ENGAGING MERTON

TRAVERSE

Final report

October 2021

Contents

This report summarises the key themes from across four engagement activities designed and led by Traverse between April and July 2021. The aim was to understand experiences of people in Merton during the pandemic and their ambitions for the future.

The executive summary provides a thematic summary of findings from across all activities, whilst the main body of the report provides detailed insights stage by stage. The conclusion uses these findings to set out principles which we believe provide the foundations for a borough-side, resident-led vision.

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Executive summary

Themes across all engagement activity

Developing place-based vision for Merton

Merton, like all London boroughs, has been profoundly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Residents, communities and businesses have been impacted in different ways and are working together to recover. The pandemic has changed the way people work, study and live in Merton, so Merton Council's recovery plans need to reflect these changes.

Recovery plans for the borough need to develop a place-based vision with residents, businesses and local stakeholders. This vision will establish a shared purpose that will assist the council and other partners in meeting the key challenges around Covid-19 response and recovery, and the financial challenges currently facing the council.

This vision needs to align with the strategic direction outlined in Merton Council's other strategies and action plans, such as:

*   New Local Plan

*   New Climate Change Strategy 2020-25

*   New Communities Plan 2020-26

*   Health and Wellbeing Strategy

*   Equalities Strategy

*   Health and Wellbeing Strategy

*   Children and Young People's Plan

*   Carers' Strategy

A place-based recovery

Previous research and engagement conducted by Merton Council into the impact of the pandemic has highlighted the importance of place to future recovery strategy.

What Merton Council have learned from the pandemic

- Communities coming together for local action

- Local businesses, faith groups and voluntary sector organisations stepping up to help in the response

- Value of green spaces and safe active travel

- Inequalities within the borough and disproportionate impact

- Level of unmet need in the community

- Value of 'social capital' – people being connected; trust and cooperation

- Reliance on local neighbourhoods
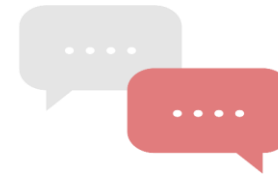
Why place matters to Merton Council

- Environment and green spaces are more valued than ever before

- How we feel about our neighbourhood affects our wellbeing and sense of belonging

- There is an opportunity to build a greener, healthier and fairer borough with a thriving local economy

- Place will be key to a local, green and sustainable recovery

- Place-based vision for Merton must have people and communities at its heart

- A healthy place can provide the physical and social conditions for all people to thrive

Engaging residents in the 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?
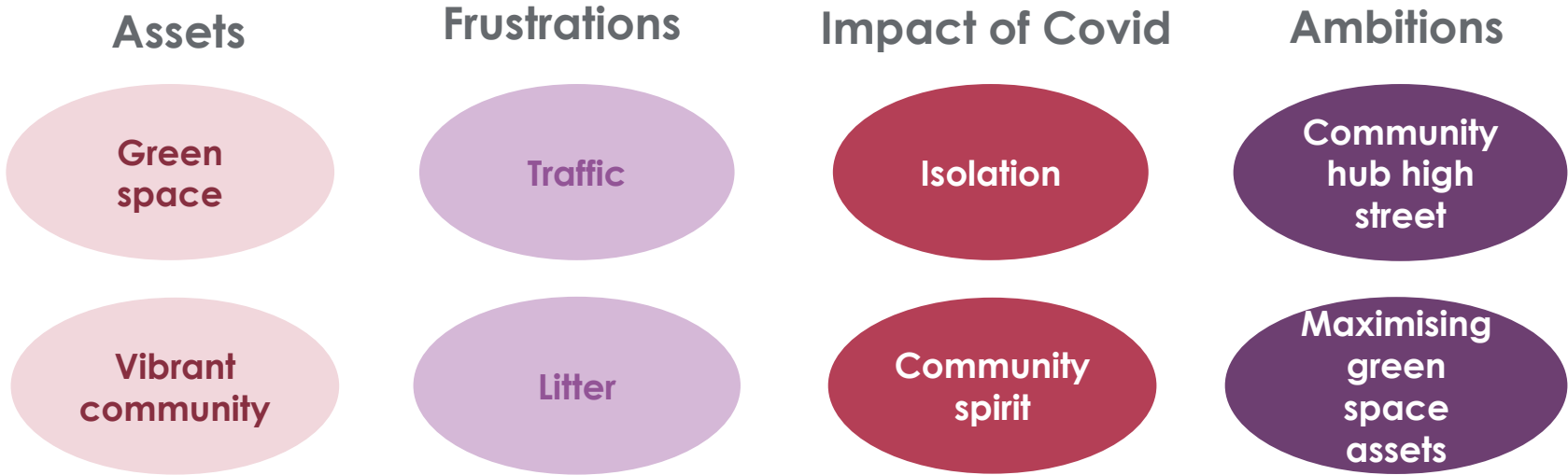
Traverse undertook four separate engagement activities to involve local people in different ways:

* A **representative survey** of the borough gathered the views of 1,000 residents.

* Around 500 residents contributed via an **open access engagement website**.

* **Focus groups with community groups** enabled us to take discussions into different parts of the community. We wanted to hear from those have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and more seldom heard - such as disabled people, young people, people from minority ethnic communities, older people and others less likely to engage online.

* 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.

Common themes around assets, frustrations, experiences and ambitions

Assets	Frustrations	Impact of Covid	Ambitions
Green space	Traffic	Isolation	Community hub high street
Vibrant community	Litter	Community spirit	Maximising green space assets

Throughout the engagement residents were most positive and proud about Merton's green space 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 community hub and an ambition to make the most of Merton's varied green space.

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 group 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 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.

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Methods of engagement

Who was engaged and how

Four engagement activities

Traverse delivered four distinct engagement activities between April and July 2021. This report summarises the key themes from across four engagement exercises.

Representative survey of Merton residents	**Open engagement through Commonplace**	**Community group discussions**	**Deliberative workshop with residents**
Completed April 2021	**Live until 7th July 2021**	**June and July 2021**	**12th and 19th July 2021**
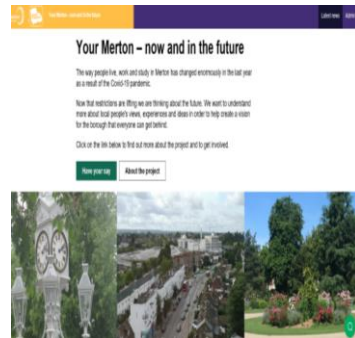
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## *Each method engaged a different audience for a different purpose*

Engagement in this project performed two related functions;

- **Insights into resident views:** Each exercise helped Merton Council understand the views of different people in different ways. The resident survey and Commonplace platform highlighted broad trends amongst larger groups of residents. The community group discussions and the deliberative workshops delivered in-depth qualitative insights amongst smaller groups of residents.

- **Providing space for residents to engage:** Each exercise also provided a public or private space to engage residents. Commonplace was the most open access public method – the website was free and available to anyone who wanted to contribute. The survey, community group discussions and the deliberative workshops all took place with an invited selection of residents. The number invited to participate in the survey was much larger.

Open access

Broad trends

In-depth views

Invited access
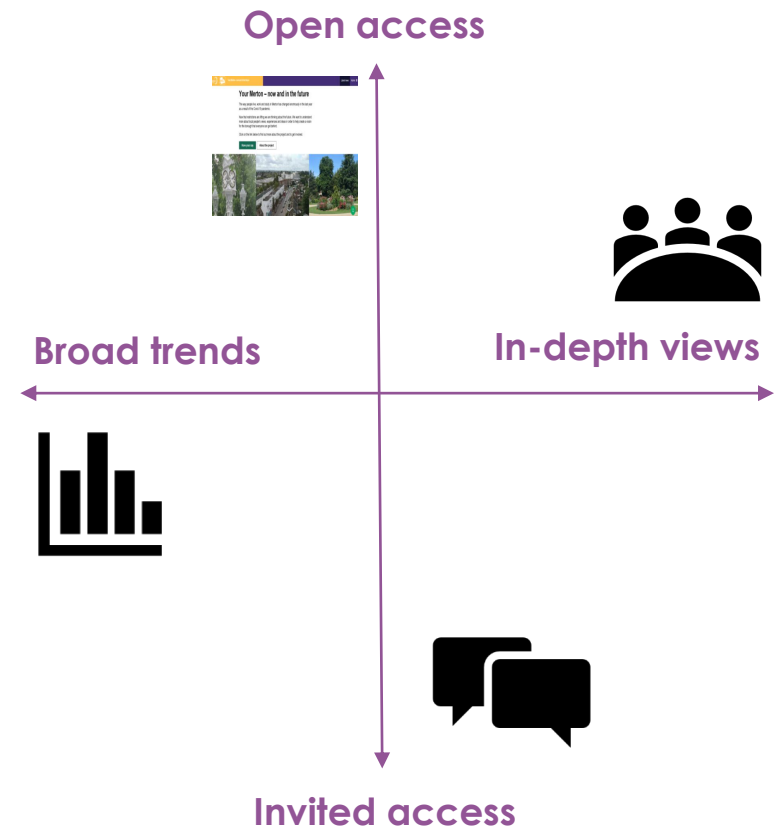
## *Each method engaged different numbers of people*

Full details of the number of people engaged across the project are available in the appendix. Below is a summary of the key communities engaged across the four methods.

Representative survey of Merton	**Open engagement through Commonplace**	**Community group discussions**	**Deliberative workshop with residents**

1,000 residents completed the resident survey and 110 completed the children and young people survey. These residents were representative of the population of Merton in terms of key demographics (age, gender, ethnicity etc).
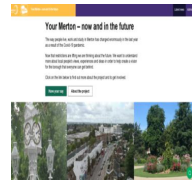
Over 10,000 people visited the Commonplace website and around 500 responded to questions on the site. As an open access platform this was not designed to be representative of the population of the borough. A wide range of ages (concentrated 35-65) responded from across the borough. More women responded than men and white residents were more represented than other ethnicities.

Thirteen community groups conducted focus group activities with their members, representing a range of communities of interest. This enabled us to hear from those who often do not participate in public engagement (for example, including Mencap and Merton Vision).

25 residents participated in the deliberative workshops. Residents lived across the borough and a mix of ages, social class, gender and ethnicity were represented.

Reading this report

This report summarises key themes from across four engagement exercises. The main body of the report provides insights from each stage of the engagement. The concluding section highlights what this means for the development of a vision. Where possible we have reported differences in views between residents (either based on what part of the borough they live in or their demographics). Four types of trend are reported:

- **Demographic and local area survey trends**: The resident survey was the most reliable source for understanding differences within the Merton population because it was designed to speak to a large enough representative sample of residents. The full survey report was conducted by DJS and is available <u>here</u>. It is the best place to look at differences in views in detail.
- **Commonplace thematic trends:** Commonplace was designed to be an open access platform. Some participants voluntarily provided demographic data. Traverse analysed trends amongst those who provided demographic data, but it was our view that these trends offered limited utility, so the Commonplace reporting was focussed on the key themes in opinion that emerged on the platform.
- **Differences between community groups:** Traverse supported community groups to run discussions that would help to surface key differences in experiences and opinions of those more likely to be seldom heard. This section, therefore, highlights key differences and considerations for these communities.
- **Differences between local areas in deliberation:** The deliberation was designed to speak to residents of five different locations within the borough. Differences in future priorities between residents living in different parts of the borough were highlighted where relevant.

