

# **SOUTHWARK DEMOCRACY COMMISSION**

## **ELECTED MEMBERS FOCUS GROUP 1**

**Southwark Town Hall**

**2 AUGUST 2010**

### **Transcript and interpretation of key comments**

#### **COUNCILLOR VERONICA WARD (VW)**

At least half the people who came (to the public gallery) for the (July 14) assembly meeting just left. Maybe that's saying a lot about what they thought of the assembly. That they thought, "Stuff this!" and went.

#### **COUNCILLOR WILMA NELSON (WN)**

Many of us didn't know there was a focus group (of residents) up there.

#### **COUNCILLOR CLAIRE HICKSON (CH)**

I think that's quite a good thing though, isn't it. Otherwise we might have behaved differently. We're asking for honest feedback so it's good for them to see what we're like.

#### **VW**

There's a very poor understanding out there in the community about the whole process - who councillors are and what we do. So we can look at the assembly but so many people don't have a context to think about it.

#### **WN**

It's true. People don't realise what councillors do in the first place. You have simple things that councillors do that you need to address before you can even go into council assembly.

## **COUNCILLOR ABDUL MOHAMED (AM)**

So are we talking about education, being made aware of meetings?

### **VW**

Just awareness. Knowing how it all works. They have no idea that there are members who are accountable in relation to local services.

### **CH**

I think it's one thing educating them but they're only going to get engaged if they see something useful in it for them. I think a big thing about council assembly is - what do councillors think it's for? And if they think it's for a particular thing which is at odds with what we might want to make it for the public, then we need to be aware of that because they're (members) the people speaking. If they're going to get up and use assembly for one thing, which is never going to engage the public, then we might have to give up on council assembly as a central part of engaging the public.

I think you have to find really easy ways to engage people. A lot of it is about accountability. I wonder how much budget information we publish in a way that people can understand. Can people walk into their local school and find out how much funding that school gets, where it comes from, and what is the role of the local council in that?

That's the kind of information they're interested in and then they might turn up at council assembly to shout at us for not doing it well. But they'll only come and do it if they realise that there's something to shout about. Then they'll come and get engaged. I think saying that "we're going to have a meeting and we're going to try and make it more fun" is .....

### **AM**

Being devil's advocate - the Freedom of Information Act means that they can go through that route (to find out how much money is being spent on their local school).

**CH**

They shouldn't have to do that. When they're stood outside their school waiting for their kid to come out they should be able to see what the budget for their school is and where it came from.

**AM**

On a board?

**CH**

Yes.

**VW**

You can always have council assembly. It is the final formal ratifying assembly. You could have a very formal meeting which finally agrees all those things that have to be agreed by all members, and another kind of meeting which involves people, to engage people out there about issues that concern them.

**CH**

And maybe move them from here so that you can actually see us. I don't think in that hall there's any chance of changing it so that people can see us.

**AM**

There could be a recommendation that the venue is not suitable. That is a valid suggestion. But there are certain things which the council does now and the only way we can change them is if you change the law.

We could look at perhaps concentrating those formal decisions of the council in as few meetings as is possible.

**WN**

I don't think that would have anything to do with the style of room.

## **COUNCILLOR TOBY ECKERSLEY (TE)**

But that's the ultimate accountable place. Let's just suppose there's a motion of no confidence in the leader, or a lot of people defected from one party to another. That particular debate would require the public to be present to listen. And it would require a high debating standard from councillors, although it probably wouldn't be achieved. But it should require that.

There are some key policies which also, under statute, have to be agreed by the council assembly. Most of those go through on the nod because they seem to be motherhood and apple pie when they reach the council. But they shouldn't. There should be a debate on those as well.

And you will find that when cabinet recommends changes to various policies which have to be ratified by council assembly - there's about 10 of them listed in the constitution - those require sensible debate in council.

What does concern me a bit, Abdul, is that in your manifesto you said you wanted more council assembly meetings, I think. And very sensibly you decided to do that. But if you're going to whittle that away now by having many fewer formal council meetings, I think there would be some concern about that. Because that would rather demean the role of the traditional council assembly in the eyes of the councillors, particularly the newly-elected councillors. So I would caution against substantially reducing the number of traditional council meetings.

I think what is interesting is that you - the new administration - is thinking of some form of alternative gathering: councillors with a better informed public, and the public participating more. And the point about visibility is that it's an absolute killer because this building is not suitable for that and nobody is going to spend a lot of money reorganising the council chamber. Therefore, if one is going to go along the road of organising two or three of those new style council meetings per year, then thinking about alternative venues is going to be very important. Because it means that it's going to be very expensive to hire the halls because we haven't got one big enough really.

