

Adult Social Care (ASC)  
Consultation on  
\*Cuts to Services 2016-17

The Voice of  
those affected



\* The local authority use the word 'savings' not 'cuts' - throughout the focus groups those who attended see this as cuts to their services and therefore it is more appropriate term to represent what they see it as being.



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### Context

Between 23 October until 7 December 2015 Merton Council ran a consultation exercise about how, and from where, they aim to achieve the 2016/17 proposed cuts of £5.06 million to be implemented in 2016-17. This is within the context of an 8 year programme of efficiencies and cuts to services.

### The programme of consultation

- Email feedback at [ASCconsultation@merton.gov.uk](mailto:ASCconsultation@merton.gov.uk)
- Online survey of views <http://www.merton.gov.uk/health-social-care/adult-social-care/adult-social-care-consultation.htm>
- Writing to all ASC customers and carers to notify them of the consultation and details of how to get involved
- Paper versions (incl. easy read versions) of the consultation documents and survey available in Wimbledon, Mitcham and Morden Libraries, Vestry Hall, Merton Civic Centre and Merton Day Centres
- Hold two public meetings at Vestry Hall
- Meet with voluntary organisations
- Two staff consultation meetings
- Hold small meetings or “focus groups” run by Healthwatch and hosted by voluntary sector partners

### Objectives for focus groups

- To get an in-depth picture of the potential impact of proposed cuts to services from the perspective of service users
- To gain an understanding of how the impact of cuts could potentially be reduced
- Focus groups are expected to complement and add depth to the findings from other consultation methods
- Support service users to get their voices heard
- Support decision makers to make decisions by understanding the full potential impact they could have

Six focus groups were run and we spoke with a total of 72 people who attended them from the following users groups:

- Learning Disabilities
- Mental Health Service Users
- Physical Disabilities
- Sensory Impairments
- Family Carers
- Older People

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- Very powerful feelings were voiced about the cuts
  - People don't feel they can influence the decision-making process
  - Existing Services are seen as important, but already of reduced quality
  - Prevention is critical, but made impossible by cuts
  - The proposed alternative provision is an illusion
  - The cuts will affect every aspect of people's lives
  - People will see their wellbeing reduced
  - People's physical health will worsen
  - Families will be put under immense strain
  - Social connections will be severed
  - Disabled and older people will be made vulnerable
  - The ultimate consequence for some is that life is no longer worth living
  - A number of alternatives were suggested, including raising Council Tax

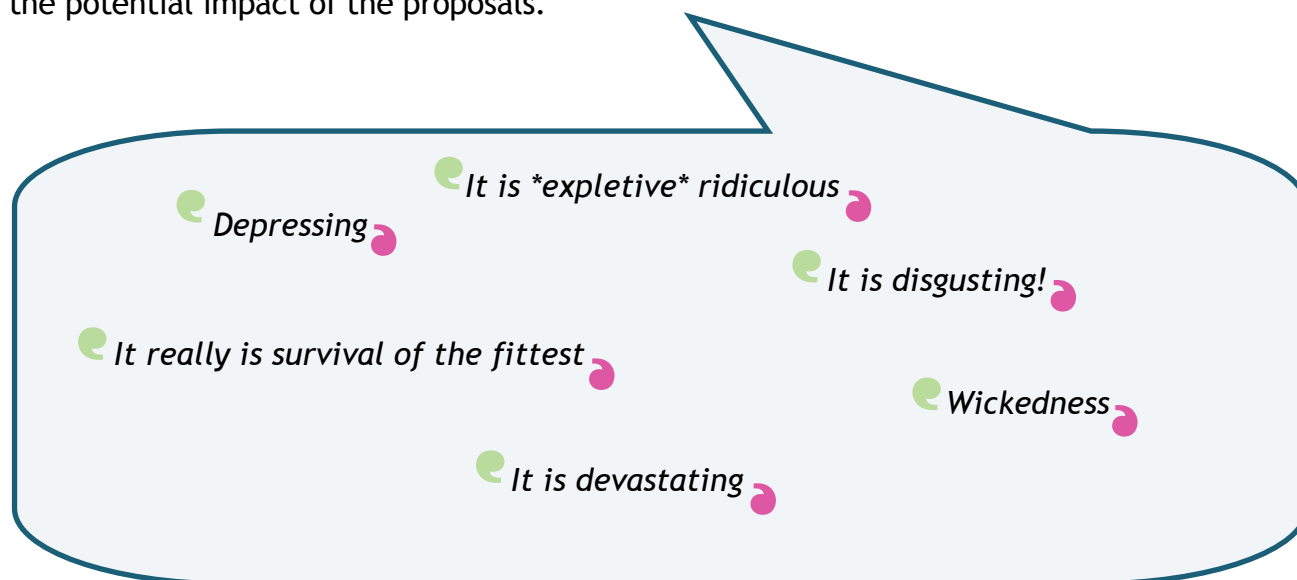
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### **Recommendations:**

