



## DEMOCRACY COMMISSION

MINUTES of the Democracy Commission held on Tuesday 7 September 2010 at 6.00 pm at Southwark Town Hall

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

**MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC PRESENT:** James Hatts  
Chris Hayden  
Liliana Dmitrovic  
Ari Henry  
Max Holloway  
Don Philips  
Dorren Philips  
Catherine

**OFFICER SUPPORT:** Stephen Douglas - Head of Community Engagement  
Julie Timbrell – Project Manager  
Deborah Collins – Monitoring officer  
Katherine Pitt- Voluntary Sector Commissioning Officer  
Shelly Burke – Head of Scrutiny

### 1. INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME BY THE CHAIR

### 2. APOLOGIES

Cllr Glover and Cllr Blango gave appologies.

### 3. MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF 5 AUGUST 2010

There was one correction to minutes; Ari Henry asked for his view, stated at the last meeting, that council officers are 'prevaricating and obfuscating' be recorded. This was agreed.

#### **4. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS**

None

#### **5. HEARING EVIDENCE**

##### **SE1 Forum – James Hatts**

James submitted written evidence, which was circulated. He then made a few follow up comments. Firstly he noted that the system the Council uses to generate minutes and agendas for Committee meetings can be set up to give members of the public alerts when something new is published. However the system does not work, although it has the ability to. James requested this was fixed. James also requested that people be let into the gallery ten minutes earlier and that sufficient papers be provided. He also asked that the papers circulated in the gallery be available on the website, as presently there can be a delay of several days before these are published.

##### **Southwark TV – Chris Hayden**

Since 2004 Southwark TV has been supported by the Community TV Trust.

Southwark TV specialises in media production and training.

In the early days, pensioners made an outstanding contribution. 2 years later for the local elections the SE5 Forum put in 11 short videos (one for each candidate, apart from 1 who was unavailable).

Chris Hayden urged the Commission to consider the use of media / multimedia. There is an opportunity to reach many people, and inspire them to be active, through medium scale technology, and also through the use of Twitter and audio podcasts.

Max Holloway commented that a very important point was made at the conference, that technology can alienate some people. Physical contact is needed as well.

Cllr Al-Samerai pointed out that Council Assembly meetings in Islington and Camden are webcast. Chris Hayden responded that it is possible to film Council Assembly and show it on the Southwark TV website, but it would need funding. It could also be broadcast on the radio station.

Michael Cleere pointed out the radio is a useful medium because there are many people who have no internet access but most people have a radio.

Cllr Al-Samerai said it was important to get information out to groups – then they can decide how to broadcast it. The council needs the audio and video infrastructure. Also there needs to be the right culture to encourage it, and also provision within the council

constitution to be able to make use of recorded material – as the London Assembly does at City Hall, where there are cameras permanently fixed in the chamber, and material is made available to radio and TV stations.

Chris Hayden pointed out that filming an open meeting is hard, because whoever is filming doesn't know who is going to speak next. Audio would be better; or having a each political group give a 'digested' version of the meeting on camera afterwards.

Ari Henry pointed out that councillors already have microphones in front of them in Assembly meetings. He added that anyone can publish on the Peoples' Republic of Southwark website, and that two officers from the Burgess Park Revitalisation Project regularly put information on there. Twitter is useful – as long as it doesn't spot the person who is twittering from actually listening to the meeting.

Cllr Soanes pointed out that material needs to be safeguarded from misuse and being taken out of context. James? Responded that this is a risk that has to be absorbed.

Ari Henry pointed out that basic training is needed for many local people in using technology. He added that a signing person at each meeting, and also 'speaking' webpages would help people with disabilities. He said that he receives email bulletins from Southwark Council that have large headings but very little content – and it's not possible to unsubscribe from them.

The Conservative group submitted evidence and this was circulated.

