

“Effective scrutiny is essential for good governance” “Scrutiny works best where the administration has the confidence in themselves to be scrutinised” **“The executive has to be open for criticism and working together”** “Always gather evidence from a wide range of sources and opinions” **“Always base recommendations on evidence rather than personal views”** “Good scrutiny reflects the voice and concerns of the public and its communities” **“The overview and scrutiny function can, at its best, provide a way in which councillors can stop being the representative of the council and start being representatives of the people”** “Need Chairmen to be totally independent of the executive, even if from majority party” **“Effective scrutiny is the lynchpin of the new political arrangements. If scrutiny isn’t working this poses a significant threat to the success of democratic renewal”** “Overview and scrutiny is potentially the most exciting and powerful element of the entire local government modernisation process. It places Members at the heart of policy-making and at the heart of the way in which councils respond to the demands of modernisation” **“Workload planning should be coordinated with a clear link to corporate processes, dovetailing the work of scrutiny with policy development and decision-making cycles to maximise influence”** “An overview and scrutiny report that is well argued, evidence-based and unanimously agreed by the panel is difficult for the executive to dismiss” **“Effective scrutiny acts as a critical friend”**

Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2005-2006

London Borough of Merton

July 2006



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Introduction

Each year this report has sought to highlight the areas of strength and weakness in scrutiny. We have attempted to achieve:

- positive working across the political groups in delivering scrutiny
- experimentation in community engagement
- an ability to engage with the detail
- the development of health scrutiny
- engagement with external partners
- to demonstrate community leadership by challenging health decisions

Over the last twelve months we have made strong progress in a number of key areas:

- The ability to work with neighbouring scrutiny Members and officers scrutinising significant variations in health.
- The ability to continue to experiment with a range of scrutiny techniques
- The capacity to plan our work programme by identifying strategic issues not just detailed issues
- Attempting to improve the balance of workload between Panels
- Capacity to scrutinise effectively – although we resolved to prioritise agenda items in 2004-2005 to do less but in more in-depth scrutiny of the important issues, we failed to achieve this and we need to plan and focus our time more effectively during the next Municipal Year.
- Strengthening of our performance management role. We have decided that in 2006-2007 we will scrutinise Cabinet portfolio priorities in the Business Plan and monitor their progress during the year, regularly review performance against our PSA targets, and review the Executive's progress in implementing the Action Plans from major inspections.
- The IDeA peer review concluded that "Scrutiny is growing within the authority" but suggested that there should be much wider engagement of elected members in Council activities including an enhanced role for scrutiny. We decided to scrutinise the scrutiny arrangements in Merton and have produced a cross-party report which builds on our strengths and which should provide an effective means of holding the Executive to account.

This has been a year of mixed successes. The resource demands to undertake scrutiny work put pressure upon Members and our small scrutiny team. We did not keep to our timetables for completing scrutiny reviews. The IDeA Peer Review acknowledged that scrutiny has been growing within the authority but highlighted areas for improvement. We took a fundamental look at our scrutiny function and Member involvement. We assessed how effective our understanding of our roles have been to date, what works well and what could we do better and smarter. We examined best practice elsewhere to inform change and have put in place a strengthened scrutiny function for the new Council; and have recommended the allocation of additional revenue funding to underwrite future scrutiny work.

Cllr Ian Munn
Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission 2005-2006

Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Membership

Councillor Ian Munn (Chair)
Councillor David Williams (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Tariq Ahmad
Councillor Su Assinen
Councillor John Dehaney
Councillor Nick Draper
Councillor Samantha George
Councillor Sheila Knight
Councillor John Nelson-Jones
Councillor David Simpson

Substitute Members

Councillor Pauline Dawkins
Councillor Maxi Martin
Councillor Debbie Shears
Councillor Andrew Shellhorn
Councillor Peter Southgate

Co-opted Members

Revd. David Monteith	Church of England Diocesan Representative
Mr Andrew Boxall	Parent Governor Representative
Mr Ravi Kurup	Parent Governor Representative
Mrs Anna Juster	Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark representative

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The Overview and Scrutiny Commission met ten times during the municipal year. Members looked at a wide variety of items, including:

- **Scrutiny Reviews**

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PROCEDURES AT MERTON

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission carried out a fundamental review of the scrutiny arrangements in place in Merton in order to highlight and build on strengths and examples of good practice already in place and to identify weaknesses and possible solutions to overcome poor performance. This work was carried out by a task group of seven members – Councillors Peter Southgate (chair), John Bowcott, Philip Jones, Ian Munn, George Reynolds, David Simpson, Peter Southgate and David Williams – who surveyed councillors and officers across the Council, visited best practice authorities, undertook research and assessed guidance. More information about this review is on Page 20 of this report.