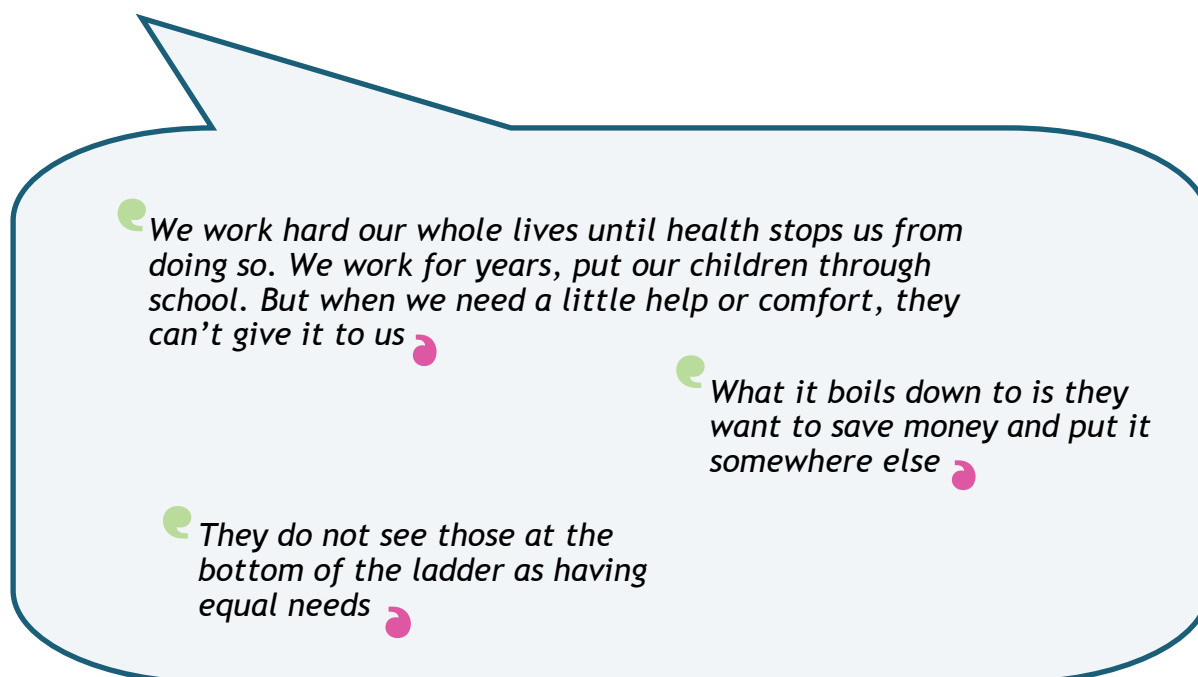
- \* To urgently review and reduce the scale of cuts proposed for ASC
- \* To facilitate connections between decision-makers and affected residents
- \* To commission an independent report into understanding the impact of cuts

