

Southwark Democracy Commission draft report: considering the evidence.

Prologue

This report presents a summary of the evidence gathered by the Commission, together with the ideas and suggestions that those that have given evidence have put forward.

The reports purpose is to enable the Democracy Commission to review the evidence and consider appropriate recommendations to achieve the aims and objectives of the Commission. It is for the Democracy Commission to ultimately decide these.

The report does not contain legal and finance concurrents. Officer advice will be provided on any recommendations that the Democracy Commission adopts.

Introduction

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.

The Democracy Commission has chosen the Council Assembly as its first task to remodel and improve participation because it is the Council's main public meeting where all the 63 local elected Councillors come together 7 times a year to debate local issues and make decisions. Presently the public can attend in the public gallery, make deputations and ask questions.

The Commission's mission is to look at what works well and what the Council needs to keep, while exploring better ways for the Council Assembly to communicate and new ways for the community to participate. The aim is to seek to make it easier for the public to get their views heard, raise concerns and hold councillors to account. The Commission is spending around 6 months reviewing the Council Assembly and this report gathers together the evidence and discusses recommendations for improvements.

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

Councilor Abdul Mohamed (Chair)
Councillor Anood Al-Samerai
Councillor Columba Blango,

Councillor Mark Glover
Councillor Helen Morrissey,
Councillor Michael Mitchell
Councillor Cleo Soanes

The Commission involved residents, community leaders, academics & council officers; conducting questionnaires, holding public meetings, focus groups, and arranging a conference to gather people's views. Alongside this the commission looked at reports produced by other councils on improving Council Assembly and took evidence from experts and the community.

This report will go to Cabinet and then Council Assembly on the 19 & 20 October respectively.

Methodology

The Commission started its formal work on 12 July 2010 and held its second meeting on 5 August 2010, which was open to the public. One further commission meeting was held on 7 September and the last one will be on 23 September.

Alongside formal meetings and conferences the Commission and supporting staff have:

- Put information on the website (www.southwark.gov.uk/democracy) including encouraging people to fill out an online questionnaire.
- Sent information by post and email to around 2,000 people that invited them to complete a questionnaire. 262 were returned.
- Held two focus groups with members of the public on Council Assembly. Members of the public viewed the 14 July Assembly meeting and then gave their comments on how public participation could be improved via two recorded discussions and written questionnaires.
- Conducted a questionnaire with Members and held two focus groups with Members in August.
- Held a focus group with community leaders from the voluntary sector.
- Recorded vox pops of the public out and about in Southwark. Around 100 voices of elected members, residents, and community leaders have been recorded so far (including recorded focus groups).
- Held a conference attended by around 120 people with speakers from the Young Foundation and Birmingham University, a panel discussion, workshops and 'cafe conversations'.

PURPOSE

The need for a shared purpose?

The first consideration for the Democracy Commission is what the purpose of the Council Assembly is. Members have noted that for the assembly to bring members and the public together there should be common understanding of what the meeting is for that will be engaging and useful for both elected members, the community and public.

Members of the focus groups called for a clear purpose and assembly "brand" to be communicated that was attractive to the public.

Questionnaire respondents asked for a purpose, aim and objectives.

It has been proposed 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. There seems to be satisfaction that the Assembly achieves its first aim and suggestions that further consideration needs to be given to improving the second aim. However it has been strongly suggested that the Assembly in its current format does not demonstrate that we are an accountable body to the wider public. There is a lack of public engagement and involvement with Council Assembly which needs to be urgently addressed.

Other reports on Council Assembly have started with identifying a purpose and aim for their Assembly : for example Bath and North East Somerset review of their Full Council decided the Council officially recognize its three roles

- a) Considering and deciding on policy
- b) Monitoring actions taken by the Executive [Cabinet] on behalf of the Council; as well as their ongoing performance
- c) Demonstrating community leadership [the report decided to particularly strengthen this role]

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The local Government Act 2000

The Local Government Act 2000 ('the Act') radically changed the nature of government by introducing the system of a powerful Cabinet with a statutory remit that means it takes the majority of decisions. Further amendments by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 extended these powers; it is now the Leader who appoints the Cabinet and decides who makes executive decisions.

The Act abolished the old committee system which formally brought elected members of both the ruling party (or coalition) and opposition parties together. These Committees would then bring reports to full Council Assembly for agreement.

The new Act introduced a Cabinet of up to ten members and also established arrangements for Overview and Scrutiny. Scrutiny committees involve backbench members from all parties and their role is to hold the Cabinet to account and contribute to policy making. (Southwark has a 'parent' overview and scrutiny committee and five sub committees covering set policy areas). Scrutiny reports to Cabinet which has to consider its recommendation, but does not have to adopt them.

This fundamentally changed the role of the Assembly from a body taking decisions on executive functions to one that sets an overall policy framework that the cabinet and wider executive works within. The Assembly decision making powers given to it under the Act are now, principally, to set the policy framework within which the Leader & Cabinet act and agree the budget. The Assembly also retains overall responsibility for non-executive matters (essentially regulatory activities covered by Committees such as the Planning Committee, Licensing Committee and Standards Committee), appoints members to committees, elects the Mayor, ratifies the appointment of the Leader and Cabinet, and agrees changes to the constitution

The impact of change

The changes the Act introduced have led many local authorities to look again at full council (in Southwark full council is called 'Council Assembly'). These reports have not usually focused on public participation so much as considering the role of Council Assembly, particularly for backbench councillors who are not members of Cabinet. National research has indicated that many non – cabinet members feel disengaged from the full council. ('The Role of Members and of the Full Council' scrutiny report, Birmingham City Council 2005)

Opportunities for variation under the Act.

