

London Borough of Merton

Report and recommendations arising from the scrutiny review of neighbourhood governance

Overview and Scrutiny Commission
July 2007

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Contents

Foreword from the Chair of the task group	1
Summary of recommendations	2
Setting the context of neighbourhood governance	4
Area forums and area committees	6
Area forums in Merton	7
How effective are Merton's area forums?	7
Are area forums right for Merton?	9
So, what is the future for Merton's area forums?	11
Proposed changes to area forums	13
The role of the frontline councillor	15
Connecting with communities: budgets	15
Connecting with communities: tools	16
Connecting with communities: powers	18
The developing role of the frontline councillor	23
Overview and scrutiny as a champion for the neighbourhood agenda	24
Powers to scrutinise CDRPs	24
Powers to scrutinise LSPs	25
Other council structures	26
Conclusion	27
Sources of evidence	28
Appendices	
Appendix I: Summary of findings from the survey of Merton councillors	30
Appendix II: Summary of findings from the survey of area forum attendees	34
Appendix III: Summary of findings from the survey of members of the public	38
Appendix IV: Elements that could be included in area forum/ward councillor work	40

Foreword

Every time the residents of Merton step outside their front doors, they are affected by the decisions we have taken on their behalf as their elected representatives. The cleanliness of the streets, the attractions of the parks, the standards of the schools their children attend, the quality of the built environment – all these are determined or at least influenced by our decisions, and we are accountable for them.

And yet few residents make the connection between the state of their neighbourhoods and our accountability as their ward councillors. Still fewer attempt to shape and improve their neighbourhoods through the democratic process.

This report sets out how we can begin to reconnect residents with their responsibility for the shape of their neighbourhoods, and energise them to realise they can change things for the better. It discusses ways in which they can become involved in the decisions that affect their neighbourhoods, from modest changes to the area forum network to more ambitious proposals for devolving budgets to ward councillors.

In the course of carrying out this review, the task group has taken evidence from many witnesses as well as visiting other authorities and experts, and we are grateful to all those who gave us the benefit of their experience. I have enjoyed hours of constructive discussion with my colleagues Cllrs Henry Nelles and Martin Whelton on the task group, and thank them for their input. But above all I would like to pay tribute to Kate Martyn, our Scrutiny Manager, for nursing this review through many months of hard work and commitment.

Cllr Peter Southgate

Chair of the neighbourhood governance scrutiny task group

Summary of recommendations

- 1 The council should retain a series of area forums across the Borough in the immediate future.
- 2 A feasibility study for area committees should be undertaken in 2009/10 to explore appropriate arrangements for rolling out area committees across the borough. By this time the additional support for area forums generated by other recommendations in this report should have increased the effectiveness of the forums to enable realistic consideration of establishing area committees in the borough.
- 3 The area forums should operate in accordance with good practice principles, including those identified in paragraphs 2.7.1 and 2.7.2.
- 4 There is a need to invest in area forums. Greater support should be given to the area forums to increase their effectiveness and a budget should be identified to fund activities to promote area forums.
- 5 There should be five area forums in Merton focused on the areas local people identify with: the town centres of Wimbledon, Morden, Mitcham, Colliers Wood and Raynes Park.
- 6 The area forums should be relaunched as ‘community forums’ that seize opportunities to champion local concerns, influence the way in which local service provision responds to local needs and guide the council and local partners when it comes to setting priorities. Clear reporting and responding mechanisms should be developed to ensure that issues raised by the forums are responded to.
- 7 Subject to satisfactory progress in the development of area forums, consideration should be given to a pilot where a small budget of £10,000 should be allocated to each of two wards to be spent by the councillors in those wards working with local people and groups to identify priorities for projects to benefit from the fund. The findings of the pilot should then be evaluated with a view to assessing whether such a scheme should be rolled out across all wards in the borough.
- 8 A cross-party working group should be established to assess the community engagement tools used by Merton councillors and their effectiveness in ensuring that ward councillors are able to gather constituents’ concerns.
- 9 A pilot – led by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission – should be undertaken in Merton to test out some of the early thinking around preparing for the introduction of Community Calls for Action.

Scrutiny review of neighbourhood governance

- 10 The learning from the LGIU network and guidance and good practice emerging from various other national projects looking at the 'role of the frontline councillor' should be fed into the member working group (identified in Recommendation 8) to assess where additional support may be needed to enable members to take up the opportunities afforded to them by new legislation.
- 11 Increasing opportunities for local people to be involved in scrutiny work in a meaningful way – through co-option, contributing views to scrutiny reviews, suggesting topics for scrutiny, attending meetings or focus groups, etc – should be a priority for the overview and scrutiny panels and Commission in 2007/08.
- 12 A working group should be established comprising members, officers and partners to prepare for the introduction of scrutiny of LSP and CDRP partners, linking into preparations for Community Calls for Action.
- 13 Council should continue to invite questions periodically from members of the public, enabling local people to address council in person.
- 14 Cabinet should consider how they could widen access for the residents to observe and participate in the public meetings of Cabinet.

1 Setting the context of neighbourhood governance

1.1 Over recent years a clear emphasis has developed in central government policy and guidance urging the public sector to enhance transparency and accountability, recognise the need for public agencies to work together to tackle complex issues, and widen opportunities for the public to have greater influence over the places they live and the services they receive.

1.2 This has been apparent in the requirements and recommendations set out in various policy themes and new legislation emerging from central government over the last seven years, including:

- The Local Government Act 2000, which introduced modernised decision-making structures for local authorities, scrutiny arrangements, and area committees.
- ‘New Localism’ and ‘Double Devolution’ agendas;
- The introduction of a requirement to develop community plans setting out strategic priorities for local people;
- NHS ‘choice’ agenda;
- Development of local strategic partnerships and crime and disorder reduction partnerships;
- Expansion of public scrutiny arrangements for the NHS and Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships; and, most recently,
- The *Strong and prosperous communities* local government white paper and Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill¹.

Neighbourhoods are now seen by government and all political parties as central to four interrelated goals:

- Deepening both representative and participative democracy, strengthening elected councils and councillors, stimulating more active citizenship, and reinforcing the legitimacy of elected government through public involvement in policy-making and delivery (at a time when low turnouts in elections have weakened the formal mandate for politicians)
- Improving the responsiveness, accountability and value for money of public services to frontline users and to local communities (at a time when the rate of growth in public expenditure is reducing) and including the possibility of “co-production” of some services between the public, private, voluntary and informal community sectors
- Tackling disadvantage, crime and neighbourhood renewal in the most deprived localities, where many social problems are concentrated
- Developing “social capital”, community cohesion and a sense of civic responsibility and belonging, at a time when the risks of fragmentation and conflict between diverse cultures, races and faith communities are being felt more strongly.

John Benington in ‘Reclaiming the Neighbourhood’
in *Lest we forget: democracy, neighbourhoods and government*

¹ The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill is currently going through Parliament and as such proposals may be subject to amendment (details in this report are correct as at June 2007).

1.3 In LB Merton we have responded to these agendas in a number of ways, for example by establishing area forums, revising and strengthening council and partner scrutiny arrangements, developing community and neighbourhood plans with residents and forging partnership arrangements in a number of areas.

1.4 The publication of the *Strong and prosperous communities* white paper in November 2006 and the subsequent development of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill come at an opportune time. The discussion about proposed 'ward networks' under the previous administration and the revisions to area forum arrangements since May 2006 have identified a need for the council to be clear about how it plans to strengthen and widen opportunities for local people to be engaged in and influence the issues affecting their areas.

'The public are not apathetic – they care deeply. But they are frustrated by their inability to influence the places they live.'

Lord Sandy Bruce-Lockhart, Chair of the Local Government Association, speaking at the LGC conference on 'Strengthening the role of councillors' on 7 June 2007

1.5 As a result of carrying out this review, we believe that **local people in Merton should be given more power to influence the decisions that shape their neighbourhood**. This report aims to set out a number of tools to make this happen, with particular reference to four key areas:

- area forums;
- the role of the 'frontline' councillor;
- overview and scrutiny; and
- other council structures.

2 Area forums and area committees

2.1 As part of the modernisation agenda for local government, the Local Government Act 2000 recommended that local authorities should establish either area forums or area committees to forge closer links with communities at a sub-council level. Whilst both models aim to enable local people to have a greater influence over the local area, the strength of influence differs. A summary of the differing roles of area committees and area forums is set out below:

Area Committees	Area Forums
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive decision-making powers and budgets devolved from the council • Only councillors elected for the area can make the decisions, but they often co-opt neighbourhood or community representatives • Public are able to attend the meetings of the area committees and share their views 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a consultative and advisory role – present opportunity for people who live and/or work in the area to discuss issues of common concern and influence council decision-making • Usually chaired by a councillor, but focus on public participation • Need reporting mechanisms to feed area forum views into council decision-making

2.2 In short, area committees have the power to make decisions affecting their local area, and area forums must try to influence decision makers within the wider council. This is not to say that area forums cannot bring about benefits for their local communities, but means that they risk being seen as merely ‘talking shops’ with little influence. As we have found in our discussions at area forum meetings and via a survey of attendees (see Appendix II), the main thing that people want is to get answers and/or action in response to the queries and problems they raise. Lack of follow-up to the issues raised at meetings devalues their contribution to the meeting and makes people think there is no point in taking part.

The LGA’s *Making Decisions Locally* report found that:

- a majority of councils have some sub-local authority level arrangements, though not necessarily at neighbourhood level
- 54 per cent of councils have area forums
- 26 per cent of councils have area decision making committees, and 90 per cent think devolved decision making has been successful
- 70 per cent of councils consult using interactive websites, focus groups and citizens’ panels

2.3 *Area forums in Merton*

2.3.1 Merton established area forums in 2001 following a scrutiny review that examined how the council should respond to the area committee/ area forum debate. Four area forums were established to take on an advisory and consultative role, without delegated powers or budgets. In May 2006, the area forums were reorganised from four to six in order to create smaller area forum units and make the area forums closer to the communities with which they are trying to engage. The borough therefore contains area forums for Morden, Lower Morden, North Wimbledon, Central Wimbledon, North West Mitcham and South East Mitcham.

2.4 *How effective are Merton's area forums?*

2.4.1 In order to assess the effectiveness of Merton's area forums, we spoke to Area Forum chairs, surveyed councillors and area forum attendees, and attempted to gather views from people who do not attend area forum meetings.²

2.4.2 The response from members to the changes made to the area forum arrangements since May 2006 have been broadly positive, particularly the move to cross-party chairing arrangements, that reports from area forums are now communicated to Council and the move by some area forums to attract outside speakers for themed meetings. We were particularly struck by the enthusiasm area forum chairs displayed, and it was obvious that a great deal of time has been dedicated to thinking about how they can make their area forum work for their residents.

2.4.3 One of the key issues identified was the low turnout at area forum meetings, as shown in the table below. When looking at the sum of attendance at all the area forum meetings, it is apparent that average attendance at each round of forum meetings is fairly consistent at 13-15 people. However, there are wide discrepancies between attendance levels at different forums, for example at the most recent round of meetings 26 members of the public attended the North Wimbledon area forum, but only four people went to the North West Mitcham area forum.

