

SOUTHWARK DEMOCRACY COMMISSION
VOX POPULI & COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Various Southwark locations

(Tooley Street, Southwark Park, The Blue, Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre, Dulwich Library, Rockingham Estate, Peckham Square, Surrey Quays Shopping Centre)

AUGUST 2010

Transcript of key verbatim comments

ANGELA (at Surrey Quays Shopping Centre)

Council assembly is less relevant now than it used to be. If you're going to go to something, go to the cabinet meeting, because there you effect change. You don't really effect change at the assembly meeting.

I'm not sure that the assembly is the right place (for the democracy commission) to start, largely because there is so little that people can effectively input into an assembly meeting.

I've been to a lot of assembly meetings in my time but I don't go to many anymore because I don't find them to be particularly relevant.

Assembly is not a meeting of minds, because the participation by petition or sending in a question is limited. We're long past the days when I can remember riots in the public gallery over contentious issues, because that's not where the fundamental decisions happen anymore. It's cabinet.

Council assembly is largely a rubber-stamping exercise. It's an opportunity for party members, and those who are not cabinet members or on particular committees, to have their view. But the decisions are already made and very few are going to be overturned. As a member of the public, if I want to influence things I have to do a lot of targeted lobbying beforehand.

Council papers are dense to the point of not being understandable for the average person. You need to de-construct things.

Apart from budget-setting there's very little purpose - for either the council or the man on the street - for having the council assembly.

Council meetings should be about real issues like housing, not about how many trees should be planted, or parking restrictions. In terms of inputting into major areas of decision-making they simply don't do it.

Residents need to be connected to the work of the committees so that they have early notice of the issues coming up. You also need to connect them to cabinet.

It's all about the powers-that-be opening up and being willing to share power, and that's quite a difficult process. There needs to be inroads into that officer/member world, and what is largely an officer-controlled process.

We have to recognise the power balances. It's not just a member (councillor) issue. Most of the resistance (to relinquishing power) comes from (council) officers.

Many people will only be interested in a particular issue that affects them. They have a life to lead. But you need to find a way of engaging people so that they can pick up issues that they think are important.

Southwark has an unfortunate history of not controlling the "loose canon" elements in the borough. It's wrecked a few things in the past and the council needs to control that.

I haven't been to a council meeting for a long time, but that's not apathy. There just hasn't been a reason to be engaged. Participating has to make a difference to people's lives, or they must feel that by taking part they can make a difference to other people's lives as well as their own.

There isn't the structure for a dialogue. And the council doesn't explain why it does things. There is Southwark Life but it's just a nice little magazine.

It doesn't use the opportunity to explain things. For example, it could explain the bidding process for housing, and why people may not be getting anywhere.

A lot of people still don't have access to the internet, so you could just be dealing with middle-class, middle-aged, articulate people who already have good access to information. I'm much more concerned about people who don't have good access to information, and who come along because something came through their door.

We need to know why councillors want more public involvement and engagement, because there are limits on it at the moment with the legal structures. As soon as we understand that, then the dialogue can continue. Also, they're elected so they're supposed to be the voice of the people anyway. I suppose it's because they feel that they're not able to achieve that at the moment.

It took 40 years to get community councils in place. It took 20 years to get neighbourhood officers in place. Central and local government saw it as dangerous territory. There has been a tradition of resistance to local democracy, so there needs to be an exploration of the reasons for that. Otherwise, this initiative will be tried and will fail again, and people will say once more, "They never listen to us. They asked us to take part in this consultation but we never hear back". And it's true.

To give Southwark its due, it has gone quite a long way up the ladder of participation, but then it hasn't done the last crucial bit so that people truly participate. If that's what's wanted, it needs to be explained to people what the pros and cons are for both sides. Sometimes people will have to be told that, no, we can't do it. But they also need to be told why not. Most people are very happy with hearing the "because", rather than seeing it disappearing into a black hole.

BERNARD (at the Rockingham Youth Festival)

Make more use of Southwark Life to promote local democracy. Why not have a monthly opinion poll in the magazine? It could be on some issue like housing, community safety, schools, or transport. People could fill this in and send it back by Freepost.

Then the following month, or even two months later, you could feedback the results of the poll. It would feel like real consultation and empowerment.

CHARLIE (in Southwark Town Hall)

Get people more involved in community councils. Let them elect a chairperson who is not a councillor, and let them have a say in the agenda. You've got to build local democracy from the bottom up, not from the top down. That's why community councils are a very good place to start.

