



Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2018/19

London Borough of Merton

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Foreword

Each new council develops its own distinctive character as new and continuing councillors learn to work together. In May last year, the local elections introduced 23 new councillors who promise to make a strong contribution to the work of scrutiny in Merton. Nearly all of them (21) have been fully involved in scrutiny activities in the past year, three have chaired task group reviews, two have taken the roles of performance leads for their panels, and one has become Vice Chair of his panel.

This is very encouraging. Elected members must take ownership of the scrutiny process if they are to represent the concerns of their residents, and this is evident in the range of topics scrutinised in the course of the year. Key external providers such as Veolia and Idverde have been held to account over (sometimes controversial) changes to service provision, the Borough Commander has responded to questions about the future of Wimbledon police station, and the CCG has been challenged over proposals to limit access to community podiatry services. The latter may seem a minor issue, but for an elderly person it could be the difference between leading an independent life and being trapped in their own home.

We have been successful in engaging the interests of the wider public when we have chosen topics for review that reflect their concerns. More than 750 responded to a survey on road safety around schools, and scrutiny sessions with Veolia and Clarion were well attended. With the support of scrutiny members, the Youth Parliament ran its own enquiry into making young people feel safe in Merton. They interviewed 742 young people, questioned witnesses and reviewed their findings. We would like to build on our work with the Youth Parliament, and bring more members of the public into our scrutiny reviews in the year ahead.

These aspirations for scrutiny would get nowhere without the dedicated support of our scrutiny officers, and I would like to thank Stella Akintan and Rosie McKeever, led by the unflappable Julia Regan, for all their hard work on our behalf in the past year. New and old members alike have every reason to be grateful to them.

Councillor Peter Southgate
Chair, Overview & Scrutiny Commission

What is overview and scrutiny?

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

Overview and Scrutiny's main roles are:

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

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

Principles

Overview and Scrutiny at Merton is:

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

How Overview and Scrutiny works in Merton

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

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

Commission and Panel meetings take place throughout the year and members of the public are welcome to attend. Dates, agendas and minutes for these meetings can be found on the council website:

<https://democracy.merton.gov.uk/ieDocHome.aspx?bcr=1>

More information about Scrutiny at Merton can be found at

<https://www2.merton.gov.uk/council/decision-making/scrutiny.htm>

or by phoning the scrutiny team on 020 8545 3864 or emailing scrutiny@merton.gov.uk.

Scrutiny achievements 2018-2019

Scrutiny is a rewarding and influential role for councillors and has led to some real changes in policies, service provision and council budgets over the past year. The detail of scrutiny activity carried out by each of the scrutiny panels and the Commission is provided in the main body of this report. Some of the highlights are set out below.

Improvements to local services

Over the last year scrutiny has made continued to recommendations that have had a significant impact on services provided by the council, its partners and other external organisations. These include:

Homeshare scheme

The recommendation of a scrutiny task group review into the viability of a home share scheme for Merton has been accepted and the scheme is now being developed. Homeshare brokers a relationship between older people who have a spare room with a younger person who will give around ten hours of support with tasks around the home.

Changes to the access criteria for the community podiatry service

Merton Clinical Commissioning Group contacted the Healthier Communities and Older People Overview and Scrutiny Panel about planned changes to the podiatry service that will limit access criteria to those with the highest need. The Panel sought re-assurance that all vulnerable residents would still receive support and made the following recommendations, all of which were accepted by Merton CCG:

- To translate information on this service into other languages
- To provide more information for people with low podiatry needs
- To promote the availability of training for carers organisations on basic foot management.

Holding external organisations to account

The Commission and each of the Scrutiny Panels have been able hold key external bodies to account through scrutiny of performance data and rigorous questioning of senior officials from a wide range of organisations that provide services that are of importance to local residents. These include Harris Federation, Police, NHS (CCG and hospital trusts), Clarion Housing, IdVerde and Veolia UK.

Changes to proposed budget savings

Cabinet responded positively to recommendations made by scrutiny asking them to reconsider two of the proposed savings – one on funding for premises occupied by voluntary sector grant recipients and the second on proposed closure of Morden Park House. Both proposed savings were withdrawn by Cabinet.