² Summaries of the findings of these surveys are attached as appendices to this report

	June/ July 2006	November 2006	January/ February 2007	May 2007	Total attendance for year	Average attendance for forum
Central Wimbledon Area Forum	No data	9	16	14	39**	13**
Lower Morden Area Forum	9	15	25	21	70	18
Morden Area Forum	18	16	11	10	55	14
North West Mitcham Area Forum	20	6	4	4	34	9
North Wimbledon Area Forum	12	17	24	26	79	20
South East Mitcham Area Forum	9	17	6	16	48	12
Total attendance for round of meetings	68**	80	86	91	** using data available	
Average attendance for round of meetings	14**	13	14	15		

Attendance figures for area forum meetings (estimates based on sign in sheets)

2.4.4 A common message coming out of the survey of area forum attendees and the general public suggested that a lot of people do not know when or where the meetings are taking place and that the average person would not know that the area forums were happening. Whilst the existing publicity tools (see box on the right) used to promote area forum meetings are valid methods, there is more that the council could do to draw people to area forum meetings. The concept of themed meetings focussing on a particularly burning issue for the area is a good one, and publicity material should be used to highlight the theme for the meetings including, for example, a provocative statement to attract people in.

How are area forums publicised?

- In August 2006 a letter was sent to all the people on each Area Forum mailing list (includes about 250 residents/external organisations) publicising dates/venues
- Each Forum agenda sent to those on mailing list for that Forum
- Notice of meetings in 'My Merton' which is circulated to all Merton Residents
- Notices put on 50 sites across Merton by the Communications Team
- Notices in all Merton libraries (including the electronic notice-board at Raynes Park Library)
- Notices at meeting venues
- Notice on electronic notice-board at Wimbledon Station
- Meeting dates and agenda put on the Council web-site

- 2.4.5 Linked to this, more can be done to build upon the area forum web presence. The webpages for LB Croydon's Neighbourhood Partnerships³ are not only informative, but also provide an opportunity for people to suggest topics for future meetings, find out what happened at the last meeting and what happened to the issues raised. Such an arrangement in Merton could also enable local people to 'subscribe' to agendas or alerts when new information is added relating to their local area forum.
- 2.4.6 The crucial factor in assessing effectiveness of the area forums is to look at whether anything happens in response to issues raised at the meetings. As mentioned above, the fact that reports are now made to Council to highlight issues raised and views shared at area forums is an encouraging development. However, there remains a concern among area forum attendees that no action is taken and/ or there is no feedback on what happens as a result of their discussions.

"Meetings are not well attended - but well organised; Yes, I can share my views - but the minutes are belatedly produced, incomplete, revised post meeting i.e. not accurate record of discussions; Follow up points/actions not carried out by officers. Very disappointing. Must be carried out within reasonable time after forum."

Survey response from an area forum attendee

- 2.4.7 It should be noted that the success of the area forums to date has been hampered by limited investment. Each forum is supported by a lead officer at Head of Service level from across the council, who works with the chair to set the agenda for the meetings, and a democratic services officer, who prepares the agenda papers, advertises and clerks the meetings. No resources have been made available for publicity material or awareness raising campaigns, venue hire or refreshments for meetings. Area forums have been supported through lead officer time and from the Democratic Services main budget. The result is that area forum meetings have received basic publicity which must be a factor in the low attendance at meetings and resourcing must be addressed if we are serious about developing effective area forums in the borough.

2.5 *Are area forums right for Merton?*

- 2.5.1 We gave a great deal of thought to whether area forums were right for Merton or whether we should dispense with such forums altogether or indeed establish area committees – which could exercise decision making powers – instead.
- 2.5.2 As mentioned above, regardless of the structure in place the main thing that people want is to get answers and/or action in response to the queries and problems they raise. Given the limited numbers of local people who go to area forum meetings, we have a number of reservations about devolving any decision-making. Whilst recognising that decisions made by area committees would be taken by councillors, the main driver behind devolving decisions is to

³ http://www.croydononline.org/neighbourhood_partnerships/

enable local people to identify local priorities for the councillors to consider when making decisions on how to spend devolved budgets, for example. As it stands, that level of engagement is not there.

2.5.3 Whilst we can see a number of benefits in devolving decision making on, for example, street management issues or deciding how section 106 monies should be spent in an area, we are uncomfortable with the idea of devolving planning and licensing decisions to area committees. There are a number of reasons for this:

- The risk of creeping inconsistency in decision-making, perhaps resulting in widening the gap between the east and west of the Borough;
- Concerns about politicising such decisions;
- Intensifying pressure on ward councillors from vociferous but possibly unrepresentative groups;
- The fact that Merton is a relatively small London Borough and that the resources required to implement devolved decision-making would be significantly increased.

2.5.4 On balance, we do not believe that Merton is ready for area committees. Before the council chooses to invest in the support structures needed to devolve decision-making down to a more local level, a great deal of work must be done to strengthen interest among the public to get involved in shaping their community.

2.5.5 With this in mind, returning to the question of whether area forums are right for Merton, we believe that the answer – at this time – is yes. There is a need to increase investment in area forums, put greater effort into publicising meetings and set agendas that will attract people to come along and take part in meetings. A forum for local people to raise concerns and debate the future of their local area is essential, but we need to recognise that the council must do much more to make them work.

2.5.6 As mentioned above, we do not feel that there is sufficient public interest or involvement in existing area forum structures to warrant an immediate shift to area committees. However, we need to be ambitious. We believe strongly that the longer-term goal must be to move towards area committees with devolved powers and budgets. By putting in place the building blocks to boost engagement in local forums, this will establish a firm basis for expanding local decision-making and allocating budgets.

Recommendation 1

The council should retain a series of area forums across the Borough in the immediate future.

Recommendation 2

A feasibility study for area committees should be undertaken in 2009/10 to explore appropriate arrangements for rolling out area committees across the borough. By this time the additional support for area forums generated by other recommendations in this report should have increased the effectiveness of the forums to enable realistic consideration of establishing area committees in the borough.

2.6 *So, what is the future for Merton's area forums?*

2.6.1 As outlined above, we see the longer-term goal for Merton being area committees. However, the council needs to do more work in the meantime to engage local people in local forums to ensure that the interest and involvement is present before we move to area committees. Area forums should seek to build on the strengths they have and address their weaknesses. We support the recommendation of the 2001 scrutiny review of area forums, which stressed the importance of the following points to ensure that area forums are effective:

- A non-political environment;
- Opportunities for the public to speak to officers and councillors;
- A choice of venue;
- Proper systems in place to administer, chair and manage the area forums.

2.6.2 In addition to this, we recommend that the following principles should also apply:

- the area forum chairs should continue to be shared across the groups, with each chaired by a local councillor;
- the area forums must be supported by ward councillors – if even local councillors do not attend, it sends a poor message to local people;
- executive members should ensure that at least one cabinet member is present at each area forum to show attendees that council decision makers are listening to them;
- clear reporting mechanisms should be in place to communicate outcomes to the Council, the executive and officers – where appropriate. Furthermore, outcomes must be communicated back to the forum, and ideally information should also be made available between area forum meetings so that people know about it straightaway, rather than having to wait until the next meeting;

- creative measures need to be developed to attract greater attendance, for example holding meetings at rotating venues around the area, varying the format of the meeting (formal 'council'-type meeting versus 'surgery'-style discussions), holding meetings on weekends or in the daytime (whenever local people want to attend meetings). Could a range of methods be used, for example alternating meetings between daytime/ evening/ weekends, or allowing people to express preferences about the sorts of issues they are interested in and be invited when those issues came up, or organise subgroup meetings on specific issues. Area Forum meetings should not clash with other council meetings;
- increase and widen the publicity tools used to highlight forthcoming area forum meetings. Publicity material for the area forums should have a modern, 'non-council' look to avoid putting people off with dry looking agendas and posters. This publicity material needs to capture people's imagination and make them feel that they do not want to miss the meeting;
- make use of electronic tools to publicise meetings and activities (e-mail alerts for agendas), post action sheets so people can see what has happened to the issues they raised at the last meeting, and provide a platform for ongoing discussions outside of area forum meetings, for example the council's website providing a virtual online community similar to the website of the Wimbledon Civic Forum; and
- area forums should be willing to experiment with meeting formats and different roles, for example as a consultation group, as a lobbying group or as a debating forum.

What else do you think area forums should do?

Either be on the doorstep, massively advertised, massively facilitated or fold and spend the money elsewhere.

A councillor's reply to the member survey

2.6.3 In order to underpin these and the recommendations that follow, resources must be made available to support the development of area forums in Merton, otherwise attendance will continue to be low and the area forums will not realise their potential. Whilst the servicing (agendas, clerking, etc) of the forum meetings clearly sits within the Democratic Services team, there is a lack of clarity with regard to where policy support for area forums sits within the organisation. As a result, there is a missed opportunity for coordination of the wider area forum agenda, to bring together shared learning and to lead on advertising and promoting area forums.

Recommendation 3

The area forums should operate in accordance with good practice principles, including those identified in paragraphs 2.7.1 and 2.7.2.

Recommendation 4

There is a need to invest in area forums. Greater support should be given to the area forums to increase their effectiveness and a budget should be identified to fund activities to promote area forums.

2.7 Proposed changes to area forums

- 2.7.1 We believe that the current distribution of area forums is not as helpful as it could be to connect with local people. The tendency to set area forum boundaries according to council wards means that wards are grouped together that do not necessarily match how local people see their neighbourhood or community. Furthermore, the 'North', 'Central', 'North West' and 'South East' distinctions seem to have confused local people who do not think of their local area in terms of the points of the compass.
- 2.7.2 We therefore recommend that the Borough should have five area forums focused on the town centres (i.e. Wimbledon, Morden, Mitcham, Colliers Wood and Raynes Park) to allow local people to make a connection with the area forum which is most relevant to how they live their lives: where they live, do their shopping, go to work or where their children go to school.
- 2.7.3 We will need to set boundaries for the area forums to ensure that members of the public can easily identify the area forum that covers a given part of the borough, and that members are clear about which area forum covers their ward. Whilst we have deliberately not specified which wards should be grouped together for each of the area forums identified above, we believe that the overarching principle must be that residents are able to make a connection with the area forum for the area they choose to identify with. This means that some area forums may comprise, for example, only two wards and others may have as many as six or more. We are comfortable with the concept of area forums being of different 'sizes' as this will best respond to how residents envisage where they live, rather than establishing a set of uniform area forums of the same size connecting communities that do not naturally sit together. Equally, residents, visitors, learners and workers in the borough may have connections with more than one area forum (for example they may live in a ward falling under one area forum, work in a ward falling under another and attend a leisure centre in yet another ward and another area forum). They must therefore be free to attend and participate in as many area forums as are relevant to them, and not be restricted to that in which they live. Indeed, members of the public who live outside the borough of Merton, but visit the borough to work or learn for

example, must be equally welcome at any area forum that is debating an issue of relevance to them.

