



**Merton CIL's response to the consultation
on the Merton Local Plan**

January 2019

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 for 10 years. 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 don't 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 time of writing we have 267 members.

Our advice and advocacy service worked with 332 people last year, providing 1,592 sessions of advice on a range of issues including social care, benefits, housing and hate crime. Many of the service users we support experience problems with a range of issues that are often interlinked. We reached 1,641 people through events and outreach, and 2,225 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 consultation.

Our members responded to the first stage of Local Plan consultation at the start of 2018, fed back to us more broadly on what life is like for Disabled People in Merton¹, and fed back again on the Local Plan in January 2019.

National context: Disabled People experience multiple inequalities

Disabled People are facing disadvantage and inequality across key areas of our lives², and are experiencing health inequalities as a consequence³.

¹ <https://www.mertoncil.org.uk/news/join-the-conversation-what-i/>

² The Equality Act 2010: The Impact on Disabled People, House of Lords Select Committee on the Equality Act 2010 and Disability, 2016

³ Is Britain Fairer? Equalities and Human Rights Commission, 2015

In particular, Disabled People are disproportionately impacted by the policies of welfare reform, with social care users particularly affected by the cumulative impact of benefit cuts and social care cuts.⁴ Barriers to employment, accessing the community, hardship and homelessness follow.⁵

Disabled people have poorer health and lower life expectancy,⁶ and perceived discrimination is associated with an increased likelihood of psychological distress.⁷

Laws and regulations already in place to support disabled people, such as the Equality Act 2010, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD), are not being effectively adhered to^{8,9}.

In fact, Deaf and Disabled people are disadvantaged across multiple areas of our lives including:

- **Education:** Higher numbers of Disabled People with no qualifications, low qualifications and restricted learning opportunities
- **Employment:** Disabled People face multiple barriers to employment
- **Transport:** One in five Disabled People have difficulty using transport¹⁰ and cuts to concessionary fares and local public transport services are leaving some Disabled People isolated and unable to travel as and when they need.
- **Environment:** Lack of accessible buildings and changes to city street scenes such as shared surfaces impact Disabled People's ability to access goods, services, civic centres, justice and the wider community.

⁴<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/cumulative-impact-assessment-report.pdf>

⁵ Evidence of Breaches of Disabled People's Rights Under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Inclusion London, 2015

⁶ Is Britain Fairer? Equalities and Human Rights Commission, 2015

⁷ Perceived Discrimination and Psychological Distress in Sweden, S Wamala, G Bostro, K Nyqvist, British Journal of Psychiatry, 2004

⁸ The Equality Act 2010: The Impact on Disabled People, House of Lords Select Committee on the Equality Act 2010 and Disability, 2016

⁹ Dignity and Opportunity for All: Securing the Rights of Disabled People in the Austerity Area, Just Fair, 2014

¹⁰ Implementation of the Right of Disabled People to Independent Living, House of Lords House of Commons Joint Committee on Human Rights, Twenty-third Report of Session, 2010–12, p. 59

- **Information:** Disabled People are less likely to be accessing the internet and inaccessible information in other formats can impact people's access to information, healthcare, etc
- **Benefits:** The welfare benefit reforms that the government brought in through the Welfare Reform Act 2012 are having a significant and disproportionate negative impact on Disabled People¹¹
- **Poverty:** Key poverty metrics for Disabled People are high and increasing¹²
- **Housing:** There has been a sharp rise in the number Disabled People who have been experiencing evictions and homelessness because of rent arrears either when housing benefit has been stopped due to sanctions, or housing benefit has not been granted because a Disabled Person has found 'fit for work' after a WCA¹³
- **Public attitudes and safety:** Disabled People are more likely to be victims of crime and Hate Crime has been identified as a serious issue affecting Disabled People. The benefits scrounger rhetoric perpetuated by the media and government has been identified as one of the drivers of this issue.¹⁴
- **Civic participation:** Disabled People, some ethnic minorities and people aged 75 and over were less likely than others to perceive that they could influence local decisions.¹⁵
- **Health:** In England, the proportion of Disabled People who reported bad or very bad health increased between 2008 and 2012, whereas there was a reduction for non-disabled people.¹⁶ Disabled People have lower life expectancies¹⁷ and are experiencing declining mental health because they had lost

