

Get Involved in Merton

An Engagement Strategy for Merton Partnership

2014 - 2017

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Introduction

In 2010 Merton Partnership¹ set out a new strategy, called Get Involved, for working with Merton's communities to make the decisions that affect their lives. The strategy set out the commitment of Merton Partnership to high quality and co-ordinated engagement essential to improving the quality of life for everyone in Merton.

This strategy reviews the progress made since 2010 and reconfirms the partnership's commitment to the vision and values set out in the strategy. This is our way of making sure that there is a clear framework for Merton that shares power and connects decision makers with our communities.

The Merton Partnership

For the past 10 years all the organisations involved in the public life of Merton have come together to work in partnership to improve the lives of everyone in the borough. The Merton Partnership aims to achieve a vision of Merton as “a great place to live and call home, where citizens are also neighbours and take responsibility for improving their own lives and neighbourhoods”.

To help us meet this ambition we bring together organisations from the public, private, voluntary and faith sectors to harness our collective strengths and resources; we recognise that we achieve more by working together. The Merton Partnership includes the following members:

- Merton Council
- MP for Wimbledon
- MP for Mitcham and Morden
- Metropolitan Police
- Merton Chamber of Commerce
- Jobcentreplus
- Merton Voluntary Service Council
- Merton Clinical Commissioning Group
- St Georges Healthcare NHS Trust
- South West London and St Georges Mental Health Trust
- Merton Priory Homes
- South Thames College
- The Interfaith Forum
- Merton Unity Network
- London Fire Brigade
- Community Engagement Network representatives

¹ <http://www.mertonpartnership.org/>

What is community engagement?

There are a number of terms used that have different meanings to different people. Merton Partnership has agreed to the following definitions, which are used in this strategy:

Community Empowerment is what happens through engagement and other activities. Power, influence and responsibility are devolved into the hands of communities and individuals. They are able to take decisions about services that affect their lives.

For example Merton Voluntary Services Council is working in partnership with the Transforming Families Team at Merton Council and the residents of Phipps Bridge to identify local issues and develop solutions that will improve outcomes.

Community Engagement is the action that we take to consult, involve, listen and respond to communities through ongoing relationships and dialogue. Communities participate to develop solutions, shape and design policies and services. Engagement enables individuals and organisations to influence decisions as well as make decisions themselves. This also sometimes called **Community Involvement** or **Community Participation**.

For example Merton Clinical Commissioning Group has held two Engage Merton events to encourage local communities to help direct their commissioning plans and understand how services need to change to reflect local needs.

Consultation is the process by which we seek advice, information and opinions about policies and services, to inform our decision-making. This includes activities such as surveys, and public meetings. We make decisions influenced by the knowledge we have gathered through consultation.

For example each year Merton Council undertakes a survey of over 1000 local residents. The survey asks a range of questions about local priorities and services. The results are used to inform the council's business plan and many of the questions are used to measure the performance of Council services.

Information is an essential part of community engagement. As well as improving access to and use of services, we provide information to local communities about the options in relation to our services. This information encourages meaningful community engagement and consultation.

For example the Merton Police Borough Commander produces a weekly e-newsletter that highlights police activities, provides updates on major issues and advice on crime prevention.

Representatives are those able to speak on behalf of others as a result of a mandate that have been given. This mandate can be given directly by individuals through a formal route such as the election of councillors, Members of Parliament or London Assembly Members. It can also be given on behalf of a group of

organisations such as the representatives of the Involve network who are elected to the Merton Partnership.

The benefits of community engagement

Community engagement is the process by which individuals and groups are involved in decisions that affect the delivery of local services. Engagement is a broad term that covers a wide range of techniques for involving local communities.

Community engagement has been shown to benefit both service providers and communities. Some of the benefits are listed below.

Improves service delivery – involving individuals, and representative groups, in planning and delivering services means that those services are more likely to meet the needs of those intended to benefit.

