



Report of the Democracy Commission – Phase 2 – Community Councils

Dated: December 2011

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REPORT OF THE DEMOCRACY COMMISSION – PHASE 2

COMMUNITY COUNCILS

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Dated: December 2011

Foreword by Councillor Abdul Mohamed

Chair of the Democracy Commission



Cllr Abdul Mohamed
- Cabinet member for
equalities and
community
engagement

1. In January 2011 the cabinet invited the Democracy Commission to begin phase two of its review of how we engage with local people. This focussed on the role and powers of community councils, in the context of budgetary reductions. The role of the commission is to bring the council closer to its residents, make it more accountable to them and more connected with their concerns and to reinvigorate local democracy.
2. The Democracy Commission has met regularly from March to December 2011 reviewing the future of community councils. This review has had to be conducted against a background of severe reductions in government funding to the council. Community councils have had to find their share of the savings just as all parts of the council have had to, including front line services.
3. Whilst we all value community councils and the contribution they make to community engagement, this means as a commission we have had to make some difficult choices on what the future role of community councils should be. An important part of this review has been ensuring that local people and members of the council were as fully involved as possible through the consultation processes. One of the key messages from local people is that who takes a decision appears to be less important to residents than having an opportunity to share their views and to influence the decisions wherever they are taken.
4. In finding the right balance in terms of the savings we have sought to continue to improve and develop our community councils. The report includes many ideas and suggestions for us to take forward. However the scale of the savings does mean we have had to make difficult decisions, including reviewing the boundaries. Even so, we have tried to ensure that the impact of the changes is limited by ensuring that they reflect both cross boundary issues that community councils already discuss and patterns of attendance.
5. Notwithstanding the difficult challenges, I believe the commission's proposals, which are based on the evidence and consultation outcomes considered by the commission, represent our best way forward. These proposals will allow meetings to focus on listening to local people and taking the decisions that matter most to people. This includes the value placed on community councils supporting and funding local projects. Therefore this year in addition to the proposals of the commission, the cabinet has decided to delegate to community councils a cleaner, greener, safer revenue fund, giving them power over revenue funding for the first time. This represents a major development in terms of community council powers. This demonstrates the commitment of the council to continue enhancing community councils, whilst having to find the necessary savings.

6. This report was agreed at the last meeting of the Democracy Commission and explains in detail the difficult decisions the commission came to based on the evidence considered. The recommendations of the commission are being considered by cabinet and council assembly through the budget process. The commission have been supported through phase two by officers to ensure that our recommendations are deliverable and that the Strategic Director of Communities, Law & Governance is content that officers can deliver the proposals to make the savings which the commission were tasked to identify.

1. INTRODUCTION

Role of the Democracy Commission

- 1.1 On 25 January 2011, cabinet resolved that the Democracy Commission be tasked with phase two of their work, focusing on the role and powers of community councils in the context of budgetary savings. The full terms of reference and membership of the commission can be found at Appendix A.
- 1.2 The current cost of operating the community councils is in excess of £1 million and this is unsustainable in the current context of severe reductions in public expenditure.
- 1.3 The commission was therefore tasked with making recommendations to cabinet and council that can deliver a reduction of £344,000 in the total costs of community councils to take effect from 1 April 2012. All other aspects of the review into the role, function and effectiveness of community councils are framed within the aforementioned constraints.
- 1.4 The cabinet asked the Democracy Commission to make their final recommendations for presentation to the cabinet in early December 2011.

How the commission has undertaken its review

- 1.5 The Democracy Commission has met roughly on a monthly basis from March to December 2011 to consider the core functions and effectiveness of community councils, and identify the savings highlighted above. The work programme of the commission can be found at Appendix B.
- 1.6 Whilst recognising that each community council is distinct, the commission considered why, how, when and where community councils met, and their performance in relation to their role and function, on issues 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.
- 1.7 Evidence was submitted to the commission in the form of reports and officer presentations. This included input from the council departments that provide the services currently delegated to community councils as consultative and decision-making functions.. The commission has made recommendations based on evidence collected and presented at its hearings.
- 1.8 Resident consultation has been a particular focus for the commission, both at community council meetings and through workshops and focus groups. A questionnaire was also circulated. Community engagement has involved members of the public and members of the community councils as far as

effectively as possible. This feedback has been extensively reported to the commission. The commission also received comparative data from other local authorities on the provision made for community engagement and local decision making.

- 1.9 The commission has made its recommendations based on evidence collected and presented at its hearings. From September 2011 onwards regular discussions took place at the commission on shaping its recommendations. At the September 2011 meeting, the commission asked officers to prepare detailed spreadsheets showing some of the various savings options available. These were considered and discussed at its November meeting.
- 1.10 At its final meeting in December 2011 the commission considered submissions from Councillor Michael Mitchell (see Appendix G) and the Labour Group on the way forward for community councils. The commission also considered a draft report prepared by officers, which included draft recommendations based on evidence collected during its review. Having considered the submissions and the draft report, the commission agreed the submission of the Labour Group as its preferred way forward. The commission asked officers to prepare the final report to reflect these proposals.
- 1.11 The commission's proposals on the future of community councils need to be reported as part of the budget process to the cabinet in January 2012. In order to make sure that the proposals were deliverable officers have been advising throughout the process and the Strategic Director of Communities, Law & Governance is content that the proposals will deliver the savings.

The cabinet's budget recommendations will be reported to council assembly (council tax setting) meeting in February 2012 for consideration and approval. Any constitutional changes required will be agreed by a subsequent meeting.

Structure of this report

- 1.12 This report sets out the key evidence presented to the commission under the various thematic headings contained in the work plan. Each section contains headings summarising:
 - Key evidence
 - Relevant input from the consultations in relation to each theme
 - Conclusions (where applicable)
 - Recommendations

2. ROLE AND PURPOSE OF COMMUNITY COUNCILS

2.1 At the May 2011 meeting of the commission, an overview paper was presented which laid out the role and function of community councils, as provided by the constitution.

2.2 These can be split into three distinct areas, and members were asked to consider the balance of these functions as they set about identifying areas for savings and the ways that community councils can be developed in the future:

- Constitutional/formal decision making role
- Engagement role
- Consultative role.

2.3 The constitutional/formal decision making role of community councils is set out in Part 3H of the council's constitution and is split into a) decision making and b) consultative/non-decision making functions. Community councils have executive functions (delegated by the leader of the council) and non-executive decision making functions (delegated by council assembly).

2.4 The formal decision making and consultative functions of community councils are summarised in the following table:

Table 1: Formal and consultative decision making at community councils

Role	Decision making	Consultative	Function
Planning	Yes	Yes	Non-executive function
Environmental management	Yes	Yes	Executive function
Cleaner, Greener, Safer	Yes	Yes	Executive function
Community Council Fund	Yes		Executive function Note: This role was originally delegated by the cabinet and is not currently listed in the constitution.
Traffic Management	Yes	Yes	Executive function
Community Project Bank	Yes	None	Executive function
Education - School Governor Appointments	Yes	None	Executive function

2.5 A full extract from the constitution outlining the role and function of community councils can be found at Appendix C.

- 2.6 In terms of engagement, community councils have been successful in balancing the constitutional and legal requirements of taking formal decisions and engaging effectively with local people. Being area based community councils give an opportunity for members to enhance their ward role by engaging with residents in their locality. Community councils are encouraged to be 'more than a meeting', and this function of community councils, which is particularly valued by residents, will be explored later in the engagement section of this report.

