

SOUTHWARK DEMOCRACY COMMISSION

ELECTED MEMBERS FOCUS GROUP 2

160 Tooley Street

9 AUGUST 2010

Transcript and interpretation of key comments

COUNCILLOR TAYO SITU (TS)

Many people have approached me about the issue of poor visibility in the public gallery and one proposal is the provision of a video link. This would mean that every councillor, including those at the back, could be seen. This would solve the problem because then members of the public could listen to the debate and see the particular councillor who is speaking.

COUNCILLOR RICHARD LIVINGSTONE (RL)

I'd very much agree with that but I think there's another side to this in that members can't see the gallery either. I sometimes feel that this establishes an artificial division between the people we represent and the members. As it is I don't think people in the chamber realise how full the gallery is or how many people have left at any particular time. They probably see how full it is at the beginning of a meeting and then continue to play to a full house at the end of the meeting, when there might be a couple of people and their dog left up there.

Also, knowing some of the individuals who can be up there I think it would be useful to know who is listening and who we are engaging with.

There's also a bit of me that wonders as to whether we should always have council assembly in the council chamber. Are there other venues around the borough that might be better fit for purpose so that we're aligned in such a way that we face the audience as opposed to having our backs to them? Perhaps for one or two assemblies.

Do they always have to be in Camberwell, for example, which is in the middle of the borough but can be quite difficult for some people to get to? It would also mean that we would stand a better chance of having a different audience each time.

COUNCILLOR PODDY CLARK (PC)

I take your point but I also think that for meetings like that it's good to have them at the same venue. I'm not saying that's the best venue (the council chamber) but at least it's good for people to know that if there's going to be an assembly meeting it's always going to be at building A. Perhaps we could look at community councils because some have moved around and some have stayed in one place. Maybe we could find out from them which has worked better.

TS

To have a council assembly in a particular venue is very good for democracy and my experience with community councils has been that shifting the venue from one area to another causes problems. I think it's better to locate the meetings, whether community council or full council assembly, in one place. It would be a more stable arrangement for people.

The facilitator then moved the discussion to what participants saw as the purpose of the council assembly.

RL

It's an important forum for debate. It's the only place where all 63 councillors come together and we can have that big discussion. But I think we should try to use that more to get a broader spread of views. We do need to have smaller groups working together to get things moving but it's also useful to be able to reflect on the views of all 63 councillors. I think that both would help us to make better decisions.

For example, budget setting and council tax is a thorough debate each year and I think that's healthy.

One of the things we've talked about is looking at other big strategic decisions that have previously only been taken by the Executive and taking those to full council. The council's capital programme is a good example. That has massive implications for how the council operates and I'm sure all councillors would have a view on that. So that's something we're planning on bringing to council assembly in the autumn.

Where council assembly has fallen down to some extent is that it's often very tribal. It's always going to be like that to some extent and some decisions do need to be whipped but there's others where, on occasion, we could have more of a free debate. And I don't think we're very good at doing that.

When council assembly is coming up we'll (Labour) sit together and decide which motions we want to put up in terms of our political messages, and I assume it's the same for other groups too. And actually there probably ought to be a bit of a broader selection of motions coming up which are not about putting a particular political stance forward for the group but looking at strategic issues around which there might be broader cross-party consensus. There might even be some inter-cutting things where people are allowed a freer vote. It's certainly worth exploring.

The danger is at the moment that some key strategic documents get to the council and they've been worked through to such an extent that it becomes very difficult to change things. And is it the best use of a councillor's time if we're always presenting a *fait accompli* in front of the council chamber? An earlier discussion might enable more of a freer debate and a lot less of nodding through things on a party political basis.

PC

What about community council decisions being linked into full council?

RL

There is a bit of a problem with community councils at the moment in that they're in a bit of a *cul de sac*. There's nowhere for community council decisions to formally go within the council structure - other than those decisions which are delegated to it such as planning decisions and Cleaner Greener Safer allocations. But I would have no difficulty with issues raised at community councils that are of borough-wide significance being fed through to the Executive, full council assembly, or Scrutiny. It might be a very healthy way to move things forward in the future.

PC

I think it's a really good way of engaging the public and it's a stepping stone for them.

TS

I quite agree with that, and with the point that there's an overall need for shaping up. It would be very good for decision-making at community councils to reach the council assembly or the cabinet. The community council is the lowest link to the community so if there are issues or policies coming from that there should be some way, directly or indirectly, of getting that to the full council assembly. Local people would see that as real participation in the mainstream.

The facilitator then invited participants to talk about the role of deputations.

TS

I can understand why deputations have been a bone of contention for some. A minority of people can use them to cause problems but there should always be a role for the community deputation, for people to come and explain things in a limited way.

RL

I understand that some people were nervous about them and that's why the previous administration decided to curtail them.

However, what we've lost through that is the ability to hear the public's voice. Maybe we need to look at the balance of things and how we get this right. What we've got at the moment seems to be too limiting. In the past, before the rules were tightened up, we had some really interesting issues that were brought before the council which we all across the chamber realised that we needed to do something about. I'm thinking, for example, of when the Carrib Football Club came to the council assembly it made us aware of an issue that most of us weren't aware of at all at the time. Hearing what the deputation had to say was very powerful and across the chamber there was a degree of cross party working together. Another example was the deputation in relation to the tragic killing on the Wooddene Estate. It was important that the council as a whole heard that story and not just the cabinet.