Community empowerment is all very well but we shouldn't denude the role of councillors. The electoral system is an important part of local democracy. That's how we choose people to make decisions on our behalf, as community champions. The role of the community is to ensure that they listen to our advice, and, if they think it right and proper, to act upon that advice. If they don't agree with us they need to tell us why not.

Southwark is like a collection of little villages. We've all got our own self interests. That's why the councillor needs to take a considered view and make a decision that's good for the community as a whole. And if a councillor goes against the decision of a community council, then they have to explain why they couldn't follow our wishes. But if they fail to follow our wishes for no good reason, then we have them out at the ballot box.

I disagree with the cabinet model of local government. It doesn't involve the other parties in a proper way, and it doesn't involve its own backbenchers in a proper way. When you had committees you gained a broad spectrum of opinion. If the majority party came up with a recommendation or an idea, the rest could add amendments. In that way you had more of a joint approach.

When you came to council with a motion (before the cabinet model of local government), it made for very good debates because councillors were focusing on different aspects of the motion and you had healthy levels of disagreement.

TANYA (at The Rockingham Youth Festival) – aged 13

If I was running Southwark I'd have more youth clubs and more police on the streets. Not just have them coming in when they think there's trouble. And maybe it would be good to have a place that's like a prison. Then when people do bad things they could go and see what it's like and they might change because of it.

DJ (at Rockingham Youth Festival)

It's all very well advertising meetings in your local newspaper or putting a leaflet through someone's door, but if you don't know anything about the topics they're going to be discussing, or have no interest in them, then you won't come.

For example, if there was something about recycling I know that I wouldn't be there. I'm more interested in things that affect me day in, day out. You need to pick topics that will really help to change things, like gangs, violence, gun and knife crime. Not wishy washy issues, as I call them.

If we elect councillors to work on our behalf, then we should be able to reach them to make sure they choose topics that are relevant to our day to day lives. We need to know what these council meetings are going to discuss before we even think about going to them.

DOT (at Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre)

When the public turn up at the Town Hall it's their right to see all that's going on. In my time they used to pack the public gallery and the issues were there. They used to stand up and have their say. Sometimes they'd throw toilet rolls!

Why was the Town Hall built? It belongs to the people. You can't get into the new Town Hall very easily. I'm talking about the one on Tooley Street - 160 Tooley Street.

EILEEN (at Rockingham Youth Festival)

Send out a survey for people to complete, telling the council what the problems are in their local area. Where I live it's all anti-social behaviour by children and young people from the age of five.

The council planted cherry trees and crab apples trees in the middle of our estate but from now on the children will fire those at you or behind you or wherever they can. If you complain the council needs to know who you are and they'll tell them who complained. Then you'll get it twice as bad.

If there was an assembly meeting about anti-social behaviour I'd be in the front row. But would the families of those who are doing it be there? I don't think so. Most of them are on benefits so we're paying for them as well as putting up with them.

FATIMA (at Southwark Town Hall)

I went with some mates to the council assembly in July. But we only stayed for half an hour. We couldn't follow what was going on or what people were talking about. They said something about the Elephant & Castle and we were interested in that because we live in the area. Then they started talking about finance or something, so we left.

FRED (at Surrey Quays Shopping Centre)

I don't think much of Westminster democracy. It's disgusting. They tell you one thing when they're looking for your vote, and then they lie to you. I detest that. I have more confidence in local democracy, Southwark Council. I trust them. When they say they'll do something, they generally do it.

I don't go to council meetings because it would take me half an hour to get there and half an hour to get home again. I'd probably go if they were closer to where I live.

GANARAJ (at South Asia Elderly Organisation)

Power to the people has been transformed by power to the PM. He runs the country the way he wants, with his cronies. He says he's listening to people but he doesn't. I call that "demon-cracy", not democracy.

In this country we have too much democracy and bureaucracy - too many chiefs and not enough Indians. We're over-governed by too many MPs and too many councillors.

Somebody has to take executive decisions. If a poor man takes them, the press will lynch him. The poor can't run the country. Councillors' hands are tied. They say they haven't got the money for services because central government won't release the funds.

GEOFF (at Rockingham Youth Festival)

Councillors need to tap into their local organisations, and be visible on housing estates. They need to go to more events like this (Rockingham Youth Festival). A lot of what they hear will be word of mouth but that's valuable too.

GEORGE (at Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre)

You can have too much democracy, and when you do it clogs the system up. They're talking now about introducing proportional representation. I don't agree with that.

Then you have financial secrecy or financial bids going in. Joe Public can't hear about that because it spoils the competition, in theory. If three people are going to vote for something, the council needs to keep that quiet.

