



## **DEMOCRACY COMMISSION**

MINUTES of the Democracy Commission held on Thursday 23 September 2010 at 6.00 pm at Southwark Town Hall

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**PRESENT:** Councillor Abdul Mohamed (Chair)  
Councillor Anood Al-Samerai  
Councillor Columba Blango  
Councillor Mark Glover  
Councillor Michael Mitchell  
Councillor Helen Morrissey  
Councillor Cleo Soanes

**MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC PRESENT:** Don Phillips  
Angela Stanforth

**OFFICER SUPPORT:** Shelly Burke – Head of Scrutiny  
Michael Cleere – Community Engagement officer  
Stephen Douglass – Head of Community Engagement  
Katherine Pitt – Community Engagement officer  
Julie Timbrell – Project manager – Democracy Commission

### **1. INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME BY THE CHAIR**

### **2. MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF 7 SEPTEMBER 2010**

Cllr Al-Samerai asked again for a breakdown of costs of the Conference and Commission. Stephen Douglass said she would receive it once the Commission had completed this stage of its work.

The minutes were agreed as an accurate record.

### **3. REVIEWING EVIDENCE SUBMITTED**

This was noted.

Cllr Mohamed thanked officers for all the evidence collected, especially Michael Cleere and Julie Timbrell.

#### **4. FOCUS GROUPS : ELECTED MEMBERS, COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR & MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC.**

Transcripts of the four focus groups were included in the pack of papers published.

#### **5. QUESTIONNAIRES**

262 questionnaires had been completed in total, both on-line and on paper. The results had not changed significantly since the interim findings had been presented at the last meeting.

Cllr Blango expressed concerns about the ethnicity monitoring, which shows the gaps in the people we are engaging with. There needs to be a strategy to engage Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) people. Any future questionnaires should be better targeted at BME people.

Michael Cleere pointed out that the vox pop interviewees are predominantly BME so this re-weights the balance somewhat.

Cllr Glover cautioned against reading too much into the questionnaire as it is a very small sample of people.

Julie Timbrell commented that the Commission had employed different types of engagement methods to try and ensure that a diversity of voices had been heard. Monitoring information had been captured from the conference but not analysed yet. She could extrapolate monitoring information from all the engagement activities; questionnaires, vox pops, conference attendance & outreach to the Youth Conference and would carry out an equalities analysis at the end of the programme. This could be used to identify any gaps and for the Commission to keep in mind for further work.

#### **6. ORAL TESTIMONY AND VOX POPS**

Two transcripts of vox pops were included in the pack of papers published. A third transcript of vox pops was tabled.

Michael Cleere presented the information and commented that it had been a very interesting way of widening the reach of the Commission. The spontaneity of the comments worked well and revealed that most people are interested in democracy – this is very little apathy.

Cllr Morrissey commented that this rich vein of material should not be wasted. Cllr Al-Samerai suggested it could go on the council website. Michael commented that Resonance FM might be

interested in producing a radio programme with the council.

Cllr Morrissey commented that this rich vein of material should not be wasted and asked Michael and the rest of the team to come up with proposals for presenting this work.

## **7. CONFERENCE: PANEL DISCUSSION, WORKSHOPS AND CAFE CONVERSATIONS FROM THE CONFERENCE**

Cllr Al-Samerai thanked the Community Engagement team for the notes. Cllr Morrissey asked if the notes for the youth cafe conversation would also be written up. Julie said this had been done but had taken a little longer as this conversation had not been facilitated by one of the team. Both the panel sessions had also now been written up and a final report on the Conference would be produced.

## **8. PROPOSED FUTURE LEGISLATION**

Cllr Al-Samerai thanked Stephan Douglas for the report. Commission can decided – once the new local government legislation comes into force next year - whether more decisions could be delegated to Council Assembly, Cabinet, or Community Councils.

## **9. CONSIDERING THE DRAFT REPORT AND AGREEING THE RECOMMENDATIONS**

Cllr Al-Samerai thanked Julie Timbrell for the draft report summarising the evidence.

Cllr Mohamed introduced the draft report with suggested recommendation for discussion. This had circulated by email shortly before the start of the meeting.

