Introduction

The Merton open space strategy has been agreed after we consulted on the draft version with people who use open space.

The consultation ran for four weeks in 2004. We sent a summary of the draft strategy, with a tear-off comments slip, to organisations such as the Greater London Authority, Sport England and surrounding local authorities. We also consulted local stakeholders such as sports groups, residents' associations and ethnic minority groups.

The summary document was posted on our website so members of the public could respond to the strategy as well. We received a total of 7 responses from organisations and 19 responses from local stakeholders.

You can view the full-length strategy by visiting www.merton.gov.uk/openspaces

Why does Merton need an open space strategy?

Merton’s open spaces are always under pressure from development.

Merton Council is committed to improving the quality of life for people who live in the borough. We take an active role in maintaining Merton’s open spaces and improving their quality for users.

We need a strategy so we can:

• Present our vision for the future of the open space network.
• Outline our action plans to achieve this vision by 2010.

The needs of the community constantly change and it is important that open space can react to new demands. Taking this long-term strategy approach will allow us to apply for public funding for improvements.

We will review the strategy every five years.
What is open space?
For the purposes of this strategy, we define open space as:

“All land and water in Merton both publicly or privately owned, mostly in an undeveloped state, that offer public enjoyment through physical or visual access”.

The strategy deals then with the following types of open space:
• Parks
• Sports pitches
• Commons
• Allotments
• Cemeteries and church yards
• School playing fields
• Waterways and streams

It does not consider:
• Private gardens
• Grass verges along roads and footpaths
• Hard landscaped areas (such as public squares and streetscapes)

Why is open space important?
Merton is rich in open spaces compared to other London boroughs. 18% of the borough’s area is taken up by open space compared to the London average of 10%. We have 67 public parks of various sizes. These open spaces are part of the character of Merton and play an important role in preserving our natural and cultural heritage.

There will always be a demand for open space. A survey of Merton residents carried out in 2003 found that 76% of those interviewed use parks. The population of Merton currently stands at 188,907. That figure is expected to rise by 10,000 by 2011.

People use open spaces mainly for exercise, socialising and relaxing. Our open spaces directly support both tourism and recreation - underpinning the borough's economic wealth and quality of life.

“Visual accessibility" is also an important aspect of our open spaces. Although access to some open spaces may be restricted, views of open space are equally as important as physical access. In an urban environment open space provides relief from buildings and defines the townscape.
Ten ways open space benefits Merton

1. Creates opportunities for sport and recreation – improves health.
2. Provides space people can go to escape pressure and get a sense of well-being.
3. Hosts community events and gatherings – improves social inclusion.
4. Attracts tourists – boosts local economy.
5. Provides outdoor classroom for learning about nature and the environment.
6. Protects wild plants and animals.
7. Protects significant natural features and local heritage.
8. Contributes towards clean air, water and drainage – serves as ‘lungs’ for the urban area.
9. Adds value to properties and localities.
10. Improves the urban environment and contributes to regeneration.

How was the strategy developed?

The strategy was developed after we carried out several detailed studies. These included:

**Merton Open Space Study (MOSS) 2002**
A professional survey (carried out by planning consultants WS Atkins) that assessed current facilities, landscapes and playing pitches. It also included focus groups to find out the needs of different users. It concluded by making recommendations for developing this strategy.

**Merton Open Space Needs Survey 2003**
A phone survey of a sample of residents. Its objectives were to understand what people use open space for, what people think about it, and why some people don’t use it.

**East Mitcham Open Space Strategy 2003**
A local area strategy developed for East Mitcham using the results of MOSS 2002. In particular it considered the future use of the former Rowan High School and Brenley Playing Field sites.

**Playing Pitch Assessment Update 2003**
An update of the MOSS 2002 playing pitch study, it used the latest advice from Sport England and collected more information about our facilities and sport teams.

**Partnerships**
Putting this strategy into place needs the cooperation of a number of local and national partners. Organisations we work with include: Groundwork Merton, Environment Agency, Sport England, National Trust, London Wildlife Trust and English Nature.
Issues

After talking to residents and people who use open spaces, we found seven main issues for this strategy to focus on.

1. Improving the range and quality of open spaces.
   With 677 hectares of open space, Merton is one of the greenest boroughs in London. The challenge is to improve the range and quality of open spaces fairly across the borough. This strategy allows us to apply for money to make improvements and help to decide where to spend it.

2. Providing a variety of open space experiences and facilities fairly across the borough.
   The quality of open spaces varies across the borough. Using detailed knowledge of demands we must work on making them accessible to all. Surveys show us that residents use their nearest park most often, so we must spend money on improving the facilities in smaller parks.

3. Protecting open space from inappropriate development (including development next to open space).
   We must ensure our planning policies help to preserve open spaces. If an open space is no longer needed for its existing purpose, we must find out if it is needed for any other open space function. We also need to check that development near open spaces does not effect the quality of the space.