The Act does allow Cabinet to delegate additional roles and functions to other bodies, including Council Assembly. As noted below, in practice what can be delegated to the Assembly is limited by the legislation which prevents the Cabinet from delegating executive functions to the Council Assembly. For Council Assembly this is restricted to such matters as plans and strategies which could be added to the policy framework and therefore become its responsibility. It is possible to recommend Council Assembly debate and make *recommendations* that would ultimately go to the Cabinet (or in some cases the Leader) for decision or it could recommend the assembly both debate and make *decisions* on a wider range of plans and strategies.

The Act also gave provision for decisions to be devolved down to a local level and Southwark introduced local based decision making bodies; which evolved into the Community Councils several years ago. It is possible for further executive functions to be delegated down to Community Councils, while taking into account the need for good governance.

The Commission has considered the Act, as well as local rules as laid out in Southwark's Constitution. The constitution can be changed by members and the Commission's terms of references allow it to make recommendations for change.

All recommendations need to consider the need for good governance including how to best strike a balance between the need for effective and timely decision making and the benefits of wider consultation by both more members and the wider public.

These are some of the principles that underpin Cabinet decision making:

- Efficiency – in that a small cabinet can act quickly;
- Transparency – the Cabinet arrangements enable the public to ascertain from the outset who is making decisions; and
- Accountability – the Cabinet can be judged by whether it has implemented the policies on which it was elected.

This is what Council Assembly has to do by law

- Appoint the Mayor
- Receive the Leader's report on the delegation of executive functions at the annual meeting
- Establish committees and appoint chairs and vice chairs, except chair of standards committee
- Agree the constitution
- Agree the budget and sets the council tax
- Agree the Policy Framework plans and strategies, most of these are statutory requirements (see below for details)
- Agree licensing and gambling statements of policy
- Confirm appointment of head of paid service i.e. chief executive
- Make, amend, revoke, re-enact or adopt by-laws or oppose making local legislation
- Adopt the local authority's code of conduct
- Agree members' allowances scheme
- Confer title of Honorary Alderman or Freedom of the Borough
- Agree any application to the Secretary of State in respect of any housing land transfer
- To consider petitions submitted under the Council's petition scheme
- Take decisions in respect of functions which are the responsibility of the cabinet which are not in accordance with the policy framework or budget agreed by council assembly
- Take decisions in respect of functions which are not the responsibility of the executive and which have not been delegated by council assembly to committees, community councils, sub-committees or officers

These are the policy framework documents it has to receive:

The 'policy framework' means the following plans and strategies

- Children and young persons plan
- Corporate plan
- Development plan documents (which form part of the development plan framework)
- Policy on community councils
- Sustainable community strategy
- Treasury management strategy (including prudential borrowing arrangements)
- Youth justice plan

Council Assembly is also responsible for agreeing the following policies:

- Licensing statement
- Gambling statement

This is what the council assembly does but could decide to change:

- Receive reports for decisions and information from Cabinet
- Provide an opportunity councilors to ask questions to Cabinet (members' questions)
 - holds cabinet to account
 - A significant opportunity for the Opposition to get information
 - Maximum of 30 minutes allowed
- Debate members' motions:
 - Motions can be made on any subject for which the council has powers or duties or that affects Southwark
 - Principal means for members to raise issues
 - Generally 45 minutes to 1 hour per meeting dedicated to debating motions
 - While it would be in order for council assembly to discuss a motion, if agreed the issue must be referred to the cabinet if it relates to consideration of any of the following:
 - to change or develop a new or existing policy
 - to instruct officers to implement new procedures
 - To allocate resources.
- Takes public questions
 - Anyone who lives or is a business ratepayer in the borough can ask a question
 - On average 1 question per meeting or less

- Questions can be on any subject for which the council has powers or duties or that affects Southwark
- Maximum of 15 minutes allowed
- Questions often directed to Cabinet if there is not a council assembly meeting due
- Local issues raised at community councils

This is what the Council Assembly cannot do

Council assembly cannot make decisions on executive functions (e.g. on housing, social services, regeneration, environment, education etc) – only the Cabinet or a member of the executive or community council exercising delegated authority from the cabinet or an officer can take these decisions. If Council Assembly agrees on something that is an “executive function” the decision has to be referred as a recommendation to Cabinet.

These are plans and strategies the cabinet has responsibility for and it could ask the Assembly to decide or debate

This list includes some of the plans and strategies that are currently the responsibility of the cabinet. These include:

- Asset management plan
- Employment strategy
- Enterprise strategy
- Food law enforcement plan
- Green travel plan
- Housing investment programme
- Housing renewal policy
- Housing strategy
- Local area agreement (LAA)
- Medium term resources strategy (including the housing revenue account)
- Renewal areas strategies
- Road safety plan
- Schemes for financing schools
- Special education needs action plan
- Statement of community involvement
- Supplementary planning documents
- Waste strategy
- Youth strategy.

Community Councils

The Act enabled functions to be discharged by an area committee. An area committee is defined as a ‘committee or sub-committee of the authority’. Area committees have to meet certain conditions

In Southwark ‘area committees’ are known as community councils. At present decisions on the following have been delegated in part to community councils;

- local planning applications,
- the cleaner, greener, safer capital programme,
- the community fund programme,
- traffic management,
- appointment of local education authority governors to local nursery and primary schools
- and community project banks.

Community councils therefore take decisions which affect a relatively small area and the Cabinet could delegate more executive functions to Community Councils.

PLANNED CHANGES TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The new government's Decentralisation and Localism Bill plans to 'free local government from central and regional control' and give 'councils a general power of competence'. Details on these proposals are sketchy at time of writing; however it could mean that many of the plans and strategies in the present policy framework that the Assembly has to decide would no longer be a statutory duty. There is little doubt that the Corporate plan would remain as this is tied to the budget, but others may become a matter of local choice. The current timetable for the Bill is for it to be published towards the end of 2010 and for it to be passed by November 2011 after the Democracy Commission reports.

The Government also plans to give Council the right to use the Committee system once again, 'return decision-making powers on housing and planning to local councils' and allow local people to instigate a referendum on local issues, including council tax rises.