Increased public satisfaction – services that reflect the needs of the local community are more likely to have a positive effect on people's lives. Communities will hold these services in higher regard and this will encourage take-up and continuing contribution from individuals.

Improved accountability – local decision makers should be held to account for their actions. Engagement enables communities to question and challenge those with power.

Stronger links between communities and decision makers – decision makers do not wish to be isolated from the communities they serve. A strong relationship built on trust and respect will lead to better decisions.

Sharing of power – engagement enables the agenda to be set by those with the best understanding of the needs of their communities, those who live and work there.

Stronger partnership working – local partners should work together to engage people, making it easier for communities to influence service across the wide range of organisations, in a simple and straightforward manner.

Improved quality of life for local people – the main point of all community engagement is improving the lives of local people. Engaging them in the decisions that affect their lives will result in better outcomes.

What do we mean by community?

Communities can form in a number of different ways. In general communities fall into three broad categories

Communities of place – people in a certain area such as Phipps Bridge or Wimbledon Village.

Communities of identity – people who identify that they belong to a certain group such as an age group, sexuality, ethnicity or religion.

Communities of interest – people who share an interest in an activity or service, such as parents of pupils at Rutlish School, or users of Mitcham Common.

Many people will consider themselves as part of a number of different communities and will change communities over time. Equally an individual may well want get involved without seeing themselves as part of a wider community.

The national policy framework

In recent years there has been a substantial change in the legislation affecting local partners and how they engage with local communities. These include:

- Health Act 2006
- Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007
- Sustainable Communities Act 2007
- Planning Act 2008
- Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009
- Localism Act 2011
- Best Value Statutory Guidance 2011
- Health and Social Care Act 2012

This body of legislation sets out a variety of responsibilities for local public bodies to engage with individuals and communities. These include a duty to consult and involve for all councils set out in the Best Value Statutory Guidance 2011 and a similar duty for health bodies set out in Section 242 of the Health Act 2006 and for police authorities and other partners in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009.

The national framework for engagement is still evolving and new responsibilities for organisations and the partnership are likely to feature prominently.

Case law has also confirmed the importance of undertaking appropriate consultation and engagement in taking decisions. The Gunning principles set out by Lord Justice Stephen Sedley in 1986 are still considered by the courts as crucial in deciding on the legality of decisions taken. The principles are that:

1. Consultations must take place when proposals are at a formative stage
2. Sufficient reasons must be given for proposals to permit intelligent consideration
3. Adequate time must be given for consideration and response
4. Consultations must be conscientiously taken into account

Why have an engagement strategy for Merton?

Merton Partnership is working to improve the quality of life for people in Merton by building strong, safe, active and sustainable communities. We are determined to bridge the gap between the east and the west of the borough. We will do this by bringing together organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors to

harness collective strengths and resources and we recognise that we achieve more by working together.

This strategy commits the Merton Partnership to working jointly to empower local communities and achieve improved outcomes. Many of the partner organisations in Merton have a long and successful record of engaging with local communities to improve their services. However as this activity has grown the need to co-ordinate both within and across organisations has also increased.

In this strategy the Merton Partnership sets out its vision for community engagement across the borough and the values that underpin our approach. This makes it clear to our communities the importance we place on involving them.

This strategy also sets out the framework for working together more effectively. The principles for undertaking engagement activities together will make it easier for people to get involved and reduce the cost of engagement.

The Merton Partnership wants to ensure that everyone in the borough can choose to get involved in the way that best suits their needs. Our strategy sets out how we will ensure the most vulnerable members of our community will be able to engage with local decision makers.

The strategy will also strengthen the role of local leadership. Councillors and other leaders will benefit from a coherent approach to engagement from across the partnership. Connecting councillors with the communities that they serve will enable them to represent their constituents more effectively and make decisions based on the best information available.

Voluntary, community and faith organisations play a crucial role in planning and delivering a wide range of services as well as advocating on behalf of our communities. The role of these groups in community engagement is equally crucial and at the centre of our strategy. Our focus is to make the most of the knowledge, and skills within these groups without placing excessive burdens on their precious resources.