4. Making sure open space experiences are relevant to all members of the community - especially young people, ethnic minorities and disabled users.
   Open spaces provide an essential setting for social interaction and public life. By planning for the needs of particular groups in the community we can maximise the enjoyment of all park users.

   Young people
   Young people are sometimes blamed for graffiti, vandalism and intimidating other park users. We need to involve young people in the decision-making process and listen to them when we are planning facilities.

   Ethnic minorities
   The Open Space Needs Survey told us that the white population uses parks more than other ethnic groups. Although the participation gap is small, it is important for us to consider different cultural needs.

   Disabled users
   People with disabilities are one of the groups most likely to use open spaces. We must consistently plan facilities that meet the needs of those with mental disabilities and the mobility and sight impaired.

5. Increasing the accessibility of parks to pedestrians, cyclists and people with disabilities.
   How to reach parks is one of the major factors affecting people's usage. We must encourage alternatives to the private car and invest in facilities for walking and cycling. But we also have to provide parking for disabled users.
6. Integrating open spaces into the urban setting and improving amenities and regeneration opportunities.
Open spaces provide relief from the built environment and help define the borough. We must make sure that open space is an essential element of planning design and that our policies enhance open spaces that improve quality of life.

7. Improving safety and security in parks.
To attract visitors parks need to be welcoming and friendly spaces where people can relax and enjoy themselves. We can make people feel safer by improving facilities, lighting, paths, surveillance and numbers of staff.

8. Playing pitch issues
Population growth and the changing popularity of sports affect the demand for pitches, courts and related facilities. We must consider both when deciding where to spend money on improvements. Some areas of the borough have better pitches than others and we have to develop facilities fairly. Parks are understaffed at the moment, so we need to think about how new facilities might affect the workload of the staff that we do have.

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**Our Vision**

We developed the strategy’s vision after consulting residents and assessing current and future open space needs. Its purpose is to provide a summary of the open space network that we want for Merton. We aim to achieve the vision with five years.

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The open space study carried out in 2002 suggested a number of targets that open space provision should reach. After consulting on those, and linking them to the strategy’s vision, we have set results (called outcomes) that the strategy will produce.
### Open space outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access</td>
<td>Public access for all Merton residents to a full range of open spaces including natural conservation areas, sports pitches, recreation facilities and heritage sites.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>A commitment to community involvement in the design, planning and management of the full range of open spaces that are relevant to the values of different communities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Opportunities for learning about the natural environment and the value of recreation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>Protection and restoration of significant natural habitats and ecosystems.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>Distribution of open space funding across the borough relevant to the needs and aspirations of local communities.</td>
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<td>Healthy lifestyle</td>
<td>A range of recreational and leisure opportunities within the open space network.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Heritage and culture</td>
<td>Enhancement and protection of natural and cultural heritage features and landscapes that represent Merton’s history, location and identity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regeneration</td>
<td>Enhancement and protection of open space that increases both the amenity and quality of life in both working and living environments.</td>
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Actions

Implementation
We are putting this strategy into action by setting up two new teams. The most senior is the Coordinating Executive Group. This will be made up of a senior councillor and senior managers dealing with planning and open space. It will meet every three months.

Reporting to the coordinating group is the Open Space Steering Group. This is made up of staff responsible for putting the strategy into place on the ground. The steering group meets every month.

The Action Plan
We have written an action plan that describes projects we need to carry out to achieve our vision. We have prioritised all the actions we are going to take and set timings for completing them. The six plans are:

1. Policy and Guidelines
2. Community Engagement
3. Partnerships
4. Parks Improvements
5. Playing Pitches
6. Research and Monitoring

Actions 1 – Policy and Guidelines
These actions are about our policies on open space and the guidance that we give to developers.

1. Set standards for the open spaces that we provide and meet them.
2. Produce a Supplementary Planning Document that says how we want builders to provide open space in new developments.
3. Look at the open space policies in our Unitary Development Plan.
4. Develop design guidelines for new open spaces so we have high quality environments.

Actions 2 – Community Engagement Actions
These actions are about how we will involve local residents in all aspects of the open space that we provide.

1. Develop marketing strategies and community initiatives to promote awareness, benefits and use of open space.
2. Develop an open space page on our website that engages the community. It will provide an interactive booking and cancellation service for our sports pitches and parks.
3. Use youth projects to involve young people in the planning, design and management of parks that meet their needs.
4. Investigate funding opportunities for open space in Merton.
5. Involve local communities in the planning, design and management of open space.
6. Set up a forum to raise awareness of the issues facing our open spaces and encourage community involvement.
7. Help the community develop friends groups for their local parks.
8. Engage ethnic communities – to establish what their expectations are.
Actions 3 – Partnerships
These actions are about how we are going to work with users of open space and organisations that can affect its future.
1. Develop partnerships with environmental, heritage and open space agencies.
2. Develop partnerships with recreational, educational, health, community and environmental organisations, private open space providers and sports clubs.
3. Work more closely with staff in neighbouring boroughs so we can draw up plans together and build cross-boundary partnerships.
4. Work with developers so they include open space in their projects.
5. Work with police and other enforcement agencies to prevent graffiti and vandalism in parks.
6. Work with open space landowners to improve areas and meet the needs of the community.
7. Develop partnerships with sports clubs.
8. Develop a partnership programme for schools to encourage appreciation of open space.
9. Work with the Environment Agency to look at the potential for restoring the river Wandle and creating habitats along its corridor.