Involving the public in scrutiny

The involvement of local residents, community organisations and partners is an important part of the scrutiny process. The Commission and each of the panels have committed themselves to increasing public involvement this year and working to ensure that this is a meaningful and rewarding interaction for local residents.

A number of different approaches to public involvement have been used this year including:

- The Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel has used social media (Twitter) to promote upcoming items at scrutiny and to encourage resident involvement and attendance. This has been particularly successful for the meetings attended by Veolia, Clarion Housing and IdVerde.
- The single use plastics task group carried out a survey of council staff to seek their views on how to reduce plastics in council buildings. A total of 171 staff responded with useful comments and suggestions. The feedback from the survey has formed the basis of many of the task group recommendations.
- The road safety around schools task group undertook a public survey to which over 750 parents and local residents responded with information about the situation in their neighbourhood and ideas on how this could be improved. This will be invaluable to the task group in helping them to identify recommendations for change.
- Five members of the Youth Parliament joined scrutiny councillors for an event to discuss and agree recommendations on actions that could be taken to help young people feel safe in Merton. This drew on the results of a consultation the Young Advisers had carried out with 742 young people aged 11-20.

Overview and Scrutiny Commission

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission is responsible for the scrutiny of cross cutting and strategic issues, crime and disorder and issues relating to the council's "corporate capacity". The Commission acts as a coordinating body in supporting the three Overview and Scrutiny Panels and has responsibility for developing and keeping scrutiny under review.

Scrutiny reviews

Road safety around local schools

This task group, established in response to concerns raised by two school governors and a local resident, has reviewed the aspects of road design, road user behaviour and enforcement activities that are currently affecting road safety in the vicinity of schools. The task group heard from more than 750 parents and residents, head teachers and council officers as well as examining information about initiatives in other boroughs and Londonwide.

The task group is in the process of reviewing all the evidence received and will submit its findings and recommendations to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission on 4 July and to Cabinet on 15 July 2019.

Recruitment and retention of teachers

The Commission has received an initial response from Cabinet plus a progress report on how it is implementing recommendations made by the scrutiny review of the recruitment and retention of teachers. A number of recommendations have already been implemented that will assist with using existing recruitment systems and structures more effectively and with promoting them more widely.

The cost of local accommodation was found to be a key factor affecting both recruitment and retention. To assist teachers to afford local rents, the task group recommended the introduction of an interest free loan to assist teachers with payment of rent deposits. The feasibility of this is currently being explored.

Involving young people in scrutiny

An event was run during Local Democracy Week 2018 to give young people some experience of and insight into the council's scrutiny processes. Five members of the Youth Parliament joined seven scrutiny councillors to discuss "what is Merton doing to help young people feel safe?" This question was chosen by the Youth Parliament to provide them with an opportunity to present and discuss the results of a consultation the Young Advisers had carried out with 742 young people aged 11-20.

A Police Sergeant and a council officer from Safer Merton also attended to outline their roles and to answer questions.

Cabinet subsequently endorsed the recommendations made by the Youth Parliament and the implementation plan is now being monitored by the Commission.

A proposal on how to more actively involve young people in scrutiny was agreed by the Commission, including to run another joint scrutiny exercise during Local Democracy Week in 2019.

Strategic issues and pre-decision scrutiny

The Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive attended to set out their priorities for 2018/19, pressures on council and health services and on housing supply in London as well as the financial challenges facing the council. The Commission asked them questions on issues including revenue streams, commercial activity undertaken and planned by the council and how service performance concerns were being addressed with Clarion and Veolia.

The Commission commented on the annual report from Merton Partnership, particularly in relationship to community development work being planned with Merton and Sutton's Voluntary Service Councils.

In November the Commission received a report detailing how the council was preparing for Brexit, including contingency plans in the event of a 'no deal', and how the council could support EU residents to secure their rights around settled status. In response, members requested that councillors be provided with information so they could encourage EU residents within their wards to apply for settled status.