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Experiences and ambitions

Themes from Commonplace and the residents survey

The interactive Commonplace experience

Commonplace is an online platform where anyone can log on and respond to questions. Traverse worked with Commonplace and Merton Council to design an interactive experience who people who live, work and study would enjoy participating in (https://engagingmerton.Commonplace.is/). The platform provided two types of engagement opportunity:
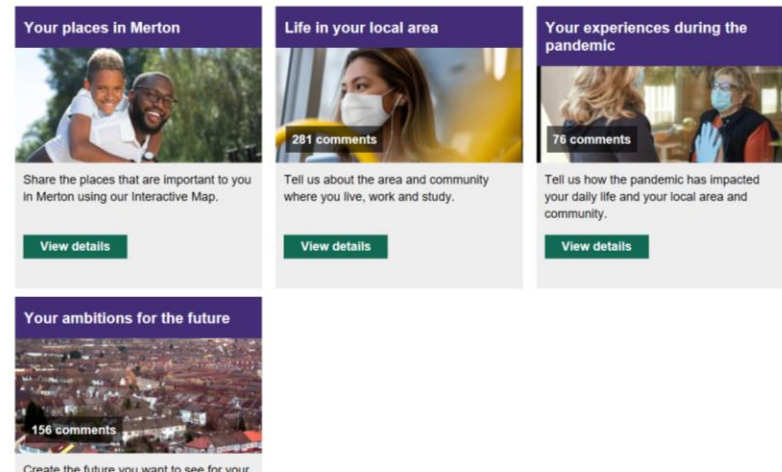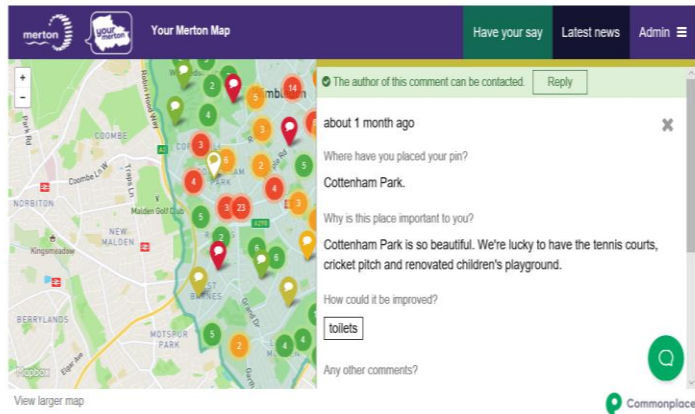
An interactive map allowed participants to place a pin over a location in Merton that was important to them. They then answered follow up questions to understand why this was important.

Three other sections asked open-ended survey style questions where participants could explain their experiences of the pandemic, how they felt about living in their local area and their ambitions for the future of Merton.

The residents survey

- The residents survey can best help us understand differences in views and experiences within the Merton population, comprising as it does a large representative sample of residents. The full survey report was conducted by DJS and is available [here](). The survey consisted of two separate components: an adult survey (aged 18+) and a young person survey (aged 11-17).

- In total, 1,005 adult interviews and 110 young person interviews were conducted. Most of these were done by phone (computer assisted telephone interviewing - CATI) due to the pandemic. As restrictions lifted a small number of face-to-face interviews (computer assisted personal interviewing – CAPI) were conducted to help with harder to reach groups.

- When making comparisons between this and similar surveys in 2017 and 2019, it should be borne in mind that these were conducted face to face.

- For the phone interviews a stratified random quota sampling approach was used. This means a random sample of households were purchased from a sample sourcing agency, ensuring a proportionate spread of contacts within each of the borough's wards. A mix of landline and mobile numbers were used. For the face-to-face element, a targeted in-street approach was employed.

- To provide a representative sample of the borough, target quotas and weighting were used based on age, gender, ethnicity and economic status, using the latest population statistics available.

Analysing and reporting Commonplace data

The following slides present an analysis of the key themes that emerged primarily from residents' contributions to the Commonplace website. Where relevant, findings from the representative 1000-resident survey have also been incorporated and combined to give a richer picture. We focussed on survey questions that aligned with the questions asked on Commonplace. Full themes from the survey are available [here](#).

Traverse conducted a thematic coding of all responses on the Commonplace site. This enabled researchers to understand the weight of opinion across all sections of the site. Residents used the opportunity to build up their perspective on key topics across the different headings and questions, rather than using individual questions to structure the analysis. The following slides therefore provide the results in terms of a number of key themes.

To reduce barriers to participation it was not mandatory to complete demographic details to engage on Commonplace. Instead, participants were invited to complete a short optional demographic survey after they had answered questions. Around 70% of those participating provided some data, which suggested that contributors came from across the borough, were predominately white and more likely to be female. This incomplete picture of demographics meant that we did not report demographic trends on Commonplace. Instead we provided trends from the survey where all demographic data was gathered and trends tested for statistical significance.

We provided quotes from Commonplace to highlight sentiment on the site. Due to the optional nature of demographic questions we have not always been able to attribute the quotes, but where we have the data we have reported it.

Common assets, frustrations and ambitions emerged

Assets

Green space

community

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 and housing regeneration

Accessible active transport

Regenerating high streets and ensuring housing developments serve the community were key ambitions for the future. For some residents improved accessible active transport options were part of this.

Green spaces are the most valued aspect of life in Merton

In response to the question what did respondents liked most about their area, green spaces were mentioned most frequently. Green space emerged as a key part of Merton's identity as a borough – distinguishing it from neighbouring Boroughs that people said felt more crowded.

This trend was consistent with the residents survey where parks and open spaces were the most valued aspect of Merton for two thirds of residents.

Most common words associated with green space on Commonplace

Most valued aspects of Merton: top 10

Aspect	%
Parks and open spaces	67%
Good public transport	32%
The quality of shops and retail	19%
Social cohesion	17%
The quality of schools	15%
Safe/low-levels of cirme	15%
Entertainment/leisure...	10%
Libraries	8%
Generally nice/quiet area	6%
Rubbish/Refuse collection	6%
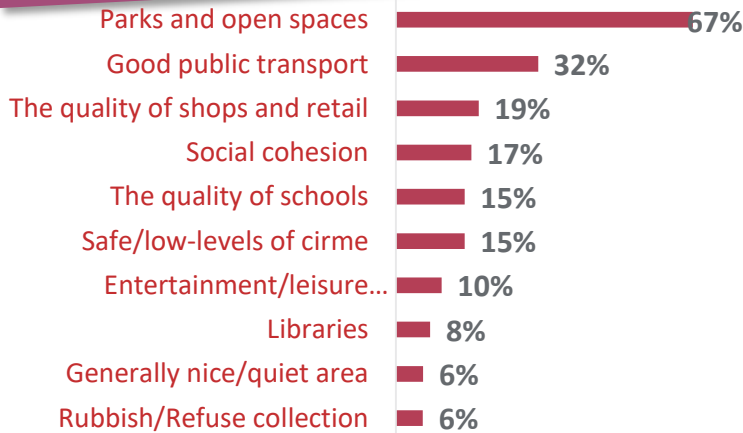
"The amount of green space; parks, nature reserves, Wandle Trail. It feels very different to Balham, Tooting, Colliers Wood; you reach Morden and the air feels better and it's less crowded."
(Morden, no details)

Q017. Please tell us up to three things that you value the most in the London borough of Merton. **Base:** all respondents (1,005). * Caution: low base size.

Green spaces were important for mental wellbeing

Residents liked green space because it had benefits for their mental wellbeing. Themes from the residents survey showed that the importance of parks and open space increased during the pandemic, which may reflect the role that green space played in maintaining wellbeing.

Part of the wellbeing benefit was in providing the opportunity for people to connect with nature. People loved spending time in the variety of green spaces on their door step to relax and de-stress, describing them as places to get away from urban life and connect with nature.

Connecting with other residents in shared spaces was another benefit to parks. Residents described the social aspect of these areas where they could see other people and feel connected to the community. Several comments related to an experience of getting to know neighbours, or thinking about the community and one's own role within it.

"I walk in the meadows and park every day. It's incredibly rich in wildlife and really good for my mental wellbeing. I also see familiar faces there and feel part of the local community when I visit." (Female, 25-34, Wimbledon)

"Clean unspoilt green natural space...good for mental/ health and peaceful walking , meeting friends clean air, wildlife, beauty , quiet no vehicles, safe walking , minimal cycles." (Female, 65-74, Wimbledon)

Green spaces were places for physical wellbeing

Green space was also important for physical wellbeing through providing places to exercise. People loved the opportunities these areas afforded them to keep physically fit as well as the fitness and sports facilities they contained.

They were seen as great places to enjoy facilities such as playgrounds and tennis courts, for children to play and dog-walking.

"I walk in the meadows and park every day. It's incredibly rich in wildlife and really good for my mental wellbeing. I also see familiar faces there and feel part of the local community when I visit" (Female, 25-34, Colliers Wood)

"Visiting nature, having space to exercise is really important for wellbeing and physical health" (Female, 25-34, Mitcham)

"Oasis of peace and calm, great for walking and running, some cycling (but could have more - a circular route), seeing birds and fish and rabbits." (Male, 55-64, Morden)

Green space supports the local response to climate change

Some respondents specifically highlighted the climate emergency and the need to protect nature as a key challenge for the area.

Birds, insects, wild flowers and bees were all described as needing protection and front gardens being paved over was seen as a problem.

Some specifically mentioned community engagement to protect the environment as something they like about their area.

"More street trees/parklets are urgently needed, near the town centre & along Kingston Road, to reflect Merton's climate emergency. The skew arch southside would benefit from urban greening."
(Raynes Park, no details)

"Vital 'green lungs' in this area. Peaceful, safe, family friendly and suitable for all ages and accessible even to those with mobility issues"
(Male 65-74 Raynes Park)

Maintaining green space was a key priority

Maintaining and improving green space was a key priority for residents.

People were upset by poorly maintained paths and facilities such as playgrounds and the amount of litter that was allowed to accumulate.

Some also made explicit mentions of trees that many respondents wanted to see planted and better cared for.

"The trees, parks and Common in Wimbledon are iconic and special. Yet for some reason Merton decision makers are not protecting our precious green canopy. We need our trees and green spaces protected and loved by all."
(Wimbledon, no details)

"This is a great resource that should be as celebrated as Wimbledon Common but it has a much scruffier reputation. It has its problems - litter, motor bikes etc but has many, many benefits and possibilities…We need more awareness and more cherishing of this environmentally, historically and culturally fascinating green space."
(Female, 55-64, Mitcham)

Increased appreciation for local green space during the pandemic

Many expressed an increased appreciation for their local area after having to spend more time at home during the pandemic. Positive comments prevailed with regard to local parks and green spaces, although they were experienced by some as 'over-run'. Many reported 'discovering' the local commons or 'exploring' local facilities and community spaces.

This is supported by survey trends that showed appreciation had grown most for local parks and green spaces, with nearly seven in ten saying that they came to value this more in the past 12 months.

Aspects of local life

Value much/
a bit more
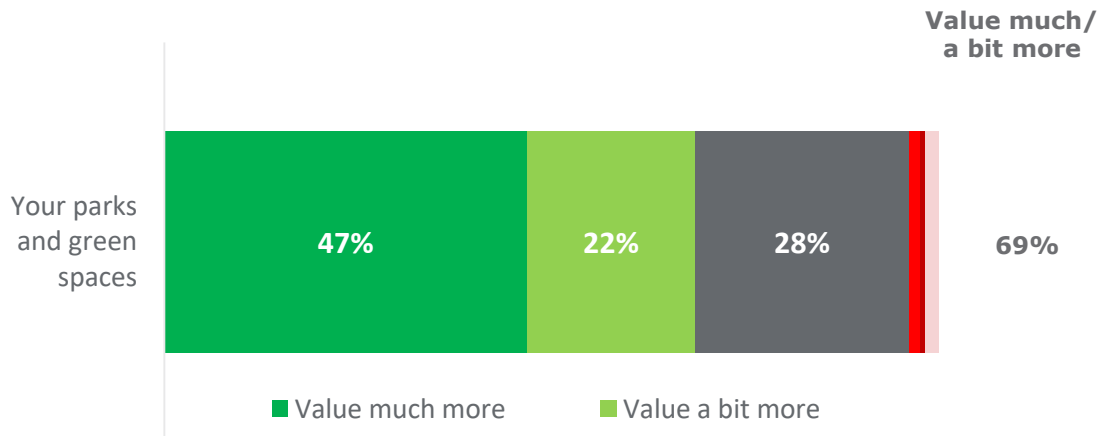
"In happier news I discovered the joys of Morden Park and walked in my local area more than I have done in the 15 years I've lived here.." (female, 45-54)

Your parks and green spaces

| 47% | 22% | 28% | | 69% |

■ Value much more   ■ Value a bit more

NEW21Q01B. Has your experience over the last 12 months throughout the COVID-19 situation made you value the following aspects of local life more or less than before...?
Base: all non-pilot respondents (974)

Most feel a positive sense of community in the borough

A good proportion of respondents identified a sense of community as something that they liked most about the area. For many it was their immediate neighbours who gave them a sense of community. For others it was a more general sense of people looking out for each other. Friendly, lovely, considerate, respectful, supportive were all adjectives used to describe other community members. Some specifically highlighted the mix of cultures, ages, ethnicities, tenants and home owners etc. as assets and saw this as giving the area vibrancy.