Cllr Al-Samerai commented that it was unfair to Members to circulate it so soon before the meeting because no-one had had time to consider it properly. Cllr Mohamed responded that any meeting would struggle to agree recommendation and the paper was aimed as guiding the discussions. Cllr Al Sameria added that the draft report was very helpful but while she thought some of the draft recommendations were fine other seemed to have come out of nowhere. Cllr Al – Samerai asked who had drafted the recommendations. Cllr Mohamed said these had been done by him with officers giving some limited assistance.

Cllr Glover commented there was a problem with the amount of time given to digest this. He said that the finalised document would go to Council Assembly along with the legal and financial concurrent. The report that goes to Cabinet will

not be able to identify all the cost implications – there is a bit of work to be done on this.

Cllr Al-Samerai and Cllr Mitchell suggested another meeting to devote more time to agreeing the recommendations. Cllr Mohamed said this would be difficult given the deadlines and suggested that they go through the draft recommendations tabled one by one. This was agreed.

## **Summary of Recommendations**

This was uncontentious but it was agreed to change the heading to ‘Introduction.’

### **Need for Change**

It was agreed to add the following bullet points:

- Improve quality of decisions made in Council Assembly
- Hold the administration to account

Cllr Glover cautioned against allowing too much time for public debate, as there would be a risk that special interest groups would dominate.

### **Purpose: role of the Council Assembly**

It was agreed that point 3.2 should be changed to: ‘strengthen the role of residents and elected Members to influence and hold the Cabinet to account and to add ‘Involve Members and the community early enough to influence change.’ The fourth bullet point would be deleted. The fifth would read ‘enable Members and the public to influence decision-making.’

There was discussion about 4.1 and 4.2 which appeared to conflict with each other. One suggestion was that it could be re-worded to make it clear that the Council Assembly could take on considering more plans and strategies than the legal minimum, rather than only discussing what was legally required.

Cllr Al-Samerai raised the issue of themed meetings. She had concerns over 1) how could they tie in with decisions that had to be made and 2) who decides the themes? Cllr Mohamed responded that support for themes came out very strongly in the evidence. Cllr Morrissey added that these are very popular with community councils. Cllr Glover agreed that there needs to be clarity over who decides the themes, the balance of the agenda and that they should not dominate a whole meeting – there should be opportunities to debate current issues.

Stephen Douglass commented that advice needs to be taken on point 5.1 – revising the number of signatories required for a petition to be presented at Council

Assembly. There was concern that if the number was too low Assembly would be inundated with petitions. It was agreed to take out the reference to the 'Council Assembly Business Panel.'

Cllr Mitchell asked what was meant by 'this is reviewed' in point 5.2 It was agreed that officers, on the basis of clear rules , rather than Members, should decided what deputations are legitimate. It is important that those decisions are a-political. Julie Timbrell said it was possible for officers to look at relaxing the rules to make it easier to bring deputations, and queried if members wanted to prevent them from coming back within 6 months? It was agreed this might be difficult to devise a satisfactory rule governing this.

It was agreed that point 5.2 should include the wording 'the number and timeframe will be reviewed by the Democracy Commission.'

It was agreed that the maximum number of deputations per meeting would be 3, and to review this after a year.

Re point 16.4 – it was agreed that the recommendations of the Commission would be reviewed after a year.

### **Council Assembly Business Panel**

Cllr Mohamed explained that the idea of the business panel was to make Council Assembly more relevant, interesting and inclusive. Its membership would need to be politically balanced or neutral and could co-opt local 'active citizens' to advise on different themes. Discussion followed on the composition of the panel. There was a query on 'proportionality' and 'balance'.

Stephen Douglass pointed out that the Council Assembly agenda is currently put together by officers following the constitution. Following a scrutiny review, North East Somerset council introduced a business management committee to agree the agenda for Full Council.

Cllr Soanes said that it was exciting that the community would be invited, but she was concerned also that we have the right structure and composition.

Cllr Al-Samerai asked if the Constitutional Steering Group could take this on, to avoid creating another bureaucratic structure that did not excite people.

Cllr Glover said that there must be room for a wide number of members to influence the agenda and ensure that topical and relevant issues are discussed and also that there are more opportunities for members to inform decision making.

Given not all the recommendations had been agreed Cllr Mohamed proposed another meeting and this was agreed. Cllr Mohamed requested that members of the Commission , particularly the different political groups, prepare draft

recommendations ready to be discussed at the next meeting.

**10. APOLOGIES**

**CHAIR:**

**DATED:**