Consultation

- 2.7 Whilst members value the formal decision making role of community councils, the focus groups and consultation with residents has shown that views differ as to how important the link to formal decision making is. For example, during the focus groups it was clear that most people were not aware of which issues that came to community councils were just for consultation, and which involved formal decisions being taken by local representatives.
- 2.8 However, what is critical is for local people to be consulted, within a reasonable timeframe about decisions which will be taken that affect their local area. The ultimate decision-making authority appears less important to residents than having a clear, transparent, meaningful (i.e. a chance to influence the decision/s) and well-managed process to enable them to share their views and receive feedback on the final decision within a set timescale.
- 2.9 In September 2011 the commission considered a report examining how area committees and devolved decision making is handled by other local authorities. This paper confirmed a strong trend away from devolved decision making at a local level and movement towards local or ward-based engagement and consultation on local issues and devolved budgets. One particular finding was that very few boroughs undertake planning decision making at a local level. In Southwark planning is the most significant area of devolved decision making to community councils and commands a significant budget. A significant saving could be made if planning were removed from community councils, particularly if decisions were taken at senior officer level. More detail on the various savings options considered by the commission is set out in the planning section of this report.

ROLE AND PURPOSE OF COMMUNITY COUNCILS

Recommendations

1. That it noted that the commission considered the decision making and engagement roles of community councils in reaching its conclusions on the identification of savings, and the ways in which community councils can be developed in the future.
2. That it be noted that the paper on area committees across other boroughs which was presented at the September 2011 meeting confirmed a strong trend away from devolved decision making at a local level and movement towards local or ward-based engagement and consultation on local issues and devolved budgets.

3. BUDGET AND RESOURCE ISSUES

- 3.1. At the April 2011 meeting, commission members were presented with an overview of the budget allocated for the running of community councils in the 2011/12 financial year. The purpose of the report was to provide the commission with relevant information concerning the running costs of community councils in relation to their various functions to inform the process of finding savings.
- 3.2. The following table contains a top-level breakdown of the budget allocated to the running of community councils in the current financial year (2011/12). This includes staff costs for the constitutional team and neighbourhoods team who manage and administer the eight community councils, publicity and running costs for the actual meetings, as well as the community council fund.

Table 2: Total cost of community councils 2011/12

Total budget for community councils 2011/12	
Neighbourhoods team	693,817
Constitutional team	528,100
SLA Charges	88,500
Total	1,310,417

- 3.3. A detailed breakdown of each of the budget lines was presented to the commission and these figures are included at Appendix D.
- 3.4. It is worth reiterating that issues relating to staff numbers are reserved to the chief executive and officers appointed by her. This does not prevent the commission making recommendations that impact on staffing numbers but if this is the case then these need to be made to the strategic director of communities, law & governance who will consider whether they are implementable.
- 3.5. The Democracy Commission on 22 September 2011 considered the final evidence submitted to it as part of its review of community councils, with the exception of some consultation feedback received in November. The commission considered how it wished to shape the recommendations. Having considered possible areas of consensus and those issues requiring further consideration, the commission asked that officers prepare a summary of options based on the evidence submitted to date for the meeting in November 2011.
- 3.6. In November the commission was presented with a series of detailed options with estimated costs prepared by officers based on the evidence submitted to date. Each summary of options was divided into two sections:
- General savings from the constitutional team and neighbourhood team budgets
 - Individual options – the general savings are included in most of the options.

3.7. The general savings reflect some of the areas of consensus identified by members during the evidence gathering meetings of the commission.

Options

3.8. The options were based on the following scenarios which were applied in different combinations:

- Retain eight community councils
- Retain the same level of meetings
- Reduce the number of meetings to five or four per annum
- Reduce the number of community councils to five
- Reduce the level of neighbourhood support to community council meetings e.g. workshops, outreach work with sub-groups, special events such as job fairs.

Areas for decision making

3.9. The following table sets out a matrix of the key areas considered by the commission based on the evidence submitted and the budget summary papers prepared by officers presented to the commission on the 14 November 2011.

Table 3: Summary of key issues

Decision	Savings	Issues considered
A	General savings from the constitutional team and neighbourhood team	There were two figures based on whether or not the commission wished to include school governor function in total with a saving of £10,895. See table 4 below.
B	Boundaries and number of areas	To decide a structure.
C	Fewer main meetings	To decide on the frequency of main meetings.
D	Planning	Four options: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model A – Status quo – retain at community councils • Model B – Delete the function • Model C – One planning sub-committee • Model D – Two planning sub-committees.
E	Other issues	These include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sponsorship • PA system.

General savings

Table 4: Proposed general savings

Constitutional team

Item No.	Description	Savings/annum
1	Marketing and publicity (previously Take Note)	11,500
2	Sound system - under spend on budget	9,000
3	School governors function recharge to children's services	10,895
Sub-Total		31,395

Neighbourhoods team

Item No.	Description	Savings/annum
4	Community council area budgets for individual publicity and marketing including transport to meetings/claims for carer costs and catering (in 2011/12 £10,083 x 8) - (50% saving identified)	40,332
5	Publicity and marketing of community council fund (50% saving identified) £5,000	5,000
6	Interpreting and translation costs (50% saving identified) £4,800	4,800
Sub-Total		50,132
Total general savings:		81,527

Consultation

- 3.10. Residents were asked to share their views on how savings could be made through focus group discussions, questionnaires and at community council meetings. This feedback is presented in more detail in the consultation section of this report.
- 3.11. Overall, residents understood the need to make savings, but views differed on how this should be done. Whilst most people were willing to accept savings around venue and equipment hire, there was little consensus about how substantive savings could be made. Although participants in the focus group clearly preferred having fewer meetings, this was not the case in terms of the questionnaires. It was therefore difficult to draw clear conclusions as to people's preferences for making significant savings.

Conclusions

- 3.12. The issue of community council budgets and staffing has been considered at a number of commission meetings and some areas for making savings emerged, e.g. around budgets for publicity and marketing across both the

neighbourhoods and constitutional teams and savings on equipment hire. These are outlined in Table 4 above. With regard to the school governors function of £10,895, it should be noted that at the meeting on 14 November 2011 it was reported that Dulwich councillors felt that this should be retained as a decision making function at community councils because it provided a link to local nursery and primary schools.

- 3.13. At its December meeting commission members noted that the school governor decisions tend to be made in a closed session at the end of a community council meeting. They are not engaging to local residents, which is a key role of community councils. The evidence the commission has heard suggests that residents are more concerned about how they can influence decisions rather than about where the decisions are taken. In future the commission proposed these decisions are not taken at community councils.