Briefings were provided on the council's target operating model (a strategic planning tool to anticipate and prepare for the future) and of the council's implementation of new statutory general data protection regulation (GDPR) requirements

The Commission has continued to examine delivery of the council's customer contact programme and has closely scrutinised details of the difficulties that had been experienced with the contract and the actions subsequently taken by the council. Members stressed the importance of learning from this project to future proof subsequent projects and to compartmentalize risk. They also stressed the importance of listening to the views and experiences of service users and staff.

The Commission welcomed progress made this year on the Equality and Community Cohesion Strategy action plan, particularly on narrowing the gap on educational attainment, the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), food poverty and welfare support.

Scrutiny of crime and disorder

Merton is now part of the south west London Basic Command Unit (BCU). The BCU Borough Commander attended twice this year to provide the latest crime data and answer questions on a wide range of issues including stop and search, anti social behaviour, gangs and knife crime. The Commission has closely questioned the Borough Commander on levels of crime, how BCU police resources are deployed in Merton and the future of Wimbledon and Mitcham police stations.

The Commission was pleased to hear of progress made in obtaining a long term injunction that will help the police and the council to respond promptly to Traveller encampments.

The Safer Merton Manager reported twice on work being undertaken by Safer Merton and the Community Safety Partnership, including detailed information on the CCTV service, anti social behaviour, victim support and hate crime. At the request of the Commission, an email was sent to all councillors setting out key messages about when to use the 999 and 101 police phone numbers so that this could be passed on to residents.

Call-in

No call-in requests were received by the Commission in 2018/19.

Finance and performance monitoring

The Commission scrutinised the London pilot of business rates retention and were reassured to hear that, to date, it had been of financial benefit to Merton and that this is being kept under review.

The financial monitoring task group has continued to monitor quarterly financial management reports and the budget outturn report. It has also scrutinised a number of budget areas and related issues in depth – budget forecasting, financial risk management, use of contingency funds and reserves, debt management, financial aspects of the Veolia and Ideverde contracts, learning from Lean reviews and a progress update on Merantun Development Ltd.

Scrutiny of the budget

Budget scrutiny was undertaken in November and January. At a strategic level, the draft business plan, medium term financial strategy and capital programme were examined. There was also detailed scrutiny of each of the proposed budget savings, alongside equality impact assessments for individual savings.

The Commission made a recommendation to Cabinet in November 2018 to express disappointment that Cabinet was not further advanced in identifying proposed savings for future years, whilst recognizing the difficult situation that Cabinet faced in relation to the size of the budget gap.

A further recommendation was made to Cabinet in January 2019 asking them to support the Local Government Association in lobbying government for a more sustainable basis for the funding of local government, to reconsider two of the proposed savings, and to re-review the future capital programme and the associated implications for the revenue budget. In response, Cabinet withdrew the two proposed savings – one on funding for premises occupied by voluntary sector grant recipients and the second on the proposed closure of Morden Park House.

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Areas of responsibility: scrutiny of issues relating to children and young people. This includes education, children's social care, child protection and youth services.

Councillor Sally Kenny, Panel Chair: "It had been an honour and a privilege to chair the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel. I have learned a great deal during my first year as chair and have been delighted with the questioning and statements from Panel Members. Panel members have visited several schools and Merton College to look at the post 16 education offered in Merton. This was interesting and impressive. Panel Members also met with the Youth Parliament which was inspiring and uplifting to witness the talent, commitment and thoughtfulness of Merton's young people.

Officers and outside groups provided updates, explained innovations and kept Members well informed of the marvellous work being undertaken and continued. They responded clearly to Members questions and provided follow up information when needed. It is rewarding that Merton's Children and Young People's Department is successful and is committed to develop and improve its practice to serve the young people of Merton in a productive approach. It is wonderful to be part of this process. Thank you to the scrutiny officers who support the panel, the officers and groups who update us and the Members who question and challenge to forge a close working relationship to ensure that Merton is a great place for young people to live. I am hopeful that in the future we can increase the involvement of young people in this work, in particular through Merton's Youth Parliament".

