Open Agenda

Southwark Council

Democracy Commission

Friday 1 October 4.00 pm
Southwark Town Hall, Peckham Road.

Membership

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

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Contact
Julie Timbrell on 020 7525 0514 or email: julie.timbrell@southwark.gov.uk
Webpage: www.southwark.gov.uk/democracy

Democracy Commission

Friday 1 October 2010
4.00 pm
Southwark Town Hall, Peckham Road.

Order of Business

Date: 28 September 2010

Southwark Council

DEMOCRACY COMMISSION

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

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 Engagment officer
	Stephen Douglass – Head of Community Engagement
	Katherine Pitt – Community Engagment officer
	Julie Timbrell – Project manager – Democarcy 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 Conferance 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-weighs 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 form 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 most 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:

Southwark Democracy Commission Recommendations

1 Introduction

1.1 The commission recommendations should be considered as whole Package. Whilst they can be implemented individually the commission believes that as a whole they represent a comprehensive solution for the Council Assembly.

1.2 The commission notes that some of the recommendations set out here will require Constitutional changes. And these need to be considered by the Constitutional Steering Panel and a report brought to Council Assembly that sets out the alterations that are required to the constitution for these recommendations to be implemented at the earliest opportunity.

1.3 The commission notes that a number of recommendations set out here are likely to have resource implications and these need to be examined by officers. The Commission is mindful of the need to minimise cost or be achievable within existing resources. For most recommendations the changes proposed should have minimal cost. One of the driving factors for these changes is to ensure the maximum benefit for the cost of Council Assembly.

2 The need for change

2.1 That the Commission accepts the need for change and acknowledges that doing nothing is not an option based on the strong body of evidence accompanying this review.

2.2 That the Commission recommendations should be considered together as a whole package to obtain the maximum positive effect.

2.3 That the Commission recommends these changes on the basis of maximising the benefits of the Council Assembly by:

- Increasing the involvement and participation of local people.
- Increasing accountability to local people.
- Discussion of issues relevant to local people.
- Better scrutiny of decision making for the people of the borough.
- Improving the quality of decisions made in the Council Assembly.
- Holding the Administration to Account.

3 PURPOSE The role of the Council Assembly

3.1 The Commission has found a need to set out a clear and easily understood role for the Council Assembly. The commission therefore recommends that the role of the Council Assembly is to:

- Decide on policy framework, strategies plans and policies.

- Debate and inform council plans, priorities and strategies.
- Debate and consider issues of relevance to residents and members.
- Hold the Cabinet to Account.
- Demonstrate community leadership.

3.2 The Commission recommends that the Council actively seeks to:

- Develop its role as a community leader by better community engagement and involvement.

- Strengthen the ability of residents and Elected Members to influence and hold the cabinet to account.

- Enable residents to more easily bring issues of relevance to the Council Assembly.

- Enable the public and members to participate in decision making early enough to influence change; both before and at the Assembly meeting.

The Commission recommends that:

4 In deliberating and deciding policy, plans and strategies,

4.1 The Council Assembly only considers those plans and strategies that the Government through the legal framework makes mandatory with the rest of these being considered by the Cabinet.

4.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) can refer more plans or strategies to the Council Assembly for debate and recommendation. The Constitutional Steering Panel will be asked to consider if there are additional plans that could be decided by Council Assembly.

4.3 The Council Assembly adopts the use of themes, related to Cabinet portfolios, to develop and inform the Councils (and related bodies), priorities, plans and strategies.

5 In debating and considering issues of relevance to residents and Members,

5.1 Council Assembly may take a petition according to the rules set out by Government. At present 2500 signatures are needed to trigger a debate at Council Assembly. The evidence supported lowering this, and the Constitutional Steering Panel should advise on an appropriate number as soon as possible for decision by the Council Assembly.

5.2 It is made easier to take a deputation to Council Assembly. Three deputations are allowed per meeting on a first come first served basis. Furthermore, more time is given to deputations, deputees are to be allowed to present directly for 3 minutes and ask a question of the Cabinet member/Leader. The relevant Cabinet Members will take responsibility for any follow up work and feedback.

5.3 The existing arrangements will continue to apply for taking and discussing Motions at the meetings. The Council Assembly Business Panel is to advise on the relevance and appropriateness of motions to proposers and their groups, given the consensus attached to the relevance of motions to the Council Assembly responsibilities.

5.4 The Council Assembly Business Panel should make allowances for a balanced business agenda and the need to make meetings more engaging. A draft of the Council Assembly agenda to be available to political groups well in advance of the despatch/publishing date.

5.5 Members can bring motions from those agreed by Community Councils to Assembly.

6.0 Monitoring executive functions of the Cabinet as well as its performance

6.1 Members Question Time will continue and be strengthened, with thought given to simplify the rules of debate, introducing parliamentary style questions and allowing the leaders of the opposition parties two supplementary questions

6.2 Cabinet Members will lead themed debate and will take motions and questions from Members on their portfolio. They will also take questions from residents and this opportunity will be actively promoted.

