



Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2010/11

London Borough of Merton

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Foreword

A new council following the elections in May 2010 brought a number of new members into scrutiny. I was pleased by their evident willingness to get involved from the outset in the workshop we ran to select topics for review in the year ahead, and in taking advantage of training opportunities. Scrutiny depends on member input, and in Merton more than most London boroughs, scrutiny members have a real chance to shape policies and outcomes on behalf of residents.

A year in which the council faced unprecedented cuts in government funding was perhaps not the best moment to choose for reducing the time allocated to budget scrutiny; one additional meeting of the Corporate Capacity panel was needed to review proposed savings in support services in sufficient detail. Cabinet did respond to scrutiny's recommendations by amending some of the proposed budget savings, which made the effort worthwhile.

Scrutiny members have carried out six in depth reviews this year, more than ever before. These have worked best where members have gone beyond the officer reports and got out of the Civic Centre to see for themselves what's going on, whether that be late night drinking in Wimbledon town centre or care of patients in St George's and Kingston hospitals. Review recommendations carry greater conviction if they are informed by first hand experience.

Members will have to do more for themselves if scrutiny is not to curtail its ambitions in the year ahead, given staffing reductions in support services. This is not necessarily a bad thing; scrutiny officers are there to support members, but it is the members themselves who must lead on reviews and investigations.

We are fortunate in having a highly professional officer team to support us in scrutiny, and I would like to thank Julia Regan, Hilary Gullen and Stella Akintan for all they have done to make scrutiny such a success in Merton over the past year. I know we can count on their support during the changes that face us in the year ahead.

Cllr Peter Southgate
Chair, Overview & Scrutiny Commission

What is overview and scrutiny?

Overview and Scrutiny was introduced by the Local Government Act 2000. Merton operates a Leader and Cabinet model, where the Cabinet makes the executive decisions of the authority on behalf of local residents.

Overview and Scrutiny's main roles are:

- holding the Cabinet to account
- improving and developing council policies
- examining decisions before they are implemented
- engaging with members of the public
- monitoring performance of the council and its partners

Scrutiny can look into services provided by other agencies and other matters of importance to the people of the borough. Scrutiny has legal powers to monitor and hold to account local health services (Health and Social Care Act 2001) and to scrutinise crime reduction and community safety issues (Police and Justice Act 2006).

Principles

Overview and Scrutiny at Merton is:

- open to the public
- informed by methodically gathered evidence
- based on careful deliberation and discussion
- conducted in an appropriate manner

How Overview and Scrutiny works in Merton

Merton Council has an Overview and Scrutiny Commission, which acts as a coordinating body supporting four Overview and Scrutiny Panels with individual areas of responsibility:

- Children and Young People
- Corporate Capacity
- Healthier Communities and Older People
- Sustainable Communities

Commission and Panel meetings take place throughout the year and members of the public are welcome to attend. Dates, agendas and minutes for these meetings can be found on the council website: <http://www.merton.gov.uk/council/committee.htm> .

More information about Scrutiny at Merton can be found at <http://www.merton.gov.uk/scrutiny.htm> or by phoning the scrutiny team on 020 8545 3864 or emailing scrutiny@merton.gov.uk.

Highlights 2010/2011

It has been a busy year for Scrutiny. The elections in May led to a change of administration, and many new councillors joined Merton. Councillors have been supported in carrying out their scrutiny role through workshops on prioritising issues for inclusion in the scrutiny work programme for the year; training events on questioning skills, budget scrutiny and effective chairing; and meetings between Cabinet members and scrutiny chairs and vice chairs to share work programmes and discuss matters of mutual interest.

This year, scrutiny councillors have carried out six in depth task group reviews, details of which can be found under the relevant Panel headings:

- balancing the night time economy (Overview and Scrutiny Commission)
- customer access (Corporate Capacity Panel)
- provision for young people excluded from school (Children and Young People Panel)
- supported housing for people with mental health problems (Healthier Communities Panel)
- cleaner town centres (Sustainable Communities Panel)
- efficient waste management (Sustainable Communities Panel)

We were very pleased that over 600 members of the public were involved, in a range of ways, with scrutiny this year – talking to councillors on Mitcham Green and in Merton Link (the Civic Centre reception area); responding to our surveys; and taking part in discussion at community forum and other meetings. More than 60 local people have made scrutiny review topic suggestions, attended Panel meetings, Public Transport Liaison Committee meetings and been involved in our task groups.

Monitoring the outcome of previous scrutiny reviews has demonstrated that scrutiny does bring about real change in policies and in service provision. Examples of such change include:

- ❖ changes made to the model of monitoring and assessment of local residential care homes in response to concerns about the quality and standards of care raised by a task group review in 2008/9.
- ❖ closer working between the Council and Friends of Parks generally and on a number of specific improvement projects as a result of a task group review in 2009/10. Another review outcome on dog walking will be subject to public consultation in 2011 with a view to updating the current byelaws to establish a maximum number of dogs per person.
- ❖ The fear of crime review in 2008/9 has led to more publicity about police and Safer Merton's initiatives to address crime, a successful "behave or be banned" scheme to tackle unruly drinkers plus a pilot extension of this scheme to tackle theft and acquisitive crime in the town centres.

Overview and Scrutiny Commission

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission is responsible for the scrutiny of cross cutting and strategic issues as well as issues relating to crime and disorder. It also acts as a coordinating body in supporting the four Overview and Scrutiny Panels and has responsibility for developing and keeping scrutiny under review.

Scrutiny reviews - balancing the night time economy

The Commission carried out a review of the night time economy, with a particular focus on how residents are affected by late night drinking in Merton's town centres. It recognised the benefits that a vibrant night time economy brings to local town centres but also acknowledged that the cost for local residents, for health services and for police and Council services is high.

A number of the review recommendations were aimed at reducing late night opening hours, dealing with establishments that attract troublemakers and imposing licence conditions that will reduce the level of noise from pubs and clubs. Commission members believe that Wimbledon town centre may benefit from purple flag status (similar to blue flags for beaches) and have therefore recommended that officers investigate the costs and benefits of applying for this.

The report has emphasised the importance of partnership working between the police, NHS and the Council on local information campaigns to provide the public with clear messages so that they can work out how many units of alcohol they are drinking and understand the long term health impact of this.

Strategic issues and pre-decision scrutiny

At the start of the year the Commission received a presentation from the Borough Commander and the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities, setting out their priorities for the year ahead. The Commission was able to take these into account, along with information from the Merton Partnership Annual Report, in drawing up its work programme for the year.

The Commission has monitored the implementation of the Council's Corporate Equality Scheme and the Third Sector Strategy as well as commenting on the structure of the Safer Merton Partnership

Call-in

The Commission received one call-in relating to the Council's Primary School Places and Future Strategy. The Commission resolved not to formally refer the matter back to Cabinet but to make a reference to ask Cabinet to consider additional information.

Cabinet responded by subsequently receiving a further report setting out in detail the current situation in relation to the option for a new school in north Wimbledon, how proactively this is being moved forward and what else could be done.

Performance monitoring

As well as receiving performance monitoring reports, the Commission has questioned the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities in order to hold her to account on progress made with implementing her priorities.

Scrutiny of the budget

The Commission has considered the council's balances and reserves strategy and, due to the current economic climate, is planning to look at this again next year.

The Cabinet's budget proposals were examined in November at an early stage in the budget setting process and again in February when the budget proposals had been firmed up. This approach has enabled each of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel Chairs to raise points pertinent to their Panels as well as scrutinising budget proposals in the round.

Cabinet has agreed to amend four savings proposals as a result of concerns expressed at scrutiny meetings:

- will retain 10 minutes free parking (formerly 20 minutes) instead of withdrawing free parking altogether
- will reduce the scale of the proposal to withdraw discretionary Freedom Passes to mentally ill people
- will reduce impact on overnight care at Brightwell Respite Centre
- will delay decision on the closure of Taylor Road in order to give community groups more time to consider options and make alternative arrangements

Cabinet also agreed to:

- bring proposed reductions in grant to Deen City Farm in future years back to scrutiny to enable further review of the impact of the proposals
- monitor the impact of no longer locking parks overnight
- monitor the impact on children of the service efficiencies and rationalisation of special educational need (SEN) budgets

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

This Panel has responsibility for the scrutiny of issues relating to children and young people. This includes education, children's social care, child protection and youth services.

Scrutiny reviews

A task group review of the provision for vulnerable young people excluded from or not participating in school, has focussed on primary, and secondary school pupils who live in Merton and are out of school due persistent fixed term exclusions. The task group looked at what measures are in place to tackle this and what more can be done. There has been a particular focus on the role of alternative education provision for pupils out of school and the partnerships in place to support young people. The task group will report back to the Panel in June.

Strategic issues and pre-decision scrutiny

At the first meeting of the municipal year, presentations were given on the key challenges for services to children and young people.

The Panel has discussed the provision of primary school places and demographic information on where expansion will be required. The Panel identified some concerns and made a recommendation to Cabinet that further information should be taken into account in taking decisions on this issue.

The Panel has received presentations to bring it up to date on school sports co-ordination, the implications of the Schools White Paper and schools funding regime.

Panel meeting agendas have also included progress reports on expanding sixth form provision and the Children's Trust.

Performance monitoring

The Panel receives a performance monitoring report at each of its meetings. The performance indicators were revised following discussion at the November meeting and streamlined to provide more pertinent information for the Panel members. One new item to be included is the incidence of road traffic accidents to children and young people in the borough.

The Panel also receives an annual report to provide greater detail on performance measures relating to education, including test and examination results, school attendance and exclusions at the final Panel meeting of the year. At this meeting, members received two excellent presentations on Safeguarding in Children's Social Care and School Standards.

The Safeguarding in Children's Social Care report highlighted Merton's policy of early intervention and support (so as to decrease the likelihood of a crisis approach and greater intervention being needed subsequently), the rising demand for front-line services and how the number of children being placed in the care system in Merton was well below the national average. Panel members had the opportunity to ask a range of questions about the service.

The School Standards report highlighted a number of achievements including, the Early Years Foundation Stage, continuous improvement at Key Stage 2 and a continuing upward trend in A levels at the secondary stage. Members were particularly interested in how the department were building links with South Thames College, Merton Campus, the apprenticeship route and links with local employers.

<i>Financial monitoring</i>

The Panel scrutinised the proposed budget for 2011/12 at its meeting on 8th February and requested further information including the effect on school standards, respite care and special needs education. As a result of this an adjustment in the savings proposals relating to Brightwell Respite Centre was agreed at Cabinet.

Corporate Capacity Overview and Scrutiny Panel

This Panel has responsibility for the scrutiny of issues relating to the council's "corporate capacity". This includes financial monitoring, communications, legal, human resources, IT, customer service and the performance monitoring framework.

Scrutiny reviews

Customer access

Task group members spoke to customers in the reception areas of the Civic Centre as well as drawing on views expressed in a telephone survey of contact centre users and by residents through a self-completion questionnaire. Three other London councils were visited in order to learn from their experience.

The task group endorsed the underlying principles and direction of the draft customer contact strategy to encourage greater use of web-based and telephone services while providing a safety net for those who will need to make contact in person.

The task group have recommended that all customer services should be made available on-line unless there is a robust reason not to. It has also recommended that expansion of the Council's telephone contact centre is evaluated, including the feasibility of providing shared services with other councils.

Other recommendations address the need to advertise the availability of on-line services to residents in order to encourage their use.

The task group has also examined the Council's draft IT Strategy and made comments aimed at ensuring IT strategies and systems are sufficiently robust to support the implementation of the customer contact strategy.

The task group has suggested that a future task group review could usefully examine the range, function and links between existing IT systems.

Strategic issues and pre-decision scrutiny

Merton 2015 (the Council's Transformation Programme)

Regular updates have been brought to the Panel so that its views can be taken into account as the project progresses. The Panel has scrutinised the rolling out of "Lean" efficiency reviews and steps taken to improve the council's performance on procurement, human resources and IT.

HR shared services

The Panel received an update on progress with the shared human resources service now provided jointly with Sutton Council and examined the savings that have resulted from this arrangement.

Transparency on Council expenditure

The Panel examined the expenditure data published by the Council, welcoming the greater transparency but expressing some concern about the cost of compiling such detailed information.

Housing Benefit changes

A report was received setting out how many local residents are likely to be affected by the housing benefit cap and what impact this might have on council services and on the local private rented sector.

Business plans

The Council's new approach to business planning was welcomed by the Panel. Members commented on the layout and content of some of the draft service plans. These comments have resulted in improvements being made to subsequent documents.

Performance monitoring

The Panel has focussed on staffing (HR) issues this year, examining detailed performance information on staff numbers, staff turnover and the use of temporary and agency staff. Questions were asked about what action had been taken to improve recruitment and retention of particular groups of staff, including those working in children's social care.

Financial monitoring

The Panel has received regular financial monitoring reports, providing members with the opportunity to highlight significant variations within the current budget and ask questions of officers and cabinet members about their plans to address this. The Panel has also commented on the format, content and timeliness of these reports so that improvements can be made in due course. The Panel has requested that simplified income and expenditure and balance sheet statements be considered rather than the wordy reports currently submitted.

In scrutinising the proposed budget for 2011/12 the Panel held an additional meeting to examine the proposed changes that would occur as a result of the restructures of support services and customer services. The Panel established a member working group that discussed the impact of these changes and developed a number of alternative proposals.

Healthier Communities and Older People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

This Panel has responsibility for the scrutiny of issues relating to health and adult social care. This includes including promoting good health and healthy lifestyles, mental health and reducing health inequalities for people of all ages.

The government's Health and Social Care Bill proposes wide ranging changes including a new role for GP's working in consortia to commission health services; Local Authorities taking on responsibility for public health; joint working and collaboration in commissioning health and social care through statutory health and well-being boards. Primary Care Trusts and Strategic Health Authorities will be abolished. Local Authorities' power to scrutinise health bodies has been extended to include all NHS-funded services, and any NHS commissioner, including scrutiny of private sector providers.

This Panel has played an important role in scrutinising these proposals and considering the implications for Merton including:

- responding to the Health White Paper consultation
- the Chief Executive of the Primary Care Trust attending the Panel to give an overview of the proposals, timetable and progress in Merton
- discussion at the Mental Health Review Group meeting in October 2010

Scrutiny reviews

Supported Housing for People with Mental Health Problems - the review has looked at the levels of provision and quality of supported living facilities for people with mental health problems and how this group access preventative and other services related to healthy lifestyle choices (on smoking, diet, exercise, drugs and alcohol). The review has also investigated whether supported housing provision enables people to become independent and able to manage their condition in the community.

The task group's report was considered at the Panel in March 2011 and included the following recommendations:

- that the Council and South West London and St Georges Mental Health Trust work in partnership to reduce unplanned discharges from hospital
- that the council and NHS Sutton and Merton work together to ensure that residents in supported housing are helped to access smoking cessation services
- that research is carried out into accessing grants, EU funding, using existing resources and working in partnerships with other boroughs to increase the range of daytime services available for people with mental health problems supported housing. Examples include; guided walks, Celebrating Age in

- Autumn, Ramblers Association, Cooking Clubs, 2012 events, internet social networking and museum visits
- that assessments are carried out on residents in supported housing on a regular basis by social workers/care co-ordinators and incorporated into the care plan. Also, that clients in supported housing are set meaningful goals and encouraged to move on into more suitable housing when appropriate.

Other review groups

The Mental Health Review Group meets three times a year to enable issues relating to mental health services to be given adequate opportunity for scrutiny. Specific issues from the Review Group are referred back to the Panel when necessary. The review group plans to visit Springfield Hospital and give further consideration to South West London and St George's Mental Health Trust proposal for Foundation Status.

Strategic issues and pre-decision scrutiny

Care in hospital for the elderly – Following a high profile report from Age Concern UK , as well as reports in the media and testimonials from residents, the Panel had concerns about treatment for elderly patients while in hospital. There were particular concerns around help with eating at meal times and responses to requests for use of a commode. Senior representatives from Kingston, Epsom and St Helier and St Georges hospitals attended the Panel to discuss the work that they had been doing in this area and their performance data.

The Panel visited the Kingston and St Georges hospitals to see the service, talk to patients and review procedures. The Panel were kindly hosted by the Director of Nursing at both hospitals. The Panel identified good practice within both hospitals and requested that they share their procedures.