This sentiment was supported by trends in the survey that showed that 86% of residents agreed that the local area was a place where people from different ethnic backgrounds got on well together. However this was 8% down on 2019.
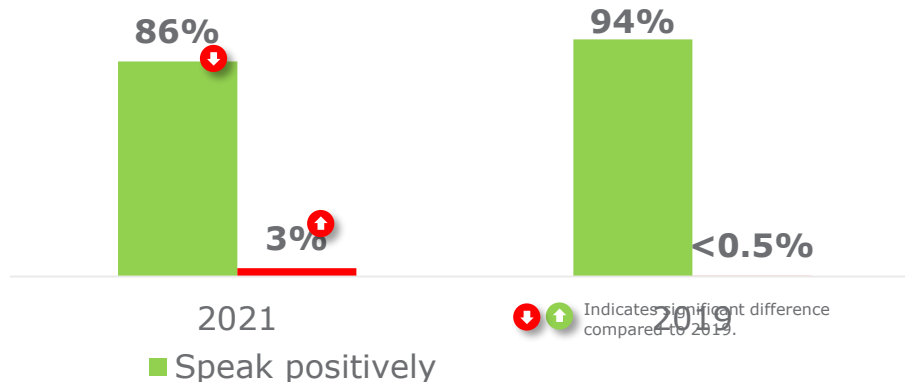
"The people on my street, we are all from different backgrounds but are all friendly and helpful." (Mitcham, female, 25-34)

"My church, my friends and neighbours, musical activities and the local groups I belong to." (Wimbledon, female, 65-74)

Q014. To what extent do you agree or disagree that your local area is a place where people from different ethnic backgrounds get on well together? **Base:** all respondents (1,005)

86%

94%

3%

<0.5%

2021

2019

Indicates significant difference compared to 2019.

■ Speak positively

For many the community is family-friendly

Through the interactive map it was clear that people felt that the area was very family-friendly and noted areas they felt were great for family's and children's wellbeing, as well as areas they felt were dangerous for children.

People thought green spaces were vital places for families to relax together and educate children about nature. They also loved the facilities such as playgrounds for young families.

They felt that Merton's community was family friendly with good schools and nurseries.

"It's a great place for the kids to meet friends and play safely. Great atmosphere with adults too. Wonderful to have free access to tennis courts too, we use these a lot as a family." (Female, 45-54, Wimbledon)

"Lots of children live in the area who walk, scoot and cycle around when playing and going to school. The traffic is now constant in the morning from 7:30am - 9:30am and in the other direction from 2:45 - 6:30pm." (Male, 45-54, Morden)

Anti-social behaviour was a concern in some parts of the borough

Several respondents, particularly from the Mitcham area, mentioned groups of men drinking during the day and antisocial behaviour as detrimental to their sense of community. Only a very small number of respondents explicitly mentioned that this was affecting their personal sense of safety. On the interactive map people also expressed concern for perceived anti-social behaviour in parks, groups of people drinking alcohol and riding motor bikes, making the parks feel unsafe particularly at night. The survey showed that concerns around ant-social behaviour and public substance and alcohol use varied across the borough and was more of an issue in Merton and Mitcham.

"Many aimless people around Mitcham Fair Green during the day and night drinking and chatting" (Mitcham, female, 35-44)

"There seems to be very little sense of community or pride in the area. This could be because some people face other struggles both financial and anti-social to be able to take on anything else." (Mitcham, female, 65-74)

Issue (% a problem)	Total	North Wimbledon	South Wimbledon	South West Merton	East Merton & Mitcham	South Mitcham & Morden	North East Merton
Vehicle crime	40%	40%	28%	43%	42%	39%	53%
Burglary	38%	42%	34%	41%	35%	30%	47%
People using/dealing drugs	31%	21%	22%	16%	**53%**	**41%**	**37%**
Anti-social behaviour	30%	25%	16%	22%	**43%**	**38%**	**37%**
People drunk or rowdy in public places	23%	15%	23%	8%	**42%**	25%	27%

Residents want to maintain 'community spirit' that felt strengthened by the pandemic

Participants spoke positively about how the pandemic had engendered a new type of 'community spirit'. People spoke of getting to know neighbours, as well as seeing those they already knew more through spending more time in the borough. People came to rely on each other more – highlighting the support offered by mutual aid groups and community groups. This sense of community was something that people wanted to maintain in the pandemic recovery. The survey supported this trend with most respondents valuing their community more over the last twelve months.

Aspects of local life

Value much/ a bit more

Your community: 26% | 30% | 39% — 56%

■ Value much more   ■ Value a bit more
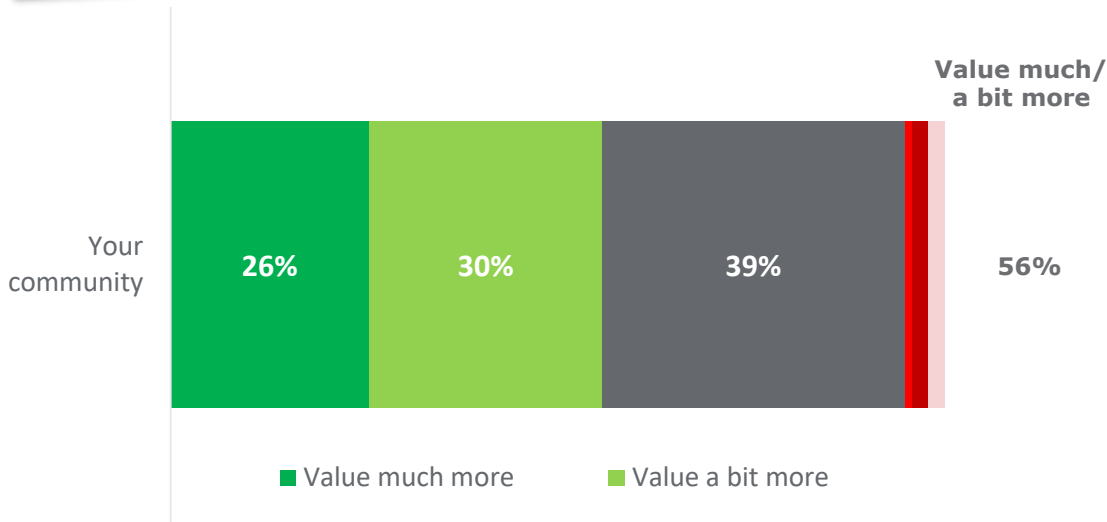
"People have been nicer and the feeling of community would be good to keep hold of." (no details)

"Walks, nature, a simpler life, no or little commuting." (female, 45-54)

"Not having to commute into London each day for work." (no details)

Inclusive community-led recovery was a key ambition

An inclusive community that all age groups and people from different backgrounds could feel part of – and that offered opportunities to engage with each other – was a key part of many respondents' ambitions for the future. They wanted to use the recovery from Covid-19, for instance, for reopening community centres or investing in activities to engage children and young people and bring different generations together. This was seen as an opportunity to rekindle a sense of community that many had valued in the spirit of mutual aid during the lock-downs.

There were many calls for a strong, attractive public realm as the space that was needed to bring residents together in informal ways. Many comments related to using public space – high streets and green spaces - for community projects, outdoor eating & drinking or bringing residents together to enjoy a cultural offer. Specific features of the kinds of spaces that would support this aspiration were also identified: greenery, more trees, water fountains, recycling bins, or CCTV cameras.

"Community involvement in planting up green spaces in the town centre, invite schools churches/ mosque and local groups to get involved. Allow Planting up of areas in front of billboards and kerbs. " (Female, 55-64)

"Lots of community inclusion opportunities like youth, sports and social clubs etc mixing all ages and cultures together in a positive way."(female, 45-54)
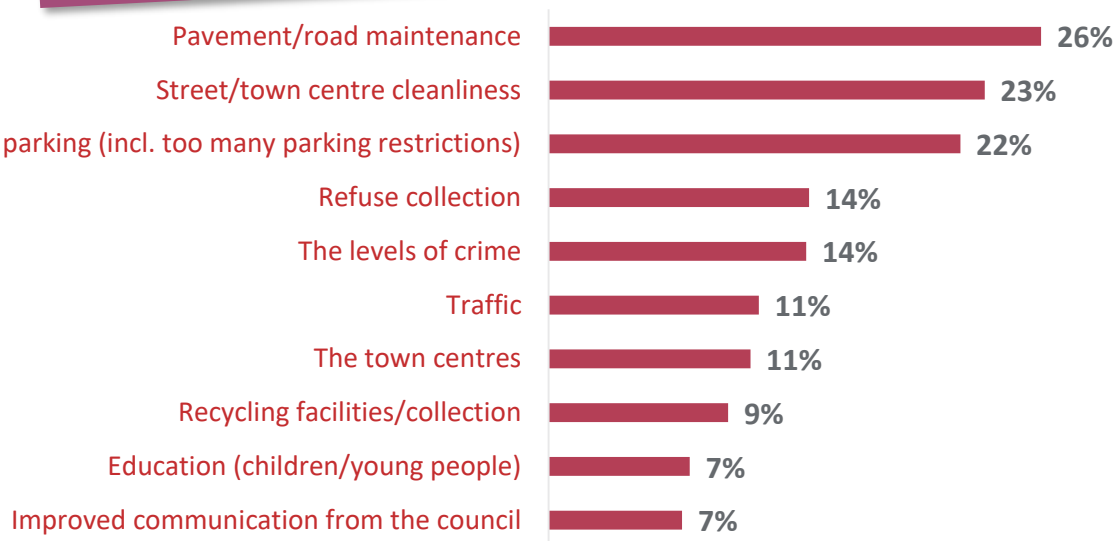
Litter and cleanliness was a key frustration

One third of Commonplace respondents included references to littering and cleanliness in their responses about their feelings towards the area, and it was identified even more frequently as one of the key frustrations. Mitcham stood out as the part of the borough where the issue received the greatest attention.

This was consistent with the survey where street/town centre cleanliness was the second highest area that needed improvement. Refuse collection was also high on the list.

"Litter and fly tipping sometimes make me want to move away." (Morden, female, 45-54)

Improvements needed in Merton: top 10

Pavement/road maintenance	26%
Street/town centre cleanliness	23%
Lack of parking (incl. too many parking restrictions)	22%
Refuse collection	14%
The levels of crime	14%
Traffic	11%
The town centres	11%
Recycling facilities/collection	9%
Education (children/young people)	7%
Improved communication from the council	7%

Q018. And, now tell us up to three things that most need improving in the London borough of Merton. **Base:** all respondents (1,005).
Please note, these results cannot be directly compared to 2019 due to this being asked as an unprompted list this year because of the change in methodology.

Litter and cleanliness was a key concern

This was a key concern for young people too – especially those aged 11-14 and young females.

Top 10 local concerns

Concern	%
Pollution/climate change	38%
Litter/dirt on the streets	38%
Traffic congestion	19%
Homelessness	17%
Anti-social/bad behaviour	16%
Groups hanging around	16%
Not enough done for young people	13%
Local housing	11%
People using /dealing drugs	8%
Lack of fun things to do	6%

Aged 15-17

Pollution (51%)

Traffic (32%)

Housing (26%)

Litter/dirt on the street

Aged 11-14*

46%*

47%

YPQ04.. Considering your local area, what aspects are you personally most concerned about? Please list up to 3. **Base:** all respondents (110)/those with at least one concern (85). *Caution low base size.

Residents felt more could be done to tackle litter as current initiatives weren't working

The perceived high volume of litter, and in particular fly tipping had a negative impact on how residents felt about their area. Residents identified certain parks and streets where fly tipping was particularly bad. It often made residents feel like their neighbours didn't care about the environment, and even that the Council didn't care enough to solve the issue.

Looking at waste management, the open recycling buckets that allowed rubbish to be blown away by the wind and the fact that some households were not allocated wheelie bins were singled out, alongside overflowing bins or bins having been removed altogether. 'Street champions' and what was seen as attempts to 'outsource' responsibility to Veolia were not received well by respondents.

Residents felt that the Council should have made it easier for households to dispose of large quantities of waste, including households without access to a car.