¹¹ Evidence of Breaches of Disabled People's Rights Under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Inclusion London, 2015, p. 13

¹² Evidence of Breaches of Disabled People's Rights Under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Inclusion London, 2015, p. 12

¹³ Evidence of Breaches of Disabled People's Rights Under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Inclusion London, 2015, p. 17

¹⁴ Implementation of the Right of Disabled People to Independent Living, House of Lords House of Commons Joint Committee on Human Rights, Twenty-third Report of Session, 2010–12, p. 60

¹⁵ Is Britain Fairer? Equalities and Human Rights Commission, 2015, p. 7

¹⁶ Is Britain Fairer? Equalities and Human Rights Commission, 2015, p. 51

¹⁷ Is Britain Fairer? Equalities and Human Rights Commission, 2015, p. 52

support services¹⁸ and / or the stress caused by benefit assessment processes.¹⁹

These are all issues that are directly or indirectly linked to the Local Plan.

The Council's Resident Satisfaction Survey has covered issues around the wellbeing of Merton residents. The 2017 survey²⁰ assessed wellbeing with a set of standard questions developed by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) that cover people's feelings of overall life satisfaction, their lives being worthwhile, happiness, and anxiousness.

Disabled People were significantly less positive in all four aspects of wellbeing covered by these questions. For example, where three percent of the overall survey rated their happiness as low the previous day it was 13 percent for Disabled People. Overall Disabled People felt less satisfied with life, were less likely to feel life was worthwhile, were less happy, and more anxious than non-Disabled people. The 2014 survey²¹ also looked at wellbeing and also found that Disabled People had much lower wellbeing than non-Disabled people. The two surveys are not comparable as they use different scales. Nevertheless, there is broadly a downward trend in wellbeing for Disabled People.

We welcome the Council's work to highlight these issues around the specific wellbeing of Disabled people in Merton. However, Merton CIL has recommended that the Council builds on this with more research on the make-up and experiences of Deaf and Disabled people in the borough. In May 2015 we approached Merton Council to highlight the fact that Deaf and Disabled people need to be more visible in reports and information about London Borough of Merton, in particular, the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA). Merton CIL undertook a detailed literature review and worked closely with Council colleagues to gather further information. Initial Council plans, announced publicly in 2017, were that there would be a borough-wide Disability Strategy.

¹⁸ Evidence of Breaches of Disabled People's Rights Under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Inclusion London, 2015, p. 8

¹⁹ Evidence of Breaches of Disabled People's Rights Under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Inclusion London, 2015, P. 15

²⁰https://www.merton.gov.uk/assets/Documents/residents_survey_research_report_2017.pdf

²¹https://www.merton.gov.uk/assets/Documents/presentation_charts_merton_residents_2014_.pdf

Unfortunately, this didn't materialise but we are really pleased that a new Merton Disability Profile has been developed and is now available.

It would be very positive to see the Local Plan linked to a Disability Strategy, thus providing a comprehensive and joined-up approach to planning for Disabled people in Merton.

The Merton picture: At least 12% of local residents are Disabled People

The London Borough of Merton has a population of 209,421 people²². 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 Annual Population Survey²³ estimates that around 14,000 people in Merton have a physical impairment, while POPPI²⁴ data shows that nearly 5,000 people of 65 and over struggled with mobility.

Estimates for local residents with hearing loss is over 27,000, especially in older age groups, while figures for the numbers of Deaf and hard of hearing people is around 840 people in Merton.²⁵

There are 700 adults who are blind or partially sighted in Merton and nearly 1,000 with moderate or severe visual impairment²⁶. 700 people are registered with GPs as having a learning disability and the local authority believes this is an underestimate, as it is significantly lower than England, London and comparator boroughs with the exception of Kingston upon Thames. In fact, statistical estimates suggest there may be nearly 4000 adults in Merton with a learning disability²⁷.

