

## **PRESS RELEASE: Disabled people to be kicked out of community centre by Merton Council and Harris Academy...without consultation**

Over 80 people with a learning difficulty and their families, as well as the local community, benefit from the High Path Community Centre. On Friday 12<sup>th</sup> August, Simon Williams, Director of Communities and Housing, London Borough of Merton, wrote to centre users informing them that the centre will be relocated to an as yet unnamed alternative site. It since came out that the land is being sold to Harris Academy. We are very concerned about this announcement coming out of the blue, without any form of consultation with users.

The decision to relocate High Path Community Centre is another step in a deeply worrying trend by Merton Council of making decisions to the detriment of disabled people, and of making decisions over the heads of disabled people and frankly poor involvement of disabled people in decision-making relating to issues that affect our lives. The approach, as here, of making decisions and then asking for our views afterwards is a pattern, and not an isolated one off.

Over the past three years we have seen the voice of disabled people repeatedly ignored by Merton Council. Examples of this have included devastating budget cuts and the closure of the Whatley Avenue Merton Adult Education site (also sold to Harris Academy) which resulted in disabled people being segregated from non-disabled people and scattered across 3 different sites in Merton, including the soon to be relocated High Path.

In another example, London Borough of Merton is shamefully one of only a handful<sup>1</sup> of councils in the whole country who choose not to accept a 2% Council Tax precept to raise much needed revenue for Adult Social Care. These are all examples where we have tried to say what we want, only to see the council not listen and do something else. We welcome the council talking directly to us and want to help this process but the trend of ignoring what we say makes it difficult. We hope together we can change that trend, if the will to do it exists. It's not all about finance, it's about what makes good practice and decisions reflecting the type of society we wish to live in.

Despite several campaigns led by disabled people to try and get our voice heard and taken on board, the impact of actions like this one at

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<sup>1</sup> 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

High Path is that disabled people feel de-valued. Our fear is that ultimately disabled people are receiving poorer services resulting in isolation. This in turn means being unable to participate in the community in which we belong and contribute to. The knock on of all this is we will need more support or help later because our well-being or health deteriorates as a result of not being given control over our own lives, which is as any other would have or expect. We wish to see an inclusive Merton and not one that excludes disabled people simply by not listening and not involving us in decision making.

The Council claims that an alternative site has been identified and we'll be informed of where High Path will be relocated to in October. Given that it took a year of searching by the council and lots of false starts to find the 3 venues for Adult Education provision for disabled people, forgive us if we express concern about where this mythical site is and whether the relocation will ever happen or whether High Path Community Centre users will be asked to squeeze into other centres or libraries instead.

There is a very real feeling that all we have fought so hard to achieve in terms of access, equality and inclusion is all under threat of being taken away, cut or closed. We would urge and welcome the council to properly engage with the voice of users of High Path. We want real involvement of users and their families in the decision making process. We want to see actions now from Merton Council to prove you are listening and acting on what disabled people say, not just paying lip-service to so-called consultations. We would like to see the rhetoric turned into reality.

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. We will continue to support users and families of High Path Community Centre, as well as local residents, in fighting for an inclusive community where everyone is heard and valued. If forcible relocation is going ahead, then the alternative must be at least equal to, and preferably better than the current centre, and disabled people must be involved in the design and development of that centre.

For further information see:

Wimbledon Guardian 18/08/2016 article on the plans  
[http://www.wimbledonguardian.co.uk/news/14688409.Protest\\_held\\_over\\_plans\\_to\\_relocate\\_centre\\_for\\_adults\\_with\\_learning\\_difficulties\\_for\\_ne](http://www.wimbledonguardian.co.uk/news/14688409.Protest_held_over_plans_to_relocate_centre_for_adults_with_learning_difficulties_for_ne)

[w secondary school which will share playing fields with primary school/?ref=mr&lp=12](#)

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**For more information contact:**

John Kelly

Policy & Strategy Manager

Email: [policy@mertoncil.org](mailto:policy@mertoncil.org)

Telephone: 0203 397 3119

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

