



IDVERDE ANNUAL REVIEW 2020
A report from Independent Merton Green Spaces Forum to Merton Council
March 2020

1. Independent Merton Greenspaces Forum was established in 2016 in response to the outsourcing of green space maintenance by Merton Council to idverde. We provide a network and collective voice for Friends and like-minded community groups for parks and green spaces across Merton. We have also supported the creation of new Friends groups.
2. We work hard to manage good relationships with idverde and we convene meetings with them for Friends and like-minded groups several times a year. These are well attended and very constructive. We have collaborated with idverde to develop and use an assessment form monitoring the quality of delivery in parks and green spaces which local groups complete and return. This has been further refined during the last year and has attracted interest from other London boroughs. The results from these assessments and the feedback provided at meetings and elsewhere have informed this report.
3. Our relationship with Merton Council has been harder to develop. We prepared our first Annual Review of idverde's performance in March 2019. This followed the written and verbal evidence we provided to the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel. It brought together the views of the volunteers who do so much to care for and celebrate Merton's green spaces. We received a response after nine months from Merton's Greenspaces Manager and welcome acknowledgement that in preparing our Annual Review 2019 we had *"taken some considerable time and effort to provide us with your comments and impressions and we sincerely thank you for that undertaking."* We also welcome recognition of the important volunteer role played by Friends and like-minded groups in the statement that *"we greatly appreciate the many and diverse contributions of the community and our friends groups in protecting, managing, raising funds for and developing the much-loved and most valuable parks and open spaces of the borough"*. Nevertheless, as this Annual Report 2020 shows we are less certain that many of the issues raised *"have been successfully addressed or improved during the period."* We have also had no response to our subsequent request for a meeting with the lead officer responsible for the idverde contract despite reminders. This report concludes there has been no overall improvement in management or delivery of the contract.

4. We are now three years into the idverde contract and have prepared this second Annual Review to inform Merton Council's own annual review of contract performance. Many of the issues we raised in our 2019 review continue to be an issue and it is clear that the contract needs both much more active management and enforcement. It is also incumbent on elected members to be more hands on in their oversight and scrutiny function.

5. Judging by Merton Council's own Performance Quality Management Score (PQMS) idverde is falling short on delivering on the contract. In the seven reports to the Sustainable Community Overview and Scrutiny Panel between January 2019 and January 2020 it exceeded the monthly target on only one occasion and the cumulative annual performance target on two occasions:

Parks Quality Management Score

Jan 2018/19 – Red 4.88/5, Jan 19 – Green 5/5
 Feb 2018/19 – Red 4.94/5, Feb 19 – Green 5/5
 May 2019/20 – Red 4.91/5, May 19 – Red 4.93/5
 July 2019/20 – Green 5.08/5, July 2019, Green 5.28/5
 Sep 2019/20 – Green 5.08/5, Sep 19 Red 4.89/5
 Dec 2019/20 – Red 4.98/5, Dec 19 Red 4.99/5
 Jan 2019/20 – No score, Jan 20 Red 4.98/5

6. A Freedom of Information request has secured a more detailed breakdown of performance against the target score of 5. It shows that performance has failed to meet target for two thirds (66%) of the contract and it has been exceeded for only one tenth of the contract (11%):

	2017	2018	2019
January	4.9	5.0	4.9
February	4.9	4.9	5.0
March	4.7	5.0	n/a
April	4.6	4.8	5.2
May	4.9	4.7	4.9
June	4.6	4.7	5.2
July	4.8	4.8	4.6
August	4.8	4.9	5.2
September	4.8	4.8	4.9
October	5.0	4.9	5.0
November	5.8	5.0	4.4
December	4.9	5.0	5.0

7. This report is informed by individual feedback and meetings we have convened of Friends and like-minded groups as well as the greenspace assessment forms (template below) they have returned to report on delivery of the contract in their local green spaces. A revised assessment form was prepared during the year in collaboration with idverde. The results of the returns are troubling with only three returns reaching an acceptable or better standard overall. There is a consistent failure to reach acceptable standards in maintaining locally important aspects identified by groups for each green space:

	MANDATORY	SUPPLEMENTARY
Durnsford Road Recreation Ground	Excellent	Excellent
Holland Garden	Good	Unacceptable
Haydons Road Recreation Ground	Acceptable	Acceptable
Figges Marsh	Unacceptable	Acceptable
Edenvale Playspace	Good	Unacceptable
Three Kings Piece	Acceptable	Unacceptable
Lower Green West	Good	Unacceptable
The Canons	Good	Unacceptable
Cranmer Green	Acceptable	Unacceptable
Mitcham Cricket Green	Acceptable	Good
Figges Marsh (second report)	Acceptable	Unacceptable

Getting the basics right

8. Our central concern continues to be that Europe's largest grounds maintenance firm is falling short on the basics of the contract. As a result Merton Council's promise that maintenance standards would not fall due to contracting out is being broken for a large number of parks and green spaces. We believe the root causes of the problems being experienced are that idverde has too few staff and too many have too little horticultural and grounds maintenance training. There is also a lack of knowledge of the different parks and green spaces and an absence of management plans and a wider strategy for their future. The idverde contract also needs more senior management oversight at idverde and more assertive management and scrutiny by Merton Council's officers and members.

9. The main shortcomings are (with examples):

- A continuing lack of basic horticultural and grounds maintenance skills - such as using a hedge trimmer to prune a rose garden, poor quality hedge trimming without removing invasive species, poor quality hedge maintenance creating numerous gaps through which children and dogs are wandering and failure to replant the gaps with shrubs appropriate to the location, failure to maintain grass edges along shared use tracks, rotting fences and dangerously exposed fallen railing, allowing shrubs to grow up and block sight lines encouraging antisocial behaviour, clearance of leaf litter by blowers which in certain (formal) locations can be inappropriate as it leads to rotting of grass, and pruning shrubs at the wrong time of year, including just before flowering (Holland Garden, Mitcham Parish Church, Lower Green West, Figges Marsh)
- Declining quality of sports facilities – including lack of efficient land drainage, use of inappropriate machinery in wet conditions and damage to cricket ground outfield and rutted football pitches (Morden Park, Edenvale Playspace, Sir Joseph Hood MPF)
- Playgrounds out of use – including poor maintenance and repair, missing equipment, shabby cordoning off of playgrounds with broken tape, broken latches and a failure to maintain swing gates that allows playgrounds to become dog toilets (Haydons Road Recreation Ground, Edenvale Playspace)

- Paddling pools and Water Play Areas – although only in use for c6 weeks during the school summer holidays, at least one was out of use during summer months without communication or explanation (Wimbledon Park)
- Green waste – left piled up for a majority of the year and the tractor needed to transport it (The Paddock, Cannizaro Park)
- Inappropriate use of motorised vehicles – leaving green spaces unnecessarily scarred, muddy and permanently rutted (Cottenham Park, Morden Park, Wimbledon Park, Durnsford Recreation Ground, The Canons)
- Inadequate and slow responses to issues raised directly with idverde’s team (Holland Park)
- Lack of a council budget for and commitment to planting, watering & maintenance of new trees in parks – this is needed in response to the declared climate emergency and to ensure sustainability of the tree stock. It is left to Friends groups and individuals to fund, plant and maintain new stock without support from idverde and Merton Council avoids responsibility for funding, planting or maintaining new planting (Borough-wide)
- Inappropriate mowing round trees in parks and street verges – this causes countless examples of bark damage which could be prevented by improved grass maintenance. Damaged trees never fulfil their potential so the increase in cost would be balanced by the development of a better more resilient tree stock. (Wimbledon Park, Durnsford Recreation Ground, street trees throughout the Borough)
- Poor project management and delivery – a combination of unclear responsibilities between idverde and Merton Council, poor communication and uncertain approaches to planning and building regulations resulting in delay and mismanagement in delivery of projects funded through Community Infrastructure Levy, Mayor of London and other sources (Gap Road Pocket Park, £32k Haydons Road Rec project)
- Commercialisation – including the impact of major income generating events on local amenity and access to and the long term quality of important parks and green spaces (Morden Park); the development of poorly considered and executed income generating proposals (Wimbledon Park’s undelivered adventure golf); long term conversion of large (up to one hectare) areas of green space to mud and bare earth (Wimbledon Park Big Top); long term areas of bare earth used as a site for circus tent (Figges Marsh) and lost income from permitting the use of public green space by private enterprises without charge (Cricket Green and Date Valley School). This is an area with an unclear breakdown of responsibility between idverde and Merton Council and a lack of transparency over future commercialisation plans. We note there is a new target to generate £531,230 in 2019/20. There is a need to ensure Merton Council’s Greenspaces team is consulted on proposals with long term management implications and there is more clarity over idverde’s role in ensuring reinstatement. Commercial

activities need to fit appropriately into the park or green space and we would welcome input into a pipeline of future commercial prospects to reduce future problems.

