

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS
March 2011

The future for Southwark – rising to the community challenge

Resident 1

You go to councillors to get things sorted out, or to seek the right advice, or to be referred to someone that can help you.

I think the borough is becoming too big, overpopulated. And the library that cost £3m (*a reference to John Harvard Library*), people come in off the street just to eat their sandwiches. It's not a place to read and get books in the way that it used to be.

Resident 2

Well, libraries are different. We remember what we remember but times change and libraries have to change too. They used to be quiet places but now they have to be a bit more like leisure centres. They can't be just about books anymore.

Resident 3

I'd like to see the repairs improve. They put out this slogan that "Southwark is working for you", but they're not really. They've got about six ways of taking your money. By post, at the housing office, by debit card, and so on, and they're all very efficient. But when it comes to having something repaired, there's nobody available. I've been waiting since December to have a roof leak looked at.

Resident 4

I think we're very lucky in our location. We do live somewhere pretty central and we don't have the transport costs that other people do in London. There are brilliant parks in Southwark, lots of open space, and lots of good things happening.

Resident 5

Yes, there's so much going on and the transport's wonderful. But there is the issue of building programmes, with more and more of it going on and lots of people coming into the area. They're not unwelcome but traffic management is going to be a very big issue.

Resident 6

And then there's The Shard going up. I know London Bridge Station is there but The Shard is going to draw more cars into the area, and then all the deliveries. Has that all been thought through?

Resident 7

I think all this high-priced housing is very divisive. We've been here for years and years in council flats and all these penthouses are popping up. I get the feeling that we're being pushed out more and more to make room for high-priced housing.

Resident 8

A lot of these private landlords and developers have no social conscience whatsoever. They buy up properties and then do nothing to improve them. And they keep putting the rent up until you can't afford it anymore.

It seems to me that the standard in social housing in Southwark is way above a lot of the private housing. I know the council gets a lot of stick for poor quality housing but it's much worse in a lot of private housing. Better homes standards need to apply to private landlords too.

Resident 9

There's also the problem with all the pubs closing. They're social and community centres but they're being turned into expensive restaurants that people like us can't afford.

Resident 10

It's all very well to turn this part of London into a world class quarter of a world class city, but you've got to be mindful of the people who've lived here all their lives.

Resident 11

Do we have any rules or regulations that say houses should be so many feet apart from each other? If we don't, we should have. As it is people are living on top of each other in some places. Southwark has been creating instant communities without sufficient planning.

Resident 12

We've had far too much migration into Southwark. The schools are overcrowded.

Resident 13

I've been in Southwark for 18 years now. I love it there. People are very friendly. From time to time the councillors write to us asking how everything is and making sure we are well cared for, and I appreciate that.

Resident 14

I came here in 1988 and have lived in Southwark all that time. I wrote to my friend and told him that I was living in the United Nations.

But the one thing I wonder about in Southwark now is why the council has to keep on repairing the security door in my block of flats. It's being sabotaged regularly by the same people. Why not catch the culprit and save the council a lot of money?

I've seen a lot of progress here over the past 22 years but I still learn new things. For example, when I saw the census form it said, "Help tomorrow take shape". I didn't understand the phrase 'take shape', and now I know that it means I can play my part in the life of this country by just completing the census form, because that means I'll help to improve living conditions in this area.

Then when I heard you saying that the council is looking at the future for Southwark, and what comes tomorrow, I thought to myself that I was right. It's good. This investigation at roots level is real democracy. Collecting ideas from people like me, and I can hardly even talk properly!

Resident 15

I've lived in Southwark all my life. I wouldn't live anywhere else. I just think we could do a lot more with that park in the holiday time for the kids.

I also think people born in Southwark should have priority when it comes to getting houses.

The police should be out more patrolling all the druggies. But then you get that wherever you go, don't you?

Resident 16

What we really need to devolve is the knowledge. It's not a devolution of the resources to the people who are already in positions of influence, and are usually of a particular socio-economic demographic. They already know how to get hold of the purse strings.

If Southwark is serious about local democracy and rising to the challenge of the community, making the Big Society vision a reality, it needs to devolve the knowledge as to how the systems that are currently in place work, how to effect change, and how to exercise influence over the smaller pockets of money that are now available.

