

The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
Fry Building
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

5th June 2020

Dear Robert,

RE: Walking and cycling schemes in the London Borough of Sutton

We first of all want to thank the help and support you have given councils throughout this Coronavirus pandemic.

Additionally, we are grateful for the share of the £2 billion package that the London Borough of Sutton has received to support walking and cycling schemes. We recognise the importance of these schemes in order to provide safe spaces for pedestrians and cyclists to maintain social distancing as we continue to tackle Coronavirus, but also longer term in addressing the climate emergency.

However, we regret we feel the need to write to you as we are becoming increasingly concerned about the approach of the Liberal Democrat-run London Borough of Sutton in designing and delivering these schemes.

The Council were contacted on 7th May by a member of our group, indeed before the official announcement was made, to ask for details of any schemes that were being considered and that there be an opportunity to work constructively with the administration in order to ensure schemes were suitable and effective. We were promised on 12th May that councillors would be kept 'in the loop'. We also asked that the same courtesy be extended to the Members of Parliament.

The London Borough of Sutton instead made a number of immediate changes to road and pavement layouts across the Borough on 22nd May to facilitate walking and cycling to which we had no prior knowledge or chance to pass comment on. Some councillors were informed a few hours prior to the council issuing a press release, but Elliot Colburn MP, for example, was not informed despite repeated requests.

These initial schemes have so far not been largely welcomed, with many cyclists complaining that some actually make it more dangerous for them to use, something that could have been avoided by proper engagement prior to decision-making.

Following this less than satisfactory episode, we were assured that ward councillors at least would be brought in to discuss larger and longer-term schemes. However, in an email this morning to

councillors, we have been informed that engagement will “now not be possible”, the excuse being the time constraints in submitting a bid to Transport for London (TfL) and the Department for Transport (DfT). We made it clear that this was not acceptable and asked to see proposed schemes before the Council issues a press release on Monday. As of 5pm today, they have not done so.

We know that you are already aware from conversations with Paul Scully MP and Elliot Colburn MP of our grave concerns about the what sometimes appears to be the secretive way this Council operates. Not for the first time, Members of Parliament, the London Assembly Member, opposition councillors and indeed residents, have found out about Council decisions via a press release or a party-political missive from the Liberal Democrats, rather than through the official decision-making channels of the Council.

This experience has exacerbated those concerns, with neither Member of Parliament, nor the opposition, at all confident that we can rely on information coming out of the Council, whether it be a lack in confidence in the accuracy of the information, or indeed a lack of confidence that we will receive the information we have requested at all.

Coupled with this is a sense that the officers of the Council are being used by the administration as a shield for decision-making failures. Indeed, it was an officer, rather than the Lead Member, who contacted us today to inform us that we would no longer be invited to comment on the development of additional walking and cycling schemes in the Borough. Officers have expressed such concerns to us in confidence.

Other London Boroughs have had to work under exactly the same conditions, but still found time to engage properly. The London Borough of Southwark, for example, has a section on their website that calls for the public to comment on schemes they think would be good for their Borough despite the time constraints. The London Borough of Croydon actually announced a first tranche of schemes in April, and are already weeks on from their second tranche in May. We also know that Conservative-run Boroughs across the capital are ensuring good engagement prior to making decisions. It appears to us that the London Borough of Sutton have wasted time and are now trying to use time pressures as an excuse for lack of engagement.

Therefore, we would be grateful if you would consider reminding the London Borough of Sutton of their need to abide by the Nolan principles of public life, and consequently bring the Members of Parliament, opposition councillors, stakeholders and indeed residents into the decision making process surrounding walking and cycling schemes in our Borough.

We thank you again for the extraordinary efforts you and your department are taking to help the country through this pandemic.

Best wishes,

Elliot Colburn MP
Member of Parliament
for Carshalton and Wallington

Paul Scully MP
Member of Parliament
for Sutton and Cheam

Councillor Tim Crowley
Leader of the Conservative
group on Sutton Council

P.S. Please reply c/o Elliot Colburn MP, House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA.