



London Borough of Merton

Report and recommendations arising from the scrutiny task group review of parks and open spaces in Merton

Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel

March 2010

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(drawn from the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel):

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Acknowledgements

The task group would particularly like to thank all the people who took the time to complete our questionnaire in order to share their views on the quality of Merton's parks and open spaces and how these could be improved.

We would also like to thank the officers and external witnesses who provided written information and came to meetings to discuss their work with us. We are especially grateful to Doug Napier, the Council's Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces Manager, who has attended all our meetings, provided us with information and patiently answered all our questions.

All contributors are listed in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 of this report.

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Executive Summary

The task group was set up in order to undertake a review of parks and open spaces in Merton.

The report is evidence based, drawing on and reflecting the wide range of written and oral evidence received. The task group questioned senior Council managers as well as hearing about best practice elsewhere from the London Spaces Forum, Mitcham Common Conservators and the London Borough of Kingston Upon Thames.

The task group heard views from the Youth Parliament, Merton Seniors Forum, Community Forums and Friends of Parks groups as well as receiving 56 questionnaire responses from individual residents. Task group members also visited Beddington Park, Pyl Brook Nature Reserve and Mitcham Common in order to see them at first hand.

The task group heard many positive comments and found that parks and open spaces are extremely important to the quality of life of our residents. They fulfil a number of different roles – providing peace and quiet; fresh air; opportunities to exercise, walk dogs, socialise and so on. They also contribute to the promotion of good health, education, tourism, biodiversity, community cohesion and many more strategic aims of the Council and its partners.

The task group believe that it is important to maintain and improve Merton's parks and open spaces. It has therefore made a number of recommendations aimed at helping the Council to make best use of existing resources and to seek new sources of revenue and capital finance.

Specific recommendations have been made to trial metal structured barbecue frames in Wimbledon Park this summer, to provide additional Green Gyms should appropriate funding become available and to nominate a member of the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel to act as a biodiversity champion.

Other recommendations are intended to strengthen the planning process, particularly in relation to identifying and developing play facilities within the borough.

The recommendations are listed in full overleaf.

List of task group's recommendations

Recommendation 1 (paragraph 28)

We recommend that the Greenspaces Service continue to work in partnership with local Friends of Parks Groups to identify capital and other projects of benefit to local residents and then to provide support with applying to funding sources and, where successful, managing the project on their behalf.

Recommendation 2 (Paragraph 31)

We recommend that the Greenspaces Service investigate other potential routes for accessing additional funding sources. This should include an assessment of benefits and costs, including the impact on the Council's revenue budget in future years.

Recommendation 3 (Paragraph 33)

We recommend that the Greenspaces Service explore new ways of maximising existing resources and of generating additional sources of income. This should include an assessment of how existing buildings could be used to develop facilities that would include the provision of refreshments and toilets.

Recommendation 4 (Paragraph 40)

We therefore recommend that the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel should identify one of its members each year to act as the Council's biodiversity champion in order to promote biodiversity issues and to progress the development and implementation of a local biodiversity action plan. The Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces Manager will act as a "link officer" to put the member champion in touch with other officers as appropriate.

Recommendation 5 (Paragraph 47)

We recommend that Children Schools and Families continue to work with schools to pilot the use of a school playground outside of school hours, preferably in an area of the borough where there is a lack of other local open space. The pilot might include the provision of a play supervisor employed through the use of some of the play pathfinder funding. We note that this funding expires in March 2011.

Recommendation 6 (Paragraph 53)

We recommend that, as part of taking a round, evidenced decision, the Director of Environment and Regeneration should ensure that the planning process draws on the views of an officer from Children, Schools and Families who can advise on play and childcare issues in relation to new housing and other relevant developments.

Recommendation 7 (Paragraph 54)

We recommend that Environment and Regeneration review whether there is adequate planning guidance to judge the quality of proposed play facilities.

Recommendation 8 (Paragraph 61)

We recommend that Environment and Regeneration continue work on the “project bank” so that it can be used to enable a more strategic approach to be taken to prioritise projects that can be funded by Section 106 and other income sources as appropriate funding becomes available.

Recommendation 9 (Paragraph 70)

We recommend that the provision of additional Green Gyms should be a priority use of additional funding as appropriate sources become available.

Recommendation 10 (Paragraph 82)

We recommend that the Director of Environment and Regeneration investigate how the bye-law regarding the maximum number of dogs walked per person has been used in other authorities and assess the feasibility of adopting and enforcing this bye-law in Merton.

Recommendation 11 (Paragraph 85)

We recommend that the Greenspaces Service trials the use of metal structured barbeque frames in Wimbledon Park during summer 2010 so that residents can continue to enjoy barbeques without the attendant litter and damage to the grass.

Recommendation 12 (Paragraph 97)

We recommend that the Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces Manager discusses with the boroughwide Forum of Friends Groups the suggestions made by the Residents Association of West Wimbledon in order to seek a consensus on how best to maintain effective communication between Friends Groups and the Council.

Recommendation 13 (Paragraph 99)

We recommend that the Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces Manager clarify existing policies in relation to the use of parks and open spaces.

Recommendation 14 (Paragraph 100)

We recommend that the Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces Manager continue to work with Friends Groups to promote the harmonious use of parks and open spaces by all sections of the community.

Report of the Parks and Open Spaces Scrutiny Task Group

Introduction

Purpose

1. The Council's Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel, at its meeting on 03 June 2009, agreed to establish a task group to undertake a review of parks and open spaces in Merton.
2. The Panel appointed a small working group of councillors to carry out this work and report back to the Panel's meeting on 31 March 2010.
3. The task group's terms of reference were:
 - a) to gain an understanding of the policy and legislative framework governing the provision and management of parks and open spaces;
 - b) to determine the roles and responsibilities of the Council and partners in the management of parks and open spaces;
 - c) to determine the financial and staff resources dedicated to the service;
 - d) to determine the quality of parks and open spaces in the Borough (landscape quality, issues with graffiti/vandalism, derelict buildings etc);
 - e) to determine resident satisfaction with parks and open spaces, reasons for under usage, where this is the case, and how residents are consulted by the Council and partners

What the task group did

4. The task group has had six meetings at which a wide range of evidence has been considered including:
 - Merton Open Space Strategy
 - presentations and discussion with the Leisure, Culture and Green Spaces Manager
 - Merton's Free Play Strategy 2007-2012
 - Information on design and planning issues from the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment
 - Information on best practice from the London Parks and Green Spaces Forum
5. Task group members have visited to Beddington Park, Pyl Brook Nature Reserve and Mitcham Common in order to see them at first hand. At each site they were escorted by officers and wardens so that they had an opportunity to discuss management, usage and other pertinent issues.
6. Task group members have spoken to the Youth Parliament, Merton Seniors Forum, Community Forums and Friends of Parks groups to seek a wide range of views. A questionnaire was placed on the Council's

website, posted to residents associations, Friends of Parks groups, school councils and community centres as well as being given out at meetings attended by task group members.

7. Appendix 1 lists the written evidence received by the task group and Appendix 2 lists the witnesses at each meeting.
8. This report sets out the task group's findings, conclusions and recommendations. The task group's recommendations run throughout the report and are set out in full in the Executive Summary at the front of this document.

Parks and open spaces in Merton – an overview

9. Merton is well provided with parks and open spaces in comparison to other London boroughs. 18% of the borough's area is taken up with open space compared to the London average of 10%. Parks and open spaces are distributed fairly evenly across the borough, giving most residents easy access. Visitor numbers are estimated to be in excess of one million.
10. Merton is home to a total of 109 parks and open spaces. These vary considerably in size from large parks such as Wimbledon Park and Morden Hall Park to relatively small sites such as Armfield Crescent and South Park Gardens. Other open spaces include 18 allotment sites, 4 cemeteries and 45 school playing fields.
11. The design, and consequently function, of the parks varies widely, providing opportunities for residents to enjoy both natural and man-made environments such as:
 - Armfield Crescent - playground and ball area
 - Cannizaro Park - sunken garden, water garden and other formal gardens
 - Cannon Hill Common - nature conservation site with mature woodland
 - Holland Garden - secluded open space with trees, woodland and an ornamental garden
 - Sir Joseph Hood Playing Fields – tennis courts, crazy golf, paddling pool, trees and woodland
 - Mitcham Common - ancient common land hosting a range of habitats – has an ecology centre and a golf course
 - Pyl Brook Nature Reserve – small nature reserve with ponds
 - South Hall Park – small park with formal triangular gardens.
12. The parks and open spaces lend themselves to a wide range of usage - 23 have sports facilities, 40 have children's playgrounds and there are 57 tennis courts. Parks and open spaces host over 70 community events each year, including firework displays, Mitcham Carnival, Wimbledon Tennis Championships and London in Bloom.
13. The borough is host to a number of high quality parks and open spaces, including two extensive commons (Wimbledon Common and Mitcham Common). Wimbledon Park, Cannizaro Park and Morden Hall Park are included on English Heritage's Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest. Three parks received the Green Flag Award in 2009 for well managed green space, signage and public amenities - Colliers Wood Recreation Ground, Sir Joseph Hood Memorial Playing Field and John Innes Park .
14. Appendix 3 contains a map showing all the parks and open spaces.

Policy and legislative framework

15. Merton's Open Space Strategy 2005 sets out the Council's commitment to maintaining Merton's open spaces and improving their quality for users. The strategy defines open spaces as "all land and water in Merton both publicly and privately owned, mostly in an undeveloped state, that offer public enjoyment through physical or visual access".
16. The Director of the London Parks and Green Spaces Forum regards Merton's Strategy as an example of best practice and its definition of open spaces as "exemplary" in including both public and privately owned land.
17. The Strategy clearly sets out the many benefits that parks and open spaces provide:
 - Creates opportunities for sport and recreation – improves health.
 - Provides space people can go to escape pressure and get a sense of well-being.
 - Hosts community events and gatherings – improves social inclusion.
 - Attracts tourists – boosts local economy.
 - Provides outdoor classroom for learning about nature and the environment.
 - Protects wild plants and animals.
 - Protects significant natural features and local heritage.
 - Contributes towards clean air, water and drainage – serves as 'lungs' for the urban area.
 - Adds value to properties and localities.
 - Improves the urban environment and contributes to regeneration.
18. In recent years a raft of different government initiatives and legislation has addressed issues on which parks and open spaces can clearly make a contribution – health, quality of life, climate change, environmental sustainability, place shaping.....
19. There are consequently a number of local and regional policies and strategies to which the provision of parks and open spaces makes a significant contribution:
 - Mayor of London's Plan, sets the strategic context for open space planning throughout London
 - Merton's Community Plan
 - Cultural Strategy
 - Unitary Development Plan and Local Development Framework
 - Draft Economic Development Strategy
 - Climate Change Strategy.
20. We explored in depth two specific areas to which the provision of parks and open spaces makes a contribution – children's play and bio diversity. These are set out in detail in subsequent sections of this report.

Management and finance

21. Merton Council's parks and open spaces are managed in-house by the Greenspaces Service. The service comprises 92 staff (of which 11 are managerial and 81 operational) plus 11 seasonal staff.
22. The Greenspaces Service is essentially non statutory except for the provision of allotments and certain legal obligations and responsibilities that the Council has in relation to trees and bio-diversity. The Service works in partnership with 24 Friends Groups and numerous local, national and community organisations.
23. Local targets have been developed – total area of open space, resident satisfaction, graffiti, Green Flag Awards, area in positive conservation management, young people's satisfaction with parks.
24. We heard from the Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces Manager that the key issues facing the greenspaces services arise from tensions between diminishing resources, increasing public demand and rising public expectations. The service is under pressure to reduce operational costs and to focus on strategic decision making, "doing less but better".
25. In 2009/10 the Greenspaces Service had a revenue budget of £3.7 million, an income of £1.4m and £1.5 m from the Council's capital programme. Additional capital has been obtained from external sources.
26. Working in partnership with local Friends Groups has helped to reduce some operational costs and to attract additional capital funding for specific projects. We were told that the Council has a good track record of obtaining funding from outside bodies, including Sport England, London Marathon Trust and the Lottery Heritage Fund.
27. Friends Groups are able to apply to funds for which local authorities are ineligible. We understand that the Greenspaces Service is already working closely with Friends Groups on particular projects within the borough, helping them to write funding bids and managing the project on their behalf.
28. **We therefore recommend that the Greenspaces Service continue to work in partnership with local Friends of Parks Groups to identify capital and other projects of benefit to local residents and then to provide support with applying to funding sources and, where successful, managing the project on their behalf. (recommendation 1)**
29. We were interested to hear examples of other routes to obtaining funding through different models of service provision and partnership working:
 - Mitcham Common is managed by the Mitcham Common Conservators, a statutory body established in 1891. The Board of Conservators has

set up two subsidiary charitable trusts (one for education and one for environmental issues) to further its work in these areas and to access additional funding.

- The Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames has outsourced its Greenspaces Service. One advantage of this arrangement is that the contractor has been able to obtain external funding for which the local authority would not have been eligible – they obtained £0.5m last year for specific projects including a sensory garden and a new playground.
 - Groundwork, as a charitable trust, is eligible to apply for landfill tax credits, and can also access charitable funds.
30. One of the messages that we heard from the Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces Manager and other officers within Merton and from elsewhere is that although obtaining funds for capital works is very helpful, this does not come with any contribution to the longer term maintenance costs. These therefore place increased demand on revenue budgets in future years and can constrain the development of new facilities.
- 31. We recommend that the Greenspaces Service investigate other potential routes for accessing additional funding sources. This should include an assessment of benefits and costs, including the impact on the Council’s revenue budget in future years. (recommendation 2)**
32. We spoke to the Director of the London Parks and Green Spaces Forum about other ways in which we can make best use of resources, protect existing resources and seek new sources of income. He made a number of suggestions:
- work in partnership with Friends Groups to encourage volunteering activities in local parks (see paragraph 90 onwards for further comment)
 - generate income through hosting big events. We note that there is a trade-off between income generated and the cost and disruption caused. It is also a high risk strategy in relation to the weather.
 - explore option of franchising of cafes and other park facilities. We note that cafes and toilets are top priorities for park users. Franchising should be explored on a site by site basis rather than seeking a “one size fits all” solution.
 - look at working with other partners such as the NHS to explore how mutual objectives can be met through pooling of resources
 - ensure that the greenspaces service area is represented on the Local Strategic Partnership
- 33. We recommend that the Greenspaces Service explore new ways of maximising existing resources and of generating additional sources of income. This should include an assessment of how existing buildings could be used to develop facilities that would include the provision of refreshments and toilets. (recommendation 3)**

Biodiversity

34. The Council's Climate Change Strategy includes a section on biodiversity, re-stating the Council's commitment to use the powers available to protect and develop open spaces across the borough and to manage these in a sustainable way.
35. Locally much of this work is taken forward through a partnership, the Merton Biodiversity Group. The Council also works with regional partners such as the London Biodiversity Partnership, London Tree Officers Association, Natural England and the Greater London Authority in order to implement regional strategies.
36. One of the areas of work involves the replacement of a number of trees and plants with more appropriate species for the location. This can be difficult to explain to the public, particularly if it involves cutting down trees.
37. We heard that the Merton Biodiversity Group and other local groups have been successful in securing funding for tree planting and obtaining a number of capital grants, match funded by the Council. For example, in 2009, the London Development Agency provided over £100,000 in match funding for the London Street Trees Project which enabled trees to be planted along highways in the east of the borough.
38. We regard biodiversity work as an essential component of the Council's commitment to preserving the quality of our parks and open spaces and protecting the animals, plants and habitats within the borough. We heard that the Council does not have a dedicated biodiversity officer, although there are three or four officers who have nature conservation as part of their job description or who contribute to nature conservation initiatives.
39. We believe that the Council's biodiversity work would benefit from the identification of a "biodiversity champion" who could promote and provide a focus for progressing the development and implementation of a local biodiversity action plan.
40. **We therefore recommend that the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel should identify one of its members each year to act as the Council's biodiversity champion in order to promote biodiversity issues and to progress the development and implementation of a local biodiversity action plan. The Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces Manager will act as a "link officer" to put the member champion in touch with other officers as appropriate. (recommendation 4)**

Provision For Children And Young People In Parks And Open Spaces

41. We received a presentation on Merton's Free Play Strategy 2007-12 and the associated work on creating environments that will encourage children to play and enjoy themselves, thus promoting fitness and health and reducing obesity. This work is particularly timely given that the distance from home within which children play has become smaller than in the past. We heard that parental worries about road safety and stranger danger are the main reason for this.
42. Parks and open spaces are clearly important in the provision of safe and stimulating places in which children can play. We were therefore pleased to hear that Merton has received £2.5million play pathfinder lottery funding and that this is being spent on developing or refurbishing 28 play spaces in the borough plus a brand new adventure playground currently being built at the Intergenerational Centre. Details of this and the other play pathfinder work can be found on the Council's website:
http://www.merton.gov.uk/play_pathfinder
43. We were also pleased to be told that the Play Pathfinder work will result in different schemes for different locations, as we wish our parks and open spaces to retain their individuality. We were particularly glad to hear that many of the schemes will be designed around play in a natural environment, for example an "aerial path" is being considered in Wimbledon Park which will make use of tree stumps and other natural features.
44. We understand that it can be difficult to reconcile the needs of different groups of park users and delicate negotiations were required in relation to some of the proposed play pathfinder sites.
45. Children have a right to opportunities for play and we discussed the need to challenge the attitude and culture currently surrounding children's play. In particular we thought about how best to encourage schools to "open up" playgrounds and other play facilities outside of school hours.
46. We discussed the work that Children, Schools and Families have been doing to identify one or two schools who would be willing to work in partnership to pilot the use of their school playground outside of school hours. We welcome this initiative and hope that this pilot will demonstrate whether there is a case for this type of provision and, if so, what the costs and benefits are.
47. **We recommend that Children Schools and Families continue to work with schools to pilot the use of a school playground outside of school hours, preferably in an area of the borough where there is a lack of other local open space. The pilot might include the provision of a play supervisor employed through the use of some of the play pathfinder funding. We note that this funding expires in March 2011. (recommendation 5)**

Planning and design issues

Planning and design

48. We were pleased to hear that the Unitary Development Plan and related planning strategies contain provision for protecting the borough's open spaces. We invited a representative from the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, the government's advisor on architecture, urban design and public space to talk to us about their work and good practice in improving the planning and design of open spaces.
49. The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment works with architects, planners, designers, developers and clients, offering them guidance on projects and encouraging them to "get better value through better design". We spoke to a representative of CABI Space, a specialist unit within CABI that aims to bring excellence to the design and management of parks and public space in our towns and cities.
50. CABI Space's work includes the publication of good practice guides and the promotion of participation and quality tools such as Spaceshaper and the Green Flag Award. We also heard about work on the "Green Information Gap", a project that involves mapping the nation's green spaces.
51. CABI Space advised us to consider the extent to which our local planning briefs address the need for well designed open space and to avoid a uniform approach so that we retain local character. Given resource limitations, CABI Space advised a gradual approach to raising standards by prioritising where investment should be allocated.
52. During our discussion of the Play Strategy we found out that members of the Play Strategy Steering Group had not been consulted as part of the planning decision process on large housing schemes. We believe that they could make a valuable input, for example in giving their views in relation to the provision of play opportunities and sufficient childcare on new developments. They could help to identify what scope there is for providing smaller spaces for playing on the street when considering other planning applications. They would also be able to provide information from their consultation work with children and young people.
53. **We recommend that, as part of taking a round, evidenced decision, the Director of Environment and Regeneration should ensure that the planning process draws on the views of an officer from Children, Schools and Families who can advise on play and childcare issues in relation to new housing and other relevant developments. (recommendation 6)**
54. **We further recommend that Environment and Regeneration review whether there is adequate planning guidance to judge the quality of proposed play facilities. (recommendation 7)**

Section 106 monies

55. Section 106 (S106) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 allows a local planning authority to enter into a legally-binding agreement or planning obligation with a landowner in association with the granting of planning permission. The obligation is termed a Section 106 Agreement.
56. The council can enter into a Section 106 agreement with a developer where it is necessary to offset negative impacts caused by construction and development. Examples of Section 106 agreements range from the provision of affordable homes and new open space to the funding of school places or employment training schemes.
57. The developer will either implement the agreement or make payments to the council for them to be carried out. It is therefore difficult to predict the level of funding that will be provided through section 106 agreements in future. Also, strict rules govern how these can be spent and they often have geographical restrictions relating to the location of the new development.
58. We heard that some section 106 monies have already been used to pay for play facilities in Morden Park and to support some of the Play Strategy work. They have also been used for environmental enhancements such as tree planting and to match fund bids to fund making organisations.
59. During the course of our review we received requests to consider recommending the use of section 106 monies to create new open spaces on new housing developments and for specific biodiversity projects.
60. There appears to be a lack of overall strategy currently for using section 106 monies. We understand that this is being addressed by the development of database of project suggestions within the Environment and Regeneration department.
61. **We recommend that Environment and Regeneration continue work on the “project bank” so that it can be used to enable a more strategic approach to be taken to prioritise projects that can be funded by Section 106 and other income sources as appropriate funding becomes available. (recommendation 8)**

Residents' views

62. We agreed at our first meeting that we wanted to seek views from a wide range of residents, in particular, from different age groups and different parts of the borough. We spoke to 65 people at a variety of different meetings including Community Forums, the Youth Parliament, Merton Seniors Forum, Ravensbury Park Friends Group, Residents Association of West Wimbledon and Colliers Wood Residents Association.
63. We sent a questionnaire to residents associations, Friends of Parks groups, school councils and community centres as well as distributing it at the meetings we attended and posting it on the Council's website. We received 56 completed questionnaires from residents living across the borough and, in a few instances, beyond.

Usage

64. The majority of our questionnaire respondents are regular users of parks and open spaces – 55% use them more than once a week and a further 20% more than once a month.
65. The main activity that our questionnaire respondents use parks and open spaces for is walking, followed by cycling, football, running and tennis. The people we spoke to at meetings reported these as main activities too but also mentioned picnics, meeting friends, tai chi, dog walking and community events. One resident at Morden Community Forum reported using Morden Park for orienteering and training with a scout group in the past.
66. Children's playgrounds were also much used and appreciated, including by grandparents taking their grandchildren.
67. Youth Parliament members (a group of young people aged 14-18) told us that they use the parks for physical activities such as tennis and running.
68. We found that usage also varies according to the physical design of the park, for example, the Friends of Ravensbury Park, a park located by the River Wandle and noted for its horticulture and landscape, reported that it is mainly used for walking, birdwatching, fishing and dog walking.
69. We heard a number of positive comments about the development of "green gyms". The Youth Parliament members particularly like these, as did the Colliers Wood Residents Association, who asked if they could be developed in other locations.
70. We were pleased to hear that Green Gyms are so popular, particularly as these make a positive contribution to the health of our residents. **We therefore recommend that the provision of additional Green Gyms**

should be a priority use of additional funding as appropriate sources become available. (recommendation 9)

71. The Youth Parliament asked if the adventure playground could have equipment that would be suitable teenagers, for example tyre swings and zip wires.

Opening times

72. Members of the Youth Parliament said they used parks but not on a regular basis, particularly as they attended college during the day and parks were not open that late in the evening. They wondered if opening times could be extended.
73. Colliers Wood Residents Association also asked if there could be extended opening hours for parks during the summer months.
74. We note that parks are currently open until dusk and so scope for extending hours is therefore limited.

Community events

75. Members of the Colliers Wood Residents Association and residents who attended regeneration consultation events said that they enjoy community events in local parks and would like to see more of these. This was echoed by the Youth Parliament, who enjoy concerts and events in parks targeted at young people, for example Praise in the Park at Tooting.
76. We regret the loss of some of the community events held in the past, such as the horticultural show. We hope that the feasibility of similar events will be investigated for the future in partnership with Friends Groups and other organisations. We recognise that there is a limit to the scope for these due to costs and disruption but also a limit to the number of suitable venues, particularly for bigger events.

Satisfaction levels

77. Our questionnaire respondents agreed that parks and open spaces are clean and well maintained (64%) and welcoming (66%). The majority of respondents said they feel safe using parks and open spaces (59%).
78. When asked “what do you like most about the parks and open spaces in Merton”, many respondents referred to the number and diversity of parks and open spaces in Merton. Also referred to the proximity of parks/open spaces – “I consider myself lucky to be surrounded by so many good quality open spaces” (male aged 30-39). A number of respondents also made positive references to greenness, trees, wildlife, space. Being quiet and well kept were also mentioned as positive characteristics of local parks/open spaces.
79. These views were also common at the meetings we attended. We also heard a lot of positive comments about the work that had been done by

the Council and others to improve standards in recent years. A number of the people we spoke to belonged to friends of parks groups and had worked closely with Council staff to make improvements to local parks.

Concerns

80. Our consultation yielded consistent responses to questions about what residents like least about local parks and open spaces. Dog mess, dogs being out of control, litter and lack of litter bins, lack of wardens and lack of toilets and maintenance issues topped the list. In relation to litter bins and dog litter bins, there was a desire for more of these to be available and for use to be enforced. The Youth Parliament asked if designated areas could be provided to walk dogs as some young people are frightened of them.
81. On our visit to Mitcham Common we heard that “professional dog walkers” can be a nuisance. We were told of one incident where 24 dogs were released, unleashed, onto the Common. We understand that there is a bye-law in relation to the maximum number of dogs that can be walked per person but that this bye-law has not been adopted by Merton Council.
82. **We therefore recommend that the Director of Environment and Regeneration investigate how the bye-law regarding the maximum number of dogs walked per person has been used in other authorities and assess the feasibility of adopting and enforcing this bye-law in Merton. (recommendation 10)**
83. We were also told of safety concerns, including reports of feeling unsafe in the evening and feeling intimidated by groups of unsupervised teenagers and a desire for patrols to be carried out. We heard that the presence of Community Police wardens in the parks is much valued. Other specific safety concerns related to damage caused by vandalism and by barbeques and other bonfires in the parks.
84. On our visit to Beddington Park we heard how Sutton Council had put in several metal structured barbeque frames, with integral waste bin. These frames prevented the scorching of grass and litter usually associated with barbeques. We also heard that the frames can be moved by fork-lift trucks within a day if any problems result from their use.
85. **We recommend that the Greenspaces Service trials the use of metal structured barbeque frames in Wimbledon Park during summer 2010 so that residents can continue to enjoy barbeques without the attendant litter and damage to the grass. (recommendation 11)**
86. When we spoke to members of Friends of Parks groups there was a general consensus that they would like the Council to spend more money on parks maintenance and a belief that Merton has a low spend per hectare compared to other boroughs.

Information and consultation

87. Only one-fifth (21%) of our questionnaire respondents said that they feel well informed about what is going on in their local parks and 61% said they would like to receive more information about activities they can participate in.
88. Members of the Residents Association of West Wimbledon told us that in their experience local residents are not kept well informed or involved in decision making on parks and other related issues. They stressed that unless local residents are involved from the outset they will become alienated and disinterested. Residents are concerned about all open spaces, regardless of ownership.
89. They suggested a number of possible ways forward. These have been included in the section on Friends Groups below.

Role of Friends of Parks Groups

90. Friends of parks groups are local residents groups that act as advocates and champions for their local park or open space. They vary in size, focus and level of activity. For example, the Friends of Ravensbury Park have a strong focus on ecological conservation activities - recent work has included coppicing sycamore trees in order to open up the views across the park. Other groups, such as the Friends of South Park, hold community events to raise money and increase community involvement in the local area.
91. Further information about some of the Friends Groups can be found through links on the parks and open spaces section of the Council's website.
92. Friends Groups play an important role in encouraging residents to participate in volunteering activities in local parks. Almost two-fifths (36%) of our questionnaire respondents said that they have volunteered at a park/open space to undertake maintenance or improve the facilities. A similar proportion said they are likely to volunteer again. These activities not only help to maintain and improve the quality of local parks but also act to promote community cohesion.
93. We were pleased to hear that the Play Pathfinder work has included consultation with Friends Groups and wider consultation with children and young people. We understand that the intention of the Play Pathfinder project, and other work under the Free Play Strategy, is to work with interested groups of volunteers within the community to encourage them to undertake maintenance or improve facilities in local parks/open spaces.
94. We have heard a number of examples of projects for which Friends Groups have successfully raised funds. We noted, in paragraph 27, that Friends Groups are able to apply to funds for which local authorities are ineligible. We were pleased to hear that the Greenspaces Service is already working closely with Friends Groups on particular projects within the borough, helping them to write funding bids and managing the project on their behalf. Earlier in this report we have recommended that this work continue.
95. We spoke to two representatives of the Residents Association of West Wimbledon who are also involved in local Friends Groups. They drew to our attention the need to maintain effective communication with friends of parks groups to ensure that they are fully engaged and informed about planned work. They also made some suggestions for improving and formalising the relationship between Council and Friends Groups:
 - Regular progress meetings between Friends and the council officer with budget authority

- Council to involve friends groups and residents at the formative stages of any policy/ strategic decisions affecting their local parks and open spaces
 - Park friends groups/local residents determine allocation of part of revenue budget for their park
 - Local groups consulted on allocation of section 106 money
 - At minimum parks friends groups are consulted on specific priorities in each budget year
 - Council (whether Children's Services, Planning or Parks Service) engage with local groups on other open space issues
96. Some of these suggestions can be taken forward through the boroughwide forum of Friends of Parks Groups. This Forum meets twice a year and is supported by the Council.
- 97. We recommend that the Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces Manager discusses with the boroughwide Forum of Friends Groups the suggestions made by the Residents Association of West Wimbledon in order to seek a consensus on how best to maintain effective communication between Friends Groups and the Council. (recommendation 12)**
98. We recognise and appreciate the valuable work that Friends Groups play in protecting and improving local parks and open spaces. We also welcome the events and activities they organise, not least because these help to encourage local community involvement. We were concerned, however, to hear of a few instances where there have been tensions regarding the appropriate use of parks and open spaces, particularly in relation to children and young people.
- 99. We therefore recommend that the Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces Manager clarify existing policies in relation to the use of parks and open spaces. (recommendation 13)**
- 100. We further recommend that the Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces Manager continue to work with Friends Groups to promote the harmonious use of parks and open spaces by all sections of the community. (recommendation 14)**

Concluding remarks

101. We are very grateful to all the individuals and groups that have shared their views and experiences with us. These have served to emphasise just how important parks and open spaces are to our residents. They have also helped to highlight potential areas of improvement.
102. We have found that parks and open spaces are extremely important to the quality of life of our residents. They fulfil a number of different roles – providing peace and quiet; fresh air; opportunities to exercise, walk dogs, socialise and so on. They also contribute to the promotion of good health, education, tourism, biodiversity, community cohesion and many more strategic aims of the Council and its partners.
103. Merton is rich in terms of the quantity and diversity of its parks and open spaces in comparison to other London boroughs. We were reassured to hear so many positive comments about our parks and open spaces. These included:
 - “We are lucky to have wonderful common area and Canizaro House. Cottenham Park has improved and so has Holland Gardens (due to volunteers). Good facilities for children (use often with grandchildren).”
 - “I like the amount of space and creativity”
 - “the best parks are excellent, with their own individual characteristics
 - “The changes made to the Colliers Wood park have been amazing! Well done!”
104. We therefore believe it is important to maintain and improve our parks and open spaces. We have made a number of recommendations aimed at helping the Council to make best use of existing resources and to seek new sources of revenue and capital finance.
105. We have also made a recommendation intended to strengthen the evidence base on which the planning committee can draw in making decisions on the design of new developments within the borough.
106. Finally, we have given particular consideration to the needs of children and young people, and made recommendations intended to help with the identification and provision of new locations for safe and stimulating play opportunities.