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF PROCUREMENT

In June 2005, the Overview and Scrutiny Commission considered the final report emanating from the scrutiny review of procurement that had been undertaken by the Way We Work Overview and Scrutiny Panel. The Commission agreed the recommendations set out in the report and forwarded the document to Cabinet asking them to approve and implement these recommendations. Cabinet agreed the thirteen recommendations and asked lead officers to develop an action plan for implementation.

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF VOLUNTARY SECTOR FUNDING PROCESSES

At the same meeting, the Overview and Scrutiny Commission also approved the report from the scrutiny review of voluntary sector funding processes produced by the

Regeneration and Public Realm Overview and Scrutiny Panel. This report was sent to the Cabinet meeting in July 2005 where the proposals were accepted and agreement was given to draft an action plan to implement the recommendations.

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF THE LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION PLAN AND BOROUGH SPENDING PLAN

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission also agreed the final report emanating from the scrutiny input to the development Local Implementation Plan and Borough Spending Plan. The final document was considered by Cabinet in June 2005 and submitted to Transport for London.

- **Call-in**

In June 2005 two Cabinet Street Management Committee decisions were called in: one regarding proposed waiting restrictions in Wimbledon Village and the other relating to a proposed controlled parking zone in the Camp Road Area. The members calling in both decisions felt that they had not been taken with due consultation or consideration and evaluation of alternatives. Following discussions with officers, the Commission voted to endorse the decisions of the Cabinet Street Management Committee.

During the course of the year, there were three call-in requests regarding Cabinet decisions on Academies in Merton. The first, in June, concerned the Cabinet's decision to work with the academy sponsors to develop expressions of interests to be submitted to the Secretary of State. Whilst the Commission did not agree to hear the call-in, members Commission received an update from the Interim Director of Children, Schools and Families on work undertaken since the report to cabinet had been issued. The Commission instructed the Life Chances Overview and Scrutiny Panel to carry out further scrutiny work on this matter.

In November, a call-in request was submitted regarding the Cabinet's decision to support the academy sponsors' expressions of interest to the Department for Education and Skills. Whilst the concerns of those members who submitted the call-in request were acknowledged, the value of scrutinising the decision at that stage was questioned and the Commission voted to not hear the call-in.

In February 2006, the Executive considered the results of the public consultation on the proposed academy status for Tamworth Manor and Mitcham Vale schools and decided to proceed with the projects and issue school closure notices. This decision was called in and the Commission heard the call-in at a special meeting on 1 March. Following a question and answer session with officers and the Leader of the Council, the Commission voted to refer the decision back to the Cabinet. The Executive was asked to evaluate the alternative options further and, in light of this assessment, reconsider their decision. Cabinet met on 6 March to do this and took a final decision to proceed with academy status for Tamworth Manor and Mitcham Vale schools.

- **Strategic Issues and Pre-decision Scrutiny**

QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE MONITORING

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission scrutinised the quarterly performance monitoring reports that are also considered by Cabinet. The Commission's performance monitoring task group met to assess the information and to prepare a

report to the Commission identifying key areas of concern, inviting departmental officers to appear before Members to explain poor performance. In June, this work focussed on targets relating to roads requiring structural repair, fly-tipping rates, home care provision and homes meeting the decent homes standard; in September the Commission focussed on levels of agency staff employed by the Council; at November's meeting Members looked at the Libraries Service and in January the Commission examined how objectives and targets were being developed for the business plan.

BEST VALUE PERFORMANCE PLAN

In June the Commission scrutinised and endorsed the Best Value Performance Plan and agreed that in future years this items should be considered by the Way We Work Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

SCRUTINY OF THE DRAFT 2006-2009 BUSINESS PLAN AND 2006-2007 BUDGET

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission coordinated the scrutiny of the draft 2006-2009 Business Plan and 2006-2007 Budget. An initial update on the budget position was presented to the Commission in September and in October officers led a briefing seminar to outline the structure, process and timetable for the development of the Business Plan and distributed an early draft for discussion. All Overview and Scrutiny Panels and the Commission considered the first draft along with an update position on the development of the 2006-2007 Budget at their December meetings. Overview and Scrutiny identified a range of additional information that was necessary for effective scrutiny of the material, including baseline performance information, resource implications of business plan priorities and targets and greater detail about growth and savings options, and officers were asked to provide this for the January round of meetings.

The Cabinet's budget proposals, plus an updated draft business plan and officers' responses to initial queries, was presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Panels in January. Each Panel focussed on the parts of the budget and business plan relating to their terms of reference and identified a response to the Cabinet. The Overview and Scrutiny Commission met at the end of January to consider the cross-cutting elements of the budget and business plan and the responses from each of the Panels. The Commission agreed a joint scrutiny response to the Cabinet's proposals to be sent to the executive to be considered when determining the final proposals to be put to Council on 1 March. Cabinet thanked overview and scrutiny for their work on the budget and business plan proposals.

