

# Open Agenda



## DEMOCRACY COMMISSION

MINUTES of the Democracy Commission held on Thursday 5 August 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 Michael Mitchell  
Councillor Helen Morrissey  
Councillor Cleo Soanes

**OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT:** Councillor Peter John, Leader of the Council and Labour group

**OFFICER SUPPORT:** Stephen Douglass - Head of Community Engagement  
Julie Timbrell - Democracy Commission and Scrutiny Project Manager  
Sharon Beckwith - Community Engagement Officer  
Michael Cleere - Community Cohesion Coordinator  
Ian Mark - Senior Lawyer, Southwark Council

**RESIDENTS PRESENT:** Alma Gray  
Simon Kitchen  
Don Phillips  
Doreen Phillips  
Jerry Hewitt  
Liliana Dmitrovic  
Ari Henry  
Will Finch  
Stephanie Lodge  
Jim Lodge

1. **INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME BY THE CHAIR**
2. **APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf Councillor Mark Glover.

### **3. MINUTES OF THE LAST TWO MEETINGS (6 & 12 JULY 2010)**

Minutes of the democracy commission meeting of 6 July and minutes of the democracy commission meeting of 12 July were agreed.

The Chair responded to questions from Ari Henry reiterating the overall aims of the democracy commission and those of the current task set for the democracy commission. Cllr Al-Samerai noted that not all members of the commission had been in absolute agreement that the initial focus on the Council Assembly was the best way to proceed.

### **4. EVIDENCE FROM THE LEADERS OF THE POLITICAL GROUPS**

#### **COUNCILLOR PETER JOHN, LEADER OF THE LABOUR GROUP**

The Leader of the Council, Cllr Peter John presented his views on how the council assembly could be made more open and his aspirations for the democracy commission. He confirmed he would submit a written testimony following the meeting.

His view was that shifts in decision making power have perhaps left the council assembly with a possible lack of purpose. He reiterated its dual role of holding the cabinet to account and fully debating important matters of local relevance and said that it was at its most effective when there more deputations. He noted a consensus within the commission on some important points including possibility of changing location of some meetings. As well as looking at the venue, the Leader suggested changes might focus on times of meetings, web-broadcasting, greater public interactions through changes to the rules on deputations, considering changing the procedural rules so more spontaneous date can take place, members' questions, public questions, order of proceedings, adoption of themes, workshops, and other participatory meeting formats. The Carrib Football Club was discussed as an example of a deputation that had real impact. He suggested that themes for meetings could include a pre-budget debate and housing.

The following issues were raised:

- Possible difficulties in allowing public opinion to put pressure on a cabinet decision where a lot of work has already gone into preparation. (Cllr Mohamed)
- The political motivation of many deputations (Cllr Blango).
- How local should local politics be? (Cllr Blango)
- Need to consider how 'regular residents' will respond. They could be put of by the formality of a 'deputations' but may well be interested in coming along to a themed debate (Liliana Dmitrovic, People's Republic of Southwark).
- Most exciting thing about community councils is having the public really participating in decision making (Cllr Al Samerai).
- Cllr Al Samerai wanted to know if there were any plans to give any more decision powers to council assembly.

- Council assembly may not be the appropriate place for direct democracy. It will always be difficult to manage a debate of 'live' issues by 63 members. There is a danger that we might be squeezing out the role of councillors if more time is given to the public and less to councillor questions. We need to make sure all ideas that emerge as part of this democracy commission process are fed into other forums as relevant (Cllr Mitchell).
- One of the problems with deputations is the lack of reply (as experienced by Cooltan Arts). Our biggest problem with the council is with officers who do not send emails to community groups - not with councillors. Themed meetings would not be relevant for whole council events (Ari Henry).

Cllr John's responses:

Timing is crucial i.e. deputations need to happen prior to decisions being made and debates must be able to influence decisions. He conceded that national issues have too much coverage and was of the view that it is acceptable for deputations to be political with a small 'p' and in particular for the administration to be held to account through deputations. He noted that options other than making deputations to council assembly should still be available. He pointed out that the council assembly does not need more decision making power as it already has the ability to influence Cabinet decisions by the mere fact that all 63 council members have a say and agreed that there will always be a need for the Assembly to carry out formal duties, which can be quite dry.