²²<https://data.merton.gov.uk/>

²³ Recorded in the categories "core Disabled" or "work-limited Disabled". Data from the Merton Disability profile.

²⁴ Projecting Older People Population Information System

²⁵ Merton Disability Profile / Department of Health 2014

²⁶ Merton Disability Profile

²⁷ Merton Disability Profile

General points about the plan

Defining access

The words access and accessibility are used extensively throughout the Local Plan documents. While we welcome this emphasis, we believe it would be useful to define what is meant by access and accessibility.

Merton CIL's Our understanding of **accessibility is ensuring the removal of barriers that are disabling and the use of inclusive practices**. The word 'inclusive' is only used in point a. of the first strategic objective, but the principle of inclusive design²⁸ is a long-established one and we believe it would be positive to emphasise it also all aspects of the Local Plan relating to the built environment.

Full involvement

"All those plans to develop town centres - we keep being assured we'll be involved, and we aren't"

We want to be sure that there is full involvement of Merton residents and particularly Disabled residents. The stages set out for the development of the Local Plan include strong plans for consultation and involvement and we would like to see measures to ensure that these activities are accessible to Disabled people and based on accessible information in formats including easy read documents.

Response to Strategic Objective 1 – Healthy places

Disabled people continue to face extensive barriers to access and getting around the general environment in Merton, as we do in most places. Removing such barriers needs to be a key part of Merton's Local Plan.

"I find it difficult to join in with the rest of the world"

Pavements and getting around on foot

The poor condition of paths and pavements restricts access and can be very dangerous for people with mobility impairments. They make using mobility scooters and wheelchairs difficult, painful and potentially

²⁸<http://www.inclusivedesigntoolkit.com/>

dangerous as some equipment can tip in the wrong circumstances. People who walk with difficulty and/or with a walking aid are put at greater risk of falling, which can obviously result in physical injury but can also damage people's confidence and make them reluctant to go out.

While it is not technically part of the Local Plan, it is essential for the Council to recognise that along with proper planning, improvements to places/areas must be properly constructed, ie not built cheaply so that they quickly start to fall apart and then need to be maintained.

“Pavement parking is an issue – I have to go on the road around it. It is dangerous”

Cars parking on pavements is a major obstacle for Disabled people. While it may not be entirely something covered by the Local Plan, it might be addressed in part through planning and design, as some roads do allow pavement parking, which can create challenges.

Bins, which are put out on the pavement for collection, or left on the pavement after collection, can also create access barriers.



Image from Merton CIL film showing a narrow pavement with wheelie bins and bin bags making access for a scooter difficult

Shared spaces

A number of areas have introduced shared spaces with less separation between pedestrians and roads. While this has not happened in Merton and does not appear to be part of the Local Plan, Merton CIL wants to be clear that shared spaces are very hazardous for Disabled people, as

evidenced in a report by Lord Holmes which found that 63% of Disabled people questioned avoided such areas.

We would strongly oppose their introduction in any part of the borough and note that the Department for Transport has recommended that local authorities pause the development of shared spaces in its Inclusive Transport Strategy.²⁹

Facilities

The built environment needs to include facilities including seating and public toilets (including community toilet schemes) that make it as easy and pleasant as possible for Disabled people to be out and about.

Public toilets obviously need to include accessible toilets. Merton CIL's members particularly highlighted the lack of an accessible toilet in Mitcham. It is welcome that the borough has its first Changing Places toilet at the re-developed Morden Leisure Centre and the Local Plan should now include plans for Changing Places toilets around the borough.

The re-developed Morden Leisure Centre is also a good example of a sport and leisure facility that is accessible to Disabled people. The Local Plans should include commitments to maintain these standards in the development of other facilities.

