

Briefing Note – Bermondsey Community Council	
Title	Community Councils – Changes for 2012-13
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REQUIRED ACTION

To note the changes to community councils, agreed by Council Assembly, as a result of the Democracy Commission's recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

1. The Democracy Commission was asked by the Council in February 2011 to undertake a review of the work of the community councils, including resident consultation, which examined the role and function of community councils and whether the current functions and powers are the right ones to meet the aims of community councils in the current resource context. Cabinet asked the Commission to identify at least £344,000 of savings.
2. The commission reviewed efficiency savings for community councils and identified savings of £81,527. This relates to the budgets surrounding venue/transport hire, marketing/publicity, access and catering. However the efficiencies savings alone did not meet the overall savings target necessary and therefore the commission investigated other options for savings.
3. The review concluded in December 2011 and the Commission concluded that savings could only be made if the number of Community Council areas, meetings and functions were reduced.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reducing the number of community councils from 8 to 5
- Reducing the number of meetings from at least 6 to 5 per year
- Establishing 2 planning sub-committees for minor applications with revised thresholds for decisions going to the main planning committee and the two sub-committees
- Removing school governor appointments and making changes to other areas of decision making such as transport
- Making reductions to the staff

CHANGES

4. These changes were agreed by Council Assembly and come into effect from May 2012:
 - Merge Bermondsey and Rotherhithe Community Councils (retaining the current split of Livesey Ward between Bermondsey & Rotherhithe and Peckham & Nunhead)
 - Merge Peckham and Nunhead & Peckham Rye Community Councils
 - Retain the current boundaries of Dulwich Community Council
 - Retain the current boundaries of Camberwell Community Council
 - Merge Borough & Bankside and Walworth Community Councils.

5. Council Assembly also approved the commission's recommendation that the planning function is no longer exercised by community councils. Instead a new model of a main planning committee and two planning sub-committees will be created.
6. School governor decisions were reviewed by the commission and council assembly agreed the commission's recommendation that this function is no longer exercised by community councils to generate a saving of £10,895. It was noted that these decisions are normally taken in closed session which is not consistent with the engagement role of community councils.
7. Given the context of the significant reductions in the council's budget some changes have had to be made to the officer support for this function as the current cost was unsustainable. The commission identified staffing savings from the engagement function, which was agreed as part of the budget decision by council assembly. The new staffing structure reduces the overall number of community engagement staff whilst retaining one dedicated officer for each of the new five areas.
8. The commission noted that residents see the cleaner, greener, safer and Community fund schemes as evidence of them having an influence on local decisions. Having a say over how council funds are allocated at a local level is valued and recognised as really putting power into the hands of residents. Community councils should be encouraged to develop upon this model. The commission welcomed the cleaner, greener, safer revenue funding of £10,000 per ward which would be available for community councils to allocate from 1 April 2012. It also agreed that there would be no reduction to the Community fund for this year.
9. The Commission also recommended changes to the operation of Community Councils and have asked Chairs to consider the following:
 - more flexibility around meeting times
 - varying the use of local venues
 - increasing the use of workshops to encourage debate and dialogue
 - enabling residents to have more influence over the agenda setting process
 - having question time earlier on in agendas
 - stricter chairing to enable balanced input from residents
 - keeping the length of meetings within a time limit e.g. two hours
 - better use of online forums and social media
 - introducing less formality to meetings was another popular suggestion made and would compliment the desire to improve engagement. People have expressed a preference for a horse-shoe or semi-circular seating arrangement at meetings (with further semi-circular rows behind), to create less "distance" between local people and members especially considering the increase in the number of Councillors for some Community Council areas
 - explore ways to simplify the paperwork to make it more accessible, e.g. plain English summaries of information items could be produced, provided adequate officer resource is available.