KHOA (at Rockingham Youth Festival)

There should be a series of small meetings across Southwark every week, and a regular opportunity for representatives from those meetings to come together in one big meeting. Get them publicised in the local press, with a contact number for people to call and register interest. Then you could phone all those people a week before the meeting to remind them it's happening.

Young people from the age of sixteen have their own views, but what can you change? What can you really change?

We need more festivals. They're a great way to reach people where they are, and a good way to get people in the local community to volunteer. That's community participation. You couldn't have a meeting at a festival like this (Rockingham Youth Festival), but you do get to meet a lot of people that you wouldn't otherwise meet.

MARY (at Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre)

They don't want to listen to us. They say they do but they don't. If I thought it would make a difference I'd get involved in my ward meetings, because I'm angry about a few things.

MUSTAFA (at Rockingham Youth Festival)

The governments we live and work with give us the illusion that we make decisions, but we don't. We just chug along and do what they want. Even they don't make their own decisions. They're controlled by big business and multi-nationals who give donations and call the shots.

It trickles down to everywhere. Even to the price of milk in the shops and the amount we pay for parking fines. It's a system that's been in place for hundreds of years. The people at the top stay at the top and we stay at the bottom, at the receiving end. The only way to change that is by changing things at the top.

The media is very powerful too. They can get rid of whoever they want by writing a story, like a sex scandal.

The world is heading in the direction of being controlled by super powers and banks. I can see the day coming when we won't use money anymore. We'll have chips in our bodies and we'll pay for things that way.

It's all very well for the council to build adventure playgrounds but it's all cosmetic. There's underlying problems not being dealt with. Like poverty and the idea that you can't be happy unless you have the latest model of whatever it is, or have a certain look. They (big business) make you want what they want you to want. We're like cogs in their grand scheme. If we all buy the same clothes from their company they'll make lots of money.

For me, building human relationships and spending time with people is far more important.

SIRIOL (at Rockingham Youth Festival)

Most people don't know what's going on. They don't know about the good projects that are happening in their own neighbourhood.

A lot of people, especially people of faith, want to do something to improve the life of their community. But they don't know about the networks and the funds that are available. We need to put them in touch with each other and show them where the opportunities are. That would be real people power.

OLU (at Surrey Quays Shopping Centre)

I've never been to a council meeting of any kind in my life and I wouldn't go unless it had something to do with me and my family. An issue like housing might get me there.

SYLVIA (at 160 Tooley Street)

The Democracy Commission needs to recognise that democracy has been happening in Southwark for a long time. Calling it a "commission" suggests that there's something wrong and it needs to be investigated. It was because of democracy that Southwark became a Beacon council for community cohesion and resilience. The commission needs to acknowledge these successes. We're on a journey and this must be seen as another step along the way.

For more people to take part in the assembly they need to know how it's going to impact on the quality of life of the local resident. They need to know who's going to be there, what it's for, what's going to happen, and how they can participate. They also need to know how the assembly links with all the other good work that's going on at grassroots level in the community, through resident involvement and people working in the voluntary and community sector.

We're all in this together. That's what joined-up working means in practice. We're not separate or in competition with each other. We're all working in partnership and in the interests of local people to improve their quality of life.

Democracy means so many different things to people. For some it's about exercising their democratic right to vote. So it's not something entirely new. It's the continuation of a journey so that the children and young people who are coming up will learn something from this process and take it forward.

The assembly needs to have some relevance for the kind of people who are unemployed and are struggling out of bed for an afternoon appointment with Connexions. They need to know what's in it for them.

The way in which these meetings are structured at the moment is very formal and a lot of people are not used to dealing with that kind of environment. Make it enjoyable. Give people an incentive to come. Have a raffle! Throw a party! People love celebrations, so let them come with their families and their food. You can achieve a lot of meaningful interaction between people that way.

A lot of people don't know what councillors do, and you shouldn't have to go to one of their surgeries to find out. Councillors need to walk about and meet people that way, or go into bars, cafés, barber shops, betting shops. Then you can talk to people about assemblies.

The voluntary and community sector needs to be much more involved and a part of things. We come into contact with local people on a daily basis, much more than the commission could ever interact with them. The democracy commission is not an island. We need to strengthen the links between us and use them more.

The council is bound by bureaucracy and often can't be as flexible as the voluntary and community sector can be. But this is a step in the right direction. It shows that there's an openness to change, a recognition that democracy is not working as well as it could be in Southwark.

We need to focus on changing the "how", not the "what". If you keep coming up with new things people get confused. First it was single regeneration budgets, then it was neighbourhood renewal, and now it's working neighbourhood fund. We don't know what the new animal will be. By the time people understand one thing, it's changed again. It's the "how to" that will help the council to connect better with people. That's the bit that needs to change.