Issues

4.1 Introduction

The following issues are derived from surveys of the open space resource and consultation with users and Merton residents.

4.2 Key Issues

Improving the Range and Quality of Open Spaces

The London Borough of Merton is one of the greenest boroughs in Greater London. Sixty-seven parks cover 677 hectares representing 18% of Merton’s total area. Given the large amount of green space Merton residents also enjoy a high ratio of open space to population compared to other boroughs with 251 people per hectare of open space.

Merton’s wide variety of parks offers an abundance of recreation experiences. Metropolitan and District Parks offer a range of open spaces, sports pitches and pavilions, and natural and cultural heritage features. Local parks are smaller and more accessible but provide a similar range of facilities across a number of different parks. Small parks can feature nature conservation areas or neighbourhood parks with space to walk the dog or kick a ball.

The challenge for open space provision in Merton is to improve the range and quality of open spaces equitably across the Borough. While it is impossible to transplant historical or cultural features or hold events and celebrations on unsuitable open spaces it is a realistic aim of the strategy to improve community access to certain facilities.

Quality improvements to the grounds and facilities will have a significant impact on residents’ enjoyment of any park. The open space strategy provides tools to enable the prioritisation of investment and improved management directing improvements to where they will best meet the MOSS vision and outcomes. The strategy also provides a solid framework for integrating with the aims of partner agencies and accessing new funding opportunities.

Providing a Variety of Open Space Experiences and Facilities Equitably Across the Borough

While the Borough enjoys the third highest population to open space ratio in Greater London, the distribution of and access to these spaces varies widely across the Borough. To provide every resident of the Borough with a choice of quality open spaces and associated facilities, Merton’s open spaces must be accessible and responsive to the needs of the residents who use them.

Realities of funding and staffing dictate that decisions regarding the provision of facilities across the Borough must be assessed against detailed assessments of need and potential use.
Resident Surveys have concluded that residents generally visit their closest open space most often. Therefore investment in the small and local parks to improve the availability of facilities for active and passive recreation will have a significant impact on residents’ quality of life.

**Protecting Open Space from Inappropriate Development (Including Development Adjacent to Open Space).**

Open spaces, while protected from development in the UDP, have recently come under pressure for development for non open space uses. The UDP provides the basis for consideration of such developments, and the Open Space Strategy that provides supplementary advice to the UDP will seek to resist the loss of open space. Where an open space is no longer required for its existing open space use, there will be a need to assess whether it is required for another open space use. Any loss of the open space resource is permanent and sets precedent for further fragmentation of the resource. Planning policies and their implementation must be reviewed to ensure their effectiveness in protecting open spaces from development. However policies should enable changes to the open space network where this will meet identified needs of the community.

It is important to ensure that development adjacent to open spaces does not adversely affect the amenity, quality or utility of the park. It is also important to ensure future opportunities are not foreclosed by short sighted developments.

**Ensuring Open Space Experiences are Relevant to All Members of the Community – Especially Youth, Ethnic Minorities and Disabled Users.**

Open spaces provide an essential setting for social interaction and public life. Care must be taken in their planning, design and management to ensure that they are relevant to the needs and aspirations of all members of the community. All members of the community must be able to enjoy access and use of these public spaces. By planning for the needs of particular groups (for example youth, ethnic minorities and the disabled) in the community and anticipating potential conflicts LB Merton can maximise the enjoyment of all park users.

**Young People**

Young people are often blamed for reducing the quality of others’ park visits. They are held responsible for damage to public property through graffiti and vandalism and they sometimes intimidate (either by action or perception) other park users. Lacking a voice in community life and council decision making, young people are often marginalized when planning for open space facilities and management.

Through these observations it may be assumed that young people are expressing a desire for appropriate facilities responsive to their needs. They have a desire to be included in decision making processes and perhaps the management and maintenance of specific open spaces. Without investment in safe spaces to congregate and interact with their peers, young people will continue to utilise (and abuse) open spaces and facilities to the detriment of all park users.

The Merton Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy (MNRS), currently under development, aims to narrow the deprivation gap between East and West Merton. Consultation on the MNRS has acknowledged the shortage of facilities for youth and the links with anti-social behaviour.
Ethnic Minorities

Merton is an ethnically diverse Borough. However, the Merton Open Space Needs Survey identified that there was a higher usage of parks amongst the white population than other ethnic groups. This was not attributed to any single factor and there was no evidence to suggest that it is due to a fear of crime or racial harassment.

While any disparity between ethnic and white participation statistics for parks visits or sport participation is small, it is important to acknowledge cultural differences and needs in the types of open space experiences the council is providing.

