



Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2011/12

London Borough of Merton

Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2011/12

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Foreword

No two years in scrutiny have ever been the same during my time as Chair of the Commission, and we have to be ready to respond to changing demands. Given the ambitions of the budget proposals to go beyond setting a budget for 2012/13 to shaping the Medium Term Financial Strategy through to 2014/15, we decided to allocate more time to budget scrutiny in all three panels as well as the Commission than we had done the previous year.

That paid off, with all but two scrutiny recommendations against taking savings of £1.308m. for 2012/13 and £4.303m. cumulated over three years to 2014/15 accepted by the Cabinet. Members were especially concerned to maintain youth provision and advised against a £500,000 reduction in the commissioning budget for CSF.

Scrutiny paid off in other ways as well, with the recommendations from reviews undertaken by the panels bearing fruit in action plans agreed with partners. One example - an above-average incidence of winter deaths amongst older people in Merton stimulated an enquiry by the Healthier Communities panel, and led to joint initiatives between the council, the NHS and Merton Seniors Forum to advise older people on how to keep warm during cold spells, and alleviate fuel poverty.

So scrutiny continues to make a difference to the lives of our residents, but it has to do so on a smaller budget, and with fewer resources. The Corporate Capacity panel was merged into the Commission for 2011/12, with its functions being assumed by an informal member task group reporting to the Commission. The review at year end concluded that this had not been successful, and for 2012/13 a new task group will meet quarterly with officer support. This necessitates some re-allocation of resources; we have to recognise that officer time is finite, and set our priorities accordingly when planning scrutiny reviews.

We are fortunate in having an officer team which is dedicated to achieving outcomes for scrutiny that make a difference for Merton, and I would like to thank Julia Regan and her colleagues Stella Akintan and Hilary Gullen for their hard work and professionalism over the past year.

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: <http://www.merton.gov.uk/council/committee.htm> .

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

Highlights 2011/2012

It has been another busy year for scrutiny. Scrutiny councillors have carried out five in depth task group reviews, details of which can be found under the relevant Panel headings:

- post 16 career pathways (Children and Young People Panel)
- safeguarding older people (Healthier Communities Panel)
- trees (Sustainable Communities Panel)
- financial monitoring (Overview and Scrutiny Commission)
- merger of the Corporate Capacity Panel and the Overview and Scrutiny Commission (Overview and Scrutiny Commission)

Almost 300 members of the public have been involved, in a range of ways, with scrutiny this year – talking to councillors on visits; responding to surveys and sending in suggestions for scrutiny review topics; as well as attending meetings and sending in views to be conveyed at those meetings. Over 50 people attended the Children and Young People's Panel meeting about the proposed expansion of Dundonald Primary School, 24 people came to an event to discuss the findings of the trees task group. The two call-in meetings – on the 20 minute free parking period in Wimbledon and the Hartfield Road bus lane also attracted a number of contributions from local residents.

Monitoring the outcome of previous scrutiny reviews has demonstrated that scrutiny does bring about real change in policies and in service provision, for example:

- ❖ the special meeting on excess winter deaths has helped to raise the profile of the issue locally which led to the NHS 1) giving funding to local partners to run initiatives, 2) sending 'keep warm in winter' leaflets to local GP surgeries.
- ❖ the review last year of supported housing for people with mental health problems has led to a clear identification of people with mental health problems on the council's housing list so that appropriate accommodation may be offered. Contracts with other housing providers now require them to provide activities for residents with mental health problems and access to smoking cessation services.
- ❖ the review of late night drinking in 2010/11 has resulted in a Christmas campaign on sensible drinking, continuation of mystery shopping on under-age alcohol sales as well as closer working between the council, police and street pastors.
- ❖ the recommendations of the waste management task group are currently being implemented – including the use of a range of methods to encourage re-use and recycling as well as the roll out of a separate collection of food waste across the borough.

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

Financial monitoring

This task group investigated and advised on the format and content of the Council's financial monitoring reports. It endorsed the immediate priority to improve the accuracy of financial forecasting and identified some improvements that could be made during the current financial year. It also identified the components of a longer term vision for the Council's financial reports – to be up-to-date, accurate, clear, and with a standard monthly format containing comprehensive information about cash flow, assets and liabilities and the capital programme.