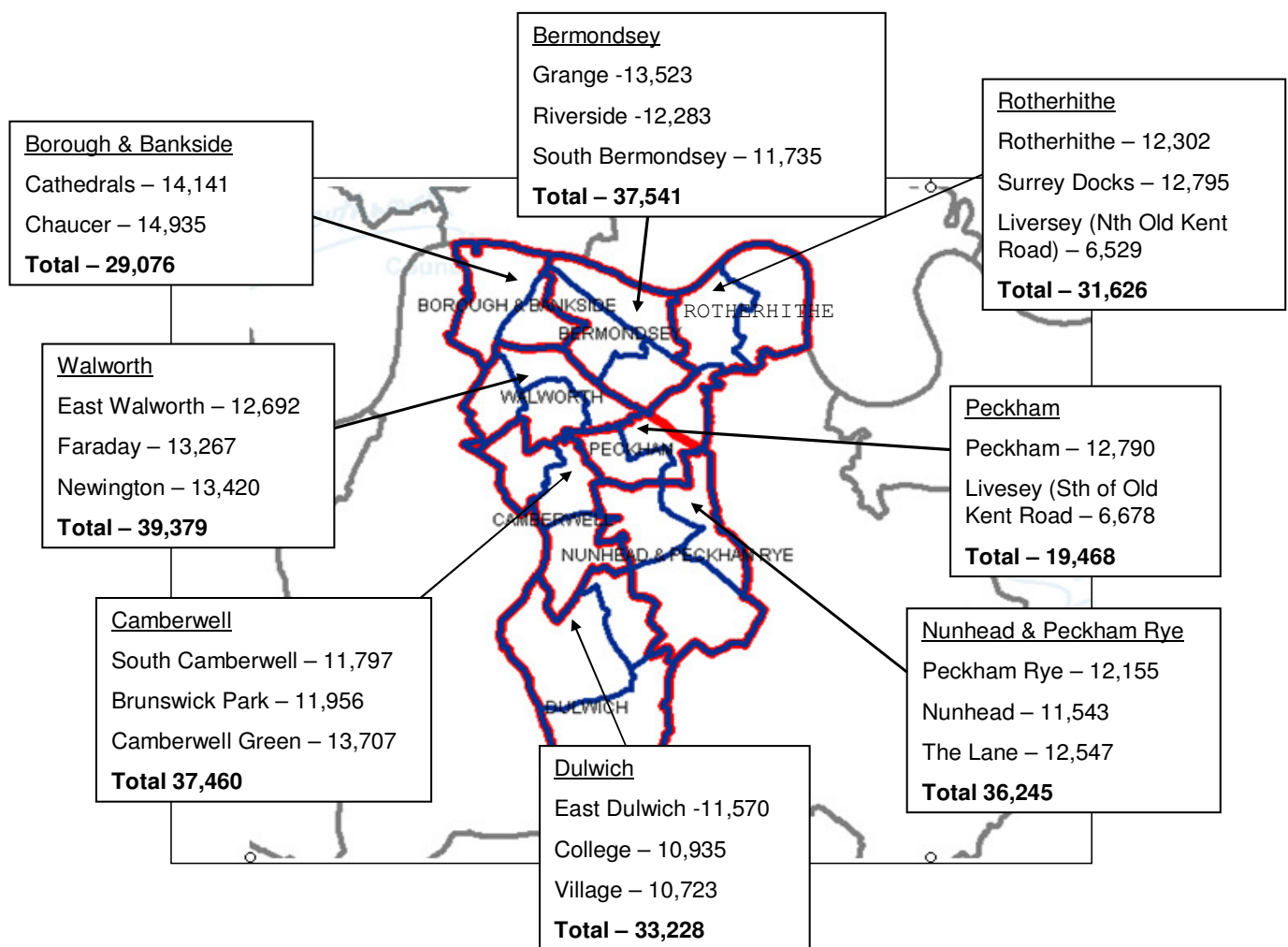
BUDGET AND RESOURCES ISSUES

Recommendations

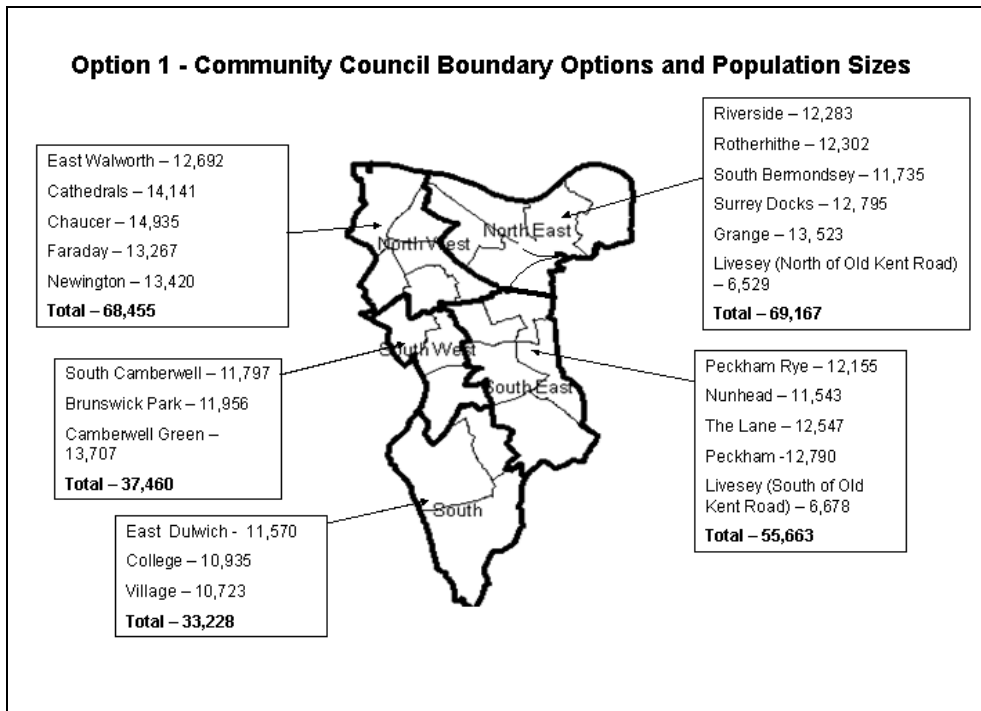
3. That the commission recommends that the appointment of local education authority school governors to the governing bodies of nursery and primary schools be removed from community councils. These decisions should be taken at chief officer level to reduce administration and deliver a saving of £10,895.
4. That the remaining general savings of £70,632 set out in Table 4 be recommended as a contribution to the savings target. The commission looked first at ways of reducing these administrative costs and felt that these would have minimal impact however the scale of the reductions in the councils funding left little choice other than more radical changes to the structure of community councils.

4. BOUNDARIES AND NEIGHBOURHOODS

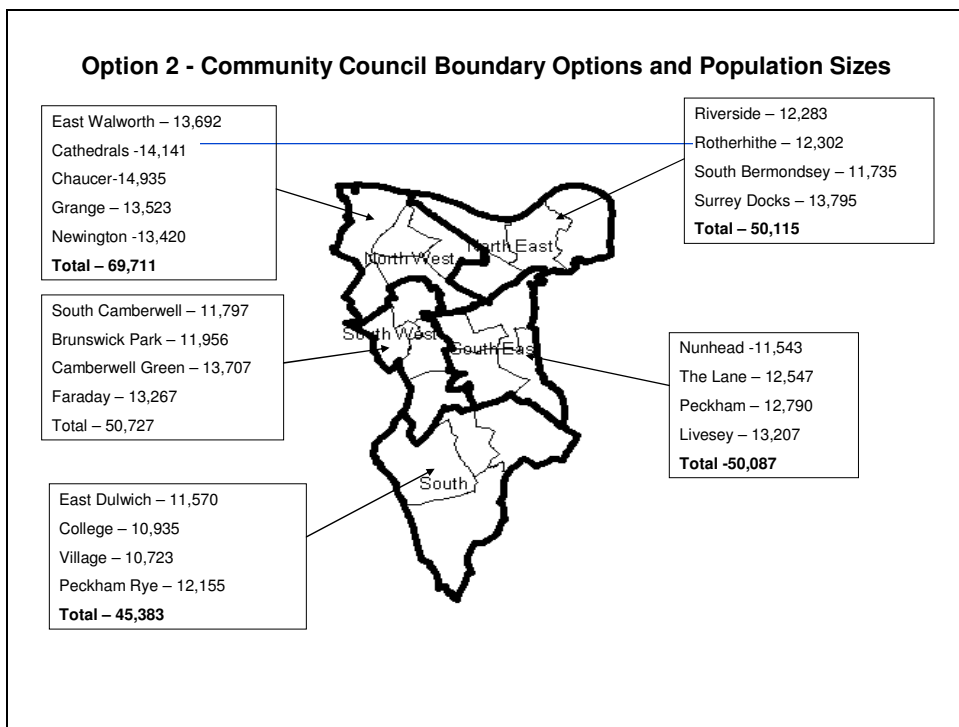
- 4.1. Changing community council boundaries to make areas larger was one of the options for making savings identified at the start of phase two. Four options for changing area boundaries - whilst maintaining rough parity of population size and the integrity of traditional neighbourhoods - were presented to the commission in May 2011. All four options have been included here.
- 4.2. The existing community council areas are shown below. There are eight community council areas, with each area containing between 2 - 3 wards. The exception is Peckham Community Council which covers just 1.5 wards.