There is discussion in the Local Plan about provision for electric vehicles to be charged. Wheelchair and scooter users would like to see similar facilities available for charging their equipment, though there are likely to be significant differences in the technology for charging electric cars, it should be feasible to make this available.

Merton CIL's members thought that other leisure facilities – the theatres and cinemas - are generally good and accessible, although there are issues with the reliability of the lift at Wimbledon Odeon.

²⁹<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-transport-strategy/the-inclusive-transport-strategy-achieving-equal-access-for-disabled-people>



Image: Comment on Twitter about the Lift at Wimbledon Odeon still being broken after several weeks

However, members commented a lot of restaurants are not very good for access.

“Why do shops and restaurants have accessible toilets up a set of stairs? Like the chicken shop in Wimbledon!”

“Why do new shops/restaurants open which aren’t accessible?”

“I hate it when they use the accessible loo as storage”

They have also highlighted the need for more community facilities and spaces for people to people to meet and to organisation activities such as lunch clubs. This would be a particularly good way to make use of empty buildings.

Response to Strategic Objective 2 – Place

The proposal for the new regional park in Wandle Valley is welcome. It needs to be developed with full consideration for access and facilities for Disabled people. The best way to achieve this is for Disabled people to be fully involved in the co-production of plans for the park.

Likewise, the development of new and existing parks for sport, leisure and recreation needs to be inclusive of Disabled people.

Response to Strategic Objective 3 – Housing

Housing is a very important topic for Disabled people in Merton. Merton CIL’s advice and advocacy service has supported many people with

problems around housing. It is essential for the Council and others involved in the development of housing work to drastically increase housing provision in the borough, and across London, so that people have decent and affordable housing options.

Merton CIL's members said there needs to be much more accessible housing and that all new housing should meet the 'lifetime housing standard' so that it is easy and economical to adapt. They believe that more ground-level housing needs to be available for Disabled people and that housing provision needs to include sheltered housing, supported housing and other schemes to meet the needs of Disabled and older people.

However, members were concerned standards for housing are not always being met by developers/builders or enforced by the Council, as in the example of the Brown and Root Tower in Colliers Wood.

Members were concerned about the implications that 'high density housing' may have for access standards and for the infrastructure around the housing, again giving the example of Brown and Root Tower where members said the flats were smaller than they should have been so that more could be included. In terms of infrastructure, members wanted to see the inclusion of local shops and that roads are accompanied by good sized pavements.

A new principle of visitability

The main focus of discussions about Disabled people and housing is about Disabled people's own homes. For Disabled people to be full and equal members of a community, we also need to have the option to visit relatives and friends in their homes, which is something that can be difficult if not impossible at present.

This is why Merton CIL supports the principle of visitability. Visitability³⁰ is the design approach for homes whose main principle is that a non-resident with a mobility impairment who uses a wheelchair or other mobility device should be able to visit the home. A social visit requires the ability to get into the house, the ability to pass through interior doorways of the house, and the ability to get into a bathroom to use the toilet. Far too often, newly constructed homes often contain the same major barriers as older, existing homes; steps at every entrance and narrow interior doors, with the bathroom door usually the narrowest door in the house.

³⁰<https://visitability.org/>

We would like to see the Local Plan incorporate the principle of visitability in new home construction practices so that virtually all new homes, whether or not designated for residents who currently have mobility impairments, offer accessibility features that will make it possible for most people to visit.

Response to Strategic Objective 4 – Environment

Disabled people are no less concerned about the environment than the rest of the population. Merton CIL's members expressed commitment doing as much as they can to support recycling.

However, living with an impairment means that options that are luxury or easy option for other people are essential to our lives. Driving and car travel are obvious examples of this and another is the use of plastic straws to drink, as evidenced in Merton CIL's recent response to the Department for the Environment's consultation on banning straws.³¹

Merton CIL members expressed concerns about expectations to increase recycling at home. One person expressed their frustration saying,

"I feel like I'm an unpaid refuse collector."