"The area could be lovely but it is always covered in litter the quieter streets are often places where people fly tip and the green areas are also not well kept, with fly tipping and lots of litter." (Colliers Wood, female, 35-44)

"The rubbish and fly tipping that's just left around is so depressing! It should be removed and more effort made to investigate and prosecute those who are guilty of it. Our environment is so important for our mental health." (Mitcham, no details)
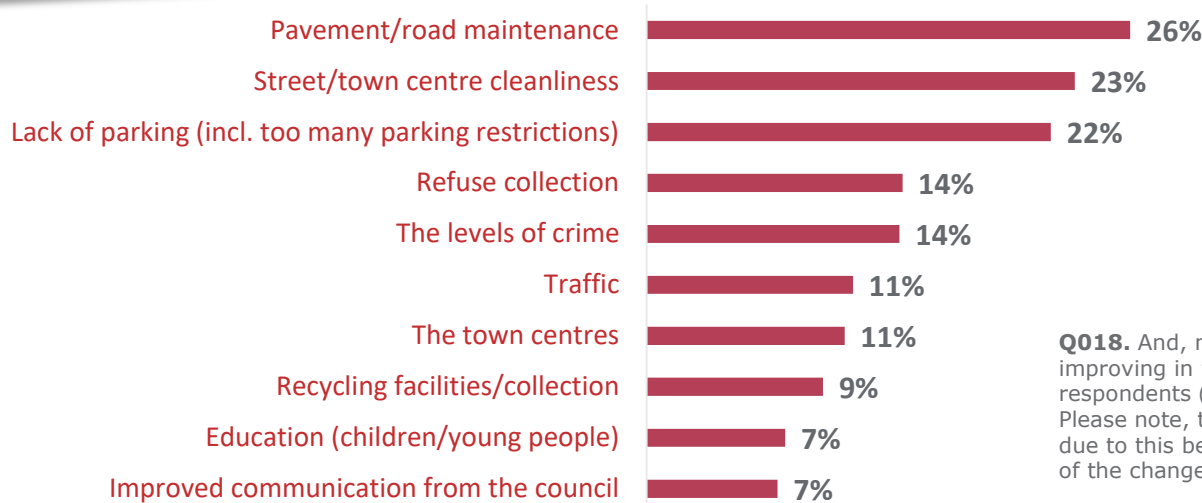
Traffic, parking and congestion were key concerns throughout the borough

More than a quarter of all responses to Commonplace 'life in the area' questions referred to the traffic situation in the borough. Comments regarded a greater need to manage and reduce traffic, and others highlighted unintended consequences of what was seen as too much traffic management were quite evenly balanced. Proportionally speaking, traffic issues appeared to be particularly prominent around Raynes Park.

This was supported by survey trends where road maintenance, lack of parking and traffic were identified as tope areas for improvement.

Improvements needed in Merton: top 10

Pavement/road maintenance	**26%**
Street/town centre cleanliness	**23%**
Lack of parking (incl. too many parking restrictions)	**22%**
Refuse collection	**14%**
The levels of crime	**14%**
Traffic	**11%**
The town centres	**11%**
Recycling facilities/collection	**9%**
Education (children/young people)	**7%**
Improved communication from the council	**7%**

Q018. And, now tell us up to three things that most need improving in the London borough of Merton. **Base:** all respondents (1,005).
Please note, these results cannot be directly compared to 2019 due to this being asked as an unprompted list this year because of the change in methodology.
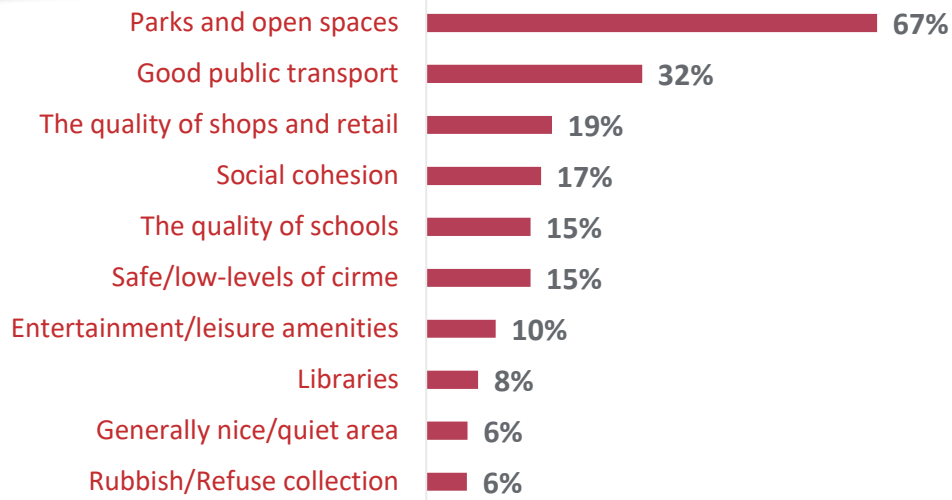
Public transport links were highlighted as a positive by residents

Morden residents praised the good transport links in their area more than other residents on Commonplace, but in the survey there were no clear differences on public transport with it emerging as the second most valued aspect of life in the borough.

Further improving public transport links between town centres was seen as an important aspect of facilitating active travel. However, many such references appeared to relate primarily to transport links into central London and further afield, in particular for Merton Park.

Most valued aspects of Merton: top 10

Aspect	Percentage
Parks and open spaces	67%
Good public transport	32%
The quality of shops and retail	19%
Social cohesion	17%
The quality of schools	15%
Safe/low-levels of cirme	15%
Entertainment/leisure amenities	10%
Libraries	8%
Generally nice/quiet area	6%
Rubbish/Refuse collection	6%

"The best thing about living in the centre of Morden is that it has excellent public transport links." (Morden, female, 45-54)

"I would like to see more encouragement for people to make local journeys on foot, public transport or bicycle." (Wimbledon, female, 65-74)

Q017. Please tell us up to three things that you value the most in the London borough of Merton. **Base:** all respondents (1,005). * Caution: low base size. Please note, these results cannot be directly compared to 2019 due to this being asked as an unprompted list this year because of the change in methodology.

A need to reduce traffic overall, making the area more pleasant to live in and safer for pedestrians, was highlighted again and again

Too much traffic making the area unpleasant was highlighted time and time again. Air pollution, noise and speeding were recurring themes. Through traffic was a particular concern and "huge lorries" came up more than once in the comments. A number of respondents suggested that busy roads in town centres were spoiling the experience of spending time there.

Many also highlighted a sense of not feeling safe as pedestrians. Narrow pavements, cars driving over pavements, uneven pavements or pavement space being encroached upon by parked cars or "clutter" on pavements (e.g. masts, electrical boxes, bike parking) all contributed to this sense of being exposed to dangers from traffic.

The traffic situation around schools received particular attention, both in terms of calling for wider pavements and traffic calming measures and taking issue with the amount of traffic caused by schools.

"There are very few places at which pedestrians can safely cross from one side of Cricket Green to the other. Traffic does not follow the posted 20mph limits and there are no cameras to enforce this speed limit." (Mitcham, male, 25-34))

"Huge lorries go wherever they want whenever they want. Roadworks are unsupervised and uncoordinated. It is a mess." (Morden, male, 55-64)

"We need more speed bumps. Drivers seem to ignore the speed limit signs and considering we have a few schools in the area it's really dangerous crossing the road." (no detail)

Car users objected to what they saw as too much traffic management

The view that car users were affected disproportionally by traffic management, particularly where they depended on the car for work or because of mobility issues, also came through on Commonplace. To some extent this was seen as a conflict over the allocation of space to different road users, with the narrowing of roads to create cycle lanes and traffic calming measures highlighted in particular.

Much of this related to unintended consequences of what was seen as too much traffic management. Specific criticisms related to one-way systems, queues building up as a result of new traffic lights, "unnecessary" speed restrictions, and Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) around schools making it difficult to drive in the borough.

Difficulties regarding the parking situation in the borough was another main theme. Not being able to park because of a lack of residents' parking, and both parking permits and parking in the centre being too expensive were highlighted as big issues, to the extent that some reported wanting to move as a result.

"Journeys which cannot be walked because of age or infirmity take much too long now. Elderly and disabled people are being discriminated against." (Mitcham, female, 65-74)

"the potential increase to residential parking permits seems a bit of a disgrace." (Colliers Wood, female, 45-55))

"Just stop with the newly introduced cycle lanes. The introduction of further lanes and reducing road width is just causing mayhem!" (Morden, female 55-64)

Experiences of the pandemic show the benefits of less traffic

Reduction in traffic was a prominent theme in comments regarding experiences of the pandemic. 'Getting cars off the road', and 'less through-traffic' was seen as a benefit of life in the pandemic.

This was combined with the experience of a different lifestyle that offered more opportunity for walking and enjoying their local neighbourhood. Those working at home talked of a 'simpler life' and a 'slower pace'. Many commented on a stronger focus on health more generally too.

"This place was hugely improved during the pandemic because there was a big reduction in road traffic with an improvement to the air quality and road safety. And one realised how much an increase in traffic and noise had adversely affected one's quality of life in the past 10 years" (Female 65-74, Wimbledon)

"The neighbourhood became more connected, and it was lovely to have people out walking, and of course the through traffic disappeared for a few months" (No details)

"I have enjoyed the emphasis on getting cars off the road , the quieter less polluted roads at the start of lockdown were a joy." (no details)

Residents wanted to 'transform the way people travel' in the future

Residents on Commonplace wanted a future where people used more active travel options but acknowledged this would be a challengee.

General safety and poor cycling infrastructure were commonly highlighted as challenges to encouraging increased use of bikes. Some respondents complained that other road users often impinged on cyclists' space, for instance, parking on cycle lanes. Many people therefore put a particular emphasis on schools and the surrounding areas to encourage less car use – to make it safe and to inspire greener ways of traveling for future generations. Some identified specific benefits, which included exercise & fitness, mental health, physical health, cutting pollution, air quality, CO_2 reduction and climate action.

"Cycling and pedestrian infrastructure is extremely poor, discouraging active travel, which Merton Council commendably promotes." (Raynes Park, no details)

"I'd like to see more of a focus on active transport. Cars speed up and down my road at double the speed limit. I'd like my kids to feel safe crossing the street." (no details)

"Investing in cycle and walking infrastructure on busy roads across Merton. Particularly near schools (the Ridgeway/ Worple Road being a good example) so that parents don't feel the need to drive their kids to school - because they can SEE safe segregated cycle lanes. " (female, 35-44)

Respondents offered different thoughts about what could be done to improve active travel in the borough

Respondents called for making it easier to walk or cycle locally and encouraging more people to travel by active modes. Extending the cycling network to cater for all parts of the borough equally, widening pavements and pedestrianising town centres were a few specific suggestions in this respect. The share of calls to focus on active travel infrastructure was slightly higher for Colliers Wood than elsewhere.

Creating safe, continuous cycling infrastructure between town centres, including (segregated) cycle lanes and more advanced cycle traffic lights were seen as an important aspect of facilitating active travel.

With regard to walking, one idea was to gradually extend pedestrianisation to wider areas and more days of the week to reduce dangerous through traffic.

"Far more one way streets for cars. For every street that is made one-way, you free up space for a two-way segregated cycle lane/more space for pedestrians." (Wimbledon, female, 35-44)

"A 15-minute neighbourhood where all the facilities for day-to-day living are within easy walking distance, and safe cycle and walking routes will reduce the need to drive. Less motor traffic will enable the streets to become more pleasant places." (no details)

"I'm excited to see how the cycling network is extended in Merton, as some areas are very well provided for so I look forward to seeing the rest of the borough catch up." (no details)

Maintaining a community feel and extending affordable housing were challenges

Raynes Park and Wimbledon were most frequently described as good residential areas, mainly because of a combination of a relatively quiet and safe areas with green spaces nearby, and living within walking distance of shops and transport links.

A relatively high proportion of respondents from Raynes Park, and to a lesser extent Colliers Wood, commented on the affordability of housing and the need for additional investment in housing as a key challenge for their area. However, negative comments about 'tower blocks' and 'high rise developments' highlighted some anxiety. Many recognised the need for new affordable housing, but comments reflected a fear that the additional measures needed to ensure new residents were part of the community would not be forthcoming.

Property developers and landlords of private rental properties, as well as Housing Associations, that were seen by some to focus on profit rather than residents, came in for some criticism. References to "the mindset of developers" and "luxury flats" being undesirable illustrated a certain lack of trust that choices would be guided by the needs of current and new residents.

