

# Southwark Democracy Commission

## Recommendations

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The commission recommendations should be considered as a whole Package. Whilst they can be implemented individually the commission believes that as a whole they represent a comprehensive solution for Council Assembly.
- 1.2 The commission notes that some of the recommendations set out here will require Constitutional changes. These need to be considered by the Constitutional Steering Panel and a report brought to Council Assembly that sets out the alterations that are required to the constitution for these recommendations to be implemented at the earliest opportunity.
- 1.3 The commission notes that a number of recommendations set out here are likely to have resource implications and these need to be examined by officers. The Commission is mindful of the need to minimise cost for these recommendations to be achievable within existing resources. For most recommendations the changes proposed should have minimal cost. One of the driving factors for these changes is to ensure the maximum benefit for the cost of Council Assembly.

### 2. The need for change

- 2.1 That the Commission accepts the need for change and acknowledges that doing nothing is not an option based on the strong body of evidence accompanying this review.
- 2.2 That the Commission recommendations should be considered together as a whole package to obtain the maximum positive effect.
- 2.3 That the Commission recommends these changes on the basis of maximising the benefits of the Council Assembly by:
  - Increasing the involvement and participation of local people.
  - Increasing accountability to local people.
  - Discussion of issues relevant to local people.
  - Better scrutiny of decision making for the people of the borough.
  - Improving the quality of decisions made in the Council Assembly.
  - Holding the Administration to Account.

### **3. Purpose: the role of the Council Assembly**

3.1 The Commission has found a need to set out a clear and easily understood role for the Council Assembly. The commission therefore recommends that the role of the Council Assembly is to:

- Decide on policy framework, strategies plans and policies.
- Debate and inform council plans, priorities and strategies.
- Debate and consider issues of relevance to residents and members.
- Hold the Cabinet to Account.
- Demonstrate community leadership.

3.2 The Commission recommends that the Council actively seeks to:

- Develop its role as a community leader by better community engagement and involvement.
- Strengthen the ability of residents and Elected Members to influence and hold the cabinet to account.
- Enable residents to more easily bring issues of relevance to the Council Assembly.
- Enable the public and members to participate in decision making early enough to influence change; both before and at the Assembly meeting.

**The Commission recommends that:**

#### **4. In deliberating and deciding policy, plans and strategies,**

4.1 The Council Assembly considers those plans and strategies that the Government through the legal framework makes mandatory with the rest of these being considered by the Cabinet.

4.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee (OSC) can recommend more plans or strategies to the Council Assembly for debate and recommendation.

4.3 The Council Business Panel will be asked to consider which additional plans, policies or strategies should be considered by the Council Assembly.

4.4 The Council Assembly adopts the use of themes, either related to Cabinet portfolios or to early debate on plans, policies and strategies. These will be presented by the relevant Cabinet member.

4.5 There will need to be flexibility to allow Council Assembly to debate urgent issues.

#### **5. In debating and considering issues of relevance to residents and Members,**

5.1 Council Assembly may take a petition according to the rules set out by Government. At present 2,500 signatures are needed to trigger a debate at Council Assembly. The evidence supported lowering this, and the Constitutional Steering Panel should advise on

an appropriate number as soon as possible for decision by the Council Assembly. We recommend 1,000 be this trigger.

- 5.2 It is made easier to take a deputation to Council Assembly. Up to three deputations are allowed per meeting on a first come first served basis. Furthermore, more time is given to deputations, deputees are to be allowed to present directly for 3 minutes and ask a question of the Cabinet member/Leader. The relevant Cabinet Members will take responsibility for any follow up work and feedback.
- 5.3 The existing arrangements will continue to apply for taking and discussing Motions at the meetings. The Council Assembly Business Panel is to advise the Mayor and his officers according to the principles outlined in 8.4
- 5.4 The Council Assembly Business Panel should make allowances for a balanced business agenda and the need to make meetings more engaging. A draft of the Council Assembly agenda shall be available to political groups well in advance of the despatch/publishing date.