Actions 4 – Parks Improvement
These actions set out how we are going to physically improve the borough’s parks.
1. Research new ways to manage parks.
2. Look at funding policies and priorities for park maintenance.
3. Consider future maintenance costs before spending money on projects in parks.
4. Increase frontline staffing in parks.
5. Upgrade existing facilities.
6. Improve the way we collect charges for courts and pitches.
7. Agree how quickly we respond to vandalism and security concerns.
8. Develop individual management plans for parks.
9. Develop the role of friends groups in the management of parks.
10. Develop partnerships with local businesses.
Actions 5 – Playing Pitches
These actions are about how we will improve playing pitches in the borough.

1. Develop a funding strategy for managing playing pitches and pavilions.
2. Develop a strategy for marketing playing pitches to potential users.
3. Upgrade facilities (such as changing rooms, toilets, showers) with particular attention to meeting the needs of women and children.
4. Look into measures to deter unofficial use of playing pitches.
5. Work with other agencies to increase participation in pitch sports in the borough.
6. Work with sports teams to improve the quality of pavilions and playing facilities.
7. Improve access to sports grounds.
8. Make sure that privately owned pitches that the public can use remain open to the public. We will do this through partnership arrangements and legal agreements.
9. Repeat the playing pitch assessment every two years.
10. Monitor the decisions that neighbouring councils make about playing pitches and take part in their consultations.

Actions 6 - Research and Monitoring
These actions are about how we are going to improve our working knowledge of the borough’s open spaces.

1. Simplify the way we rate open spaces using a scoring system called the “evaluation matrix”.
2. Develop our database of open spaces so we can better monitor its supply.
3. Make use of the new methods of classifying different sizes and types of parks.
4. Set markers for the quality of open space we provide (called performance indicators).
5. Monitor how neighbouring boroughs plan and provide open space.
6. Research ways to improve the use of open spaces by different ethnic communities.
7. Look into ways of creating more green corridors (relatively continuous areas of open space that lead through the urban environment).
8. Research the demand and supply of allotments.
9. Research the value of cemeteries and the future demand for them.
Funding Opportunities

We do need extra money to pay for the actions we want to take. It is important that we work with other organisations and community groups to share expertise and information that will help us get funding. We may be able to get funding from the following places:

Heritage Lottery Fund – lottery distributor that gives money for heritage projects. (Nature conservation is part of heritage.)

New Opportunities Fund – lottery distributor that gives money for education, health and environment projects.

Green Spaces and Sustainable Communities – a programme designed to help communities that want to improve their environment.

Living Spaces – government programme that gives money to neighbourhood groups that want to improve their open space.

Sport England – a distributor of lottery money for projects that widen participation in sport.

Football Association (FA) – governing body that invests in improving facilities through the Football Foundation.

Rugby Football Union (RFU) – governing body that provides money to help improve teams and facilities through the Rugby Football Foundation.

Developers Contributions – we can agree with developers before giving them planning permission that they will provide some quality open space or improvements to existing open space.

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**Open Space Projects 2005**

To view the most up to date ward boundaries please visit: http://www.merton.gov.uk/council/voting/youraddress.htm

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**Planned Open Space Strategy Improvements - 2005**

1. Working with local young people to provide essential youth facilities at Figges Marsh.
2. Implementing internet pitch booking for Joseph Hood Recreation Ground and all other Merton sports grounds.
3. Upgrading hard court facilities at King Georges Field.
4. Working with local Friends Group to improve the park environment at South Park Gardens.
5. Targeted measures to address vandalism at Dundonald Recreation Ground and improve security across all parks.
7. Replanting, funded by the Living Spaces Fund, at John Innes Park as part of the Historic Landscape Restoration Project.
8. Enhancing access, biodiversity and appreciation of London’s woodlands through Capital Woodlands Project at Morden Park.
9. Achieving Forestry Stewardship Council Certification for our woodlands at Ravensbury Park and other sites in the Borough.
10. Upgrade pitches at Raynes Park Playing Fields, and others across the borough, using Sport England’s quality criteria.
11. Seek expressions of interest from Sports Clubs to participate in the refurbishment of the pavilion at Cottenham Park and others across Merton.
12. Implementing a green recycling scheme at Cottenham Park Allotments and other sites across the Borough.
13. Repairing memorials at the closed church yards of St Mary’s Merton Park and St Mary’s Wimbledon.