"How to secure greater investment for good quality, affordable, family friendly housing development - no more tower blocks! " (no details)

"Second home ownership and financial organisations owning property as an asset not a home keeping house prices artificially high. If you can only afford a short term rental you will never truly feel part of the community." (25-34)

"Affordable housing for lower income people and balancing this against preserving the character of the village." (Wimbledon, female, 55-64)

The appearance, look and feel of the built environment in their areas were important to respondents and triggered positive and negative comments

Many highlighted the heritage nature of much of the building stock, e.g. red-brick terraced and Victorian homes in Colliers Wood, 'attractive Victorian and old-style houses' in Wimbledon and the 'variety of architecture' that gave the area character. There were also specific calls to protect historical points of interest in regeneration plans. Comments also reflected a sense of poor maintenance and saw buildings in disrepair becoming 'an eyesore'. Mitcham residents often felt neglected and deplored what they saw as uneven provision between different parts of the borough.

Out of environmental concerns, some actively called for 'densification, taller buildings and more infill', but many thought that the area was getting too built up. Described as 'ugly blocks of flats', new 'tower blocks' and dated '1970s estates' were seen to blight the area and crowd out the 'nice residential feel'.

'Exciting ideas' (e.g. a proposed Frank Gehry-designed Concert Hall) were seen as better alternatives but were seen to not receive sufficient attention.

"More tower blocks will dwarf the lovely red-brick terraced and Victorian homes that reside across Colliers Wood." (Colliers Wood, female, 45-54)

"The town planning seems odd around this area. There are some nice pockets but lots of housing/ commercial developments seem to have been signed off with very little consideration of their look and feel." (Mitcham, female, 35-44)

"There is no urban design vision, no design code, no respect for the Victorian and Edwardian character of town." (Wimbledon, male, 35-44)
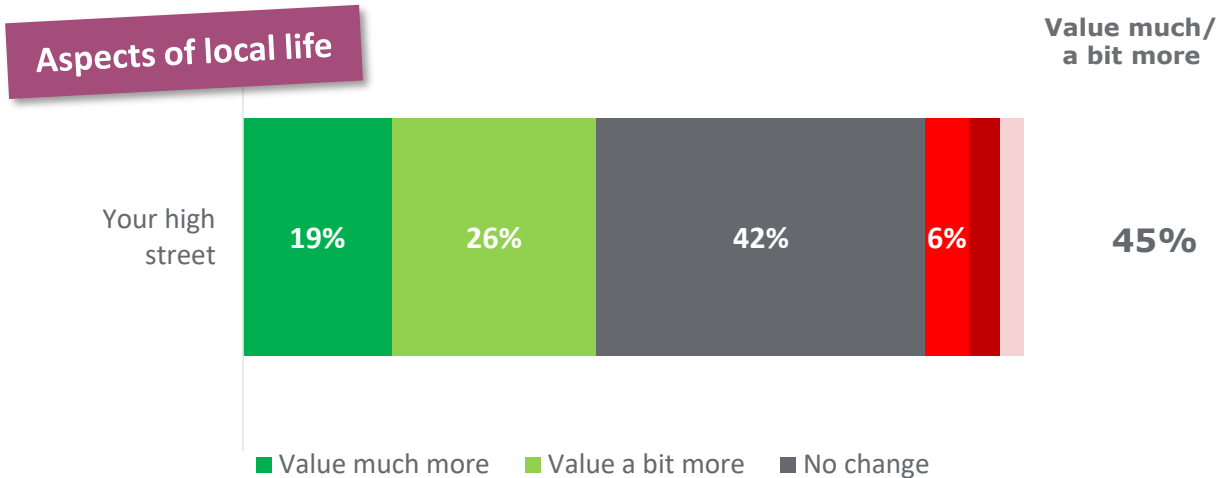
Positivity in the high street was driven by convenience and places to connect

Many respondents, particularly from Raynes Park, highlighted a good shopping and leisure offer as something they liked about their area. Positive comments related to the convenience of town centres – often referring to individual high streets, a good selection of shops including big brand food shops, a lively high street and friendly staff. People liked to see independent local shops, but also strong brands. A local library also received several positive mentions.

In the survey just under half respondents valued their high street more in the pandemic, and older residents (65+) were less likely to value it more.

Aspects of local life

Value much/ a bit more

Your high street

| 19% | 26% | 42% | 6% |

45%

■ Value much more ■ Value a bit more ■ No change

"It is a lively area, which, before the pandemic, had a range of shops, pubs, coffee shops and restaurants - places to meet for many different people." (Raynes Park, female, 65-74)

"Good selection of shops with friendly staff." (Mitcham, no details)

Negativity focused on lack of provision for shopping and socialising

For Mitcham respondents the offer of shops and services tended to be seen as poor while Colliers Wood residents didn't comment much on the topic at all. For Morden, perceptions also tended to be more negative. For these areas, the offer being very limited and too many betting shops, charity shops, hairdressers and barbers was a key criticism. Markets tended to be seen as a positive, but described as lacking in quality and variety with a lack of fresh produce particularly highlighted.

Some respondents identified retaining or attracting good businesses as a key challenge in the local area. Achieving a better mix, and an offer that would make residents spend more time, were seen as part of the solution. Several responses called for Council investment to support local businesses and improve the offer.

"I live and work here. However there is not a single place I would go to for a coffee, lunch or evening meal or drink. Nor, would I shop there for any of my groceries or general shopping. It is so run down, shabby, and ugly. It attracts a number of reprobates making it an uncomfortable place for to visit." (no details)

"Mitcham is like a ghost town despite the revamp. We were hoping for more entertainment and leisure options. Instead, we keep seeing more 'greasy spoons', more betting shops. " (Mitcham, no details)
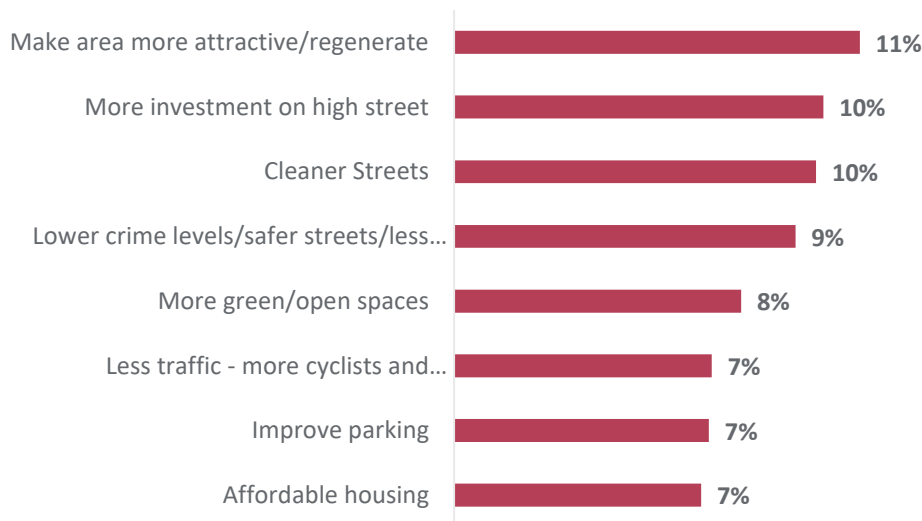
"Demolish those awful rows of shops and build new modern ones that might attract some decent brands, and put some flats above them." (Morden, no details)

Residents showed a shared desire for a revitalised high street

Although some residents were positive about their local high street, there was a common desire across all areas for a revitalised high street that encouraged residents to spend more time shopping and socialising locally. Vibrant, bustling, sustainable, thriving were some of the key words used to describe what people wanted to see.

This was supported by the survey where residents' ambitions for Merton in 10 years time varied, but the two most popular themes centred around improvements and investment in the town centre and high street. This was a particularly popular ambition in South Mitcham & Morden.

Make area more attractive/regenerate	11%
More investment on high street	10%
Cleaner Streets	10%
Lower crime levels/safer streets/less...	9%
More green/open spaces	8%
Less traffic - more cyclists and...	7%
Improve parking	7%
Affordable housing	7%

NEW21Q02. Now I would like you to think about your ambitions for the future. If you could see your local area ten years from now,
what is the single biggest change you would want to see? **Base:** where response was given (863). Top 16 answers displayed.
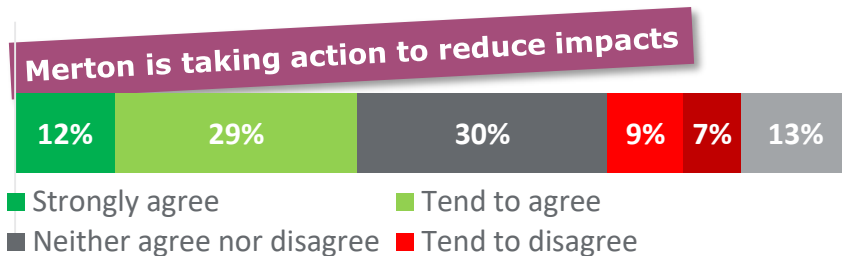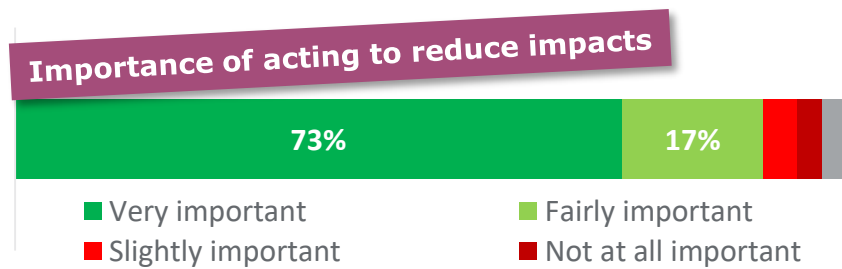
Protecting the environment and tackling climate change was a key ambition

Concern for the environment came to the fore when residents were asked about their ambitions and ideas for change. People taking climate change more seriously and taking action, protecting nature and wildlife, were key aspects of what many respondents wanted to see. Greening travel and transport with a radical shift towards walking and cycling was a key aspect of this.

This trend was evident in the survey where the vast majority (89%) agreed that acting to reduce the impacts of climate change was very/fairly important, but only 41% agreed that Merton Council was taking action to reduce these impacts.

Importance of acting to reduce impacts

73%	17%		

- ■ Very important
- ■ Fairly important
- ■ Slightly important
- ■ Not at all important

Merton is taking action to reduce impacts

12%	29%	30%	9%	7%	13%

- ■ Strongly agree
- ■ Tend to agree
- ■ Neither agree nor disagree
- ■ Tend to disagree

QNEW21Q04B. How important is it that we act to reduce the impacts of climate change? **NEW21Q06B.** To what extent do you agree or
disagree that Merton Council is taking action to reduce the impacts of climate change **Base:** all non-pilot respondents (974)

Residents provided specific measures to protect the environment and tackle climate change

There were a number of specific suggestions on Commonplace to protect the environment and tackle climate change, such as introducing 'green breaks' in the form of hedges, trees and green walls, and creating connected green spaces as suburban wildlife corridors, making more use of district heating and cooling, or offering more electric vehicle charging stations.

There were widespread calls for green technologies, including a better electric car infrastructure and bans on non-electric vehicles, and green heating technologies were in evidence with regard to a look further ahead, to 2030.