- Contract management – a contract of this scale and importance needs senior leadership and the level of senior oversight at idverde has fallen with the Merton Council relationship lacking a Contract Director, putting more pressure on other operational staff.

10. We have seen fewer issues this year in grass mowing and managing litter although these are not without issue. We await with interest the results of further studies of the impact of removing bins on litter levels.

Active management

11. Three years in it is clear that the contract needs much more active management, including a stronger role for Merton Council, more effective member oversight and scrutiny, more direct engagement of local community groups and a step change in transparency in reporting and data.

12. The main areas to be strengthened are:

- Transparency – data on idverde’s performance is rarely published and not in an accessible form leaving it to Freedom of Information requests and Council Questions to elicit basic information. An “idverde performance dashboard” should be published weekly by Merton Council similar to that made available in relation to the Veolia contract. This should be aggregated into monthly and annual reports published ahead of the annual performance review which should invite feedback from Friends and like-minded groups. A Freedom of Information request has also shown that both the 2017/18 and 2018/19 annual reports required to be provided by idverde are “*unfinished documents*”.
- Reporting – the online reporting system remains entirely unfit for purpose and does not address the large majority of issues relating to green space management and maintenance. Support for a well-designed online reporting tool (with telephone option) should be integral to the contract.
- Assertive contract management – we ask Merton Council to be much more active in managing performance and enforcing delivery of the contract. The monitoring which has been published shows idverde’s performance has fallen short during most of the contract so far and, in the most recent information available, Merton Council has only docked idverde £38,000 since the contract began and there have been no deductions at all in 2018/19 or 2019/20 despite performance below standard. A Freedom of Information request shows that “*there have been no formal contract amendments to date*” despite all the lessons to have been learned from the first three years of operation.
- Oversight and Scrutiny – The idverde contract has not been subject to review by the Sustainable Community Oversight and Scrutiny Panel since November 2018. A contract of this scale and importance should be publicly scrutinised at least

twice yearly. It also requires a different approach to the overview and scrutiny provided by councillors who understandably often lack the skills and training required for this role. A programme of skills development addressing the important scrutiny role in relation to major contracts should be introduced akin to that provided for councillors who serve on the Planning Applications Committee.

- Lack of a Green Spaces Strategy– In the absence of any overall strategy or vision for Merton’s parks and green spaces the contract lacks context. An improved green spaces strategy for Merton is timely and should be developed. It is a clear and necessary requirement for any effective response to the declaration of a climate emergency during the year in July 2019. It would also inform the review of the Local Plan and the strengthened approach to increasing canopy cover, expanding green spaces and securing net gain in wildlife in the new London Plan. Friends and like-minded groups would welcome the opportunity to contribute to its development. The Strategy should include:
 - guidance on the best locations for future tree planting and measures to increase the canopy, including the (meagre) 235 street trees proposed annually
 - strategic investment in the infrastructure and management systems needed to support effective watering across the borough, including the availability of taps and bowsers that can be deployed in different locations by local volunteers
 - existing and potential future investment sources (such as community infrastructure levy) and focus as much on revenue funding for maintenance as capital investment in new planting
 - extension of the idverde contract to include planting, watering & maintenance of new trees in parks in collaboration with Friends and like-minded groups
 - improved arrangements for project management and delivery, including of projects funded by the community infrastructure levy
 - addressing the inherent unsustainability of facilities such as green waste services being used to dump waste and popular paddling pool facilities for reasons of need for daily attendance, daily filling & emptying, waste of water and the permanent need to repair failing construction
- Site information – Friends and like-minded groups still regularly report idverde staff lack even basic knowledge of their parks and green spaces, such as when gates open, who holds keys and where wildflowers should be left undisturbed. Each site should be supported by a summary of “key information” to which Friends and like-minded groups would be willing to contribute. We have identified with idverde that this might be piloted at John Innes Park, Ravensbury Park, The Canons & Cricket Green, Holland Gardens and Haydons Road Recreation Ground but no progress has been made.
- Management plans – The large majority of parks and green spaces lack management plans and those that do exist are significantly out of date and/or over-elaborate (for Green Flag Award purposes). A programme of management plan preparation should be instigated across the Borough in collaboration with

Friends and like-minded groups to provide proportionate guidance on future objectives and approaches.

