Introduction

This is a summary of the Merton Open Space Study (MOSS) carried out recently by WS Atkins Planning Consultants. The Council’s first aim in producing this summary is to inform the public about the study’s key findings and recommendations. Its second, but equally important aim, is to obtain feedback. The MOSS study is the first stage in the process of developing a strategy for managing open spaces in Merton - your views are vital if we are to get the approach right.

The Mayor of London’s Draft London Plan 2002 requires London boroughs to produce open space strategies. This study sets out what steps Merton is going to take to achieve this. The study has taken account of government advice (Planning Policy Guidance Note 17, and the Urban Green Spaces Task Force Report) when preparing these documents.

The Council would like to hear your views on this study: a feedback form is attached for this purpose. Any technical phrases used in this document marked with an asterix* are explained in a technical summary.
Background

This is the first audit of open space for a long time in Merton. The absence of information has meant it has been difficult to assess whether Merton’s open space is meeting the needs of local people. The advice given by government makes it clear that an open space strategy should be based on an up-to-date assessment of needs.

The re-organisation of the borough’s schools means there will be some surplus land. A borough-wide approach needs to be set out to protect and enhance open space, and to ensure that it makes a contribution to the quality of urban environments and people’s needs.

There have been pressures facing open spaces. These include a lack of funding, anti-social behaviour, and plans to develop private sports pitches. The Government task force was set up to report on issues. Benefits of open space reported include:

- **Regeneration and renewal projects** - parks can help raise the image of an area.
- **Healthy lifestyles** - an environment used for relaxation and physical exercise.
- **Social inclusion** - communities are developed when people get involved in the design and management of local spaces.
- **Outdoor classroom** - learning opportunities and work experience in environmental management.
- **Ecology** - parks counter pollution, absorb noise, provide wildlife corridors, sustainable urban drainage, and act as ‘lungs’ for the city.
- **Heritage and culture** - open spaces can provide venues for festivals and civic celebrations.

Assessing Open Space

WS Atkins was appointed in November 2001 to survey the borough’s open spaces and develop ideas for a strategy. Three volumes were produced: Strategic Assessment, Landscape Strategy, and Playing Pitch Assessment. The consultants looked at all those parks and open spaces identified in Schedule Two of Merton’s Unitary Development Plan.

Please note school sites were included and extra playing fields (some private) were surveyed if they qualify as Urban Green Space. Other examples of Urban Green Space, such as allotments and cemeteries, weren’t assessed because information was already held on them.

Volume One - The Strategic Assessment

- This volume surveyed the open spaces in terms of amenities, ownership, function, landscape and visual quality. Individual sites were also assessed on the basis of their ecological, cultural, and educational values. The Council had already assessed the structural value of open spaces. The Assessment was carried out using the terms of the Metropolitan Open Land Study 2000.
- A database for the information was established so the values and qualitative distribution of
open space could be seen. A Geographic Information System (computer programme) was used to map the data so open spaces can be easily monitored.

- Public focus groups were set up to ascertain the needs and views of different users. Turnout was low, so the significance of findings is limited, but it did help identify general issues and concerns to take forward into the strategy.
- This volume sets out their findings and includes recommendations for further work. The report also includes a list of strategic objectives that could be part of Merton’s open space strategy.

**Volume Two - The Landscape Strategy**

Landscape character and biodiversity was examined, and action proposed for its protection and enhancement. This knowledge is essential for the structure of a Green Network* in Merton and across borough boundaries.

**Volume Three - The Playing Pitch Assessment**

- This was based on Sport England’s methodology. It required an assessment of existing and future supply and demand. To do this the consultants carried out surveys of sports clubs/teams that play within Merton.

### Key Findings

#### Supply of open space

1. Merton has a lot of public open space, 677 hectares in all, but it is unevenly distributed. The West of the borough tends to be deficient in Small Local* Parks but has more playing pitches. However the East is deficient in District* and Metropolitan* Parks, and has less playing pitches. Merton has a need for more sports pitches for certain sports, e.g. rugby, cricket and hockey. The study found no area with a surplus of any type of park.