"We have started a garden in our street. The amazing response I have received illustrates that the community is desperate for initiatives which bring it together and enhance the living environment." (female, 45-54)

"New housing needs to be low-car or car-free to avoid increasing pressure on the road system and land-use." (no details)

"Most exciting opportunity: Looking after the environment, protecting nature, wildlife and local history." (no details)
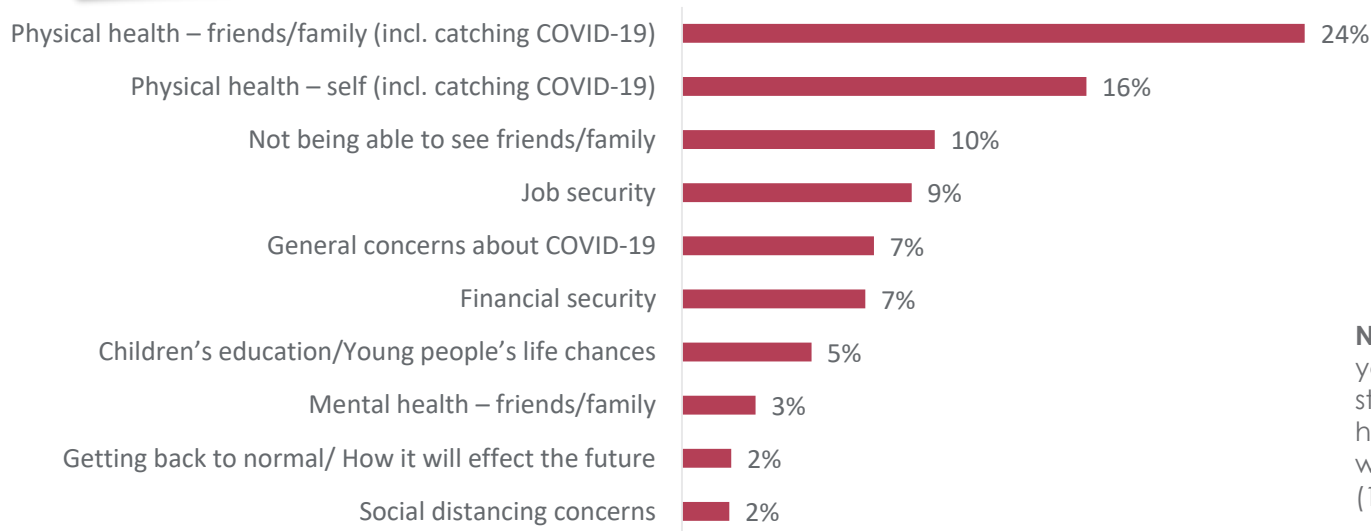
Wellbeing was impacted by restrictions on socialising

Around a third of all respondents on Commonplace said that the pandemic had reduced their social lives. The language used illustrated that for some – particularly those who were shielding – this had a substantial effect on their wellbeing. Others referred to a sense of isolation, identified the lack of contact with family and friends, or suggested that they had missed socialising, going out, taking part in cultural activities or shopping.

Not being able to see friends and family was the third most common worry in the survey (after physical health of themselves and family members). Mental health was a lower concern in the survey.

Top 10 worries

Worry	%
Physical health – friends/family (incl. catching COVID-19)	24%
Physical health – self (incl. catching COVID-19)	16%
Not being able to see friends/family	10%
Job security	9%
General concerns about COVID-19	7%
Financial security	7%
Children's education/Young people's life chances	5%
Mental health – friends/family	3%
Getting back to normal/ How it will effect the future	2%
Social distancing concerns	2%

"Little or no contact with family. Lockdown started on my birthday, I will never celebrate it again."
(female, 65-74)

NEW21Q03. Thinking about your life since the pandemic started in March 2020, what has been your biggest worry?. **Base:** all respondents (1,005).
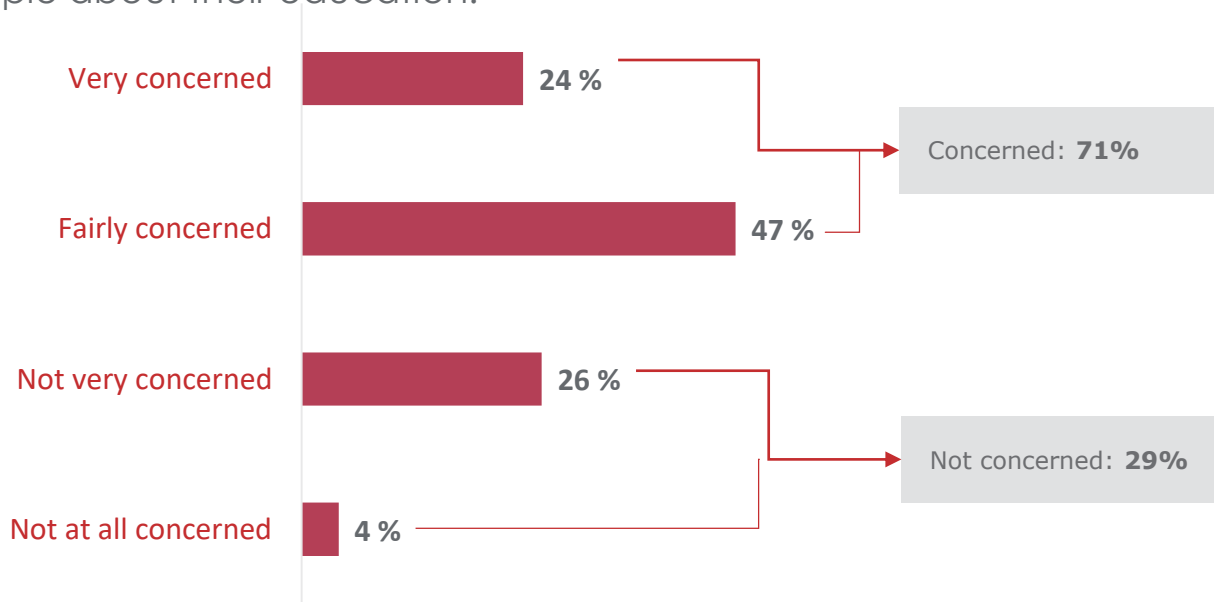
Work and school pressures impacted residents differently

When it came to work, this was commented on by a good proportion of respondents on Commonplace. For some it was mostly the work pattern that had changed. Many reported working from home – which required adaptations to the home environment and again reduced valued social contact with work colleagues. It also led to an increased workload for some, extra pressures from home schooling, or less work being available.

Others were unable to work, for instance as a result of increased caring responsibilities, had to change jobs or were made redundant. Financial difficulties as a result of lost work did not feature strongly. The survey shows 16% listed job security and finances as their biggest worry in the pandemic. The young people survey reveals the level of concern amongst young people about their education.

Very concerned	24 %
Fairly concerned	47 %
Not very concerned	26 %
Not at all concerned	4 %

Concerned: **71%**

Not concerned: **29%**

"Was made redundant from my job and spent 9 months to find a new role, but found more time to do things that I was putting off."
(male, 25-34)

YPQ08. How concerned are you, if at all, about the impact that COVID-19 has had on your education? **Base:** all respondents (110)

Fair recovery understood as making life affordable and providing adequate services

Participants were explicitly asked what a 'fair recovery' meant to them. Most were unfamiliar with the term or unsure of what it meant, but those that answered emphasised the affordability of the basics of life.

Public investment, e.g. in the NHS, social care and schools were called for just as keeping living costs down through social housing and low Council tax. Many comments related to "those in need", "lower income households" and "vulnerable groups". Children, young people and the elderly were explicitly referenced. Backing and supporting local businesses through tax breaks and lower business rates was also a priority for many.

A few participants on Commonplace did reference the East/West divide in the borough in response to other questions, but this type of inequality was not an explicit feature of understanding the 'fair recovery'.

"Access to excellent local NHS imperative. Local shops & restaurants given a break from high taxes. Music, dance & theatre becoming an affordable priority." (no details)

The longer term future focussed on green initiatives and a vibrant high street

On Commonplace, participants were asked about what they wanted to see in 2030 as well as this time next year. The key difference between expectations for next year and a look to 2030 was that calls for measures to protect the environment grew louder, referencing green transport - electric cars, better buses, a tram and active travel, green infrastructure, tree canopy cover or less light pollution.

Looking further ahead to 2030, people were looking for radical steps to reinvigorate town centres to make them 'vibrant places' where 'people actively choose to visit and spend time'. Independent business initiatives were seen as an indicator of success. This longer-term perspective included a full scale redevelopment of town centres with completely re-designed road lay-outs and strong moves towards making them more pedestrian friendly.

'Dutch style levels of active travel' were seen to be part of the desirable mix for 2030, as were ideas such as a large pedestrianised area with outdoor seating, a shuttle bus to take shoppers to and from town centres, and shared workspaces and drop-in craft and fix-it units.

"Cleaner air, better recycling, less traffic, more electric charging points for cars." (Wimbledon, female, 35-44)

"An entirely revamped town centre that has become an attractive destination for shopping, entertainment, socialising and working from." (no details)

"A thriving town with shops, cafes, theatres, cinemas and parks. Nice cafes with outdoor areas. Attractive paving and more trees. Some interesting buildings - and historical buildings well maintained. " (no details)

TRAVERSE

Experiences and ambitions of different community groups

Themes from focus groups

Engaging community groups

To ensure that groups who are less often heard participated, Traverse worked with Merton Connected to engage key community groups – in particular reaching those in our communities who have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. In total thirteen community groups that represented a range of communities of interest were engaged.

Traverse designed a focus group discussion guide that covered similar areas to the Commonplace platform; Thoughts and feelings about the area, impacts of the pandemic and future ambitions for Merton. Traverse then delivered a training session for interested community groups to ensure each group understood the engagement objectives.

Focus group discussions were then conducted by the leaders of each community group to engage members of each community of interest. They may have taken place face to face at a community hub or online.

Traverse then analysed themes from the written notes provided by the community group leaders. This section of the report summarises key themes from these focus groups with a focus on highlighting key similarities and differences between the resident views on Commonplace and the experiences of community groups.

Shared appreciation of green space and community, and increased focus on public transport

The vast majority of participants in these groups really appreciated the **area's public transport links** within and around the borough that helped them to be active and independent. They also loved the **green spaces**, particularly how they were never too far away from them and their use as a place to exercise.

There were mixed views on **the sense of community** in the area however, most participants agreed that the variety of **community groups and community centres** were good and helped them to feel part of the community.

However not all felt there was enough provision, so in the future they wanted to see more community groups and activities, particularly for younger people and those with limited financial means, particularly in disadvantaged areas that many noted were mainly concentrated in the east of the borough.

"There are good people in the world, good people in Merton and I do feel that there is a community."
CIL

"I actually don't get any sense of community. I feel quite isolated. I mean I've lived here 20 years and I don't really know the neighbours."
CIL

More emphasis on public transport

Most groups felt that the area was well served by public transport and there was a bigger emphasis on public transport compared to Commonplace as a whole. This was particularly true for those with learning difficulties or physical disabilities. People in these groups were likely to spend more time locally and less likely to drive. They stressed that changes to public transport disproportionately affected them. There were mixed views on the accessibility of public transport for these groups but a shared view that the needs of those with disabilities including hidden disabilities need to be considered.

"it is important to consider this group in both road-design (height of rails and buttons, ramps), transport design (dial-a-ride/community transport, wider parking spaces, accessible public transport), and facilities ('changing places' disabled toilets, quiet spaces to administer medication)" - Mencap

"For some, public transport is a valued activity in itself, and it is one way for people to feel part of their community." - Mencap

Traffic, high streets and litter a shared frustration

Participants shared the concern for **declining high streets** and wanted to see a wider variety of independent shops as well as leisure facilities to support social life. This was **particularly important for the less mobile and digitally excluded.** Many participants also stressed the importance of local amenities to support their independence and feeling of involvement in the community.

These groups also shared the concern of **anti social behaviour** in town centres, particularly for young people, women, and those in minority groups as they spoke of being victims of street harassment.

These participants also shared the same concerns for the appearance of the area, particularly litter, dirty pavements and graffiti. They wanted a clean and well maintained environment with less litter, noise and pollution from traffic.

"The getting off the buses is an issue, as you have to cross in the blue lane to get the pavement or crossing then get around the island or the curves in the road." Merton Vision

Participants didn't like the amount of **traffic** in their area, particularly its effect on air quality and the amount of noise it produced.

Participants had mixed views about the accessibility of the public spaces in the area; Some aspects were good, but difficulties remained. In particular there were several comments about infrastructure design and constant changes to paths and cycle lanes, making navigation difficult for pedestrians and those with physical disabilities in particular.

Increased challenges around inclusion, loneliness and access to health services

Participants commented on the effects of the pandemic on their mental health. They spoke of loneliness, isolation and depression, and missing normal everyday activities. They also highlighted that their physical health was impacted because of restricted access to health services. Polish, West Indies and Tamil participants also noted the economic vulnerability of their communities that limited their access to basic necessities such as healthy food. Most participants were positive about the way their communities had supported each other and looked out for vulnerable neighbours.