Scrutiny reviews

Prevent task group

Following on from the previous years' work, the Prevent Duty task group recommendations report was presented to Cabinet on 25 June 2018. In January 2019 the Panel was updated with a six month review of the agreed action plan demonstrating how the recommendations of the Prevent Task Group have been implemented. It was decided at this meeting that going forward it should be included as a standing item in the Director's Departmental Update.

Care leaver accommodation

The topic of care leaver accommodation returned to Panel in October 2018 and March 2019 this year, both times with a progress summary on the previously made recommendations to Cabinet on aspects to explore in order to further improve the Council's support for care leavers in gaining suitable independent accommodation upon leaving care. The report made nine recommendations and the Panel was delighted to learn that the Director of Children Schools and Families, the Head of Social Care and Inclusion and Officers across the Children, Schools and Families and Community and Housing departments had worked together to develop an action plan to further explore and address the recommendations made. Update reports on the progress made against the action plan were welcomed as were the opportunities

for Panel Members to ask questions about areas not included, such as tackling anti-social behavior and encouraging independence.

Routes into employment for vulnerable cohorts

The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel originally set-up a task group to look at the housing, health, education and employment of care leavers or those with additional learning needs. However, this was refocused to look solely at the employment of these groups. The task group's report and recommendations were presented to the Panel for review in January 2018 which resulted in a request from the Panel to receive an update report after six months.

During the June 2018 review it was noted that the recommendations were largely met. The Panel resolved to review them further after six months' time.

Therefore the future Merton Programme Manager returned in February 2019. The Panel noted the update on the Coram research, the statistics on Apprenticeships within the Council, and the work of the 'Toward Employment Pilot' all contained in the report and congratulated Officers on the work achieved.

Children's Mental Health task group

The Panel set up a task group to consider how to improve mental health services for children and young people aged 11-25. The task group has considered how to embed prevention and resilience, mental health provision in schools and how to strengthen existing services. Task group members have met with a wide range of witnesses including; children and adolescent mental health services, charity groups, Merton youth parliament, young service users, senior council officers. The final report will be presented to the Panel in June 2019.

Pre-decision scrutiny

Harris Wimbledon Secondary Academy

Panel continued its work with officers to review progress on the delivery of the Harris Wimbledon secondary school. Members enjoyed a visit to Harris Wimbledon the day before Panel and then welcomed the attendance of Sir Daniel Moynihan, CEO of Harris Federation, and the Head teacher of Harris Academy Wimbledon, Joanne Larizadeh to the January 2019 meeting. Sir Daniel answered Panel Member Questions and stated the new build will be finished in 2020 will have 1150 pupils with 250 in the sixth Form.

Merton Safeguarding Children Board

The Panel received the annual report of the Merton Safeguarding Children Board (MSCB) in November 2018. Members used the session to understand how the board will continue its strong partnership working, what is being done to address the on-going concerns about the timeliness of health assessments, what support is provided to fathers to help them engage with the process how the service monitors illegal schools.

Health and wellbeing strategies for children and families

Officers from Public Health and the Clinical Commissioning Group provided the Panel with a progress update on the delivery of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2015-2018) theme: Best Start in Life (Early year's development and strong educational achievement). This was the final report on the 2015-2018 strategy.

The Panel was pleased to see the work that had been done to reduce waiting times for the first CAMHS appointment. Panel Members and Officers also discussed the range of work being done to combat childhood obesity. Officers also sought to engage the Panel members on the refresh of the Health and Well-being Strategy for 2019-2024 particularly in relation the 'Start Well' children and young people's theme.

Regional Adoption Agency

A report that summarised the business case for Merton entering regional adoption arrangements with nine other local authorities in South London as part of Adopt London South was brought to scrutiny in October 2018.

Panel members were reassured that Merton will continue to receive sufficient resources to meet the needs of local children and that it will not weaken the good work Merton has been doing. Merton received an outstanding rating for their adoption service during the last Ofsted Inspection. Panel resolved that progress with the Regional Adoption Agency be included in the department update report at future CYP scrutiny panels.