### Very powerful feelings voiced about the cuts

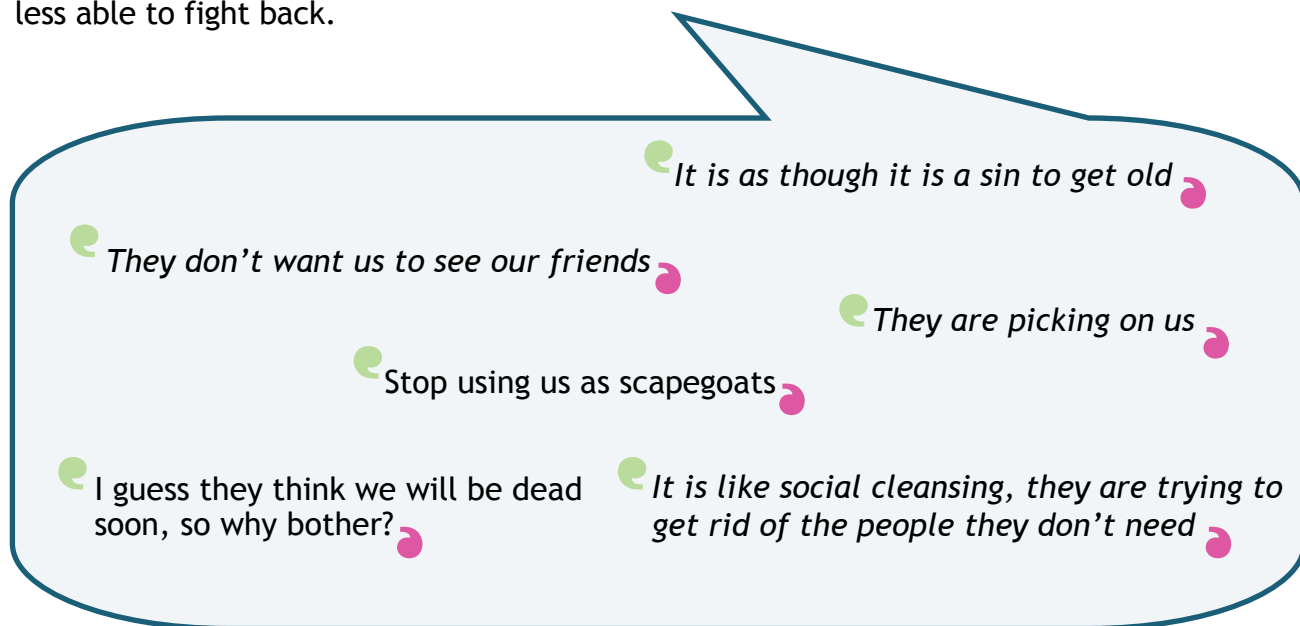
People who attended the focus groups voiced very powerful feelings about the proposed cuts to ACS services and used extremely strong language to express their anger and anxiety about the potential impact of the proposals.



One of the key feelings voiced was a sense of betrayal and abandonment by Merton Council. People talked of being left behind, being left on the scrapheap, and not being treated equally.



For some people, the sense of betrayal resulted in a feeling of being specifically targeted by the Council for cuts to services, because they felt they were seen as more vulnerable and less able to fight back.