Merger of the Commission and Corporate Capacity

This task group reviewed the impact of the merger of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission and the Corporate Capacity Panel on the Council's ability to undertake effective scrutiny. It recommended that the Commission establish a task group to meet four times in 2012/13 to carry out scrutiny of the Council's financial monitoring information, thus freeing up the Commission's agenda for other items.

Civil unrest

The task group is in the process of examining reports of the recent civil unrest in Merton and the profiles of those arrested and charged , investigating how the Council works with disaffected youth and considering recommendations for change, based on analysis of lessons learned in Merton, London and nationally.

Balancing the night time economy

The Commission is pleased with progress made with the implementation of the recommendations made by this task group last year and is continuing to monitor this work.

Customer contact strategy

The Commission received a report describing how the task group's recommendations have been taken forward through an options appraisal which will be presented to Cabinet in June/July

Strategic issues and pre-decision scrutiny

At the start of the year the Commission received a presentation from the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive to set out the Council's priorities for Merton in 2011/2012, as well as information about the Council's transformation programme. The Borough Commander and the Cabinet Member for Community Safety, Engagement and Equalities outlined their four priorities for 2011/12 - alcohol, anti social behaviour, acquisitive crime and domestic violence.

The Commission has discussed and commented on a number of strategic issues including:

- an endorsement of the findings and recommendations of the review of volunteering
- the emerging findings from the voluntary sector review
- the Council's policy on fees and charging so that the Commission's views can be taken into account when the policy is next reviewed
- noise nuisance – resulting in agreement that further scrutiny is needed 1) to examine a business case for extending the out of hours service, 2) to examine the scope for a more rigorous approach to noise nuisance enforcement
- community engagement and community forums – this discussion resulted in a process being agreed whereby scrutiny panels are alerted to new e-petitions
- IT strategy update
- progress report on procurement
- progress report on the corporate equality scheme

Councillor Peter Southgate and Councillor Rod Scott had a number of meetings with officers to explore ways of involving residents in decisions about the allocation of Section 106 monies and the Community Infrastructure Levy. A subsequent report to the Commission recommended the establishment of a working group comprising the Chairs of the Community Forums or their nominees. The Commission endorsed this approach and recommended that an early priority for the working group should be to agree processes for taking forward greater resident involvement in the project selection process.

Finance and performance monitoring

The Commission has financial monitoring reports at each of its meetings. Its questions have focussed on the underspend in service expenditure, debt management and the re-profiling of the capital programme and the impact that this would have on the revenue budget.

The Commission has commented on the layout and content of draft service plans so that improvements could be made. Members asked questions about a wide range of performance information including figures on staff sickness, agency workers, payment of invoices and the collection of council tax.

Scrutiny of the budget

The Commission received a presentation on the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy 2012-16 (MTFS). This presentation set out the assumptions underlying the individual components of the MTFS and illustrated how changing these would impact on the budget gap for 2012/13 and successive years through to 2015/16.

Budget savings proposals have been examined in detail and recommendations made to Cabinet about which should be accepted, reviewed or rejected. Cabinet agreed with the majority of the recommendations made, including not taking savings relating to the welfare benefits service.

The Commission welcomed the allocation of Performance Reward Grant monies to Safer Merton and noted that this will effectively replace lost funding from the Mayor of London/Home Office.

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

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

Scrutiny reviews

A task group review of Post 16 Career Pathways was carried out this year that sought to investigate:

- The progress made at secondary schools with sixth form provision, particularly those that launched the arrangements in September 2010;
- The vocational opportunities available in the borough and the links that exist with local employers that could be built upon;
- The advice young people currently receive on post 16 career opportunities given the significant reduction in the Connexions service; and
- The implications for Merton arising from the raising of the participation age.

Strategic issues and pre-decision scrutiny

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

Pre decision scrutiny took place on a new strategy for the Youth Service and Brightwell and the provision of a Short Breaks Strategy.