Children and Young People's Plan 2019-23

The Director of Children Schools and Families gave an overview of the report, highlighting that young people had identified outcomes which are important to them. Members of the panel were asked to discuss their priorities for the children and young people of Merton for the period 2019-23 and to provide their views to feed into the consultation and engagement activity underway to support development of the plan.

Performance monitoring

Performance monitoring data

The Panel has continued to review progress against a basket of agreed key targets (Key Performance Indicators) with Councillor Hayley Ormrod and Councillor Eleanor Stringer sharing the role of performance monitoring lead for the Panel. This item has been discussed on the majority of agendas with time allocated to the scrutiny of the data and for key points and clarifications to then be discussed at the meeting.

Education, Health and Care Plans

The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel has taken a lead over the last year on scrutinising the progress being made with the transfer of 1,023 SEN statements to Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). This work was run in parallel to meeting requests for new EHCPs within the newly introduced Government deadline of twenty weeks between the initial request for an EHCP being accepted and production of the resulting plan.

Monthly data on performance against the twenty week target for the production of new EHCPs was provided to the Panel regularly and made publicly available as part of the agenda for the Panel meetings.

During the June 2018 Panel, it was discussed that the department were just about to complete a formal consultation on the experience of parents/carers involved in the EHCP process. Panel resolved that the consultation results be shared with the members once completed. As agreed, the Assistant Director of Education presented the survey work report during the February 2019 Panel.

Schools annual report

The Panel received its annual schools report looking at the performance of Merton's schools over the academic year September 2017 to August 2018. The proportion of schools judged to be good or better in Merton rose from 88% to 93% over the course of the academic year. This proportion is above the London and national averages. All of the Council's secondary schools continued to be judged to be good, with the proportion judged as outstanding rising to 63% (well above national and local averages). School attendance in Merton is also above the most recent national and London comparative data for secondary and special schools, and in line with these averages for primary schools.

Financial monitoring

Members used the two budget and business planning sessions this year to explore the large budget gap of savings still to find for 2020-21, the work done regarding saving costs on School Transport and the impact of Government grants ending in the coming years.

Call-in

No call-in requests were received by the Panel in 2018/19.

Healthier Communities and Older People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

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

Councillor Peter McCabe said “*There are many challenges across health services, particularly prevalent in adult social care due to our ageing population, funding pressures and rise in complex needs. Despite this, we as a Panel have found dedication and creativity amongst staff to provide high quality services to our most vulnerable residents.*”

Adult Social Care

The Panel received a comprehensive update of service provision within adult social care. The Panel were pleased that Merton has made a significant improvement in delayed discharges of care, moving from one of the worst outcomes in London to one of the best. To address the higher demand on services with less resources the team are focussed on helping people to remain independent in their own homes with re-ablement an increase in physiotherapy and a focus on prevention.

Homeshare Scheme Task Group

Last year the Panel conducted a task group review of the viability of a Home share scheme for Merton. Homeshare brokers a relationship between older people who have a spare room with a younger person who will give around ten hours of support with tasks around the home. The Panel were pleased that all the recommendations were accepted and will receive an update in the autumn of 2019.

Improving the Personal Independent Payment Process in Merton

The Panel maintains an on-going concern about Personal Independent Payment process regarding the on-going impact on Merton residents including:

- Overbooking at assessment centres
- Higher rate of appeals being overturned at tribunal by Merton residents
- There are no assessment Centres in Merton therefore people are required to travel out of the borough

The Panel have continued to seek changes with these issues and are calling for the Department for Work and Pensions to provide a ‘pop up’ assessment centre for Merton. The Panel worked alongside Merton Centre for Independent Living to conduct an audit of the Croydon and Wandsworth assessment centres and many of the recommendations are currently being implemented.

Changes to the access criteria for the community podiatry service

Merton Clinical Commissioning Group contacted the Panel about planned changes to the podiatry service. The proposed changes will limit access criteria to those with the highest need. The Panel sought re-assurance that all vulnerable residents would still receive support and made the following recommendations, all of which were accepted by Merton CCG:

- To translate information on this service into other languages
- To provide more information for people with low podiatry needs
- To promote the availability of training for carers organisations on basic foot management.