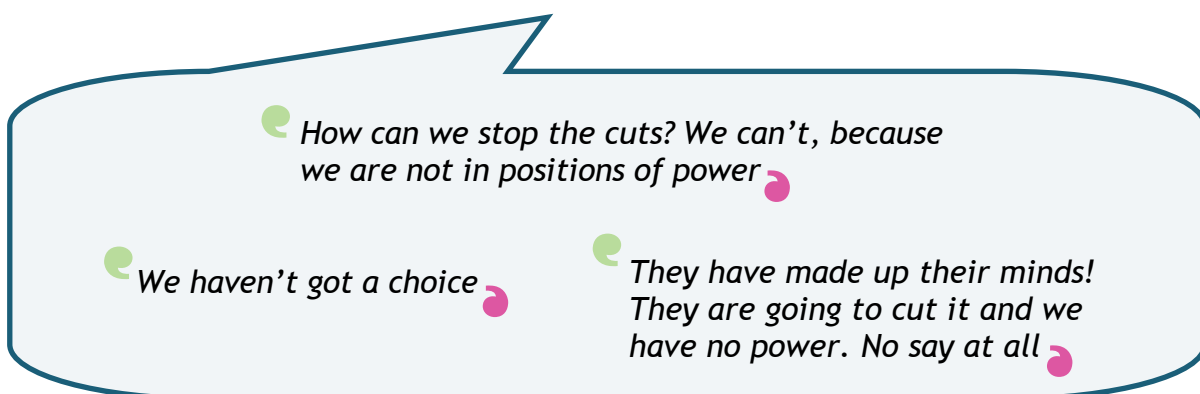


For some people we spoke to, the prospect of further cuts to services was so worrying and their were people crying in nearly every single focus group which was run.

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### People don't feel they can influence the decision-making process

In every focus group, people expressed concerns that their views were going to go unheard. Although people participated willingly and shared their views openly despite a real sense of powerlessness.



Although the facilitators explained that focus groups were being run specifically so that people's views could be heard and shared with decision-makers (Councillors), people felt that they had never been able to influence decisions in the past, and they didn't believe that they would be able to prevent cuts to services now. They expressed the view that all the cuts in front of them had already been decided and were set in stone.

## Existing services are important, but already of reduced quality

People talked at length about the value of existing services and the positive impact they have on their lives and their ability to live independently and with dignity. These services exist because people need them.

*I can only care well with the respite I receive at the moment. I won't be able to manage without it*

However, disabled and older people using these services also pointed out that provision of services had already worsened over recent years.

*I was placed in a care home. It feels like a prison. I pay £600 per week to live somewhere I hate and I don't use any of the services*

*We are not getting the service that we got in the past already*

*Day centre levels are already at a minimum just to ensure safety and quality levels are met. Outings have been cancelled due to lack of staff. It is desperate and sad to see*

*The Council have become less and less supportive, they are withdrawing help and taking things back to Victorian times*

*I had to beg social services to take notice of me. What chance is there going to be for people that don't have a voice like I did?*

*I've had a horrendous year. I haven't heard from my social worker in six months*

People found it hard to see how services delivered by the Council could continue to operate safely with the level of cuts proposed. For some people, there was a suspicion that some services were deliberately underfunded and run down over time so that they could be cut completely in later years.

*To say the service was run down is an understatement*

This sense of existing services already being stretched beyond their capacity, fed into the sense of hopelessness and despair expressed by many of the focus group attendees.

## Prevention is critical, but made impossible by cuts

Disabled and older people in the focus groups talked very eloquently about the need for ASC support to prevent crisis and to prevent the need for more costly intervention later on. They highlighted the likely knock-on effect of the proposed cuts to ASC services on other areas such as the NHS and Mental Health services.

*Hospitals will be filled with people if there is no support. A lot of people will end up in hospital*

*No places in hospitals, they will be crowded and people will start hearing voices again and be paranoid and bad things can happen when people are out of care too soon*

*It will have a knock-on effect on other services like the NHS. We will be queuing for doctors*

People talked about reaching a tipping point very soon, after which services would be pared down to such an extent that they would no longer be functional at all. They highlighted the fact that once services had been run down, it was almost impossible and very expensive to build them back up again.

