

# **Submission to the Democracy Commission investigation on the future of Council Assembly**

## **James Hatts, London SE1 community website**

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### **Introduction**

I edit the London SE1 community website - [www.London-SE1.co.uk](http://www.London-SE1.co.uk) - which reports on local news and politics in the north west corner of the borough. Our coverage area can be approximately mapped on to six local government wards: five of them in Southwark and one in Lambeth.

I am a member of the National Union of Journalists.

Our news coverage is non-partisan. One of our driving motivations is a belief that local politics matters and that it is important that people should have access to high-quality independent information about political and civic activities.

The website was established in 1998. For the past five years we have regularly reported on Council Assembly meetings when something relevant to our part of the borough has been on the agenda, such as the Elephant & Castle regeneration.

Members' question time can also be a significant source of local stories.

This submission is a mixture of professional and personal observations. As well as writing about the activities of Southwark Council, I am also a lifelong resident of the borough.

### **Debates and motions**

Too often the Assembly wastes valuable time debating motions which only have a flimsy connection to the powers and responsibilities of the council.

Both of the main political groups are guilty of tabling motions which are motivated entirely by party-political point-scoring.

Sometimes I have seen the debate on such motions prolonged to such an extent that debates on more pertinent local subjects have been shelved due to a lack of time.

I strongly support the suggestions made by John Cade at the recent Democracy Commission conference that Council Assembly should debate the findings of scrutiny reports and also have a chance to debate issues and policies at an early stage of development.

## **The Chamber**

As someone who has spent many hours in the public gallery, I agree with the view of the focus group that the gallery is not fit for purpose. The sight lines are poor and it can be hard to see what is happening on the floor of the chamber, especially when backbenchers are speaking.

Perhaps it would be worth considering the installation of screens visible from the public gallery which could show a feed from a camera positioned near the Mayor's seat facing towards the members' seats.

The sound system, however, is good. If the venue for council assembly is to be varied, I fear that it would be difficult to ensure that the AV arrangements were of consistently high quality.

## **Availability of printed materials**

I have often found that there is an insufficient supply of papers for the meeting in the public gallery. This is especially important in the case of papers tabled on the night of the Assembly, such as the written answers to members' questions, as they are not available for reading on the web in advance of the meeting.

Without access to the yellow answer booklet, it is hard to follow the supplemental questions.

As a journalist I have sometimes been able to scrounge a copy of the written answers from one of the political groups, but if this is not possible on the night, the answers are often not added to the website for many days after the meeting, and getting hold of the answers booklet via the press office can also take a long time.

## **Resolutions**

If you are sitting in the public gallery it is nearly impossible to know what the final text of a motion passed by the Assembly is, once the various amendments have been accepted or rejected.

Please could the commission give some consideration as to how this could be communicated in a timely and clear fashion.

As a journalist it is easier to focus on the colourful interventions in the debate rather than reporting on the final decision or resolution, partly because it is a mind-bending business to discern what the final view of the Assembly might be.

## **Communications**

For a short while under the previous administration, regular press briefings were held prior to Council Assembly (and executive) meetings at which executive members and senior officers would set out the background to the decisions and issues coming up.

Consideration should be given to reinstating this practice, although clearly there are sensitivities about the risk of the cabinet exercising media management on the reporting of an all-party council meeting.

## **Webcasting**

I strongly welcome the comments recently made by the leader of the council in support of the idea of webcasting meetings of the council.

Even if the audience for webcasts is not large, I think it sends an important message about transparency that the meetings are in some way accessible beyond the confines of those who choose to (or are able to) venture to Camberwell to sit in a gloomy public gallery.

I believe that Council Assembly meetings are already recorded to aid the preparation of the minutes of the meeting.

At a minimum, the council should publish these recordings as a podcast.

This would have a negligible cost to the council and would dramatically improve the accessibility of Council Assembly meetings.

When parliamentary and London Assembly proceedings are available online both live and on-demand, it is incongruous that Council Assembly debates should only be accessible to those physically present in the building at the time of the meeting.

## **Broadcast and publication of audio by third parties**

The council should also consider relaxing the rules on the recording and broadcast of Council Assembly meetings by media organisations.

Clearly there is a risk that material will be used out of context or misrepresented, but if the words of other elected politicians in other debating chambers are freely available for publication and broadcast, the justification for restricting coverage at council level seems to be non-existent.

It would be good, if reporting on a Council Assembly debate on, for example, the Elephant & Castle regeneration, we could embed some audio clips from that debate on the same web page as our written report.

Some people may prefer to consume the material in this way rather than read a lengthy piece of text.

I will not pretend that the audience for such material would be large, but in the interests of transparency and accountability the council should at least consider redrawing its constitutional arrangements so that local media - professional and non--professional - can use the latest multimedia technology to creatively cover the meetings of the Assembly

without having to seek special permission in advance and jump through lots of bureaucratic hoops.

### **Audio transmission to the town hall foyer**

There have been occasions when I have arrived at the town hall too late to secure a seat in the public gallery. Most recently this was at the mayor-making meeting, but it has also happened at ordinary Assembly meetings when a particularly contentious issue has been on the agenda.

On the most recent occasion there were a number of friends of the incoming mayor, and other members of the public, who were kept in the foyer for some time until space became available in the gallery. This was very frustrating for those who had made a special journey to be there.

The council should consider the costs and benefits of transmitting the audio from the chamber to the foyer. At least those of us waiting in the foyer, and the staff controlling the queue, would be able to tell what stage the proceedings had reached.

### **Social media**

I know that the commission is considering how social media might be used in relation to Council Assembly.

I would like to draw to the attention of the commission the Twitter account I set up in July 2009: [twitter.com/councilassembly](https://twitter.com/councilassembly)

I have used this for ad hoc tweets from the public gallery at some, but not all, council assembly meetings.

The account has not been updated or managed on a consistent basis - it is as much a way of passing the time sitting in the gallery waiting for whichever agenda item I am intending to write about for the SE1 website as anything else.

So far the account has a limited following - 99 people at the time of writing, including quite a few councillors and council officers.

However, a number of people active in Southwark life have expressed appreciation for the Twitter coverage as it has enabled them to keep tabs on a meeting that they were unable to attend in person.

There is a burgeoning informal network of hyperlocal website publishers and bloggers in South London.

If the council is serious about a culture change, perhaps it could consider making wireless internet access available in the gallery to encourage 'live' reporting on Council Assembly meetings by local journalists, bloggers and 'citizen journalists'?

The council may struggle with the idea of making life easier for its critics, but the benefits of than by ensuring that the council's proceedings can easily be subjected to informal scrutiny.

### **Gimmicks**

Finally, I would urge the commission to resist the temptation to recommend changes to Council Assembly for the sake of change. It is clear that there are improvements that can be made, not least in how the meetings of the assembly are communicated - in advance, during the meeting and afterwards - but ultimately it is the place where our elected representatives come together and their representative role should not be compromised by creating an illusion of consultation or involvement.

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