The Government also proposed to 'new powers to help save local facilities and services threatened with closure, and give communities the right to bid to take over local state-run services'.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC EVIDENCE ON COUNCIL ASSEMBLY

The Commission asked around twenty residents to attend the Council Assembly meeting on 14 July and then held two focus groups to get people's views and asked participants to fill in a questionnaire. 262 people also filled in an online questionnaire or postal questionnaire. Around 80 local people gave oral evidence via 'vox pops' and extended interviews.

Public knowledge and perception of Council Assembly

Survey respondents

Public knowledge of local democracy is very variable and some people have little understanding of local democracy and the existing options for getting involved while

others are fully conversant. The Commission attempted to particularly engage active citizens but to also gather a cross-section of views from people who had little or no knowledge of local democracy via vox pops and invitations to participate in focus groups. The Commission also attempted to ensure that it heard from a representative sample of Southwark residents.

Respondents to the questionnaires do not represent 'average' local people as people were directed to the questionnaire through targeted promotion to active citizens who attend community councils or other council engagement structures; traffic via articles on Southwark website and through articles in local and national press coverage. Therefore they would be expected to have a higher than average knowledge and participation in local democracy and this is borne out by the statistic; over 70 % had attended a local community groups meeting and nearly 60 % attended a Community Council. Nevertheless 29 % did not know that Council Assembly existed and only 15.9% had a good understanding of its work (this is despite 28% attending a Council Assembly meeting). An overwhelming majority, 90% agreed or agreed strongly, with the statement we should do more to promote Council Assembly.

Knowledge on the current ways of getting involved in Council Assembly via attending a meeting, formally asking a question, presenting a petition or making a deputation varied, but most people wanted more information. Most survey respondents didn't know if the Assembly format worked well. A large majority of respondents said they would consider attending an Assembly meeting in the future; 85%. This demonstrates a high level of interest in the sample in being more informed and involved.

Focus groups who attended Council assembly on 14 July 2010

Understanding and interest in the Assembly meeting

This varied according to their understanding and interest in the issues being debated and their ability to tolerate the barriers to engagement.

Many people found the meeting difficult because the paperwork was unavailable or difficult to navigate, the language unfamiliar and there was no explanation of how the assembly worked or anybody on hand to help. When they started to understand more what was going on it became easier – for example the names of speakers flashing up and the countdown in the Assembly Council Chamber.

One of the biggest barriers was the layout of the room; people could not see most of the backbench councillors when they spoke. The layout of the gallery and pillars obstructed the view and the focus groups complained that not being able to work out who was speaking or read the body language was a big barrier. They were also concerned about excluding wheelchair users or other people with disabilities. The prominence of the mayor, clerk and chief executive in huge chairs was also questioned. Many participants sent a clear message that the current layout of the council chamber is not conducive to greater public engagement.

We left after half an hour. We couldn't see what was going on. Our attention started going downhill.

Content and subject of debates

On the whole the debate on Elephant and Castle regeneration elicited the most positive responses; participants often knew something about the plans and some were directly affected and they appreciated hearing the breadth and depth of debate and the impact on local people's lives.

"I liked hearing the debate and the arguments from both sides. I really liked getting that rich perspective rather than just reading about it in Southwark News."

The discussion on budget elicited the least favorable responses; particularly because it tended to focus on national politics:

"The bit about Elephant & Castle was interesting because we know about the regeneration stuff. Apart from that ... was it about finance or something? "

"I thought it was just a replication of national party politics, with people just taking their party position rather than focusing on the issues that might affect people."

The Democracy Commission debate where members voted collectively to support the motions supporting the work of the Commission was welcomed as it was perceived as a rare moment where members came together.

Style of debate

Members of both focus groups discussed the style of debate at length; both the perception that decisions had already been taken; 'pre ordained' and the staged nature of the debate. The other big issues for both focus groups was how differing views were expressed and the political nature of the debates

Everybody wanted to say how good they were. And wanted to ridicule the other instead of being constructive and thinking about the people, not their jobs. They were just thinking about spinning and this is what I saw really. I really didn't see dialogue.

The focus group members drew a distinction between debate and what they perceived as 'politicking'.

I think there's a difference between conflict and point-scoring. We can argue with each other here but I don't think we need to score cheap points and I'm afraid that's what a lot of councillors are trying to do. And so much time is wasted

Members of the focus group, particularly those who know individual members noted that outside of this arena local politicians often behave very differently:

But I wonder how much of that is really following the party line, because outside that room, in their own communities, they will engender change because they are genuinely passionate about their communities. There is a little bit of a performance going on. Behind the scenes they will work together.

On the whole the members of the focus group wanted to see more genuine debate and dialogue, a greater focus on teamwork and a sense that the Assembly was working for good of the wider community.

Participative democracy

Members of the focus groups also noted that their perception was they were only there to watch and couldn't get involved and voice their own opinions. One resident commented 'if I wanted to participate, I couldn't. So there was no democracy. There was no outlet for the population.' Another commented: 'I think it's important to make clear what the purpose of the assembly is. Because if it's about informing people and you can't speak, then that would be alright if I'm told that beforehand.'

Suggestions for change from focus groups & survey respondents' open text responses

There was a call for a clear purpose that is well communicated. One of the focus group participants called for something that will galvanise people to be participants in their community, to challenge and debate, and become stakeholders. It was noted how much potential for community dialogue there was at Council Assembly. Members of the focus groups suggested a brand such as 'meeting point'. Respondents to the questionnaire called for a clear aim and objectives.

Respondents to the survey and vox pops emphasised that public involvement has to make a difference. Councillors and officers must be open to change. Feedback and follow up to participants is very important, even if this is explaining why something can't be done.

It was suggested that Community Councils could be used to gather issues of concern. These could be taken by the Community Council to the Assembly if the issue needs a borough wide or full council response. It would empower councillors to know they were coming with the support of their constituents.