2. Some wards are more sensitive to open space deficiencies due to deprivation. These wards are likely to be prioritised for open space improvement. Some areas have a much higher ratio of people to open space than others e.g. Graveney has no open space, whereas Village has 27 hectares per 1000 population.

3. The District* Park proposed for the Wandle Valley (extending Wandle Park, Colliers Wood) would go some way to meet deficiencies. Measures to extend the catchment area of parks also need to be considered (see recommended action).

4. The borough has large areas of green space in the form of private gardens. In the West this helps alleviate deficiency in open space and nature conservation.

### Quality of supply

1. The Open Space Hierarchy* provides a guide as to what facilities are typical in each type of park. However, the guide is only in general terms, and some parks do not provide all the facilities. Therefore an assessment of facilities on a park-by-park basis is needed to see if any additional facilities would be appropriate.

2. Some wards are much better served by facilities than others, e.g. Graveney and Figge’s Marsh have few facilities, whereas Phipps Bridge and Village have many.

3. Only three parks were considered ‘poor’ overall - Tamworth Farm Rec, Deer Park Gardens, and Lynmouth Gardens. Improvements to Lynmouth Gardens have been agreed with residents already.

4. There are 23 parks assessed as ‘fair’. This could be due to lack of facilities, but 10 of the parks concerned also had ‘nature conservation value.’ This means that their management might be organised around habitat creation - some facilities are unsuitable for these types of open spaces.

5. The typical open space in Merton consists of recreational grassland with some natural woodland and informal grassland. Most Local* Parks consist of recreational grassland, which is not very stimulating - effort is needed to broaden
their appeal, and make them more significant contributors to quality of life.

Research shows that most visits to parks are for passive recreation. Care for natural features such as scenery, streams and vegetation is therefore needed. Major tree planting, land modelling and restoration work has already been carried out, but there are currently seven areas that are said to be in need of real improvement.

6. These findings show that each park needs to be examined individually for its character, amenities and management mechanisms. Nearby parks and user surveys should also be considered when drawing up improvement plans.

**Roles of open space**

1. 73% of open spaces in Merton have at least some visual amenity value. 60% have 'a clearly definable townscape value'. Contribution to visual amenity depends on the amount of open space in the area, how visible the open space is from the surrounding area, how visually attractive it is, and the contribution it makes to the street scene.

2. 31% of all open spaces have significant ecological value. 45% of all sites are a link in a Green Corridor*. Information from the GLA Biological Unit shows that two areas in the borough have no publicly accessible sites of 'Metropolitan or Borough importance for nature conservation' (around Wimbledon Town Centre and East Mitcham).

3. At present there are 10 Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) within the borough. However some areas are beyond the pedestrian catchments of these LNRs. A further 11 sites are being investigated for designation; four of these would help meet deficiencies.

4. 21 open spaces were found to play a cultural role, e.g. used for community meetings, fairs, and fireworks. The study also looked at social use: activities such as BMX, skateboarding, dog walking, and informal sports. Clearly this will fluctuate depending on time of day and season. Further assessment is needed on this for each park.

5. The study shows estimates for informal recreation in Merton based on the General Household Survey with regard to the demographic profile of the borough. 45% of adults walk regularly (once every 4 weeks). 12% regularly cycle, 5% regularly jog/run. Even more partake on a casual basis (once every 12 months).

6. Participation in these activities is expected to rise, as is the population. The variety and extent of recreational provision needs to increase in line with demand. Improvements to the London Cycle Network and the Wandle Riverside Walk will contribute towards this objective, but more needs to be done.

7. The non-recreational values of open spaces are highlighted. Most areas have amenity and townscape value, and generally the bigger spaces play a cultural role. The urban needs fulfilled by open spaces are numerous, and there is strong support for its protection as set out in the borough’s Unitary Development Plan.