- 2.7.4 We recognise that should area forums become area committees in the future there may be a need to revise boundaries to ensure areas are appropriate to exercise any devolved powers effectively. But as mentioned above, there is a great deal to do in developing area forums first, and a significant step forward will be to ensure that the forums we have fit with how people view where they live.
- 2.7.5 In light of the new start we propose for area forums, we also recommend that we should rename our area forums as ‘community forums’ to forge the link with the local area and to convey from the start the sense that these are forums which belong to local people.
- 2.7.6 In order to be effective area forums must move away from being seen as just ‘talking shops’ where nothing ever happens in response to issues raised. As they move towards becoming ‘community forums’ the new style area forums should seize the opportunities to champion local concerns, and the council will need to ensure that there are more formal ways in which the issues raised by the forums are responded to, and that the accountability for doing so is clear. Area forums should be able to directly influence the way in which local service provision (whether by the council or other local agencies) responds to local needs and also guide the council and local partners when it comes to setting priorities. In order to really capture the potential of area forums to achieve these ends the council will need to provide leadership, direction and investment.

Recommendation 5

There should be five area forums in Merton focused on the areas local people identify with: the town centres of Wimbledon, Morden, Mitcham, Colliers Wood and Raynes Park.

Recommendation 6

The area forums should be relaunched as ‘community forums’ that seize opportunities to champion local concerns, influence the way in which local service provision responds to local needs and guide the council and local partners when it comes to setting priorities. Clear reporting and responding mechanisms should be developed to ensure that issues raised by the forums are responded to.

3 The role of the frontline councillor

3.1 Throughout the literature relating to the local government modernisation agenda, reference was made to 'backbench councillors': a term to describe non-executive councillors. Research evaluating the implementation of the various provisions of the Local Government Act 2000 identified a great deal of irritation on the part of non-executive councillors who thought that it suggested that they did not have as important a role as executive councillors. Indeed, the very term 'non-executive councillor' focuses on what their role *is not*, rather than what it is.

'Frontline councillor' is a term used increasingly as a more positive alternative to the term 'backbench councillor'. It generally refers to a non-executive ward councillor, although it should be noted that executive members represent wards and in that sense all councillors have a 'frontline' role.

Ed Cox in
Frontline Councillor 2017

3.2 The emergence of the 'frontline councillor' concept in government literature perhaps responds to this irritation, but it also seeks to highlight the role of the ward councillor on the 'frontline', managing a role which involved championing local people and issues in their ward and representing the council to their constituents. This shift away from defining councillors in terms of their role in decision-making can be seen in the *Strong and prosperous communities* white paper and provisions of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill. Judy Billing, IDeA's Head of Programmes for Leadership and a district councillor herself, sees these proposals as methods of addressing and strengthening the role of local councillors outside of the cabinet, scrutiny and committee positions they might hold⁴.

Public opinion would appear to recognise the importance of the ward councillor: 87% of people believe councillors should be involved in local decisions and 31% believe councillors are best at running services, compared with service managers (25%) or service users (22%)⁵

3.3 *Connecting with communities: budgets*

3.3.1 In terms of looking at the powers afforded to councillors, we must consider devolving budgets to the ward level for ward councillors to spend on local projects. The LGA's 'Closer to people and places' campaign challenges local authorities to recognise that local councillors are the 'pivotal link between the council and local people and organisations. Our vision is for excellent councillors with the powers and support to be the advocates for the whole of their community.'⁶ A number of authorities have strengthened this role by

⁴ Judy Billing, speaking at the LGC conference on 'Strengthening the role of councillors' on 7 June 2007

⁵ A Together We Can Survey (April 2006) found that 87% of people believed councillors should be involved in local decisions. An LGiU/YouGov poll (May 2006) found that 66% of people felt that Council decisions should be taken by local councillors. Quoted in *Frontline Councillor 2017: Empowering a new generation*, Ed Cox, LGiU, January 2007

⁶ <http://www.lga.gov.uk/Documents/Publication/peopleandplaces.pdf>

providing individual councillors or wards with a pot of money that councillors can then hold and distribute in grants to local voluntary and community groups, and for local projects. We see this as an essential tool for our ward councillors to make a difference in their communities and take direct action to tackle problems in their ward. Indeed, the local government White Paper outlines devolving budgets to frontline councillors as being integral to their vision for local government. Furthermore, the white papers makes specific mention of ward councillors drawing on devolved funds to address local issues, for example those raised as part of Community Calls for Action (see paragraph 3.5.1 onwards for more detail about Community Call for Action).

3.3.2 We therefore recommend that consideration should be given to running a pilot to devolve a small budget of £10,000 to each of two wards.⁷ The councillors in the ward would be responsible for working with local people and groups to identify priorities for projects to benefit from this fund (in accordance with the Council's contract standing orders and probity arrangements). The findings of the pilot will then be evaluated with a view to assessing whether such a scheme should be rolled out across all wards in the borough.

'Local councillors should know and be known by all the key local public services, community organisations and institutions. They should bring people together, broker solutions and be the advocate for their residents and their localities.'

'Closer to people and places',
Local Government Association

3.3.3 This scheme could also help to reinvigorate the new 'community forums' as councillors could use area forum meetings as a means of gauging how they should spend their ward budgets and provide a greater draw for the public.

Recommendation 7

Subject to satisfactory progress in the development of area forums, consideration should be given to a pilot where a small budget of £10,000 should be allocated to each of two wards to be spent by the councillors in those wards working with local people and groups to identify priorities for projects to benefit from the fund. The findings of the pilot should then be evaluated with a view to assessing whether such a scheme should be rolled out across all wards in the borough.

3.4 *Connecting with communities: tools*

3.4.1 In order to find out how Merton councillors engage with their constituents a survey was circulated to all members seeking information about the methods they use, how often they use them and how effective these tools are. The survey also sought their views on the role and effectiveness of area forums, and their wider vision of what 'neighbourhood governance' should look like in

⁷ It should be stressed that such a pilot should involve two wards which a) are not marginal wards and b) are represented by councillors from different political groups.

Merton. Twenty-three completed surveys were returned; a 38% return rate (A summary of the findings is set out in Appendix I).

- 3.4.2 Although it is difficult to gauge how representative the findings of this survey are due to the relatively low return rate, a broad look at the results indicate that Merton councillors use a variety of methods to connect with their constituents, ranging from publicising their contact details so people can approach them direct to using electronic tools to communicate with local people to getting out in the community using door-to-door walkabouts and roving surgeries. Attendance at community meetings, area forums and multi-agency meetings also feature in their engagement methods.
- 3.4.3 It is clear that it is vital that local councillors forge strong and close links with their constituents, whether through one-to-one contact, groups such as residents/tenants associations or community groups, written communication (for example newsletters and leaflets) or using electronic tools such as websites, e-mail, or blogs. Linked to this, it is imperative that a multifaceted approach is used to communicate with residents. After all, a one-size fits all approach quite simply will not meet the diverse needs of local people. It is vital that the tools we use as councillors address the needs of all of our constituents – not just our own needs. This is particularly important with regard to hard to reach groups and the new communities that we are seeing emerge in our wards.
- 3.4.4 It is therefore important that we as councillors recognise the breadth of communication tools at our fingertips, the potential they offer us and how we can make the most of these opportunities. For example, all councillors are entitled to their own web page hosted on the Merton Council website to provide information on their priorities, views and activities. To date only two of sixty councillors have set up councillor webpages.
- 3.4.5 With this in mind, there is a need to have a cross-party approach to assess the community engagement tools used by Merton councillors, how well we respond to the needs of our constituents, whether other tools are required. Such a group should also examine:
- the needs of councillors in relation to engaging their residents – for example how do councillors share good practice, are members aware of the changing demographic profile in their wards, could learning and development opportunities help councillors with their work in this area, could a toolkit be developed to support members; and
 - the development of ward councillors' role in relation to the 'frontline councillor' role envisaged by the *Strong and prosperous communities* white paper, the advent of Community Call for Action (see paragraph 3.5.1 onwards for more detail) and the potential for devolved decision-making and budgets to ensure that new tools are used to respond to local concerns and priorities.

Recommendation 8

A cross-party working group should be established to assess the community engagement tools used by Merton councillors and their effectiveness in ensuring that ward councillors are able to gather constituents' concerns.

3.5 *Connecting with communities: powers*

3.5.1 Provisions within the Police and Justice Act 2006, the *Strong and prosperous communities* local government white paper, and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill set out a new tool for frontline councillors to use to respond to local concerns: the 'Community Call for Action' (CCA).

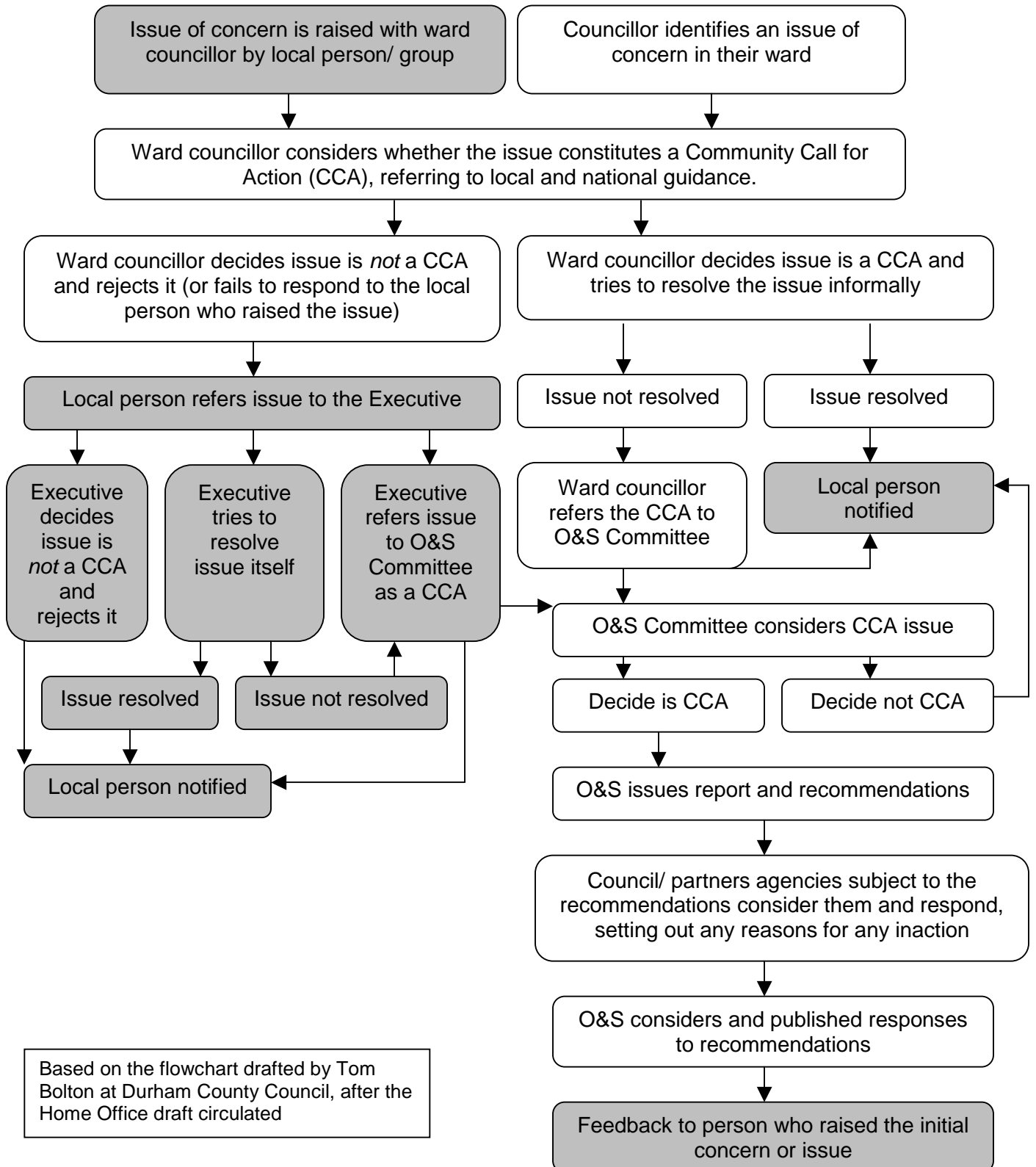
3.5.2 'Community call for action' describes where a councillor – as a result of information from individuals, community groups or their own observations – becomes aware of an issue that is causing concern to the local community and is able to trigger a response from service providers, whether the service provider is the council or a partner agency.

