

Item No. 5.	Classification: Open	Date: 14 November 2011	Meeting Name: Democracy Commission – Phase 2
Report title:		Consultation with residents on review of community councils – Updated	
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 qualitative and quantitative data to highlight the views of residents on 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. This is an updated version of the consultation report which was presented to Democracy Commission members at its meeting in September. Since that meeting, the following activity has taken place and is included in this report:
 - a dedicated focus group on planning has been conducted (see paragraphs 20-29)
 - the number of questionnaire responses has risen to 83 (see paragraphs 30-42)
 - feedback has been received from a number of community councils (see paragraphs 42-49).
4. 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.
5. Officers also widely distributed questionnaires 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.
6. 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.

7. 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 the review. This is included at Appendix 2.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Feedback from resident focus groups

8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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.

Community council agendas

11. 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.

Community council minutes

12. 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.

Marketing and publicity around meetings

13. 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.

Chairing and presentations

14. 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

15. 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

16. 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

17. 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

18. 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.

	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4
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

19. 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 amongst focus group participants.

Feedback from focus group on planning

20. A dedicated planning focus group was held at Tooley Street in early September. It is recognized that residents that attend planning meetings are a distinct group and that it was critical that they be engaged given the savings options being considered in the review.
21. We had an unprecedented level of interest in this session, and as the attendance swelled to 23 people, it became more of a workshop than a focus group per se. The following is a general summary of the issues discussed:

Access to information

22. People highlighted that there was a lack of information in relation to planning decision making, in terms of the process, the actual applications, and the Statement of Community Involvement. Comments included:
- Plans should be easily accessible online and on request
 - Various queries about the quality of information, and concerns about partiality and accuracy of information presented
 - Lack of feedback if people did send in comments in regard to consultations, or pose questions to the planning department. They didn't know who the relevant officers were
 - Inconsistency around the posting of notices was also highlighted
 - Inaccessibility of the manual developed by officers.

Lack of focus on resident engagement/consultation

23. There is frustration that residents are only given limited opportunity to input or comment at meetings, as opposed to officers for example. It was stated that this

contrasted with the national guidelines which should allow 3-4 minutes for objectors, applicants and supporters.

24. It was highlighted that there was an overwhelming focus on “buildings” rather than “community” – a feeling that the engagement aspect was missing i.e. no space for local community to debate collaboratively with planning officers in advance.
25. It was mentioned that other local authorities enabled local organizations and people to have more input during meetings and that Southwark should follow best practice.

Role of councillors

26. There was frustration that local councillors, who know about the areas cannot vote on planning applications.

Suggested improvements

27. Some specific suggestions were made in relation to how planning meetings could be improved:
 - Have a list of planning applications at community councils
 - Each ward should have a lead councillor for planning
 - More effective information transfer between community council and planning meetings.
28. Overall, it was felt that a number of things could be done to ensure better collaboration with communities around planning decision making. In terms of savings, it is clear that taking planning away from community councils would not be well received without compensating actions to support community inputs into the planning process.
29. However, it was not felt that people were necessarily attached to planning as a decision-making function at community councils, but rather that they wanted a say on local planning matters, facilitated through:
 - a clear and well-managed process
 - transparent and timely access to information
 - meaningful dialogue with the council in advance of any decisions being taken
 - effective feedback mechanisms.

Maintaining the ability of local people to influence local planning decisions is seen as very important.

Feedback from questionnaires

30. 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, until the end of August, to return the form.

31. Nevertheless, due to the initial disappointing response, officers went back to the September round of community councils to try to obtain a valid sample size in relation to community councils attendees.
32. Subsequently, 83 questionnaires have now been completed across all community council areas. This increased response rate is considered to be statistically valid as it represents a response rate of just under 20% (using the average community council attendance in 2011 so far, which is 60 people as a target audience per area, and applying it across all areas).
33. **Question 1** asked an open question about what respondents valued the most about their local community council. Two responses were the most popular: influencing decisions and finding out about local issues. Please see the table immediately below.

Valued the sharing of decision making and being able to influence decision making.	32%
Valued being able to find out about local issues, and going along to gain new information more generally.	39%
Valued the way community councils have improved the accountability of the council, and enabled residents to scrutinise what we do.	9%
Meet other residents	6%

34. 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.
35. **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.	43%
Debating local issues of concern with councillors and other residents.	42%
Having your say and getting involved in consultations, e.g. Southwark Spending Challenge.	14%
Don't know.	1%

36. The answers to questions 1 and 2 indicate that people value many different things about community councils, especially being able to discuss and influence the outcome of local issues, the sharing of decision making, finding out new information, and meeting and talking to local councillors and other residents. It is possible to conclude that the more local the issue, the more immediate and important it will be to many of the respondents, perhaps because the benefits of coming to community councils can be more easily demonstrated if the issue is both local and subject to the impact of a community council debate or decision.
37. **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.	28%	32%	22%	5%	5%	8%
Debating local issues.	31%	34%	21%	4%	4%	6%
Getting involved in consultations.	23%	36%	23%	6%	4%	8%

38. The results show that approx 60% of respondents think that community councils are good or very good at all of these tasks. About a quarter of respondents think that community councils are only average. Approximately 10% of respondents think that community councils are poor, or very poor.

39. **Question 4** asked what improvements should be made to community councils. There were 36 different responses. Some of these are listed below, with the three ideas that got at least 10% of the total suggestions from respondents listed first of all.

Top three suggestions

- Keep as it is.
- Less items/keep to time.
- Fewer presentations.