Some respondents felt that themed meetings on issues such as housing, schools and transport could be more relevant and appealing to local residents and the community but we have to make sure this leads to practical changes.

It was suggested that residents should be allowed to ask cabinet members questions.

Some focus group members proposed that Southwark hold a big event with a panel of politicians and organise it so it brings people together on a more equal footing and where residents have the ability to speak. People wanted more informal participative meetings as well as opportunities for people to mingle and socialise

Other suggestions that were supported by the group were:

Make council surgeries more interesting and community based.

Move the Assembly around the Borough and the change the times of Assembly meetings.

Broadcast Assembly meetings online or on radio with information in local traditional news outlets, and local online community websites; with reminder alerts.

Hold online debates.

Have online and participative voting.

Support deputations; if they can make a difference. Treat deputies with respect and ensure that feedback is given.

SUMMARY OF ELECTED MEMBERS EVIDENCE ON COUNCIL ASSEMBLY.

Members were asked to fill out a questionnaire post assembly meeting on 14 July and to attend two focus groups. Each of the political groups gave evidence and Commission members deliberated at meetings.

More understanding of local councillors' role

Members expressed the view that there is a need to improve local knowledge of democracy: many people don't know what councilors do and that they are accountable for local services. There is a need for clear information about local structures, the role of councillors and how people can get involved; Southwark life could be used.

Improve the practical support at meetings

The paperwork available in the gallery should be more helpful. Basically it's a random number of whatever agenda, minutes, and questions etc left out on a table which is very hard to follow. Perhaps a simple leaflet explaining procedure, format and order would be good. A listing of councillors by name, party and responsibility would help. It would also be good if a member of constitutional staff could be in the gallery as people arrive to explain the paperwork and the process.

Council language and papers should be in plain English as far as possible.

Tickets for gallery are given out at 7pm meaning it is a rush and people miss the beginning of the meeting - they should be given out 10 minutes before.

More decision making powers or influence on final decision

Many members identified the need for the Assembly debates to have more impact. It was commonly noted that many of the policies and strategies that members do take decisions on have gone through months, sometimes years of input and decision taking and at that point its often too late to open it up to serious change through debate; in effect the Assembly is often ratifying strategies that have been largely agreed. In some cases where policies are required to go to Council Assembly, for example the Core Strategy or the Children and Young People's Plan the statutory consultation rules limit member input. Doing more of this will not necessarily be very engaging for the public. Another issue is that following the Local Government Act of 2000 most decision making is now taken by Cabinet.

There were broadly two main suggestions for achieving an Assembly with more impact in relation to its decision-making function; the first is to restore some decision making powers to Council Assembly and the second is that the Cabinet take major reports to Council Assembly for debate before taking a decision. Reports would come for deliberation, debate and recommendations which would then go to Cabinet for final decision.

Option one:

Support for devolving decision making to the Assembly focus on the perception that an Assembly with real power will attract great engagement. Reservations expressed on the first options include restrictions from doing so under current legislation. It has been noted that the new Decentralisation & Localism Bill is due and also been suggested that representations could be made to central government on this issue. Another reservation is that moving decisions to Assembly could impact on good governance and the advantages of efficiency, accountability and transparency that Cabinet decision making give.

Option two:

Support for the second option focus on the benefits of a wider group informing decisions, and that an early debate could inform later decision making, so that the Assembly would not be debating a fait accompli, but be involved early enough to influence the final plan that would later be decided by either the Assembly or Cabinet or the Leader. The points made in debate would be recorded and motions making certain recommendations could be put to the floor and voted on, although it was noted that this would present very serious logistical challenges in making sure that the consensus of the meeting was reflected, particularly if the requirement for all amendments to be presented in paper form before the meeting was abandoned. This option does not necessarily provide for any greater engagement with residents, unless they are given some form of speaking rights. If the debates were on the basis of papers circulated beforehand, it would be similar to the process of considering some planning documents, which already come to Council at an earlier stage Consideration could be given to the notion that these pre decision debates would not necessarily be whipped and encouraging motions from backbenchers who might appeal across political groupings. Examples given for possible early debates were a pre-budget discussion in the meeting prior to the Assembly that agrees the budget; something similar on Housing and the

Capital Programme coming to the Assembly for debate in autumn to garner the views of all councilors. The Assembly could have impact through the quality of debate, at a time when it could still influence decisions, and the weight of recommendations potentially coming from 63 councilors. Against this is the risk of there being confusion as to what it was in fact deciding.

Motions, questions and political debate

Members expressed the view that much of the council assembly meeting is devoted to motions which are very political and often used to boost the morale of the member or their political group rather than devoted to debating local issues. Therefore Council Assemblies can become show cases for members' motions and this might not be very engaging for the public

It was suggested that time given to more participative democracy may be more constructive.

It was noted that the presence of the public at Community Council had a positive influence on members and reduced excessive politicking. However members commented that many local issues were not so 'political' but there may be some real ideological differences at a Borough wide level. The Commission should consider whether Community Councils are a more appropriate forum for some of the public engagement on policies and strategies.

Members suggested limiting petitions and motions to issues over which the council has control rather than just debating national or international issues.

It was suggested that Assembly retain or give more time for members' questions (1 hour instead of 30 minutes) with the possibility for 2 supplemental questions. Or we could have half an hour of public questions from the gallery.

Allow more urgent questions to the Leader from members so that more topical issues can be discussed.

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?

Publicise public question time more widely (maybe push via CCs) and actively invite community groups/TRA/residents to come and ask questions. Particularly residents who aren't getting satisfaction through other council channels

Holding the Assembly in a more accessible location or improving the current one

Members identified problems with the gallery space; including they often can't see the public and the public have complained they can't see all the members.

