**Merton Conservative Group’s response to the emission based parking charges consultation**

Merton Conservatives oppose the introduction of the emission based parking charges scheme. This is the second time in 18 months that Merton Council has introduced a new tax focused on Wimbledon and Raynes Park under the guise of an air quality measure. When taken with the charging increase last year, some residents will have seen an increase from £65 to £150, and now to £690 over the course of a few years.

The council was never able to produce any conclusive evidence that increasing the price of CPZ permits and other parking charges in 2019 would improve air quality, instead choosing to rely on spurious nudge theory, and irrelevant out of date studies to attempt to justify its tax grab on Wimbledon. It is hardly surprising that evidence from the 2019 parking charges tax hike has not been included in the evidence base to justify this latest tax on Wimbledon. After all if last year’s parking charges increase had actually improved air quality then this new emission based charging scheme would clearly be unnecessary.

The Labour administration claims, for the second year in a row, that this new money making scheme is necessary to improve air quality, and from the lack of action on any other air quality improvement schemes; most notably the low emission bus zones which was voted through council in February 2019, it clearly is not pursuing any other options. The Labour administration has a clear record at the previous two budget council meetings of voting against air quality improvement measures that could have made an immediate impact in combating the pollution crisis in Merton.

This lack of action has stripped this administration of all credibility on the issue of improving air quality.

It is a shame that the administration cannot be honest with local residents about the true nature of these proposals. The emission based charges scheme is simply a tax on the parts of the borough that do not vote for the Labour party, and forms a major part of the council’s anti-car agenda. It will have no discernible effect on improving air quality, as has the previous tax hike on Wimbledon that was dressed up as an air quality measure.

We find it deeply concerning that the council’s own equality analysis recognises that this new tax could have a negative impact on the disabled, the elderly, and those on low incomes. Residents have been constantly misled over the reason and cost of permits by the Labour administration. Most were told it was to limit commuter parking, with the fees set only to administer and enforce commuter restrictions, and not as a method to fill the council’s accounts. The repeated price hikes have been deeply unfair on residents who now feel betrayed.

This new tax hike has come at the worst possible time for many residents across the borough. While many are facing job losses, stretched household budgets and an uncertain financial future due to the Covid19 pandemic, the Labour administration has chosen to put residents under the cosh with a series of new charges that fall on residents at the most financially difficult time many families will have experienced for decades.

This latest tax is clearly the wrong approach to reducing pollution and emissions in the borough, and will disproportionately burden the elderly, the disabled, and those on low incomes. We call on the Labour administration to bring in practical workable solutions, and not to resort to another tax on local residents that will not improve air quality in Merton.