SOUTHWARK DEMOCRACY COMMISSION

VOLUNTARY & COMMUNITY SECTOR FOCUS GROUP

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160 TOOLEY STREET

CLAUDINE BONGO (CB)

We're making an assumption here - that local residents know what council assembly and community council meetings are. It would be good to explain to people what the different levels of involvement are, or the decision-making within the structure. Then we could see if they understand and if they want to be involved. And at which level they want to be involved.

AISHA BRYANT (AB)

Yes, that's fundamental. We run a course called How Southwark Works because people have no understanding of how local government is structured, how regional government fits in, back to central government. Expecting people to give their responses to a body they don't know anything about - how can they contribute if they don't even know it exists? Fundamentally they need knowledge that it exists, what it is, what it's for. Then you can try to engage them to participate in it.

CB

People generally know about community council meetings. It's not that they attended any, but they can more or less understand what they're about. They don't agree with the way they're planned, organised, or run, because it doesn't really give them a way of interacting during the meeting itself. But as for the assembly and committee meetings, there's something to be done around all the other meetings and how they actually fit in with one another.

Is the assembly meeting the highest level of decision-making? Is it possible still to get some kind of involvement at that stage? People need to know what's in it for them.

AB

Or is it a party political stage show where people from the public are not allowed to speak? Even if they came they aren't allowed to interact.

MAIRI MILLS (MM)

Sometimes decisions have already been made by the time you get to this kind of meeting. And that's relevant to the consultation about the children's and young people's plan, which the community and voluntary sector feed into. So where I've been asking groups to look at these strategies, or the planning consultations - that doesn't seem to be reflected in the questionnaire. If people have already been very involved, isn't there a duplication in some way in the assembly meetings?

Working with the council, when we get things like the Core Strategy, to the extent that residents can engage with things like that, those that do engage can develop a lot of knowledge through that engagement process. But then others just don't have the time to even start that process.

Sometimes the information that's available on the (council) website is a little difficult to access and that's a big challenge – to present information in an easily accessible way. An example of this is the fact that planning documents can be huge downloads which are not well labelled, and links change or disappear so that information can't be found again. This complex information could be made more accessible by improving the signage, format, labelling, etc.

Also, information about the council can be almost impossible to access - even for highly educated people with resources and time. For example a Rotherhithe public realm study was compiled with input from residents but when those residents asked officers about it, no information was available. Then, after 2 years, it appeared on the council's website as part of the Core Strategy documents, where it could be downloaded - but anyone finding this at this point was likely to be trying to read and make sense of 50 or so very large files involved in the Core Strategy.   Another example is that people heard there was a food growing strategy, or perhaps a draft food growing strategy, that some residents had been invited to have an input to, but others were not able to find out about at all. This sort of thing is confusing when the information involves resident input, or should do.

So it's not just about the challenge of explaining complicated concepts, but also facilitating access to information so that people (possibly, but not necessarily, those who are already actively engaged) don't have to spend lots of time searching for it.

AB

Yes, and it's making an assumption that everyone can negotiate textual information. That's just not the case in such a diverse borough as we have. And if the council assembly is just a public meeting where there's no real representation of areas around the borough, people need to be supported on that pathway of knowing nothing to being able to be effective and influential.

In the Active Citizens Hub we're asking for opportunities in the council so that people can shadow councillors and council officers and sit on Scrutiny committees, so that they could get a feel of where they might fit in - to actually participate and contribute. You're not just going to take Joe and Joanne Public off the street and put them in a room and suddenly they're going to be experienced representatives of the borough.

So, it's great that these changes are being looked at but it's not something that can be achieved overnight. There's a pathway to it.

CB

We're in a borough that is 47% or 48% BME - you know the stats more than me. The way the information is presented at the moment, this commission seems to be targeting the people who are currently involved in democracy. It is targeting or will be attractive to the white middle class to upper class person. But the average Southwark resident coming from Sierra Leone or Latin America wouldn't find a way of being engaged with it. We're making a lot of assumptions here. It's about accessibility. If the language isn't right, if the information is only on the internet, if there are so many things that to some seem normal and not a barrier, then the average person is just not going to have access to it.

MM

I think it's still a barrier because you have to spend so much time reading and learning about whatever the topic is. Things are so involved and complicated.

AB

I favour the *shurah* model. It's an Islamic principle where people in far out areas meet together to discuss their issues and then one person in that area brings it up to the next bigger *shurah*. They debate and discuss that there and then it's brought up to the parliament of the country. And the community councils are one link in that chain here but they need to be changed as well.

So it seems to me that there's a whole range of things that you could do. But there's also the legalities of what you can and cannot do under local government legislation about what can and cannot happen at council assemblies.

I would also take a longer term view and have a youth parliament developed through the citizenship or PHSE (Personal, Health, and Social Education) curriculum. So that at least the young people know and understand the structures. They can in turn educate their families as a way of raising issues, and the voluntary sector could play a part in the development of that *shurah*-type model.

The facilitator then introduced the idea of themed-meetings.

MM

If you take an issue like housing, there's several areas of interest or concern among residents about housing, which might mean having to hold several meetings.

AB

I'm thinking of (elected) members as well. If they had an opportunity to have a dialogue beforehand with people who are putting items up for discussion, then they (members) could champion them. They have a duty to champion community engagement and involvement in decision-making. Maybe we need another layer before the actual assembly. What usually happens at assembly is that the different political parties will say their piece on whatever agenda item comes up. They have to say something and that is very time-consuming as well. It's not feasible to do everything on that night so you need another layer beforehand.

MM

Maybe spread things over two evenings to avoid going on until one in the morning.

