



IDVERDE ANNUAL REVIEW
A report from Independent Merton Green Spaces Forum to Merton Council
March 2019

1. Independent Merton Greenspaces Forum was established in 2016 in response to the outsourcing of green space maintenance by Merton Council to idverde. We provide a network and collective voice for Friends and like-minded community groups for parks and green spaces across Merton.
2. We have worked hard to establish relationships with idverde and we convene meetings with them for Friends and like-minded groups several times a year. These are well attended and very constructive. We have supported efforts to include a community perspective in monitoring idverde's performance and have developed and trialled a volunteer assessment form which has been used by a significant number of local groups. The results from these assessments and feedback at meetings and elsewhere have informed this report. We are working with idverde on a new assessment form for future use.
3. We are now two years into the idverde contract and have prepared this report to inform Merton Council's annual review of contract performance. The contract has now been running for long enough for idverde to be established in its role and assessed on its delivery.
4. By Merton Council's own Performance Quality Management System idverde is falling short on delivering on the contract. In the period April 2017 to October 2018 reported to the Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel in November 2018 it fell short of the contract standard in 16 out of 19 months.

Getting the basics right

5. Our central concern is that Europe's largest grounds maintenance firm is falling short on the basics of the contract. As a result Merton Council's promise that maintenance standards would not fall due to contracting out is being broken for a large number of parks and green spaces. We believe the root causes of the problems being experienced are that idverde has too few staff and too many have too little horticultural and grounds maintenance training. There is also a lack of knowledge of the different parks and green spaces and an absence of management plans and a wider strategy for their future.

6. The main shortcomings are (with examples):

- A lack of basic horticultural and grounds maintenance skills - such as hedge trimming without removing invasive species and pruning shrubs at the wrong time of year (The Canons, Ravensbury Park)
- Poor quality grass mowing - including the failure to litter pick in advance of mowing now a recurring issue which is blighting too many green spaces (Moreton Green, Figges Marsh) - reinforced by a lack of the full range of appropriate machinery.
- Declining quality of sports pitches – including use of inappropriate mowers in wet conditions damaging cricket ground outfielders (Cricket Green) and a lack of advance litter picking resulting in shards of glass rendering grounds unusable (Morden Park)
- Playgrounds out of use – including poor maintenance and repair (Haydons Road Recreation Ground, Moreton Green, Edenvale)
- Inadequate litter clearance (numerous)
- Inadequate and slow responses to issues raised directly with idverde's team (Ravensbury Park)
- Poor liaison with local groups – including the destruction of planting by local community groups about which idverde staff were informed (Lower Green West) and weak engagement over longstanding tasks agreed locally (Holland Garden)
- Waste accumulating at allotment sites (The Paddock)
- Inappropriate use of motorised vehicles – including churning up green space on a regular basis in order to empty waste bins (Ravensbury Park, Moreton Green)
- Commercialisation – including the impact of major income generating events on local amenity and access to and the long term quality of important parks and green spaces (Morden Park); the development of poorly considered and executed income generating proposals (Wimbledon Park adventure golf); and lost income from permitting the use of public green space by private enterprises without charge (Cricket Green, Date Valley School). This is an area with an unclear breakdown of responsibility between idverde and Merton Council. There is a need to ensure Merton Council's Greenspaces team is consulted on proposals with long term management implications and to ensure they fit appropriately into the park or green space and we would welcome input into a pipeline of future commercial prospects
- Contract management – a contract of this scale and importance needs senior leadership and the lack of a Contract Director needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency

Active management

7. We wish to see much more active management of the contract, including a stronger role for Merton Council, more engagement of local community groups and more transparency in reporting and data.
8. The main areas to be strengthened are:
 - Transparency – data on idverde’s performance is rarely published and not in an accessible form leaving it to Freedom of Information requests and Council Questions to elicit basic information. An “idverde performance dashboard” should be published by Merton Council weekly, akin to that made available in relation to Veolia as a minimum
https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ldmerton/pages/1259/attachments/original/1548160674/Veolia_performance_w_c_31_Dec_2018.pdf. This should be aggregated into monthly and annual reports published ahead of the annual performance review.
 - Reporting – the online reporting system is not fit for purpose and does not address the large majority of issues relating to green space management and maintenance. Support for a well-designed online reporting tool (with telephone option) should be integral to the contract.
 - Assertive contract management – we ask Merton Council to be much more active in managing performance and enforcing delivery of the contract. The monitoring which has been published shows idverde’s performance has fallen short during most of the contract so far and yet Merton Council has only docked idverde £38,000 to end 2018.
 - Site information – Friends and like-minded groups regularly report idverde staff lacking even basic knowledge of their parks and green spaces, such as when gates open, who holds keys and where wildflowers should be left undisturbed. Each site should be supported by a summary of “key information” to which Friends and like-minded groups would be willing to contribute. We have identified with idverde that this might be piloted at John Innes Park, Ravensbury Park, The Canons & Cricket Green, Holland Gardens and Haydons Road Recreation Ground.
 - Management plans – The large majority of parks and green spaces lack management plans and those that do exist are significantly out of date and/or over-elaborate (for Green Flag Award purposes). A programme of management plan preparation should be instigated in collaboration with Friends and like-minded groups to provide proportionate guidance on future objectives and approaches.
 - Baseline condition survey – The lack of any baseline assessment of the condition of Merton’s parks and green spaces or transferred equipment ahead of the contract is a serious omission which makes it hard to manage performance or assess delivery on Merton Council’s promise that maintenance standards would not decline. We are aware of major gaps and errors in the information provided

by Merton Council at the start of the contract and in the information being used to inform the evidence base for the Local Plan. A baseline condition survey supplemented by up to date and accurate information on each site is an early priority. We would support a pilot approach with a sample of parks and green spaces with different characteristics drawn from across the Borough. For each location a baseline condition survey should be undertaken and the maintenance standard monitored and managed to ensure no deterioration. This would enable the contract to be managed through the lens of different locations as well as through the monitoring of different assets and maintenance operations.

- Accelerated decision making – The slow speed of decision making on issues such as whether idverde or Merton Council is responsible for the replacement or repair of assets (e.g. playground equipment, benches) is having a significant impact on the green space and park standards with assets left in poor repair for prolonged periods
- Informed scrutiny and oversight – The shift towards Merton Council services being provided through external contractors requires a different approach to the overview and scrutiny by councillors who often lack the skills and training required for this role. A programme of skills development including contract management akin to that provided for councillors who serve on the Planning Applications Committee should be introduced and the main contracts subject to at least twice yearly scrutiny review.
- Strategic vision – In the absence of any overall strategy or vision for Merton's parks and green spaces the contract lacks context. An improved green spaces strategy for Merton is timely and should be developed. This would also address the review of the Local Plan and the strengthened approach to canopy cover, wildlife and green spaces in the new London Plan. Friends and like-minded groups would welcome the opportunity to contribute to its development. The new strategy should address both the potential of future investment sources (such as community infrastructure levy) and provide a management approach which can endure in the long term

9. We ask for a response to the issues raised in this report and details of any changes to the contract or its management which result from Merton Council's review.