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ENGAGING MERTON

Key reflections

September 2021



Minute Item 3



Engaging residents in building a vision

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 Council commissioned Traverse to run their largest ever engagement exercise to understand three key things:

- **Experiences of living, working and studying in the borough:** Merton wanted to know how people felt about living and working in the borough – what they liked as well as what they found frustrating.
- **Experiences of the pandemic:** Merton wanted to understand how the pandemic had impacted different communities in Merton – what they found most challenging, as well as any aspects of life they wanted to maintain as the local area moved into recovery.
- **Priorities for the future:** Merton wanted to know what residents wanted the Council to prioritise in the recovery – what did they want their local area to look and feel like in the immediate and long-term future?





Engaging residents in building a vision

Traverse undertook **four separate engagement activities** to involve local people in different ways:

- A **representative survey** of the borough gathered the views of 1,000 residents reflective of the population.
- Around 500 residents contributed via an **open access engagement website**.

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- **Focus groups run through 13 local community organisations** enabled us to take discussions into different parts of the community, including amongst those more seldom heard (e.g. people from minority ethnic communities, disabled people, those less likely to engage online and others more likely to be disproportionately impacted by the pandemic).
- A two-stage **deliberative workshop with 25 residents** from across the borough, grouped by locality, enabled us to explore themes from the survey and engagement website in more depth.





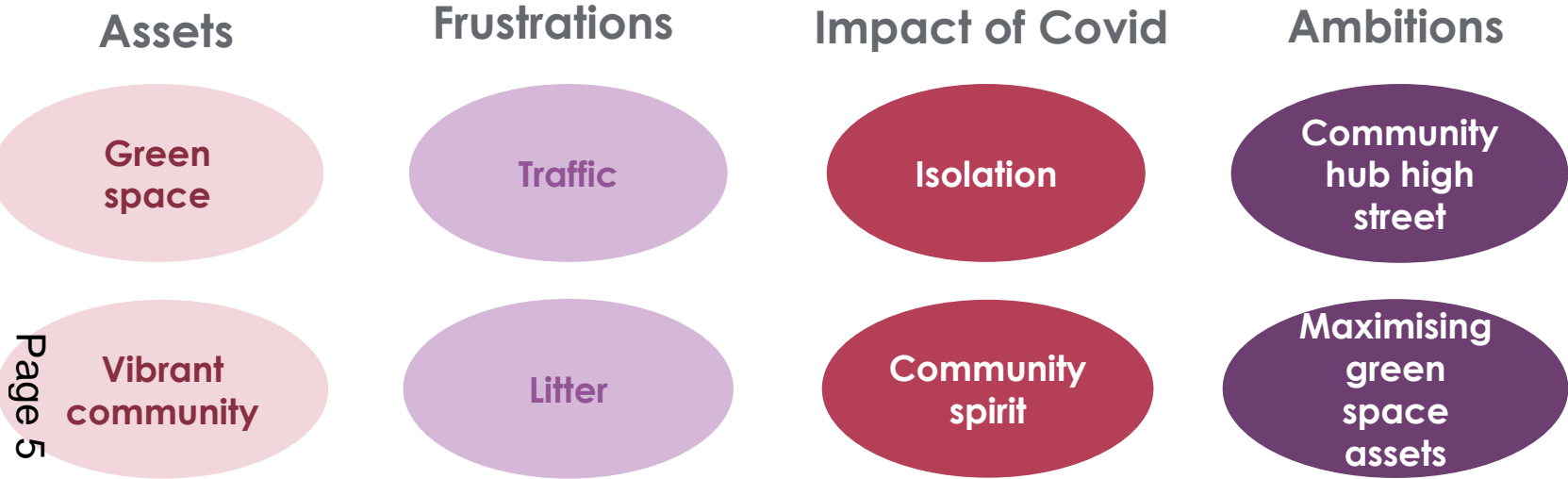
Merton Community groups	
Age UK Merton	Operating within the national Age UK network providing services for older adults in Merton.
Association for the Polish Family	Provides advice and support for Eastern European residents.
Avanti	Offers services for individuals and groups with mental health needs.
Commonside Community Development Trust	Runs a community centre, community events and a number of community development programmes.
Filmanthropy	Uses media to work with organisations, groups and individuals that make a positive social impact.
Inner Strength Network	Supports women and girls and their families to overcome difficult moments in their lives.
Mencap Merton	Provides support and services for children, young people and adults with a learning disability and/or autism.
Merton Centre for Independent Living	Deaf and Disabled people's organisation working to address the marginalisation of Deaf and Disabled people.
Merton Vision	Provides services to visually impaired children and adults.
Off the Record	Provide counselling and support services to young people.
South London Tamil Welfare Group	Supports the Tamil community and other ethnic communities.
South Mitcham Community Centre	Organises community events and groups.
WIFFA – West Indies Friends and Family Association	Support and social organisation for the Caribbean community.

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Common themes around assets, frustrations, experiences and ambitions



These themes stand out from across the different strands of the research and engagement activity

- People were **most positive and proud about Merton's green spaces and vibrant community**. They were continually frustrated by traffic and litter.
- Covid brought challenges of isolation, but also an **appreciation of community spirit** that residents wanted to maintain.
- This led to shared ambitions of a **regenerated high street that acts as a distinctive place and community hub** and an ambition to **make the most of Merton's varied green spaces**.





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. Communities of interest 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**. Communities of interest highlighted that pavements and road provision did not support them to easily navigate local streets.
- For **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 communities of interest. 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 communities of interest:** Focus groups with communities of interest 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.





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 workshops, 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.





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.



What we already know – a snapshot

- **Disproportionate financial and health impacts of the pandemic**
 - Higher rate of COVID-19 deaths in the East (131.1 per 100,000), than those in the West (120.7 per 100,000) over 2020
 - Claimant rate as a proportion of the working age population is currently 5.8% - over double the pre-pandemic level with significant ward level differences
- **Pressures on low income households**
 - 317% increase in emergency food provision during the pandemic - mostly provided to households in the East of the borough
 - Low levels of affordable housing in the borough – high housing costs, overcrowding
- **Impact on local businesses and our high streets**
 - £55m in financial support paid to businesses through rates relief and grants.
 - Merton had highest level of Self Employment Support among neighbouring boroughs
 - Street inspections show doubled vacancy rate – highest in Mitcham ,Raynes Park and Wimbledon

Facing the challenges ahead in recovery

- Increasing living costs – food, energy, fuel...
- Impact on local businesses and economy still to be fully seen
- Risk of deepening health inequalities
- Impact on children's education, wellbeing and development

....but there are also opportunities ahead

Emerging priorities from Your Merton

1. Maintaining excellent **education and skills** for all ages and needs
2. Promote a dynamic, connected, and inclusive **community and economy** with safe, vibrant high streets and jobs for our residents
3. **Support and care for residents in need** and promote the safety and wellbeing of all our communities
4. Ensure a **clean and environmentally sustainable borough**, with inclusive outdoor spaces, that is home to a variety of natural life
5. Work to make Merton a **fairer, more equal borough** and support those on lower income by tackling poverty and fighting for affordable quality housing

Any questions