

# Case Study: Our Policy Work in Merton

**“We will do everything we can to ensure the many issues faced by Deaf and Disabled people in Merton are brought to the attention of all local candidates”**

Traditionally Disabled People have faced barriers to voting and democratic engagement. These barriers can include a lack of accessible information, inaccessible polling stations and society's failure to properly value the voices and choices of disabled people.



In April 2017 we were concerned when a snap election was called with just 7 week's notice, because holding a snap election creates extra barriers for Disabled People.

At Merton CIL we felt that political decisions are having a direct impact on the day-to-day lives of Deaf and Disabled People. Because of this, we needed to make sure our voices were heard in the democratic process. Voting and getting involved in activity in the lead up to elections was one important way to do this.

We prepared a short guide on how to register to vote, and the voting process. We sent that out to all our members, and, one member got in touch after the election saying she hadn't known about proxy voting, but, because of the information we sent,

she was able to organise this.

We publicised party manifestos, including accessible versions once they were available, and the #CripTheVoteUK online campaign which had the aim of sharing and amplifying the views of Disabled People.

We organised two Hustings events, one for Wimbledon Constituency and one for Mitcham and Morden, including a light lunch, BSL interpreters, and volunteers briefed to support participants to ask questions. We invited Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidates to come and speak to local Disabled People and supporters. The Conservative candidate for Wimbledon, Stephen Hammond said that he would not attend the event.

Unfortunately both the planned hustings had to be cancelled following the suspension of campaigning after the horrific events in Manchester in May. We didn't have time to organise another two accessible events so we decided to send written questions to the candidates. We had to chase some candidates, but did eventually get a response from all.

The questions covered some of the key issues brought up by our members including concerns about the UNCRPD finding the UK guilty of “grave and systematic violations” of Disabled people’s rights, reducing choice and control due to local authority cuts, hate crime, inclusive education, and the fact that Disabled people in Merton have poorer health and wellbeing than non-disabled people. The responses, as well as a summary of the key manifesto promises, went out to all our members <https://bit.ly/2p6qmDr>

When local elections were called for May 2018 we took a slightly different approach. Having worked with Merton Electoral Services in 2015, we checked in with them about the accessibility of polling stations and what they have been doing to make sure people are registered to vote, especially as changes to registration, implemented by central government, affected the registration of Disabled people and especially people living in residential, sheltered and supported accommodation.

We also shared our hustings organising experience with MVSC as they were organising a hustings event themselves, and we had previously also shared this with other Deaf and Disabled People’s organisations across London. We decided to offer local candidates across all parties an opportunity to have an ‘Independent Living’ conversation with one of our team. This was an opportunity for us to share what members told us about what independent living means, and what life is like for them in Merton. Unfortunately, despite several attempts, the local Labour party didn’t take us up on the offer. However, other parties were really positive about the opportunity and one of them said

**“I am very excited about this and think it’s a great way to learn about different community groups and see how as a party we can learn about them, their needs and issues and how we can represent them better.”**



Picture: Speakers at MVSC hustings event

This approach to engaging directly with candidates seemed to have an impact because at the MVSC event, Disabled People or social care was mentioned in 4 out of 5 of the opening speeches. This is a big improvement on previous years where Merton CIL were told by candidates that issues affecting Disabled People weren’t a doorstep issue. Attendees also asked questions about social value of the voluntary sector, the environmental sustainability of housing, support to connect the voluntary sector with businesses, support for Residents Associations and what the Council will do about low spend on mental health.