**Space not accessible to the public**

1. Open space that is not publicly accessible can play an important role in meeting recreational needs. The East of the borough is deficient in publicly accessible District* Parks (providing outdoor sports and playing fields), and playing fields. There are, however, a number of school
The study has identified a need for additional match slots for rugby, cricket, and hockey in the East of the borough. Options to meet the deficiency include:

- Gaining access to sites not currently in public use (including school sites).
- Converting sports pitches to provide more intensive provision.
- Developing existing open spaces and new areas to provide better sports facilities.

2. The study also identified a need for an artificial turf pitch (ATP). At present there is only one in public use - in the West of the borough.

3. Other options for widening access to facilities already in place include:

- Secure public access to Westminster City School playing fields.
- Eastfields school (now Mitcham Vale) for football, cricket and rugby.
- Tamworth Manor School for football and rugby. Access, facility and pitch improvements would have to be made to make these areas viable.

4. The school re-organisation has resulted in surplus school sites. The Brenley playing fields has potential to become a Local* Park; this would go some way towards meeting the surrounding area’s deficiency in open space but major landscape work is required. Rowan School also has potential as a Local* Park, and new sports facilities could be put in place. The area is similarly lacking in recreation amenities and possibly some nature conservation interest, as this could extend the local Green Corridor*.

5. Further work is needed to assess the options for improving pitch capacity in the East of the borough, but opportunities do exist at:

- Mitcham Vale School - sports pitch potential.
- Lonesome School - sports pitch potential.
- Rowan School - sports pitch potential.
- Lyndhurst Avenue Recreation ground - mini pitches.

6. There may also be opportunities for cross boundary provision. It maybe, for example, that open space in a neighbouring borough could be used to reduce deficiency in Longthornton Ward. There may also be scope to jointly provide facilities in deficiency areas.

Local opinion and demand for open space

1. The focus groups revealed a number of residents’ concerns. It is felt that people are not making the most of open space, and that the Council needs to find out why.

2. The quality and quantity of facilities is perceived to have declined. There were concerns that space would be seen as surplus if it wasn’t used.

3. Some residents felt certain sports were favoured over others, and that playing pitches were given priority over nature conservation areas.

4. It was agreed that children and young people need to be encouraged into sports and active recreation.

5. Access was considered acceptable, but that there is scope to improve the number of points of access. Signage could be improved, as could access for people with disabilities.

6. Some thought there should be more public involvement in the management of open space, whilst some felt that the Council should do more - such as employ park keepers.

7. Residents agreed that maintenance arrangements for open spaces should be responsive at the local level. Friends groups, Partnerships and specialised arrangements have been established, and there is now a more consultative approach to management.

8. Generally speaking, the focus groups demonstrated strong support for retaining surplus school playing fields, and all open spaces in the borough.
Recommended Action

WS Atkins have recommended that the following work should be undertaken to assist in the development of the Open Space Strategy:

- A Priority Matrix* should be developed to link provision of open space with other initiatives in order to decide investment.
- Park-by-park analysis of facilities which takes account of unique character, the management mechanism, proximity to other parks, and user surveys. This information would be fed into the Priority Matrix*.
- Measures to extend pedestrian catchments of parks in areas of deficiency should be investigated; e.g. more access routes, gates, better signage.
- Management strategies for Local* and Small Local Parks* should be developed.
- User surveys should be undertaken to establish perceptions, informal use of open space, number of visitors, and frequency of visits.
- Schools should be surveyed to see which open spaces they use. Amenity, educational, social and cultural role of cemeteries, allotments and incidental open space should be surveyed.
- A feasibility study is needed to determine solutions to the pitch and open space access problems in the East of the borough. Urban Green Space and playing fields should be examined in order to meet deficiencies across the borough.

