

Item No. 8	Classification: Open	Date: 3 August 2011	Meeting Name: Democracy Commission – Phase 2
Report title:		Member and Officer Consultation on Community Councils	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
From:		Strategic Director of Communities, Law & Governance	

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the Democracy Commission notes the contents of this report which presents summaries of some member and staff consultation on the core functions of community councils.
2. That the Democracy Commission identifies ways to incorporate useful suggestions and feedback into its recommendations for savings and improvements to community councils.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

3. As outlined in the Commission's workplan, a series of workshops and focus groups have been conducted over the past couple of months to obtain qualitative data from members and officers around the core functions of community councils.
4. Members and officers were asked to share their views in relation to the three core functions of community councils (below) as well as on ways to make savings:
 - decision-making
 - engagement and participation
 - consultation

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Feedback from Community Council Chairs and Vice-Chairs

5. A workshop was held at the May meeting of Chairs and Vice-Chairs of community councils to inform phase two of the work of the Commission.
6. The main issues raised are summarised below.

<p>Decision making</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value of decision making at community councils • Decision making is less important than discussing issues of local importance • Community councils contrast to Council Assembly which can be seen as a rubber stamp for decisions taken by the Cabinet • Devolved budgets are a popular decision making role of the community councils and people can see a direct effect on their community from those decisions • Taking planning decisions at community councils is important • Some applications are out of time when they come to community councils meetings which means applicants can lodge an appeal for non-determination • Community councils give residents the opportunity to influence decision makers
<p>Engagement and participation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement depends on the issues on the agenda • Power point presentations can often be ineffective at engaging community council audiences • It can be better if councillors give presentations rather than officers • Community councils are a good introduction to getting involved with the council • Community councils can empower the community • Engagement needs to reach beyond existing limits and needs to find away to attract new people to the community council meetings • Could Southwark Life be used to promote the community council meetings? • Community councils are good at giving access to people residents wouldn't usually get to talk to: officers, TfL, police etc • It is important to involve other organisations such as the voluntary sector • It's good to involve people in the decision making process • Having specific local issues or themes tends to increase attendance at meetings • The community councils are not so good at attracting different people to attend • Workshops and interactive activities work really well • Some community councils leaflet every door with meeting details and engage with local community leaders to ensure agenda reflect the needs of the community
<p>Consultation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There can be difficulties in reaching all areas of the community in terms of consultation • Some councillors promote council consultations themselves by leaflet drops and getting out and talking to residents

7. Members also discussed the need for the Democracy Commission to make recommendations which would make savings. There was a willingness to consider various options in each area to reduce meeting costs e.g. around refreshments, publicity, venue hire, equipment. Members were keen to have a look at meeting budgets and requested that officers present a break down.

8. In terms of planning, some members felt that this could be combined with regular community council meetings, whilst others considered that it would not be feasible or appropriate.
9. At the June meeting of Chairs and Vice-Chairs the idea of a joint meeting with the Democracy Commission was suggested. This would provide a further opportunity for Commission members to explore some of the issues raised.
10. In terms of engaging other ward councillors, it is proposed that this should be linked to the September round of community council meetings, which Democracy Commission members will be attending. Members will be able to contribute to discussions, and in addition, officers can also prepare a specific feedback form.

Feedback from officers

11. Four focus groups have been conducted throughout July with staff from those departments working with community councils, including: planning and regeneration; communities, law and governance; transport; environment; housing and children's services.
12. Feedback from officers has been summarised and grouped into the three main community council functions. Feedback on decision-making functions is as follows:

Decision making
<p><i>General points</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshops are very valuable and engage people if done well. • The community council themes sometimes work well with decision-making when a consultation topic coincides with or compliments the theme. However, sometimes they do not compliment one another. A solution could be for themes to be scheduled to go with particular types of consultation exercises. A consultation diary for the municipal year was also suggested. • Good forward planning is important so sufficient notice about decisions being taken to meetings is given – a shared forward plan was suggested. • Noted that not all residents go to community councils or get involved at meetings. Some residents want to have more of a say, others just happy to understand process so they can influence it themselves. • Chairs are vital to deciding how meetings are run. • People can get concerned at length of time it takes to get decisions implemented or issues resolved. Sometimes complex due to different agencies being involved. <p><i>Specific decision-making functions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful to get local perspective e.g. in terms of section 106 decisions which go to main planning committee meetings. • Clarity on roles of different meetings and decision makers would be welcomed e.g. parking zone consultation boundaries. • Planning application decision-making is useful as they have local knowledge. • Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) necessitates that planning and some transport policies need to be subject to consult at community councils. However time available at different community council varies depending on relevance of the issue, other agenda items and notice given by department. Some officers felt that

Decision making

SCI should be reviewed.

