

**Democracy Commission business meeting  
6 July 2010**

**1. PRESENT**

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

**2. OFFICER SUPPORT**

Sharon Beckwith - Business and Performance Planning Officer  
Stephen Douglass - Head of Community Engagement  
Julie Timbrell –Democracy Commission and Scrutiny Project Manager

**3. INTRODUCTIONS AND WELCOME (CHAIR)**

The Chair introduced himself and welcomed those present at the meeting and asked officers and members to introduce themselves. He asked that members recognise the great opportunity they had in front of them and that they respect and trust each other. He reminded them that the subject of this first part the commission's work would be the council assembly, asked that their work be focused, practical and meaningful and reminded them that the commission should aim to minimise spending.

**4. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf Councillor Michael Mitchell

**5. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS THAT THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT**

There were no urgent items of business.

**6. DISCLOSURE OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS**

None were disclosed.

**7. Agenda pack**

It was noted that the report included in the agenda pack was not the final version. The report that was distributed led to some confusion as it stated that the commission would appoint a Chair at its first meeting whereas the final adopted version stated that Councillor Mohamed had been appointed as Chair by the Cabinet. Stephen Douglass apologised for the mistake and confirmed that the correct version would be emailed to members after the meeting.

## **RESOLVED**

- That officers would circulate the final version of the Cabinet report of 15 June 2010 pertaining to the establishment of the Democracy Commission.
- That for future meetings documents in the agenda pack should be numbered.

## **8. Underlying Issues**

- 8.1. Cllrs Al-Samerai and Blango questioned the composition of the commission and expressed regret that it was not independently chaired, that there were independent members and that the ruling party had sought an assured majority. Cllr Al-Samerai asked for an explanation of rationale behind the make-up of the commission that seemed undemocratic and requested that the Cabinet reconsider. It was noted that Cllr Al-Samerai wrote to the Leader of the Council to express these concerns. Despite these concerns members welcomed the appointment of the Chair. Cllr Blango noted that the commission members had not had the opportunity to consider the Cabinet report together and decide what should be brought out of it.
- 8.2. The Chair explained that the cabinet was keen to have ownership of commission's output and to keep its spending and the scope of its enquiries under control. He reiterated the cabinet's commitment to reviewing the set-up and the work of the commission at the end of the first stage which would allow for members to put forward their concerns and ideas for improvement in subsequent stages. Cllr Glover reminded members that proportionality ensured it would reflect the democratic make-up of the council and that members were acting as party representatives but added that he hoped the commission would not be whipped. Cllr Morrissey made the point that regardless of party politics all the members had a shared interest in increasing participation in democracy. The Chair assured members that the draft documents put to them at the meeting were officers' interpretation of the Cabinet's recommendations and that they were free to agree changes, additions and deletions.
- 8.3. They considered the reasons for starting with the council assembly. It was suggested that it could be considered the council's primary or supreme meeting and the only forum in which all 63 elected members take part; that a large part the public and media tend to identify the council with its full meeting and that some may see it as being far removed from the public's reach. It was also argued on the other hand that the strong executive model reduced the powers of the full assembly and it would therefore be necessary to look into the implications of past, current and planned legislation on its potential impact.

## **9. Terms of reference**

- 9.1. Members considered a draft terms of reference. The Chair explained that the document was intended as a starting point and that they should agree on what to keep, add, delete or change. It was noted that the terms of reference should be as simple as possible so they could be easily understood by all and used to inform the public about the democracy commission.
- 9.2. Cllr Al-Samerai questioned whether the council assembly was an appropriate forum to try to engage the public with. She made the point that its powers and way of working were heavily dependent on national level policy and so requested that that it be within the scope of the commissions first task to

make recommendations at a national as well as at a local level. The Chair noted that establishing what, if anything, can be done to make the assembly more engaging was precisely what the Commission was tasked with.

