

# **SOUTHWARK DEMOCRACY COMMISSION**

## **VOX POPULI & COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS 2**

### **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**

#### **TANDI (at Rockingham Youth Festival)**

When councillors come around at election time, they don't fully explain to us how the system works and what they're fighting for with budgets, and they make a lot of promises. When people are promised something again and again, and again and again it doesn't happen, they switch off.

It's very difficult because the whole system is not bottom up. It's top down. So when the councillors get elected they are responsible to central government and are constrained by the legal structures of the council. That means that it's harder for them to do what the community had suggested or asked for.

Community council meetings are supposed to help people understand democracy better, and participate more, but when you go to them they're so rigid that ordinary people find it very hard to take part and have their say.

In theory it's a better system because it's much more neighbourhood-oriented. The same people go to them so they should be able to challenge councillors at the next meeting about commitments they have made. They're also good for joined up thinking between the police, the schools, the PCT (Primary Care Trust), and everybody.

It doesn't always work that way but the structure has more potential for democracy than the council assembly.

Council assembly is far too party-political. I just wish they'd stop arguing along party lines and blaming each other. They're so busy playing against each other that they forget the need for a holistic approach to the borough.

It would be good to take a single issue, a theme, and discuss that thoroughly and fairly across the borough. You could do this through the use of the internet, by email, or in meetings.

### **TARIQ (at Rockingham Youth Festival)**

You need to tell people about these meetings. Market them better. Make announcements at local hot spots - places where people meet such as festivals and religious buildings.

The Town Hall seems to be the best place for them but they need to be publicised better. You can't complain that people don't turn up at these meetings when you haven't even asked them to come or told them they're happening.

Reprezent FM is the voice of young London. If you want young people there, get them involved.

### **TASNEEM (at Rockingham Youth Festival)**

I spoke to some young people who went to the assembly meeting in July. They claim that they were tricked into going. But we needed to get them there to hear their feedback. They said that as soon as the meeting started talking about finance they were lost. They failed to see how they could possibly play any part in it. So they ended up bored and left.

The whole set up was difficult for them too. They didn't know where to go or who to ask for help.

## **THEO (at Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre)**

Democracy is all about letting the people speak for themselves, involving them in decision-making. The council needs to find out how people want to be involved and how it can respond to that.

I believe in community empowerment. That means identifying the problems that are plaguing our communities and then training people, young people especially, to become agents of change. That's people power in practice. It gives them a real say in finding a solution to the challenges in our communities. I've never been to a council assembly meeting but I hope that's what they do.

The people who know the challenges facing communities today are local people who are living with them every day. I'm sure they don't go to council meetings because they don't believe their voice will be heard or their opinions taken into account.

Getting people involved is the key. But to be involved they need to be empowered. They need to be trained. They need to understand the systems.

People make the mistake of thinking that leadership is just for business people or politicians. But leadership is for everyone, no matter what field you're in. Individuals can change things but they don't realise that. They can do things but they don't know they can do things. This is where the council could come in - to help people reach their potential and develop their skills. It's all about harnessing the people power. That way the council can work closely with the people to achieve its goals rather than depending solely on its internal resources to achieve those goals.

People naturally want to improve their environment and in a time of recession, when money is short, the council should harness that enthusiasm. People will feel good about changing where they live for the better. So the council saves money, and people see improvements in their neighbourhood. It's a win win situation.

This is my message to councillors: remember that you are human and you will never satisfy everyone.

You can't achieve all that you want to. So, involve the community and follow your heart in doing what you think is right for the people. Community involvement must be your priority.

To the people I say, you have so much potential. But until you get involved your potential will not be recognised. It's your community and you need to develop it. As the community has given to you, you also need to give to your community.

### **JOEL (at Surrey Quays Shopping Centre)**

If it's about stuff that's close to people's hearts they'll turn up at (council) meetings. People also need to know that by going to that meeting there will be changes.

It all comes down to promotion too. I wouldn't have a clue when there's an assembly meeting, and most of the public wouldn't know either. It's as simple as that. The council needs to move with the times – Face Book, My Space, YouTube. You need to use all those things that young people are interacting with now. And X-Factor - why not buy some advertising during one of those programmes?