- Resource implications associated with officers attending community councils, especially in times of reducing staff numbers. Suggested that more paper briefings from officers may be the way forward, which some CCs already do.
- Full meeting workshops can be useful, e.g. planning area action plans.

13. Feedback from staff on engagement and participation functions:

Engagement and participation

- Topics, timing and engagement all affect participation. Themed meetings work well.
- Discussion about how to reach out beyond regular attendees to engage hard to reach communities. It was noted that different venues bring people in and some CCs move around depending on the availability of venues.
- Relevance of the agenda is key to engagement, and attracting people from different backgrounds.
- Particular agenda items and issues will attract more diverse groups of people e.g. community fund, job fairs
- Sub-groups are good for engaging people on a particular issue e.g. transport.
- Measuring engagement is about more than attendance, it's also about supporting local networks (interest groups and service-delivery groups) and linking them into meetings, organising events, ongoing dialogue and relationship-building with local groups and residents, capacity building, organising sub-groups etc. Community councils are not the only way to engage, e.g. linking up with faith groups, trade associations, business, young families and tenants and residents associations.
- Many attendees are also community champions that then access their own networks – we are reaching out more widely than just the headcount
- It is great that the council has sustained 40-60 people attending across the areas for several years.
- Some noted positive impact of having external speakers such as cabinet members at meetings.
- Having an e-newsletter has helped encourage participation and info-sharing.
- Agenda-setting is important. E.g. some CCs prioritise public questions so they are taken early in the meeting which seems to work well in their areas.

14. Feedback from staff on consultation function:

Consultation

- Noted that it important the reason for and scope of consultation is set out so there is clarity about what is expected and type of consultation/officer input required.
- Suggested that the council needs a consultation diary/schedule in line with municipal year – other local authorities do this.
- Complicated policy documents and jargon put people off.
- Consultations should be well structured and present clear options for people to consider.
- Consultations can work well e.g. Area Action Plans and Burgess Park.
- Variable quality of power point presentations can often make them ineffective for

Consultation
<p>consulting with community council.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People like maps, interactive presentations with photos, or items to touch

Policy implications

15. The terms of reference for the Democracy Commission phase two have been drawn up within the specific context of current council policies, plans and strategies. The information gathered during the second phase of the commission's work will provide opportunities for the council to engage in debate with residents and will potentially provide decision makers with new information when developing council policy.

Community impact statement

16. The aim of the Democracy Commission is to bring the Council closer to its residents, making it more accountable to them and more connected with their concerns. The work of the Commission will be led by the Community Engagement team that has significant experience in leading work of this nature, aimed at improving the voices of local people in decision-making. The engagement activity will be underpinned by principles of equality and human rights (including the new public sector equality duty which comes into force in April 2011) and will reflect the diverse residents of the borough.

Resource implications

17. No additional budget is required for the setting up of the commission and stage two of its work. Any costs will be covered within existing resources. The commission will be required to bear in mind the need to keep under review the officer and other resources required to support its work and the implementation of its recommendations within the context of increasing resource constraints on the council.
18. The task of the Commission will be to deliver a reduction of £344,000 in the total costs of community councils to take effect from 1 April 2012 as agreed in the council's Policy and Resources Strategy 2011-2014.

Consultation

19. The work of the commission includes public consultation and involvement: public meetings and conferences, questionnaires, focus group and recording vox pops. This work will be developed and improved upon during phase two.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Democracy Commission Phase 2 reports and agenda	160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH	Tim Murtagh 020 7525 7187

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Deborah Collins, Strategic Director of Communities, Law & Governance	
Report Author	Stephen Douglass, Head of Community Engagement	
Version	Final	
Dated	18 July 2011	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / CABINET MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments included
Strategic Director of Communities, Law & Governance	Yes	No
Finance Director	No	No
Cabinet Member	Yes	No
Date final report sent to Constitutional Team		25 July 2011