*All it takes is one thing to go wrong. One person to die of malnutrition or not be safeguarded quick enough and bam!*

*There is a saying: penny-wise, but pound-foolish*

*Merton is a low spending authority. Any more cuts will push them over the edge*

*Cuts now will lead to greater expenses in the future*

*There will be ill and disabled people on the streets and no room in hospitals*



## The proposed alternative provision is an illusion

The people at the focus groups were very clear that the alternative provision suggested for cuts to services in the Business Plan, was wholly unsuitable. The primary alternatives discussed were:

- Family
- The community
- Volunteers
- Support Packages
- The Voluntary Sector

Disabled and older people told us that their families are struggling too, the community is a myth, volunteers are hard to get, support packages are being cut too, and so is the voluntary sector.

*Support from the community? Younger people are at work and can barely cook for themselves. Why are they going to cook for us?*

*It is ridiculous that volunteers are expected to take on the work; they are an extra, not a substitute for services*

*I don't think there are communities anymore*

*They are cutting funding to the voluntary sector and still expecting the sector to pick up more of the preventative work*

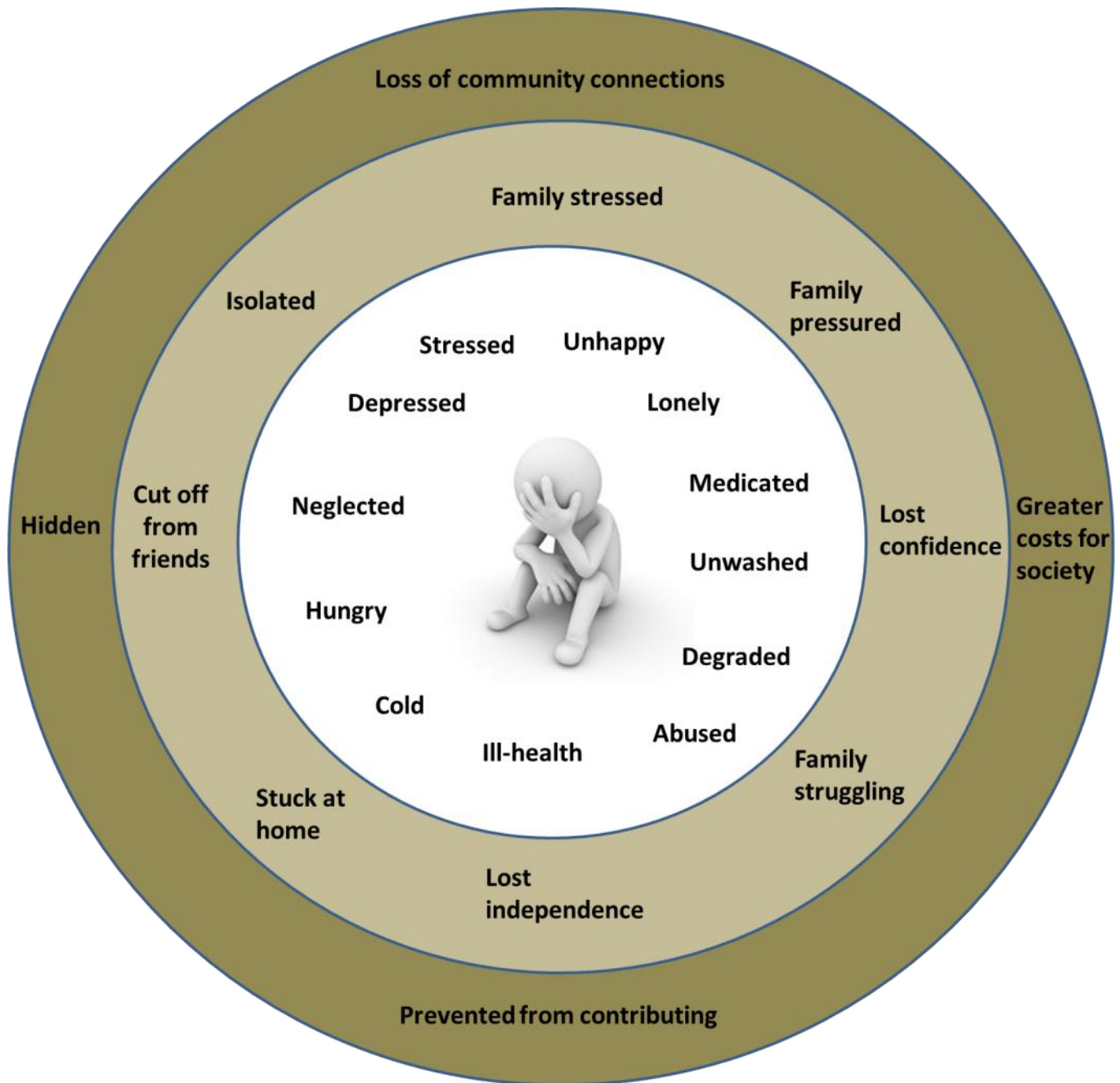
*I don't see how they can cut the voluntary sector when everything else they are cutting relies on the voluntary sector*