## **6. Monitoring executive functions of the Cabinet as well as its performance**

- 6.1 The existing rules for public questions will continue to apply.
- 6.2 Councillors will continue to submit members' questions in the existing manner; these must be topical and relevant. One member from each Community Council will be able to submit a question on behalf of their Community Council. The leader of the opposition will be allowed two supplementary questions. The minority opposition leader will be permitted one supplementary question. The time limit for members' questions will be 30 minutes.
- 6.3 In the themed Council Assembly meetings Cabinet Members will present for up to 10 minutes on the theme or plan, policy or strategy being debated. This will be followed by 15 minutes of public questions which must relate to the theme of the meeting. The opportunity for residents to ask questions on the theme will be actively promoted
- 6.4 Themed debates will be linked to plans, strategies and policies and this will be clearly signposted to residents and Members so they are able to connect debate to plans and monitor their implementation.
- 6.5 Scrutiny's role will be enhanced with space on the Assembly agenda to bring reports and recommendations to Assembly for endorsement (final decision on scrutiny recommendations will continue to rest with the original decision maker e.g. Cabinet, Cabinet Member or Chief Officer).

## **7. Demonstrating community leadership**

- 7.1 The Assembly will seek to involve the wider community in planning debates, to build and strengthen its community leadership role. Alongside this it will provide more opportunities for the community to influence and participate in debate and decisions at an opportune time.

## 8. Themed meetings

8.1 In order to achieve the above aims the Commission recommends that each year the seven Council Assembly meetings may have a themed aspect as follows:

- Annual State of the Borough meeting.
- Constitutional and Mayor-making.
- Budget meeting.

Four further themed meetings focused on a Cabinet member's portfolio following certain principles (detailed later) but can vary:

Example of themes might be:

- Finances and resources - to inform the annual Budget setting meeting.
- Young people, children's and families meeting (held with Southwark Youth Council).
- Adult Social Care.
- Housing.
- Regeneration.

8.2 Cabinet Members will involve residents at Community Council and other forums (such as Scrutiny) sometime before they come to Council assembly on the set themes. Participatory formats such as workshops and committee discussion will be used on these occasions. An example is the current consultation on the budgetary process in preparation (for a themed debate in January on Budget, Finances and Resources) for final decision in February.

8.3 A Council Assembly Business Panel will be established (see below).

8.4 Themes will be chosen bearing in mind the following principles:

**a) Accountable** led by Cabinet member and directly related to their portfolio. This is the first and most important principle.

**b) Relevant and local** to the public and able to resonate with them - not too specific and technical and not too broad so the meeting is unfocused.

**c) Suitable** for Community Council themed meetings or other participatory events leading up to and informing the Assembly meeting.

**d) Useful** - an issue that the Cabinet wants feedback and involvement on.

**e) Related to plans and strategies** - choosing ones that the Council is already devising and consulting on or refreshing existing ones( Enterprise and Employment / Independence and Wellbeing / Children's and Young Peoples plan for example).

**f) Partnership** that outside community leaders/ active citizens/ experts / relevant officers are invited to attend Council Business Panel meetings in an advisory role to plan debates on coming themes. (Organisations that have a representative structure or are constituted groups that have representation on Scrutiny Committees would be prioritised– i.e. Southwark Youth Council, Tenant Management Council etc).

**g) Involvement and participation.** That relevant partnership groups / constituency groups are invited to Council Assembly. Groups may be invited to actively participate before, during and after by assisting with consultation, presenting information and doing follow up work; There would be a flexible and creative approach so, for example, the Youth Council may want to do a presentation or a Pensioners group show a film, a Scrutiny Committee may want to do detailed policy work on issues raised.

**h) Measurable with Feedback and Follow-up** That following on from the Assembly meeting on a theme the residents and the community would be signposted to the plans, strategies and policies that the debates had impacted on. They would also be made aware of the ongoing partnership groups that take these policies forward, representatives that sit on these bodies (elected Members, constituency representative, community representative) and how they can continue to influence and monitor these plans .

**i) The choice of themes** should be subject to proportionality allocated among political parties.

8.5 The Council Assembly should receive a single annual report covering the work of the Community Councils to highlight issues that are of borough wide concern.

## **9. Format of the Council Assembly meeting**

9.1 That each Council Assembly starts with an informal session, this to be up to an hour before the formal start of the meeting. The informal session will be an opportunity for information on the theme or debate to be presented in creative ways and for residents to mix with Members and the community in an informal setting.

9.2 During these informal sessions officers provide sufficient information papers about the meeting in plain English outlining the agenda of the meeting and the way the meeting is conducted. Also to make available sheets explaining how the Council and Council Assembly works and the role of the Councillors.