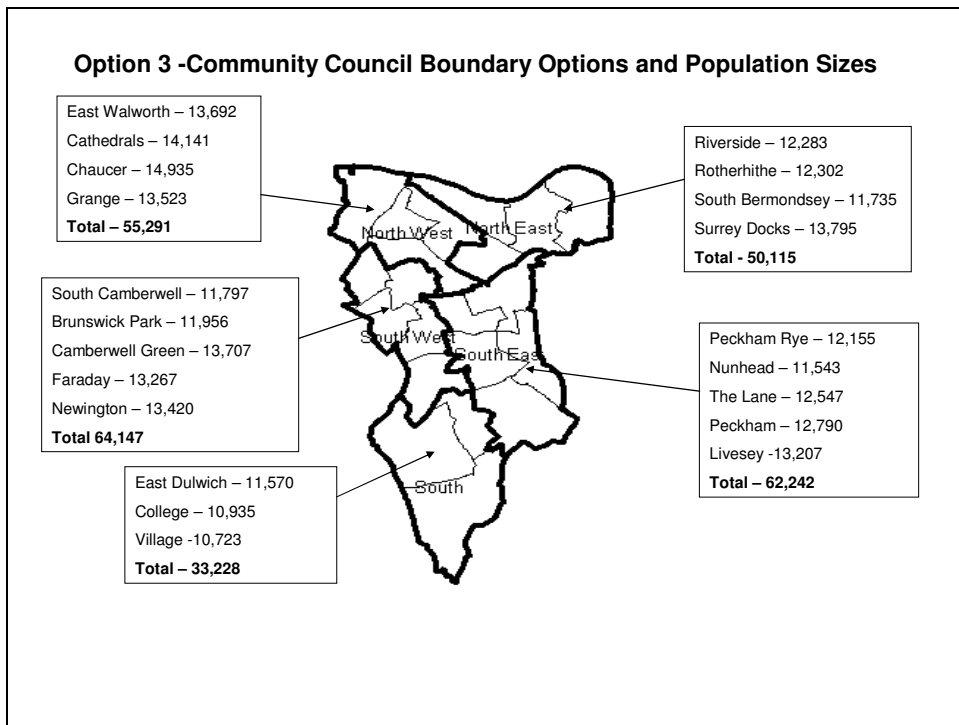
- 4.3. The options gave a detailed breakdown of what five community council areas could look like. In presenting the options, officers were wary of balancing population sizes to ensure they do not greatly vary from area to area whilst retaining the integrity of traditional neighbourhood boundaries.



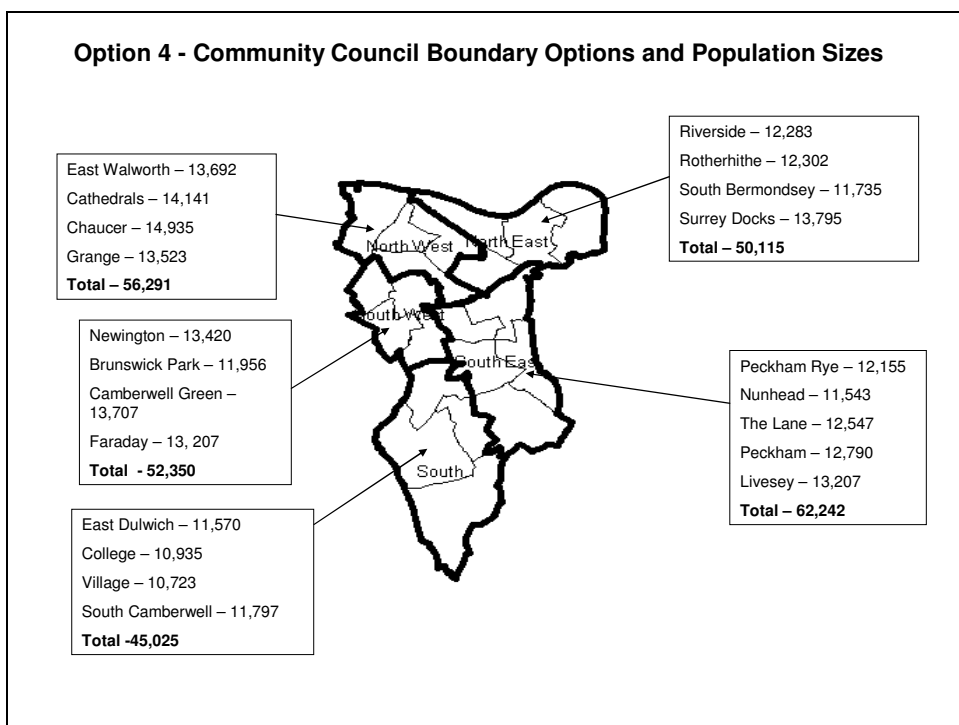
4.4. Although there is variation in terms of population size, the integrity of traditional neighbourhoods remains with this option.



4.5. With this option sizes of population are more evenly distributed. However the wards that make up the neighbourhood of Peckham are split between two different community council areas.



4.6. This third option distributes population even more and subsequently takes away from the traditional neighbourhoods of Walworth and Camberwell by amalgamating them.



4.7. This last option moves further towards a more balanced distribution of population sizes whilst impacting on the traditional boundaries of three community council areas - Walworth, Camberwell and Dulwich.

- 4.8. It was reported to the commission that any recommendation reducing the number of community council areas would lead to a subsequent reduction in the number of meetings and an opportunity to save costs. For example if the number of community council areas were to be reduced to five there would be 18 fewer main meetings and savings in terms of running costs (i.e. hire of public address equipment, printing of agendas, publicity leaflets) could be made.
- 4.9. No additional budget is required for the setting up of the new community council boundaries. A re-branding of community council areas will need to be met from the existing publicity and marketing budget.
- 4.10. The commission in November also considered a number of budget saving options based on six community council areas.
- 4.11. At the meeting of the commission held on 26 May 2011, members commented that some issues such as the regeneration of Elephant and Castle were currently dealt with by more than one community council.
- 4.12. The issue of split wards was also considered and Livesey was given as an example of how it was sometimes appropriate to split wards across different community council areas if this reflected the needs of residents and how those residents identified with their localities.
- 4.13. The commission held in September 2011 received a report on attendance at community councils. This showed areas of overlap of attendance between Bermondsey and Rotherhithe (20 people on average) and to a lesser extent between Peckham and Nunhead and Peckham Rye (three people on average).

Consultation

- 4.14. As previously mentioned, there was a fairly uniform response across the focus groups with regular and non-regular attendees that having larger areas was the least favoured way of reducing community council budgets. However, this was not the case in terms of the questionnaire responses, where people equally disliked the options of having larger areas and fewer meetings. It is worth noting, however that residents in some areas seem more willing than in others to consider merging with neighbouring community councils, particularly if this reflected the needs and/or identity of residents.

Conclusions

- 4.15. The commission considered the appropriate boundaries for community councils and noted the following key factors:
 - Strong evidence that the community councils are a valued means of engaging with local residents. However given the context of the significant reductions in the council's budget the current cost of over £1 million in operating the community councils is not sustainable.
 - Some evidence of crossovers in attendance between Bermondsey and Rotherhithe in particular and to a lesser extent Peckham and Nunhead & Peckham Rye.

- Some crossover in the issues that community councils consider for example both Borough & Bankside and Walworth discuss the Elephant & Castle regeneration as part of their regular agendas and Peckham and Nunhead & Peckham Rye consider issues around Peckham town centre.
- 4.16. The commission therefore proposed that to make the level of saving required that in future there should be five community councils, which each meet on five occasions per year. The boundaries of these should be as follows:
- Merge Bermondsey & Rotherhithe Community Councils
 - 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.

This creates a saving of £85,405.