Some of the rest of the suggestions for improvements

- More powers and money for community councils, make savings elsewhere
- Allow more shared decision making.
- Organize residents by streets.
- Less time for officer reports.
- Feedback to residents.
- More issues about hate crime.
- Have more workshops.
- Improve community council - cabinet interactions.
- Encourage more people, especially young people, to attend.
- Meet at weekends.
- Ask local opinion before drafting plans and proposals.
- Increase consultations about development proposals
- More influence on roads budget
- Stop planning meetings/include discussions of significant applications in main CC meetings.
- Hold all meetings in one venue(e.g. new library at Canada Water)
- Use better PA systems.

40. **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.

There were few clear results from this ranking, with respondent's views never really coalescing into any overwhelming direction. The options of reducing venue and equipment costs and reducing activities did get the most support, whilst less meetings, larger community council areas and changes to decision making got the least support, but there was by no means a completely compelling trend towards these answers.

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

- Bermondsey & Rotherhithe to join.
- Hold meetings in homes.
- Use modern technology/web (the most popular)
- Less food/drink (also very well supported).
- Ask volunteers to help.
- Buy not hire equipment.
- Less staff at meetings.
- Do not merge Walworth.
- Do not cut community councils
- Save power costs with daytime meetings
- Combine Peckham and Peckham & Nunhead community councils.

42. **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. In addition 11 people cited very specific places where a local debate or funding decision at a community council seemed to have brought about improvements, e.g.

- "Northcross Street Market"
- "East Dulwich Community Centre"
- "saving Camberwell Leisure Centre"
- "regeneration of The Blue", and
- "Albion Street regeneration".

Feedback from Community Council meetings

43. As requested by the Commission, officers approached Chairs and Vice-Chairs of community councils with regard to having an agenda slot at the September round of meetings to discuss the review.
44. Due to the nature of community council agendas, officers developed a couple of options for how the item could be handled – depending on the amount of time available on agendas – namely, either a Q&A or workshop session. Different approaches were taken, as has been summarised below:

Democracy Commission at September Community Councils	
Bermondsey	Chair declined an agenda slot
Borough & Bankside	Five minute officer presentation with questions from the floor
Rotherhithe	Five minute member presentation with questions from the floor. Officer asked to come back for November meeting with budget
Walworth	Officer presentation and interactive voting
Dulwich	Community announcement from Chair
Peckham	Officer presentation and interactive voting
Camberwell	Community announcement from Chair
Nunhead and Peckham Rye	Officer presentation and interactive voting postponed to November meeting

45. Due to the fact that the review was handled in a range of different ways, it is difficult to draw clear parallels or conclusions across areas. For example, in areas where a Q&A session took place, it is not possible to highlight any overall feedback from that area as most of the questions related to process. In such cases, residents were encouraged to fill in questionnaires so their views are captured above. However, feedback from the following community councils that allocated longer agenda slots can be highlighted:

46. Walworth (interactive voting)

- People most value finding out what is happening in their local area, closely followed by influencing decisions and then contact with councillors
- In terms of improvements, people wanted more time for questions, closely followed by more community input to agendas and better feedback
- In terms of making savings, reducing venue and equipment costs came out top, followed by reducing publicity costs. Having fewer meetings a year was the least popular option.

47. Peckham (interactive voting)

- People most value finding out what is happening in their local area, closely followed by participating in consultations and then influencing decisions.
- In terms of improvements, having more community input to agendas was the overwhelming favourite option, followed by better feedback.
- In terms of making savings, having fewer meetings per year was clearly the most favoured option, followed by changing the way planning is done at community councils.

48. Nunhead (interactive voting)

- People most value influencing decisions followed by what is happening in their local area.
- In terms of improvements, having better feedback was the favoured option, closely followed by having more community input to agendas and more time for questions.
- In terms of making savings, having fewer meetings per year and changing the way planning is done at community councils received the most number of votes, closely followed by larger areas.

49. Rotherhithe (only six feedback forms returned)

- Slight preference for finding out what is happening in their local area.
- Slight preference for better feedback.
- Slight preference for reducing venue and equipment costs.

50. The feedback from those community councils that dedicated at least a 20 minute agenda slot to the Democracy Commission appears to confirm that obtained through the focus groups and questionnaires on the whole. That is that people value the local information-sharing and influencing that goes on at community councils, they want more opportunity to shape agendas and speak out at meetings, but that views differ over how to make savings.

Common themes

51. A number of common themes emerge from the consultation work we have undertaken, namely:
- People value community councils; both to discuss but also have an influence over local issues.
 - Views differ as to whether this needs to be linked to formal decision-making powers or not, but emphasis seems to be more on transparent and timely access to information, having a say in the decision-making process, and being informed of an outcome.
 - A number of improvements could be made to increase engagement e.g. better feedback around outcomes, stricter management of agendas, changing format and times of meetings, improved resident input to agendas, less formality.
 - People understand the need to make savings, but views differ on how this should be done. Participants in the focus group preferred having less meetings. However, the feedback from the questionnaires in terms of how to make savings was far less conclusive.

Policy implications

52. 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

53. 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

54. 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.

55. 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

56. 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 2QH	Tim Murtagh 020 7525 7187

APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix 1	Community Councils Questionnaire
Appendix 2	Member and Officer Consultation on Community Councils Note: Report previously considered by the Democracy Commission on 3 August 2011 and 22 September 2011

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Deborah Collins, Strategic Director of Communities, Law & Governance	
Report Author	Stephen Douglass, Head of Community Engagement	
Version	Final	
Dated	11 November 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	11 November 2011	