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission received a final update on the Capital Strategy and Capital Investment Programme in March. Cabinet had agreed to approve the most pressing capital bids that had been submitted as part of the budget-setting process, but has taken the decision to review the remaining bids in June 2006. The Commission agreed to consider these bids and feed into Cabinet's consideration in June.

- **One-off/ Monitoring items**

RESPONSE TO THE INDEPENDENCE, WELL-BEING AND CHOICE GREEN PAPER

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission considered the draft response to the *Independence, Well-being and Choice* Green Paper alongside the comments made by the Health and Community Care Overview and Scrutiny Panel and recommended that the combination of comments form a full response to the Department of Health.

IDEA PEER REVIEW

Following the Council's IDeA peer review in April 2005, the Overview and Scrutiny Commission considered a briefing paper setting out the key messages relating to scrutiny that had been identified in the draft peer review report. The peer review found that there is positive working across the political groups in delivering scrutiny and that the role of scrutiny is growing within the authority, however stressed that there needs to be a much wider engagement of elected members in council activities, including an enhanced role for scrutiny and greater access to information on delegated decisions, and that the council is likely to benefit from the opposition being provided with greater opportunities to contribute to the council's business. The Overview and Scrutiny Commission agreed to feed this information into the review of overview and scrutiny arrangements. Following the final production of the Peer Review Report, the Commission considered the full documents and discussed the implications of the full set of findings.

RISK MANAGEMENT REVIEW

In September, the Commission received an update about progress on embedding risk management across the authority. Members agreed to receive further update reports on risk management after the Corporate Management Team and the Corporate Risk Management Group consider them.

LOCAL PUBLIC SERVICE AGREEMENT UPDATES

The Commission considered update reports on progress made by in delivering against the Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA) targets.

STOUTHALL

In November, the Commission received a report on Stouthall, a former environmental educational centre, that was leased by the Council but that has been closed since July 1998. Members of the Commission were concerned that efforts were not being made to bring the centre back into use and that the Council was not making use of this resource. The Commission was informed that a working group of councillors was to visit the site and to work with an external charitable body to assess the feasibility of reopening the building. A detailed update report was to have been presented to the Commission in March but due to the cancellation of the visit to Stouthall was delayed. This issue was identified as a matter to be carried over to the next municipal year for consideration as a matter of urgency.

VOLUNTARY SECTOR GRANT FUNDING

The Commission considered a paper outlining a new process for allocating Voluntary Sector Grant Funding along with the proposed grant allocation for 2006-2007. This item had been referred to the Commission by the Regeneration and the Public Realm Overview and Scrutiny Panel, which had met to consider the item two week's before but had not felt able to take a view. The Commission felt strongly that it was inappropriate for overview and scrutiny to participate in the allocation of grants and stated that in future this role should not be carried out by scrutiny and that a forum should be established to undertake this work.

ANNUAL AUDIT AND INSPECTION LETTER 2004-2005

The Council's District Auditor and Relationship Manager attended the Commission's meeting on 13 March to present the Annual Audit and Inspection Letter 2004-2005 and respond to Members' queries.

- **Items referred to Overview and Scrutiny Panels**

The following items were initially considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission and referred to the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Panel(s) for detailed scrutiny:

- Canons Manor House
- Capital Expenditure and Resources Report
- Efficiency Gains and Savings Report
- Community Plan Framework Consultation

Health and Community Care Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Membership

Councillor Sheila Knight (Chair)
Councillor Gilli Lewis-Lavender (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Joe Abrams
Councillor Margaret Brierly
Councillor Horst Bullinger
Councillor Maxi Martin
Councillor Peter McCabe
Councillor Beth Mitchell
Councillor Terry Sullivan
Councillor Martin Whelton

Substitute Members

Councillor George Reynolds
Councillor Ronald Wilson

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The Health and Community Care Services Scrutiny Panel met seven times in this municipal year (including one joint meeting with the Way We Work Scrutiny Panel). Members considered a wide range of issues within the Panel's remit, including:

- **Scrutiny Reviews**

INTEGRATION OF OLDER PEOPLE'S SERVICES

This review was postponed due to a delay in implementing new management structures. The Panel will continue to monitor those services already integrated as necessary (mental health services; learning disability services).

HEALTH SCRUTINY ACTION LEARNING PROJECT

The Panel secured funding from the Centre for Public Scrutiny to undertake an action learning project based on a theme in the Government's Choosing Health agenda. The Project is focussing on how the health of local people can be improved through development and enhancement of community leadership. Part of the Project involves a case study of older people's health and there is also a focus on voluntary sector services and their contribution to health improvement. The Project will run until September 2006 and will therefore be included in the panel's 2006-2007 work programme.

