Item No. 7.	Classification: Open	Date: 22 September 2011	Meeting Name: Democracy Commission – Phase 2
Report title:		Consultation with residents on review of community councils	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
From:		Strategic Director of Communities, Law & Governance	

RECOMMENDATIONS

1.   That the Democracy Commission note the contents of this report which presents some qualitative and quantitative data to highlight the views of residents on community councils.

2.   That the Democracy Commission identify 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 focus groups have been conducted over the past couple of months to speak to residents about community councils, share details of this review, and find out what they think in relation to improvements to the format and potential ways to make savings.

4.   We also widely distributed questionnaires (Appendix 1) to residents at community council meetings, through community council email networks, other resident networks and on the council website. The information obtained through this questionnaire is also presented in this report.

5.   Focus groups were held with regular attendees of community councils across the eight areas, and separate ones with one-off or non-attendees, to hear their perspectives on the barriers to participating in meetings.

6.   At the July meeting of the Commission, members were presented a report on focus groups and meetings conducted to obtain the views of members and officers on review. This is included at Appendix 2.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Feedback from resident focus groups

7.   Focus group participants who were regular community council attendees 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

8. Focus group participants who had only attended one or two meetings, or none at all, were asked to share their impressions of their meetings they had attended, and identify some of the barriers to more regular attendance.

9. The feedback from focus groups contained in this report relates to comments or points which were raised or supported by several participants. We have also included points which would be of use to the Commission in terms of its task to identify savings.

<u>Community council agendas</u>

10. Several residents we consulted felt there should be greater flexibility and resident involvement in setting agendas. It was suggested that there should be:

- More input from residents on setting themes
- Residents should be able to suggest agenda items for next meeting
- Agendas to be sent out further in advance
- Flexibility to shift agenda at meetings in response to interest from attendees
- Agendas should be less busy
- Should have more local interest topics
- Big items should not be given priority as they take over meeting
- Question time should be early on the agenda
- Give less platform for items which interest just a few

<u>Community council minutes</u>

11. Residents made some useful suggestions around improving how minutes are handled to make it clearer to residents how issues are being followed up:

- Minutes should contain a 'rolling action list', covering:
  a) Who the issue went to
  b) What the response was
  c) What has taken place
- All CC actions for members and officers should be available to the public (e.g. online)
- Often not enough minutes available at meetings

<u>Marketing and publicity around meetings</u>

12. Many participants felt that the diversity within the community was not adequately reflected at community council meetings:

- Wider outreach in the community
- More notice of meetings
- Need to reach out more to young people, young parents, beyond the usual suspects
- Should let people know about Council Assembly meetings
- Should use more social media

13. It was felt that there was room for improvement in this area in many cases and that this would help reduce the length of meetings:

- More time for questions
- Stricter chairing to avoid overly lengthy presentations
- Short, succinct presentations – PowerPoint presentations should be limited per meeting
- Less domination by the same residents

Meeting timing and format

14. There were a number of comments in relation to when meetings are held, bringing councillors and residents closer together and restricting the length of meetings:

- Weekend or daytime meetings from time to time to allow more people to attend
- Roundtable format
- Table seating rather than formal audience
- More interactive and less formal
- More workshops and group discussions
- A maximum duration of two hours per meetings should be strictly adhered to
- Community council meetings shouldn't clash with other meetings
- Would be good if councillors could come early to welcome and talk to residents

Resident input and feedback

15. The following points were made in relation to improving how residents' viewpoints are featured and followed up through meetings:

- More time for residents to pose questions, debate issues
- More feedback about how residents' suggestions have been taken into account e.g. around consultations – strengthening accountability
- Information on council spending in areas
- Should collect vox pops around meetings so people less able to attend can respond to specific questions
- Meetings can be very intimidating for new people
- Paperwork format can be difficult to penetrate, easy for officers/councillors but not residents
- Online blog/forum for those who can't attend to have their say, e.g. on major consultations
- More walkabouts in the local area by councillors with residents, TRAs etc.

How community councils can make savings

16. Participants were made aware of the savings element of this review, and some of the areas being looked at in relation to reducing costs. There were some specific comments in relation to this:

- Tea and biscuits should be enough – don't need food
- PA systems are very important, should be rationalised so less expensive.

- Planning should be centralised
- Community councils should support local projects, it's not all about money
- Planning meetings should not be incorporated; they are physically exhausting.
- Planning could be cut at community council level but have a slot or paper distributed at each meeting to inform people what will be going to central planning from the local area, and how to get involved
- Invest in the community by putting PA systems in community centres so they can be used for community council meetings, as well as other community meetings. Community groups can look after the ongoing maintenance and provide support to the community council meetings

Savings ranking exercise

17. Participants at each focus group were asked to agree how they would rank the following methods of making savings to community council budgets. Here are the rankings from the focus groups (favoured method at the top):

	Focus Group 1	**Focus Group 2**	**Focus Group 3**	**Focus Group 4**
1	Fewer meetings	Fewer meetings	Fewer meetings (Planning should become central)	Fewer meetings (but have subgroups in between)
2	Reducing venue and equipment costs.	Reducing activities at meetings	Reducing publicity	Changes to decision-making powers (more decision-making for residents)
3	Reducing publicity. .	Changes to decision-making powers	Reducing venue and equipment costs	Reducing activities at meetings.
4	Reducing activities at meetings	Reducing publicity	Reducing activities at meetings.	Reducing venue and equipment costs
5	Changes to decision-making powers (fewer but longer planning meetings)	Reducing venue and equipment costs	Changes to decision-making powers	Reducing publicity (be smarter and use more technology)
6	Larger CC areas	Larger CC areas	Larger CC areas	Larger CC areas

18. Having fewer meetings a year emerged clearly as the preferred option for making savings, and increasing the size of community council areas was the least preferred option across the board.