A special meeting was held in September 2011 on the proposed expansion of Dundonald Primary School and the impact on Dundonald Recreation Ground. The Panel made a number of recommendations to Cabinet following the meeting; in particular, it recommended that the strongest possible form of protection be provided for the remainder of the recreation ground in order to keep it as a leisure facility for residents.

The Panel has received information throughout the year on a range of issues including the recruitment of foster carers, teenage pregnancy, primary school places and inspections.

Performance monitoring

The Panel receives a performance monitoring report at each of its meetings and has reviewed the performance indicators it wishes to receive, in particular in relation to safeguarding.

The Panel also receives an annual report to provide greater detail on performance measures relating to education, including test and examination results, school attendance and exclusions in the Celebrating Success – Standards and Achievement in Merton Schools report.

The Safeguarding in Children's Social Care report gave members the opportunity to consider and comment on the MSCB annual report and current issues relating to the Munro Report to inform future strategic developments in safeguarding.

Financial monitoring

The Panel scrutinised the proposed budget for 2012/13 in November and January. Several budget saving proposals were referred back to Cabinet for further consideration after panel members expressed concern about the decommissioning of the early intervention and prevention service and about elements of youth service provision.

Healthier Communities and Older People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

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

Scrutiny reviews

Safeguarding older people task group

This year, the Panel conducted a task group review on safeguarding older people from abuse, particularly within their own homes. Panel members spoke to a wide variety of witnesses including Age UK Merton, Compassion in Care and Action on Elder Abuse. They also met with providers of local domiciliary services and care homes. The Panel will agree the final report and recommendations in April. The impact of this review is already being felt prior to the recommendations being agreed by cabinet. The Panel Chair and Cabinet member met to discuss the report and in light of issues raised by the review and her own work in this area, the Cabinet member has resolved to hold a dignity in care conference in the near future.

Mental health and housing task group

Last year the Panel held a review on supported housing for people with mental health problems. The recommendations put forward a number of ways that supported housing could better support this client group. In March this year the Panel considered the progress with implementing the recommendations. Panel members found that new contracts with supported housing providers clearly incorporated many of the recommendations, but believe there is still some way to go with regards to ensuring clients had access to activities, were given stronger support to cook and eat healthy food, and are actively dissuaded from smoking in shared accommodation, as well as simply having access to smoking cessation services.

Better services better value – South West London Joint Overview and Scrutiny Review

Last year the Chair and Vice Chair of this Panel were appointed to a Joint Southwest London Overview and Scrutiny Committee to review consultation processes and key outcomes from a wide scale review of healthcare services across southwest London, known as the Better Services, Better Value Review. It was already clear that the review would result in some significant changes to where services are provided.

The joint committee has already made recommendations to NHS officers which have influenced the timing of the consultation process and are expected to impact on the consultation process going forward. Several individual panel members have also been consulted at group events throughout the process.

Strategic issues and Pre-decision scrutiny

Excess winter deaths

In August last year the English Public Health Observatory data for Merton highlighted that excess winter deaths were above the national average. This was of great concern to the Panel and they resolved to see what could be done to address it.

The Interim Director for Public Health at NHS Southwest London was invited to the Panel in September. It emerged that this issue needed to be tackled through a partnership approach and a further meeting was held with local partners including AGE UK Merton, Merton Seniors Forum and environmental health officers in the council to discuss this. Following the discussions at the meeting the Panel made the following recommendations to Cabinet:

- NHS, council and partners to work together to develop a winter plan.
- That a printed leaflet and online materials be produced to suggest ways vulnerable people can alleviate fuel poverty.
- That the NHS and the council identify vulnerable people and are given more advice on keeping warm during cold spells.
- That energy saving schemes are also spread to the south of the borough. That the Council considers supporting the Greater London Forum Campaign to end Fuel Poverty

All the recommendations were accepted by Cabinet. A progress report and discussions with energy companies will take place at the April meeting, The Panel also helped to raise the profile of this issue locally, as this led to joint initiatives between the NHS and Merton Seniors Forum and NHS representatives attending the local Health and Warmth Partnership.