I think it would be constructive for the democracy commission to concentrate on the new style meetings which the new administration would want and I would have some sympathy with.

## **AM**

I just want to respond to that question about reducing the number of council meetings. I wasn't personally suggesting that we reduce them but to look at the content of them. Perhaps we could strip away, or you could concentrate, the formal bits that perhaps tend to keep members of the public away from the council (meetings), because they tend to be bored or it doesn't get them involved in the decisions that are being made, or the debate that happens as a result of issues being raised in the chamber. So perhaps it's the content of what happens in the council chamber that needs to be looked at closely.

Can we concentrate those formal decisions in fewer meetings? And leave the new style council meetings more open for residents.

## **RENATA HAMVAS (RH)**

I think the problems are far more fundamental than that. A lot of people in my ward don't understand the fundamentals of what a councillor does. They don't understand basics and council structure. I've just received a letter from someone who addressed me as an MP, because they don't know the difference between an MP and a local councillor.

I think community councils are very good for engaging members of the public. The problem is you always get the same group of people, the converted, who turn up to the community council.

## **WN**

The problem is, if people are not aware of what we do as councillors, how are they going to engage and come to a council assembly and listen to what we're talking about?

**RH**

I wonder if an issue of Southwark Life could be dedicated to going through the basics of what the council does, about the council structure. That individual councillors don't have the ability to make huge changes, but how we liaise with council officers. I think that would be really useful if that went to all the members of the borough. It might encourage more people to come along and have a look at community councils and what goes on there.

**WN**

Unless there's an issue that they're interested in, like when we were discussing the Elephant & Castle.

**VW**

There are formal decisions that have to be made, but how you try to make that meaningful?

**CH**

There is the official purpose which is making decisions. And then there's the stuff which occupies quite a lot of time. You could call it 'debates', although I'd be interested to hear your views on the quality of that debate. But an awful lot of what is actually said in those assemblies would alienate the public. There's too much politicking for people, and obviously politicians are not going to abolish politicking, but I don't think that's particularly engaging or that people like that kind of thing.

**RH**

Could assembly meetings be broadcast live on the Southwark website? Unless there's closed issues that would have to be blocked. And then people who are unable to come to the meetings, if they're interested, would be able to follow it.

**CH**

But if they do watch it, will they think more of us at the end of it?

## **WN**

I think on the mayor making there can be a lot of changes because it happens so quickly. There must be something they can do to make the changeover better.

*The Chair then invited participants to look at community councils again and how they work.*

## **TE**

One of the reasons why community councils are different is because the chair is obliged to throw the discussion open to the people present. So, if councillors stray from talking sense the next person who speaks as a member of the public is going to rubbish that councillor. I think that's a key difference between those meetings and assembly meetings. So community councils have a lot of merit. Because some of that debate is prior to taking decisions on, for example, CGS (Cleaner Greener Safer) allocations. So you do have more participation and you have an inbuilt discipline on councillors not to be silly and engage in excess party politics.

How much of the community council structure could be replicated in the council assembly is another matter. You could do it by topic. So that one of the new style council assemblies could have maximum two or three topics, which could be animated or dealt with by the Mayor if he or she presides, in the same way as the chairs of community councils achieve those benefits. It's quite a big step but I think, yes, look into it. But I would repeat the point about not diminishing the number of formal decision-making council assembly meetings.

## **RH**

I agree with Toby but I also think that there are other issues because in community councils you're dealing with very local issues. And in some ways politics doesn't come into those local issues at all. But in council chamber you're often dealing with large issues that affect the whole borough. And you're going to have issues that are linked in with the fundamental differences in the parties and their party politics.

## **TE**

Council assembly agendas today are, unfortunately, largely opportunities for party machismo. They're used to boost the morale of the person who put down the motion or the person who's speaking, to show off to his party colleagues and to show he's in charge and doing his duty. And that's because so much of the council assembly meeting is devoted to motions. And that is a function of the recent legislation which has actually diminished the decision-making powers of the council assembly. I personally find that very regrettable but we live with that.

So we have to realise that the council assemblies are sort of show cases for member's motions. They could be reduced and replaced by the kind of participatory idea we discussed already, which might be more constructive.

## **VW**

But it's only the large things that come up for decision-making. They have gone through months and years of input and discussion. We still do try to put things in at the last minute but you can't put something like the core strategy before people and say, "Right, let's have a general discussion about it". And if you were going to have a discussion involving the public you'd have to explain what you were doing - that you were now ratifying this large thing. It's the same with the budget.

