

Workshop 2: Involving People in Debates and Decision Making

1. Framework

- 1.1. It was apparent from the earlier part of the conference that many people present attended Community Council meetings and were questioning why so much attention was being given to the role of the Council Assembly. A theme which evolved was that it was more important to develop first the role of Community Councils. It should be “bottom up” rather than “top down”.
- 1.2. I, therefore, felt it important that the workshop addressed this issue and I sought to structure our time into two components:
 - (a) The relationship between Community Councils and the Council Assembly and
 - (b) The role the Council Assembly could play.

2. Relationship between Community Councils and the Council Assembly

- 2.1. Issues identified around Community Councils included:
 - (a) Many Community Council agendas have gone stale. They need a re-launch.
 - (b) Local people need to be able to influence what items are on the agenda.
 - (c) Meetings often seem like a tick box exercise.
 - (d) Senior Officers do not take these meetings seriously enough
- 2.2. What was evident, however, was that when there was an opportunity for Community Councils to make decisions as opposed to just being informed of what was happening, this made a real difference to people’s perception of the value of the meeting.
- 2.3. The example was given of the “Cleaner, Greener, Safer” agenda where some funding allocations were involved. This, it was felt, gave real meaning and purpose to the Community Council meetings.
- 2.4. The workshop included the Cabinet Member for Finance and this prompted a very positive discussion around the Cabinet’s intention to share with Community Councils some of the emerging budget issues to provide them with the opportunity to feed in their views prior to final decisions needing to be taken.

2.5. Considerations

Flowing from the discussion I would suggest that the following could be purposefully explored:

- (a) A re-launch of the Community Councils' agendas by focussing more on a few key issues where influence can be made rather than "padding" them with items essentially for information.
- (b) A greater use of Community Councils in using them to help shape impending policy/budget decisions. I believe the Leader of the Council has already intimated that he would like to have some discussion in the Council Assembly on emerging budget issues prior to firm decisions having to be taken in January/February 2011. It would be really good if this Assembly discussion could be informed by issues coming through from the Community Councils. Whilst difficult and unpalatable budget decisions are inevitably going to have to be taken it is important that local people see that this is not being done in isolation to priorities expressed at Community Council meetings. This principle of Community Councils being used as an early sounding board for policy/budget decisions could then be developed further.
- (c) The Local Government Act 2000 expressly places the legal accountability for key decisions with the Cabinet. The "Cleaner, Greener and Safer" agenda has however demonstrated how Executives have delegated such decisions to more local bodies such as Community Councils. From comments made these are, for local residents, the most worthwhile meetings to attend. The possibility of further delegations should also be explored. I sought in the workshop to explain that this is not as simple as it might seem. With legal accountability remaining with the Cabinet/Cabinet Member it is not easy to "let go" and let decisions be taken by another body, particularly if most of the Councillors on that body are from a different political group. But, there is undoubtedly scope for more delegation and some checks and balances can be put in place here.

3. Role of Council Assembly

- 3.1. You would be hard pressed to find any Council that is really satisfied with the role of their Council Meetings. Whereas, if asked, and they knew anything about the workings of their Council, most people would say that they would expect the monthly meeting of all their Councillors (ie the Council Meeting) to be the place where decisions affecting their lives are taken, in reality, practically all decisions are now made by the Cabinet. So, not surprisingly the question is asked, "What is the role of the Council Assembly meeting?".

3.2. What is right for one Council is not necessarily right for another, but, I do believe from the discussion which took place in the workshop, there was a reasonable consensus that two particular developments could make a real difference. One was around a more active role in considering Overview and Scrutiny reports and the other was in debating emerging policy/budget proposals at a “Green Paper” stage.

3.3. Considerations

(a) Overview and Scrutiny is the opportunity for non-executive Councillors (ie: all but the maximum of 10 in the Cabinet) to look at issues in some detail and make recommendations for improvements/changes. Personally, whilst I believe the ability to “call-in” a decision can be useful on occasions, scrutiny is much more effective when it has the opportunity to help shape policy formulation.

Scrutiny reports should come to the Council Assembly for debate and endorsement of the recommendations made. When a report has been prepared, together with partners, or particular community groups/interests (eg young people) those people should also have the opportunity to contribute to the debate. The intention would be both to raise the profile of the issue examined and to give those people who have contributed to the review the opportunity to express their views.

Whilst recommendations for action will invariably be with the Cabinet/Cabinet Member to take forward, the endorsement of the Council Assembly should be seen as providing the endorsement and commitment of the whole Council to take the matters forward. The implementation of the recommendations should then also be tracked with the Council Assembly being advised of any non-compliance.

(b) Considering Policy/Budget Issues at “Green Paper” Stage.

This would be building on the intention, already expressed by the Leader of the Council, to have a discussion on emerging budget issues prior to final decisions having to be taken.

A frequent criticism of the Local Government Act 2000 is that while it was intended to provide more transparency and accountability on who takes decisions, quite often it has worked in the opposite direction with only a few Members really involved in decision taking. The meeting of the Council Assembly is an opportunity to redress this balance. Without raising false expectations about the powers of the Council Assembly it can become the means to ensuring that the development of certain policy frameworks can be done in a more open an engaging manner.

4. And Finally

- 4.1. The workshop was oversubscribed, which must be an indication of the interest in these issues. Hopefully this note brings out the salient points from a very lively discussion.

Perhaps I could just finish this note by including the comments I made at the start of the workshop. I started my career with Southwark Council as a graduate trainee in 1973. Looking back I think I was quite confident in my abilities but I was quite taken aback to be told that one of my first jobs was to be Committee Clerk for the Council Meeting. I had no previous experience of this kind of work and from my studies understood this meeting to be the pinnacle of a Council's governance arrangements. "Don't worry", I was told, "the Council Meeting rarely lasts more than one and a half hours and what happens is essentially all pre-determined in the Political Group meeting." So issues around the role of the Council Assembly meeting aren't exactly new!!

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