Merton’s Open Spaces

3.1 LB Merton Context

Open space within the London Borough of Merton makes up part of the extensive Greater London open space network. The London network provides a range of different types of open space to meet a variety of needs across London. Within London there are complex patterns of use of the open space, and sport and recreation facilities, reflecting the fact that residents don’t recognise borough boundaries when choosing which open space to use, particularly if the closest open space is across the borough boundary.

Merton has a high proportion of open space in relation to other London boroughs. 18% of the Borough area is taken up by open space compared to the London average of 10%. Merton also compares favourably with its surrounding Boroughs in South West London with regards the number of people per hectare (ha) of public open space, with 251 per ha, compared to Lambeth 954 per ha, Sutton 368 per ha, Wandsworth 364 per ha, and Croydon 265 per ha.

When assessing the Borough’s open spaces and the needs of the local community, it is important to recognise their contribution to the wider London context, and the additional pressures this puts on Merton’s open spaces.

LB Merton Open Spaces

An audit of Merton’s open spaces was carried out by WS Atkins as part of the Merton Open Space Study (MOSS 2002). The MOSS Volumes 1-3 provide detailed analysis of Merton open spaces. In order to present a context for the Merton Open Space Strategy some key facts about Merton open spaces are discussed in this section.

Figure 3.1 Map of Merton’s Open Spaces


1 Wards are those that existed pre 2001 boundary changes. These are used throughout the strategy. This is due to census projections being only available on old ward boundaries.
Merton has a lot of open space (see Figure 3.1 above, a full size version is available as Appendix 5). In total approximately 677 ha of public open space. This equals 4 ha per 1000 population, which easily meets the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA) standard of 2.43 ha per 1000.

Open spaces within Merton vary considerably. The network consists of a variety of public open spaces that includes 2 Metropolitan Parks, 4 District Parks, 33 Local Parks, and 28 Small Local Parks. These spaces are within the Open Space Hierarchy (as set out in the London Plan).

Along with those spaces within the Hierarchy, there are a variety of other open spaces within Merton. These include allotments, cemeteries, school playing fields, private sports grounds, and unique sites of wildlife value.

There a variety of landscapes across the Borough. Many are represented within public open spaces, protected from future development. The two Metropolitan Parks, Wimbledon Common and Mitcham Common, consist of natural landscape of heath land and woodland, whereas District Parks tend to provide a wider variety of landscapes. Wimbledon Park, for example, includes large areas of recreational grassland, as well as planted parkland, informal grassland, woodland, a lake and hard surface play areas. Local Parks have some variety in landscape but tend to be mainly recreational or informal grassland.

Open Space Deficiency

Merton Open Space Study (2002) assessments of open spaces used the UDP Open Space Hierarchy (based on the London Plan Hierarchy). This provides a measure of accessibility to the range of public open spaces that are within the Hierarchy. By mapping each of the open spaces within the Hierarchy and showing the assumed pedestrian catchments of the spaces it is possible to identify open space deficiency. The open space deficiencies are identified in MOSS Volume 1, Figures 4.1 – 4.4.

The analysis of deficiency in MOSS Volume 1 has shown that despite the large amount and variety of open space within Merton, it is unevenly distributed across the Borough. Accessibility is a key issue resulting in deficiencies in provision for certain communities in the Borough. Although deficiency in terms of accessibility is seen as a key issue, the quality of open space and range of facilities available is equally as important.

Priority Wards

Merton’s parks offer a range of facilities including: sports pitches (rugby, football, cricket, hockey and lacrosse); tennis courts; walking trails; paths; sitting out areas children’s play facilities; toilets; lighting, and seating.

The quality and range of facilities available in parks varies according to park type and location. District parks and larger local parks provide the widest range of facilities, and often include the better quality facilities.

It is clear that that some wards are considered deficient in open spaces and facilities when compared with other parts of the Borough (See MOSS Volume 1, Table 5.5). It is important to take account of deficiencies in quality and range of facilities as well as deficiency in accessibility to open space. An evaluation matrix has been developed to enable a comparison of Wards on the basis of a number of factors including; open space deficiency, range of facilities, quality of open space, population per hectare of open space, deprivation, ethnicity, and accessibility. The development and design of this evaluation process is described in Appendix 4.
The evaluation matrix enables the Council to prioritise Wards for investment. Through application of the evaluation criteria, priority wards for open space investment have been identified:

- Graveneys;
- Figge's Marsh;
- Hillside;
- Longthornton;
- Colliers Wood.

**Park Evaluation**

The variation in quality of parks across the Borough means that there is a need to prioritise investment in particular parks. To do this it was considered necessary to develop a park Evaluation Matrix. The development and design of this evaluation process is described in Appendix 4. The Parks Evaluation Matrix enables parks to be assessed against a number of criteria (e.g. safety & security, range of facilities, amenity).