Fairer Contributions Policy – The Panel received details of the new charges for home care and other non-residential services to take effect from April 2011. Although the costs will be means tested, the Panel was concerned that some residents would be facing higher charges that could impact upon their quality of life. There were concerns that increased charges could lead to more people going into residential care. The Panel noted their concern that the policy may not be fair for all service users.

All Saints Respite Centre – The Panel has had on-going concerns about the residential respite unit for people with Learning Disabilities in South Wimbledon. The Panel called in a decision to change the service provider in March 2010. This decision was upheld and the Panel considered the progress with this in December 2010, where a number of carers attended the meeting to give their views on the service. Carers expressed some concerns with the project and officers agreed that there had been some teething problems. The Panel requested a further update in March 2011

Joint Health Scrutiny

The Merton, Sutton and Surrey Joint Health Committee held a meeting in February to consider Epsom and St Helier NHS Trust, Foundation Trust options; Epsom and St Helier annual health check and safe water services; and progress with the Better Healthcare Closer to Home proposals. A further meeting is due to take place in April.

Performance and budget monitoring

The Panel considered the Budget proposals at their meeting in January 2011 and raised a number of concerns including:

- Reduction in allocation of freedom passes for mentally ill people
- Reduction in transport costs that could lead to fewer vehicles with service users having longer journeys
- Inflation increase of 0% on all social care providers
- Reduction in grants to voluntary organisations

Consultation responses

The Panel has responded to the following consultations:

- *A proposed model of care for Cancer and Cardiovascular Services in London*
The Panel called for greater investment in preventative services and information technology
- *Closure of Family Planning Clinic at Birches Road Mitcham* – The Panel were broadly in agreement with the proposals
- *South West London and St Georges application for Foundation Trust Status* – The Panel called for the governance structure to be strengthened
- *NHS White Paper: Equity and Excellence - Liberating the NHS* – The Panel called for a distinct scrutiny of health services function to be maintained and more accountability.

Panel visits to local services

As there were a number of new councillors this year, the Panel visited a number of facilities across the borough, these included Merton Vision, which provides a range of services for people who are blind or partially sighted.; and High Path Community Resource Centre; which hosts a range of facilities including a day centre for people with learning disabilities. Panel members also met with senior social workers at MASCOT community alarm response service. During the course of the visits Panel members met with staff, service users and gained a greater understanding of how these facilities run on a day to day basis.

Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel

This Panel has responsibility for the scrutiny of issues relating to housing, environmental sustainability, culture, enterprise and skills, libraries and transport.

Scrutiny reviews

Cleaner Town Centres

The purpose of this review was to make our town centres and shopping parades more appealing, thereby helping local businesses to thrive and to make Merton a better place to live and work.

Task group members spoke to local residents on Mitcham Fair Green, asking them to complete a short questionnaire to elicit their views about Merton's town centres.

The main recommendations from this review are: that the public need to be educated about the nuisance of litter and the cost of cleaning it up and the penalties that can result; review of the use of national indicator 195 (covering litter, detritus, graffiti and fly-posting); methods of working; how planning can assist and how partnership working can be employed to improve the town centres.

Efficient household waste management and the environment

This task group review will be considering current and alternative methods of domestic waste collection, evaluating each model and making recommendations to Cabinet on how domestic waste collection should be arranged in future. The task group will report its findings to the Panel in June.

Past reviews

The Panel received a follow up report on its review of Parks and Open Spaces, and were satisfied with progress made with the implementation of its recommendations, although members also agreed that friends' groups should to be promoted as widely as possible, that the issue on locking up parks needed following up and appointed a bio-diversity champion to receive bi-annual monitoring updates.

Strategic issues and pre-decision scrutiny

The Panel examined the South London Waste Plan and Merton Park Pool as part of the pre-decision scrutiny process.

South London Waste Plan

The Panel expressed gratitude to all officers who had completed this large project and endorsed the report. Panel members recommended the submission of the plan to the Secretary of State.

Morden Park Pool

At their meeting on 15th March, Panel members received a presentation on the proposals for the future of Morden Park Pool, noted the extensive research and analysis that had been carried out and considered the financial implications involved.