- **Following up on previous Scrutiny Reviews**

The Panel has not formally monitored progress on previous scrutiny reviews during 2005-2006 but the Chair requested a progress report by the end of the 2005-2006 municipal year on the following reviews in relation to implementation of agreed recommendations for: -

The Review of Day Care Provision for Adults and Older People
The Review of Transition for Young People moving to Adult Social Care

- **Strategic Issues and Pre-decision Scrutiny**

The following topics have been scrutinised as part of the Panel's work programme for 2005-2006. Some items have been drawn from the Forward Plan or have been included at the request of members:-

Independence, Well-Being and Choice Green Paper

The Panel held a focus group event in July 2005, to which service users and carers were invited to give views on the proposals outlined in the Green Paper for adult social care. The Chair then submitted a formal response to the Department of Health on behalf of the Panel. The subsequent White Paper '*Our Health, Our Care, Our Say*' has incorporated a range of views, including ones which the Panel had highlighted, such as the need to identify proper training and support for carers;

SCRUTINY OF THE BUDGET FOR 2006-2007

Members expressed continuing concerns about the effects of proposed community care budget savings on vulnerable clients, advising that in their view the proposed savings were not achievable without detriment to the quality of adult social care provision.

JOINT BUDGET SCRUTINY

Health and Community Care Panel members took part in a joint panel meeting in October 2005 with Way We Work Panel members to consider the report into investigation of the budget monitoring process for 2005-2006, which focused on particular areas of high overspend, including spend on community care services. Members reconfirmed their wish to receive monthly budgetary monitoring reports, so that areas of spending pressures could be identified at the earliest opportunity. The Joint Scrutiny Panel congratulated officers on the submitted report and their work in providing a clear and honest account of the results of their investigation.

MERTON'S COMMUNITY PLAN 2006-2015

The Panel has also contributed to development of the Community Plan, commenting particularly on the key areas of focus in relation to health care

THE BUSINESS PLAN 2006-2009

The Panel considered and commented on the Council's priorities for improvement over the next three years, focusing particularly on the strategic themes within its remit, i.e. Healthier Communities and Older People.

MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY

The Panel received regular updates at meetings throughout the year from the South West London & St George's Mental Health Trust. The Mental Health Strategy will continue to be developed during 2006-2007 and the Panel will therefore continue to focus on local mental health services as a key part of its work programme.

HEALTH INEQUALITIES REPORT

The Director of Public Health presented Sutton & Merton Primary Care Trust's Annual Health Inequalities Report 2005 to the Panel and highlighted the key issues needing to be addressed in terms of local inequalities. Panel members will use the report as a reference document to underpin future health scrutiny work.

SCRUTINY ARRANGEMENTS FOR NHS TRUSTS' ANNUAL HEALTH CHECKS

The Panel has ensured that members attended each of the trust events held since September 2005, so that overview and scrutiny has taken part in the self-declaration process, which has now replaced the NHS trusts star rating system. Local consultation on PCT services, which the Panel agreed it would undertake to inform the new process, has also contributed to this process (See section on community engagement below). A focus group of mental health service users was also held, so that users' views on the key domains in the annual health check assessment could be sought.

- **Items Monitored**

ST GEORGE'S NHS TRUST FINANCIAL RECOVERY PLAN

The Panel scrutinised the Trust's financial recovery plan and put questions to the Trust's Director of Finance. Members were reassured that the proposals in the recovery plan would have minimal impact on patient services.

- **Other Issues Considered**

The following topics were also considered by the Panel through inclusion of a report on the agenda for specific meetings:-

- GP Data Systems
- Commissioning A Patient Led NHS – update
- Joint Housing/Learning Disabilities: Haslemere Avenue
- National Service Framework for Long Term Conditions

Life Chances Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Membership

Councillor Nick Draper (Chair)
Councillor Debbie Shears (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Jillian Ashton
Councillor Fiona Bryce
Councillor Pauline Dawkins
Councillor Maurice Groves
Councillor Edith Macauley
Councillor Maxi Martin
Councillor Oonagh Moulton
Councillor George Reynolds

Substitute Members

Councillor William Brierly
Councillor Dennis Pearce

Co-opted Members

Revd. David Monteith	Church of England Diocesan Representative
Mr Andrew Boxall	Parent Governor Representative
Mr Ravi Kurup	Parent Governor Representative
Mrs Anna Juster	Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark Representative
Mr John Gourlay	Teacher Representative
Mrs Henry Macauley	Merton Governors Council Representative
Mr Dominic Leeson	Member of the National Youth Parliament
Ms Natasha Stephens	Youth Forum Representative

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The Life Chances Overview and Scrutiny Panel met eight times in this municipal year. Members looked at a wide variety of items within the panels terms of reference, including:

- **Scrutiny Reviews**

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Six members of the Life Chances Panel formed a task group to look at youth engagement and services available to young people in Merton. The purpose of the review was *'to determine ways to increase engagement with young people in Merton, including identifying mechanisms to enable them to actively participate in the democratic process and to give young people a vehicle for expressing their views'*.