### **COUNCILLOR ANOOD AL-SAMERAI, LEADER OF THE LIBERAL DEMOCRAT GROUP**

Cllr Al-Samerai introduced and presented points from the paper submitted for this meeting, tabled and attached to the minutes.

Issues and comments:

- Cllr Cleo Soanes acknowledged that community councils were the ideal forum for engaging on local issues but that there is a real place for deputations at council assembly too. She said that local groups are not necessarily politically motivated but that come to assembly because of a passion about an issue.
- Cllr Helen Morrissey asked if there were themed meetings, e.g. on Housing, whether the Opposition would feel compelled to use this as an opportunity to gain political capital
- Gerry Hewitt expressed support for public questions and deputations at council assembly particularly when residents feel their views are not being represented through their ward councillors. He also pointed out that the Liberal Democrat suggestion of reducing the threshold for petitions to be heard at assembly meetings down to 100 was impractical as it would be too easy to get that number of signatures (although he agreed 3000 was too high).
- Cllr John noted that deputations to Cabinet could be very effective but that some groups were frustrated if they were unable to put their points to council assembly.
- Cllr Blango stated that deputations could be 'fantastic' if 'politics and mischief' were removed and a balance was struck so that members are not demotivated.

Responses:

In response to a question by Cllr Blango, Cllr Al-Samerai responded that local politics should be very local and bottom-up i.e. at community council level but that there needs to be mechanisms for different decision making bodies to feed into each other. She reiterated the importance of timing the debates and deputations carefully to have maximum impact. There is also a need to for effective communications of the opportunities available. Cllr Al-Samerai commented that the Opposition intended to be constructive. She noted that one potential problem with themed meetings was that they might not always include the most topical issues but that they would work well in terms of promoting meetings to the wider community and public. She suggested that the public could select themes and Cllr John agreed this was a possibility, and that other council bodies had set up task groups to plan the agenda.

The leader of the Conservative group; Councillor Lewis Robinson sent his apologies and is planning to do a written submission.

## **5. COUNCIL ASSEMBLY DECISION MAKING POWERS - OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE**

The last meeting requested more information on what decision making powers could be transferred to the Council Assembly or delegated to other bodies such as Community Councils. Ian Mark, Senior Lawyer, Governance Team noted that it was very difficult to come up with a black and white list of powers that can be devolved because of a complicated set of rules determined by the Local Government Act 2000. He then presented the main points made in the paper he had submitted to the meeting and took questions.

Questions and comments:

- Cllr Mohamed asked if it would be possible to make space for initiatives like topical debates at meetings by giving more provision for late motions
- Cllr Blango suggested that the commission hold an in-depth meeting to consider such fundamental issues.
- Cllr Mitchell suggested delegating issues that would benefit from local knowledge to community council level such as road repairs. With regard to when decisions on changing the constitution of the council assembly are considered, he suggested a workshop at the democracy commission conference.
- Cllr Al-Samerai expressed concern at the idea of doing away with motions.
- Cllr Mohamed confirmed that the commission may need to get back to Ian once to advise them as and when they are developing their recommendations.
- Ari Henry objected to some of the language being used such as 'the public' instead of 'residents' or 'community' and repeated use of the word 'complex' implying that policy documents were inaccessible to residents. He also commented that community councils do not need to be at such as local level as they are now as the decisions they deal with are often of a wider nature and that if they were dealt with at council assembly level more groups would get involved from different areas which would limit instances of debates being

- dominated by a single group or view.
- Jerry Hewitt expressed a lack of trust in politicians and in particular community councils to distribute funds fairly and stated that he would prefer council officers to make funding decisions.
  - Cllr Morrissey asked that the new version of the paper on opportunities for change be written in Plain English.

#### Responses

Ian Mark confirmed that there was no obligation for the public to be able to participate in council assembly meetings but that there is a strict process to follow in order to change current provisions of the constitution. He confirmed that the Cabinet can in effect delegate anything it wants to the Council Assembly except in some very specific cases.

#### **ACTION**

Ian Mark to review his paper and add more details including some sentences regarding delegation to community councils by council assembly, clarification on budgetary powers and potential implications of the recent localism bill. Efforts will be made to re-write in Plain English.

