



Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2013/14

London Borough of Merton

Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2013/14

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Foreword

Although this is the foreword to the annual report for 2013/14, the temptation to look back and consider how overview and scrutiny has fared during the life of this council is almost irresistible at this stage in the electoral cycle. I see no reason to resist.

I believe that scrutiny has come of age in Merton, and achieved a level of self confidence that was lacking four years ago. Then, we were absorbing reductions in officer support that led to the painful but inevitable conclusion that the number of panels (excluding the Commission) would have to be reduced from four to three. It took a while to find a format to replace the Corporate Capacity Panel, but we now have it in the Financial Management Task Group which functions as a sub committee reporting to the Commission. The FMTG is strictly for those who like delving into the numbers, but its devotees have been rewarded with insightful reports into the potential impact of reductions in council tax benefit, and the operating economics of Merton's commercial waste service.

The report includes a number of examples where scrutiny has made a difference to the decisions taken by council, but if I had to pick one it would be the impact on the budget, and scrutiny's recommendations not to proceed with savings that could have affected service delivery. It is a mark of the mature relationship between scrutiny and the executive that nearly all of our recommendations were accepted by Cabinet.

Much of the credit for scrutiny's confident performance belongs to the stability of the team, both chairs and officers. I would like to thank Cllrs Jeff Hanna, Russell Makin and Logie Lohendran for chairing their panels with professionalism and impartiality. But we all depend on officer support to make things happen, and we are indebted to Julia Regan, Stella Akintan, Rebecca Redman and Richard Greig for their enthusiasm and unfailing commitment to scrutiny.

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.

Scrutiny achievements 2010-2014

Councillors involved in scrutiny have indicated that they have found this to be a rewarding and influential role, as highlighted from feedback from our last survey of scrutiny councillors, co-opted members and Cabinet members:

“Task group work continues to be one of the most rewarding aspects of scrutiny for those who take part.”

“Overall find overview and scrutiny very intensive and effective.”

“Cabinet usually takes on board the comments/communique issued during scrutiny meetings.”

Scrutiny has led to real changes in policies, service provision and council budgets over the last four years. Some of the highlights are set out below:

Scrutiny impact on the Council Budget

Scrutiny councillors have had a significant impact on budget decisions taken by Cabinet. In many cases, following intervention by scrutiny, the proposed budget savings have been overturned or additional money made available to reduce the impact of the saving. For example:

- In 2013 when a significant number of savings were proposed across council services Cabinet agreed with the majority of the recommendations made by scrutiny panels, including not taking savings relating to the Attic Theatre or the council's enforcement team and to defer savings on parks and greenspaces until a review of these services has been carried out.
- Again in 2013, Cabinet responded to a request by scrutiny to reconsider their plans to withdraw Freedom passes from people with mental health problems, by finding temporary funding to support this group
- In 2014 Cabinet agreed to withdraw savings relating to the council's enforcement and building and development control services. It also agreed to defer savings on green spaces and staffing reductions in the Children Schools and Families' Division until detail information can be provided.

New money allocated for noise nuisance pilot

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission has made two referrals to Cabinet, resulting in the allocation of £12,000 for a pilot of an increased out of hours service to assess the actual level of demand.

Tackling climate change and alleviating fuel poverty

The task group review of Climate Change and the Green Deal resulted in the development of a proposal for a Merton Energy Services Company (ESCO). The ESCO will generate benefits in terms of the type and scale of energy efficiency initiatives that the council could deliver, as well as opportunities for improvements to

council estates, local businesses and residents, in particular seeking to support residents at risk of fuel poverty.

The Cabinet Member for Environmental Sustainability and Regeneration and the Director for Environment and Regeneration enthusiastically welcomed the work of the task group which also involved the contribution of co-opted members with expertise in this area, (from a local Charity, Sustainable Merton). Acknowledging that the proposal and associated recommendations could offer opportunities for innovative energy solutions in Merton, the Cabinet Member also asked that full Council agree the proposal to ensure cross party consensus on such an important issue.