9.3 That an officer from the constitutional team is present in the informal session to explain the process and the paper work. The information screens in the Assembly Meeting should provide better information such as the speakers name, the ward they represent, political group and position if Cabinet member.

9.4 That the outcome of the meeting should be available in Plain English and accessible format and published on the Councils' website. And this should form the basis of any feedback to the residents at the following Council Assembly.

9.5 See appendix 1 for the suggested outline of a Council assembly meeting format

## **10. Council Assembly Business Panel**

10.1 The Commission recommends that a Council Assembly Business Panel be set up. The Council Assembly Business Panel is to be responsible for planning the Council Assembly's agenda as an advisory panel to the Mayor **and will meet twice per year**. The Panel

will plan the annual agenda for up to a year of programmes for policy, budgetary framework development, themes, community leadership items and the content of informal sessions. These themed meetings to have a minimum of two months notice.

- 10.2 The mayor has the ultimate responsibility for deciding on the Council Assembly business and will be advised by the Council Assembly Business Panel.
- 10.3 The Council Assembly Business Panel to be chaired by the Mayor. The composition of the Panel should be one representative from each political group on the Council. It will have the ability to seek advice from community leaders/ active citizens/ experts / relevant officers as required who will act in an advisory role to plan debates on coming themes.
- 10.4 The Council Assembly Business Panel will take into account a balance between items of business promoting participative democracy (community engagement) and representative democracy (getting more out of elected members).

## **11. Meeting Content**

- 11.1 At themed Council Assembly meetings Cabinet lead Members are to be called to present annual reports on their work and their vision, priorities and plans for the future, for adoption. They will already have conducted engagement activities involving residents intended to inform policy development on their theme at Community Councils and in other fora. Residents will have the right to ask pre-submitted questions to this item on the agenda.
- 11.2 The Mayor to have more discretionary power in debate and allow interjections during discussions if there is a relevant point to be added to the discussions. Debating rules will be simplified. This item to be kept under review by the Council Assembly Business Panel and to offer changes if it does not elicit good behaviour.

## **12. Times and venues for Council Assembly**

- 12.1 The Commission recommends that the times of the Council Assembly be altered from previous times for the different themed meetings to cater for a meeting held for young people in partnership with the Youth Council, or for a slightly earlier or daytime themed meeting on Adult Social Care which could particularly appeal to older people.
- 12.2 That the budgetary meeting in (January or February) may be held on a Saturday afternoon to enable a larger cross-section of residents to attend.
- 12.3 The commission recommends that future Council Assembly Meetings be alternated between suitable venues throughout Southwark. The suitability of a venue and the facilities available will be screened including with an appropriate Equality and Community Impact Assessment. Venues will be assessed to ensure that they are appropriate to the status of the Council Assembly. This assessment will also include reviewing the current Town Hall Council Chamber. The criteria for a suitable venue to include maximum participation and involvement by the community.

12.4 That the officers working on the current accommodation strategy explore this recommendation and the special requirements outlined in this report and present suitable alternative venues. The officers work out the costs of the various options available for the complete cycle of Council Assembly meetings including the cost of the current Council Chamber.

### **13. Communication and using new technology**

13.1 The Commission recommends engaging the media by providing media briefings before the meetings. These should be briefings by officers on the information role only and the Members on the opinion and values. Updates, briefings and alerts could go out to all media and local online community websites.

13.2 That all documents are published online before the meeting or soon after (with a summary decision sheet) so media outlets have all the documents on hand.

13.3 That the rules on the recording of audio are relaxed and all audio recording of the proceedings in Council Assembly be allowed.

13.4 That podcasts be released on the Council's website from recordings of the sound system.

13.5 That wireless access is enabled in any meeting venue that houses Council Assembly to enable tweeting and posting online.

13.6 That better use of the Council's existing communication platforms and networks is undertaken. A better explanation of the Council Assembly should appear on Southwark media; Southwark Life and on the web including dates and announced in advance, summaries of the meeting, and the calls for questions. Updates, briefings and summaries and alerts should go out to community networks (Southwark Life, TRAs, Forums, social media Sites, newspapers).

13.7 Text / Facebook / Twitter /Assembly newsletter updates and invites should go to those residents signed up to Southwark platforms or there could be an option to join a specific list. Cost effective posting of important debates and decisions could have limited 'clips.'

13.8 Targeted promotion for specific debates should be considered when at all practical – i.e. regeneration of a particular area would lead to invitations to local groups and people; a debate on Housing would target local TRAs etc.