Many participants noted difficulty accessing health and care services during the pandemic. People in these groups were likely to need health related services more regularly than other residents. They also felt a lack of face-to-face services and communication, with an **overreliance on the use of the internet and technology.**

"Had problem with my foot, needed a face to face appointment couldn't not get one have to then sit for hours down A&E." - Merton Vision

"Medical access was not the greatest during covid getting doctor's appointment was a struggle as there was no face to face appointment it was all over the phone." - Merton Vision

Participants spoke a lot about feeling **digitally excluded.** They felt that many local services and information sharing were happening online or in another format e.g. written small print or a different language that was not accessible to them, and that face-to-face services were suffering as a result. They said that if they couldn't use the internet or didn't have it they couldn't do basic tasks like banking and shopping. Similarly, younger people wanted to see newer forms of communication to help them engage like a Merton YouTube channel.

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Prioritising different visions for the borough

Themes from Deliberative workshops

Deliberation using Zoom

Deliberation is a form of public engagement that is designed to support citizens to consider the pros and cons of different policies or ideas, and navigate the potential trade-offs. In this project deliberative techniques were used to help local residents decide between different versions of the future in their local area. Through the process of deciding and discussing their rationale, we were able to understand in more detail what local residents prioritised in the future of their local area.

Traverse conducted two discussions on zoom with 25 residents across Merton. Residents were recruited by DJS research – all had previously completed the resident survey. Across the 25 participants a mix of demographics (age, social class and ethnicity) were represented.

The first session used themes from Commonplace to understand in more depth people's expectations and ambitions for their area. In between sessions Traverse analysed responses and created three potential future scenarios for parks and the high street. These were used to enable residents to explore trade-offs in potential futures.
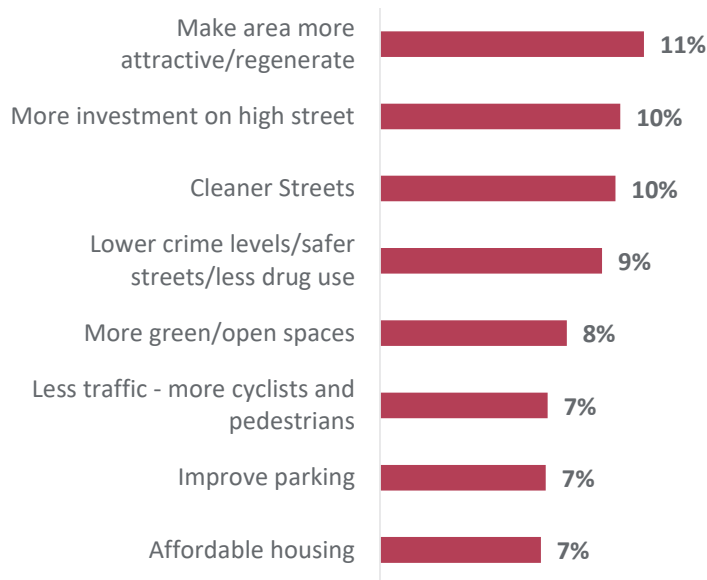
Deliberating the future of green space and high streets

Insights from the Commonplace platform and the residents survey informed the design of the deliberative workshops.

We knew from the survey and Commonplace that parks and green space were the most valued assets for residents in Merton. When asked about ambitions for the future in the residents survey the two most popular themes centred around improvements and investment in the town centre and high street.

Make area more attractive/regenerate	11%
More investment on high street	10%
Cleaner Streets	10%
Lower crime levels/safer streets/less drug use	9%
More green/open spaces	8%
Less traffic - more cyclists and pedestrians	7%
Improve parking	7%
Affordable housing	7%

Therefore, the two sessions were structured around discussing green space and the high street.

The first session was an open discussion of expectations and ambitions. The second session used scenarios of possible future high streets and park use to understand how residents trade-off different visions.

NEW21Q02. Now I would like you to think about your ambitions for the future. If you could see your local area ten years from now, what is the single biggest change you would want to see? **Base:** where response was given (863). Top 16 answers displayed.

Exploring through hyper local experiences

Residents were recruited by DJS Research via the resident survey, which all had previously completed.

Across the 25 participants we ensured a mix of demographics (age, social class and ethnicity) to broadly reflect the population. Full details are provided in the appendix.

Residents were recruited from across the borough and divided into 5 local areas for breakout room discussions. This ensured that residents used the same local shared space (parks and high streets).

Three themes underpinned resident's vision for the future of Merton

In the first workshop residents discussed their expectations and ambitions for their local high street and green space. Through analysis of responses we identified three themes:

- **Accessible, safe and clean** was both an expectation and an ambition. Residents didn't always feel safe in green space at night and got frustrated with the cleanliness of public space.

- **Community feel and ownership** was important but very hard to define. For green space varied use (by different groups) and lack of litter communicated ownership.

- **Character and identity** was also important, particularly in the high street where people wanted to avoid the space feeling bland or anonymous. Some residents felt they had no real local high street.

Character and identity

Community feel and ownership

Accessible, safe and clean
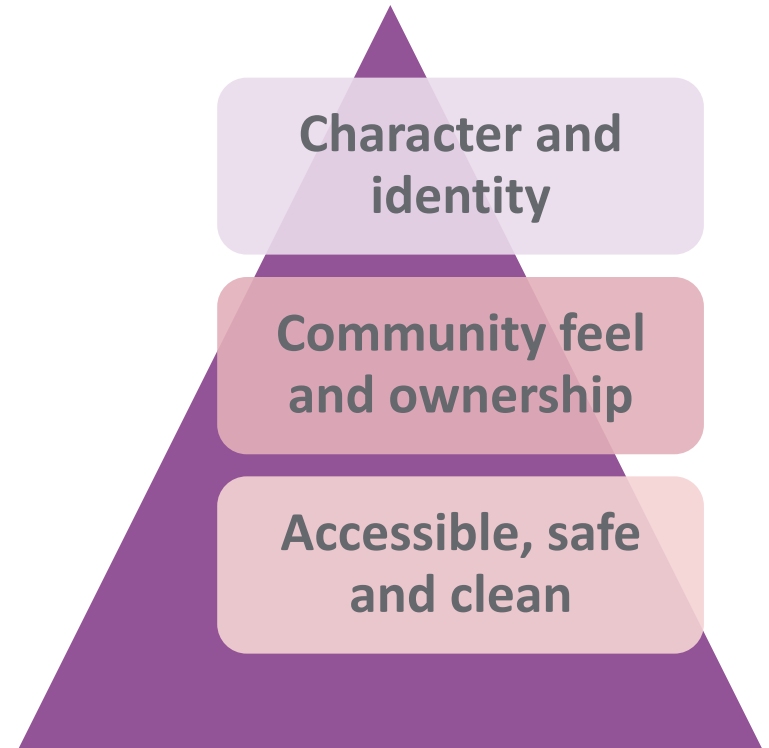
Three different high street futures were deliberated

In the second workshop participants were presented with three different visions for the future of their high street and asked to chose a preferred vision. Through discussion of why they made this choice we explored how residents approached the trade-offs in different priorities for the future.

Traverse designed three visions, each with a different focus. The full text presented to participants is available in the appendix.

High street living: This future focussed on using the high street space to provide **more housing and home working space.** Retail space was reduced with people shopping online.

Character and identity: This future focussed on **supporting local independent shops** to survive in the high street. It provided space for **socialising** over meeting the everyday retail needs of residents.

Convenience: This future focused on **meeting the everyday retail needs** of residents through supporting larger businesses to maintain stores and click and collect points so residents could do all their shopping locally.
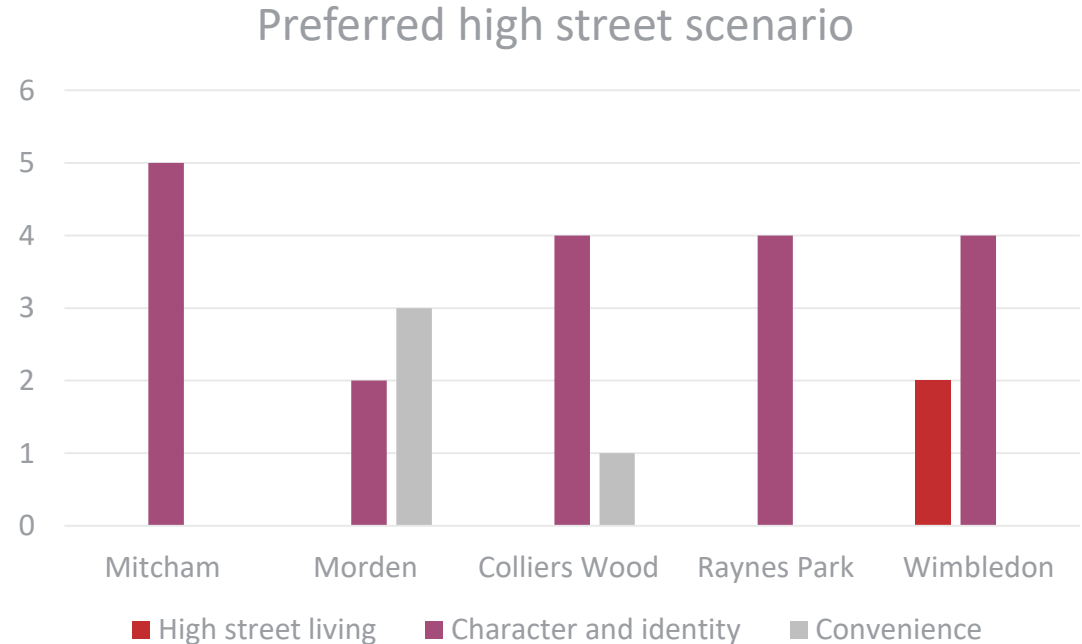
Residents prioritised character, identity and socialising

Across four of the five local areas a vision of the high street that prioritised character, identity and socialising through supporting independent shops was prioritised.

Residents in Morden were divided, with some favouring a vision focused on convenience and larger chain shops and others preferring independent shops and character.

A couple of residents in Wimbledon were the only ones to favour a high street that prioritised housing.

Preferred high street scenario

Legend:
- High street living
- Character and identity
- Convenience

Categories: Mitcham, Morden, Colliers Wood, Raynes Park, Wimbledon

Community feel and income-generation emerged as the key trade off

Residents struggled to see how a convenience-focused or residential-focused high street could support a sense of community.

They also struggled to see how an independent high street could be financially sustainable.

Given the choice most opted to prioritise community, although they were not pushed to see if they were willing to subsidise with increased council tax. Those that preferred convenience often cited the need for investment in the borough, which may come with bigger businesses.

Strong community

Generate income

Costs money

Weak community
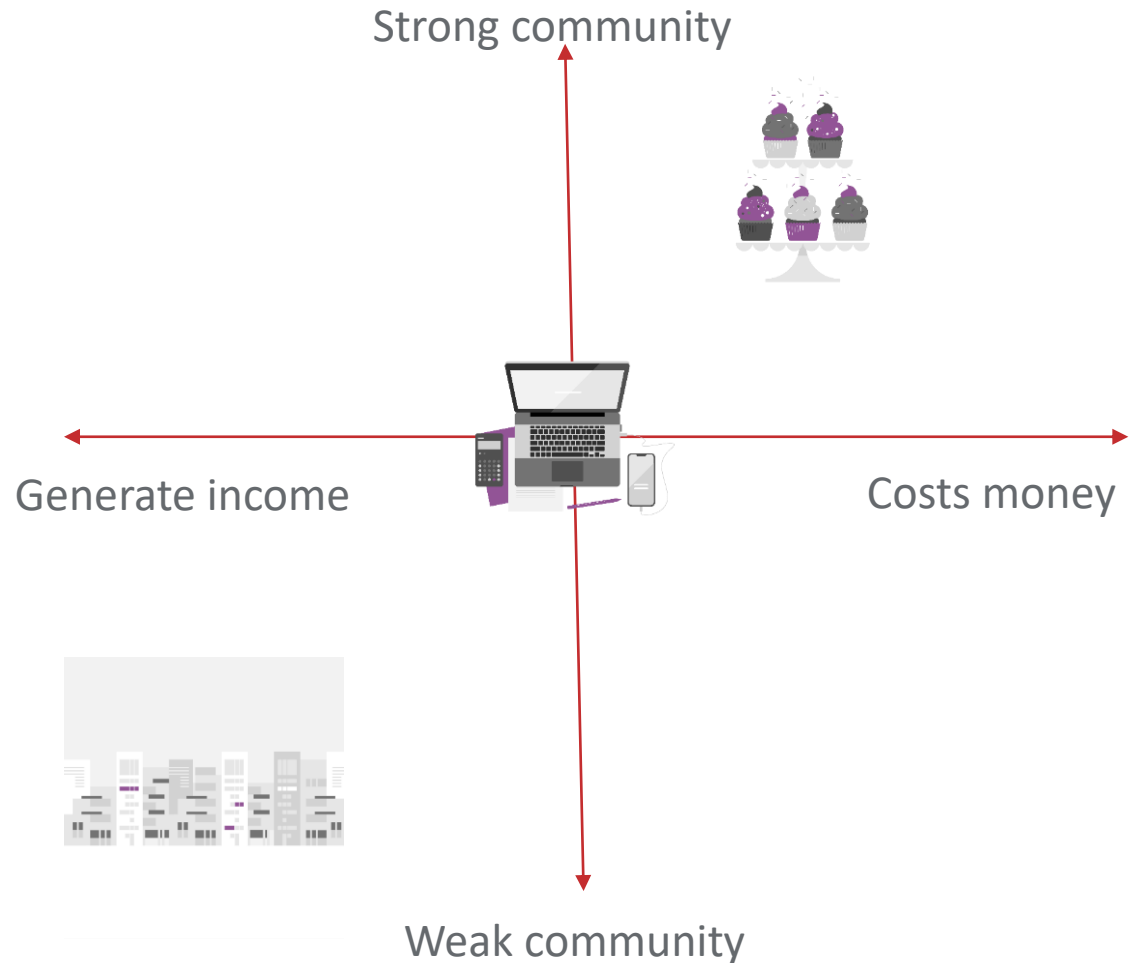
A residential-led high street felt like a loss of public space