6.3 Themed debates will be linked to plans, strategies and polices and this will be clearly signposted to residents and Members so they are able connect debate to plans and monitor their implementation.

6.4 Scrutiny's role will be enhanced with space on the Assembly agenda to bring reports and recommendations to Assembly for endorsement (final decision must rest with Cabinet).

7 Demonstrating community leadership

7.1The Assembly will seek to involve the wider community in planning debates, to build and strengthen its community leadership role. Alongside this it will provide more opportunities for the community to influence and participate in debate and decisions at an opportune time.

8 Themed meetings

8.1 In order to achieve the above aims the Commission recommends that each year the seven Council Assembly meetings have a themed aspect as follows:

- Annual State of the Borough meeting
- Constitutional and Mayor-making
- Budget meeting

Four further themed meetings focused on a Cabinet member's portfolio following certain principles (detailed later) but can vary:

Example of themes might be:

- Finances and resources - to inform the annual Budget setting meeting.
- Young people, children's and families meeting (held with Southwark Youth Council).
- Adult Social Care.
- Housing.
- Regeneration.

8.2 Cabinet Members will involve residents at Community Council and other forums (such as Scrutiny) sometime before they come to Council assembly on the set themes. Participatory formats such as workshops and committee discussion will be used on these occasions. An example is the current consultation on the budgetary process in preparation (for a themed debate in January on Budget, Finances and Resources) for final decision in February.

8.3 A Council Assembly Business Panel will be established (see below).

8.4 Themes will be chosen bearing in mind the following principles:

a) Accountable led by Cabinet member and directly related to their portfolio. This is the first and most important principle.

b) Relevant to the public and able to resonate with them - not too specific and technical and not too broad so the meeting is unfocused.

c) Suitable for Community Council themed meetings or other participatory events leading up to and informing the Assembly meeting.

d) Useful - an issue that the Cabinet wants feedback and involvement on.

e) Related to plans and strategies - choosing ones that the Council is already devising and consulting on or refreshing existing ones(Enterprise and Employment / Independence and Wellbeing / Children's and Young Peoples plan for example).

f) Partnership that outside community leaders/ active citizens/ experts / relevant officers are invited to attend Council Business Panel meetings in an advisory role to plan debates on coming themes. (Organisations that have a representative structure or are constituted groups that have representation on Scrutiny Committees would be prioritised– i.e. Southwark Youth Council, Tenant Management Council etc).

g) Involvement and participation. That relevant partnership groups / constituency groups are invited to Council Assembly. Groups may be invited to actively participate before, during and after by assisting with consultation, presenting information and doing follow up work; There would be a flexible and creative approached so, for example, the Youth Council may want to do a presentation or a Pensioners group show a film, a Scrutiny Committee may want to do detailed policy work on issues raised.

h) Measurable with Feedback and Follow-up That following on from the Assembly meeting on a theme the residents and the community would be signposted to the plans, strategies and policies that the debates had impacted on. They would also be made aware of the ongoing partnership groups that take these polices forward, representatives that sit on these bodies (elected Members, constituency representative, community representative) and how they can continue to influence and monitor these plans .

8.5 The Council Assembly should receive a single annual report covering the work of the Community Councils to highlight issues that are of borough wide concern.

9 Format of the Council Assembly meeting

9.1 That each Council Assembly starts with an informal session, this to be up to an hour before the formal start of the meeting. The informal session will be an opportunity for information on the theme to be presented in creative ways and for residents to mix with Members and the community in an informal setting.

9.2 During these informal sessions officers provide sufficient information papers about the meeting in plain English outlining the agenda of the meeting and the way the meeting is conducted. Also to make available sheets explaining how the Council and Council Assembly works and the role of the Councillors.

9.3 That an officer from the constitutional team is present in the informal session to explain the process and the paper work. The information screens in the Assembly Meeting should provide better information such as the speakers name, the ward they represent, political group and position if Cabinet member.

9.4 That the outcome of the meeting should be available in Plain English and accessible format and published on the Councils' website. And this should form the basis of any feedback to the residents at the following Council Assembly.

9.5 See appendix for suggested outline of a Council assembly meeting format

10.0 Council Assembly Business Panel

10.1 The Commission recommends that a Council Assembly Business Panel be set up. This Council Assembly Business Panel is to be responsible for planning the Council Assembly's agenda as an advisory panel to the Mayor. The Panel will plan the annual agenda for up to a year of programmes for policy, budgetary framework development, themes, community leadership items and the content of informal sessions.