Scrutiny intervention halts closure of a residential mental health facility

Earlier this year the Chair of the Healthier Communities and Older People Panel was informed a decision had been made to close Norfolk Lodge, a residential facility for people with mental health problems. Merton Clinical Commissioning Group (MCCG) were invited to scrutiny to discuss this decision. Following intervention by scrutiny, the MCCG decided to halt the closure plans and conduct a comprehensive review of mental health services across the borough. The results of the review are due in April and will be reported to scrutiny in the new municipal year.

Scrutiny Panel lobbies local MP's

The Children and Young People Panel discussed the implications of the national Children and Families Bill going through Parliament and were concerned that the Act may lead to additional financial burden on local authorities, who are already working to reduce budgets in the most efficient way possible. Therefore they requested that the Children Schools and Families Department contact the local MP's on behalf of the Panel to lobby on consideration of the financial implications of the Bill for Local Authorities and the need for Government to properly resource any statutory provisions within the Bill once it is passed.

Improvements to local services

Over the last four years our task group reviews have also had a significant impact on council services:

The review of trees in 2011/12 has led to greater community involvement in caring for the borough's trees through increased support to the tree wardens and friends groups. It also resulted in the Council making a commitment to woodland creation and improvement of the "urban forest" through an annual tree planting programme in open spaces and on streets.

The review supported housing for people with mental health problems in 2010/11 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.

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

Volunteering

The task group made a number of recommendations aimed at supporting and celebrating the valuable roles that volunteers undertake in the community and to help communities and the Council to achieve maximum benefit from this work. It also recommended that the Overview and Scrutiny Commission should promote volunteering and encourage innovation by receiving an annual progress update.

The Commission received a detailed implementation plan in September 2013 and a further update in April 2014, including information on the volunteering strategy and associated action taken by the Council's corporate management team. The Commission was pleased with the progress made.

Civil unrest

The Commission has continued to monitor and is now satisfied that all recommendations have been implemented. It was pleased to hear that the Mayor's Office of Policing and Crime had allocated £23,000 to commission a service for offenders aged 19-25 to help prevent re-offending.

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 2013/2014.

Later on, it received a detailed report on population shifts projected to 2017 with associated policy development and financial information. This has subsequently been used as a context for scrutinising the Council's budget. It will also be used to identify priorities for inclusion in the 2014/15 scrutiny work programme.

The Commission has examined a number of strategic issues including:

- noise nuisance – it has made two referrals to Cabinet, resulting in the allocation of £12,000 for a pilot of an increased out of hours service to assess the actual level of demand. Cabinet also agreed to the Commission's recommendation that there be further analysis of the pattern of calls

- customer contact strategy – the Commission has continued its scrutiny of this strategy and stressed the need for prompt action on this project so that customers be able to access services in the most efficient way
- single fraud investigation service – the Commission commented on forthcoming changes and referred concerns to the Cabinet Member for Finance so that these could be taken into account

Policing in Merton

The Borough Commander has attended three times to answer questions about crime and policing in Merton. The Commission thanked him and his officers for excellent work in continuing to keep crime rates low. It has examined detailed information on officer numbers and performance so that the impact of the move to the Local Policing Model could be assessed.

Call-in

In May 2013, the Commission referred a decision on the sale of land on Wimbledon Broadway (P4) back to Cabinet for further consideration. Cabinet was asked to consider the potential the site to contribute to the emerging "creative quarter" in this part of the Broadway; and to be mindful of the provisions of the Localism Act allowing the community right to bid for public assets. After receiving further information, Cabinet decided to uphold its initial decision to proceed to sell.

Finance and performance monitoring

The Commission established a sub-group to examine financial monitoring reports on a quarterly basis. The work of the sub group has resulted in various changes to the layout and content of the reports. The capital programme has been examined in detail and its large size compared to spend in previous years was noted.

The sub-group has also discussed a range of options for the local council tax benefit scheme and recognised that any decision on these would be a political one and therefore a matter for Cabinet rather than scrutiny.