CB

It's about looking at everything that exists at the moment and looking at the most effective way of utilising that without creating duplication.

Surely people will get fed up if it's about the same thing being talked about over and over again and they can't see where it's going.

AB

People need a simple straightforward line of communication as to where they can get some kind of support from their political representatives, and they can get an issue aired and raised in public, and debated. That loop doesn't exist at the moment because the structures are too formal for residents across the board. If they came to those meetings (now) they wouldn't know what people were talking about.

We need to get down to reality and provide a forum and a format where ordinary residents can get their concerns up and through a channel. And to report back to the person. That's what so many people complain about - that you consult with them and they never hear anything back. You raise an issue and it just gets passed around. Southwark Council needs to get a reputation for getting back to people. We need to break down this them and us attitude of the council being in opposition to the people.

And see it as a partnership where the members are the servants, the representatives of the people, and there has to be a channel of communication than is better than the one we have at the moment. That would realise real democracy.

The facilitator then moved the discussion to the role of the voluntary sector.

AB

Maybe the surgeries councillors have could be placed more in the voluntary sector, where they would get more people dropping in because they're in places where people would be dropping in anyway, rather than in some secluded office somewhere.

And even the language of "surgeries" - these are just old things we've kept going. So much of the language needs to change.

(Council) officers are busy doing the work of the council. Councillors need to concentrate on building contacts in their local communities.

CB

There's also a need for councillors to work more closely with people involved in community development.

MM

I also wonder if there's scope for using social media forums more, where you could have specific cases raised, not necessarily by councillors because of confidentiality issues, but by residents themselves. Or have a set of frequently asked questions dealt with.

AB

Or a series of "How To's": How to campaign effectively, how to contact the council, and so on. People could perhaps find their problem there. Council assembly as it is can't work like that. It's not the right level. And that's what people need to know: where do they come in to get things passed up for decision-making?

But you still need a community and voluntary sector interface because people don't want to go on the council website. You've (council) got these different hats on. One minute it's an enforcement hat, then it's a "come and get involved" hat. People are not going on there and baring their souls, but you do get that at the community and voluntary sector interface.

CB

It seems to me that we're starting this democracy discussion at the highest level - in terms of how can we improve community participation in the council assembly. But there's only so much people can do at that level. Why don't we start at the grassroots?

AB

Members (councillors) need training in community development so that they can feel confident themselves in all these different types of approaches and in how to communicate with the electorate. From that will come a lot more engagement among themselves as well. They might decide that they're going to break up into thematic work groups, with four focusing on faith groups and another six focusing on planning, and so on. But if they had more knowledge and understanding they'd be so much more effective in their community champion roles.

The discussion then moved to the issue of community councils.

CB

I'm going to be a bit blunt here, and I've been saying this for years to the council. Community councils are good but they do not work. The same people come. It starts at 7pm and ends at 9pm. It is very intimidating for the average migrant person I'm working with. If it's a single mother she just wouldn't be able to go to it at that time of the day. The language is pitched so high. There are so many things that make it so difficult for people to have access to it. So what you end up with is the average person on Camberwell Grove who has been to every meeting of Camberwell Community Council for the past ten years.

AB

You've got to think about the enablers as well as the barriers, to make things like council assembly and community councils work better and be more accessible.

What you're undertaking is huge change management and for any change management to be successful you have to bring the people along with you who are involved in the change. It's admirable that you're taking the time to do these consultations but trying to rush it through for an October deadline is optimistic to say the least.

You've got another piece of work to identify the enablers. Do you need translators there? Do you need council officers to explain the process? Do you need great big billboards throughout the borough saying, "Assembly Meeting Tonight"? What do you need? And it will have a cost and it will have a process.

MM

I'm still struggling slightly to understand why people would want to go to assembly meetings. It's got to be something to do with our work, or our environment, or housing. It can't be just to go and hear stuff.

AB

Most people are struggling to survive and struggling with time. That's why we've been training people (at the Active Citizens Hub) to become community champions across the borough, to be involved in decision making and to develop a close working relationship with their local councillors, so that they can give them the kind of information they need.

Research shows that people will come together around an issue. When a child gets knocked down they'll want a (pedestrian) crossing. When their aim is achieved, or not achieved, then they go back. People take action and then they plateau. Then they take action again and then they plateau again. They're not on a trajectory. It's a pathway of involvement and it's often not a continuous chain. That's why to have people trained as community champions, it is their role to be part of a continuous chain.

People have their own lives to lead. They're not just locked into the council's agenda. When they come to our How Southwark Works course they don't understand what your departments are, what they do, where benefits come from, how things function at all. They are so empowered when they see how it all works. They're like, "Ah! I know where to go now!"

MM

But they still can't have the kind of discussion and debate that is perhaps being offered by this opportunity to engage. It's something that is ongoing.

AB

And it's also about wiping out some of the mystery of the knowledge council officers hold. Local authorities need to be more flexible and more open to influence.

CB

Yes, if we're serious about empowering people this means that someone has to be willing to let go of their power. But I have to say that the democracy commission is a good idea and Southwark is a place where the council is really trying to engage the people. It's all about being open to discussion, and to hear what people are saying. That's why we have the partnership.

MM

And you need to get all the (council) departments on board, including Planning.

CB

Community development and engagement should be at the core of every housing department. It shouldn't just be (the role of) Community Engagement or Scrutiny. The same goes for children's services and young people. Every department should do it.

AB

It's the responsibility of every part of the council to be inclusive but a lot of officers put it off on to this community engagement team and it's not their affair. So there's training to be done within the council. Sometimes it's the council officers who are hard to reach, not the community.