- Addressing poor management – Through wider use of more skilled staff, more staff developing long term relationships with individual green spaces, and measures to avoid damage by motorised vehicles by using only narrow wheel based light weight and ideally electric vehicles; instructing staff to collect bins only on foot; removing the majority of bins from parks and more timely repairs to pavings, edgings & grass.
- Baseline condition survey – The lack of any baseline assessment of the condition of Merton’s parks and green spaces or transferred equipment ahead of the contract remains a serious oversight which makes it hard to manage performance or assess delivery on Merton Council’s promise that maintenance standards would not decline. We are aware of major gaps and errors in the information provided by Merton Council at the start of the contract and in the information being used to inform the evidence base for the Local Plan. A baseline condition survey supplemented by up to date and accurate information on each site remains a priority. We would support a pilot approach with a sample of parks and green spaces with different characteristics drawn from across the Borough. For each location a baseline condition survey should be undertaken and the maintenance standard monitored and managed to ensure no deterioration. This would enable the contract to be managed through the lens of different locations as well as through the monitoring of different assets and maintenance operations.
- Accelerated decision making – The slow speed of decision making on issues such as whether idverde or Merton Council is responsible for the replacement or repair of assets (e.g. playground equipment, benches) is having a significant impact on the green space and park standards with assets left in poor repair for prolonged periods and Friends and like-minded groups left frustrated by the lack of action.
- Deployment of community payback schemes – the use of Community Rehabilitation Company labour to manage and maintain parks and green spaces can be transformational and we believe a more strategic approach should be taken and Friends and like-minded groups encouraged to apply for this service.

13. We ask for a response to the issues raised in this report from both Merton Council and idverde and details of any changes to the contract or its management which result from Merton Council’s review. We also ask that it is used to inform further overview and scrutiny of the idverde contract by councillors.

YEAR-ROUND SCORING MATRIX for LB MERTON PARKS



Park/Green Space/Site name	Survey date
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Section A: MANDATORY <u>All four</u> items to be scored	SCORES
3 Litter bins empty or partially filled 2 Bins full 1 Bins overflowing	x 8 =
3 No appreciable evidence of litter on the ground 2 Perception of litter on the ground at some locations 1 Significant litter on the ground at several locations	x 8 =
3 Grass appears regularly cut ie between 25mm and say 60mm 2 Grass appears reasonable – but maybe marginally outside of these 1 Irregular grass cutting in excess of say 75mm or significantly less than 25mm	x 8 =
3 Site feels safe, welcoming, well cared for and thriving 2 Site generally feels safe and welcoming but may have limited graffiti, vandalism and/or damaged infrastructure (ie paths, seats, bins signage or railings etc) 1 Site has significant or long-term graffiti and/or significant damage to infrastructure (ie paths, seats, bins, signage, railings)	x 8 =
SCORING PROCEDURE (Please score Sections A & B separately) Above 83 = Excellent / 66 –83 = Good 49 – 65 = Acceptable / Below 49 is unacceptable. Note: multipliers are set to achieve a percentage score for each section. Please do NOT add the two section scores together	TOTAL Section A only
This assessment form has been developed in association with Independent Merton Green Spaces Forum	

Section B: SUPPLEMENTARY <u>Any two</u> of the items to be scored <i>A Score of 2 may be given as a mid-point if so desired</i>	SCORES
3 Sports pitches, safe, completely free of litter and grass at playable height 1 Sports pitches with significant litter or grass not cut correctly	x 16 =
3 Shrubs or hedges trimmed and generally weed free- not overhanging walkways 1 Shrubs or hedges with excessive weeds and overhanging walkways	x 16 =
3 Floral bedding/herbaceous borders, dead-headed, edged and generally weed free (except May or September) 1 Floral bedding/herbaceous borders smothered by weeds (except May or September)	x 16 =
3 Playground/gym equipment is working, well signed and free from litter or glass 1 Playground/gym has damaged or missing equipment and may have graffiti or litter present	x 16 =
Other – Please Score 3, 2 or 1 and give brief description	x 16 =
Please email completed form to slwpenquiries.merton@idverde.co.uk Please also copy to imgsforum@gmail.com	TOTAL Section B only