An independent review of the commercial waste service was examined and the sub-group discussed development plans with the service managers.

Scrutiny of the budget

The draft business plan and proposed budget savings proposals were scrutinized in detail and recommendations made to Cabinet. At the Commission's request, draft service plans were made available to provide a context for the savings proposals.

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 school leadership succession planning was carried out this year that sought to determine how succession planning was undertaken by schools and supported by the council, and how the next generation of leaders could be identified, and talent nurtured, to address the future shortage of head teachers due to the anticipated retirement of current head teachers in the next few years.

Recruitment and retention and the role of governors was considered, as well as BME leadership and succession planning, to seek to address the under representation of BME and female leaders in headships and ensure that teachers could be recruited from within and outside of Merton schools and given opportunities to develop leadership capabilities to progress into headship.

A range of stakeholders were engaged in the review ranging from head teachers, governors and consultants and representatives from the Merton Education Partnership, the National College for Teaching and Leadership and the Institute of Education. The task group made a number of recommendations upon conclusion of their review which sought to address the following:

- Tackling the underrepresentation of female and BME leaders;
- Ensuring sufficient mechanisms are in place to identify and nurture talent;
- Increasing the number of professional development and leadership capacity building opportunities for teachers in Merton schools; and
- Supporting governors more in their role in succession planning

The task group will report its findings and recommendations to Cabinet in June 2014.

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 and priorities for the year ahead.

The Panel also received a report at each meeting on the developments in the Children, Schools and Families department covering national and local developments that fell within the remit of the Panel, which enabled Members to maintain a strategic overview.

The Panel has considered a number of strategic issues including:

Children and Families Bill – The Panel discussed the implications of the national Children and Families Bill going through Parliament and requested that a letter be sent to the local MP's from the Panel to lobby on consideration of the financial implications of the Bill for Local Authorities and the need for Government to properly resource any statutory provisions within the Bill once it is passed.

Children's Health Services - The Panel considered the councils priorities for delivering public health outcomes in relation to health services for children. Panel also commented on the opportunities for partnership working in this area.

Free School Meals – Members made recommendations on how to address the shortfall in pupils who were entitled to free school meals not applying for this benefit, which had a knock on effect on the council's pupil premium funding that forms part of schools budgets.

School Places Strategy – Members considered the councils strategy for addressing the anticipated demand for school places in Merton. This item was linked to the work that the task group had undertaken during its task group review of the provision of secondary school places.

Performance monitoring

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

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 and standards in the Celebrating Success – Standards and Achievement in Merton Schools report.

Members also received progress updates on the following:

- Home Office Peer Review Programme on Gang Culture;
- Transforming Families initiative in Merton;
- Permanency and Adoption;
- Safeguarding;
- Looked After Children;
- Early Intervention and Prevention services; and
- Early Years and Children's Centres

Outcomes of previous task group reviews were also considered to ensure that agreed timescales for implementation of the Panel's recommendations were met, and that anticipated benefits and outcomes had been realised:

- Alternative Education; and
- Post 16 Career Pathways

Financial monitoring

The Panel scrutinised the proposed budget for 2014/15 in November and January. Several budget saving proposals were referred back to Cabinet for further consideration after panel members expressed concern about efficiencies being made within early years and school improvement.

The Panel also undertook budget monitoring at appropriate intervals throughout the year.

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 promoting good health and healthy lifestyles, mental health issues, and reducing health inequalities for people of all ages.

Introduction

Health Scrutiny has been a point of stability during a time of change within the health landscape. New organisations have emerged such as the clinical commissioning groups, Health and Wellbeing Boards and Healthwatch, while the Primary Care Trusts and local Links ceased to operate. The council was also given responsibility for public health. As the new structure embeds, we have been able to provide the consistent scrutiny and accountability based on local knowledge and expertise. The recent changes means that the scope and breadth of scrutiny work has increased.