How does the strategy fit in with other Merton Partnership documents?

The Community Plan² is a long term plan of action to improve the quality of life and services in Merton. The plan will guide how local organisations including Merton Council, local health services, police, and the voluntary and private sectors, work together to improve Merton. The 2013 Community Plan sets out the following ambition for Merton:

“We want all individuals, groups and organisations to actively contribute to their community, whatever time they have available. We have a mission to enthuse and enable people and organisations to get involved by ensuring there are accessible and effective opportunities.”

² <http://www.merton.gov.uk/communityplan>

Community Cohesion Charter³ and **Community Cohesion Strategy** were launched along with the Community Plan in June 2006. It outlines the Merton Partnership's commitment to promoting community cohesion across the borough and building good community relations to achieve a stronger, more resilient borough. The charter commits members of the partnership to working to make Merton a place where everyone can benefit from improved life opportunities and outcomes; where residents experience improved standards of living; and where learning, cultural and leisure opportunities are enjoyed by all in safe and accessible environments. The Community Cohesion Strategy was refreshed in 2012.

The Merton Partnership Equality and Diversity Policy⁴ demonstrates the Partnership's commitment to the principles of equal opportunities, diversity and social inclusion. All agencies belonging to the partnership will work to:

- Promote equal opportunities for all;
- Remove barriers to direct and indirect discrimination; and
- Promote good relations amongst and within different groups.

The aim of the policy is to provide a coherent and overarching framework that the Merton Partnership can use to ensure there is a co-ordinated and joined up approach to promoting equality and diversity issues across the Partnership. Community engagement and community empowerment are essential to achieving these goals.

The Merton Compact⁵ is a partnership agreement between local public bodies and the voluntary and community sector. The Compact sets out the principles and values of the partnership and aims to achieve a Compact way of working by helping us:

- Communicate better with each other;
- Understand and respect each other's views; and
- Work together more effectively to support the people of Merton.

The Compact includes a code of practice of consultation and policy appraisal and the principles highlighted have been adopted into this strategy.

Merton's **Participation Promise to Children and Young People⁶** was launched in 2009. The promise sets out a clear commitment from organisations providing services to involve children and young people in making the decisions that matter to them.

Developed with children and young people the promise covers listening, taking responsibility, making choices and decision and how money is spent. The aim of the promise is to support children and young people to tell us what you think of services they use and to get involved in making Merton a better place to live.

Individual organisations within Merton Partnership also have their own engagement, involvement or consultation strategies. Some of these, such as Merton Council's

³ <http://www.merton.gov.uk/community-living/equality-diversity/community-cohesion.htm>

⁴ <http://www.mertonpartnership.org/mp-home/mp-merton-partnership-documents/equalityanddiversitypolicy.htm>

⁵ <http://www.merton.gov.uk/compact>

⁶ http://www.merton.gov.uk/community/youngpeople/participation_promise.htm

Statement of Community Involvement⁷, are a statutory requirement and are externally validated. This strategy sets out the framework for the partnership and we expect all other organisational plans to reflect the requirements of this document.

⁷ <http://www.merton.gov.uk/living/planning/planningpolicy/ldf/sci.htm>

The Merton Context

The London Borough of Merton is an outer London borough, situated to the south west of the capital. It has borders with the London Boroughs of Wandsworth, Sutton, Kingston, Croydon and Lambeth.

The borough is suburban in nature, with a high number of residents commuting in and out of London to work. It is, on the whole, well connected, with two London Underground lines, Tramlink, over ground trains and numerous main roads. A defining characteristic of the borough is the difference between the poorer, more deprived east, and the wealthier, more prosperous west.

