

DEMOCRACY COMMISSION
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Council Assembly

The decline in the importance of Council Assembly can be traced back to the decision by the last Government to move the vast majority of decision making powers in local government to a “Cabinet” model.

So when the question is asked, how can we re-engage residents in the functions of Council Assembly, we have to consider that if it does not have the power to change a decision or even debate it, then people are hardly going to waste their time attending the meeting.

The most important recommendation that the Democracy Commission could make is to restore some decision making powers to Council Assembly, or if the Council is restricted from doing so under current legislation, the Cabinet could take major reports to Council Assembly for debate before taking a decision.

When Council Assembly does have to take a decision, such as with the debate on the Aylesbury Estate regeneration proposals earlier this year, members of the public will attend, as they know the decision does have a real impact on their lives. To sum it up, if Council Assembly is used as no more than a “*talking shop*” after the decisions have all been made, then the residents of Southwark will see it as such, and we will all have failed them.

Venue

There has been some discussion of “alternative” venues for Council Assembly. I suspect that the practicalities of this will prove difficult, disabled access, cost etc. The current venue is located in the heart of the Borough with good transport links, and there is an argument that the “*Town Hall*” has a civic identity which would be lost if we were just reduced to renting floor space at other venues, in other words a “homeless council”.

Format of the meetings

Public Question Time, Deputations & Petitions

Both of these should be made more interactive. I welcome the return of deputations, but the ability of members of the public to ask questions of the Cabinet is restricted, and only a councillor can present a petition. The responsible cabinet member should be required to report back on the actions taken following a petition or deputation

The threshold for petitions to Council Assembly is too high and should be reduced.

Members Questions

Member's questions is one of the few opportunities for holding Cabinet Members to account in a public meeting. It should be retained.

Council Reports and Debates

Often Council Reports and Debates seem arcane and remote to members of the public. I would suggest that one way to re-engage members of the public would be for the Leader of the Council to be required to present a full annual report on his decisions for debate as a "State of the Borough" debate.

Other issues

I would welcome webcasting and an annual meeting with the Southwark Youth Council to discuss issues of importance to young people. I am happy to attend a future meeting of the Democracy Commission to discuss their work in further detail.