13.9 It is recommended that the costs for webcasting and TV broadcasting are looked into alongside the opportunities for using venues with built in facilities (e.g. the London Assembly debating chamber at the GLA).

### **14. Community Education**

14.1 That there should be better information through the existing channels for better awareness and understanding of the Council Assembly, the workings of the Council in general, and the role of the Councillors in particular for the residents of the

borough. Training, mentoring and citizenships class should all be promoted so residents have the skills, knowledge and support to get involved.

## **15. Equalities issues**

- 15.1 The Democracy Commission has been set up with the aim of bringing the Council closer to its residents, making it more accountable to them and more connected with their concerns. And these recommendations are primarily aimed at achieving that aim. Any implementation plan should include a full Equality and Community Impact Assessment.
- 15.2 The Council Assembly Business Panel will need to think carefully about how it works with existing equalities groups to enable wider participation
- 15.3 Consideration should be given to training for officers and members in community engagement and how to ensure openness to community influence.

## **16. Next Steps**

- 16.1 Following the acceptance of these recommendations, the Chair of the Democracy Commission to report back to the next meeting of the Council Assembly with a full implementation plan including any resource implications.
- 16.2 Also the Council Assembly requests that a report is brought to the next Council Assembly to outline how the Council Constitution will be altered to enable these changes to be implemented.
- 16.3 The Democracy commission oversees and assists the development of the implementation plan.
- 16.4 That the Democracy Commission reviews the implementation of the agreed recommendations after 12 months after these changes have been fully implemented and to work to for further improvements.



## **Appendix 1**

### **INDICATIVE MEETING FORMAT**

This is an outline guide to timings; it is recommended this is given to the CSP for more work. This meeting format emphasises topical and themed debated. The agenda timings will need to be carefully thought through; an Assembly meeting is 3 hours and it would not be possible for all the planned agenda items to have the maximum time available at each meeting. There would need to be some mechanism for creating a workable and balanced agenda.

### **Preparation**

Prior to the themed debate taking place outreach would take place by Cabinet Members visiting Community Councils and other community forums on set themes in the weeks prior to the event. There may also be other engagement work to support this

### **Meeting**

#### **Informal start**

30 minute to one hour informal 'meet the Assembly session' prior to the meeting start.

This would informally present the information gathered from Community Councils etc and report on the Members vision, by for, example displays There may be a presentation by a community group – for example the Youth Council. This space would emphasis creative and informal ways of communicating.

It would give an opportunity for the public to informally discuss issues with Members and the wider community. It would not be obligatory for members to attend.

#### **Formal meeting**

The Council Business Panel would most likely need to adjust the timings by deciding the priority of each meeting. The meeting will last for no longer than three hours (subject to guillotine on debating formal reports for decision).

#### **1 Introduction, announcements, declarations of interest and agreement of minutes.**

- 5 minutes.

#### **2 Time for residents to bring topical and pertinent issues to Assembly – would need to find a balance between quality over quantity & accessibility:**

- Max of three Deputations
- Petitions from the public (currently petitions have proscribed time of 40minutes)
- Public questions (max 15 minutes).

#### **3 Themed debate centred on Cabinet member's portfolios or plans, policies and strategies presented by a Cabinet member** Cabinet lead to present vision, priorities and plan for the year (max 10 minutes).

#### **1 hour – or less where other business is at or near the maximum time indicated for**

- Cabinet member presentation on theme or debate
- Public pre-submitted questions on the theme of the meeting (max 15 minutes).
- Member's motions and questions on the Cabinet theme using present principles to allow sufficient political balance and political parties to hold Cabinet to account (max 30 minutes).

#### **4 Time for Members to bring topical and pertinent issues to Assembly**

- Members to bring topical motions (timings to be decided).
- Members' questions (max 30 minutes).

**5 Consideration of scrutiny reports (10 – 30 minutes).** This slot would be reserved for occasional engaging and appropriate reports (e.g. freedom passes food strategy)

**6 Formal constitutional business** ( Variable – can take 10 minutes but the whole meeting in case of deciding the budget – *note in some instances this currently takes as little as 10 minutes but could require up to 30 minutes in which case time allowed for themed debate and scrutiny reports would be less*). This may be able to be reduced further if some reports are removed but would expand if Members wanted Council Assembly to consider additional policies for decisions – bearing in mind legal constraints may make this difficult.