The review was carried out over a five-month period, concluding in March 2006, and gathered evidence from a number of sources including: young people, voluntary and community groups, officers of the council and the Government Office for London. The report is scheduled to go to Cabinet early in the new municipal year.

- **Following up on Previous Scrutiny Reviews**

EXCLUSIONS REVIEW

The panel at its meeting on 1 December 2005 received an update on the current position with regard to the disproportionate number of ethnic minority pupils excluded from the education system. All the actions from the 2002-2003 Exclusions Scrutiny Review have been completed apart from the long-term recommendation that 'a long-term project concerning study of the correlation between the ethnic minority achievement and exclusion is build into the work programme'. It was evident from the percentage of the school roll that there is a still a disproportionate number of ethnic

minority children being excluded. The panel agreed to continue to monitor these figures and at future meeting receive information on the possible strategies for intervention to improve this situation.

INCLUSION AND LEARNING CONTINUUM REVIEW (ILC REVIEW)

An update on the ILC Review was considered by the panel at its meeting on 1 December 2005. The paper specifically referred to the current position with regard to the continuing operation of the bases and their occupancy levels.

UPDATE ON POST-16 REVIEW, IMPROVING POST-16 OPPORTUNITIES IN MERTON

On 29 June 2005 the Panel received an update on progress in relation to the recommendations resulting from the Post-16 Scrutiny Review.

- **Strategic Issues and Pre-decision Scrutiny**

DEPARTMENTAL SERVICE PLAN 2005-2006

The Panel were asked to comment upon the Children, Schools and Families Service Plan 2006-2009. The plan outlines the Department's work to ensure that social care services are effective in keeping children safe, education services raise standards in Merton schools, and that the range of services in the department work well with our partners in meeting the five overall outcomes of Every Child Matters.

COMMUNITY PLAN FRAMEWORK DOCUMENT

Members of the Panel at their meeting on 29 June 2005 were asked to review the Community Plan Framework document and to focus particularly on areas within their remit. The Life Chances Panel therefore looked at the issues around 'Cohesive Communities' and 'Education and Skills'. The Community Plan Framework was agreed by Merton Partnership in March 2005 following community-wide consultation and the document is therefore owned by all the stakeholders who make up the Merton Partnership.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF LIBRARIES

This paper was submitted to the Panel on 29 June 2005, it describes the developments and opportunities now facing Merton Library and Heritage Services and invited Members to contribute to shaping the future of the library service. Members supported the vision for libraries 'to enhance people's opportunities for success and well-being through access to services, information and lifelong learning opportunities, so that they can progress personally and contribute to wider society'.

YOUTH MATTERS GREEN PAPER

The panel at its meeting on 14 September were asked to consider the implications of the 'Youth Matters' green paper on the future shape of the Merton Youth Service. The panel agreed to refer this issue to be considered by the task group as part of the wider review of youth engagement that was to commence in October 2005. The Youth Matters green paper will make it a statutory duty for the local authority to provide an adequate youth service and to ensure that it is properly resourced in order to fulfil a youth offer.

BUSINESS PLAN AND BUDGET SCRUTINY

The Panel, at their meeting on 25 January 2006, were given the opportunity to scrutinise the package of Business Plan for 2006-2009 priorities, with a particular focus on those priorities that are within the Panels remit. Members also received a paper updating them on the latest budget situation along with areas of saving and growth. The Panel were asked to consider the two papers in tandem in order to review the affordability of those priorities and targets put forward.

- **Items Monitored**

MERTON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE PLAN 2006-2009

The Panel were provided with information on the Merton Children and Young People Plan 2006-2009 Emerging Themes consultation paper. Members were asked to input their views at this formative stage. Members discussed this working document noting that the plan had received constructive criticism and has in this regard been seen as a model of best practice.

ADULT LEARNING INSPECTION ACTION PLAN

Members received an update on the adult learning inspection action plan at the panel on 29 June 2005. In October 2004 the service underwent an inspection by the Adult Learning Inspectorate. As a result of the outcome a detailed post inspection action plan, detailing the weaknesses to be addressed and strengths maintained, was produced and approved by the Inspectorate. Members were informed that two monitoring visits had been made and results indicated that good progress had been made in all but one area (which had remained as 'some' progress) and exceptional progress had been made in one area.