- 9.3. Members questioned the bullet-point referring to a 'joint communication and engagement strategy promoting the new style council assembly meetings'. It was agreed that it would not be appropriate to recommend a whole strategy for the first task of the commission and that the phrase 'new style council assembly' was unhelpful and pre-empted the commission's work.
- 9.4. There was a discussion about the review of the commission's work. It was pointed out that point 7 of the Cabinet Report (15 June 2010) states that a review and recommendations for future phases of its work be presented to Cabinet and the Assembly in October, that is at the same time as it presents its recommendations on the council assembly. Cllr Glover expressed a view that this was neither practical nor useful.
- 9.5. Members discussed the likely cost of the commission's work and what budget was available. It was clarified that as stated in the Cabinet Report (15 June 2010), there was no additional budget associated with the commission but it was recognised that there would necessarily be some cost associated with its work. The Chair confirmed that costs would be kept to an absolute minimum and would come out of existing budgets. Members hoped that spending would be closely monitored. The Chair proposed that they might at the next meeting decide to task individual commission members to keep an eye on this and other key issues.

## **RESOLVED**

That subject to the following, the terms of reference were agreed:

- Consideration of the national context and recommendations on national policy should be included in the terms of reference.
- The bullet point on a joint communications and engagement strategy be removed.
- It be made clearer which points refer to the commission's first task and which refer to its review.
- That a competent officer to be identified by Stephen Douglass to provide evidence on the relevant government policy.
- That Cllr Mohamed will request of Cabinet that the report be amended to allow submission of the review to be at a later council assembly.
- That mechanisms would be agreed to ensure that costs were kept in check.

## **10. Methods to be used by the Commission and workplan**

- 10.1. Stephen Douglass summarised the draft discussion papers on suggested methods and potential sources of evidence which covered select-committee style hearings that would be held in public with some public participation and other more engaging and participatory ways to collect evidence.
- 10.2. He confirmed that a focus group could be set up in time for the next council assembly meeting (14 July). Members were enthusiastic about the later and stressed that the composition of the group was very important and

care should be taken to make it fully representative of the borough's population.

- 10.3. There was a discussion about the aims, subject and nature of the next meeting on 12 July 2010. Stephen Douglass explained that due to the short timeframe, potential witnesses have been provisionally invited and venue pre-booked subject to commission members' agreement; that although Cllr Mohamed proposes that it be open to the public, it was not appropriate to publicise it before the commission had reached agreement on this.
- 10.4. Members questioned whether the proposed subject of 'Strategic and legal perspectives on the relationship between Council and the public' was appropriate for a public meeting that aimed to engage residents with the commission's work.
- 10.5. There was concern about there not being enough time a) to allow members to thoroughly consider all the relevant documents before deciding on the format and content of the first public meeting (Cllr Blango) or b) to give the public sufficient notice (Cllr Al-Samerai). Both councillors expressed regret that the commission may be missing an opportunity to fully involve the public from the outset, finding out how they would like the Commission to proceed.
- 10.6. The Chair stated that the primary aim of the first meeting was not necessarily to engage the public but to inform the commission whilst allowing for and welcoming the public's participation. He reassured members that rationale for proceeding in this way was to establish boundaries to the commission's work but that there would be opportunities to use much more engaging methods later on. Cllr Al-Samerai hoped that the format would allow for members to put questions to officers freely.
- 10.7. It was agreed that care needed to be taken in publicising the meeting appropriately so as not to raise expectations of full engagement at this point.
- 10.8. Members confirmed that a detailed workplan should be agreed at the next meeting and that it should include desk research to be carried by officers with recommendations of good practice, carefully considered outreach by commission members and officers in August and September according to availability and use of internet based and social media. Outreach should target people who already have some knowledge of how the council assembly works (e.g. councillors and people who have already attended council assembly) as well as the wider public.

## **RESOLVED**

- That a focus group that is representative of Southwark's population be set up in time to attend the 14 July council assembly meeting.
- That the outputs of the meeting on 12 July would include a) a list of questions that could be used to find out what residents think about key issues related to the council assembly, and b) a simplified version of the agreed terms of reference that could be used to inform people about the democracy commission, and c) agreement on how to launch the commission's work.
- That Julie Timbrell will email commission members and gather details of their availability in July and August.
- That members should email the Chair with any ideas and issues they have regarding the terms of reference or the workplan.

- That in terms of outreach, events to consider attending should have a local, community-based focus, such as Tennants and Residents Association events and that time constraints (such as school term times) need to be considered in the workplan.
- That the multi faith forum be added to the list of bodies to included in consultations.