It is common sense that anyone needing support with independent living will need assistance with an activity like recycling. But while people are being expected to do more to recycle, Merton CIL's evidence shows that Disabled people are getting less support with independent living.³²

The assisted collection service is very useful to many people but it would also be useful to look at different types of bins that would assist some people to manage their recycling more easily.

As well as the need for physical assistance, members said that recycling can be confusing and particularly difficult for people living in flats and smaller houses.

People suggested that shops and supermarkets should do more to reduce waste, and there could be more information about which shops are doing so.

³¹<https://www.mertoncil.org.uk/news/save-our-straws-we-need-to-dr/>

³²<https://www.mertoncil.org.uk/a/36664810-36928722>

Response to Strategic Objective 5 – Infrastructure

The focus of infrastructure plans is around making walking, cycling and public transport options available for all journeys.

Walking and cycling will always be difficult options for some Disabled people, though it is important to say not all Disabled people, and accessible cycling options do exist. For example, one member reported being excluded from cycling because they did not have a cycle storage area that was accessible for them.

Another note on cycles is that people cycling on pavements is a particular hazard for Disabled people. Ensuring there are proper cycle routes should help to reduce cycling on pavements and the associated hazards. Earlier in the year there were also issues with Ofo bikes being left around the borough creating access issues. The company have now folded, but members would like Merton Council to act proactively to address access issues like these, whether dockless bikes or scooters.



Image from Twitter of Ofo bike blocking access at Wimbledon bus stop

While there have been improvements in access to buses in recent years, further improvements are needed for them to be fully accessible to wheelchair and scooter users. Issues remain around prams and buggies being in spaces for wheelchair and scooter users and accessibility needs to be improved for users of larger wheelchairs and scooters. The reliability of ramps on buses, both mechanical and in terms of drivers' training and attitudes, also needs to be improved.

In addition, consideration needs to be given to bus routes to key areas such as travel to hospital, all of which are out of borough. This can be particularly important for local residents who are unable to drive but struggling to access patient transport services, with one member telling us "I had to wait for 4 hours after my appointment to be collected by patient transport".

"At Raynes Park station it is only possible to go in one direction"

The vast majority of the over- and underground- networks are inaccessible to many Disabled people, particularly wheelchair and scooter users. Transport for London has been able to make some underground stations accessible, and has plans for others including Wimbledon Park, but this only enables limited use of the network. As with buses, there are issues about the reliability of some of the facilities such as lifts. It is essential for transport services to provide better information where there are problems with access, such as lifts that are not working, so that people can plan their journeys accordingly. For example, our members have recently twice been turned back at both Morden and Wimbledon Stations due to lifts not working. This has added hours to their journey, as well as stress and inconvenience which is not faced by passengers without mobility impairments.

While we understand the difficulties involved in improving access to many parts of the train network, even easy improvements appear to be difficult to achieve. For example, according to members, at Haydons Road over-ground station a planning requirement for a fence to be taken down to enable step-free access was put in place eight years ago but still has not been enforced.

Merton CIL's members appreciate the accessibility of the Croydon Tramlink service and the link it provides to the neighbouring borough. They are also keen on the proposals for the new Sutton Link and want this to be just as accessible as the Croydon tram.

Overcrowding is a problem on many buses and under- and over-ground trains and this particularly affects Disabled people. Even where underground stations are accessible, wheelchair and scooter users would not contemplate using the tube in rush hour.

The local bus services that run on side-roads are very useful – especially the hail and ride services as getting to and from the bus stop can be the biggest obstacle to people using bus services.

Some Disabled people will probably always need a car because of difficulties walking and getting to bus stops, so there will always need to be facilities for disabled drivers/passengers. This is particularly relevant to new and re-developments such as at High Path where national guidelines restricting the creation of parking spaces create possible flashpoints and design neighbour disputes into our communities as Blue Badge holders and other residents compete for space.