Suggestions for improvement included introducing screens in the space downstairs so the public can see all the members, but it was noted this would not solve the problem of members seeing the audience. Moving the meeting around the Borough to different locations; this would also have the potential advantage of reaching different audiences. Sourcing a single new location (such as the GLA, Unicorn Theatre; one of the Schools or a council building) and holding meetings there would have the advantage of the public always knowing where the meeting would be held. Members suggested that Community Council experience is considered to weigh up the benefits of moving around or having a set venue. Some reservations were expressed over moving out of the Town Hall and the potential loss of a "Town Hall" civic identity and also the costs and feasibility of moving around the Borough. Remodeling the existing Town Hall was briefly suggested but dismissed as far too expensive. Building a New Town Hall was alluded to as a possibility in the longer term

Changing the times of meetings

Members thought this should be explored.

Web-broadcasting

This was a popular proposition with many members.

Changing the debating rules

It was proposed that Assembly considering changing the procedural rules so more spontaneous debate can take place, akin to parliamentary debate.

Order of proceedings

Place statutory reports and constitutional items at end of meetings to make sure the early part of the meeting is focused on the parts which the public find most interesting.

Adoption of themes

It was noted that the budget meeting is a themed meeting; other suggested themes include housing. A youth themed meeting with Southwark Youth Council was proposed and it was suggested letting them have a role in agenda setting. Other suggestions for themes included theming around Cabinet portfolios. Themed meetings could gather peoples' views and these could go to Scrutiny or cabinet or somewhere else for action or policy development.

Members proposed two types of Assembly meeting; formal and informal

Workshops and other participatory meeting formats were thought particularly suitable for themed meeting; but unsuitable for formal decision making.

Introducing participatory budgeting

This was suggested as an exciting idea worthy of further exploration

Lower the threshold for petitions

All groups suggested lowering the threshold and the Lib Dems proposed 500 as much more sensible than the current rules of 3000. A threshold of 100 was put forward for a ward issue.

Make it easier for groups to bring deputations.

Many members thought the assembly had lost the voice of the community when restrictions on petitions were introduced; formally meeting would have three or four petitions. Others thought that deputation had been used for 'political' or mischievous purposes. Most members welcome some relaxing of the rules. It was suggested that we consider allowing residents to present and ask questions of the cabinet members and Leader. It was noted that deputations need to be given sufficient time and it is important that we ensure that the issues raised are followed through by Cabinet member/scrutiny etc. It was proposed that the cabinet member be given responsibility for feeding back. There might need to be a process to consider deputations before coming to Assembly.

Involve the community, voluntary sector and business sector

Bring scrutiny reports to Assembly

Assembly would then have an opportunity to debate and endorse, or reject, recommendations that would then go to the cabinet or Leader to agree and implement

MEETING VENUE AND FORMAT – practical issues

There are a number of suggestions for improving administrative support to the public which seems to have the support of everybody (early entrance to the town hall gallery, more paperwork, all paperwork online shortly after the meeting, Plain English where possible, a guide to the meeting and members roles, the support of a clerk etc)

The present meeting Assembly meeting space is far from ideal and there is consensus that this venue needs to change if we want to increase participative democracy. The gallery is very small, the sightlines are poor, the public cannot see many of the members and disabled people are ill catered for. Furthermore elected members and the public are physically removed and the layout emphasis hierarchies which appear outmoded. The seating arrangements with the political groups facing opposite each other encourage a confrontational approach which can be very off putting to the public.

It should be noted that some aspects of the Town hall do work well; specifically the sound system and acoustics. It also has a civic identity, although that has somewhat

diminished with the move to Tooley Street. Many residents see this as the new 'Town hall'.

Given the identified barriers to participation the Commission could recommend the present Council Assembly chamber is not fit for purpose and a new more suitable venue/s is found.

It could also request that the following options are considered as solutions or it could identify preferred options from the below (or think of others):

1) Introduce screens in the space downstairs so the public can see all the members (but this would not solve the problem of members seeing the audience or wheelchair users or the layout)

2) Moving the meeting around the Borough to different locations; this would also have the potential advantage of reaching different audiences and was a very popular option in the questionnaire .Would need some feasibility to work to identify venues which are large enough with sufficient access

3) Sourcing a new location (such as the GLA, Unicorn Theatre; one of the Schools or a council building) and holding meetings there; this would have the advantage of the public always knowing where the meeting would be held and would be the easiest to administer

Some reservations were expressed over options 2 and 3 and the potential loss of a "Town Hall" civic identity and also the costs associated with option 2 in particular

4) Remodeling the existing Town Hall (costs in the tens of millions would likely make this prohibitive).

5) Building a new Town Hall - in the longer term

COMMUNICATION

There are several things that could be done relatively easily to improve communication of the assembly debates, some that might be relatively easily achieved (but there would be resource implications) and others that might need more investigation as they might incur significant cost so there would be a need to decide if it was good value.

Engaging with the Media

Suggestions include:

There used to be a briefing given to the media prior to the meeting by senior officers and cabinet members to give a background to the report and discussion. Other political groups could also give briefing on their view point. If this was reinstated there would need to be a clear distinction between officers role (focused on information) and

politicians (more focused on opinion and values). Updates, briefings and alerts could go out to all media and local online community websites

Prompt reporting of resolutions and decisions would be very helpful as it is often unclear to the audience what has been decided (this might be done through early release of a decision sheet)

Publishing all documents online before the meeting or swiftly after so media outlets have all the documentation at hand.

It is likely these options would increase the depth of reporting on the issues as media outlets would have a more thorough understanding of complexity of the issues, a clearer understanding of any political differences and clarity on decisions.

Audio and radio broadcasts

The Council could consider relaxing the rules so media outlets could record audio. This could then be broadcast as audio clips by media outlets such as online forums to supplement other written material. This may well be more engaging.

The Council may also be able to record its own audio via the sound system fairly cheaply and this could be released as a podcast on the council website. Members and officers would need to manage the risks; however many assemblies and parliaments do broadcast routinely so there are precedents.

Radio may also be a possibility and there are local radio stations who might be interested in putting together a community radio programme featuring the Assembly with recorded audio and possibly debates and discussions.