People felt that the impact of the proposed cuts to ASC had not been properly understood by decision-makers, and they felt that decision-makers did not have a real life understanding of disabled and older people's lives, and the challenges they and their families are facing.

*They are treating people no better than animals in Longleat. Someone just comes in to clean you, feed you, lock you up and then on to the next person*

### The cuts will affect every aspect of people's lives

People highlighted how the cuts will have a deeply negative impact on every aspect of their lives from their wellbeing and mental health, their physical health, their family and social connections, and with wider consequences for the community in Merton.



## People will see their wellbeing reduced

People told us how they were already being isolated due to reduced service provision, and how these cuts would isolate them even further. They explained that not only would they be cut off from society, they would be more stressed and anxious, as well as bored and lonely. They expected to experience an increase in mental health problems, and to have to use mental health services more. However, people were worried that they wouldn't be able to access mental health support at all in the next few years.

*We will worry a lot and the worry will make us ill*

*The cuts will be a headache. It will make me anxious and worried*

*I have had to up my dose of anti-depressants*

*Mental health knocks on to physical health. We will reach breaking point fairly soon. They are building an incredibly huge long term crisis*

*I am struggling now. I can't be in a worse place than I am already*

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## People's physical health will worsen

Many of the people in the groups talked about having to neglect their physical needs whether due to reduced incomes, or reduced support. People are already seeing reduced incomes due to Welfare Reform, and they expect this to worsen. In particular, if ASC support is cut, people will potentially be making heat or eat type decisions as they may need to pay for their own care, or pay more for services that they need. Reduced ASC support was also expected to lead to greater physical neglect.

*I will start practising to eat less from now on*

*I can't just go out and buy I new dress, I have to wear the same old clothes all the time*

*I will just have to go without*

*I am careful putting on my heating already*

*People will stop looking after themselves*

## Families will be put under immense strain

*I was discharged from hospital and the doctors said a carer had to be with me at all times, but no one came to check on me in the care home. My granddaughter had to take me to appointments because they said the carer was busy. But we had to talk about medical issues, and I did not feel comfortable in front of my granddaughter*

People were really clear that their families were going to be put under huge pressure, and that some will not be able to cope. Both for family carers, and for disabled and older people talking about their families, the feeling was that they were already not coping, and that they were going to reach crisis point really soon.

*Mum has no help to do the things she needs to do*

*As a younger person getting older and with ageing parents, I am disgusted and frightened for the future*

*It will be difficult for mums and dads too*

*Carers will become more stressed and it will impact on the person that they are caring for. They will suffer*

*Families already struggle themselves. It is awful, my daughter struggles and is going through depression. How can she care for me too?*

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## Social connections will be severed

People expected to be less able to keep up social connections following the cuts. Whether this was from a family carer no longer able to access respite, or a disabled or older person unable to get enough support to get into the community, people expected to be more isolated as a result.