3.5.3 The idea is that service providers must then consider the issue and either state what action they plan take in response or explain their reasons if they decide not to act. A diagram showing the possible steps for dealing with a CCA request is set out over the page.

- The Police and Justice Act 2006 includes powers for a CCA for '**crime and disorder**' issues.
- The *Strong and prosperous communities* white paper identifies a CCA for more general '**local government matters**'

Possible steps for dealing with a Community Call for Action request

(Shaded boxes only applicable for crime and disorder CCAs)



- 3.5.4 Of course, much of this happens already: ward councillors address local concerns through their case work, work to sort them out on behalf of local people and, where necessary, flag up issues for possible scrutiny involvement. Where issues require approaches to other agencies – not just the Council’s executive or officers – councillors take them up with those organisations.
- 3.5.5 What is new, then? The main thrust of the CCA concerns creating leverage to help councillors get things done where, under current arrangements, they might find it difficult to get help from partner organisations⁸, or to bring a number of partners together to tackle issues which require a multi-agency approach to solve the problem.
- 3.5.6 The intention is that ward councillors should be able to deal with the vast majority of CCAs and resolve the issues themselves. However, there is an opportunity for councillors to escalate a CCA to overview and scrutiny should it prove too difficult for the ward councillor to resolve with partners alone. The new requirements mean that partners will have a duty to participate in such scrutiny exercises – providing information and, in the case of crime and disorder issues, attending scrutiny meetings – and have regard to recommendations scrutiny make as a result of their investigations. There will also be an additional requirement for Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (known as Safer Merton locally) to respond to scrutiny with details of action, or indeed reasons for inaction, when recommendations concern crime and disorder matters.
- 3.5.7 This opportunity to involve scrutiny when ward councillors are not able to resolve issues themselves with partners will encourage partners to assist at the early stage of a CCA. Whilst there will not be specific requirements about how or to what extent partners should help ward councillors at this stage, the risk of an issue being escalated up to formal overview and scrutiny procedures may act as a driver to get matters sorted out early on, rather than partners then being subject to scrutiny in a public setting.
- 3.5.8 Thus, CCA presents ward councillors with greater scope to help resolve the concerns of their constituents’ on issues outside the sole remit of the Council and gives overview and scrutiny greater influence to hold partners to account and increase the transparency of how partners respond to local concerns.

⁸ The named LSP partners (where relevant) required to participate are: Upper tier or unitary authorities, District authorities, Chief Officer of Police, Police authorities, Local Probation Boards, Youth Offending Teams, Primary Care Trusts, NHS Foundation Trusts, NHS Health Trusts, The Learning and Skills Council in England, Jobcentre Plus, Health and Safety Executive, Fire and rescue authorities, Metropolitan Passenger Transport Authorities, The Highways Agency, The Environment Agency, Natural England, Regional Development Agencies, National Park Authorities, The Broads Authority and Joint Waste Disposal Authorities. As per *Strong and prosperous communities: the Local Government White Paper*, October 2006

‘Local councillors are the bedrock of local democracy. They have a key role in ensuring local services are responsive to the needs of their constituents and enabling local people’s voices to be heard.’

Strong and prosperous communities: the Local Government White Paper

3.5.9 So, what do we need to have in place in order to make CCA work in Merton? Guidance is due to be published this summer, but already there is a great deal of discussion among scrutiny practitioners nationally, through organisations such as the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), and across London through the London Scrutiny Network. Indeed, some authorities, for example Kirklees Council in West Yorkshire, have already put in place pilot arrangements.

3.5.10 One key issue that has been raised is that the two pieces of legislation present different models of CCA, as summarised below.

Police & Justice Act CCA	Local Government & Public Involvement in Health Bill CCA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only for crime and disorder issues • Tool empowering members of the public – with duty on councillors to respond • Use normal mechanisms to resolve problems fast • Can refer issues to O&S Committee • Right of appeal via the Executive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For ‘local government matters’ – excludes crime and disorder issues • Tool to strengthen the power of ward councillors • Councillors can use devolved budgets to sort out the problem themselves • Can refer issues to O&S Committee • No right of appeal to the Executive

3.5.11 In practice, most of the challenges posed by implementing two different mechanisms with the same name will have to be addressed ‘behind the scenes’ by officers, councillors and partners. However, there are concerns that the two models will provoke confusion among members of the public who can generate a CCA under the crime and disorder model – and can appeal to the executive if they see fit – but cannot if their concern is on any other local government matter. This is an issue that has been flagged up on numerous occasions to the Home Office, the Department for Communities and Local Government and lobbying organisations such as the CfPS, the Local Government Association and IDeA, and it is hoped forthcoming guidance will seek to address this problem.

3.5.12 Early thinking emerging from these discussions highlight the following issues to consider and address:

- At what point does a regular piece of casework become a CCA?
- How will local authorities manage two different CCA mechanisms (crime and disorder CCA and local government matters CCA) and avoid confusion?
- Do ward members understand the different CCAs and the duties placed on them? What support – guidance, officer support, awareness building – do councillors need to deal with CCAs?
- Are partners aware of CCA? Can they identify main contacts for councillors dealing with CCAs?
- Are training and development opportunities and local guidance available for councillors and partners to help to ensure all parties understand roles and responsibilities?
- What systems/ processes will be needed to administer CCAs? Will any IT solutions be necessary?
- How should CCA be communicated to the public (as a tool they can use, to convey the outcomes of CCA investigations, to build confidence in the process among partners and the public)?
- How can ward councillors and scrutiny panels manage public expectations?
- What impact will CCAs have on time available for issues identified for the scrutiny work programme?

3.5.13 The crime and disorder CCA will come into force in April 2008 and it is anticipated that, subject to the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill receiving Royal Assent late in 2007, the local government matters CCA will be brought in at the same time. In order to ensure that councillors and partners are able to respond appropriately and confidently to these new powers, early preparation will be vital. It seems that guidance from central government is unlikely to be made available before October 2007. With this in mind, we recommend that a pilot be undertaken in Merton to test out some of the assumptions around CCA and options for multi-agency work to tackle issues raised through CCA. Such a pilot should learn from the pilot work going on elsewhere in the country and should involve local partner organisations to ensure that the needs of all those who will be involved in CCA work are taken into account when developing processes and support arrangements.

3.5.14 Whilst the precise nature of the pilot arrangements will need to be explored with group leaders, partners and officers, we would expect this to focus on two wards. Draft local guidance would be produced, ward councillors and partners would be briefed, ward members would evaluate issues raised as part of their work in their wards to identify potential CCA topics and attempt to resolve issues themselves. If further examination is needed, items could be referred to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission for scrutiny. The pilot should then be evaluated to enable amendments to be made, where necessary, before

establishing structures and processes for the April 2008 implementation deadline.

Recommendation 9

A pilot – led by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission – should be undertaken in Merton to test out some of the early thinking around preparing for the introduction of Community Calls for Action.

3.6 The developing role of the frontline councillor

3.6.1 There is a great deal of work currently being undertaken outside of this review that will have an impact on the role of the frontline councillor. Not least, the council's involvement in the LGIU learning network on the 'role of the frontline councillor' will undoubtedly highlight additional developments and good practice that LB Merton can learn from in order to ensure that all of our councillors are able to perform their role effectively.

3.6.2 There is also a great deal of work ongoing at a national level on examining and strengthening the role of councillors. Whilst guidance has yet to emerge on implementing the *Strong and prosperous communities* white paper and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill, as proposals are firmed up and expectations are clarified this will need to be communicated across the authority, among partner organisations and to local communities. Furthermore, the Councillors Commission project⁹ is due to report to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government by December 2007 with findings and recommendations regarding the barriers and incentives to encouraging suitable qualified, able and representative people to serve as councillors; the retention and development of councillors; and how councillors can secure public interest and recognition for the work they carry out for their communities. The council should keep a close eye on developments relating to this workstream with a view to examining how Merton may need to respond.

Recommendation 10

The learning from the LGIU network and guidance and good practice emerging from various other national projects looking at the 'role of the frontline councillor' should be fed into a member working group (identified in Recommendation 8) to assess where additional support may be needed to enable members to take up the opportunities afforded to them by new legislation.

⁹ www.communities.gov.uk/councillorscommission

4 Overview and scrutiny as a champion for the neighbourhood agenda

- 4.1 Ever since its introduction in 2001, overview and scrutiny has had a role in involving the public in scrutiny and championing local concerns and priorities. Recent assessments of LB Merton's overview and scrutiny function have identified this as a key role for scrutiny, and greater efforts to gather the views of local people have been made over the last year. However, more can be done, for example holding meetings in community venues, seeking suggestions for overview and scrutiny work, and gathering the views of the public when carrying out reviews.

Recommendation 11

Increasing opportunities for local people to be involved in scrutiny work in a meaningful way – through co-option, contributing views to scrutiny reviews, suggesting topics for scrutiny, attending meetings or focus groups, etc – should be a priority for the overview and scrutiny panels and Commission in 2007/08.

- 4.2 In addition to this, provisions within the Police and Justice Act 2006, the *Strong and prosperous communities* local government white paper, and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill seek to strengthen the role of overview and scrutiny and outline a new set of powers for local authority overview and scrutiny committees.

- 4.3 These concern:

- The introduction of 'Community Call for Action' (discussed under 3.5 above);
- Powers to scrutinise crime and disorder partnerships; and
- Powers to scrutinise local strategic partnership partners.