### **DUANE (at Rockingham Youth Festival)**

Because people don't really understand what councillors are all about they're not going to have an opinion on things like assemblies and other council meetings.

It doesn't really matter where you have assembly meetings as long as people are aware in the first place that they're happening and what they're for. Most people don't know the first thing about them.

Broadcast them (council assemblies) on the radio, and TV if you can afford it. Leaflet people's houses to tell them about the meetings. That's still a good old fashioned way of reaching people.

I care about what's happening in the community and I like to know what's going on, but I don't think I'd get involved in making decisions.

Crime is a big problem in Southwark, just as it is in any London borough. But the police don't help matters with their stop and search policies. I'm a youth worker trying to help young people but I've been stopped lots of times. Housing is another problem. I know lots of good people who've been waiting years and years for a house, so there must be something wrong with the system.

What I like about Southwark is the different ethnic groups. It's multi-cultural and that means you get to know about lots of other lives. Because it's so mixed there's always some kind of event happening. That's a great way to bring people together. These days people don't know who their next door neighbour is, but this kind of thing (Rockingham Youth Festival) helps to introduce people to each other. So thanks Southwark Council. Yeah.

### **LINA (at Rockingham Youth Festival)**

I've got 4 teenagers and I'm a lone parent. You don't always have the money to take them to things but this (Rockingham Youth Festival) is free so that really helps.

The council is good for organising things like this, but my experience of trying to get a house hasn't been so good. We've just moved to Peckham and it took me 10 years to bid. I didn't even have a bedroom for myself where I was. I gave the bedroom to them and I had to eat, live, and sleep in the only other room we had. They told me that unless I was ill or something like that I didn't have a chance. But I fought my corner and when they offered me this place with an extra bedroom I took it.

It's not just me. It's everybody. If I thought it would make a difference I'd get involved in meetings and come to assemblies, but you can talk and nothing ever happens.

### **CHERYL (at Rockingham Youth Festival)**

People power? We don't have no power. The world's made up for us. We don't have a choice or a say in it. They've made up their minds and it doesn't matter what we think or what we're going to do.

### **OLA (in Southwark Park)**

I go to T&RA (Tenants & Residents Association) meetings but I wouldn't go to any council meetings. I go to those meetings because they're always about where I live. People like me don't understand those other meetings.

### **SYLVIA (in Southwark Park)**

I went (to council assembly) when they had the new mayor - the night one went out and the other one came in. I was with the tenants people and we wanted to see who was elected. There was a lot of people there that night, but I wouldn't have known about it only for the tenants association.

I don't know if I'd go again, though. Peckham's not a very nice area to be in of a night.

### **JACK (in Southwark Park)**

I used to be the senior pest control officer for Southwark. I'd only go to a council meeting if I wanted to find out about something or make my feelings known about something.

### **JASON (in Southwark Park)**

Local politics just doesn't have the same profile as the national stuff. That's one of the reasons why people don't know about things like council assembly meetings, or take part in them. But an invite would help. How else are we supposed to know about these things (council meetings) unless someone tells us?

I think residents need some incentives. They need to have a vested interest in their communities, in the places where they live. Financial incentives are best of all. For example, if I owned a share of the green space or communal area where I live in Rotherhithe I'd take much better care of it. Or if I was to be given a discount on my rent for looking after it, that would help. As it is, nobody owns it and nobody looks after it, because nobody cares. If there was a financial incentive, I'd soon care, and that would be real people power - people doing it for themselves.

## **PATRICIA (at her home in Bermondsey)**

I believe in fair representation. If local democracy doesn't promote that, it's at nothing. That means making sure that people who don't have a voice, or can't speak the language, or can't speak at all, are represented. There should be someone, a facilitator, at council meetings to put their point of view across.

Community council meetings spend a lot of time talking about things that are of no interest to a lot of the people who attend them - things like bikes and where to park them, trees and where to plant them. There should be separate meetings to consult on issues like those, with the people who live in those areas.

I've been to council assembly three times and on each occasion there's been intimidation - local people protesting about this and that. Then these great big hench men come in and take them away. Why should I be scared to come to my own council assembly?

Then the meeting begins and you want to get involved but you can't. When they put things to a vote among the councillors, why don't they put it to a vote with the public gallery as well? That would give us some reason to be there.