Population

According to the 2011 Census the number of people living in Merton was 199,693. This is an increase of over 6% since the last Census in 2001. The Office of National Statistics estimates the population has grown to 202,200 by June 2012. Looking ahead, the Greater London Authority predicts there will be 210,600 people living in the borough by 2021. Compared to the rest of London, Merton has a slightly higher proportion of children under five years old. In the last 10 years Trinity ward has seen a 45% increase in this age group. The population aged 85 and over accounts for 1.6% in Merton compared to 1.5% in London and is projected to rise by nearly 41% over the next 10 years.

Merton is a diverse borough. 35% of our residents come from a Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority background. A further 15% describe themselves as 'White other'. After English, the top three languages spoken from Primary School Census data in 2010 were Polish, Urdu and Tamil. After the UK, Merton residents' top three countries of birth are Poland, Sri Lanka, and South Africa.

According to the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) figures from 2010, Merton is the fourth least deprived borough in London. However there is a huge range in deprivation across the borough. For example whilst overall, life expectancy in Merton is higher than the London and England average, there is a difference in life expectancy between the most and least deprived areas in the borough of about 9 years for men and 13 years for women. Three of Merton's wards are in the top 15 least deprived wards in London: Village, West Barnes, and Dundonald. The three most deprived wards in Merton are Cricket Green, Figges Marsh and Pollards Hill.

What do people think?

As part of Merton Council's Annual Residents' Survey respondents are asked whether they agree that the Council involves residents in decision making. The percentage agreeing with this statement has gradually increased from 33% in 2000 to 52% in 2013. Over the same time period the percentage agreeing that the council listens to residents concerns increased from 36% to 60% and the percentage agreeing that the council keeps residents informed increased from 52% to 76%.

What are we already doing?

There are already lots of ways for Merton residents to get involved in deciding local services are delivered. We are keen to make the best use of these options and will only develop new activities where there are gaps to be filled. The examples below outline just a few of the engagement activities being delivered in Merton.

Healthwatch Merton⁸ has been set up to enable local people to improve health and social care services in the borough. It does this by asking people about their experience of health and social care services and taking up suggestions on how those services can be improved.

INVOLVE⁹ (Community Engagement Network) is a voluntary and community sector network that aims to ensure groups are kept abreast of new developments that are likely to affect them. INVOLVE also provides an information exchange and acts as a consultation body for the public sector. It elects sector representatives to sit on a range of planning and policy groups including Merton Partnership and its associated Thematic Groups.

Community Forums¹⁰ are a way for individuals and groups to be heard and challenge local public services. They help people who live, work and learn in Merton make sure that the Council and other agencies in the borough know about their concerns and aspirations for their community. The five Community Forums meet up to four times a year and members of the public can share their views on any issues.

Annual Residents' Survey¹¹ is an independent survey of residents in the borough. Over a thousand local adults are interviewed, face-to-face, by researchers, about their personal concerns, attitudes to the council and local services. Researchers go to people's homes and public places to ensure that the opinions of a broad mix of residents are collected. In addition between 200 and 300 young people between the ages of 11 and 17 are also asked for their views.

Joint Consultative Committee with Ethnic Minority Organisations (JCC)¹² is one of a number of forums for specific communities within Merton. The JCC is made up of 17 Community Organisations and 5 Merton Councillors. Its role is to advise and make recommendations upon strategic policy issues including issues of local concern to the ethnic minority communities, and the promotion of equal opportunities and good relations between different groups

Each year the **Safer Merton Strategic Assessment**¹³ takes place to identify local priorities for dealing with crime and anti-social behaviour. The responses from individuals and organisations are analysed along side crime data to ensure that the Safer Merton partnership addresses the concerns of local communities.

⁸ <http://www.healthwatchmerton.co.uk/>

⁹ <http://www.mertonconnected.com/involve>

¹⁰ <http://www.merton.gov.uk/communityforums>

¹¹ <http://www.merton.gov.uk/council/performance/residentssurvey.htm>

¹² <http://www.merton.gov.uk/community-living/equality-diversity/jcc.htm>

¹³ <http://www.merton.gov.uk/community/communitysafety/safermertonnewsandevents/safermertonconsultation>

Our online **Consultation Database**¹⁴ was launched in July 2012 and acts as a hub for consultations taking place in Merton. Residents can search current consultations to find out how to get involved, search previous activities and register for automated alerts to notify them of new consultations. The database is also able to host online surveys and discussion boards.