4.4 *Powers to scrutinise crime and disorder partnerships*

- 4.4.1 In addition to establishing a Community Call for Action on crime and disorder issues, the Police and Justice Act 2006 also created a greater role for local authority overview and scrutiny functions through scrutiny of crime and disorder reduction partnerships (CDRP). These new provisions, to be in place from April 2008, have been identified as a means of increasing visible and constructive accountability to CDRPs through requiring attendance at scrutiny committee meetings, consideration of reports and recommendations from scrutiny, and a response to those recommendations, including an explanation for inaction where relevant.

- 4.4.2 It is anticipated that scrutiny would have a role in ensuring that the CDRP applies and meets the national minimum standards and taking up issues of local concern either through scheduled scrutiny work or CCA, as mentioned above.

4.4.3 There are a number of issues to be explored in advance of the powers to scrutinise Safer Merton – Merton’s CDRP – coming into force:

- Resolve structural/ process issues: where will the crime and disorder scrutiny power sit within the Council’s scrutiny structure, identify co-optees and set criteria to evaluate possible topics for scrutiny;
- Evaluate whether there is a knowledge gap among councillors about the role of Safer Merton and provide training and development opportunities for members to address this;
- Briefings for Safer Merton staff and partners on the role of scrutiny and how they may be involved; and
- How local people can best be involved in and/or made aware of scrutiny of Safer Merton, including identifying issues of concern to form part of the scrutiny work programme.
- Do existing resources have the capacity to support the workload generated by the new scrutiny powers?

4.5 *Powers to scrutinise LSP partners*

4.5.1 The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill sets out new powers to hold the statutory partners involved in the local strategic partnership (LSP) – called the Merton Partnership locally – to account. Similar to the new provisions for CDRPs, legislation will require statutory LSP partners to provide information in relation to Local Area Agreement targets and have regard to reports and recommendations from overview and scrutiny¹⁰. Again, a number of the issues identified around preparations for CDRP scrutiny will also apply to LSP scrutiny. A particular issue that should be explored is whether a local agreement might be reached to apply accountability arrangements to the non-statutory local partners involved in the Merton Partnership, for example the Chamber of Commerce or the voluntary sector.

4.5.2 In addition to the planning work recommended above to prepare for forthcoming Community Call for Action powers (under paragraph 3.5), we recommend that issues around partner scrutiny – of both the LSP and the CDRP – be explored over coming months to identify effective joint working processes and protocols in anticipation of guidance and the powers coming into force in April 2008.

Recommendation 12

A working group should be established comprising members, officers and partners to prepare for the introduction of scrutiny of LSP and CDRP partners, linking into preparations for Community Calls for Action.

¹⁰ The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill is currently going through Parliament and as such proposals may be subject to amendment. The details included in the report reflect the position as at June 2007.

5 Other council structures

- 5.1 A number of opportunities for members of the public to influence their communities have been set out above, both in terms of direct participation and through their ward councillors. In addition to these there are other routes that local people can use to challenge local services and share their views.
- 5.2 We regularly see high levels of public attendance at our planning and licensing committee meetings and this is, of course, to be expected when it comes to applications which have received objections from the public. However, it is rare for council meetings – and even more so for cabinet meetings – to have a number of local people in the public gallery.
- 5.3 Recent developments may help encourage greater interest in attending council meetings. As mentioned above, updates from area forum meetings are now reported periodically to council and a new development in 2006/07 gives members of the public an opportunity to put questions at council twice a year. These tools enable a higher profile for citizens' views to be represented to council and, indeed, for citizens themselves to address their concerns to council in person.
- 5.4 This shift towards greater accessibility for the public to observe and participate in public meetings should be taken further. Could, for example, members of the public be given an opportunity to make a statement, at the discretion of the chair, at cabinet meetings? Could cabinet take their meetings, where appropriate, out into the community to enable local people to attend more easily?

Recommendation 13

Council should continue to invite questions periodically from members of the public, enabling local people to address council in person.

Recommendation 14

Cabinet should consider how they could widen access for the residents to observe and participate in the public meetings of Cabinet.

6 Conclusion

- 6.1 Developments in legislation are to afford ward councillors with greater opportunities to build on the good work they currently do for their constituents and champion the local concerns they uncover both within the council and with our partners. Ward councillors – and the council as a whole – must seize these opportunities with enthusiasm so that our residents can benefit fully from the tools at our disposal.

Sources of evidence

Interviews carried out with:

- Abdool Kara, Assistant Chief Executive, and Monica Wambu, Diversity and Community Engagement Manager
- Sue Tanton, Regeneration Partnerships Manager
- Cllr David Williams, Leader of the Council and Leader of the Conservative Group.
- Cllr Andrew Judge, Leader of the Labour Group
- Cllr Linda Scott, Chair of the North Wimbledon Area Forum
- Cllr Marc Hanson, Chair of the Central Wimbledon Area Forum
- Cllr Agatha Akyigyina, Chair of the North West Mitcham Area Forum
- Cllr Brian Lewis-Lavender, Chair of the Lower Morden Area Forum
- Cllr Maxi Martin, Chair of the Morden Area Forum
- Cllr Maurice Groves, Cabinet Member
- Cllr David Simpson, Cabinet Member
- Gareth Wall (CfPS) and Laura Julvé (IDeA)
- Annalise Elliot, Safer Merton Manager

Public consultation:

- South East Mitcham area forum (9 November)
- North West Mitcham area forum (14 November)
- North Wimbledon area forum (15 November)
- Morden area forum (21 November)
- Lower Morden area forum (22 November)
- Central Wimbledon area forum (23 November)
- Survey of area forum attendees
- Survey of general public
- Survey of LB Merton councillors
- Publicity campaign in local press encouraging people to share their views

Conferences/seminars attended:

- LGIU good practice seminar regarding 'Scrutiny of police and crime' (19 October 2006)
- LB Hillingdon/ALG conference regarding 'Improving Local Services: The Role of External Scrutiny' (20 October 2006)
- LGIU conference on 'Place shaping councils, strong democratic communities' (9 November 2006)
- London Councils seminar on 'urban parishing' (9 March 2007)
- PSS conference on 'The CDRP reform programme – scrutiny, accountability and public engagement' (27 April 2007)

- NLGN debate on 'After devolution: building a new contract between citizen and state' (29 May 2007)
- LGC conference on 'Strengthening the role of councillors' (7 June 2007)
- LGIU Network on the Role of the Frontline Councillor
- London Scrutiny Network meetings

Other sources consulted:

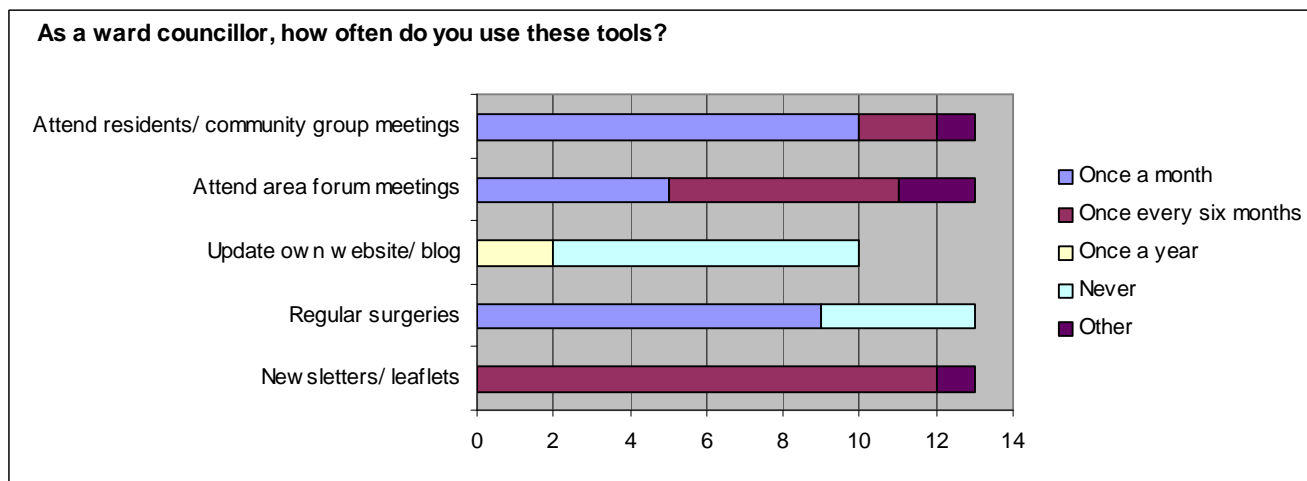
- LB Merton Scrutiny Review of Area Forums final report (2001)
- Article: 'Community engagement Brazil-style', LGC 22/6/06
- DCLG News release: Ruth Kelly sets out her agenda for devolution (<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1002882&PressNoticeID=2198>)
- 'Devolution to and from the town hall', Speech by Rt Hon Ruth Kelly MP (<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1501519>)
- LGA Conference, Speech by Rt Hon Ruth Kelly MP (<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1501327>)
- 'Bringing local governance closer to the people', Lucy de Groot, IDeA (<http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=4986075>)
- IDeA Knowledge site: Area devolution case studies (http://www.improvementnetwork.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?wax=lh_mn_0_0&pagelid=76293)
- Ruth Kelly's letter to the Prime Minister in response to his letter of appointment and remit (<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1501559>)
- Local: Vision website (<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?docid=1137789>)
- The Future of Local Government: Developing a 10-year Vision (Discussion Document July 2004)
- All Our Futures: The challenges for local governance in 2015 (April 2006)
- Empowerment and the deal for devolution (<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1501300>)
- Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter (<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1163148>)
- LGA 'Closer to people and places' campaign
- Campaign report (<http://campaigns.lga.gov.uk/peopleandplaces/home/>)
- Government 'Together We Can' campaign (<http://www.togetherwecan.info>)
- Article: 'Rare chance to revive local democracy', LGC 25/5/06 – hard copy to be circulated
- Article: '5.5bn cost of neighbourhoods', LGC 25/5/06 – hard copy to be circulated
- IDeA Knowledge site: background information regarding Community Calls for Action <http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=5126878>
- *Citizen Engagement and Public Services: Why Neighbourhoods Matter*, ODPM, January 2005
- *Making Decisions Locally: a survey of local authorities on area committees and area forums*, LGA, September 2004
- *Lest we forget: democracy, neighbourhoods and government*, SOLACE, November 2006
- *Strong and prosperous communities: the Local Government White Paper*, October 2006
- *Frontline Councillor 2017: Empowering a new generation*, Ed Cox, LGIU, January 2007

Appendix I: Summary of findings from the survey of Merton councillors

Surveys circulated to all councillors – 13 surveys were returned

Which ward do you represent?

- Abbey
- Longthornton
- Ravensbury
- Village
- Colliers Wood
- Lower Morden
- Raynes Park
- Cricket Green
- Merton Park
- St Hellier
- Graveney
- Pollards Hill
- Trinity



Are there any other ways you engage with your constituents?