Residents largely rejected a future high street focused on residential space because it felt like they would be losing valuable public space for socialising as well as losing a focal point of the area.

Although the scenario said there would be a community feel, most residents did not believe this would be achieved. A majority of participants feared that this scenario would drive population growth above all else and would result in poor quality, high density residential developments. Many participants feared that this would threaten the 'village-y' feel of their area, would overcrowd high streets and green spaces and lead to more traffic. Most had negative associations with housing developments lacking character – either being low quality or sterile 'luxury flats.'

The re-investment in public space was an aspect of this future that residents did recognise as a positive way to develop the area.

"If everything is converted to housing it is solving a practical problem, but where I live, there are a lot of residential houses, and it does not feel like a community here." (Collier Wood resident)

"I love the idea that income from housing development is reinvested into public space." (Wimbledon resident)

It was felt an independent high street would support socialising and community feel

Residents preferred this scenario because it re-established the high street as a place to socialise and a heart of the community.

Backing small independent shops by offering lower rents, was welcomed by some as an opportunity for local people to grow businesses and as a way to offer a challenge to large corporates. The focus on greening spaces and walking and cycling as the main mode of transport was also seen as a positive.

Many were happy to see a pedestrianised high street prioritised over parking. Car owners said they would be happy not to drive to the high street if it helped maintain character and identity. Many did envision themselves still driving to other parts of the borough for weekly shopping. They noted that the success of this would depend on collaboration with other Boroughs to ensure that all necessary functions and components of the high street offer would still be available.

Others, however, queried whether such a model would be economically viable, because small shops would struggle to compete with large online retailers, be more expensive, attract only some demographic groups - with a potential knock-on effect of gentrification - and don't offer good salaries or career options. The view was also expressed that this would be the scenario that would cost the Council most – as opposed to high street living, which would generate the greatest income and convenience, where income and investment would come from big business.

"This would attract a different variety of people, more youth and professionals and people with families." (Wimbledon resident)

"An independent retailer can't compete with Amazon. Sad reflection of society really." (Raynes Park resident)

Most residents were not willing to sacrifice character for convenience

Most residents described giving the high street over to mini warehouses and big business as soulless. Doubts were expressed whether any positive community effect would be achieved, because it would encourage quick in-and-out car use and there would be no reason to spend time on the high street. Participants also thought that the carbon footprint associated with people driving to the high street to collect orders was a problem.

Participants also highlighted the risk involved in becoming too dependent on corporate investment. And all of those services that could not be delivered by large online retailers, such as a coffee or a haircuts, would struggle to keep a foothold.

Those in favour of this future saw the benefit of having access to well-known retailers for their own shopping habits as well as the potential investment it attracted to the borough. They highlighted potential for this scenario to create local jobs.

"It would be nice to keep the supermarkets - we have many and I want to keep them." (Mitcham resident)

"Click and collect stuck with me with number 3 – this is convenient, but it is also cultural suicide if you turn an area into a dropbox." (Colliers Wood resident)

Three different green space futures were deliberated

In the second workshop participants were also presented with three different visions for the future of their green space and asked to chose a preferred vision. Through discussion of why they made this choice we explored how residents approach the trade-offs in different priorities for the future.

Traverse designed three visions, each with a different focus. The full text presented to participants is available in the appendix.

Event spaces: This future focussed on using green space to host a mix of **local community events that bring people together and larger income generating events.**

Nature and wellbeing: This future focussed on using green space as a **tranquil space to support residents' wellbeing** as well maintaining biodiversity to meet **climate change targets**.
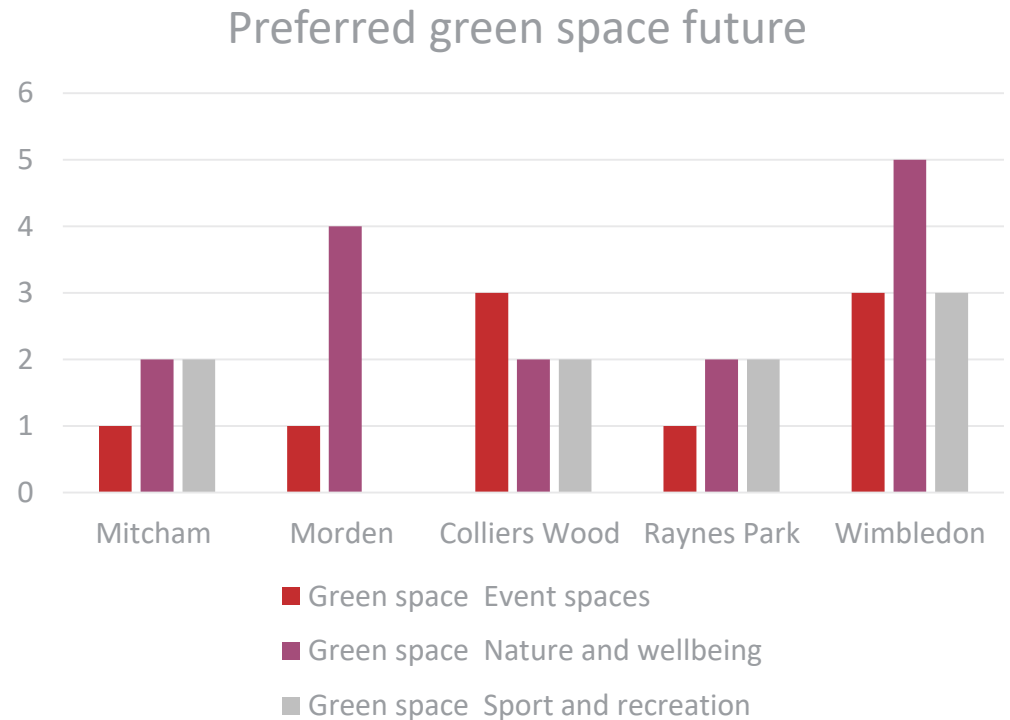
Recreation and sport: This future focussed on using green space to **support physical exercise through supporting organised sport and activity** groups.

Green space use was evenly prioritised

The different futures were evenly prioritised across the five local area groups.

The three different focuses were seen as equally important and most residents felt that Merton had enough green space to have different green spaces with different focuses.

Preferred green space future

Legend:
- ■ Green space Event spaces
- ■ Green space Nature and wellbeing
- ■ Green space Sport and recreation

It was felt that Merton has enough green space to accommodate all scenarios discussed

A fourth scenario with a mix of uses across green spaces in the borough was the preferred future identified by all breakout groups. Overall, however, most participants leaned towards nature as a key driver for all choices - creating space for, and protecting nature was recognised as an integral function of green spaces in Merton.

Between the many green spaces in the borough and sizeable parks with space for several activities, participants saw the extent to which different uses would engender a sense of community, and foster a link to place as an important measure for the desirability and success of different activities.

Citing examples from elsewhere, participants suggested that an integrated strategy could help make sure that green spaces were used as a crucial resource. Such a strategic approach would make it possible for green spaces to make a maximum contribution to a range of outcomes including health, biodiversity, jobs and income.

"I have ready access to a few parks which could all perform the purposes I need. No park has to have everything." (Raynes Park resident)

"We all have to do our bit to meet the Paris accord on climate change." (Wimbledon resident)

"Promote enjoyment of green spaces as varied nature destinations, with provision for events too. Let's make more of our spaces being this attractive and enticing." (Colliers Wood resident)

Events and income were important and said to be currently lacking in Merton

Events were seen as an important focus for green space, and something that Merton could improve upon. Some referenced previous local carnivals – such as Mitcham carnival – that in years past had provided space for residents to come together. Events that created benefits for residents were seen as the key criterion for the choice of different events, from book and Christmas fairs to music festivals and concerts. They also saw larger events that attracted visitors as a positive and currently something that other Boroughs do better than Merton.

Residents recognised the income generating benefits of this scenario and stressed that a particular emphasis should be placed on giving business to local traders and community food stalls.

Residents were cautious of potential negative impacts of large events. Strong management should be in place to ensure that organisers of commercial events paid the whole cost of them (e.g. incl. the clean-up afterwards) and that they didn't create detrimental impacts for residents or the environment.

*"I think there's always an issue with events which is more to do with management. Some are well organised and policed, and others are not so well done. It's tricky to prioritise events over other things."
(Wimbledon resident)*

"Instead of bringing commercial food stalls, bring in community food stalls. We have lots of good food shops. We have everything here, but we are not using them." (Raynes Park resident)

Wide consensus that green space should protect nature and promote well-being

There was a strong recognition that protecting nature was an important role for parks, and many felt the borough had good provision at the moment so the focus should be on maintaining that provision. The use of these spaces could also be increased through things like walks and talks to educate people about nature and the environment.

The costs involved in maintaining natural spaces, highlighted by several groups, was often the reason to opt for a combination of several scenarios so that events could help pay for the upkeep. The importance of nature for residents' wellbeing was seen as the main incentive for residents to play their part in creating and maintaining natural spaces in Merton's parks and commons, e.g. through community and 'friends of' groups, social prescribing initiatives or creating employment opportunities focused on nature conservation.

Several groups also discussed the need to look beyond the parks to invest and create space for nature. According to them, a wider network of green spaces would be required to support biodiversity and address climate change, from verges, urban trees and rooftops to playing fields and people's gardens. The cost involved in creating and maintaining habitats was seen as justified and necessary.

"I learnt about bat highways it never occurred to me. It's just more educational use of green space " (Morden resident)

"I think if the council wants to be visionary, it's what they do outside the parks that counts. What they do with verges, central reservations, unused plots." (Wimbledon resident)

Sport and recreation was important but needed to be inclusive and flexible

Views differed considerably as to whether sufficient provision was already in place for exercise and playing sports. Some thought that there were enough facilities so the future focus should be around promoting their use and enabling access. Others thought provision could be improved stating that it used to be easier to play sports like football in local parks.

This led to the conclusion that if more space was given to sports and exercise, this would need to be well managed and flexible so that other people could use the space when the sport was not being played. Cricket fields were an example of less flexible space.

Some felt that offering more activities would make parks safer, because young people were entertained and engaged. Again, as for the events focus, being clear about the actual benefits or outcomes that would be created was seen as a key criterion for any investments to be made. Outcomes that could potentially be delivered through recreational facilities in the parks crucially included savings for the NHS, through social prescribing and if people exercised more.

"I think a little more investment in gym facilities, more things teenagers may use, basketball courts, something like that to bring teenagers and make them active." (Mitcham resident)

"Some kinds (athletics tracks, cricket greens) are not spaces that are flexible. So those tie up the space for only the people who actively do those things." (Colliers Wood)

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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.