SEN POLICY AND CONSULTATION

The Life Chances Panel were asked to comment upon the draft Merton Home to School Travel Policy and outcomes of the consultation exercise. The public consultation was released on 9 September 2005. Comments using a questionnaire were welcomed from individuals, organisations and groups along with two public meetings. The consultation period finished on 14 October.

At the meeting on 1 December 2006, the Panel received the results of the consultation exercise along with an action plan describing the processes planned to take account of the results in the policy itself.

- **Other**

ACADEMIES IN MERTON

At a meeting of the Life Chances Panel on 25 January 2006 Members agreed to convene a special meeting, which took place on 23 February 2006, to look at the consultation exercise carried out in relation the possible introduction of two academies in Merton.

Initial discussions regarding proposed Academies in Merton had begun with the authorities in May 2005. During the summer of 2005 options for potential sponsors were explored, two sponsors were identified. At the end of December 2005 the Secretary of State gave approval for both schools to go forward to the feasibility assessment phase. A consultation exercise proceeded on proposals to close two existing community schools – Tamworth Manor and Mitcham Vale schools – on the basis that they would be replaced by Academies. The consultation exercise commenced on 9 January 2006 and concluded on 13 February 2006. The purpose of the consultation exercise was to seek the widest possible range of views from local people. The consultation therefore had a key focus of two schools directly affected, but also allowed views from the whole of Merton.

After a detailed discussion the Panel agreed that ‘on an annual basis, the Life Chances Overview and Scrutiny Panel should receive a report on the impact of the city academies in Merton on the remaining four high schools with particular reference to finance and pupil numbers’.

Regeneration and Public Realm Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Membership

Councillor Su Assinen (Chair)
Councillor Tariq Ahmad (Vice-Chair)
Councillor John Bowcott
Councillor John Cole
Councillor Mary Dunn
Councillor Dot Kilsby
Councillor Sheila Knight
Councillor Ian Munn
Councillor Philip Jones
Councillor Andrew Shellhorn

Substitute Members

Councillor Matt Bird
Councillor John Dehaney

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The Regeneration and Public Realm Overview and Scrutiny Panel met seven times in this municipal year. Members looked at a wide variety of items within the panels terms of reference, including:

- **Scrutiny Reviews**

WASTE COLLECTION

Four members of the Panel formed a task group to look at Waste Collection. The purpose of the review was to *'establish a clear and consistent framework for dealing with waste collection'*. The main focus of the review was waste collection and recycling including refuse collection, garden waste and bulky waste. The review was undertaken over a five-month period, concluding in February 2006. It included gathering evidence from a number of sources including from the public, interested organisations and community groups, front line council staff and council officers from Merton and from Sutton. The recommendations that arose from this review were agreed in full by Cabinet at its meeting on 6 March 2006.

- **Following up on Previous Scrutiny Reviews**

SMARTER, CLUTTER-FREE STREETS SCRUTINY REVIEW

An update on the Smarter, Clutter-free Streets scrutiny review was considered by the panel at its meeting on 6 October 2005. This review was completed in November 2004 and looked at issues relating to the street scene in Merton. The Panel were asked to comment upon the actions taken to date and those ongoing together with the estimated costs to implement the remaining recommendations.

- **Strategic Issues and Pre-decision Scrutiny**

DEPARTMENTAL SERVICE PLAN 2005-2006

The Panel were asked to comment upon the Environment and Regeneration and Community and Housing Service Plan 2005-2006 at its meeting on 10 August 2005. The service plans outline both Departments' work and action plans.

DELIVERING DECENT HOMES

Members of the Panel at their meeting on 10 August 2005 were asked to review the Decent Homes Strategy for 2005-2010. The Government has established the Decent Homes Standard as a minimum standard for social housing. It is not a statutory standard but is effectively mandatory, since the level of funding we receive through the Major Repairs Allowance is designed to ensure that the councils housing stock is continually maintained and updated. The Government has set a target for all social a housing to meet this standard by 2010. The Panel endorsed the Decent Homes Strategy 2005-2010.

COMMUNITY PLAN FRAMEWORK DOCUMENT

At their meeting on 10 August 2005 Members of the Panel were asked to review the Community Plan Framework document and to focus particularly on areas within their remit. It was resolved that Councillors feed back to the diversity and community engagement team on a ongoing basis the views on the framework from neighbourhoods within their wards.

BUSINESS PLAN AND BUDGET SCRUTINY

The Panel, at their meeting on 25 January 2006 were given the opportunity to scrutinise the package of Business Plan for 2006-2009 priorities, with a particular focus on those priorities that are within the Panels remit. Members also received a paper updating them on the latest budget situation along with areas of saving and growth. The Panel were asked to consider the two papers in tandem in order to review the affordability of those priorities and targets put forward.