- Telephone and meetings by appointment.
- During the course of my getting around the ward, telephone contact and attending meetings.
- Party based canvassing; 'mobile' surgery; coffee mornings and public meetings; weekly ward tours (bicycle); publish home phone number; use e-mail; home visits; and a few other ways
- Mobile surgeries - rolling programme around the ward. Public meetings every six months. Ward survey every 4 years. Ward canvassing.
- Newsletters can include tear off forms with a freepost address asking for views on specific issues or offering a chance to raise any issue. The levels of response indicate that, at any one time, the number of constituents wanting their councillors to 'engage' with them is very low.
- We abandoned fixed monthly surgeries as a waste of time: the average attendance was less than one, and these were often repeat callers! We have started instead having roving surgeries in different parts of the ward, publicised by leaflets a day or two beforehand, and these have a better response. If a constituent's problem cannot be adequately expressed over the phone or in an email, or requires an onsite assessment, we offer to visit them in their homes, which is generally welcomed (some appear to expect us to summon them to the Civic Centre).
- Door to door street surgeries, petitions
- Letter/ email/ neighbourhood meetings and activities
- 3 surgeries per month. One roving, 2 in community bases. Older people's lunch club. Youth clubs. Public meetings. Joint Agency Group. Mosque Liaison Group
- Attendance at local community meetings/events
- Phone and email.
- Welcome packs for new residents.
- Provide contact details (email and mobile) to residents on newsletters, flyers and website. Hold public meetings on important issues. Letters to specific groups/areas on specific issues. Street surgeries/knocking on doors on a weekly basis.
- When residents wish to engage with councillors their preferred method is the phone: either direct to our home numbers (which have been circulated several times throughout the ward) or to the Labour Group office at the civic centre. Letters are less popular. The use of emails is increasing but still surprisingly low, which may reflect a low proportion of e-citizens. Analysis of responses via freepost a year ago showed that, in supplying contact details, fewer than 15% included an email address.

Which are the most/ least effective tools?

Most effective

- Individual meetings are most effective but of course labour intensive
- Engaging directly with local groups e.g. residents associations, etc
- Roving surgery very effective. Personal contact
- Newsletter is effective as it goes to everyone in the ward. Monthly meetings are well attended, but by the same people all the time! We don't yet know how effective the welcome packs are as they are a new initiative
- By email, telephone and attendance at regular local meetings
- For individual problems, letter/email is most effective
- Anything where you're going to them is effective; anything where it's clear you're out in the community and a member of the community yourself is effective
- Contact via phone, email and personal meetings are the most effective forms of engagement.

Least effective

- Area Forum least effective.
- Surgeries are not effective (probably replaced by letter/email)
- Fixed surgeries are rarely effective.
- Area fora may be useful but I haven't been to a useful one yet

What other forms of neighbourhood governance exist in your ward, for example area forums, multi-agency groups?

- Area Forums and a great many RAs all liking Cllr attendance
- Area Forums, Multi agency group, Mosque Liaison Group
- Area forum (also poorly attended); Safer neighbourhood ward panel
- Multi agency group, Mitcham Society, Cricket Green Trust, Glebe Court Residents Assn, Village Residents Assn, Phipps Bridge Residents Assn, Mitcham Partnership, Mitcham means business, South Mitcham community Assn
- Multi agency group and area forum meets quarterly; area fora are poorly attended
- Area forum - I go as a councillor so do other councillors - residents don't; 4 x resident associations - I go to 3 of them; safer neighbourhoods meetings - I'm involved; Friends of parks, the community centre, religious-based groups, etc - various levels of involvement
- The one body which might be regarded as exercising 'neighbourhood governance' is the Safer Neighbourhood panel established by the police, to discuss and determine local policing priorities. The police have had difficulty in recruiting member to this. The only other community groups in the ward are the meetings of the Neighbourhood Watch Co-ordinators and the Friends of Ravensbury Park, both about two-monthly with attendances of 10-20. These draw their membership (which overlap) predominantly from the same part of the ward. I attend all three of these bodies.
- Area forums plus quite a few residents associations, also a body which tries to pull them together, with local business.
- A range of groupings exist from an Area Group of different agencies to other larger community groups.
- I have set up the Graveney Partnership - however, there has been a bit of a dramatic change of personnel recently - so it's a bit like having to start again.
- We need a community centre.
- Involved in forums, multi-agency (safer neighbourhood, neighbourhood watch, residents associations - community centres.

Do you feel that these meet the needs of your residents?

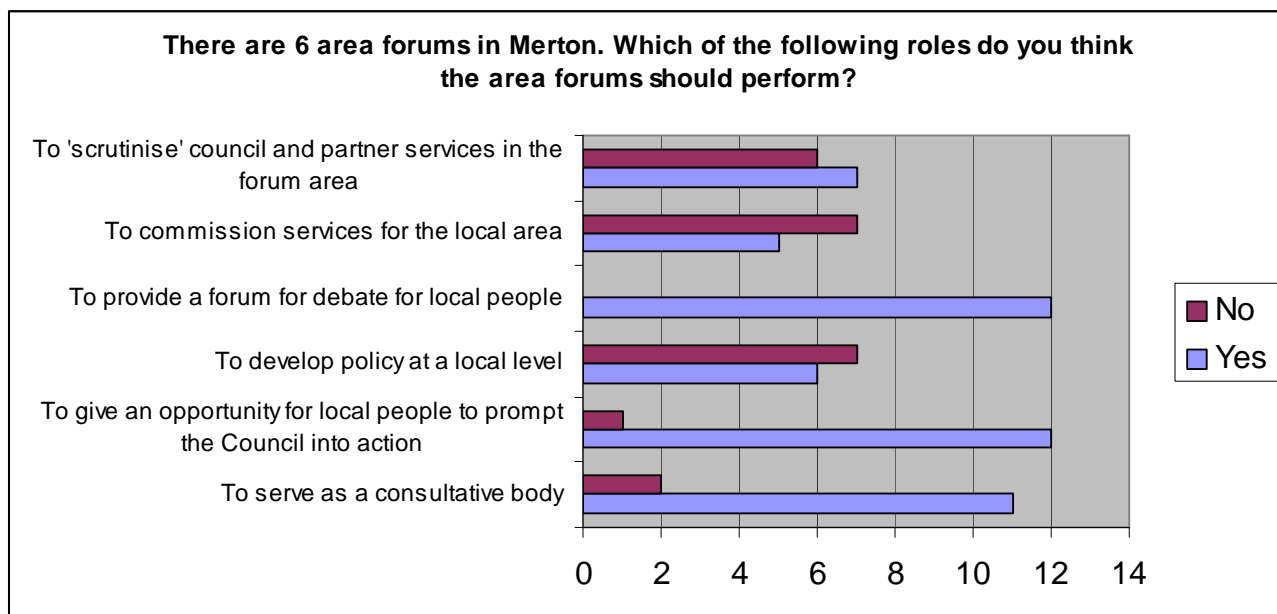
Yes - 6

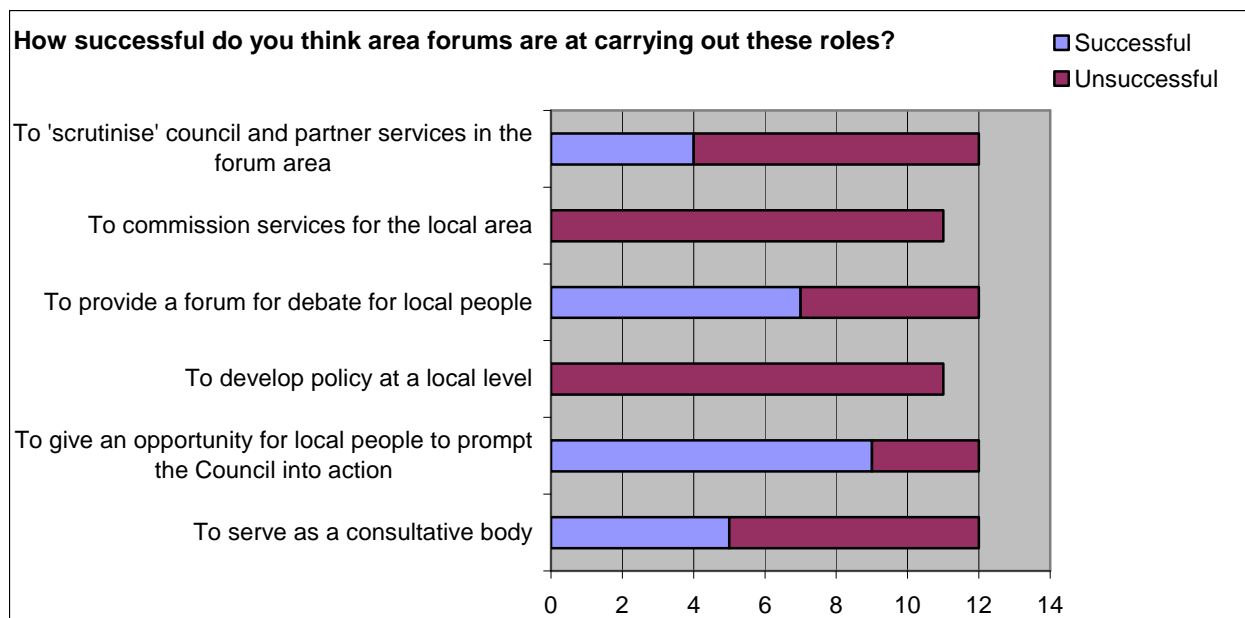
No - 5

Yes and no/ no answer - 2

Comments

- RAs and especially individual meetings are good opportunities to both learn and explain
- Broadly - most people e-mail in if they have a problem
- I am always willing to engage with residents and investigate new ways of meeting more people in different settings at their convenience.
- The SN ward panel is new and will take some time to develop. At the moment most of the people, who should be representing a local group, use the meeting to voice their personal concerns and the line between this group and a Councillors' surgery is rather muddy. The biggest problem is being able to reach people at the geographic extremes of the ward.
- It would help if there was an over-arching body to connect all these disparate groups. The Mitcham Society is attempting to reach out in this way.
- Multi agency addresses problem areas but not wider issues (e.g., parking)
- There are several thousand people live in C. W. and several thousand sets of needs to go with. There can be no universal panacea.
- No as so few people are involved but perhaps there are no 'needs' in this sense for the majority of people. Hence apathy, disinterest in governance. Then again I have quite a few comments to the effect that issues raised at forums are not dealt with or that there is inadequate feedback from the meetings.
- I think my response is neither yes nor no. Different communication methods are appropriate for different groups. I think we fail as councillors in that too many residents are entirely sure that the council does and how their councillors fit into it. I think we have lots of means by which residents can have their voices heard but the residents themselves aren't sure why or how to use them.
- Clearly it's an attempt to interact with the majority of residents but as with all attempts at consultation you are never able to reach everyone.
- A community centre is really needed.
- Lower Morden well attended - other areas are not