- 4.17. The commission also considered the impact of changes on the criteria for allocating cleaner, greener, safer capital resources between community councils and asked officer to review this to ensure that it is proportionate to the size of community council areas.

BOUNDARIES AND NEIGHBOURHOODS

Recommendations

5. The commission recommends that to make the level of saving required that in future there be five community councils meeting on five occasions per year. The boundaries of these should be as follows:
- Merge Bermondsey & Rotherhithe Community Councils
 - 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

This creates a saving of £85,405.

6. That officers review the criteria for allocating cleaner, greener, safer capital resources between community councils to ensure that it is proportionate to the size of community council areas.
7. That it be noted reducing the number of community council areas would have significant implications for the formal decision-making role. It would also affect their consultative and engagement functions and necessitate a different approach to agendas.

5. PLANNING FUNCTIONS

- 5.1. Currently community councils take planning decisions where the development proposed involves the creation of fewer than 50 housing units or less than 3500m². Community councils deal with a wide breadth of planning applications including majors, minors, and others. However, the large majority of applications heard by community councils fall into the minors and other categories of applications. The community councils also have consultative roles in areas such as section 106 funding and conservation area adoption. Community councils are scheduled to meet on a monthly basis (excluding the August break) to consider planning matters.
- 5.2. Prior to the establishment of community councils in 2003, all of the decisions currently considered by community councils were considered under delegated authority by a senior development management officer.
- 5.3. The commission was presented with different options in relation to the planning function at community councils as follows:
- retain the planning function at community councils
 - delete the planning function at community councils
 - develop another planning decision making model.
- 5.4. The table below sets out the estimated financial impact of each of the options.

Table 5 – Planning options

Potential savings				Model A: Retain planning at community councils	Model B: Delete planning from community councils	Model C: One planning sub- committee	Model D: Two planning sub- committees
Security Services (Van hire etc)	£16,610	x	✓	✓	✓		
Hire of rooms/halls	£5,885	x	✓	✓	✓		
Legal Services for planning	£30,200	x	✓	Partially £25,670	Partially £19,932		
Printing and postage	£14,740	x	✓	Partially £12,300	Partially £9,951		
Staffing costs	£48,000	x	✓	✓	x		
Departmental support costs - planning	£71,000	x	✓	Partially £60,350	Partially £46,860		
Total Savings		£0	£186,435	£120,815	£92,238		

- 5.5. It was reported to the Democracy Commission that the potential savings that could be achieved by withdrawing planning decision making from community councils would make a significant contribution to the commission's savings target.
- 5.6. For the maximum savings to be realised the majority of decisions currently

taken by community council would need to be delegated to officers. This is the situation that existed prior to establishment of community councils in 2003. It was reported to the commission that a direct transfer of decisions from community councils to the main planning committee would not be feasible or practical because of the number of applications involved (approximately 192 additional applications a year). This would result in more frequent planning meetings which would have a significant cost implication, depending on how many more meetings would be required and the officer support required. The establishment of planning sub-committees would also impact on the savings which could be achieved.

- 5.7. The report presented to members outlined some of the advantages and difficulties in taking planning decisions at community council level:

Advantages:

- Taking the decision making process closer to local people
- Accountability of decisions by local councillors
- Providing for member discussions on applications to be in the local community.

Difficulties:

- Planning decisions at community council level can sometimes be difficult for members when faced with strong local opinion which may contradict planning policy
- As planning decisions are taken by a variety of committees planning policy is not always applied consistently
- Members are often faced with the decision as to whether to sit on the committee and take a decision or withdraw from a decision in order to represent the views of constituents, this can limit the ability of members to get involved in local campaigns on planning applications
- Scheduling community council planning meetings causes extra pressure on the council calendar due to the need to schedule meetings on a four week cycle
- A significant number of applications which are considered by community council planning meetings are 'out of date'; that is they are considered by community councils after the application expiry date and can be challenged for non-determination. Between June 2010 and May 2011 approximately 76% of applications were considered after the application expiry date.

- 5.8. In July 2011, the commission considered the impact of the Localism Bill and noted that the bill does not strengthen the position of area committees but empowers non-elected bodies such as neighbourhood forums. The report also noted the role of community councils in developing planning policy and suggested a more formal role in terms of strategic planning policy. Some community councils have been successfully involved in the development of area actions plan such as the Canada Water Area Action Plan and Aylesbury Area Action Plan. This consultative role is not defined in the constitution but this role could be developed giving community councils the opportunity to discuss planning policy issues and comment on the framework for how applications are determined in their local area.

- 5.9. As part of the discussion on how area committees are handled in other local authorities, members noted in May 2011 that some authorities have recently removed the planning function from their area committees and that Southwark was one of the few local authorities which still has delegated planning decisions at area committees.
- 5.10. Having considered the evidence submitted and the consultation, members expressed their support for retaining some planning function at member level which would mean there was still a degree of accountability. At the November meeting of the commission the meeting discussed the various planning models and in particular asked for further information on the implications for sub-committees for proportionality, membership and importance of all political groups being represented on sub-committees. There was concern at the level of applications considered by community councils which were over the application expiry date and that these could be challenged for non-determination.
- 5.11. Members considered the level of objections required for an application to be considered by a community council and suggested that the delegations and thresholds for decision be reviewed. This review should ensure that the necessary constitutional changes allow the commissions' preferred option of two sub-committees to achieve the required level of savings.
- 5.12. In addition to the sub-committee models reported to the commission (Table 5), the commission also considered other options, which could deliver varying degrees of savings - albeit not on the same level as delegating the planning functions to the relevant chief officer. Members of the commission discussed the possibility of introducing an area element to a sub-committee model for example east and west sub-committees or having a sub-committee of community council chairs. However the commission were advised by officers that introducing such arrangements would risk introducing a structure that would be more costly to administer and/or inefficient in that the meetings would not necessarily meet on the same frequency because of unequal workloads caused by a disproportionate number of applications in the different areas.
- 5.13. Council assembly would agree the overall arrangements for sub-committees as part of any necessary changes to the constitution. The individual planning sub-committees should be established by the main planning committee. Sub-committee memberships are required to be politically balanced, unless no member of the committee votes against a disproportionate allocation of places.

Consultation

- 5.14. Community council chairs and vice chairs were consulted on the planning function at community councils at their meeting in May 2011. Chairs and vice chairs commented on the importance of taking planning decisions at a local level, but raised concerns relating to the number of applications which were out of time when brought to the community councils and which could be appealed on the grounds of non-determination. It was suggested, at that meeting, that if planning is removed from community councils a commitment is made to return the function to the community councils if the budget allows in the future.
- 5.15. Participants in the general resident focus groups indicated that:
- Planning should be centralised

- Planning meetings should not be incorporated as 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.
- 5.16. A dedicated planning focus group was held in early September 2011 (see Appendix E for full detail on the feedback). It was recognised that residents who 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. Overall, it was felt that a number of things could be done to ensure better collaboration with communities around planning decision making. Focus group participants made it clear that taking planning away from community councils would not be well received without compensating actions to support community inputs into the planning process. Significantly, it was not felt that people were necessarily attached to decision making at community councils, but rather that they wanted a clear and well-planned process, transparent access to information, meaningful dialogue and the opportunity to input in advance. Maintaining the ability of local people to influence local planning decisions is seen as very important.

Conclusions

- 5.17. The evidence presented to the Democracy Commission suggests the following disadvantages to retaining planning decision making at community council level:
- Members are often faced with the decision as to whether to sit on the committee and take a decision or withdraw from a decision in order to represent the views of constituents; this can limit the ability of members to get involved in local campaigns on planning applications.
 - Scheduling community council planning meetings causes extra pressure on the council calendar due to the need to schedule meetings on a four week cycle.
 - A significant number of applications which are considered by community council planning meetings are 'out of date'; that is they are considered by community councils after the application expiry date and can be challenged for non-determination. Between June 2010 and May 2011 approximately 76% of applications were considered after the application expiry date.
- 5.18. The commission expressed its support for retaining some planning function at member level which would mean there was still a degree of accountability. Therefore the commission recommended the adoption of two planning sub-committees for minor applications (Model D). This leads to an overall saving of £92,238. In working up the detail of this proposal, the commission noted that officers will need to be mindful of the need to maintain the ability of local people to influence decision making.