There is a strong commitment from partners to promote the engagement of children and young people in providing feedback, shaping decisions affecting them and informing local democratic processes. A range of engagement mechanisms backs the '**Participation Promise**'. Most of our schools have active school councils; a borough wide **Children's Council** and **Youth Parliament**¹⁵ are in place; we have participation groups for young people looked after and those with disabilities.

Our youth services have engaged young people strongly in shaping services and in making decisions on allocating funding, in particular engaging with **Young Advisors** who are in place to provide youth consultation on specific programmes of work undertaken by the Council (for example, on regeneration programmes) or for them to develop and carry out their own research and local campaigns.

¹⁴ www.merton.gov.uk/consultations

¹⁵ <http://www.merton.gov.uk/community/youngpeople/youthparliament.htm>

Our Vision and Values

We believe that everyone who lives, works, studies or visits Merton has a stake in the decisions that affect their lives. Our vision is that those affected are informed about these decisions, able to influence these decisions and wherever possible are empowered to take decisions themselves or in collaboration with others.

In order to achieve this vision for community engagement we have set out the key values that Merton Partnership will follow.

A single open door

It should not matter which organisation someone is engaged with, their valuable contribution should reach the relevant decision maker in a timely and appropriate manner. People should feel as though whichever door they have entered they are able to reach across the local partnership.

We understand the frustration of communities when they hear “that’s not our responsibility” or “we can’t do anything about that”. What everyone deserves to hear is that we will make every effort to ensure what they are saying reaches those who need to hear their voice.

One of the benefits of working in partnership to solve local problems is that we can take action together in a coordinated fashion. By linking our attempts to engage with local communities, we can ensure that we can overcome the complex decision making structures that often exist in large organisations.

In many areas of public services, local providers are greatly restrained by decisions taken at a national or regional level. In these circumstances we are often left as frustrated as local communities in attempting to make the changes we need to. As a result, it is critical that service providers are clear about what change can be affected locally and what cannot.

Trust

At the heart of any community engagement must be trust between the decision makers and the communities they serve. Openness and honesty are the building blocks to build this trust. Decision makers must be open about the options that are available and honest about the implications of the decisions. This enables communities to understand what they can influence and how it will affect them.

People are quite rightly suspicious of any consultation or engagement activity where it seems decisions have already been taken. Simply seeking approval for a decision can build cynicism and discourage involvement.

Equally, people have a right to understand how their involvement has effected the decisions that have been taken. They should be confident that their voice has been heard and that the decision being taken has been informed by the views of those affected by it.

Accountability

Those with power should be accountable to the communities they serve. This accountability can be formal through elections and other representative systems or it can be informal through participation.

Community engagement plays a critical role in supporting accountability and no form of engagement will be effective without ensuring decision makers are accountable.

Shared ownership

We recognise that ownership of public services rests with the people we serve. This means whenever possible it should be those people that decide how local services are delivered.

In order to achieve this, communities need to be well informed about the services provided on their behalf, and be clear about how they can get involved in making decisions. Communities working together are often in the best position to understand local problems and how to solve them.

The role of local leadership

Community Engagement is not an attempt by local leaders to abdicate their responsibility. The aim of community engagement in Merton is to ensure that councillors and other leaders make better decisions as a result of the dialogue they have with local communities and individuals.

Decisions affecting local services and communities are rarely straightforward and often involve balancing competing interests and demands. Equally, technical issues may need to be addressed by those with a particular expertise. In order to effectively make these decisions, local leaders need to have a mandate. This can be gained from the democratic process or established over time through a commitment to working with local communities.