*Human contact is important*

*I will never get out of the house. I won't be able to go to meetings or go shopping or get a coffee with people*

*I will miss out on talking to people*

*I will have nothing to do, I will be cut off from society*

## Disabled and older people will be made vulnerable

People talked about being made vulnerable by the cuts. This is driven by the mental and physical impacts on people's wellbeing, and by the financial impact. They felt they would be at greater risk of abuse and simultaneously less likely to be protected from abuse. They felt they risked being made homeless. They also felt that they were being made vulnerable at an accelerating rate.

Stop making us more vulnerable to exploitation

People will sit at home in their own urine while looking out the window watching the world go by

People are going to be starving - no money and they can't feed themselves

Prepare for people to turn into zombies. They will be full of anxiety and depression. Money will be reduced and they will lose the people who helped them in need. People will fall through the cracks, and the cracks will get bigger

I pay two carers to live in. I am in a three bedroom house. If I can't have my carers, my house will be under-occupied and I will face the Bedroom Tax. I will lose my home

We'll have to get the begging bowls out

I am going to have to pawn my watch to pay my bills. I like my watch

A man on my estate was dead for 7 weeks and he was only found because of the smell. He had mental health issues. The lack of care leads to death

## The ultimate consequence for some is that life is no longer worth living

People were very open and honest with the facilitators about the stresses and strains they were already facing, and the impact of the additional cuts being discussed. Some people felt they would keep struggling on, although this was getting harder and harder. However, for some people, the cuts proposed felt very much like the final straw. A number of people expressed extreme anxiety and helplessness about the cuts. For some, they felt that life would be so intolerable, that it would no longer be worth living, and they blamed Merton Council for that.

*This is another way of killing us.  
We are also human*

*I won't be here [if cuts happen].  
Maybe not suicide, but in a bad  
place*

*I want to ask for a one-way ticket to Switzerland*

*I am 92 years old. I find  
everyday living very hard*

*I will end up in my flat like a hermit, self-harming again*

*Even with medication, I won't be able to handle it, I will  
go up the walls, there will be nothing to interest me. Life  
will not be worth living*

## Section Three: Alternative to ASC cuts suggested

People made it clear that they found the cuts proposed unacceptable, and suggested a number of alternatives to facilitators. These ideas included reducing spending in other areas such as environment and senior salaries. There was also a lot of enthusiasm for the Council to raise money, e.g. through Council Tax. Finally, a number of people mentioned the high cost of Merton's transport contract.

For the people we spoke to, they felt cuts to Adult Social Care were a matter of priority, rather than necessity.

*It is a question of their priorities*

*Aren't we more important than wheelie bins?*

*I would rather not spend money on bins*

*I would rather close all of the libraries*

*Sort out your spending on transport*

*Use your reserves*

*Council staff at the higher end of the spectrum are well paid and I wonder whether they have lost any of their salaries - this would alleviate some of the pressure*

*Put up Council Tax, Do it!*

*I can afford an extra pound a week on my council tax*

*Merton are very proud they have frozen Council tax for 3 years. Why should they be proud of cutting services?*

## Section Four: Conclusion and Recommendations

The expected impact and consequences of the cuts proposed are extremely significant. People felt that the negative impact on their lives would have a direct knock-on effect on other services, and would be a false economy overall as more people would fall into serious crisis.

Based on feedback from participants in the focus groups, the following recommendations are made:

### To urgently review and reduce the scale of cuts proposed for ASC

- The cumulative impact of the proposals is seen as so devastating that we strongly recommend the scale of the cuts allocated to ASC is reviewed and reduced as an urgent priority

*Please, just think a little more* *Don't cut! It will cost more money in the end*

### To facilitate connections between decision-makers and affected residents

- People made it very clear that they wanted decision-makers to come and spend more time with them, and to understand their day-to-day lives better.