Facilitating twitter and other social networking coverage

Wireless access in the gallery would enable journalists, including "citizen journalists", to tweet and post online. This is a low cost approach that makes use of the success of social media that is seen in Southwark in the popularity of some of the local online forums in engaging with relatively large numbers of citizens.

Using Southwark platforms and networks

An explanation of Council Assembly could appear in Southwark media (Southwark Life and on the web) including dates announced in advance, summaries of meeting and calls for questions. Updates, briefing and summaries and alerts could go out to community networks (Southwark Life, TRAs, Forums, social media sites, newspapers)

Text/Facebook/twitter /Assembly newsletter updates and invites could go to those residents signed up to Southwark platforms or there could be an option to join a specific list.

Targeted promotion for specific debates – i.e. regeneration of a particular area would lead to invitations to local groups and people; a debate on Housing would target TRAs etc.

Webcasting and TV broadcast

This is a popular idea but could incur more significant costs. These would need to be established and then a decision made on value for money. Community television organizations would be interested in this, but would need funds.

WHO SHOULD WE ENGAGE AT MEETING and WHAT ROLES SHOULD THEY PLAY

Throughout the gathering of evidence the public, elected members and officers have from time to time considered the difference between residents, community leaders, elected members and officers' roles and responsibilities.

Many residents have said they want to get involved but some have said they don't feel qualified to make decisions. Most Members want to increase public involvement but note, whatever democracy's shortcomings; they have been elected to take decisions. Most participants have agreed that is a need to find the right balance between 'participative' and 'representative' democracy.

Community Councils have seemed to have adopted the practice of the public and community participating in debate but members taking decisions. The Commission might want to consider if this is a principle it wants to adopt for the Assembly.

It might also want to think about the role of community leaders who might have a recognized role in their community and often have a mandate from their constituent groups; for example elected members of Youth Council or the Chair of an older people's group. What roles might they have? Suggestions have included the Youth Council helping to set the agenda and co hosting a themed meeting on young people. Some of these constituent groups have robust process for electing representatives and large constituent groups, others less so. Thought would also need to be given to how widely representative these groups are and any additional support that might need to be put in place to ensure we don't hear only the voices of those who are already actively engaged.

There is also the role of community leaders from the voluntary sector who provide service; for example the settlements, youth clubs, older people activities etc. Many Full Councils have sought to actively involve these stakeholders in their deliberations and debates. Many Southwark stakeholders are already involved through the Southwark's Local Strategic Partnership structure.

Lastly there is the business community who were least engaged throughout the evidence gathering but is an important constituency that, again, other Assemblies have sought to involve. The government is proposing to introduce more provision for outside

bodies to run statutory services. There has been debate nationally about increasing the role of cooperative and mutuals where citizens have a greater role in running services they use. Lambeth has a Cooperative Commission and the coalition government has endorsed these developments nationwide and is seeking to promote them further.

The assembly must also seek to ensure it successfully brings together members in all their different roles; cabinet, scrutiny, community council, committee members etc.

WHAT should the Assembly hold debates so local people can get involved and Members can make better decisions?

Content of meetings

If the Assembly wishes to increase participation it will need free up space on the agenda or devote more time to assembly meetings; or both. Members and the public have also emphasized the need to make meeting more attractive to the public by increasing the impact its debates have on decision or by taking more decisions.

The public and members have advocated increasing opportunities for the public to bring issues to the meetings; either directly on behalf of community councils, endorsing a 'bottom up' approach.

Members and residents have identified the importance of an arena for debate that relate to local concerns that the public can identify with; regeneration schemes; housing, transport etc.

Many residents want a voice at meetings; either via their community council representative, online or at the meeting and they want less formal opportunities to engage. The three most popular suggestions for improving meetings were firstly to involve residents in the debates at meetings, secondly meet in different places around the borough, and thirdly to involve residents in debates online. Participation is highly valued.

Opportunities for freeing up agenda time

Suggestions for freeing time have centred on spending less time on motions that are to do with national politics and concentrate on more on quality debates on issues of local concern at a time when it can make a difference.

Changes to local government obligations may mean it will not need to debate as many plans and strategies so the Commission might consider this an opportunity. However these plans and strategies make up the policy framework that it is one of the assembly's key roles to agree. They were also conceived to give an overarching structure to the cabinet decision making process. If these go will the Assembly lose another role? Or could it devise a new way to develop plans which are more engaging to local residents? Or concentrate on quality debates to inform plans and policies developed elsewhere?

A bottom up approach

Suggestions included:

Make it easier to bring deputations

Lower the threshold for petitions.

Empower community councils to gather issues of concern and bring items to Assembly which it cannot resolve at a local level and which would benefit from a Borough wide or full council response.

Greater use could be made of Community Councils and other Forums to help shape impending policy/budget decisions. The Leader of the Council and Cabinet have already started to visit Community Councils and community forums to discuss the impending budget cuts. He has also already stated 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. There may be potential for this Assembly discussion to be informed by issues coming through from the Community Councils and community forums. This principle of Community Councils & Forums being used as an early sounding board, and elected members taking the lead in gathering views, for later policy/budget decision, could then be developed further.

Question time

Increase the opportunities for asking questions and giving residents a voice by:

- i) enabling the public to post questions and comments online;
- ii) promoting the present opportunities for asking questions at the meeting.

Debate scrutiny reports at Assembly and make recommendations

Overview and Scrutiny is the opportunity for non-executive Councillors (i.e. all but the maximum of 10 in the Cabinet) to look at issues in some detail and make recommendations for improvements/changes. Scrutiny reports could come to the Council Assembly for debate and endorsement of the recommendations made. This would enhance scrutiny's role in shaping policy formulation. When a report has been prepared, together with partners, or particular community groups/interests (e.g. 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. Recommendations for action would still invariably lie 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 could then also be tracked with the Council Assembly being advised of any non-compliance

However it would probably be best for there to be a sifting process; not all scrutiny reports are that engaging and sometimes they can be very short pieces to respond to particular issues. A formulaic obligation to send all report to full councils could result in most reports being sent to the end of agenda or given little time. Therefore thought needs to be given to deciding which reports go; perhaps on the recommendation of OSC?