10.2 The Council Assembly Business Panel to be chaired by the Mayor. The composition of the committee should be politically balanced, have all the whips as members plus 3 Councillors. It will have the ability to seek advice from community leaders/ active citizens/ experts / relevant officers as required who will act in an advisory role to plan debates on coming themes.

10.3 The Council Assembly Business Panel takes into account a balance between items of business promoting participative democracy (community engagement) and representative democracy (getting more out of elected Members).

11 MEETING CONTENT

11.1 At themed Council Assembly meetings Cabinet lead Members are to be called to present annual reports on their work and their vision, priorities and plans for the future. They will already have conducted engagement activities involving residents intended to inform policy development on their theme at Community Councils and in other fora. Residents will have the right to ask pre-submitted questions to this item on the agenda.

11.2 The Mayor to have more discretionary power in debate and allow interjections during discussions if there is a relevant point to be added to the discussions. Debating rules will be simplified. This item to be kept under review by the Council Assembly Business Panel and to offer changes if it does not elicit good behaviour.

12 Times and venues for Council Assembly

12.1 The Commission recommends that the times of the Council Assembly be altered from previous times for the different themed meetings to cater for a meeting held for young people in partnership with the Youth Council, or for a daytime themed meeting on Adult Social Care which would particularly appeal to older people.

12.2 That the budgetary meeting in (January or February) may be held on a Saturday afternoon to enable a larger cross-section of residents to attend.

12.3 The commission recommends that the Council Assembly ceases meeting in the current Council Chamber and has its meetings in other venues around the borough.

12.4 That the officers working on the current accommodation strategy explore this recommendation and the special requirements outlined in this report and present suitable alternative venues. The officers work out the costs of the various options available for the complete cycle of Council Assembly meetings including the cost of the current Council Chamber.

13 COMMUNICATION and using new technology

13.1 The Commission recommends engaging the media by providing media briefings before the meetings. These should be briefings by officers on the information role only and the Members on the opinion and values. Updates, briefings and alerts could go out to all media and local online community websites.

13.2 That all documents are published online before the meeting or soon after (with a summary decision sheet) so media outlets have all the documents on hand.

13.3 That the rules on the recording of audio are relaxed and all audio recording of the proceedings in Council Assembly be allowed.

13.4 That podcasts be released on the Council's website from recordings of the sound system.

13.5 That wireless access is enabled in any meeting venue that houses Council Assembly to enable tweeting and posting online.

13.6 That better use of the Council's existing communication platforms and networks is undertaken. A better explanation of the Council Assembly should appear on Southwark media; Southwark Life and on the web including dates and announced in advance, summaries of the meeting, and the calls for questions. Updates, briefings and summaries and alerts should go out to community networks (Southwark Life, TRAs, Forums, social media Sites, newspapers).

13.7 Text / Facebook / Twitter /Assembly newsletter updates and invites should go to those residents signed up to Southwark platforms or there could be an option to join a specific list. Cost effective posting of important debates and decisions could have limited 'clips.'

13.8 Targeted promotion for specific debates should be considered when at all practical – i.e. regeneration of a particular area would lead to invitations to local groups and people; a debate on Housing would target local TRAs etc.

13.9 It is recommended that the costs for webcasting and TV broadcasting are looked into alongside the opportunities for using venues with built in facilities (e.g. the London Assembly debating chamber at the GLA).

14 Community Education

14.1 That there should be better information through the existing channels for better awareness and understanding of the Council Assembly, the workings of the Council in general, and the role of the Councillors in particular for the residents of the borough. Training, mentoring and citizenships class should all be promoted so residents have the skills, knowledge and support to get involved.

15. Equalities issues

15.1 The Democracy Commission has been set up with the aim of bringing the Council closer to its residents, making it more accountable to them and more connected with their concerns. And these recommendations are primarily aimed at achieving that aim. Any implementation plan should include a full Equality and Community Impact Assessment.

15.2 The Council Assembly Business Panel will need to think carefully about how it works with existing equalities groups to enable wider participation

15.3 Consideration should be given to training for officers and members in community engagement and how to ensure openness to community influence.

16. Next Steps

16.1 Following the acceptance of these recommendations, the Chair of the Democracy Commission to report back to the next meeting of the Council Assembly with a full implementation plan including any resource implications.

16.2 Also the Council Assembly requests that a report is brought to the next Council Assembly to outline how the Council Constitution will be altered to enable these changes to be implemented.

16.3 The Democracy commission as currently constituted oversees and assists the development of the implementation plan.

16.4 That the Democracy Commission reviews the implementation of the agreed recommendations after 12 months after these changes have been fully implemented and to work to for further improvements.

Appendix 1

MEETING FORMAT

This meeting format emphasises topical and themed debated.