Scrutiny reviews

Safeguarding older people task group

The panel maintained oversight of the recommendations from the safeguarding older people task group. This review looked at safeguarding older people in their own homes as this was the area with the highest level of abuse.. The Panel were pleased to see that many of the recommendations were implemented including training for unpaid carers, improved identification of those living with dementia, leaflet for self funders; self funders can get a free Criminal Records Bureau check.

Physical Activity for the 55 plus age group

This year the Panel decided to conduct a review on sport and fitness for residents who are fifty five plus. It was agreed to look at this area because only 7% of this age group participates in enough sport and physical activity to benefit their health. The panel is keen to focus on the prevention agenda in its reviews and this continues with that theme, as improving health for this group can help to stem the rise in a number of diseases that can be attributed to an inactive lifestyle. The Panel spoke to a number of witnesses including Chief Executive of Age UK, Merton and PRO-Active South London. A number of barriers to participation included the cost of services and finding out where events are being held. Recommendations included Using Sport England's market segmentation tool to identify where to place services. The report was agreed by the Panel and will be forwarded to Cabinet.

Strategic Issues

Local Health organisations protocol

With health scrutiny, Healthwatch and the Health and Wellbeing Board covering a range of health issues across the borough, it is important to avoid duplication and overlap between the three bodies. Therefore a joint protocol was developed setting out how the organisations could work together, share information and use resources effectively, whilst maintaining their distinct roles. The Protocol has got off to a good start with the Chair of the Health and Wellbeing Board providing regular updates at scrutiny meetings and officers meeting to discuss the work programme.

Joint Strategic Needs Assessment

Every year the Health and Wellbeing Board leads on refreshing the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, which sets out the health and wellbeing needs and inequalities of the local population. The panel looked at this document in the draft stage and will scrutinise different elements of JSNA as a regular part of the work programme.

Sutton hospital

The panel were approached by Sutton Hospital and asked to endorse their proposals to consolidate services from three sites into one. While this would involve some considerable changes Panel members felt that overall it would improve services for residents, therefore they supported the plan. The panel will be receiving an update report when the work has progressed.

Long term conditions

The Panel had a comprehensive discussion about the services for people living with long term conditions such as diabetes, respiratory and circulatory diseases. The Panel asked about a number of issues including varying quality between GP Practices, how to improve detection rates of long term conditions and take up of NHS health checks.

Extension of alcohol pathways to increase prevention

The Director of Public Health and Head of Safer Merton attended the Panel to discuss the projects in place to reduce the harmful impact of alcohol. The panel asked for more information about policies to reprimand those who sell alcohol to those who are underage, training for front line staff and other council officers and the fire service about talking to people about alcohol and smoking cessation services. The Panel will receive a detailed action plan on alcohol prevention programmes in the next municipal year.

St Georges Healthcare NHS Trust

The Chief Nurse and Director of Corporate Affairs, from St Georges attended the Panel to provide an update of the work of the Trust. The Panel were informed that significant improvements had been made since their last Care Quality Commission inspection. The panel also asked about feeding policies for vulnerable patients, and plans to tackle the variation in quality of care between wards.

Immunisations

The Panel considered NHS England's local immunisation programme as they assumed responsibility for this area of work from the local authority in April 2013. The

Panel received data on Child Immunisations and Diabetic eye Screening. Members of the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel were invited to join the discussion on child immunisations. Panel members asked to receive information which relates to Merton only, rather than Sutton and Merton. The Panel also agreed to include cancer screening in their future work programme.

Public Health Team

The Director of Public Health attended the panel for a number of report items during the year. The Panel also received an update on the work of the team over the last twelve months. The panel have on-going concerns about health inequalities in Merton and were pleased that the Public Health Team has this as a key focus for their work. The Panel were also informed that Public Health will be supporting GP's to improve their take up of NHS Health checks by providing them with administrative software.