What happens next?

107. This task group was established by the Council's Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel and so this report will be presented to its meeting on 31 March 2010 for the Panel's approval.
108. The Panel will then send the report to the Council's Cabinet on 21 June 2010 for initial discussion.
109. The Cabinet will be asked to provide a formal response to the Panel within two months.
110. The Cabinet will be asked to respond to each of the task group's recommendations, setting out whether the recommendation is accepted and how and when it will be implemented. If the Cabinet is unable to support and implement some of the recommendations, then it is expected that clearly stated reasons will be provided for each.
111. The lead Cabinet Member (or officer to whom this work is delegated) should ensure that other organisations to whom recommendations have been directed are contacted and that their response to those recommendations is included in the report.
112. A further report will be sought by the Panel six months after the Cabinet response has been received, giving an update on progress with implementation of the recommendations.

Appendices

Appendix 1: written evidence

Presentation “Introduction to Merton’s Greenspaces Service”, Doug Napier, Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces Manager, 29 July 2009

Merton Open Space Strategy (summary), 2005, Merton Council

Selection of publicity materials, including SW19, My Merton, Change4Life Roadshow leaflet, Merton in Bloom Competition 2009 poster, Friends of South Park Gardens – Newsletter October 2009 and Spooky Halloween Treasure Hunt poster

Presentation “Biodiversity and arboriculture”, Martin Boyle, Merton Greenspaces Team, 18 November 2009

Presentation “ Parks and Green Spaces Design”, Doug Napier, Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces Manager, 18 November 2009

Parks and open spaces: towards an excellent service, Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), August 2007

Making the invisible visible: the real value of park assets, Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), 2009

The green information gap: mapping the nation’s green spaces, Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), 2009

Open space strategies. What local authority decision makers need to know, Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), 2009

Merton’s Free Play Strategy, 2007-2012

Analysis of task group questionnaire on parks and open spaces, 27 January 2010

Handout describing key features of Royal Borough Kingston upon Thames Grounds Maintenance Service, 15 February 2010

Local resident engagement in park management – statement from Residents Association of West Wimbledon, 15 February 2010

Appendix 2: list of oral evidence

Speakers:

- Doug Napier, Leisure, Culture and Greenspaces Manager, 29 July, 20 October and 18 November 2009, 27 January, 15 February and 9 March 2010
- Martin Boyle, Greenspaces Warden, Mitcham Common, 18 November 2009
- Tony Edwards, Merton Design Review Panel/CABE National Design Panel, 18 November 2009
- Allison Jones, Service Manager, Early Years & Children's Centres, 27 January and 9 March 2010
- Shirley McCarthy, Childcare Policy Manager, 27 January 2010
- Marie-Claire Edwards, Service Manager (Green Spaces), Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames, 15 February 2010
- Rob Dickson, Service Director (Environment & Sustainability), Royal Borough of Kingston Upon Thames, 15 February 2010
- Paul Harper, Chair, Mitcham Common Conservators, 15 February 2010
- Catherine McCann, Secretary, Mitcham Common Conservators, 15 February 2010
- Tony Leach, Director, London Parks and Green Spaces Forum, 15 February 2010
- Jane Barnes and Patricia Keith, Residents Association of West Wimbledon, 15 February 2010
- Councillor David Simpson, Cabinet Member for Environment and Leisure Services, 9 March 2010
- Councillor Debbie Shears, Cabinet Member for Children's Services, 9 March 2010
- Chris Lee, Director of Environment and Regeneration, 9 March 2010

Consultation meetings:

- Colliers Wood Residents Association, 6 October 2009
- Youth Parliament, 12 October 2009
- Wimbledon Community Forum, 13 October 2009
- Morden Community Forum, 14 October 2009
- Rayne's Park Community Forum, 19 October 2009
- Merton Seniors Forum, 20 October 2009
- Mitcham Community Forum, 2 December 2009
- Friends of Ravensbury Park, 7 December 2009

Appendix 3: Map of parks and open spaces in Merton