For planning purposes and to define deficiencies in accessibility parks are defined by using the Open Space Hierarchy, however to enable an evaluation of the quality of parks for prioritisation of investment there was a need to develop a way of categorising different parks to enable parks of a similar ‘type’ to be compared.

Therefore a new typology of open spaces has been developed for the purposes of this Strategy. The new typology is based on the PPG17 typology, however the categories within the PPG17 typology have been subdivided and refined to reflect local circumstances. The typology classifies parks and open spaces according to function and the size of the open space (see figure 3.1 above).

The new typology allows the quality of open spaces to be judged against similar open spaces and allow prioritisation of investment and implementation of the Actions Plans (detailed in Section 6) to reflect local circumstances. The development of the new Open Space Typology and prioritisation framework is detailed in Appendix 4. The new typology and examples of the open spaces within the typology is set out in Table 3.1 below.
### Table 3.1 Open Space Resource Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PPG17 Typology</th>
<th>Merton Typology</th>
<th>Hierarchy classification</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parks &amp; Gardens</td>
<td>Metropolitan Park</td>
<td>Metro Park</td>
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<td>Mitcham Common</td>
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<td>District Park</td>
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<td>Wimbledon Park</td>
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<td>Local Park</td>
<td>2 – 20 ha</td>
<td></td>
<td>Raynes Park Sports Ground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Multi Use</td>
<td>Local Park</td>
<td>2 – 20 ha</td>
<td></td>
<td>Three Kings Piece Open Space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Passive Recreation</td>
<td>Local Park</td>
<td>2 – 20 ha</td>
<td></td>
<td>Cannizaro Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Open Space</td>
<td>Local Park</td>
<td>2 – 20 ha</td>
<td></td>
<td>Wandle Park</td>
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<td>Small Children’s Play</td>
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<td>&lt; 2 ha</td>
<td></td>
<td>All Saints Recreation Ground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Passive Recreation</td>
<td>Small Local Park</td>
<td>&lt; 2 ha</td>
<td></td>
<td>Lynmouth Gardens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Multi Use</td>
<td>Small Local Park</td>
<td>&lt; 2 ha</td>
<td></td>
<td>Tamworth Farm Rec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Open Space</td>
<td>Small Local Park</td>
<td>&lt; 2 ha</td>
<td></td>
<td>Police Green Cricket Green</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
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<td>Youth Facilities</td>
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<td>Churchyard and Cemetery</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>St Mary’s Merton Park</td>
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</table>
3.2 Demographic Trends

The population of Merton currently stands at 188,907\(^2\). This is split fairly evenly between male and females with females making up a slightly larger proportion of the population (51\%).

Merton’s population is ethnically diverse, with 25\% coming from ethnic minority groups. The largest single ethnic group within the Borough is the White population (White British), which makes up 64\% of the population. The largest ethnic minority groups are: Asian/Asian British; Indian, and Black/Black British; Caribbean; which each account for about 4\% of the population.

Ethnic minority groups are resident throughout the Borough, but there is a significant concentration of ethnic minority groups in wards in the East of the Borough. The wards of Graveney and Longthornton have large ethnic minority populations (53\%, 43\% respectively).

Overall the population of Merton is set to increase between now and 2011 by approximately 10,000 from its current level to 198,409\(^3\). Population will grow in all wards (except Hillside) with the largest amount of growth in the eastern wards of Lavender, Figge’s Marsh and Pollards Hill. The growth in population will continue but slow down to 2016 with a further increase of 4,142, taking the total population to 202,551. This growth is largely in the East of Borough with Phipps Bridge the largest area of growth.

The Sport England playing pitch assessment model, assumes that those over the age of six and below 55 are part of the ‘active population’. Merton’s ‘active population’ currently stands at 136,640\(^2\). This has been used to calculate likely future pitch demand and Team Generation Rates (See Appendix 1). The active population will increase to 145,860 by 2011, the largest areas of growth in active population is within the eastern wards of Phipps Bridge, Lavender, Figge’s Marsh, Pollards Hill. The wards of Hillside, Dundonald, and Colliers wood will see a slight decrease in the Active Population at this time.

Demographics are important to the provision of open space because different sections of the community have very different needs. The methodology of Open Space Needs Survey (2003) was designed to ensure that a representative sample of the Borough’s population in terms of age, sex, and ethnic group was collected. The sample of residents was drawn from across the Borough.

The information collected has shown variation in how people use open spaces depending on age and ethnic group. Trends in parks usage, and factors in the enjoyment of parks amongst groups are discussed below.