PLANNING FUNCTIONS

Recommendations

8. The commission recommends the adoption of Model D in Table 5, remove the planning function from community councils and establish two sub-committees for minor applications, leading to an overall saving of £92,238.
9. That the commission recommends a strong consultative role for community councils to enable local people to influence local planning issues and, that if the budget allows in the future planning decisions are returned to community councils.
10. That in light of the involvement of some community councils in the development of area actions plan such as the Canada Water Area Action Plan and Aylesbury Area Action Plan, that the constitution includes a specific consultative role on planning policy.
11. That the constitutional steering panel be recommended to consider any necessary constitutional changes to delegations and thresholds to allow the commissions' preferred option to achieve the required level of savings.
12. That community councils be invited to consider whether each ward should appoint a lead member on planning as a way of strengthening the link between planning decision making and community councils.

6. ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT

- 6.1. The community councils have decision making powers in relation to environment and transport functions. Community councils take decisions on: cleaner, greener safer capital funding allocations, traffic management functions and highways and lighting capital schemes. Community councils also have an established consultation role in relation to transport and have been consulted on the transport plan and Transport for London (TfL) funding plans. Officers from the transport team regularly attend community councils from a consultative and decision making perspective. The decision making and consultative roles are set out in Appendix C.
- 6.2. The committee were advised that the street action team, which had a more frequent input in community council meetings, no longer existed so street audit reports were no longer brought to community council meetings. Officers from environment no longer attended community council meetings on a regular basis.
- 6.3. In July 2011, the commission were informed that cleaner, greener, safer was being reviewed by the cabinet member for transport, environment and recycling and that options for different models of devolved decision making were being put forward including:
- Providing grants – involving small sums of money with decision by either cabinet member, community council or ward member
 - Capacity building – working with communities and local groups
 - Engagement – e.g. public vote.
- 6.4. Members considered the option of devolving decision making to individual members at ward level. Some felt that the current system worked well at the moment and could not see a case to change the system unless sufficient reductions in costs could be made. Officers clarified that any such savings would not impact on the savings the Democracy Commission was seeking. The cabinet member attended the meeting of the commission in July 2011 when it considered environment and transport and sought the commission's views on how the community councils should administer cleaner, greener, safer allocations in the future.
- 6.5. Members of the commission were advised of the important role the community councils had played in the consultation process on the transport plan. The community councils had highlighted schemes of local importance before a final decision was taken by cabinet.
- 6.6. Officers requested that the commission review the transport decision making functions. An example given was local disabled parking bays which although approval of bays is reserved to community councils the allocation of places is actually based on a borough wide criteria.
- 6.7. Another area of decision making which would merit review was community councils involvement in controlled parking zone (CPZ) decisions in light of the recent changes to the constitution to make strategic transport and CPZ issues decisions reserved to the relevant cabinet member. Currently the same CPZ proposal could be considered at different stages by a community council on no less than three occasions: (1) to agree in principle the consultation plan on a

CPZ, (2) report back on consultation and (3) finally a report on final design of the scheme. Officers suggested that this could be reduced by officers producing a consultation plan and reverting back to members at the final design stage. In response to a question officers advised that consultation plans are rarely changed.

- 6.8. A similar approach on consultation policy could also be applied to traffic management orders.
- 6.9. The commission welcomed any proposals to rationalise decision making in the way proposed by officers.

Consultation

- 6.10. With regard to environment and transport issues, participants in the consultation were not necessarily aware of whether they were being consulted around a formal decision, or a part of a regular consultation process. However people did value having a say in relation to environment and transport issues that affect their areas.

Conclusions

- 6.11. Members expressed their support for a rationalisation of current decision making whilst noting that the consultative role on transport is valued in many community councils.

ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT

Recommendations

- 13. That local non-strategic traffic management functions are rationalised as outlined above e.g. where borough wide criteria exist, simplifying the number of decisions required, considering the final design proposals for CPZs, etc. It was noted that the consultation role in relation to transport policy and on the transport plan and Transport for London (TfL) funding plans be retained.
- 14. That it be recommended that specific clauses on the community fund and the proposed cleaner, greener, safer revenue programme be included in the constitution.
- 15. That the constitutional steering panel be recommended to consider any necessary constitutional changes.

7. ENGAGEMENT

- 7.1. At the August 2011 meeting, commission members were presented with a range of case studies demonstrating the way in which community councils have successfully engaged residents in local level decision-making, job fairs, community cohesion events and consultations on regeneration projects – among other things. 50% of the role of the Neighbourhood Team is to provide specific support on engagement at community councils.
- 7.2. The aim has been to make community councils, ‘more than a meeting’ through the use of such approaches as themed meetings, alternative venues, interactive voting, facilitated workshops and alternative times e.g. at weekends.
- 7.3. Although there has been no significant rise in the average attendance at community council meetings, the fact that such a large number continue to attend is of itself significant. Members of commission have been made aware of the strength of feeling from this cohort; although the commission has also received evidence that these meetings should not be overloaded with consultation requests and should try to remain focused on a specific theme or activity.
- 7.4. Members of the commission have indicated that they value community councils as a way to engage with residents. The use of themed meetings and alternating meeting venues and times are methods of increasing engagement that the commission have identified as proven.
- 7.5. The commission noted that the times and dates of meetings and the input of locally active people were important in increasing attendance at meetings.
- 7.6. In considering the areas for potential savings the commission looked at the current levels of engagement support. Officers have advised that making savings in this area would have some impact because there would not be dedicated officer resources available to support the current range of activities to make meetings more engaging e.g. themed activities, job fair, follow-up to meetings, supporting sub-groups, etc. Depending on the extent of any reduction this could also impact on the administrative support provided to run the community council fund. In making its recommendations, the commission decided not to reduce specific support to the community council fund; but did recommend reductions to the Neighbourhood Team’s budget as a result of the proposed changes to community council boundaries.

Consultation

- 7.7. The engagement role of community councils is clearly valued by residents and members. For many people who attend community councils, it is the chance to find out what is going on in their area and meet with local councillors that brings them to meetings. If meetings were solely devoted to decision making, without a focus on responding to issues of local interest, or basing them around popular themes, this may have an affect on attendance levels.

Conclusions

- 7.8. The commission noted that key principles of community engagement should be developed in context of the commission’s proposals.

- 7.9. In terms of the level of engagement support provided to community councils in the future, the commission identified a saving of £85,000. Overall this represents a reduction of 25% in the support provided by the Neighbourhood Team. The commission concluded that reducing the boundaries will reduce the impact of the consequent reductions in the Neighbourhoods Team by retaining dedicated support to each community council that would otherwise be unsustainable with the current structure of eight community councils.

ENGAGEMENT

Recommendations

16. That it be noted that delivering 'more than a meeting' requires significant officer resources and will therefore be affected by any reduction from the current level of resources. Furthermore, it was noted that meetings should not be solely devoted to decision making but provide a focus for responding to issues of local interest.
17. The commission noted that in terms of the level of engagement support provided to community councils in the future, reducing the boundaries will reduce the impact of the consequent reductions in the Neighbourhoods Team by retaining dedicated support to each community council. A savings of £85,000 is recommended. The commission noted that key principles of good community engagement should be developed in the context of the proposed arrangements for community councils.

