

Submission to the Democracy Commission

from Cllr Peter John, Leader of the Council

What is the purpose of Council Assembly?

In order to determine whether Council Assembly fulfils its functions it is necessary to consider what those functions are. My view is that Council Assembly has three principal purposes. Firstly, to take those decisions which are currently reserved to Council Assembly only. Secondly, for the Administration to be held to account by the opposition and back-bench councillors, and thirdly, to demonstrate to the public that the council is a democratically accountable body which discusses issues of relevance to them.

Whilst I believe that we achieve the first aim, and the second aim partially, I do not believe that we currently demonstrate that we are an accountable body to the wider public. There is a lack of public engagement and involvement with Council Assembly which I believe needs to be urgently addressed.

What has previously engaged the public?

Prior to constitutional changes made by the previous administration there was a clear route of engagement for the public by bringing deputations to Council Assembly. It was common for there to be three or four deputations each evening, bringing issues of relevance to that group or their area. The deputation would often be followed by a debate on a motion proposed in response to the deputation's request. It was an example of Council Assembly being seen to respond to public representations.

Themed Community Council meetings held in venues away from the Town Hall have also proved popular and successful in engaging members of the community who would not usually attend a formal council meeting.

Therefore, relaxing the current rules on deputations and possibly holding 'themed' Council Assemblies may be a method of gaining greater public engagement. For example, a Council Assembly could be held to discuss housing issues and strategy; transport issues and strategy; environmental and recycling issues and strategy; regeneration issues and strategy etc. If these 'themed' meetings were published sufficiently far in advance it is possible they would encourage greater public participation.

Is there any potential for holding breakout workshops in which members of the public can participate?

Where Should Council Assembly take place?

Although some members are wedded to the notion of Council Assembly taking place at the Town Hall it is clear from public surveys that the public does not share this enthusiasm, stating that it does not provide a good environment for public viewing or participation.

Could Council Assembly take place at different venues around the borough? Is there any reason why Council Assembly has to start at 7pm on a Wednesday evening? Could there not be some more flexibility in these arrangements?

Members Questions and Debates

Having been on both sides of asking questions and debating, I am concerned that our current rules do not achieve the objective of really holding the administration to account. Should there be a system for members written questions and answers and a separate ballot mechanism for asking oral questions similar to the Parliamentary approach, with the Leader of the Opposition permitted two follow-up questions?

Debates should be limited to debating local issues. Too often national party motions are submitted for debate or national issues are brought forward. There may be a specific local impact of a national policy which it is appropriate to debate, but this must be a clear requirement of the rules. It should also be possible to intervene during a member's contribution so that issues of relevance can all be debated at the same time. Quite often a member will have a small point to make during a debate which is better taken at the time rather than half an hour later!

These are the principal points which I believe the Democracy Commission needs to deal with, in addition to any further points which we discussed when I was giving live evidence to members.

Peter John – 16.9.10