

The purpose of this report is to give expert witness evidence to inform the Democracy Commission.

**The background of the witness.**

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European Social Fund Integgra project leader; Action research in France,Corsica,Ireland,Italy,Spain and UK.Investigating local government reform on social inclusion.

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Include Us In: Participatory measures and mainstream governance.

**The Context.**

Communities and Local Government, which sets policy on local government , housing, urban regeneration and planning is committed to giving ,

*'local people and local communities more influence and power to improve their lives' (Stronger Prosperous Communities', Oct.2006.*

National Indicators reinforce this;

- N14 Percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their locality.
- PSA21; Building cohesive, empowered and active communities.
- N13 Promoting Democracy

The Democracy Commission

Democracy is a multifaceted word as it covers so many voting systems and political philosophies . Involvement Commission would better describe what the Commission is looking into.

The fact that there are no terms of reference may be viewed as positive as it allows a more flexible approach to what is tackled next following the initial focus on the Council Assembly.

The time limit of the exercise does not enthrone optimism, as community development is a long term process and cannot be a quick fix. Other local authorities have approached the Duty to Involve by way of doing reviews to study involvement/engagement.

Ref: Research into the determinants of National Indicator 4(N14) Scores-relating to the Place Survey question 'Do you agree or disagree that you can influence decisions affecting your local area?'

This commission is basically about change Management and research shows that 70% of all change management fails unless you involve ALL the people in the process.

### **Key Issues:**

When we look at the question of promoting local democracy and increasing involvement in local decision making by individuals and communities we must be realistic and recognise there are significant barriers to being an influential active citizen which are well documented.

REF: Empowering Agencies to engage Communities: Exploring how public agencies can assess and improve their openness and ability to respond to community influence. 2008. National Empowerment Partnership.

The outcomes of the commission will be most successful and positive if the main focus is on the enablers to involvement rather than the barriers.

### **Conflicting role of the Council**

Levels of trust in authorities and public authority figures are generally low, and this judgement encompasses councillors and MP'S, Officers and staff, and consultation processes.

There is a national distrust of institutions that on the one hand have an enforcement role and then try to engage communities and individuals to get involved in their decision making processes.

Communities are encouraged to inform on their neighbours and at the same time encouraged to be more neighbourly.

### **Community capacity to influence**

It is a misnomer, that people decide to become active in their community and then continue on a trajectory path and then become a Councillor for example. It is indeed a pathway and unrealistic to expect someone who has not been active in their community to suddenly be able to sit on a scrutiny planning committee for example and be influential. They would be nothing other than tokenistic and require training and support and opportunities to enable them to gain experience and confidence to become influential.

The UK General Household Study GHS 2000 Research found that few people go straight from a situation of no involvement to one of active engagement within their neighbourhood. Knowingly, or not, most are on a ladder of involvement, with simple acts of good neighbourliness at one end and a regular commitment with a formal or statutory organisation, or a position of community leadership at the other end.

There is a lack of understanding by the general public of how the local authority functions the restrictions and legislative requirements that councillors and officers have to operate within and its relationship to regional and central government. Knowledge is power and in order to redress the imbalance of power in partnerships with the community sector and the local authority, it requires the giving up of some local authority power.

### **Training.**

Individuals require training to enable them to be more effective and influential in local decision making. All the courses that the Active Citizens Hub offers are fully subscribed and if Southwark is to increase its citizens participation in democratic renewal, more training of this nature will be required.

Opportunities need to be created for individuals to shadow and be mentored by councillors, especially young people -or where will the next generation of active citizens come from? It is highly recommended that knowledge of how local democracy works is introduced in future through the PHSE school curriculum and that thought is given to the establishment of a youth parliament.

### **The Council Assembly**

The Council Assembly function is to meet the legal requirement that LA'S make most of their important decisions in public. It is the meeting of all 63 elected councillors and is chaired by the Mayor. However, the major decisions governing the council are taken by the executive cabinet members and the assembly is seen as a rubber stamping exercise. Although debate between political parties takes place it is irrelevant as decisions have already been made. The public cannot interact in the debate or ask questions. They can deliver petitions or deputations which have been agreed to prior to the meeting.

Whilst the business of the assembly involves the following functions, a major part of the function is approving the policy framework, the budget and the council tax.

- Adopting and changing the constitution
- Approving the; Policy Framework' (see below)
- Appointing the leader and members of the cabinet
- Agreeing and amending the terms of reference for committees, the composition and appointments to committees.
- Appointing representatives to outside bodies.
- Adopting a members allowance scheme]Making, amending, revoking, re-enacting or adopting bye-laws and promoting or opposing the making of local legislation.
- Approving licensing and gambling statements of policy.

Most of the above functions are internal and can be dealt with at the beginning of term.

The 'policy framework 'means the following plans and strategies part of the function, in which therein lays an opportunity for meaningful involvement of citizens.

- Children and Young Persons plan
- Corporate Plan
- Development plan documents (which form part of the local development plan framework.
- Policy on community councils
- Sustainable community Strategy
- Treasury Management Strategy(including prudential borrowing arrangements)
- Youth Justice Plan.

In the Democracy Commission workshops on Influence 4<sup>th</sup> September common themes that emerged were:

- Community Councils policies and procedures need changing with a uniform protocol across all areas.
- Facilitators needed to help people express their views.
- Accountability- midterm appraisal of Councillors.
- There needs to be a mechanism/organisation to co-ordinate the gathering of community issues other than the council.
- The assembly should move around the borough in different locations and at different times, as evening meetings are not accessible to everyone.
- The issues that are gathered and fed up to the council should be addressed at the assembly meeting.
- The thematic groups that are held by CAS are for agencies and not accessible to ordinary citizens.
- There is no way that the community or individuals can challenge council decisions without recourse to legal resources.
- More use of online media.

The public are consistently more interested in the outcomes of their interactions with authorities, and the way that these have left them feeling, than in particular engagement mechanisms. Improving these interactions, feeding back outcomes to the public in appropriate and segmented ways, and linking this contact to ongoing involvement in local decision-making processes will be vital. Feedback is very important to people.

### **How open to being influenced are the Councillors and Officers of the Council?**

It is also a misnomer to expect all councillors to be adept at community engagement attitudes and techniques. Echoes is a diagnostic tool developed by the National Take Part programme that helps local authorities and statutory agencies examine how 'open' they are to being influenced by communities and individuals.

REF: Voice is the tool for community agencies to measure their influence and Echoes is the tool for statutory agencies to examine how open they are to community influence. 2008. LEP. Attached.

It is a common complaint that council officers are perceived as obstructive, refusing to answer questions or giving the wrong information. The Councillors are accused of arrogance and not being accessible, who are only seen profusely at election time.

## CONCLUSION

There are many barriers to participation, particularly for deprived communities, and community development has a significant role to play in strengthening community involvement for democratic renewal. Community development has a long history of working at the interface of communities and local and central government. In practice community development workers in many circumstances often act as 'navigator' to help councils and communities understand each other better.

By investing and supporting community development work, local government can more effectively balance their new duties of community leader and facilitator of community empowerment.