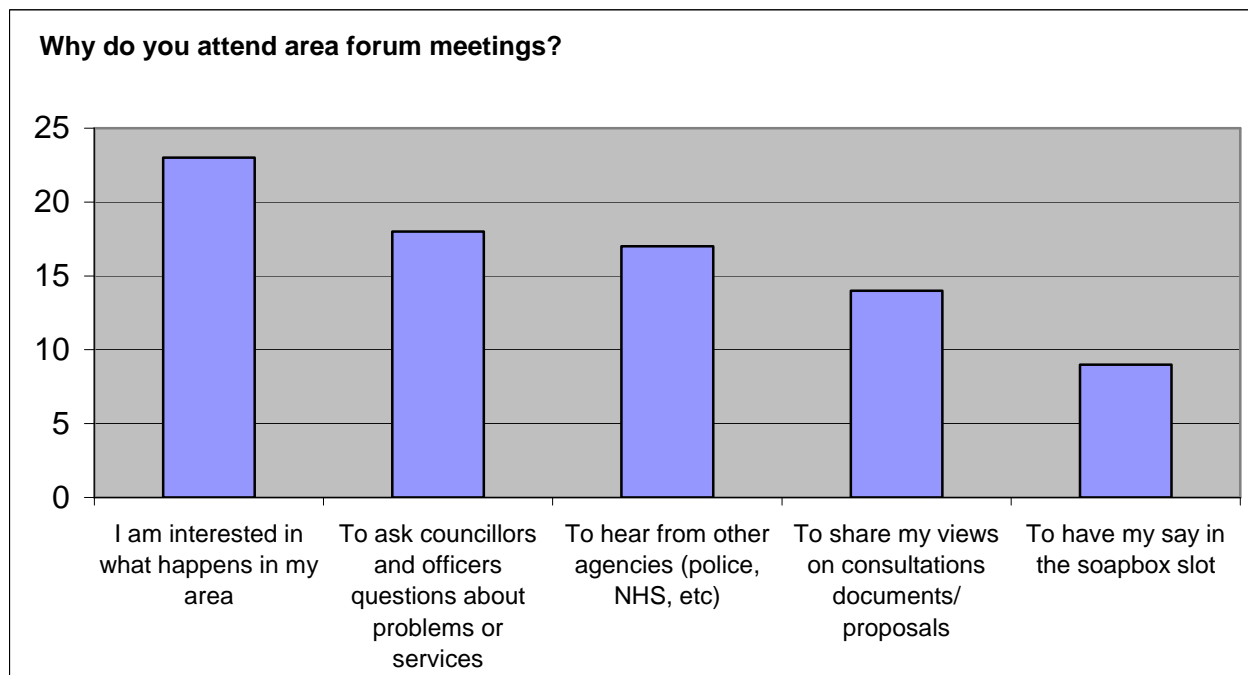


What else do you think area forums should do?

- They need to be resident driven. Summaries do need to be reported to Council and responses delivered back. Then you get better attendance
- Either be on the doorstep, massively advertised, massively facilitated or fold and spend the money elsewhere.
- They should also inform people about initiatives that are planned that affect the area. They should offer guidance on Council policies, particularly with regard to planning applications. They could also be used to view and comment on planning applications, as the people present are the ones who know the area best.
- Before Area Forums can be effective the areas they cover needs to reflect "natural" area boundaries. The existing Forum areas are too large for them to encourage any local allegiance.
- Publicise its presence and activities. People in my ward are totally unaware of the forum. Its location is unhelpful.
- A platform to discuss major local issues
- I think the whole concept of Area Forums needs to be rethought. At present they cover groups of wards that are not viewed as natural groups by residents (such as that covering Pollards Hill). They are poorly attended (15 residents out of 24000 in my experience). I think that attending an evening meeting with 'officialdom' in a draughty hall where other residents take it in turns to demand action from the council has some uses but do not think that new powers should be devolved to the area forums in anything like their current format.
- Encourage better attendance otherwise only a very few people will continue to address personal issues
- Nothing. This stems from my experience of the Morden Area Forum, where the officers and councillors usually out number the public, and the latter consists of familiar faces who are already activists of one kind or another. The sole value of the forum is to give an opportunity to ask questions and let off steam. This is good for the souls of members and officers, but the forum has no legitimacy to take on any further role.
- As we have begun to explain in detail various topics of council practice and policy, so folks understand them better. One detailed topic per forum meeting is a good idea as well as standard items.
- Be the voice of the community and serve as a member place for groups and individual.
- I usually go to Lower Morden forum and the Pollards Hill, Cricket Green etc forum - they are very different. Depending on where they are held in Mitcham - just the people from the area come. Lower Morden I think others come as well. I think they should update people on planning, problems in the area. Not convinced they do anything unless there is a major problem (i.e.: planning)
- Provide greater opportunity to discuss initiatives that are underway

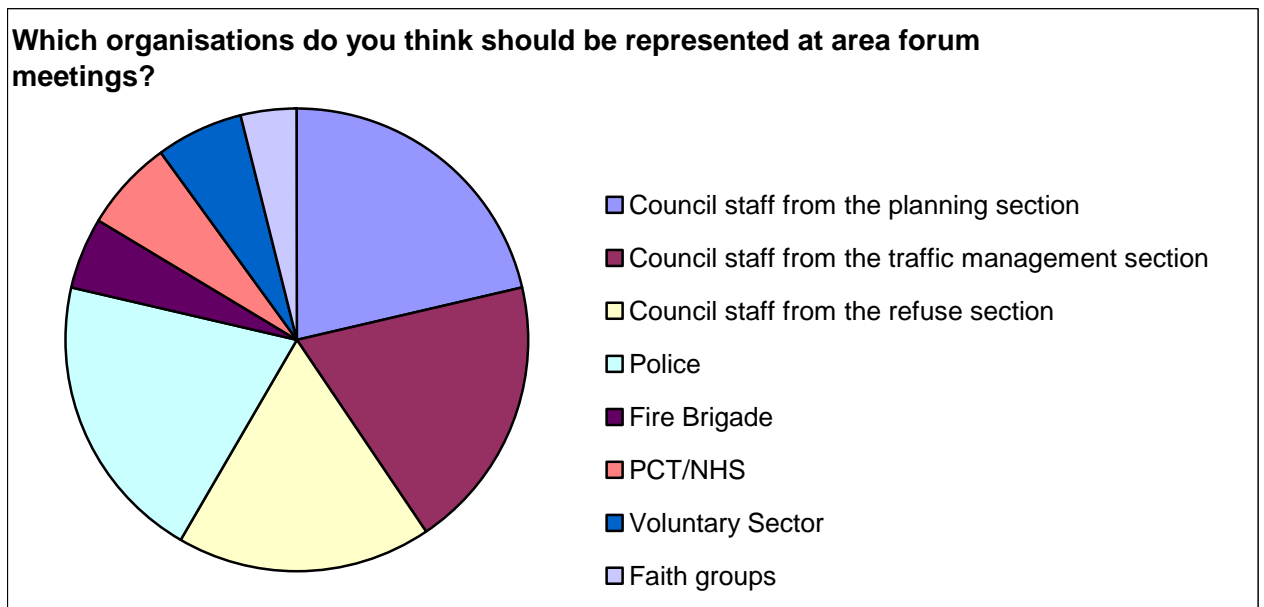
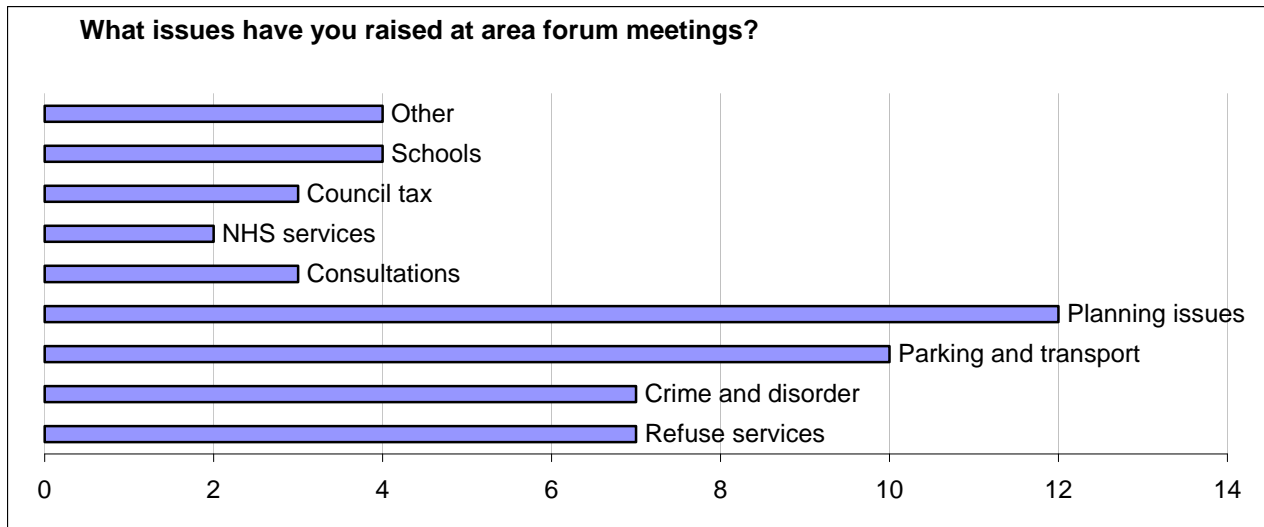
Appendix II: Summary of findings from the survey of area forum attendees

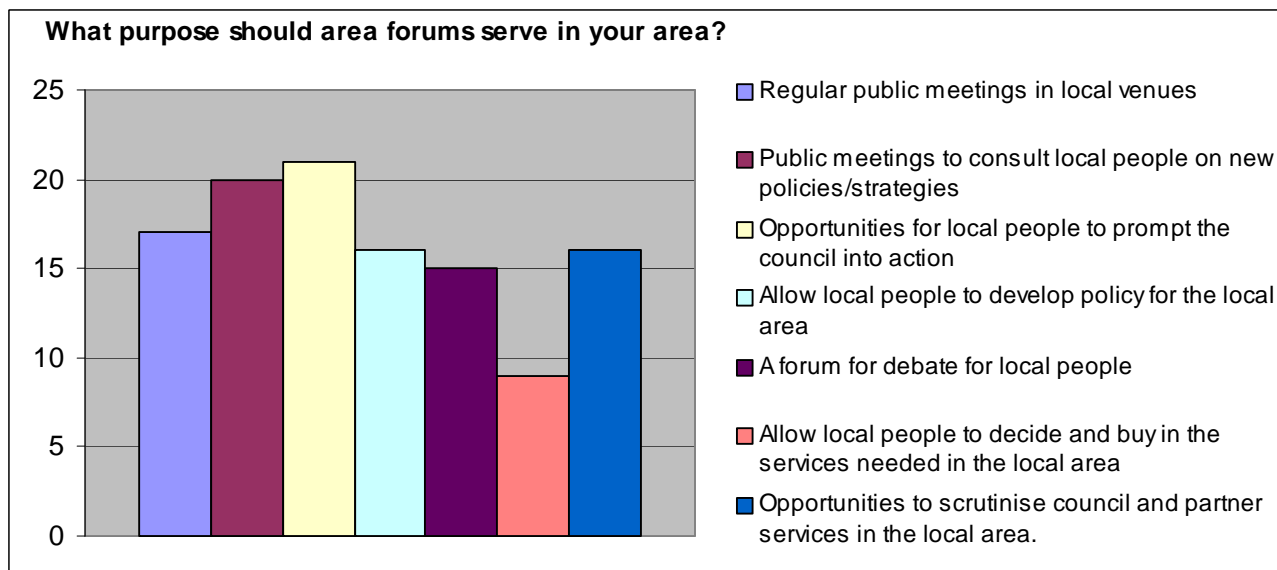
Surveys handed out at the area forum meetings in November 2006 and publicised in the local press and online – 23 surveys were returned



What are your experiences of area forum meetings?