- **Items Monitored**

HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT 2006-2007

The panel at its meeting on 19 January 2006 were asked to comment on budget setting for the Housing Revenue Account in relation to both revenue and capital for 2006-2007. Members were asked to review the current overall position of the Housing Revenue Account and the information on growth and savings.

- **Other**

CANNONS MANOR HOUSE

An item on Cannons Manor House was referred to the panel by the Scrutiny Commission and was considered at a meeting of the Panel on 10 August 2005. The Manor House is a local historical building in Mitcham dating from the 17th century. It is a Grade II listed building. The building has been identified 'at risk' under the classification of English Heritage but its report in January 2005 indicates that the building is in reasonable condition overall. It is currently occupied with groups associated with the council. The panel received a brief history of the Manor House and the action plan for its proposed future.

Way We Work Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Membership

Councillor John Dehaney (Chair)
Councillor Samantha George (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Joe Abrams
Councillor Angela Caldara
Councillor Nick Draper
Councillor Corinna Edge
Councillor Peter Southgate
Councillor Martin Whelton

Substitute Members

Councillor Chris McLaughlin
Councillor Ian Munn

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The Way We Work Scrutiny Panel met eight times in this municipal year (including one joint meeting with the Health and Community Care Services Scrutiny Panel). Members considered the following issues within the Panel's remit:

- **Scrutiny Reviews**

MERTON AS AN EMPLOYER OF DISABLED PEOPLE

The Panel has undertaken a major review during 2005-2006 on Merton Council as an Employer of Disabled People – the review was completed in February 2006 and the report and findings have been published. The Panel will monitor progress on implementation of the recommendations, with a member champion to be identified at the first Panel meeting in 2006-2007.

- **Following up on previous Scrutiny Reviews**

CORPORATE EQUALITY PROGRAMME AND PROGRESS TOWARDS LEVEL 3 OF THE EQUALITY STANDARD

The Panel has considered further work on progress with moving the Authority towards achieving Equality Standard Level 3 and will continue to be updated on this issue.

- **Strategic Issues and Pre-decision Scrutiny**

SCRUTINY OF THE BUDGET FOR 2006-2007

Members considered the proposed savings and growth items put forward and requested information on the areas of savings and growth originally put forward but rejected, with the reason for the rejection outlined. The Panel reconfirmed its request for budget monitoring reports to be provided for members on a monthly basis, to allow the areas of high spending pressure to be addressed as early as possible, so that remedial action can be taken early.

JOINT BUDGET SCRUTINY

Way We Work members took part in a joint panel meeting in October 2005 with the Health and Community Care Panel to consider the report into investigation of the budget monitoring process for 2005-2006, which focused on particular areas of high overspend, including spend on community care services. The Joint Scrutiny Panel

congratulated officers on the submitted report and their work in providing a clear and honest account of the results of their investigation.

MERTON'S COMMUNITY PLAN 2006-2015

The Panel has contributed to development of the Community Plan, focussing on the priority themes.

THE BUSINESS PLAN 2006-2009

The Panel considered and commented on the Council's priorities for improvement over the next three years, through a focus on all the strategic themes.

- **Items Monitored**

CORPORATE BUDGETARY CONTROL

The Panel considered a budget monitoring report at each meeting during the municipal year. Concerns about areas of high overspend were highlighted and, as indicated above, a joint panel meeting was held to consider the investigation report into how the significant overspends had developed.

ENGAGEMENT OF CONSULTANTS

The Panel considered an update on the use of consultants as at March 2006 and is likely to continue to request updates on this issue where the level of expenditure indicates this to be necessary. This scrutiny work follows on from a previous review of engagement of consultants in 2001-2002

E-GOVERNMENT – PROGRESS WITH MEETING TARGETS

The Panel has monitored progress with implementation of E-government to meet the targets set. Members were pleased to learn that all but two of the 29 outcomes required for December were delivered and that the 25 outcomes required for March 2006 were in progress. E-payments are up 40% with additional growth in this area expected to be in the region of 15%. It was noted that the Council's web site continued to make progress markedly to a position of being judged by the society of IT managers as being among the top 40 sites in the United Kingdom.

- **Other Issues Considered**

HR ISSUES: STAFF SICKNESS AND ABSENTEEISM; HR RESTRUCTURE

A number of HR issues have been scrutinised, including staff sickness and absenteeism and the HR restructure. The Panel has endorsed the raised profile of diversity and the identification of diversity in employment as a strategic priority requiring appropriate commitment and resourcing.

CORPORATE PROCUREMENT STRATEGY

Members considered an update on progress with Merton's Procurement Strategy, following its scrutiny review of procurement during 2004-2005. Although there has

been a delay in producing the Strategy, the Panel will continue to be updated on this issue during 2006-2007.

