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Engaging Merton
Executive Summary

October 2021





Engaging residents in a place-based vision for Merton

To support its recovery plans Merton Council wants to develop a place-based vision with residents, businesses and local stakeholders. This vision will establish a shared purpose that will assist the council in meeting the key challenges around Covid-19 response and recovery, and the financial challenges currently facing the council.

To shape this long term vision, **Merton Council wanted to understand the views, experiences and ambitions of local people** - that includes residents, and also those who work and study in the borough.

Merton commissioned Traverse to deliver four separate engagement activities to ensure a broad mix of the community were involved in different ways:

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- A **representative survey of the borough gathered the views of 1,000 residents** to provide quantifiable trends in priorities and experiences.



- An **open access Commonplace platform (<https://engagingmerton.Commonplace.is/>) provided a space for around 500 engaged residents** to provide stories of their experiences and aspirations for the Borough.



- **Thirteen Focus groups with local community groups ensured we heard from seldom heard voices** and understood their particular experiences.
- A **two stage deliberative workshop with 25 residents** from across the borough enabled us to explore themes from the survey and Commonplace in more depth.





Headline findings

Themes across all four engagement activities





Common assets, frustrations and ambitions

Through the survey, Commonplace and focus groups shared assets, frustrations and ambitions were identified. These were then deliberated in detail in the workshops.

Assets

Green
space

community

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Residents were most positive about the green space and sense of community in their local area. Maintaining and improving these assets were central to their ambitions for the future.

Frustrations

Traffic

Litter and
cleanliness

Residents were frustrated by traffic and litter. Addressing these frustrations was central to their ambitions for the future.

Ambitions

High street
regeneration

Maximising
green space

Regenerating high streets and making best use of green space underpinned residents ambitions. Possible visions for these spaces were deliberated in the workshops.





Green space and sense of community were key assets to strengthen

Green space and a supportive, vibrant sense of community were the things that residents most liked about their local area. Residents grew to appreciate these more during the pandemic, and wanted the vision for the borough to be built upon them.

- **Green space** and parks in Merton were important spaces that helped residents maintain their physical and mental wellbeing.
- They were also at the heart of **Merton's identity as a 'leafy' borough** – residents felt the parks marked Merton out as distinct to neighbouring boroughs.
- Residents reported an increased appreciation for their local parks during the pandemic. **Maintaining parks as clean, inclusive spaces was a priority for residents in the future.**
- **Community** was also important to residents but more difficult to define. In the survey residents reported an increased appreciation for their community during the pandemic. In Commonplace this was described at a **hyper local level** – the support offered through mutual aid groups and neighbours. It led residents to want the **vision to maintain and foster this sense of 'community spirit'**.
- Volunteering and community action was another theme. Community groups respondents highlighted the positive support they accessed during the pandemic from volunteers, and expressed a desire for increased community activities. This was also present on Commonplace and in the deliberative workshops where residents wanted **community action and ownership to be part of the future.**
- Finally, it was clear throughout the engagement that **'sense of community' was felt by residents in the built environment** – through accessible, vibrant high streets, clean parks and attractive housing developments.





Litter and traffic were key frustrations to be acknowledged and addressed

Litter and traffic congestion were the most common frustrations for residents. Anti-social behaviour was an additional issue in some parts of the borough. All these frustrations reduced the strength of Merton's assets – reducing the quality of green space and putting strain on a sense of community.

- **Litter** was a key concern for residents. It negatively impacted the way they felt about living in the borough – it made them **feel like fellow residents and the Council didn't take pride in the area**. They wanted a vision that addressed this problem.
- Many felt that **current Council services were not maintaining good quality public space**. Community groups highlighted that pavements and road provision did not support them to easily navigate local streets.
- For **East Merton and Mitcham residents anti-social behaviour and safety** were higher concerns in public space. They often cited public alcohol consumption as an issue.
- **Traffic congestion** was a frustration for pedestrians, cyclists and motorists. No one was happy with the status quo.
- The **reduction of traffic during the pandemic highlighted to many residents the benefit of less congestion** to their daily life – making their local area a more pleasant place to walk and cycle.
- **Car users expressed frustration with current initiatives to manage traffic flow** (such as low traffic neighbourhoods). The provision for residential and high street parking was also viewed negatively in the survey and Commonplace.
- Residents on Commonplace and in the deliberative workshops wanted a **vision that encouraged more active travel initiatives and a reduction in local traffic**. This involved cycle lane provision and the pedestrianisation of town centres.