## **TE**

In practice you're right. They do become set pieces, mere ratifications. But legally speaking, amendments can be taken which are discussed in those statutorily reserved items. So, somebody could put down an amendment to the children's plan and that would have to be debated. The quality of the amendment or the quality of the person who moves the amendment is interesting. This person would have to be so good that you'd be required to withdraw the item before it was put to the vote. That is the only way in which council can effectively use its debating power with items that are statutorily required to be taken by council assembly.



## **CH**

The question then is who is the real audience for what is said in there and it seems to me that it's primarily those who are sat on the seats (councillors). And to some extent the media.

Either we continue to do the formal council assembly meetings and we think of some other way of engaging people, or you have to try and make council assembly meetings something else. But I think that trying to weld two things together in one meeting is not going to work.

To be honest, if I wasn't a councillor and I wasn't involved in politics I'm not sure that it would be the most tempting prospect of how to spend a Wednesday evening - watching decisions being made. Unless you had a strong interest in something like Elephant & Castle and you were going to come and talk about it.

## **VW**

Which is why deputations were so useful because it focused on a very contentious issue in the borough, which some members of the community would come in a deputation about, to say this and this and this is happening, and we want you as an assembly to know about it and we want your support. And you would pack the gallery for that kind of issue.

## **AM**

But some deputations can have other agendas. They can be vexatious or are generated politically to create mischief.

## **TE**

It would certainly increase interest and the new style council meetings could have one deputation but how you would select between competing deputations I have no idea at all. But if it's a themed council meeting then a deputation would have to stick to that theme. That would allow kick off with participation so you would have solved part of the participation issue straight away.

**RH**

Some of the issues are better dealt with at community councils though, if they're very specific local issues. And you do get quite a few deputations at community council meetings.

**WN**

That's the reason why you have community councils in every area. If you're going to talk about a specific issue that affects an area it's better to do that with the people who live in that area.

**RH**

Also some discussion is devolved via Scrutiny. For example, I went to a Scrutiny meeting about primary school places and you had a large number of people from the local area who were concerned about primary school places. I think those kinds of meetings work very well to engage members of the public when it's about a single issue and I think we should have more of those.

*The Chair then invited participants to add anything else they felt strongly about.*

**WN**

People have no idea what councillors do. They think all we have to do is to have surgeries. They don't know about all these meetings we have to attend. People are not aware of that and that's how we get all the bad names.

**CH**

That's why I think Renata's idea is so good about having case studies (in Southwark Life) of councillors and what they do. And what they're responsible for.

**TE**

Because of the visibility issue (*a reference to the physical layout of the council chamber*) the new style meetings will have to be outside the council chamber. But I wouldn't rule out using the council chamber for more traditional ones. After all, it's free.

If we are going to go for a new style council meeting, what are going to be the outcomes? Let's just say that it's going to be a themed meeting to do with transport. What happens at the end? Are motions going to be allowed, moved by a councillor and debated? If we don't think about the outcomes there's going to be even more frustration. The danger is that there could be yet another stage of decision-making.

It depends how the cabinet reacts (to all this) and if the actual decisions are still taken by the cabinet. Because at the moment the decisions of cabinet meetings are in fact taken behind closed doors before the actual cabinet meeting takes place, which is the absolute antithesis of open decision-making.

## **CH**

My experience of community council meetings has been good in the past, except that there has been quite a lot of demand from council officers to come along with their presentations. It went on for a quarter of an hour, nobody understood what it was about, but they went off and ticked a box that they had consulted with the community. We have to be careful that they (any new style meetings) don't get hijacked by consultations also.

Participation can be a woolly word which you say you've done but nobody has benefited from it.

## **VW**

There are dangers, and we've started to have these discussions nationally, about how you can have people discussing what they should set the council tax at. Fine, but who are the people from the community that we're talking about and who do they represent, apart from themselves? You have to be extremely careful.

I think it would be good to involve the community in a discussion about the budget so that people understand what they're paying for, how it all works, and why there isn't enough money to go around. But you have to be so careful when it comes to council tax.

**RH**

I'm just wondering if it would be good to have meetings themed loosely around each of the cabinet positions. And then it could go to Scrutiny, or full council, or to cabinet, depending on what was brought up by members of the public at those meetings.

**WN**

But don't you think that's better discussed at community council meetings? You could bring the cabinet member to those meetings. Otherwise you're going to have a lot of extra meetings.

**TE**

That would involve a possible constitutional enlargement of community council powers, which is separate at least to the initial task of the democracy commission.

**VW**

We've got to look at community councils as well.