You could become very cynical over the years - and I have in the past - but there are moments in history when there's something happening that's quite different to other times, and I think that this is one such time.

So, if you can galvanise enough people you can effect some structural change that will be lasting, that will be beneficial to the poorest.

Resident 17

People need to get to know about their councillors. It would be better if everyone had a hotline to them because they do have a lot of influence.

Resident 18

Communication is the big challenge as I see it. Lots of people find it difficult to come out and make their view known. Some fear that it will go against them or that their housing officer will know about it.

They need to be reassured that they are part of the democratic system, as members of the community, and they need to be fully involved in decision-making. They should be able to speak up without fear.

People also need to realise that they are on common ground, and that culture shouldn't come into things. It's one thing about your culture; it's another thing about the community. We should all be dealt with equally, regardless of our ethnic

background. If you have a view you should share it, and you should be heard as a human being.

Resident 19

Some councillors are not good at relating to their constituents, at dealing with them on a one to one basis. That's where language comes into it, especially government jargon. They need better people skills, and greater empathy.

Resident 20

That's what worries me about trying to use their very council meetings as a means of reaching the community. That's where decisions are made and power is held. Taking it out of the council chamber and into the community is not going to make it more democratic as long as the structure is so rigid.

Resident 21

But we have to take personal responsibility too. We can't say it's all the fault of councillors or the system. There's a fault in me too if I keep making excuses for not turning up and getting involved. I need to make an effort too.

We say that we have to accept things because the council has decided them. We like to moan too much, instead of doing something about it ourselves.

Resident 22

Carers need to be recognised as people who have human rights as well. They're the ones being dumped on all the time and there are 25,000 of them in Southwark. We need a lot more thought about how we make life better for carers. They weren't put on this earth to be slaves for other people and it's just a matter of chance as to whether you become a carer or not.

Resident 23

It's all well and good having equalities legislation in place, but the groups themselves – the disabled, the elderly – they often have quite low expectations of public services and how they're treated and will often put up with quite shabby standards. So I think disseminating awareness and understanding that people do have rights and of course responsibilities so that they are more empowered.

Resident 24

Southwark needs to make income inequality and poverty part of its equalities agenda. Even if the current government is not committed to implementing that element of The Equality Act it would be a shame if Southwark didn't have it as a priority given the high levels of income inequality and poverty in the borough.

Resident 25

What is good about Southwark is the diversity, the different communities ... the way the communities are part of the system; I feel everyone is one of us. I feel happiness when I come to a day like this, and I meet everybody, every faith, every colour, everything! It is not like this everywhere in the world.

Southwark could be improved a lot if the decision makers considered listening to the community before they make a decision.

The council could help by coming to have contact with the people, rather than sitting in their offices and making decisions, instead come and have real contact with the people, with the communities, whatever they are, whatever background ... at least do the same as you're doing now, come and ask us.

The council can have the contacts I talked about by opening their doors and seeing if we come in to speak to them, take a risk.

Resident 26

What is good about Southwark is its diversity, that is its forte. I love walking down Peckham High Street every day, and seeing and hearing people from every corner of the world ... and they're not kinda keeping themselves to themselves, it's everyone in together, which I love, and I think that Southwark celebrates that well...it's good to see things like that encouraged and celebrated.

Southwark can be improved in terms of communication. I have been involved in kinda, consultations about different things. Communication with adults is ok. But I pick up that communication between the authorities, that means the council, the police and so on, and young people, could be improved. There is a gap between them and us that needs to be bridged.

The council could help, first of all, by being approachable. I also think that where there is things like councillors' surgeries, things like that, it can be intimidating for young people to go onto the council's turf, as it were. So maybe have people who can travel around to places like youth clubs, to meet young people where they usually are found in daily life. Kinda go along and listen to them and engage, not just tell them what is happening, but listen to what is on their minds. Let young people have a say in what happens.

Resident 27

What is good about living in Southwark for me, as somebody with an African background, is that it is like a local area for me, I can get everything I need, you know, food wise. I lived there a long time, I just like the area, I feel comfortable in the area ... I know that a lot of terrible things happen, and I'm not happy about the bad things that happen, but it's just that it is an area I have lived in for quite a few years now, I'll got used to living there.

Southwark could be improved by trying to fish out the bad people that are in there, you know, and the youth need to have more things to do.