Performance monitoring

The Panel has examined performance monitoring information and additional data on how the transfer of council stock to Merton Priory Homes progressed. Key performance indicators were reviewed at each meeting and all queries were discussed fully with the relevant officers concerned. Targets for recycling were being met, but concern was expressed over the fly-tipping target - which showed an increase in this illegal activity.

Financial monitoring

The Panel scrutinised the proposed budget for 2011/12 at its meeting on 25th January. Additional information was requested on several items around parking charges, street cleansing and parks savings. Cabinet responded to the overview and scrutiny recommendations by amending the proposed removal of 20 minutes free parking to 10 minutes, and to monitor the impact of the phased reduction in the Deen City Farm grant and the impact of the change in policy regarding locking parks in the evenings.

Public Transport Liaison Committee Meetings

There were two meetings of the Public Transport Liaison Committee this year. The meeting in October 2010 looked into accessibility issues and at the March 2011 meeting presentations on updates to the services were given. Presentations were heard from Transport for London, Tramlink, First Capital Connect and South West Trains. This Committee continues to be an important vehicle for members of the public to challenge transport providers in the borough.

Presentations from the PTLC meetings are available to view on our website:
www.merton.gov.uk/scrutiny

Call - ins

There have been four call-ins under the remit of this Panel this year on:

- Wimbledon Area Traffic Study – Panel resolved that the decisions taken in respect of this study be referred to the Cabinet Member for reconsideration. As a result of the call-in, the new Cabinet Member agreed to a further round of consultation in relation to the previous Cabinet Member's decision. A comprehensive scheme has now been devised which will go to Street Management Advisory Committee in June.
- 165-169 Merton Road and Ravensbury Grove Garages (upheld) after extensive discussion, Panel decided not to refer the decision back to Cabinet.
- The Core Strategy (upheld) - the Panel took the decision that the Core Strategy submission to the Secretary of State was not referred back to Cabinet.
- Parking arrangements in Dundonald ward –Panel referred this decision back to the Cabinet member with additional comments for consideration. The Cabinet Member is reconsidering the decision and expects to issue an amended decision shortly.

Get involved

The involvement of local residents, community organisations and partners is an important part of the scrutiny process and councillors are committed to responding to the views and concerns of residents.

Getting involved in scrutiny is one of the best ways to influence decision making at the council, as councillors will hear your experiences first hand. There are a number of ways you can get involved in the work of scrutiny at the council:

Suggesting an issue for scrutiny

The council's website contains an online form which can be used to make suggestions on issues and topics for future scrutiny:

<http://www.merton.gov.uk/council/scrutiny/scrutiny-getinvolved.htm>

Suggestions may also be made in writing, by email or by phone to the Scrutiny Team – contact details overleaf.

All suggestions received will be discussed by the relevant scrutiny Panel and the person who made the suggestion will be contacted to let them know what has happened to it.

Attending meetings

All scrutiny meetings are open to the public except where confidential information has to be discussed. A list of meeting dates and agenda items can be found on the council's website. <http://www.merton.gov.uk/council/committee.htm>

If you would like to attend a meeting simply come along to the meeting venue or, if you want more information, contact the Scrutiny Team – details overleaf.

Providing information and views

Members of the public can send in written views or speak on issues that are under discussion at the Overview and Scrutiny Commission or one of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels.

Information on current task group reviews and any deadlines for submission on information can be found on <http://www.merton.gov.uk/scrutiny> or by contacting the Scrutiny Team – details overleaf.

Contact the Scrutiny Team

The Scrutiny Team provides independent and professional support and advice to the Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission and the four standing Overview and Scrutiny Panels.

You can contact the Scrutiny Team using one of the following methods: -

In writing:

Scrutiny Team
Chief Executive's Department
Merton Civic Centre
London Road
Morden
Surrey SM4 5DX

By emailing:

scrutiny@merton.gov.uk

By phoning:

Julia Regan – Scrutiny Manager
020 8545 3864

Hilary Gullen – Scrutiny Officer
020 8545 4035

Stella Akintan –Scrutiny Officer
020 8545 3390

For further information about Overview and Scrutiny at Merton please access our web pages using the following address <http://www.merton.gov.uk/scrutiny>