Feedback from questionnaires

19. A questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was distributed at community council meetings in June and announcements were made at meetings to encourage residents to fill them out. An online survey was also available on the website, and neighbourhoods team officers distributed questionnaires electronically to local contacts e.g. TRAs. People were allowed a period of two months to return the form.

20. Nevertheless, we have had a disappointing response to the survey - only 21 questionnaires about the future of community councils were returned. Clearly, when dealing with such a small sample size it is not possible to draw any clear conclusions.

21. Fortunately, the results of the survey are strengthened by the focus groups and other one-to-one meetings with residents that have taken place. More information will also be available following the September round of community councils as we are distributing the questionnaires again.

22. **Question 1** asked an open question designed to ascertain what respondents valued the most in their local community council. Three ideas were most frequently cited - please see the table immediately below. Influencing decision-making was valued above all.

Valued the sharing of decision making and being able to influence decision making.	**36%**
Valued being able to find out about local issues, and going along to gain new information more generally.	**28%**
Valued the way community councils have improved the accountability of the council, and enabled residents to scrutinise what we do.	**14%**

23. Other less frequently cited, but important ideas, were that community councils help to tackle hate crime, that they build local identity, allow residents to meet each other, and enable discussions about roads. Two people said that they did not value community councils.

24. **Question 2** asked what respondents think is the most important function of community councils. This was a closed question, and the result is reported in the table below.

Being able to influence local decisions, e.g. planning, traffic management.	**40%**
Debating local issues of concern with councillors and other residents.	**30%**
Having your say and getting involved in consultations, e.g. Southwark Spending Challenge.	**25%**
Don't know.	**5%**

25. Interestingly, the results from question 1 where people wrote up their own answers in an empty box, and question 2 where the questionnaire asked respondents to tick a box against pre-set answers, were remarkably similar.

26. **Question 3** asked how effective are community councils are in relation to the main three headings in question 2.

	Very good	Good	Average	Poor	Very poor	Don't know
Influencing decision making.	21%	37%	26%	0%	5%	11%
Debating local issues.	33%	33%	6%	11%	6%	11%
Getting involved in consultations.	16%	50%	11%	6%	6%	11%

27. The results show a consistent and clear majority of respondents thinking that community councils are good or very good at all of these tasks. However, about a quarter of respondents thought that community councils were average, or poor, or very poor.

28. The majority thought that debating local issues was the most effective function of community councils.

29. **Question 4** asked an open question about what improvements should be made to community councils. There were 13 different ideas, none of which stood out as any more or less popular then the others. The 13 ideas are:

- Ask local opinion before drafting plans and proposals.
- Keep as it is.
- Organise residents by streets.
- Less time for officer reports.
- Feedback to residents.
- Less items/keep to time.
- Allow more shared decision making.
- More issues about hate crime.
- Have more workshops.
- Give more powers and money to community councils and make savings elsewhere in the council.
- Improve community council - cabinet interactions.
- Encourage more people, especially young people, to attend.
- Meet at weekends.

30. **Question 5** asked respondents to rank possible ways to reduce the costs of community councils. The options provided on the questionnaire were to:

- Have fewer meetings.
- Have larger community council areas.
- Changes to decision making powers.
- Reduce publicity for meetings.
- Reduce activities at meetings, such as job fairs, films and food.
- Reduce venue costs and equipment costs.

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There were few clear results from this ranking, with respondent's views never really coalescing into any overwhelming direction. The only option that was supported by most of the respondents was to reduce venue and equipment costs.

31. **Question 6** asked for suggestions from the respondents about how to reduce the costs, and a very wide variety of ideas were provided back, which were:

    - Bermondsey & Rotherhithe to join.
    - Hold meetings in homes.
    - Use modern technology/web.
    - Less food/drink.
    - Ask volunteers to help.
    - Buy not hire equipment.
    - Less staff at meetings.
    - Do not merge Walworth.

32. **Question 7** asked for examples of how resident's views have influenced decisions at community councils. The Cleaner, Greener, Safer grants and the Community Council Fund were the most popular ways for residents to influence decisions, closely followed by being able to influence planning and traffic & transport decision making.

Common themes

33. A number of common themes emerge from the consultation work we have undertaken, namely:
    - People value community councils to have their say on local issues, and crucially receive feedback in response.
    - Views differ as to whether this needs to be linked to formal decision-making powers or not, but emphasis seems to be more on having a voice and being informed of an outcome.
    - A number of improvements could be made to increase engagement e.g. better feedback around outcomes, changing format and times of meetings, improved resident input to agendas, less formality
    - People understand the need to make savings, but are not keen on larger areas, having less meetings or reducing costs in other ways are far preferred

Policy implications

34. 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

35. 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

36. 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.

37. 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

38. 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	Tooley Street, London, SE1 2TZ	Tim Murtagh 020 7525 7187

APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix 1	Community Councils Questionnaire
Appendix 2	Member and officer consultation report

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Deborah Collins, Strategic Director of Communities, Law & Governance		
Report Author	Stephen Douglass, Head of Community Engagement		
Version	Final		
Dated	15 September 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			15 September 2011