Volume Two, The Landscape Strategy, makes a number of recommendations to protect biodiversity and enhance the Green Network*. These include:

- Investigate the potential for additional Green Corridors* to meet nature conservation deficiencies
- Measures to improve provision of accessible natural green space should be investigated.
- Improve access to nature conservation through Green Chains*.
- The Local Biodiversity Partnership, which identifies habitats and species for protection and enhancement, would benefit from a budget and a dedicated officer.
- To help set investment priorities, open spaces should be ranked in terms of interest to the public and nature conservation.
- Biodiversity enhancement plans should be formulated for sites where multiple uses may be accommodated.
- The Council should take opportunities to improve the Green Network* where it falls within, or adjacent to, development application sites.

Objectives & Consultation

The Vision: “The Council in partnership with the local community, local business, and key stakeholders will provide high quality green spaces throughout the borough to serve the needs of the whole community, and improve the quality of life and environment for Merton’s residents”.
The additional work suggested by the consultants will be carried out soon, and a strategy for open spaces formulated. We are seeking your opinions on the vision, and aims and objectives that have arisen - this consultation is essential to the understanding of local needs.

We can draft a strategy with action points as soon as we have your response to this study. Core objectives are laid out in the questionnaire - please give us your input. We would like to receive comments by the 30th of November.

It can also be completed online at the Council’s website: www.merton.gov.uk/plansandprojects/openspaces/

**Further Information**

If you would like to purchase a copy of the Study it can be obtained from: Plans and Projects, Merton Civic Centre, London Road, Morden, Surrey, SM4 5DX.

Tel: 020 8545 3041, Fax: 020 8535 3336, email policyandinformationteam@merton.gov.uk

All three Volumes: £30  
**Volume One** - Strategic Open Space Assessment £15  
**Volume Two** - Landscape Strategy £15  
**Volume Three** - Playing Pitch Assessment £5

Alternatively, the full report can be found at all Merton’s Libraries, and is available on Merton’s website: www.merton.gov.uk/plansandprojects/openspaces/

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**Technical Summary**

**District Parks** - (approx 20 hectares in size) landscape setting with a variety of natural features providing a range of activities including outdoor sports facilities, playing fields, children’s play and informal recreation.

**Green Chain** - these are areas that are identified as links between open spaces. They can provide important informal recreation opportunities for walking and cycling, and create a safe and pleasant environment.

**Green Corridor** - relatively continuous areas of open space leading through the built environment which link to each other, larger green spaces, or Metropolitan Open Land. They can assist in the movement of some plant and animal species through the borough.

**Green Network** - term used to describe the borough’s open spaces and the links between them.

**Linear Open Spaces** - (size varies) these include canal towpaths, paths, disused railways and other routes that provide opportunities for informal recreation and nature conservation.

**Local Parks** - (approx 2 hectares in size) providing for court games, children’s play, siting-out areas, nature conservation, landscaped environment, and playing fields if the parks are large enough.

**Metropolitan Parks** - (approx 60 hectares in size) are areas of either natural heathland, woodlands, commons etc. or formal parks providing for active and passive recreation. They may contain playing fields, but have at least 40 hectares set aside for other pursuits.

**Open Space Hierarchy** - an open space hierarchy categorises open spaces by type and function. It gives guidance on what facilities might be found in each type of open space. In London the London Planning Advisory Committee hierarchy is the most commonly used. This includes Metropolitan Parks, District Parks, Local Parks, Small Local Parks, and Linear Open Spaces.

**Priority Matrix** - WS Atkins have recommended that the Council develop a Priority Matrix to prioritise investment in open space. The matrix can include a variety of criteria including economic and cultural factors, use of open space etc.

Each open space receives a score for each of these criteria and an overall score. Using the matrix allows the Council to take into account factors other than open space deficiency when deciding which open spaces need investment.

**Small Local Parks** - (less than 2 hectares in size) gardens, siting-out areas, children’s play, and nature conservation.

**Urban Green Space** - in London this term refers to open spaces to which public access is restricted or not formally established; but which meets, or is capable of meeting, recreational or non-recreational needs within an urban area.
If you would like more information in your own language, please contact us at the address shown in the bottom box.

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Si usted desea mas informacion en su propia lengua, por favor contactenos en la direccion al pie del formato.

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