Adult immunisation programme

NHS England presented the Panel with the immunisation programme covering 2015-2018. The data highlighted that Merton along with most other London boroughs had lower uptake rates than the national average. Panel members put forward some suggestions on how services can be improved and highlighted that as the council is not responsible for promotion of immunisation, it is limited in what we can do to support this area within existing budgets. The Director of Public Health informed the Panel that they do their best to promote the importance of immunisations by using the material from national campaigns to highlight the issues locally.

Annual Public Health Report

The Panel received an update on tackling the health inequalities that exist between the East and West of the borough. The results painted a complex and somewhat unexpected picture. The data highlighted that the gap in life expectancy is closing for women but not for men. Also, self-reported wellbeing and mental health is worsening in more affluent areas. The Panel agreed that this is a significant long term piece of work and if interventions had not been put in place it is likely that the gap would be significantly worse.

Improving access to psychological therapies

Local news reports cited that NHS Merton was one of the 28 areas in the country were not meeting their targets for access to psychological therapies. The Panel invited NHS colleagues to attend and set out they are addressing this challenge.

The Director of Commissioning reported that the service has been re-commissioned with St George's University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust who are a larger and more experienced provider with the new service beginning on the 1st April 2019. The Panel were pleased to find that the funding been doubled for the service. Panel members highlighted the importance of reaching out to seldom heard communities such as those with long term conditions and carers.

Enabling Older People to live independently at home

The Panel heard about the measures put in place to support older people to remain in their own home. This work focussed on the importance of preventing ill health and early intervention. This approach is beneficial for service users as most people prefer the comfort of their own surroundings. This approach also provides cost savings to the council.

Merton Clinical Commissioning Group Primary Care Strategy

The Panel were asked, through the topic selection process, to look at strategies to improve access to GP Surgeries. They also had a wider look at primary care services. It was reported that this area had received significant increased funding by Merton Clinical Commissioning Group. This has led to an increase in morning and evening surgeries and more appointments available including weekends. Panel member raised a number of issues that need to be addressed including; ensuring older people are not disadvantaged by digital access, enabling doctors surgeries to collect fluid samples as people currently have to travel to different sites and continuing to tackle loneliness through the social prescribing process.

Supporting Frequent Attenders at Accident and Emergency Services

Frequent attenders are defined by primary care as those who attend A&E six times in 12 months. Many amongst this group will be vulnerable residents and the Panel were asked to look at the support provided to this group. There are a range of services in place to redirect people to appropriate provision such as mental health support and primary care. Panel highlighted the importance of making people aware of the correct service to approach in the time of an emergency or with a health issue including the 111 service.

Transitions from Children's to Adult Services for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disability – Task Group Review.

This year the Panel commissioned a task group to consider services for those who move from children adult provision. The task group decided to focus on special educational needs and disability. The task group spoke to a wide range of witnesses who highlighted that a good transition to adult life should focus on supporting greater independence and employment as a result the terms of reference were as follows:

- Review the transitions process and make recommendations for improvement.
- Review opportunities to increase volunteering and employment to reduce isolation amongst adults with SEND.
- Review support for those with substantial needs to ensure they are able to maintain independence and not revert to critical care in future.

The final report and recommendations will be presented to the Panel in June 2019.

Joint Scrutiny Committees

The Chair and vice-chair also participates in the South West London and Surrey Joint Health Scrutiny Committee looking at strategic issues affecting the South West London area.

The Chair is also sits on the Improving Healthcare Together 2020 Joint Health Scrutiny Committee with membership from Merton, Sutton and Surrey Councils. This body is reviewing the proposals for acute care re-configuration across the Epsom and St Helier Hospital sites. Merton continues to maintain support for the retention of a full range of services at St Helier Hospital.

Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Areas of responsibility: scrutiny of issues relating to housing, environmental sustainability, culture, enterprise and skills, libraries and transport.