8. CONSULTATION

- 8.1. The main aim of the consultation process was to hear from residents who attend and value community councils to ensure that their views were fed into the decision-making process. Over a four month period residents were invited to have their say, through the council website, at two rounds of community council meetings (June and September 2011), and through email networks.
- 8.2. The consultation methods used were:
- Focus groups (including people who do not attend community councils to ascertain barriers to getting involved)
 - Questionnaires
 - Presentations and interactive voting at community councils.
- 8.3. Workshops and focus groups were utilised to also gather the views of chairs and vice-chairs and officers who work on or with community councils.
- 8.4. As previously mentioned, the public consultation had a specific target audience – people who go to community councils – which is a relatively small section of the population of the borough. Despite the aforementioned efforts to enable broad engagement across this group, it is felt that the consultation process would have been enhanced if more residents across all community council areas had taken part.
- 8.5. Nevertheless, members of the commission have indicated that the input obtained from residents who have participated in the consultation is valued and appreciated, and provides some useful insights to inform the decision-making process.
- 8.6. The results at various stages of our qualitative research were presented to the commission at its August, September and November 2011 meetings.

Resident focus groups

- 8.7. To explore the community council review in detail with selected residents, four focus groups were held in July 2011. The borough was split between north and south and six regular attendees or one-off/irregular attendees were invited to each focus group to explore what improvements could be made to community councils, and how savings could best be made. The actual attendance figures for the focus groups are as follows:
- | | |
|---------------------------------|----------|
| • Regular attendees (south) | 6 people |
| • Regular attendees (north) | 4 people |
| • One-off/non-attendees (south) | 4 people |
| • One-off/non-attendees (north) | 1 person |
- 8.8. The full feedback report is included at Appendix E, but here are the points in summary:
- Several residents we consulted felt there should be greater flexibility and resident involvement in setting agendas

- Residents made some useful suggestions around improving how minutes are handled to make it clearer to residents how issues are being followed up
 - Many participants felt that the diversity within the community was not adequately reflected at community council meetings, and that this should be actively addressed
 - It was felt that there was room for improvement in terms of how meetings were chaired and that this would help reduce the length of meetings
 - There were a number of comments in relation to when and how meetings are held and the need to be more flexible. People wanted to be on a more equal footing with members, e.g. with more workshops and roundtable seating
 - People wanted more time devoted to public questions, and for these to potentially be earlier on in the meeting
 - There was a strong feeling that consultations should be handled better, with criticism of over-use of PowerPoint presentations, and the lack of feedback
 - Weekend or daytime meetings should be held from time to time to allow more people to attend.
- 8.9. In terms of savings, focus group participants understood the need to make savings, and on seeing the figures felt that savings could be reasonably made in terms of publicity and marketing budgets, venue and equipment hire and refreshments at meetings.
- 8.10. Residents at the focus groups felt strongly that having fewer meetings per year was the most preferred option for making a substantial contribution to the savings. Having larger community council areas was the least preferred option.

Questionnaires

- 8.11. Questionnaires were distributed at community council meetings in June and September 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. tenants and residents associations and other resident groups.
- 8.12. Having extended the timeframe for questionnaire responses following an initial disappointing response, 83 questionnaires were completed across all community council areas. Based on the average number of people who have attended community councils in 2011, this represents a response rate of nearly 20%¹.

¹ 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.

8.13. The main findings from the questionnaires can be summarised as follows:

- People value many different things about community councils, such as being able to discuss and influence the outcome of local issues, and find out about their local area
- The local nature of the issues and decisions for discussion is very important
- Approximately 60% of respondents think that community councils perform well across the three areas of:
 - decision making
 - engagement and participation
 - consultation
- About a quarter of respondents think that community councils are only average and around 10% of respondents think that community councils are poor, or very poor
- In terms of improvements to community councils, the main suggestions were:
 - Keep them as they are
 - Less items/keep to time
 - Fewer presentations
- In terms of reducing costs at community councils, respondents expressed most support for reducing venue and equipment costs and reducing activities
- Respondents least preferred the options of having fewer meetings and larger community council areas in equal measures – so there was no clear consensus around the areas for making substantial savings in terms of the questionnaires
- In terms of examples of how residents have influenced decisions at community councils, the cleaner, greener, safer and community council fund schemes were frequently cited. These were closely followed by being able to influence planning and traffic and transport decision making.

Feedback from September round of community councils

8.14. Chairs and vice-chairs of community councils were approached with regard to having an agenda slot at the September 2011 round of meetings to discuss the review of community councils. Three community councils – Walworth, Peckham and Nunhead & Peckham Rye (which actually took place in November), conducted interactive voting sessions which enabled residents to provide quantitative feedback that could contribute to the review. Here are the numbers of people voting in each location:

- Walworth 46 people voted
- Nunhead and Peckham Rye 26 people voted
- Peckham 29 people voted

8.15. Some community councils held brief question and answer sessions, which

mainly provoked questions around the review process, rather than feedback around improvements or savings. Other areas declined to have an agenda slot on the review. In such areas, residents were encouraged to fill in questionnaires so that their views could be captured elsewhere.

- 8.16. 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. However, across the three areas that did conduct interactive voting sessions, it is possible to say that:
- In terms of what people most value about community councils, finding out what is happening in their local area came out top
 - In terms of what people think needs most improving, both more community input to agendas and better feedback were most popular
 - In terms of preferred ways of making savings, having fewer meetings a year received the most votes.

Workshop with chairs and vice-chairs

- 8.17. At the workshop with chairs and vice-chairs of community councils, value was attached to community councils in relation to the decision making, consultation and engagement roles of community councils. It was felt that they were an effective way to empower communities.
- 8.18. Chairs felt that improvements could be made in terms of reaching out to a broader demographic of the local population and that themed meetings and workshops were popular and worked well.
- 8.19. There was a strong feeling that the way in which consultations are done needed to be improved, particularly in terms of use of PowerPoint presentations and improved public speaking skills.
- 8.20. Chairs and vice-chairs were willing to consider various options of making savings within their own specific area budgets e.g. in terms of refreshments, publicity, venue hire and equipment costs.

Consultation – predominant themes

- 8.21. There were some clear areas of agreement amongst residents, members and staff (who were also consulted):
- 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. Whilst most people were willing to accept savings around venue and equipment hire or publicity, there was little consensus about how substantive savings could be made. Although participants in the focus group clearly preferred having fewer meetings, this was not the case in terms of the questionnaires. It is therefore difficult to draw clear conclusions as to people's preferences for how significant savings can be made
- Restrict use of PowerPoint presentations – quality varies and not seen as engaging
- Need to attract a more representative group of local people to meetings – smarter publicity to bring in new audiences
- More notice in advance of meetings, and of issues to be discussed (e.g. consultations)
- Value of local knowledge in planning decisions.

Conclusions

8.22. The commission noted that the input obtained from residents who had participated in the consultation is valued and appreciated, and provided some useful insights in reaching its decisions. The commission recommended that the chairs and vice-chairs meeting should continue as forum for sharing best practice and considering updates. The commission decided to refer some of the ideas and suggestions that had come out of the consultation to the chairs and vice-chairs meeting to consider, with the caveat that any proposals could only be taken forward on either a no-cost or low cost basis.

CONSULTATION

Recommendations

18. That the commission notes that all of the following points have potential significant resource and logistical issues, which should be considered in the context of the overall approach taken to identifying savings.
19. That community council chairs and vice chairs quarterly meetings continue as a regular forum for sharing best practice and considering updates on forthcoming activities.
20. That community councils chairs and vice chairs are invited to consider ways to improve engagement of a more representative cross-section of people in their local area, subject to any proposals only being taken forward on either a no-cost or low cost basis. The following suggestions derive from the consultation and include:
 - more flexibility around meeting times e.g. weekend meetings
 - 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

CONSULTATION

Recommendations

- 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
- 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.

21. It is 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 of developing community capacity, through approaches such as community or participatory budgeting. These approaches align strongly with central government localism and neighbourhood-led agendas. The commission noted the recently announced cleaner, greener, safer revenue funding of £10,000 per ward which would be available for community councils to allocate from April 2012.

