

# **Liberal Democrat thoughts on council assembly**

## **Decision Making**

As the Democracy Commission has already noted, the last government ensured that decision making was moved towards the Executive and the Leader. This makes it particularly difficult to engage the public as they are not actually taking part in real decisions. This is something which we now have an excellent opportunity to address. The new government's Localism Bill plans to free up local authorities from centrally controlled rules and Southwark should be contributing ideas about how decisions and powers can be moved back to local elected representatives and local people. We could already start by ensuring that important Cabinet decisions are debated at full council. We should be making representations to DCLG about the decisions which should be taken by all 63 councillors rather than just the Cabinet.

## **Petitions and deputations**

Although the last government created prescriptive rules about where and when a petition could be heard we could still look at some elements such as the number of signatures needed for an issue to be debated. 500 seems much more sensible than the current rules of 3000 and some Liberal Democrat councils have already opted to reduce the number in this way. We could have a threshold of 500 for a borough wide issue and 100 for a ward issue.

Petitioners could also be allowed to present instead of councillors.

Allow deputations to ask questions of the Leader/Cabinet members as well as questions being asked of them.

## **Questions and Motions**

More time could be allowed for members' questions (1 hour instead of 30 minutes) with the possibility for 2 supplemental questions. Or we could have half an hour of public questions from the gallery.

Allow more urgent questions to the Leader from cllrs so that more topical issues can be discussed.

Publicise public question time more widely (maybe push via CCs) and actively invite community groups/TRAs/residents to come and ask questions. Particularly residents who aren't getting satisfaction through other council channels.

Limit petitions and motions to issues over which the council has control rather than just debating national or international issues.

Place statutory reports and constitutional items at end of meetings to make sure the early part of the meeting is focused on the parts which the public find most interesting.

### **Information and access for the public**

One of the great benefits of community councils is that the public are actually part of the meeting and can take part in an active way - through workshops, by voting, by allocating funding, by asking questions and by making their own presentations. This means genuine participation and engagement and we need to look at how to apply these methods to council assembly. Participatory budgeting would be really exciting for the public if possible.

Holding council assembly in different locations across the borough and publicising it would help to ensure greater public attendance.

The paperwork available in the gallery should be more helpful. Basically its a random number of whatever agenda, minutes, questions etc just left on table which are very hard to follow. Perhaps a simple leaflet explaining procedure, format and order would be good. A listing of councillors by name, party and responsibility would help. It would also be good if a member of constitutional staff could be in the gallery as people arrive to explain the paperwork and the process.

Council language and papers should be in plain English as far as possible.

Tickets for gallery are given out at 7pm meaning it is a rush and people miss the beginning of the meeting - they should be given out 10 mins before.

### **Tying in with existing public engagement**

Have a joint meeting with Southwark Youth Council and let them have a role in agenda setting.

Allow community councils to feed in to full council more formally. For example if there is an issue to be debated at full council, ensure views from community councils are included by having items on CC agenda before and after full council.

### **Other issues**

Concerns has been raised that council assembly is the first item for the Democracy Commission to look at and that the approach of the commission appears to be top down.

August is also the worst time to be doing any form of consultation as councillors and members of the public are often away.

We would also like to discuss an STV voting system for councillors at some stage of the commission's work.