

Liberal Democrat Draft Budget Amendments 2026

Amendment 1: A place we choose to call home

To add after Recommendation A, Recommendations B, C, D, E, F, G, and H as follows:

B. For future budget decisions and in-year financial monitoring, Council asks Cabinet to consider the following additional Strategic Priorities, which will help to make Merton the borough that residents proudly choose to call home:

- **‘A fairer and more affordable Merton’**, including initiatives to help people through the cost-of-living crisis, such as making grants to support local furniture schemes (Recommendation C).
- **‘A thriving local economy’**, including measures to protect jobs, sustain high streets, and support hospitality venues, such as discretionary business rates relief (Recommendation D).
- **‘A healthier Merton’**, including prevention and early-intervention measures, such as a social prescribing programme for young people (Recommendation E).
- **‘A safer, cleaner borough’**, including visible, community-based approaches to crime prevention and neighbourhood safety, such as the introduction of community safety hubs across the borough (Recommendation F).
- **‘A great place to grow up’**, including action to improve children’s quality of life through fun and innovative activities (Recommendation G).
- **‘A borough fit for the future’**, including modernising services, such as transforming Council support to residents both in-person, by phone and online, enabling more effective engagement (Recommendation H).

C. Council notes that 26% of families in the Social Rented Sector (SRS) experience furniture poverty, and that one in ten children from low-income families are living in bed poverty. As a first step to create a *fairer and more affordable Merton*, Council proposes creating a grant scheme to support local VCS organisations tackling furniture poverty by providing furniture and mattresses for families in need. This would be funded by one-off allocation of up to £300,000 from the Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF), subject to the submission of Merton’s CRF delivery plan and approval by the Department for Work and Pensions.

D. Council notes that new rateable values will take effect on 1 April 2026 and that small businesses in retail, hospitality, and leisure will see bills increase by around 52% by 2028/29. Local authorities can propose additional discretionary reliefs. As a first step to make Merton a *thriving local economy*, Council asks Cabinet to consider establishing a Merton Enterprise Relief Fund of £300,000 to support businesses over a three-year period that bring economic, cultural, and social benefit to the borough. Eligible businesses will qualify for support if their final payable business rates at the end

of the three-year period is set to increase by 60% or more. 37% of the cost will be borne by Government, 33% by the Greater London Authority (GLA) and only 30% by Merton Council. Therefore, the net cost of this fund will be £90,000 to Merton, funded from “For use in future years” Budget Reserve.

E. Council notes that social prescribing is a proven, cost-effective way to support mental and physical wellbeing and that Merton’s Children and Young People’s Social Prescribing Service ceased in March 2025 when funding expired. As a first step to making *a healthier Merton*, Council asks Cabinet to consider reopening the service for one year and expanding it across all six Primary Care Network areas in Merton. This would be delivered through the Family Hubs. This one-year programme, continuation of which is subject to further examination, would be funded by £200,000 from the “For use in future years” Budget Reserve. In addition, should it not prove possible to immediately achieve the full savings envisaged by the significant transformation projects CLLF 2026/27/009 (Strategic joint commissioning & service delivery for vulnerable children) and/or CLLF 2026/27/00 (Joint Commissioning ICB & CLLF) within 2026/27 – if for example it is not possible to pass on greater costs to the ICB or other NHS or care bodies – then up to £600,000 of the “For use in future years” Budget Reserve should be made available after being set aside. This extra funding is intended to provide transitional support for these services while new arrangements are negotiated.

F. Council notes that Merton’s Safer Streets Team and Met Police Safer Neighbourhood Teams spend valuable time travelling rather than being present in the communities they serve, and that the Mayor of London’s front desk closures have undermined community policing in Merton as access to the police is reduced. As a first step as part of making Merton *a safer, cleaner borough*, Council asks Cabinet to consider commissioning feasibility studies for *Community Safety Hubs* across the borough, which could be used as additional local police bases, dependent upon discussions with the Metropolitan Police. These studies would be funded using £50,000 from the “For use in future years” Budget Reserve.

G. Council acknowledges that healthy eating is part of a supportive environment for children and young people’s development. As a first step to make Merton *a great place to grow up*, Council requests that Cabinet considers working in partnership with local VCS organisations, schools, youth clubs, and high-profile ambassadors to deliver a fun, innovative in-person and online *Cook and Eat* classes. For example, the programme could deliver a five-week programme of 15 courses per year over a three-year period. This would be funded by an allocation of up to £150,000 per annum (2026/27 to 2028/29) from the Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF), subject to the submission of Merton’s CRF delivery plan and approval by the Department for Work and Pensions.

H. Council acknowledges that the Civic Centre’s ground floor layout and Merton’s complex digital systems mean the Council falls short of providing the welcoming “front-door” experience residents should receive when they need help. Therefore, as a first step to make Merton *a borough fit for the future*, and noting the funds allocated in the Capital Programme to remodel the ground floor of the Civic Centre, Council asks Cabinet to consider expanding the project scope. This could include a new *Help Hub*, family-friendly furnishing, soft play, and single points of contact for residents both in person, by phone and online. This would be funded by allocating an additional £50,000 from Capital Receipts to the existing capital programme sum for 2026/27.