Preparation

Prior to the themed debate taking place outreach would take place by Cabinet Members visiting Community Councils and other community forums on set themes in the weeks prior to the event. There may also be other engagement work to support this

Meeting

Informal start

30 minute informal 'meet the Assembly session' prior to the meeting start.

This would informally present the information gathered from Community Councils etc and report on the Members vision, by for, example displays There may be a presentation by a community group – for example the Youth Council. This space would emphasis creative and informal ways of communicating.

It would give an opportunity for the public to informally discuss issues with Members and the wider community.

Formal meeting

This is an outline guide to timings; it is recommended this is given to the CSP for more work. The Council Business Committee too would most likely need to adjust the timings by deciding the priority of each meeting. The meeting will last for no longer than three hours (subject to guillotine on debating formal reports for decision).
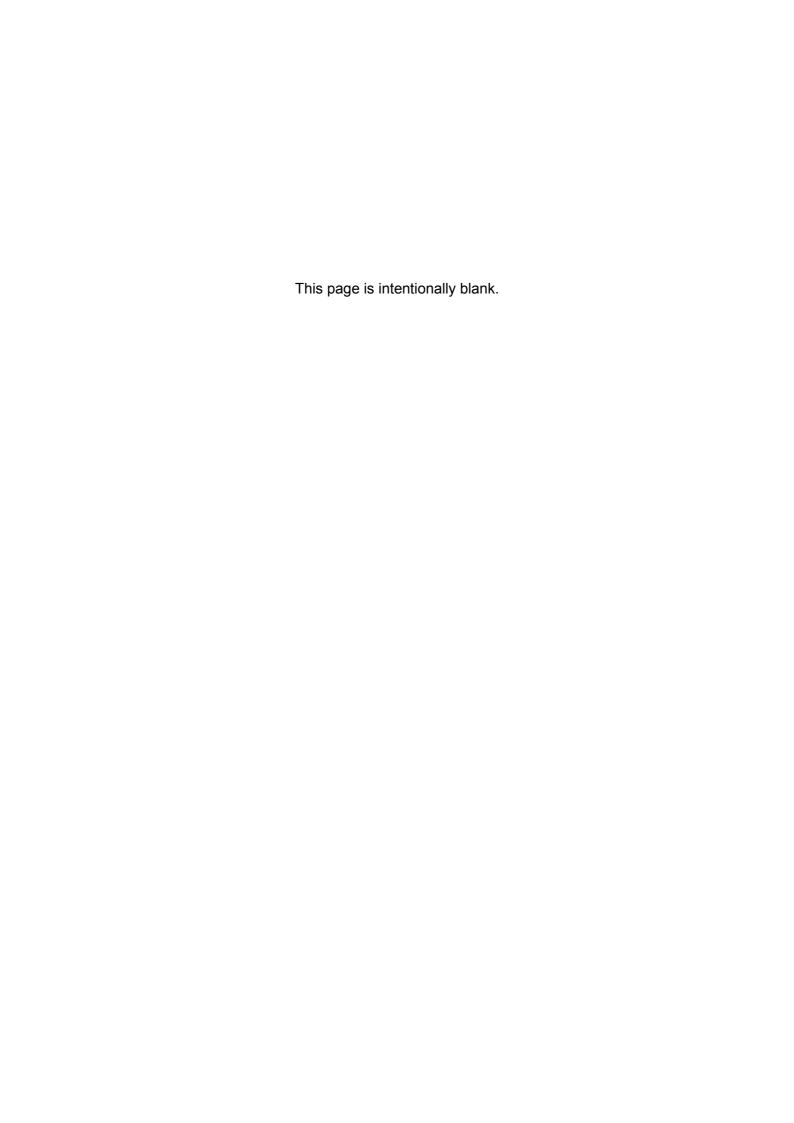
1. **Time for residents to bring topical and pertinent issues to Assembly** – would need to find a balance between quality over quantity & accessibility

   30 - 45 minutes for deputations and petitions from the public.

2. **Time for Members to bring topical and pertinent issues to Assembly**

   20 - 45 minutes for Members to bring topical motions, motions from Community Council and ask parliamentary style questions

3. **Themed debated centred on Cabinet member's portfolios - 1 hour for themed debate**
   - 10 minutes for Cabinet lead to present vision, priorities and plan for the year
   - 15 minutes for public pre submitted questions
   - 30 minutes for Member's motions and questions on the Cabinet theme using present principles to allow sufficient political balance and political parties to hold Cabinet to account.

4. **Scrutiny reports** (max 10 - 30 minutes) This slot would be reserved for occasional engaging and appropriate reports (freedom pass, food strategy)

5. **Formal constitutional business** (normally 10-30 minutes but the whole meeting in case of deciding the budget). This may be able to be reduced further if some reports are removed but would expand if Members wanted to Council assembly in future to consider additional policies for decisions – bearing in mind legal constraints may make this difficult.

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Democracy Commission 2010
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