Green papers / pre debates on important decisions and policies

Considering Policy/Budget Issues at "Green Paper" Stage.

"Green Papers" in Whitehall terms are consultation documents and the question for the Commission is therefore whether a full council debate is the best forum for consultation. The advantage of introducing this would be to enable discussion on emerging 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. However the size of the Council Assembly and the difficulty of recording clear decisions may make this proposal difficult to achieve. It may be that smaller committees such as the Scrutiny Committees combined with the existing mechanisms for consultation and community engagement on policy formulation would be a more effective forum for this purpose. Taking scrutiny reports to Council Assembly could also achieve this role.

Furthermore it might want to link the green papers proposal to outreach work with Community Councils and other meeting such as community forums and committees such as scrutiny; either by asking the same questions or by developing ideas based on outreach work so that the green paper is based on developing ideas and already resonates with residents.

If this approach was adopted considerable further thought would need to be given to how it would work in practice and what the resource and legal limitations could be as well as to the issues of what plans and policies would come to the Assembly and who would decide. The Cabinet? OSC? A set number of members? The public? Community Councils? An agenda planning committee? A combination of these?

Themed meetings

Proposals for themed meeting encompass a variety of different ideas including an annual 'state of the Borough' debate and specific proposals for themed meeting in partnership with the Youth Council on young people. Other popular suggestions for themes include housing, transport, and issues of relevance to older people. Themed meeting overlap with the concept of green papers; for example pre decision debate on the budget could also be conceived as a themed meeting.

State of the Borough debate

This is a popular proposal from the public and members alike. It could potentially also bring together other stake holders and build on similar events Southwark has historically

held, but with more public engagement. Proposal for its format include an 'annual report' by the Leader with an opportunity for public questioning of both the leader and other cabinet members. Suggestions have included involving local MPs as well as cabinet members. This could be complemented by other activities that bring elected representatives together with constituents and other stakeholders to exchange views and debate borough wide issues. Residents have emphasized the importance of hearing views, more opportunities for less formal debate and the importance of time to meet and mingle.

Thematic debates

If the Commission wanted to recommend holding themed meeting it would need to think about how these would be chosen and then how these meetings would go on to influence the council's decision making process. Residents will expect outcomes. Themed meetings could relate to the council's plans, strategies and policies and help inform them and /or hold Members to account for the delivery of plan and strategies. Another suggestion from the Member focus group was to hold themed meetings and then ask cabinet, scrutiny, a community council or some other body (Community Action Southwark etc) to deliberate and come up with detailed recommendations for action.

Themed meeting would be a significant change from current arrangements and could be resource intensive. It would be advisable to consider the costs and value of this approach carefully and undertake some small pilots to test out early ideas. Thematic meeting would also throw up challenges for recording information, prioritising issues and making recommendations, and these issues would need to be carefully thought through. They are likely to need significant community engagement support to support.

These are some of the options for structuring thematic debates:

Plans and strategies

Themes could be chosen that relate to existing plans and strategies; for example the Children's and Young People Plan; the Green Travel Plan; the Housing strategy. However this may tricky as some plans are agreed years in advance, others may no longer have a statutory obligation to be published so Members would need to actively endorse their continuation.

Arranging them around cabinet portfolios

Cabinet members could be invited to meeting to present annual reports on their work and take questions from members and possibly the public. This could compliment the questioning that already takes place in scrutiny and has the added advantage of strengthening the role of the Assembly in holding the cabinet to account.

Thematic groups

Themes could be chosen that fit around existing thematic groups for example the Local Strategic partnership thematic groups; Community Action Southwark thematic partnership groups; the five policy areas that Scrutiny covers.

Constituent groups

It could identify constituent groups it particularly wants to engage with and groups it wants to work in partnership with, for example young people and the Youth Council.

Combining the above

There is potentially overlap between many of these groupings; Young people have been proposed as a theme for an Assembly meeting plan in conjunction with the Youth Councils. There is a cabinet lead for children's services. The LSP has a children's and young people thematic group (Southwark Children's and Families Trust) and this is mirrored in a CAS thematic group 'Southwark Children, Young People and Families'. Scrutiny has a 'Children's services and education' committee. There is also a plan that underpins the work of the Children's Trust; the Children's and Young People Plan. This is a plan that the Youth Council has done a deputation on and has indicated that they are keen to continue monitoring its implementation.

Similarly there is an Independence and Wellbeing LSP thematic and that has two strategies that underpin it; the Health Improvement Strategy 2007-2012 and the Independent and Wellbeing for Life Strategy 2006-10. There is also CAS's 'Independence and wellbeing' groups. The Independence and wellbeing strategy was developed in partnership with Southwark Pensioners Forum and they undertook much of the involvement work, producing this at the same time as the Pensioners Manifesto (which they brought as a deputation to assembly). Pensioners' representatives sit on a steering group and monitor and assist with the Independence and Wellbeing plans implementation. This steering group is chaired by the cabinet lead for Adult health and social care.

There is some overlap for other themes; the LSP has a thematic partnership for both Housing and a Safer Southwark Partnership. These areas are covered by one Scrutiny committee and CAS has a thematic group; 'Southwark Space', which focuses on issues relating to the environment, housing, regeneration and safety.

Freeing up space for topical and relevant issues

Alternatively the Commission could decide to leave the agenda free to respond to topical and relevant issues and devise some mechanism to do this; for example an Assembly agenda setting task group with representation.

