

Terms of reference for Democracy Commission Phase 2: Community Councils

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. Task and approach

In its first phase the Commission made recommendations on changes to the Council assembly to make it more open and accessible to residents.

In its second stage of work the Commission will oversee a fundamental review of the 8 community councils that will include:

a) Recognition of the budget context:

The budget proposals 2011/14 set out the need in the context of significant reductions in public expenditure to deliver a reduction of £344,000 in the total cost of the community councils to take effect from 1st April 2012. The Commission will make recommendations to cabinet on how this reduction will be implemented to feed into the budget setting process for the 2012/2013 financial year.

b) Examination of the role and function of community councils

The Commission will need to consider why, how, when and where community councils meet, and their performance in relation to their role and function, such as:

- Whether the number and frequency of community council meetings is right
- Whether the current boundaries make sense in terms of representing distinctive areas and can be maintained in the resource context
- The extent to which they have succeeded in building stronger relationships with our communities.
- Whether the current functions and powers are the right ones to meet the aims of the community councils, particularly given the resource context noted above.

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

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

c) Establishing how community councils can be improved

The Commission is tasked with improving community councils, through:

- identification of good practice that can be shared across community councils
- gathering the opinions of residents
- recommending if and how community councils can be made more engaging to residents within the constraints noted above

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 Community Councils 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 the council's constitution as well as changes to the way it operates more generally.

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

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

Supporting officers will ensure that evidence, findings and actions that emerged from the first phase of work that have a bearing on the review of Community Councils are fed into the design of this stage of the Commission's work.