- *'The concept of the forums was inspired and they have the potential to be built upon'*
- *'Follow up and feedback on issues raised by residents have been disappointing up to now'*
- *'Follow up points/ actions not carried out by officers'*
- *'Soap box really good idea - but maybe a time limit with one point per person unless there is time for more questions in the time allowed'*
- *'Not controlled well all the time, some people hijacked the meeting'*
- *'They should not discuss issues that the council has no influence over'*
- *'This is my first meeting – it was very useful and should be much better/ more widely advertised'*
- *'Attendance is improving. The meeting is well-chaired with plenty of two-way communication.'*
- *'[Area forums] are valuable as we (our residents associations) know what is going on.'*
- *'It is great to put faces to names in the council'*
- *'Attendance poor! Communication good!'*
- *'Politics MUST not be discussed'*
- *'Participants must see some progress/ reason for being there'*
- *'Over the years the meeting are dull and uninspiring as too much time has been devoted to officers and officials restating facts [... in] agenda papers and insufficient time given to debate'*





What sorts of issues should be discussed at area forum meetings?

- *Better local shops and school status*
- *Crime, tipping, etc and relevant issues to all in the local community*
- *Local problems and solutions; development and future vision*
- *Concerns of the elderly, e.g. toilet provision, home care*
- *Local issues on which local people might wish to convey views to central government or the GLA, such as funding of the Olympics.*
- *Not matters of minor importance which should be raised with ward councillors.*
- *Healthcare provision*
- *Brief resume of council actions so we know what is happening. If [we] only discuss local issues on agenda some residents may not have full and relevant information*
- *Can we have an annual report on what actions actually happened as a result of these meetings please as to their effectiveness?*
- *Community/social issues that affect people's lives*
- *Crime, refuse/ environmental issues, street management, planning, council activities generally*
- *ANY issues that affect us the 'public', AND more to the point US the taxpayers*
- *Issues of BORO WIDE interest; MAJOR issues of local interest*
- *Local issues with implications for more than one household and which are the responsibility of LBM or the GLA*
- *Major new traffic, speed and parking initiatives*
- *Future development in the town centre*
- *Any improvements the council plan to make in improvements in consultation procedures involving the public in the early stages of new development proposals*
- *The emerging LDF and the way the policies will affect our town centres (Wimbledon, Village and Raynes park)*

What else would you like to see happen in your area regarding community engagement/ neighbourhood governance?

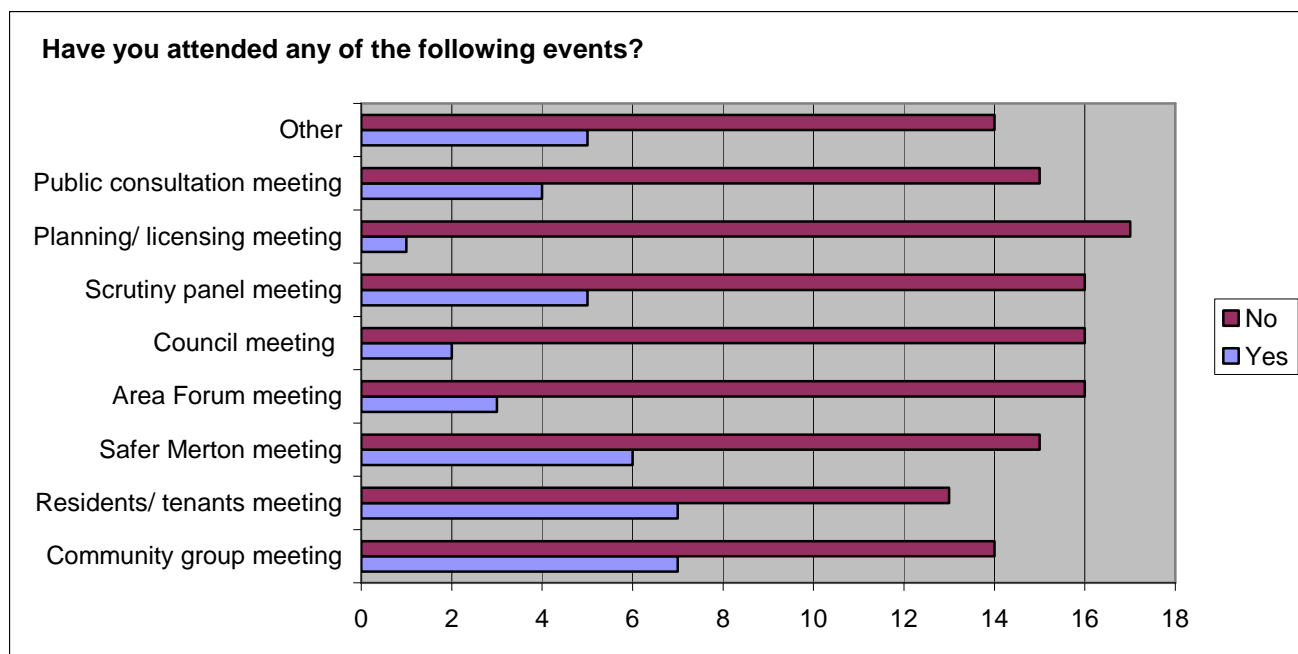
- *An invited speaker/ presenter for specific subjects, e.g. licensing, educations, public transport, planning, environment, libraries, etc*
- *'More resident interest and participation with far more resident awareness of what is happening with the various groups. A big thorny problem which will take time and effort.'*
- *'This forum is a good idea but let people know about it! Library, notice board at station, advertise in Guardian, in local post offices, on council website, eventually leaflet drop with bin collection leaflet.'*

Scrutiny review of neighbourhood governance

- *'A more local newspaper, large electronic Bill Board on top of the Community Centre or Library could be a way forward but of course this would be a security challenge.'*
- *'People are busy and make choices about their time - you have to be creative [to attract them to meetings]. It is important to have issues that you can give comments on before decisions are made.'*
- *'Ward councillors to hold regular public meetings to discuss ward issues (bi-monthly?)'*

Appendix III: Summary of findings from the survey of members of the public

Surveys publicised in the local press and online – 23 surveys were returned



If you have not attended any events, why not?

- *'I have only recently purchased my property in Merton. However, now that I am a home-owner I am keen to get more involved in my local community and make a positive difference to my area.'*
- *'Apart from having a busy schedule, I don't have access to the internet at the moment to check when meetings are held. It would be useful to have meetings advertised more prominently in the local paper or published lists'*
- *'Did not know about meetings. Would have liked to be informed'*
- *'Times are not always convenient if working full time.'*
- *'I am a carer'*
- *'I don't know when they take place'*

What were your experiences of the events you attended?

- *'Monthly meeting with councillors - not useful as questions put to councillor were not followed up as different councillor came to next meeting (one councillor rarely attended)'*
- *'Councillor surgeries are ok but a waste of time for me. One of my councillors is excellent, one is new and trying hard and one just never makes contact'*
- *'Most meetings well attended, but felt issues raised were often not taken 'on board' [...] meetings only valid if problems discussed and/or resolved.'*
- *'The last community meeting I went to at Morden Baptist church hall was an opportunity for the attendees to ask questions and it was informative. Held by the police.'*
- *'Enjoyed the meetings. Fairly well attended. I did have an opportunity to share my view and I did find it useful.'*
- *'The council meeting I attended was a meeting I was able to witness but obviously not partake in. It was interesting to gain more knowledge of how council works and it was impressive to see how well organised it is.'*

- *'Community group meeting - useful where guest speaker knows his/her job'*
- *'Planning meetings - felt legitimate worries not listened to.'*
- *'The meetings I have been to - scrutiny and cabinet were ok. At scrutiny I was welcomed, valued and allowed to speak. Amazed however at how little councillors know of the topic. It was reasonably well attended. Cabinet meeting not good because couldn't hear most of what was going on. I was only member of the public present, but it was about budget.'*
- *'Too many personal points were raised. The meetings should be concerned with 'general problems' concerning the community. This problem could be helped by accepting written questions. If the person with a question needed help in wording their question - help should be available.'*
- *'Generally good - well attended and informative. Useful two-way communication'*
- *'Council meetings - not my sort of democracy!'*
- *'The meeting was useful in sharing views and information, but I was disappointed that the council representatives (elected and employed) did not seem to take seriously any views that opposed their own.'*

What would you like to see available in your area?


	Regular public meetings in local venues	Public meetings to consult local people on new policies/strategies	Opportunities for local people to prompt the council into action	Allow local people to develop policy for the local area	A forum for debate for local people	Allow local people to decide and buy in the services needed in the local area	Opportunities to scrutinise council and partner services in the local area.	A roadshow for residents to find out more about different services	Regular councillor surgeries/meetings	Councillors websites/blogs	Interactive website for you to contribute your views electronically
Yes	14	18	13	13	12	9	16	10	13	11	12
No	2	1	3	2	3	5	1	5	3	2	3

What else would you like to see?

- More effort to engage to a wider variety of people, including 'capacity building' for those groups.
- Not everyone has access or can use electronic methods
- Specialist topics on forums with councillors e.g. disability/carers
- More effort to engage to a wider variety of people, including 'capacity building' for those groups.

Appendix IV: Elements that could be included in area forum/ ward councillor work

Examples gathered through web and best practice research

	Cost	Risk	Activity
Low Cost  High Cost	L	L	Regular councillor walk-about, covering all neighbourhoods
	L	L	Participating in community meetings in schools, community organisations, residents and tenants associations, partners
	L	L	Set up ward information webpage
	L	L	Run surgeries in regular and alternative venues across the ward
	L	L	Meet your councillor coffee mornings in the usual and other community venues
	L	M	Work collaboratively with neighbouring wards on areas of common interest
	L	M	Apply for external funding
	L	M	Influencing of budgets and service levels
	M	L	Produce community information in a 'non-political' Ward newsletter
	M	L	Meetings to agree ward priorities to inform and compliment neighbourhood plans
	M	M	Identifying community priorities e.g. through feeding back known information and/or ward survey. Ward survey would involve cost
	M	M	Creation of ward committees to develop, monitor and challenge ward plans which address local issues and problems.
	M	M	Promoting and getting involved in Merton Partnership activity
	M	M	Providing a dynamic consultation and engagement tool
	M	M	Supporting community and voluntary sectors
	M	H	Some devolution of decision-making, e.g. planning decisions
	H	M	Resource levels based on index of multiple deprivation
	H	H	Fixed budget of £10,000 per ward

Risk and cost estimates are subjective and a basis for discussion

(Based on the 'Elements that could be included in a Ward Network' note produced by Monica Wambu, Diversity and Community Engagement Manager, February 2006)