Response to Strategic Objective 6 – Economy

Looking at the diverse local economy with a mix of premises as set out in this objective, it is particularly important for Disabled people to have access to post offices, banks and other financial services as part of that mix. While many Disabled people make full use of the availability of such services through the internet and telephone, others are not able to use them in this way and find it easier to visit in person.

"I tried to use telephone banking and they asked me how old I would be on my next birthday. I asked my friend to help me with my maths, so the operator froze my account"

The issues discussed above around accessibility in place, transport and infrastructure all need to be addressed for Disabled people to be active in the local economy. The Department for Work and Pensions³³ estimates the spending power of Disabled people and their families was £249 billion in 2014/15. This highlights the importance of making shops and services in Merton as accessible as possible so that Disabled people and their families choose to spend their money in the borough.

Employment

"I have not worked for a long time. The average employer doesn't want me. They think I would cost too much."

Employment is an important issue for Disabled people. The unemployment rate for Disabled people from July – September 2018 was 9.3% compared with 3.7% for non-Disabled people.³⁴

³³

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/572187/spending-power-of-disabled-people-and-their-families-2014-15.pdf

³⁴<https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7540>

It is important that Disabled people have equal access to the training and education opportunities open to everybody and, in parallel with this, that any training specifically beneficial Disabled people is also available.

There also needs to be recognition that improving the employment of Disabled people is not just an issue about training and educating Disabled people themselves. Alongside this, there needs to be work to train and educate employers about taking on Disabled staff, and discrimination and bad practice must be challenged.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Local Plan brings together the Council's planning on the development of a range of issues for the borough over the next 15 years. It is a particularly useful opportunity for the development of strategic and joined-up approaches to the issues covered by the Plan.

If the Council works with Disabled people in the borough to address these issues, the Plan has the real potential to have a positive impact on the quality of life of Disabled people in Merton.

Specific recommendations which Merton CIL would want to highlight from its members are:

1. The Plan should have a proper definition of access and accessibility which can be used throughout the plan and then in its implementation.
2. The principle of inclusive design should be used in the developments covered by the Plan.
3. Consultations and co-production of the Plan must be fully accessible so that Disabled people are fully involved.
4. Pavements and paths need to be designed to be accessible and maintained so they continue to be accessible.
5. Consideration needs to be given to how road and pavement design can minimise cars parking on pavements.
6. Shared street spaces should not be introduced because of the dangers they pose to Disabled people.
7. The design of places should include accessible toilets and Changing Places toilets, street furniture to enable people to rest, and charging facilities for mobility equipment.
8. The design of places should include space for community facilities and places for people to meet.
9. The Wandle Valley Regional Park should be developed with the full involvement of Disabled people.

10. All new and existing parks should be developed with sport, leisure and recreation facilities for Disabled people.
11. Housing provision needs to be increased in the borough with more accessible housing and general housing built to 'life time' standards so it is easy and economical to adapt.
12. The principle of visitability should be adopted so that Disabled people can access the homes of family and friends.
13. There needs to be flexibility in recycling with support available and alternatives such as different types of bins where required.
14. There needs to be clear information about recycling and recognition of the difficulties for people in small houses and flats.
15. Shops and supermarkets should be made to do more to reduce waste.
16. Accessible facilities need to be available so that Disabled people who are able to cycle can do so.
17. Cycling routes need to be provided to reduce the hazard of cyclists on pavements, and guidelines and enforcement of dockless bike or scooter schemes
18. Further improvements are needed to access on buses and over- and under- ground trains.
19. There needs to be better information system to ensure that Disabled people are made aware of any problems with accessible routes, such as lifts being out-of-action.
20. Plans should include hail and ride bus services where possible.
21. Facilities for Disabled drivers/passengers will remain necessary.
22. Ensure that local facilities include post offices, banks and other financial services.
23. Make place, transport and infrastructure and shops and services as accessible as possible.
24. Ensure that education and training opportunities are fully accessible to Disabled people.
25. Include initiatives to challenge discrimination and educate employers in strategies to increase the employment of Disabled people