CUSTOMER ACCESS IMPROVEMENT PLAN

There has been further consideration of the Customer Access Improvement Plan particularly in relation to Merton Link and improved levels of sickness absence amongst Link staff and to the number of services that can be booked online. The Panel are satisfied with progress made and targets achieved to date. Members were informed that there would be review of the Council's main switchboard number, as the current one is not very memorable.

Community engagement in scrutiny

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission and Panels have been pro-active in developing community engagement opportunities for local people and community groups. Members of the public have been involved in scrutiny work in a variety of ways during 2005-2006:

- The Health and Community Care Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel has been particularly successful – something that was highlighted through Professor Leach's Review of Scrutiny – by arranging single-issue meetings, such as one to consider users' and carers' views on the Adult Social Care Green Paper, using a local community venue rather than the Civic Centre.
- In addition to this, Members involved with the Health Scrutiny Action Learning Project have held meetings with voluntary sector groups, and social services guilds. The Project's external researchers have set up focus groups to look at health issues for older people. There has also been consultation with local ward councillors representing six wards at the top end of the deprivation scale to determine any key health issues emerging from ward surgeries.
- As part of the annual health check process, consultation on local Primary Care Trust (PCT) services included the use of electronic consultation, drawing out issues through area forums, a meeting with young people (who then consulted their peers and reported back to the members), circulation of flyers and posters in libraries, leisure centres and GP surgeries, and inclusion of articles in local newsletters. The key issues emerging from the Panel's community consultation were highlighted in their response to the PCT. Mental Health Service users were also consulted through a focus group event and their views contributed to the Panel's response to the Mental Health Trust.
- Another significant piece of community engagement was achieved through the review of Merton as an Employer of Disabled People, which engaged with around 100 people by holding a variety of events such as a Question Time-style panel session, focus groups, site visits and discussions with staff and Staffside representatives.
- The waste collection review sought the views of the public, councillors, staff and environmental and other community groups through a variety of means. A press release was issued and picked up by local newspapers and articles were featured on the Council's website and on the staff intranet site. Notices were also posted on plasma screens around the civic centre, in libraries and Merton Link. In addition to this, and Area Forums and residents associations were contacted and discussions were held with environmental groups through the Environment and Safety Forum. A total of 45 responses were received.
- Finally, the review of youth engagement and services available to young people in Merton involved the community and young people in particular. The task group spoke to a number of organisations and community groups working with young people but placed a particular emphasis on talking to young people by visiting Merton College, meeting the Youth Parliament Steering Group and having a discussion with young people in reparation.

All this work resulted in a total of 293 people getting involved in the work of overview and scrutiny in 2005-2006.

Looking forward to 2006-2007

The 2005-2006 Municipal Year was particularly significant for overview and scrutiny at Merton due to the Review of Overview and Scrutiny Procedures carried out by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission. Five years after the introduction of overview and scrutiny to local government, Merton's scrutiny councillors took the opportunity to take stock of the successes and weaknesses in the system to date and to set out a clear plan to improve the function to better serve the authority and, more importantly, the people of Merton.

This full and in-depth review involved visits to best practice authorities (L.B. Hounslow and L.B. Camden), gathering evidence from scrutiny conferences and training seminars run by the Centre for Public Scrutiny and the LB Brent, and drawing on best practice case studies and guidance literature. Great efforts were made to ensure that councillors and officers were able to share their views of how scrutiny was (or was not) working at Merton. Questionnaires were issued, an 'ideas board session' was held before a full Council meeting and discussions were held at each Departmental Management Team regarding perceptions and experiences of scrutiny.

Keen to ensure that the review included an independent 'critical friend' element, overview and scrutiny commissioned two external reviews of scrutiny, with Professor Steve Leach from De Montfort University taking an overview of the whole function and Richard Poxton from the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) focussing on health scrutiny. These reviews, along with comments from earlier corporate audits from the 2002 Corporate Assessment and the 2005 IDeA Peer Review, were fed into the wider member-led review.

The findings from the cross-party review highlighted examples of good practice in the function, but noted that they were not consistent across all of the Panels and Commission. Criticisms were constructive and supported with practical and tested suggestions for improvement.

The recommendations responded to concerns of all those involved in scrutiny – members, officers and the public – and the reaction to the report has been immensely positive. Indeed, all thirty-eight recommendations were endorsed by full Council on 5 April 2006 (although it should be noted that recommendations 12, 19, 30 and 36 were agreed in part or with qualifications). These will be implemented at the start of the 2006-2007 municipal year.

Further information

For more information about overview and scrutiny at the London Borough of Merton, please visit our website at www.merton.gov.uk/scrutiny or contact us via the Scrutiny Team using the details below:

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