## **6. REVIEWING EVIDENCE GATHERED SO FAR**

### **Evidence collected**

Cllr Mohamed and Julie Timbrell summarised the amount of information collected since the Democracy Commission began its work on 12<sup>th</sup> July: around 200 questionnaires completed, 5 focus groups, 3 Committee meetings, oral testimonies, and the conference on 4<sup>th</sup> September.

The task was now to come up with a set of recommendations before the Council Assembly meeting on 20<sup>th</sup> October.

### **Focus Groups**

Julie Timbrell said that some of the transcripts of the focus groups had been circulated to members of the Committee. Once participants had approved the text for the members focus groups they would go on the website within a week, with the rest to follow.

### **Vox pops**

Michael Cleere introduced his sound sample. He said that 88 vox pops with local residents had been recorded, out of a target of 100. They had been recorded in shopping centres and libraries around the borough. Some clear themes have emerged:

- A lack of awareness of how democracy operates
- Lack of awareness of Council Assembly and how it operates
- Lack of awareness of what a councillor is
- A willingness on the part of the local community to get involved.

One resident who particularly stood out was a young man called Jason. There was a lot of passion in what he had to say.

Ari Henry said that many people experience alienation from the council. Officers don't answer emails or the phone, or if they do, nothing is done in response. People contact the council to try and find information but give up. He had still not had a response to a complaint he had made regarding a hustings meeting the People's Republic of Southwark had held in April.

Cllr Mohamed responded that the Democracy Commission is looking at how to improve the system, so that people are listened to. He was advised to detail his complaints one by one so they can be addressed.

Ari Henry said he had contact all the councillors on the Commission with a query about SurveyMonkey. None had replied. Cllr Mohamed responded that Julie Timbrell was sorting it out.

### **Questionnaires**

Julie Timbrell said that approximately 200 questionnaires had been completed. The last time she checked, 111 had been completed on-line. Cllr Al-Samerai clarified that all the people invited to the conference had been sent a questionnaire, but it was not included with the second letter about the change of time. One members said he said he had counted 70 attendees atone point . Another member commented that some people came and left and it was probably over a 100 throughout the day. Cllr Soanes said she thought the attendance was healthy, with people from the length and breadth of the borough.

Max Holloway commented that the questionnaire had not appeared on the council's Facebook and Twitter pages. Julie Timbrell responded that Communications were putting it on. Max replied that he had seen some activity on Social network platforms, but not since early August.

Cllr Al-Samerai requested a breakdown of the costs incurred by the Commission so far.

Julie Timbrell presented interim findings of the questionnaire, including the free text responses. She then described the breakdown of the respondents by gender, disability, age, and ethnicity. Representation was roughly equal among women and men, and high among people with a disability, but there was concern at the very high proportion of white people responding.

Cllr Al-Samerai said the issue of BME involvement had been raised at the conference. The Commission should work with voluntary organisations to reach BME communities.

Cllr Morrissey said the diversity of people at the conference was encouraging – apart from the lack of young people.

Michael Cleere said that 42 out of the 88 vox pop participants were BME.

Cllr Al-Samerai said that more work needed to be done on engaging young people. She explained that the Commission had already taken some steps to engage young people. She also described a youth-themed meeting of Bermondsey Community Council which involved outreach in advance to youth clubs; special workshops with young and older people; and voting buttons. Suggestions made by young people at the meeting had been passed to the Cabinet. She stressed that a meeting needs to have clear outcomes or people will become disengaged. She also pointed out that the Southwark Youth Council has control over its own budgets.

Don Phillips asked about the outcomes of the conference workshops. Julie Timbrell responded that these would be posted on-line.

### **Cafe Conversations**

Julie Timbrell talked through the key points raised in the conference Cafe Conversations. These had also been circulated in the papers for the meeting.

Don Phillips asked about the outcomes of the conference workshops. Julie Timbrell responded that these would be posted on-line.

### **'Plain English' paper**

Ian Mark described the paper on Council Assembly which had been tabled. Basically it was a simplified version of an earlier paper which had been circulated.

