Supplementary Planning Document on tall buildings** to ensure the Council has greater capacity to shape local development.

In addition, the Council should seek to address gaps in planning policy affecting town centres. Co-living developments are becoming an increasingly popular housing choice, often built near transport hubs - a key feature of Merton's town centres. This type of rented accommodation is categorised as Large Scale Purpose Built Shared Living (LSPBSL) under the London Plan. Merton currently has no policy on co-living, unlike other London Councils including Westminster, Lambeth and Barnet.

If the Council developed their own policy, they would have greater control over the circumstances in which these developments would be permitted and how they might be managed. For example, Lambeth's co-living policy prohibits co-living developments where it "*may be detrimental to the balance and mix of uses in the area or place undue pressure on local infrastructure.*"[4] Due to this policy gap, the Council has limited means to regulate these developments. Developers instead look to London Plan Guidance which fails to account for local factors. **We urge the Council to address this gap by producing a Supplementary Planning Document on co-living developments**.

The Liberal Democrats also believe that residents should have a greater involvement in planning decisions at the pre-application stage. While the Council administers a system of commenting on planning applications, by the time they have been submitted the development is largely set in stone and supported by planning officers. Engaging residents in meaningful discussion earlier on would allow residents to raise concerns while plans are still being formulated, thereby reducing the likelihood of conflict with developers further down the line. Resident engagement is currently a voluntary, developer-led responsibility which **we would encourage the Council to take ownership of and consider new ways to engage meaningfully.**

In a similar measure to promote positive relationships between residents and developers, we ask the Council to provide better assistance to residents where construction work is disruptive. In town centres where there are large concentrations of residents living in proximity, construction work can impact day-to-day lives. As suggested previously by the Liberal Democrats, **the Council should look to introduce a 'one-stop shop'** whereby residents can easily inform the Council of issues without needing to know precisely which Council team or teams need to be engaged. The Council can then offer a response through the most suitable team, whether that's planning enforcement, environmental health or building control.

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[4] Lambeth Council, *Lambeth Local Plan 2021* (London: Lambeth Council, 2021), p. 79. Available at: https://www.lambeth.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2021-09/Lambeth%20Local%20Plan%202021.pdf

Embedding local history and culture

Measures to embed local culture and heritage are essential to building and consolidating the unique character of each area. There is a strong showing of this in Wimbledon during the Championships, but we would like to see more of this across Merton.

For example, Rose Lamartine Yates, a suffragette and social campaigner, lived at Dorset Hall in South Wimbledon. Rose led the Wimbledon branch of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) which campaigned for women's suffrage. Liberal Democrat councillors were involved with the campaign to preserve Dorset Hall in South Wimbledon, Rose's former home. **We encourage the Council to explore more opportunities to honour key individuals** as part of visual design:

Please note these images were generated using AI.

We are lucky in Merton to house one of University of the Arts London (UAL)'s campuses. **We would like to see the Council explore opportunities for students to co-produce design work alongside the Council,** drawing upon local talent to help tell Merton's story across our town centres.

Creating safe and accessible high streets

We must ensure our high streets have the necessary amenities for visitors' needs. Over the last decade, the number of public toilets has declined by 14%, resulting in 'toilet deserts.'[5] We have long called for the expansion of the limited Community Toilet Scheme in Merton, pointing to successful schemes like Liberal Democrat-run Richmond Council who recently reached 100 community toilets. Without adequate provision, our high streets become inaccessible to some. **We encourage the Council to meet with representatives of Richmond Council** to discuss the merits and

[5] Denis Campbell, "England Left with 'Toilet Deserts' as Public Facilities Decline by 14% in a Decade," *The Guardian*, Accessed 20th April 2026. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2026/apr/20/england-left-with-toilet-deserts-as-public-facilities-decline-by-14-in-a-decade

workability of their scheme, **with the aim of reaching fifty toilets – currently twenty-one - by July 2027.**

In addition, the safety of shoppers on the high street should be guaranteed. Yet, uneven and damaged pavements present danger to all shoppers, but particularly those with reduced mobility or parents with prams. **We urge the Council to conduct a borough-wide review of pavements in town centres**, ensuring pavements are up to a safe, acceptable standard.

Pavements are often damaged when Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGVs) travel down residential streets close to town centre areas that are unsuitable. This deters walking and cycling where it is not safe. Therefore, ensuring that HGV limits are properly enforced would help to make residents feel safer and also reduce air pollution. **We urge the Council to increase patrols and CCTV in rat-running hotspots with a zero-tolerance approach to breaches.**

Likewise, we should be able to guarantee our high streets are free from 'street clutter'. However, delivery bike riders often lack a suitable spot to pick up and drop off, causing obstructions to pedestrians. **We encourage the Council to identify delivery bike hotspots and install dedicated parking with suitable proximity to food venues**, ensuring high street pavements are clear. **We also suggest the Council makes the necessary modifications to ensure cycle lanes are fully segregated** from the pavement across Merton where possible. The current cycle network is patchy and inadequate, forcing cyclists onto the pavement where they could collide with pedestrians.

The Council should specifically look to control pedestrian congestion outside Morden Underground Station. This is not an appropriate space for a conjoining bus stand, creating difficulty moving through the high street particularly at peak travel times. Morden regeneration presents a key opportunity to transform this high street. We welcome the Council's objective within the plans to "*create a public transport hub that works well for pedestrians and is not dominated by the buses*,"[6] but **we are yet to see detailed plans which would outline an alternative, suitable spatial strategy.**

In the Council's Walking, Wheeling and Cycling Strategy, active travel is listed as a key objective. We recognise the Council is taking step towards reducing car use through Car Free Days, however **we urge the Council to take this a step further by exploring, in collaboration with businesses and residents, the feasibility of pedestrianisation** on more high streets. Pedestrianisation helps to reduce air pollution, increase walking

[6] London Borough of Merton, *Cabinet Report: Morden Town Centre* (report to Cabinet, 19th January 2026), p. 9. Accessed 23rd July 2026. https://democracy.merton.gov.uk/documents/s57744/Cabinet%20report%20-%20Morden%20Town%20Centre%20-%2019th%20Jan%202026%20-%20FINAL.pdf

and cycling, create safer streets and more spaces for local businesses. The seasonal pedestrianisation of Northcote Road by Wandsworth Council was designated following its popularity during the pandemic. The initiative has been a huge success, creating more space for pedestrians and promoting local businesses during summer – the busiest time of the year for hospitality.

Lastly, poor transport in the East of Merton has been continually noted by the current administration with limited action on actually improving this infrastructure. Access to the local economy not only brings more shoppers onto the high street but also offers increased job opportunities. Some of the most deprived wards in Merton have limited access to public transport, and better connectivity could help to alleviate this. **We would like to see improving transport links in the East of Merton as a top priority in the upcoming Council Plan.**