Preparing for the new landscape in health services

The Panel are rising to the challenge in preparing for the new health bodies that will come on stream with the implementation of the Health and Social Care Act. The Chair of the Panel has sat on the shadow Health and Well-being Board and has established an important link between the work of the Board and scrutiny. Members of the Panel also attend the Board to observe.

The Panel also received reports on the transition from Link to Healthwatch, Local Authorities Public Health Role and the Merton Clinical Commissioning Group. The Panel had a session looking at this issue with an advisor from the Centre for Public Scrutiny.

Joint Health Scrutiny

Changes to Neurorehabilitation Services in South West London

The Chair of the Panel was approached by the Chief Executive of St Georges NHS Trust regarding proposals to reconfigure the Neurorehabilitation services at the Wolfson hospital. Merton was asked to lead given that the Wolfson site is in our borough. Scrutiny Chairs from across South West London attended the Panel meeting in November to discuss the proposals. A further discussion was held at the end of January to consider how the Trust had responded to the consultation proposals.

Other work

Training sessions with the Centre for Public Scrutiny

Between December 2011 and January 2012 the Panel were awarded three free sessions with an expert advisor from the Centre for Public Scrutiny. Funding for these sessions came from the Department for Work and Pensions to support scrutiny committees in addressing the support needed for older people in an ageing population or the 'healthy ageing' agenda. This Panel was able to demonstrate this as a priority throughout its work streams including work on excess winter deaths and the safeguarding older people task group.

The panel chose to use these sessions to look at its work from the last two years and consider how its approach could be refreshed or improved. The final session looked at the main provisions in the Health and Social Care Bill and the implications for health scrutiny in Merton.

Key outcomes from the session were that:

- The panel were attracted to the idea of developing gold standard recommendations which include very specific information such as timescales and cost of implementation
- Task group reviews can strengthen their recommendations by developing value for money arguments, i.e. putting forward figures that will say how much money can be saved by the council if a particular recommendation is implemented.

Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel

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

Scrutiny reviews

In 2011/12 the Panel undertook a Task Group review of Trees. The review helped task group members understand the process of how and where our trees are planted and maintained by the Council. The task group heard about some of the challenges involved in making sure they are protected and given the chance to grow to maturity. The task group was given a guided tour of Merton's most notable green spaces and trees. The report highlighted areas in which changes could be made and offered solutions to problems identified.

The key recommendations for change were:

- That a tree strategy be developed;
- That existing data collection and analysis be established and strengthened;
- That Planning and Enforcement procedures be clarified and more effectively enforced;
- That the local community are encouraged to become involved in caring for the Borough's trees;
- That accessible information is provided; and
- That Cabinet review how tree planting and maintenance is financed.

A public meeting was held on 28th February 2012 to raise awareness of tree management in the borough. The presentations given by Officers and a representative from the Tree Wardens were well received.

Cleaner Town Centres/Efficient Household Waste Management

The Panel continues to monitor progress on the recommendations made as a result of the Cleaner Town Centres and Efficient Household Waste Management reviews of 2010/2011.

Strategic issues and pre-decision scrutiny

The Panel has scrutinised a wide range of services and issues, including:

- Alleygating;
- Street lighting;
- Changes to the planning system;
- Budget saving proposals;
- Green waste service; and
- Environmental Permitting

The Panel was also particularly interested to hear about the preparations for the Olympics/Paralympics and Golden Jubilee celebrations and applauded officers for the hard work they had put in to ensure Merton is going to have a memorable year.

Performance monitoring

The Panel has regularly undertaken a performance monitoring role by reviewing performance results against key indicators and making recommendations to the appropriate service. Service Plans were also discussed at the meeting in April 2012.

Financial monitoring

The Panel scrutinised the budget saving proposals in two rounds, one in November and one in January, and following discussion, made comments and recommendations to Cabinet.

Call - ins

There have been two call-ins this year:

- The reduction of 20 minutes of free parking in Wimbledon Village; and
- Hartfield Road bus lane

The original decision in each case was upheld.

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
Chief Executive's Department
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

Rebecca Redman – 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>