We recommend you:

- ⇒ Consider connection programmes such as a day in your life or mentoring programmes (with decision-makers as mentors)
- ⇒ Consider actively inviting carers, disabled and older people to contribute to Council processes such as Scrutiny

*Put yourselves in our shoes. Anyone can become disabled and everyone gets old. Think before you cut*

*I wish they would spend one day with me*

*Reading a document and experiencing our lives is vastly different*

### To commission an independent report into understanding the impact of cuts

- The issues discussed in focus groups were just the tip of the iceberg, with clear concerns about existing services already, and the impact of national cuts through Welfare Reform affects on people's resilience. We recommend a more detailed, independent report into the impact of cuts on Disabled people, Family carers, and Older people is undertaken.



### The Methodology

#### Why focus groups?

Focus groups were chosen as an approach in order to complement other consultation methods. It was important that the focus groups concentrated on hearing from service users about how the proposed cuts might affect them. The focus groups were not an opportunity to meet Councillors or officers, as that would be possible through public meetings.

Because the cuts proposed may affect different groups in different ways, it was decided to group the focus groups based on people's experience of disability, although it was also recognised that many people have multiple identities.

Groups were deliberately kept smaller than public meetings would normally be, to ensure that the facilitators could hear from as many attendees as possible.

#### Who We Spoke With

Six focus groups were run with a total of 72 people from the following users groups:

- Learning Disabilities
- Mental Health Service Users
- Physical Disabilities
- Sensory Impairments
- Family Carers
- Older People

#### Focus Group Session Outline

- Warm up and welcome
- Initial Responses to the cuts proposed
- Potential Impact of the cuts proposed
- Suggestions for alternatives
- Sum up
- Thank and Close

#### Safeguarding and Ethics

A number of people expressed very high anxiety around the proposals, partly driven by the feeling that they would not be listened to. It was not the place of facilitators to offer reassurance, although, they did let participants know that the aim of running focus groups was to ensure that their views were heard.

Where people cried in groups or talked about the possibility of suicide, facilitators gave people the space and time to express themselves. They also raised any concerns after the sessions with the hosting organisation.

**Abbreviations**

**ASC** = Adult Social Care

**MVSC** = Merton Voluntary Service Council

**NHS** = National Health Service

### About Healthwatch Merton

Healthwatch is the consumer champion for health and social care in England. Here to give children, young people and adults a powerful voice - making sure their views and experiences are heard by those who run, plan and regulate health and social care services.

By making sure the views and experiences of all people who use services are taken into account, we can help make services better now and in the future. Healthwatch actively seeks views from all sections of the community, especially from those who sometimes struggle to be heard and not just from those who shout the loudest. We also encourage health and social care providers, regulators and planners to hear directly from people themselves.

### What does Healthwatch Merton do?

Healthwatch Merton works to help local people get the best out of their local health and social care services. Whether it's improving them today or helping shape them for tomorrow. It's all about voices being able to influence the delivery and design of local services, not just for people who need to use them now, but anyone who might need to in future.

Healthwatch Merton will play a role nationally through Healthwatch England and at a local level as one of the 148 community focused local Healthwatch. Together we form the Healthwatch network, working closely to ensure consumers' views are represented nationally and locally.

Merton Council awarded the Healthwatch Merton contract to MVSC because of their excellent local knowledge. MVSC is based in the borough and already engage on a daily basis with the many diverse communities in Merton. Their experience and knowledge about health and social care services working within Merton is also another strong quality.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of the people who attended and shared their thoughts and views with us at the focus groups.

We would also like to thank the following organisations for their support with supporting and hosting the focus groups:

- Age UK Merton
- Carers Support Merton
- Focus-4-1
- Merton Centre for Independent Living
- Merton Vision
- MVSC
- Speak Out Group



**Adult Social Care (ASC) Consultation on \*Cuts to Services 2016-17**

**The Voice of those affected**

by Healthwatch Merton and Associates

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