Level of Park Use

The level of park use in Merton is reasonably high with 76\% of those interviewed using parks. There is no real difference in level of use between sexes; but there is some variation in levels of use for different age groups:

- The 12-15 age group has the highest percentage of users followed by 30-44;
- Over 75 years old less users but still over 50\% (possibly due to accessibility difficulties);
- Levels of use of open space do vary by ethnic group with largest level of users coming from the white population. Despite the level of use amongst ethnic minorities being lower than the white population the levels are also reasonably high (61\% - for all ethnic groups combined). The survey found no clear reason why park use amongst ethnic minority groups is lower than other ethnic groups.

\(^2\) Based on ONS release of Key Statistics for 2001 © ONS
\(^3\) Based on 2002 Round Based Ward Projections
**Reasons for Use**

People generally use parks for informal activities. The most popular reason for using a park is for exercise (e.g., jogging, walking, cycling), followed by taking the children to the playground, and using the park as a pleasant route to walk through. Enjoying nature/wildlife, walking the dog and taking part in informal sports activities are also popular park attractions. The reasons for visiting parks vary by age:

- The young (12 – 19) tend to visit for exercise, meeting friends, informal sports and some using the playground;
- In the 20 – 29 age group over half are using parks for exercise (jogging, walking, and cycling). Some are using the parks because they are a pleasant route, and some to meet friends;
- Around 40% of 30 – 44 year olds visit parks to exercise with a 1/3 of these visitors taking children to the park. Some use parks as a pleasant route;
- Over 45s still enjoy exercising in parks but numbers are decreasing. More use as a pleasant walk, for dog walking or to enjoy nature and wildlife;
- For the over 60s exercise remains the most popular attraction to parks but using it as a pleasant access route, or to enjoy nature and wildlife are also popular.

Exercise is the most popular reason for visiting a park amongst all age groups. It is highest amongst 12 – 15 but decreases in popularity amongst the 16 – 19 year olds and peaks in the 20 – 29 age group. Its popularity decreases with age. Informal sports ranks highest amongst 12 – 15 year olds. This activity decreases with age. Formal sports are most popular amongst 16 – 19 year olds. More relaxing pursuits, such as enjoyment of nature and wildlife and walking through a pleasant route tend to increase with age.

The most popular reason for visiting a park across all ethnic groups is for exercise. However Black and Chinese populations cite this reason for visiting parks less than other ethnic groups.

The white British population are most likely to take part in formal sports, with the Asian community second. The Black and Chinese populations tend not to cite this as a reason for visiting parks. The Black population cite visiting parks to meet friends more than other ethnic groups.

Most people walk to open spaces, some use a car to get to open space. Those between 30 to 74 are more likely to drive than other ages. Therefore providing a range of good quality facilities throughout the Borough is important. Those under 20 almost exclusively walk to parks, some use bikes. Bus is important for those over 75 and the 20 – 29 year olds have the broadest ranges of transport modes. Few use the train.
Enjoyment of Parks

Most people enjoy the open space that they use. When asked to score (1 – 10) their level enjoyment, most respondents score over 7. However, levels of enjoyment are lower amongst the black population than all the other groups. The reasons that the black population give for scoring under three are similar to those for the population in general, lack of facilities, lack of maintenance, and dogs are a nuisance.

89% agree or strongly agree that open spaces meet their needs. There are slight variations with age, with 16 – 19 year olds least likely to agree that the open space meets their needs.

When examining the satisfaction of minority ethnic groups levels are generally the same, apart from the black population. 24% disagree that their needs are met compared to 4% for White British, 2% White Irish, 0% for Asian and 8% for the Chinese population.

What Do Users Like About Open Spaces?

When park users were asked to state what they liked about parks the most popular response was simply the fact that it is an open space. People enjoy getting out in fresh air and/or connecting with nature. In terms of facilities children’s play areas were most popular, followed by various sports facilities.

People of all ages enjoy the intrinsic nature of open spaces. Those over 75 and people with disabilities particularly like them because they can get out in the fresh air. Parents with young children are attracted to play areas. Youth of 12 – 15 are more likely to refer to specific activities/facilities within a park than other age groups. 16 – 19 year olds are likely to refer to sports facilities.

Dislikes

As a whole, park users were satisfied with their open spaces. When queried 1/3 of park users couldn’t identify anything they specifically disliked.

Those park users with specific dislikes identified: nuisance from dogs; vandalism; litter; lack of facilities; youths hanging around. 14% of 12 – 15 year olds are unimpressed with the facilities in parks complaining there is nothing to do in them.

