

Democracy Commission introduction and terms of reference

Southwark Council has set up a **Democracy Commission**, with the aim of bringing the council closer to its residents, making it more accountable to them and more connected with their concerns.

For its first task the Democracy Commission will look at the **Council Assembly**. This is a public meeting of all 63 elected councillors sitting on the council, and is chaired by the Mayor of Southwark. It meets seven times a year in The Council Chamber, Southwark Town Hall, Peckham Road, to debate local issues and make decisions.

Members of the public can attend in the public gallery, make deputations, present petitions and ask questions.

The Democracy Commission will look at what works well at these meetings and what the Council needs to keep. It will also explore better ways for the Council Assembly to operate and new ways for the community to take part. It will seek to make it easier for the public to get their views heard, raise concerns and hold councillors to account.

The Commission consists of 7 Councillors representing all three political groups; Labour, Liberal Democrats and Conservative. The Commission will involve residents, community leaders, academics & council officers; conducting questionnaires, holding public meetings, focus groups, and arranging events to gather peoples' views. Alongside this the commission will look at good practice by other councils and public bodies and take evidence from experts.

Once it has completed its consultations it will produce a report and make recommendations to the October 2010 Council Assembly. It will then move onto the second stage of the Commission.

Terms of Reference for the Democracy Commission

1. Aims

The aim of the Democracy Commission is to bring the Council closer to its residents, make it more accountable to them and more connected with their concerns.

2. Membership

The Commission consists of 7 Councillors representing all 3 political groups : 4 Labour members, 2 Liberal Democrats and 1 Conservative member

3. First task and approach

It will review why, how, when and where the Council has its full meetings (Council Assembly) and ways of making these meetings more open and accessible to residents.

Powers and attributes that are necessary for the proper functioning of the Council Assembly, legally required, valued by Councillors or have potential to attract more public interest in the meetings will be preserved.

The Commission will consider the formal legal and constitutional framework currently in place as well as any proposed changes to local government arrangements.

The Commission will also explore informal engagement activities that will complement the formal Council Assembly meeting

4. Ways of working

It will operate in a way that models good community engagement by involving members of the public and members of the Council Assembly as effectively as possible.

The Commission will involve residents, community leaders, academics, experts and other people who are active in Southwark, such as business leaders who have a stake in the Borough.

Evidence will include public and expert opinion as well as examples of approaches and activities that have successfully increased public engagement with Southwark Council or with the equivalent meetings of other authorities .

The Commission will make recommendations based on evidence collected by its members and presented at its hearings.

All the reports and recommendations the Commission produces will be in Plain English and easily accessible.

5. Reporting

The Commission will produce a description of the current situation and historical context, a statement of what should be kept and what should be changed.

The Commission will be able to recommend changes to the rules set out in its constitution as well as changes to the way it operates more generally.

The Commission will produce a report with recommendations for the October Council assembly meeting

The Commission will carry out an initial review of its first task as soon as it is completed and will suggest how to assess its impact in the longer term.

6. Further work

Once this first stage has been completed the Commission will review how it has been set up and make recommendations for carrying out further work as it moves into the second stage of the Democracy Commission.

Supporting officers will ensure that evidence and findings that have a broader or different focus than the Council Assembly are fed into the design of subsequent stages of the Commission's work