## **6. FEEDBACK ON FOCUS GROUPS AND QUESTIONNAIRES**

Ari Henry asked why the commission had chosen to use an external website to produce and host the online questionnaire and expressed concern at the possible misuse of respondents' email addresses and personal data by Survey Monkey. Julie Timbrell explained that Survey Monkey was the Council's communications department's recommended tool for producing online questionnaires. A response to the questions about survey monkey's privacy policy and reliability will be provided by Julie Timbrell.

To date there has been a focus group of residents who attend Council Assemble and a one elected members' focus group.

Another focus group for residents is being arranged.

A further focus group for elected members will be held on 10 August and in September.

Members of the commission stressed the need to collect more views through distribution of the questionnaire and holding of additional focus groups for members.

Residents, both those who are active and attend Community Councils or other meeting and others who have not been involved in council meetings are being targeted for their views. Residents and the community are being consulted through vox pops, by being invited to submit oral evidence and through focus groups.

Michael Cleere informed the meeting that officers had produced audio recordings of all of the focus groups, oral testimonies and vox pops and that he will be working on editing the recordings and transcribing the most relevant parts.

The online questionnaire will be distributed more widely through facebook and twitter

and sent out through various email networks.

Hard copies to be sent out to community council and other mailing lists , including all Tenants and residents association secretaries maintained by the Community Engagement Division & Resident Involvement as well as being distributed at other events. Julie Timbrell to look into the possibility of using Planning's mailing list, particularly their email list.

It was agreed that once Julie Timbrell obtained permission from participants to share audio-recordings on the internet, People's Republic of Southwark would be able to upload content onto their website.

## **7. PLANNING OUT THE CONFERENCE ON SATURDAY 4 SEPTEMBER**

The following venue options were considered: In-Spire, the Town Hall and Amigo Hall at St George's Cathedral. Amigo Hall was agreed.

A list of potential speakers was circulated and discussed. Officers were asked to contact Philip Whiteman of Birmingham University and Simon Schama, well-known historian' to find out if they were interested and available to be keynote speakers. It was also agreed that facilitators would be needed for workshops and possibly a panel discussion.

Councillors failed to agree on one of the proposed speakers /facilitators, a local activist, with labour political affiliations. Cllr Soanes hoped that political views would not exclude inspirational speakers. Other possibilities for keynote speakers that were discussed included the Chief Executive of Southwark and the Editor of the Southwark News.

The following points were flagged up:

Workshops would keep people more interested; too many presentations or long presentations were to be avoided; care needs to be taken if combining panel discussions and workshops; having celebrity speakers tends to skew results of consultation exercises as it attracts a specific group of people; workshops require extra time for the sharing of conclusions; facilitators need to be non-partisan.

Cllr Al-Samerai was keen for communications about the conference to be clear about the aims and focus of the day so as not to create false expectations. Cllr Mohamed reassured commission members that it will be made clear that the conference is focusing on making the council assembly more open and engaging but that would not preclude participants discussing wider democratic issues.

Findings of the democracy commission's consultation will be fed back to those taking part at the conference including results of questionnaires and extracts from focus groups.

## 8. YOUTH COUNCIL ENGAGEMENT

Members' attention was drawn to the letter in the agenda pack from Southwark Youth Council inviting members to take part in their summer event. Julie Timbrell asked members to let her know if they were able to attend.

## 9. WORK PLAN

Cllr Mohamed confirmed that the commission would not attend *any* of the community council meetings as all agreed that it would be inappropriate to consult at some and not others. He explained that the date of the final report could not be changed. Cllr Al-Samerai expressed regret that the commission was not able to extend its timescale so that it could encompass all 8 community council meetings. Cllr Mohamed and Julie Timbrell assured members that all of the active citizens in each community council area would be appropriately informed and invited to get involved by the community engagement division that supports community councils.

It was agreed that commission members would continue to plan the finer details of future events and the report by way of an email discussion group.

The next formal meeting of the democracy commission was confirmed for 7 September. The final meeting will be on 23 September. Helen Morrissey gave her apologies for meeting of 23 September.

**CHAIR:**

**DATED:**

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