Review of Health Services in South West London

Dr Howard Freeman, Chair of Merton Clinical Commissioning Group attended the panel to discuss the next steps for health services in South West London following the end of the Better Services Better Value Review. Dr Freeman informed the panel that there would be another review as the issues with the current configuration of health care services still remain. The Panel raised a number of questions and concerns including what had happened to the funds from the Treasury to support to redevelopment of St Helier Hospital. (Dr Freeman stated that the hospital passed the first stage of the application process, but due to its financial position it did not make an application for the stage two and three.) Members were told that St Helier are preparing to apply for a loan of £78 million from the Treasury. The Panel were also informed that the six South West London Clinical Commissioning Groups (Merton, Sutton, Kingston, Croydon, Richmond and Wandsworth) are drawing up a five year strategy for health services, the broad priority areas will be published in June 2014 with further work taking place over the next year.

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

The Panel undertook a task group review of Climate Change and the Green Deal. The task group made recommendations on:

- Developing a business case for further rolling out solar PV to schools and other council sites, as well as establishing the opportunities for residents to access solar PV technology;
- Developing a business case for an ESCO (Energy Services Company) to deliver energy efficiency improvements internally and externally and generate income for future initiatives;
- Increased strategic working across council departments to roll out climate change initiatives that impact on several service areas and various customer groups;
- Marketing and engagement to raise awareness of climate change activities; and
- A local Green Deal for Merton

Adult skills and employability: The Panel endorsed its scrutiny report in this area and forwarded recommendations to Cabinet for consideration which addressed reducing unemployment, increasing inward investment and improving the adult education provision in the borough

Strategic issues and pre-decision scrutiny

Mitcham Town Centre regeneration scheme: The Panel heard the call in and considered residents concerns about the possibility of a new bus lane in the area and made recommendations to officers and Cabinet in response.

Regeneration of housing stock by Merton Priory Homes (MPH): The Panel heard the call in of the Merton Priory Homes housing modernisation proposals. The Panel discussed their concerns regarding the lack of sufficient consultation with residents and councillors. The Panels recommendations informed subsequent stages of consultation on proposals brought forward by MPH.

Street lighting: The Panel discussed an options report on the council's current contract and commented on considerations that needed to be made with regard to the new contract.

Parking on shopping parades: the Panel undertook pre-decision scrutiny of the department's findings and proposals on parking in neighbourhood shopping parades

and made recommendations for Cabinet consideration.

Cycle routes: the Panel provided comments on the next stages of the councils bid for the Mayor of London 'Mini Holland' fund which would allow the council to roll out a wider and more improved cycling provision in the borough.

Performance monitoring

The Panel has regularly undertaken a performance monitoring role by reviewing performance results against key performance indicators (KPIs) and making recommendations to the appropriate service.

Street cleaning: The Panel contributed to the Public Value Review (PVR) of street cleaning being undertaken by the department from the scoping stage and throughout, at the appropriate intervals, on findings and recommendations. The recommendations made included automated e-forms for online reporting of issues and an improved system of mobile response in the borough.

20 mph limits/zones: The Panel received an update about how 20mph road limits are reducing road casualties. In order to assess the effectiveness of the current schemes that have been implemented in Merton and if a borough wide 20 mph scheme should be implemented, the Panel made recommendations to Cabinet to request that further analysis be undertaken and proposals brought back for consideration, which should include benchmarking and good practice from other boroughs.

Trees: The panel received an update and progress report on the action plan resulting from their review on the council's approach to tree planting and maintenance. An outcome of which has been increased community engagement.

Financial monitoring

The Panel scrutinised the proposed budget for 2014/15 in November and January. Several budget saving proposals were referred back to Cabinet for further consideration after panel members expressed concern about efficiencies being made on parking permits, building and development control, waste disposal, leisure centres, libraries and housing needs.

Call In

The panel heard the call in of the following decisions that have been taken and made recommendations which were accepted by Cabinet:

- Merton Priory Homes Regeneration Proposals (9 October 2013)
- Mitcham Town Centre Regeneration Scheme (6 November 2013)

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
Corporate Services
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>