I think we've lost quite a lot through the tightening of these rules and we need to look at redressing that imbalance.

PD

Do you think that deputations could have the opportunity of speaking with a committee before going to full assembly? So that there could be some filtering out. In the past some deputations have been used as a talking shop and it hasn't been very constructive. Maybe we could encourage more people to go and meet together and propose a deputation, and these could be looked at before going to full council. I think it would be good to have a half way house of some kind.

The facilitator then invited participants to consider the role of Scrutiny and questions in the context of full council assembly.

TS

For democracy to be strong we need Scrutiny. It's good for those in power and it's good for those in opposition.

RL

The interviews that Scrutiny have of lead members happen once a year and they tend to be quite detailed, with a number of supplementary questions, whereas question time in council assembly is more regular and is more public forum. So they're doing slightly different things but the two complement each other.

I think that being asked questions in such an exposed environment makes you a better cabinet member. It helps you to think things through and to make better decisions. But I'm not sure that having it where it is on the agenda is necessarily the right thing.

The discussion then turned to who we should be involving more.

TS

We need to look at ways of involving the voluntary sector and small businesses more. We need to link with them so that they can participate more fully in decision-making, or at least so that they know what is going on. There are so many parts of society where they have a role to play.

Our recent experience in the development of Peckham Space (newly opened arts gallery in Peckham Square) is a good example, where we have worked closely with small businesses and the voluntary sector. It would be good to filter their views through to community council or cabinet. And they have a clientele whom they can help us to reach. So it works both ways.

PC

But the councillors themselves represent all parts of society. We have people (as councillors) who've got businesses, who are professionals, or have been teachers and lawyers. But this doesn't always come across to the people because they don't always know the background of the councillors unless they've met them as individuals.

RL

I think generally there's a relatively low recognition of what councillors do and what they're for. Some people are surprised when a councillor doesn't answer an email after two hours because they assume that all councillors are doing it full time and are paid massive salaries to do it. How we change that perception is an interesting question. And maybe that's something we need to do when looking at council assembly. It might be useful to explain to people what's going on, why it's going on, and who these people are.

TS

In my experience of holding surgeries, people will know individual councillors as someone they voted for. But most of them have no concept of councillors meeting in a full assembly. I think we need to publicise more the fact that this (the assembly) is where decisions are made that affect local people. And that's why we have to be careful about shifting the meetings around because as soon as they get used to it being in one place then it's moved to another.

The facilitator then introduced the idea of having themed meetings.

TS

I think it would be a good way of generating interest, even for those people who think it's (the theme) not relevant for them at the moment. And word of mouth will help too. Issues like risk assessments of social housing, and cost effectiveness - these are themes that local people are interested in and will want to talk about among themselves or at meetings. For example, they will have a view on the cost effectiveness of a publication like Southwark Life which many people think is not being used as well as it could.

I have noticed that when council officers text people two or three days before a community council meeting to remind them about it we have a big turn out of people.

Maybe we should also report a summary of the decisions made at council assembly in Southwark Life.

RL

Yes, and it's a relatively cheap way of telling people that the meetings are coming up and maybe give them a quick snippet about what's going to be discussed. That might be a good way of being proactive about it.

The facilitator then asked if people had any final thoughts to offer.

RL

I think we should use community councils to publicise council assembly meetings. Have a leaflet on the table among the other stuff that's there.

On themed-meetings: we do it once a year already with budget-setting, when that's all the meeting is about. I guess the question is, how do we schedule other themed meetings far enough ahead so that political groups can be ready with what they want to put in for debate? And how do you fit all the other stuff council assembly *has* to do around it? But I couldn't see a problem with, for example, a council meeting that starts at 7pm with an hour and a half on a particular theme and then spends the rest of the meeting dealing with the other business.

PC

I have some very simplistic views about encouraging people as soon as they get there, because I've been sitting in the gallery for a long time and I know my way around the paperwork. But you see people coming who don't know what it's about and the paperwork is just sitting there. So, I think a simple guide on how the meeting is going to be formatted would be more important than all of the paperwork that's already there. I think there should be a council staff member there - not just a security guard - whom you could ask questions of about the paperwork.

Also, it's quite nice when people know the face of the councillor. Just having one of the posters up at the back that have the photos of the councillors and which wards they represent.

The other thing is that people are not let into the gallery until 5 to 7, so there's no time to familiarise yourself with the questions and the rest of the paperwork.

TS

Local government is about services to the local people and we must never lose sight of that. Otherwise the people will think that we are just like central government, making cuts here and there.

RL

I don't think we always help ourselves in that. We're all very keen at times to use the motions to discuss national issues and perhaps put some kind of local slant on that. But you have to ask yourself, is this really what we're here to do? Maybe we need to find more ways of doing things that are directly relevant to Southwark, and maybe what we really need to keep in mind is what we can do about this issue locally when we're putting forward motions. What can we do to address it?

Asking a member of cabinet to write a letter to someone, where the chances are that he was always going to write it anyway - is it really worth us debating the issue for an hour about something like that?

TS

But this is what takes so much of our time because there will be debate and counter debate of less relevance to our main business of giving very good services to local people. That's the reason why we have been elected – to be the last link from central to local government.