

Dear Councillors

This is open letter to all Merton councillors. It is a request for safe space for residents during the COVID-19 lockdown and into the future. We welcome TfL's Streetspace plan¹ and the fact that Merton's COvid-19 response² recognises "Major events shape our society and the way we experience everyday life." It is a time of disruption. We are pleased Merton signed the Climate Emergency and adopted 20mph limits but to make walking and cycling viable for households of mixed ages - now and into the future - we need physical protection from motorists and low traffic streets across the borough.

Physical distancing may last for many months and years. 85% of the population who usually use public transport will need another way to travel as public transport capacity is cut by physical distancing. People need to be able to walk in the carriageway to avoid each other so the threat of motor traffic must be cut, and footways widened. If the Council fails to take substantial action now traffic levels will not merely revert to but exceed pre-lockdown levels, as seen in Wuhan. Merton's emergency travel response needs to go much further; the Council must enact measures which make walking and cycling viable for all.

It is logical to redistribute road space to the most efficient modes. The graph below indicates capacity by mode per 3.5 metre width per hour.

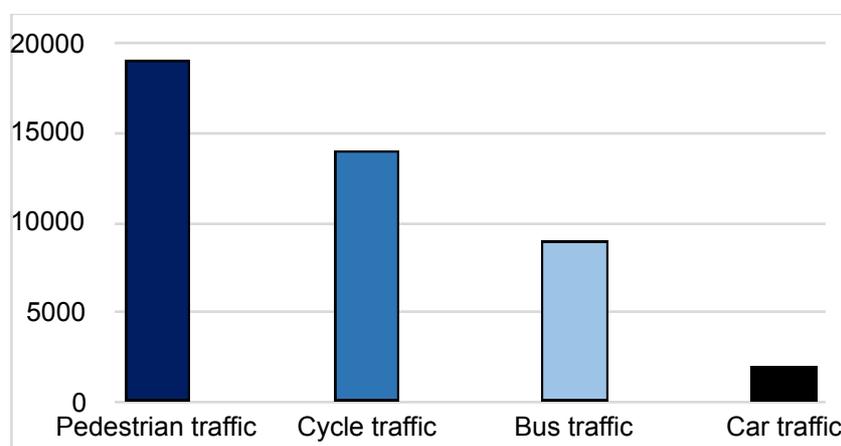


Figure 1: Capacity by mode; number of people who can be carried in 3.5m wide space per hour. Source: Cycling Embassy of Great Britain³

Merton's roads are designed primarily for motor traffic. In normal times, this makes for unpleasant streets and kills residents – either directly through road collisions, or indirectly by causing ill-health. Recent studies show links between air pollution and COVID-19 death rates. Long-term exposure to fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) at even quite small levels is associated with an increased risk of COVID-19 death. Cars (electric or otherwise) produce particulate matter from brakes and tyres which weakens our respiratory systems. Lungs recovering from Covid19 must not be forced to breathe harmful gases and particulate matter.

Not since pre-war times have so many households and families been out together jogging, walking and cycling. Motor traffic is down to 1955 levels. While we may want to get back to most aspects of pre-Covid19 life, we are now experiencing, many for the first time,

¹ <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/mayors-bold-plan-will-overhaul-capitals-streets>

² <https://www.merton.gov.uk/assets/Documents/Merton%20Covid%20Transport%20Strategy%207%20May%202020.pdf>

³ Car capacity will be lower than shown in the graph with COVID-19 as car sharing will not be an option

how pleasant it is to live with much less motor traffic. Parks, streets and communities have been bought back to life. You can now often hear the noise of birds rather than cars. The Council must lock-in less traffic. We cannot go back; air pollution, the climate emergency and the links to COVID-19 mean permanent change is needed.

As an outer London borough, Merton Council faces the prospect of major increases in commuting driving from residents and the commuter belt as people avoid public transport unless it takes drastic action. Neighbouring boroughs are acting to cut motor traffic. If Merton does not go far enough the borough will be left behind, and grind to a halt with an increase in car traffic from pre-lockdown levels, which will hurt our recovery.

We therefore ask that all councillors work together to create an ambitious cross-party borough-wide plan to create safe space. On residential streets, people need to be able to walk in the carriageway to avoid other pedestrians. Streets need to be suitable for children to move, play and socialise⁴. Safe routes to parks, schools, food shops, hospitals should be prioritised. This should not be just an emergency response; there needs to be permanent change in the way we move.

We ask that you create across Merton:

- Trial modal filters on residential streets to cut rat-running (low traffic neighbourhoods)
- Resident-led community/ quiet/ exercise streets⁵
- Trial bus gates
- Reallocation of motor traffic and parking space to safe space for pedestrian and cycle traffic.
- Protected cycling infrastructure to main roads (cylinders, wands etc) and to existing painted cycle lanes to ensure routes can be used by households of all ages.
- make cycling two-way on all gyratories and one-way streets
- Wider footways – Merton has highlighted some locations already
- Change signal timings to prioritise pedestrians, additional temporary crossings

This crisis has shown how quickly we can act as a society when facing a threat to our lives. We must act with the same haste to improve our transport system as this too will save lives. Many others wanted to sign this as individuals; we believe there is huge potential support for change. We understand the Council may be overwhelmed by other issues. We would like to help and offer our support and combined expertise to the Council to create the necessary change.

Your sincerely,

Lucy Marstrand, Associate Member, All Party Parliamentary Group for Cycling & Walking
Dr Robert Davis, Road Danger Reduction Forum
Jeremy Leach, Merton Living Streets
Diana Sterck, CEO, Sustainable Merton
Adrian Voce OBE, European Network for Child Friendly Cities
Lucy Colbeck, Playing Out
Jemima Hartshorn, Mums for Lungs
Laura Collins, Clean Air Merton
Kathryn Stewart, Merton Cycling Campaign
Mariana Pacheco, Merton Friends of the Earth
Sara Sharp, @savewimbledon/Merton TV
Dr David Taussig, Haemato-oncology research lead Royal Marsden Hospital

⁴ <https://policyforplay.com/2020/03/20/government-should-issue-guidance-on-childrens-play-during-the-coronavirus-crisis/>

⁵ <http://news.croydon.gov.uk/road-closure-scheme-to-help-residents-keep-fit-and-healthy-during-lockdown/>