Ian explained that the Cabinet can delegate plans and strategies to Council Assembly but the Assembly cannot discharge executive functions. It can also receive policy framework documents to consider. He said that there was some possibility of reviewing the regulatory functions that Council Assembly is responsible for – eg the responsibilities it delegates to the Planning Committee, but this would alter the responsibilities of those committees rather than Council Assembly.

Deborah Collins stressed the importance of making it very clear what is being decided at a Council Assembly meeting, especially as debates become more free-flowing, involving more people, with the use of social media etc. There is a question to be resolved of how the results should be recorded. The Commission may wish to direct officers to explore different routes to decision-making.

Cllr Mohamed said mentioned of adopting the parliamentary style of Green and White Paper processes. Deborah Collins responded that the Green and White Paper processes would not fit in with Council Assembly processes as it stands at the moment. Council Assembly has traditionally been used to take decisions, Green papers are early consultation papers that tend to ask questions.

Cllr Al-Samerai clarified that also Council Assembly cannot discharge executive functions, Community Councils can. Any Cabinet function can be delegated to a Community Council. She stressed the importance of getting decision-making as close to the 'grassroots' as possible.

Stephen Douglass said he was going to arrange to have a paper drafted for the next

meeting of the Democracy Commission to comment on the implications of the recent Localism Bill.

## **7. SCOPING OUT THE REPORT**

Cllr Al-Samerai asked about the process of agreeing recommendations from the Commission. Julie Timbrell suggested using the Scrutiny process which involves officers putting back information together. Recommendations can then be devised in a number of different ways, , such as having an informal meeting with councillors , or putting together a number of very draft recommendations or leaving it for Councillors to agree the recommendations once they have reviewed the background information.

Stephen Douglass pointed out that the summary of emerging issues has some broad headings which can be added to.

The councillors thanked Julie Timbrell for putting in a huge amount of work in a short space of time.

It was agreed that information and feedback on other structures e.g. Community Councils needs to be retained, for future use.

Cllr Mitchell proposed that the 'Emerging Issues' document should be used as a basis for the draft recommendations. Broad headings should include:

- The need to address the powers of the Council Assembly, in order to improve democracy in the borough
- We should have full democracy in Council Assembly; how does this work (e.g. petitions)?
- The role of the councillor; e.g. in asking questions and putting forward motions
- Micro-details relating to meeting arrangements
- Location of meetings
- Communication – how do we 'broadcast' the meetings?

Cllr Al-Samerai added that issues should be covered including

- Having meeting papers in the public gallery
- Ticketing
- Having a constitutional officer present to explain to the public what is going on
- Having the 'raw material' of the meeting available in print or webcast so that other organisations can use it
- Links to Scrutiny – Scrutiny reports presented to Council Assembly
- Community Council decisions reported to Council Assembly
- The Localism Bill – exploring the possibility of the council taking more power from central government

Cllr Morrissey proposed that an Equality Impact Assessment of current arrangements should be carried out. Deborah Collins said that the council was required to make reasonable adjustments to the Council Chamber for people with disabilities, but that we have to take the building as we find it and also take resources into consideration. She said it would not be possible to commit resources to an Equalities Impact Assessment in the next few weeks. Stephen Douglass pointed out a lot of the information that would be collected in an Equalities Impact Assessment was already there in the evidence that had been gathered – for example, in the Cafe Conversations on the involvement of BME groups and people with disabilities. Cllr Morrissey said she would send Julie Timbrell her thoughts on the subject.

A local resident present asked a question about the type of decisions that residents can influence. Julie Timbrell explained that very local decisions, for example on the use of a building, would go to Community Council, whereas a decision affecting a wider area, such as about a regeneration scheme, would go to Council Assembly.

Stephen Douglass said that officers would circulate an early draft set of recommendations in advance of the next meeting on 23<sup>rd</sup> September. Deborah Collins said that she would need to check that anything suggested by the Commission was lawful, and the Director of Finance would need to check that recommendations were affordable.

**CHAIR:**

**DATED:**