Councillor Laxmi Attawar, Panel Chair: “2018/19 has been a busy year for Sustainable Communities Panel, that it has been necessary to include an additional meeting in our schedule. In my first year as chair of a relatively new panel I am pleased that we have overseen, scrutinised and reviewed the biggest change to the Borough’s waste collection scheme with the roll out and implementation of the wheelie bins. In the scrutiny process I have sought to encourage residents from across the Borough to participate to get views from a broad cross-section. In addition, a briefing was organised for all members on Housing and Homelessness which was successful and well attended.”

Anita Cacchioli, Interim Assistant Director Public Space “Participation in the scrutiny process has been valuable for the Public Space team, as well as its contractors. It has afforded the opportunity to share the service aims to increase recycling, save money through switching to residual waste collections every fortnight and make Merton’s streets cleaner by using wheeled bins to solve the issue of refuse not being contained; engage with councillors on the performance of the waste and street cleaning contract and grounds maintenance contract, to listen to concerns and to allow us or our contractors to explain the action being taken and demonstrate how this is beginning to improve the services; to consider the behaviour of residents and visitors to our borough in the context of littering and fly tipping and the work of the Environmental Enforcement team to bring about modified behaviour, prosecute or fine those caught negatively impacting on our environment; and finally the role public space protection orders and initiatives to implement new dog controls in the borough can play in bringing about improvement”.

Scrutiny reviews

Air Quality Task Group

The Sustainable Communities Panel conducted pre-decision scrutiny of the scope of review of parking levies which are a key way to influence decisions about vehicle purchases. The action plan to achieve the task group’s recommendations will continue to be reviewed every six months.

Crossover Task Group

The task group’s action plan was presented at the September 2018 Panel meeting with a recommendation of a limit of 2.5 annual permits to be issued per bay. Once this is reached no further crossovers should be allowed in that zonal area. A review to monitor the implementation of the recommendations is scheduled for June 2019.

Commercialisation Task Group

The Panel receives annual updates on the progress against the recommendations and performance reports following large scale events.

The Panel were assured that commercialisation and income generation remain a priority and that the Council are taking every opportunity to explore ideas and events through the Greenspaces team and pursue investment in the Morden area.

Housing Supply Task Group

The Panel has enjoyed regular updates on progress against the recommendations at six month intervals and received a summative and final report on this task group in March 2019. All recommendations were achieved. Housing Officers commented on how the Task Group recommendations helped to focus their minds and added value to their work.

Single Use Plastics Task Group

The Sustainable Communities Panel set up a task group to consider the council's role in reducing single use plastic. The task group decided to focus on reducing plastic in council buildings and met with the chief Executive of Plastic Free Pledge, Sustainable Merton as well as the public health and facilities management teams. A staff survey was commissioned and 171 responses were received. The findings were presented to the Panel in April 2019, who agreed the report should be sent to Cabinet for final agreement. If the recommendations are agreed by Cabinet, they will ask the relevant officers to take this work forward by producing a report/action plan.

Strategic issues and pre-decision scrutiny

The Panel has undertaken pre-decision scrutiny on a range of strategic issues and Council priorities. These include:

Highways and maintenance contract

Members' views on the scope for the re-procurement of the highways contract were sought in September 2018. A detailed specification and details of the full procurement process returned to scrutiny at its February meeting for pre-decision scrutiny (before this progressed to Cabinet for its decision).

Diesel levy implementation

The Council introduced the diesel levy surcharge in 2016. At the time of approval, Members requested the effect of the levy be reviewed after 2 years of its operation. The Panel received a report setting out the terms of reference for this review in February 2019.

This resulted in a reference to Cabinet recommending that they consider whether to extend/clarify the terms of reference for the diesel levy review and the review into emissions based charging to examine whether there is any evidence of the type of behavioural change that these schemes achieve.

Public health and air quality - a review of parking charges

At its meeting in January 2019 the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel received a report on a strategic approach to parking charges that was referred to the Panel by Cabinet at its meeting on 10 December 2018.