Disabled Users

People with disabilities themselves or those with a family member with a disability are one of the groups most likely to use parks and open spaces. While this is encouraging, disabled users represent a challenge for open space planning and design to make them more enjoyable. Facilities that are responsive to the needs of those with mobility and visual and mental disabilities greatly benefit not only disabled people but also their family members and the wider community.

Increasing the Accessibility of Parks to Pedestrians, Cyclists and Disabled Users.

Getting to, and around, Merton’s open spaces, is perhaps the most important factor determining people’s choice, use and enjoyment of parks. Given the dominance of the motor vehicle in everyday life, parks offer an important opportunity to escape the noise, degraded air quality and the visual intrusion of cars and roads.

Merton’s largest and most well equipped and resourced parks are all accessible by car and offer plenty of parking. It is important that car parking facilities are provided at the larger parks especially where public transport alternatives are insufficient to meet current or expected demand. However, access to local parks by walking and cycling will promote a better distribution of facilities across the Borough’s wards and encourage people to use alternatives to private cars.

Encouraging people to access parks on foot and by bicycle will require investment in appropriate facilities (improved paths and signage, bike stands, shelters, security) and ensuring safe access points and paths that do not adversely affect the safety and enjoyment of the park by pedestrians.

People with disabilities who are park users should be able to access and enjoy all open spaces in the Borough. Removing obstacles to the mobility and sight impaired would encourage more use of the particular park.
Integrating Open Spaces into Their Urban Setting Improving Amenity and Regeneration Opportunities.

Open spaces provide relief from the built environment. Trees, landscaping, gardens, paths and formal sitting areas all provide an attractive backdrop to living and working areas where people can congregate, escape the urban environment, appreciate nature and engage in active recreation.

The unique identity of the Borough is defined by the communal spaces that provide distinctive settings for events and social interactions. Historical and cultural heritage features, unique landscaping and nature conservation areas all represent opportunities to structure and integrate urban planning and design.

Valuing open spaces as an essential element in the design of the urban area will help make Merton a great place to live, work and learn. Development control policies must reflect a desire to protect and improve the amenity of open spaces and prevent their loss and degradation through incremental and unimaginative (re)development projects.

Improving Safety and Security in Parks.

Users’ perception of the safety and security of a park is greatly influenced by, but not limited to, observations of design, the appearance and behaviour of other users and evidence of damage and graffiti. For a park to attract and retain visitors it is essential that open spaces are welcoming and friendly spaces where people can relax and enjoy themselves.

Perceived threats to personal safety are greatly reduced by improvements in lighting, paths, increased staffing and surveillance, and better quality facilities that are actively managed and maintained.

Threatening behaviour from young people using the park as a gathering place creates a significant deterrent to some members of the public from using the parks. The issue will not disappear by simply removing the young people and enforcing their permanent exile. It remains that young people are disenfranchised from their society and have a need for places for social interaction and recreation just like everybody else. Working with young people and relevant agencies to assess their open space needs may improve their mischievous stereotype and improve their respect for open spaces and their facilities.
4.3 **Key Playing Pitch Issues**

The Playing Pitch Assessment revealed a number of issues around the provision and quality of pitches in Merton. Playing pitches are a vital community resource facing significant challenges to their effective and efficient management. Pressures range from a growing and evolving population, the shifting popularity of different pitch sports, ongoing maintenance of associated equipment and facilities and consistent enforcement of access and charging policies.

Investment decisions in sports pitches must consider the future needs of Merton’s residents. Growth and changes in the population and the popularity of various sports manipulate the demand for additional pitches, courts and associated facilities. Demand for pitches and facilities is also driven by trends in female and ethnic sports participation. When responding to the requirements of female sports participants, issues of design, safety and security become very important in encouraging healthy lifestyles for all Merton residents.

While a full range of facilities are available across the Borough, their quality varies considerably depending on their location. The Strategy aims to improve the provision and standard of sporting facilities equitably across the Borough. The Council believes that all Merton residents should have access to a variety of quality sports facilities that meet their recreation requirements.

Frontline park staff are essential to the successful implementation of the Strategy objectives. Currently parks are understaffed. Staff in the parks are the “human face” of the Council, engaging directly with the community to respond to complaints and vandalism, provide security, enforce charging and access policies and maintain and manage pitch surfaces and facilities. Any additional pressure on parks staff from new facilities or responsibilities should be addressed in the planning stage. Including maintenance plans in the approval of any capital projects would address this issue.

4.4 **Demand Implications of Issues**

- More quality open spaces
- More accessible spaces
- More pitch sports
- Youth facilities
- Improved security
- Increased staffing
- Equitable distribution of quality facilities according to need (both by space and ward).