Agenda planning and meeting management

Improving agenda planning for the Council Assembly could bring significant benefits. In some authorities this is achieved through a small committee others have some input into the agenda from scrutiny committees. Similarly thematic debates would need advance planning to engage residents and stakeholders and ensure that the debates and deliberations were taken forward. They would be events that would likely work best as participative events that would inform policy and where meeting would identify key items for more detailed work to be done by other bodies; such as Scrutiny, thematic partnership groups, Cabinet etc. These bodies could then come back to Assembly or to other bodies (partnership groups) with proposals for final decisions making by more formal means; cabinet leader individual decision, Assembly approving the strategy etc.

Outcomes

Thematic meetings such as these could be part of a process whereby residents are empowered to contribute to debates and participate in decision making. It would potentially bring together different constituent groups and a wider group of residents, some of whom would continue to be involved in developing policy and implementing services.

The alignment of thematic meeting with plans would enable there to be a level of accountability. If residents and elected members have the opportunity to ensure that these plans reflect the views of residents and that they are being implemented then there is more chance of concrete outcomes that residents will value and can be traced back to assembly meetings.

Engaging people in the Assembly's debates and decisions; different meeting formats.

Members in focus groups were keen to draw a distinction between the formal business of the Assembly and the potential for more participative and informal debates. The Assembly has important responsibilities as detailed earlier and these need a formal structure. The Assembly would have very serious responsibilities in the event of a political crisis – for example a significant number of members crossing the floor to a different party – and would need to exhibit a very high standard of debate and decision making.

A number of members suggested promoting a more of a parliamentary style debate in the Chamber, (by allowing interjections) and the Mayor having a role in cutting short debates going no where (or which are becoming less relevant to local people) and prolonging interesting debates.

Members suggested that less structured meetings could be appropriate for more deliberative or participative meetings which did not have the same formal decision making responsibilities.

It is possible to conceive of meetings in different ways where they are most structured for formal decision making and least structured for informal discussions. Different meeting formats could be appropriate for different purposes.

- Formal debate and decision making - usual formal council assembly procedures but rules could be simplified or made more akin to parliamentary debate
- Deliberative debates leading to recommendations - but held in the same way as normal council assembly with motions prepared in advance. A record of debate and recommendations would go forward for decision making to Cabinet/Leader/later Assembly. The public could ask questions under the normal rules. These may be most suitable for pre decision debates/ green papers. There are significant practical issues with this approach that are noted above that may mean there are other forums that are better suited to this function for example scrutiny committees.
- More participative meetings using techniques such as workshops involving members and the public held under the auspices of Council Assembly but not taking 'decisions' could be used to inform policy making by other bodies. The issue here is how would the view of the majority be identified and taken forward. These could only ever be seen as one part wider public engagement.

Alongside this evidence has pointed to

- Conference style debates which might combine some of the above styles
- Online debates. A summary could be recorded and which could then feed into workshops or be used to directly make recommendations for further policy development work. Or the public could pose questions (in advance) for the Chamber to answer.

Members of the public put a high value on both participating in debates; both at the meeting and online (72% and 52 % respectively)

Other Local Authorities have recommended holding green paper style debates in committee style meetings

Participative meetings would be much more analogous to Community Council meetings and would be a major departure from present arrangements. The Commission would need to think carefully about how it records discussion and where it takes it. For people to be involved they would have to feel that their contribution had been recognised and understand what was done with it. It would be difficult for officers to record the decisions of more than a small group of people: for example Community Councils involve a wider group or residents in deliberations but decisions are taken by a smaller group of elected members, which are then recorded. Workshops in these formats are usually recorded as summaries that inform later decision making.

The Commission may want to think of how it could use other media to both formally and more informally record meetings to compliment the written record – for example vox pops, podcasts, webcasting, radio debates.

The Commission may want to consider how the political nature of assembly might be approached in different formats. For example political groups may want to whip very formal decision making meeting, but consider not whipping deliberative or participative debates.

OTHER ISSUES

Devolved decision making

The “Cleaner, Greener and Safer” agenda has demonstrated how the Cabinet has managed delegated decisions to Community Councils. From comments made at the Conference workshop these are, for local residents, the most worthwhile meetings to attend. The possibility of further delegation; from either Cabinet or Assembly could also be explored. Greater participatory budgeting at a local level could also be considered.

Returning to the Committee system

A small number of respondents have suggested reverting to the Committee structure and ending Cabinet and scrutiny set up

Timing of meeting

The public has suggested meeting at different times – for example day time meetings are better for older people – later meetings better for working people

ENABLING PARTICIPATION

Evidence from the Active Citizens Hub following the workshop emphasised that *“the public are consistently more interested in the outcomes of their interactions with authorities, and the way these have left them feeling, than in particular mechanisms. Improving these interactions, feeding back outcomes to the public in appropriate ways...and linking this to ongoing involvement in decision making process will be vital. Feedback is very important to people.”*

Improving access

There are also particular issues that need to be considered if different communities are going to be able to more easily access meetings; meetings during the daytime are preferred by older people, disabled people need accessible information and venues; young people are unlikely to be engaged in by very formal dry meetings; plain English is better for everybody, particularly for people who English is not the mother tongue.

Community engagement

Building trust and maintaining relationships is very important in engagement work. We need to think about the support we put in place to enable residents to get involved. This is particularly important if we want to involve excluded and marginalized communities. Community engagement workers have an important role in facilitating conversations between residents and authorities.

Community capacity to influence

There is a lack of understanding by the general public of how the local authority functions, the role of councillors and officers and the framework they operate within. Training for active citizens is very important; individuals require training to enable them to be effective and influential in local decision making; mentoring by councillors; citizenship training in schools and the community; and the Youth Council all have a role to play. The active citizen's hub uses a 'Voice' tool for community agencies and active citizens to measure their influence

How open to being influenced are Councillors and officers of the Councils

It was noted by some witnesses that not all councillors or officers are adept at community engagement attitudes and techniques. In order for participation to be effective it requires officers and councillors to give up some power and allow them to be influenced; and to see the value in this. The Active Citizen Hub has an 'Echoes' tool for statutory agencies to examine how open they are to community influence.