The Panel was asked to discuss and comment on the report and this resulted in a reference to Cabinet recommending that the results of the planned public consultation be shared with the Panel. This will happen at the Panel's meeting on 27 June 2019 prior to the report being received by Cabinet on 15 July.

The Panel also recommended they be given an opportunity in the next municipal year to carry out pre-decision scrutiny of the findings of the 6-12 month review that will be carried out after implementation of the new charges.

Performance monitoring

Performance monitoring data

The Panel has continued to review progress of both the Environment and Regeneration and the Community and Housing Departments key performance indicators. This item has been discussed on the majority of agendas. The lead member for performance monitoring this year was Councillor Nick McLean who held regular pre-meets with the relevant officers to allow further time to be given to the scrutiny of the data and for key points and clarifications to then be discussed at the meeting.

Waste, recycling and street cleaning featuring

Monitoring the performance of the waste, recycling and street cleaning contract has formed a key part of the Panel's work. This topic featured on four agendas in this municipal year. There has been increased input from residents and the involvement of Veolia representatives allowing the Panel to highlight key concerns and look at how these are being addressed.

Planning enforcement

Updates on the performance of planning enforcement were given and although there is still a backlog of cases, Panel members noted that the dip in performance was formally addressed and targets are now being accomplished. The team has been stabilized with permanent staff and greater efficiencies in I.T continue to be explored.

Town Centre regeneration

The Panel was pleased to receive a presentation highlighting all that has been achieved in delivering work to date on the programme of town centre regeneration in March 2019.

Financial monitoring

The Panel used the two sessions on budget and business planning to focus on new savings proposals, replacement savings and to question officers on the content of the service plans.

“The Panel noted that there was not a savings item in relation to Christmas parking. Subsequently a reference to Cabinet requested that once the Christmas parking analysis is concluded, the results be brought to the Sustainable Communities Overview & Scrutiny Panel for comment.”

Scrutiny of external bodies

The Panel was pleased that Merton’s largest social housing provider, Clarion Housing, returned this year to update the Panel and answer questions on the estates regeneration. Residents were invited to speak at the Panel and as happened previously, the opportunity was taken to seek questions from all councillors and not just Panel members. These were sent to Clarion in advance with its responses being circulated to members in advance of the meeting. Clarion have agreed to return again in the next municipal year.

We welcomed representatives from Veolia UK, who provide Merton’s waste, recycling and street cleaning services, at the June 2018 and February 2019 Panels. These panels were used as an opportunity to discuss performance issues, hear resident feedback and receive updates on the service.

The Panel also received a report focused on the performance of the *idverde* contract. Areas of underperformance were discussed and *idverde* were asked to take responsibility for the shortcomings within the service and make improvements. The *idverde* representative in attendance reported additional staff have been employed to support the contract.

Different approaches

During the municipal year the Panel has explored different approaches to support it in achieving effective scrutiny.

Keen to reach out and engage Merton residents in the scrutiny process, Panel members have continued to use social media (Twitter) to promote upcoming items at scrutiny and to encourage resident involvement and attendance.

Before February’s Panel meeting on the performance of Merton’s waste, recycling and street cleaning services provided by Veolia UK, the Panel members held a pre-meet beforehand to agree on a themed line of questioning. It was felt this systematic approach was successful and had more impact in terms of scrutiny of the service in question. There are some minor practical difficulties in getting panel members together before the meeting starts, given members are travelling directly from work but these are difficulties that can be overcome if members are keen to reproduce this approach for further meetings.

Call-in

The Panel had no call-ins during this municipal year.

Get involved

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

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

Suggesting an issue for scrutiny

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

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

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

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

Attending meetings

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

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

Providing information and views

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

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

Contact the Scrutiny Team

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

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

In writing:

Scrutiny Team
Democracy Services
Merton Civic Centre
London Road
Morden
Surrey SM4 5DX

By emailing:

scrutiny@merton.gov.uk

By phoning:

Julia Regan – Head of Democracy Services
020 8545 3864

Stella Akintan –Scrutiny Officer
020 8545 3390

Rosie McKeever – Scrutiny Officer
020 8545 4035

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