We also understand that not everyone wishes to be involved in decisions that affect their community and many are happy for others to exercise power on their behalf. This relationship will only function successfully where trust has been established and accountability is clear.

The role of the voluntary, community and faith sector

We know that the voluntary, community and faith sector is an important element of a strong society. It has a clear role in providing services as well as helping to shape policy and contributing to the development of stronger communities. Merton already has a strong and vibrant voluntary, community and faith sector that has a good relationship with its strategic partners supported by a nationally acclaimed Compact.

Voluntary, community and faith sector organisations within Merton have a unique insight into service needs resulting from direct contact with end users and a detailed

understanding of local concerns. To capture this insight such organisations will be actively involved in determining and shaping service priorities to ensure the best outcomes for residents.

The way in which we engage voluntary, community and faith sector organisations will depend on the role the organisations are playing. As stakeholders in local public services, or as advocates for their own services users, organisations can offer a great deal of useful insight and can make a powerful contribution. In other circumstances organisations may have a mandate to represent a particular community or sector. For example INVOLVE elects representatives to participate in the Merton Partnership. These representatives have a mandate from the INVOLVE membership and have mechanisms to consult with that membership.

We also understand that voluntary, community and faith sector organisations are often placed under great pressure to meet local needs and their resources can be severely stretched. We therefore need to be sensitive to the needs of these organisations, encouraging them to engage in local decision making in ways that do not add to their burden. Therefore engaging the voluntary, community and faith sector should reflect the code of conduct set out in the Merton Compact.

Engaging vulnerable communities

People may be vulnerable because of their dependence on services, because they are at risk of harm or because they are marginalized or discriminated against in society. Some groups can be at very high risk, such as people who need, or are leaving, care services, people with learning disabilities or people receiving mental health services.

Understanding the needs and aspirations of our communities includes those whose circumstances make them vulnerable and those who are hardest to reach or hear. These individuals may have a greater need for public services than the population as a whole.

We need to be effective at giving a voice to people who are vulnerable or at greater risk of disadvantage and inequality. This means we need to ensure the way in which we engage our communities is accessible and that often we will need to be more creative in the ways we engage vulnerable communities. In many cases developing trust through long-term dialogue is a critical factor in successful engagement.

The Principles of Engagement

The members of Merton Partnership have agreed that the following principles will be reflected in all forms of community engagement we undertake.

We will be clear about our purpose

- There will be a clear reason for any engagement activity
- We will present information in a clear and understandable way
- We will be clear about what influence people can have and what choices can be made
- The limits of any influence will also be set out and explained
- We will be clear about the time scale for activities and make sure enough time is allowed to meet the purpose
- We will make sure what we do is relevant to those involved

We will be open and transparent

- We will ask people to be engaged in a decision at the earliest opportunity, and always before a decision is taken
- We will make sure people can make an informed choice about when, how and if they want to engage with us
- We will use a range of activities to encourage different people to get involved
- We will be creative and use best practice to engage those traditionally excluded from decision making
- We will ensure our activities are inclusive for example by making sure activities are accessible to those with disabilities

We will work together

- We will avoid duplication by delivering joint activities
- We will make the most of existing groups and networks
- We will share the information we get with each other
- We will not ask questions that we already know the answer to

We will provide feedback

- We will report what happened as a result of the engagement as soon as possible, both what was said and what we did with the information
- We will ask participants to evaluate what we do
- We will thank those who take the time to get involved

Our Actions

This section sets out the actions that the Merton Partnership will take over the next three years to achieve our vision for community engagement across the borough. This includes how we will strengthen our partnership, and how we will improve the way in which we work together.

Merton Partnership will review these actions every year. We will assess the progress made and report this.

Action	Target Date	Key Partners
Refresh map of engagement mechanisms across the partnership	April 2015	Merton Council, all partners
To add on-going engagement mechanisms to our database of consultations	September 2015	Merton Council
Develop a strategy to improve engagement skills within Merton	April 2016	Merton Council

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