22. It was noted that residents value having on say on local issues, including consultations, but want a more structured process to ensure they are given transparent access to information, an appropriate timeframe to influence a decision and receive feedback.

23. It was recommended that officers explore improving feedback channels between the council and local people in relation to public questions or queries in relation to consultations or decisions. There would be some officer and associated development costs. One way to do this would be to an action point summary in the minutes of each meeting (also available online), covering the following:

- The issue or question raised by resident
- Who it has been sent to for a response and the timeframe
- What the response was
- Action that has been taken.

9. OTHER ISSUES

Sponsorship

- 9.1. The commission ruled out the viability of seeking sponsorship for community council meetings because of the lack of a corporate framework and legal issues. They also noted that it would not bring significant savings.
- 9.2. The commission requested that the Justgiving model of match-funding of public contributions to charitable organisations be given further consideration when a corporate framework for sponsorship is in place.

PA system

- 9.3. The commission received a report on the budget allocated to the cost of the public address (PA) systems used at main community council and occasional local planning committee meetings. The commission was advised that in 2010/11 there was a budget under spend of approximately £9,000 in this area. This sum is available as a contribution to the savings target and included in the budget section of this report (see Table 4). An information gathering exercise was conducted by officers to check the competitiveness of the current provider and members considered this information in closed session. Members agreed that the most cost effective approach was to continue hiring a system rather than purchasing one and requested that further work be carried out by officers to see if additional savings could be made through a procurement exercise, whilst maintaining the standard of sound at meetings.

Conclusion

- 9.4. The commission agreed to recommend the proposals set out below.

OTHER ISSUES

Recommendations

Sponsorship

24. That the commission recommends that options be explored around maximising the use of volunteers to assist with relevant support roles at community councils, e.g. registration and the utilisation of free venues where possible.
25. That the Justgiving model of corporate match-funding of public contributions to charitable organisations be given further consideration when a corporate framework for sponsorship is in place.

PA system

26. That the commission notes the saving of £9,000 for PA systems and request that officers carry out further investigations to see if additional savings can be made.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

ROLE AND PURPOSE OF COMMUNITY COUNCILS

1. That it noted that the commission considered the decision making and engagement roles of community councils in reaching its conclusions on the identification of savings, and the ways in which community councils can be developed in the future.
2. That it be noted that the paper on area committees across other boroughs which was presented at the September 2011 meeting confirmed a strong trend away from devolved decision-making at a local level and movement towards local or ward-based engagement and consultation on local issues and devolved budgets.

BUDGET AND RESOURCES ISSUES

3. That the commission recommends that the appointment of local education authority school governors to the governing bodies of nursery and primary schools be removed from community councils. These decisions should be taken at chief officer level to reduce administration and deliver a saving of £10,895.
4. That the remaining general savings of £70,632 set out in Table 4 be recommended as a contribution to the savings target. The commission looked first at ways of reducing these administrative costs and felt that these would have minimal impact however the scale of the reductions in the councils funding left little choice other than more radical changes to the structure of community councils.

BOUNDARIES AND NEIGHBOURHOODS

5. The commission recommends that to make the level of saving required that in future there be five community councils, meeting on five occasions per year. The boundaries of these should be as follows:
 - Merge Bermondsey & Rotherhithe Community Councils
 - 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

This creates a saving of £85,405.

6. That officers review the criteria for allocating cleaner, greener, safer capital resources between community councils to ensure that it is proportionate to the size of community council areas.
7. That it be noted reducing the number of community council areas would have significant implications for the formal decision-making role. It would also affect their consultative and engagement functions and necessitate a different approach to agendas.

PLANNING FUNCTIONS

8. The commission recommends the adoption of Model D in Table 5, remove the planning function from community councils and establish two sub-committees for minor applications, leading to an overall saving of £92,238.
9. That the commission recommends a strong consultative role for community councils to enable local people to influence local planning issues and, that if the budget allows in the future planning decisions are returned to community councils.
10. That in light of the involvement of some community councils in the development of area actions plan such as the Canada Water Area Action Plan and Aylesbury Area Action Plan, that the constitution includes a specific consultative role on planning policy.
11. That the constitutional steering panel be recommended to consider any necessary constitutional changes to delegations and thresholds to allow the commissions' preferred option to achieve the required level of savings.
12. That community councils be invited to consider whether each ward should appoint a lead member on planning as a way of strengthening the link between planning decision-making and community councils.

ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT

13. That local non-strategic traffic management functions are rationalised as outlined above e.g. where borough wide criteria exist, simplifying the number of decisions required, considering the final design proposals for CPZs, etc. It was noted that the consultation role in relation to transport policy and on the transport plan and Transport for London (TfL) funding plans be retained.
14. That it be recommended that specific clauses on the community fund and the proposed cleaner, greener, safer revenue programme be included in the constitution.
15. That the constitutional steering panel be recommended to consider any necessary constitutional changes.

ENGAGEMENT

16. That it be noted that delivering 'more than a meeting' requires significant officer resources and will therefore be affected by any reduction from the current level of resources. Furthermore, it was noted that meetings should not be solely devoted to decision making but provide a focus for responding to issues of local interest.
17. The commission noted that in terms of the level of engagement support provided to community councils in the future, reducing the boundaries will reduce the impact of the consequent reductions in the Neighbourhoods Team by retaining dedicated support to each community council. A savings of £85,000 is recommended. The commission noted that key principles of good community engagement should be developed in the context of the proposed arrangements for community councils.

CONSULTATION

18. That the commission notes that all of the following points have potential significant resource and logistical issues, which should be considered in the context of the overall approach taken to identifying savings.
19. That community council chairs and vice chairs quarterly meetings continue as a regular forum for sharing best practice and considering updates on forthcoming activities.
20. That community councils chairs and vice chairs are invited to consider ways to improve engagement of a more representative cross-section of people in their local area, subject to any proposals only being taken forward on either a no-cost or low cost basis. The following suggestions derive from the consultation and include:
 - more flexibility around meeting times e.g. weekend meetings
 - 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
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 - 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
 - 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.
21. It is 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 of developing community capacity, through approaches such as community or participatory budgeting. These approaches align strongly with central government localism and neighbourhood-led agendas. The commission noted the recently announced cleaner, greener, safer revenue funding of £10,000 per ward which would be available for community councils to allocate from April 2012.
22. It was noted that residents value having on say on local issues, including consultations, but want a more structured process to ensure they are given transparent access to information, an appropriate timeframe to influence a decision and receive feedback.
23. It was recommended that officers explore improving feedback channels between the council and local people in relation to public questions or queries in relation to consultations or decisions. There would be some officer and associated development costs. One way to do this would be to an action point summary in the minutes of each meeting (also available online), covering the following:

- The issue or question raised by resident
- Who it has been sent to for a response and the timeframe
- What the response was
- Action that has been taken.

OTHER ISSUES

Sponsorship

24. That the commission recommends that options be explored around maximising the use of volunteers to assist with relevant support roles at community councils, e.g. registration and the utilisation of free venues where possible.
25. That the Justgiving model of corporate match-funding of public contributions to charitable organisations be given further consideration when a corporate framework for sponsorship is in place.

PA system

26. That the commission notes the saving of £9,000 for PA systems and request that officers carry out further investigations to see if additional savings can be made.

Summary of savings

Saving	£
School governors appointment	10,895
General savings	70,632
Boundaries and frequency of meetings	85,405
Planning options	92,238
Engagement support	85,000
Total:	344,170

APPENDICES

Appendix A – Terms of Reference and Membership

Appendix B – Democracy Commission Work Programme

Appendix C – Role and Function of Community Councils - Extract from the Constitution

Appendix D – Community council budgets

Appendix E – Feedback from consultation

Appendix F – Planning options

Appendix G – Submission from Councillor Michael Mitchell