Improvements

Respondents suggested a wide range of improvements to enhance their enjoyment of Merton’s parks. Many are improvements in maintenance and management practices including:

- Clean / clear up litter;
- Clean up / prevent dog fouling;
- Control of vandalism;
- Better maintenance.

Some suggested new and improved facilities:

- More bins;
- Better play areas;
- Providing refreshments;
- More seating;
There are some variations with age 12 – 15 year olds seeking general improvements and more facilities for young people. 16 – 19 year olds would like to see improved sports facilities. Over 20s believe keeping the parks clean and better maintained are the main improvements needed.

Encouraging use

Park Users cited that provision of a café or restaurant, improved security, improved seating, toilet improvements/provision and new or improved play areas would encourage them to use parks more.

For all ages a café and improved security and would encourage use. 12 – 15 year olds would also be encouraged by skate area, sports facilities and play facilities. 16 – 19 year olds would also be encouraged by sports facilities. For 20 – 29 year olds Sports facilities and play facilities would encourage greater use and 30 – 44 year olds would be encouraged by play facilities. For the over 45s Café, security, seating and toilets would encourage use.

High rating for parks – Satisfaction is highest in the over 75s and lowest amongst 12 – 15 year olds, who tend to seek more formal activities or facilities (e.g. skate roller park, improved sports facilities, things for children/young.

Non-Users of Open Space

There are a variety of reasons why some residents do not use open spaces. Apart from various lifestyle issues respondents noted the following as why they do not use open spaces:

- No green space near (10%);
- Youths hanging about (6%);
- Poor quality facilities (4%);
- Problems with dogs (4%);
- Nothing to do in the park (4%);
- Fear of crime (4%).

Younger age groups (16 – 59) tend to cite not having time to visit parks, Those over 60 are the main group citing being housebound. 16 – 19 year olds are the main group citing having other interests (33%). The over 45 age groups refer to the fact that they have children that have now grown up.

3.3 Future Trends

The current levels of open space use are expected to continue in the short term. The Needs Survey found that the majority of users will maintain the same level of park use over the next 6 months.

The popularity of informal activities such as walking, cycling and jogging identified in the Needs Survey, was also identified in MOSS Volume 1 (para 6.17). MOSS predicted that these activities will continue to rise in popularity in the future. Participation in these activities is expected to increase by 3 – 5% between 2001 and 2016.

MOSS Volume 3 (Para 6.23) stated existing national trends show an approximate 2% increase in sports participation (MOSS Volume 3 para 6.23). The predicted growth in participation has been used in the PPM calculations for predicting the number of future
teams (Appendix 1). Many factors influence future participation making it difficult to predict. New facilities, sports development campaigns, media coverage and national team success can all raise the popularity of pitch sports.

Participation in sport is also influenced by age, decreasing as participant's age. Life stage and family status is also important. An ageing population will tend to increase levels of non-participation, whilst delaying marriage and starting a family will have the opposite effect. Generally, with more demands on people's time due to other commitments, leisure time decreases. "Not having enough time" was a common explanation offered by survey participants for not visiting open spaces. However, time pressure could be a factor in the shift toward more informal forms of team sports like five a side football and touch rugby.

Some future trends likely to have an impact on sports pitch policy and maintenance in Merton include:

- Growth in the Borough’s ‘active population’;
- Potential growth in youth sport (currently high latent demand);
- The development of girl’s football could follow through into the women’s game.

### 3.4 Challenges and Opportunities (Facing Merton’s Open Space Network)

Many challenges and opportunities for improving the provision and management of open spaces and playing pitches will arise from the trends in open space use and evolving nature of communities. Over the next 5 years the Strategy will address these.

The popularity of open spaces and their varied use by Merton residents provides an important opportunity to raise the awareness of the contribution quality open spaces play in improving quality of life. The amount and variety of open spaces and facilities in the Borough should be promoted as important to the character of the Borough.

Satisfaction with open spaces is currently reasonably high. This approval is not universal with lower levels of satisfaction amongst young and ethnic minority groups. The challenge of meeting the open space needs of specific groups is likely to increase in future as these sections of the community expand.

Exercising is a popular informal activity in Merton’s parks. This trend is expected to continue and increase, creating pressure to ensure this activity remains attractive and accessible. Ensuring all sections of the community have access to open spaces suitable for these activities particularly to those who may find access challenging. People with disabilities or parents with young children or those without private transport must be considered when evaluating open space investment.

Although informal activities could potentially take place in most of Merton’s open spaces, if the quality of the space is poor, people will not use it. Improving the quality of grounds and facilities and addressing security concerns are therefore major future challenges.

A large proportion of people walk to parks. Therefore if the Council are to continue to meet people’s open space needs it will be important to ensure the equitable distribution of quality parks and facilities throughout the Borough.