Experiences of the pandemic

Residents highlighted the impact of isolating and social distancing on their wellbeing, which was particularly challenging for community groups. Health, education, finance and work were also concerns for some residents. Accessing support from the local community was the main positive aspect that residents wanted to build upon in recovery.

- **The negative impact of not seeing friends and family:** Across Commonplace and the survey the restrictions on seeing friends and family had the largest negative impact on residents alongside fear of catching the virus.
- **Increased isolation for community groups:** Focus groups with community groups highlighted the increased isolation experienced by these members of society. The lack of face to face community meetings combined with digital exclusion made the pandemic particularly isolating.
- **Education and work concerns:** The children and young person survey showed that education was a very significant concern for young people in the borough. For adults finance and job security was a concern for a some, but not a theme that emerged on Commonplace.
- **A 'community-led' recovery:** The increased appreciation of the local community during the pandemic, alongside the change in people's lifestyles to being more local contributed to residents desire to maintain 'community spirit' in the pandemic recovery.

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Shared ambition for a regenerated high street at the heart of the community

High street regeneration was a shared ambition for residents across the borough. When we spoke to residents in more depth to understand what regeneration meant to them, they emphasised a high street that delivered a community hub and a sense of pride.

- **Revitalised high street:** Across Commonplace and the survey residents were negative about their local high street's shopping provision, and saw high street regeneration as a key priority for the future.
- **A community hub high street:** In the deliberation, residents explored what type of high street they wanted in the future. Residents across the borough prioritised high streets that provided space for residents to socialise and connect with each other.
- **Pride and identity:** Residents also spoke about the potential source of pride and identity that comes from a vibrant high street. In the deliberation, possible futures that did not support this were rejected. On Commonplace, frustrations with the high street often stemmed from a feeling that local high streets used to be places residents could take pride in.
- **Accessible and traffic free:** In the deliberation, residents preferred high street futures that prioritised pedestrian and cycle access over car access, provided this helped to establish a high street that was 'worth it' – i.e. an attractive community hub with a strong offer and its own identity.

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Shared ambition to maximise Merton's green assets

As Merton's perceived main asset, residents wanted well-maintained parks and green space to be central to the future vision. They wanted parks to support individual wellbeing, foster a sense of community, generate income and help tackle climate change.

- **Maintaining parks as safe and accessible:** Across all the engagement it was clear the green space and parks were sources of pride for all residents, and many expressed frustration that they were not always well maintained. Underpinning all ambitions for the future of parks was the importance of maintaining them as safe, clean and accessible shared space.
- **Shared spaces for community activity:** Parks were important for residents during the pandemic partly because they provided local space to connect with residents. In the deliberation residents wanted this trend continued in recovery – to maximise the community events when residents connect with each other.
- **Attracting visitors and generating income:** In the deliberation residents also thought parks could be used to generate more income for the borough.
- **Protecting the environment and tackling climate change:** Finally residents wanted their green spaces protected to provide access to nature. This was partly for individual wellbeing – to provide tranquil space to relax in the borough, and partly to support the Borough's commitment to tackling climate change.





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Concluding principles

Next steps towards a resident-led vision





Towards a place-based vision for Merton

Looking across the findings, we see an overarching ambition for a future Merton where people feel safe, included and connected. To achieve this, the Council's vision needs to:

- **Bring people together and build community:** Residents want to maintain a 'sense of community' that they have felt during the pandemic. Engaging, well-maintained high streets and parks will support this, providing places where they connect with each other.
- **Acknowledge the frustrations about public space:** Residents don't always enjoy being in public space and some community groups feel actively excluded. Residents need spaces that are clean, traffic-free, safe and welcoming.
- **Nurture character, identity and sense of ownership:** Residents want to feel proud of their local high streets and parks, and these are central to how they experience and feel about where they live. But protection, improvement and regeneration needs to happen in ways that involve local people and foster a sense of ownership.
- **Manage trade-offs in possible futures:** Residents acknowledge the tensions and challenges facing Merton in promoting active travel, economic growth, accessibility and tackling climate change. They need to be involved in how these trade-offs are managed so that difficult decisions have more credibility and are better understood.

Our engagement showed that residents were passionate about the potential of their local area and were keen to be involved in decisions around its strategic direction.



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