

MINUTES OF THE LOCAL DEMOCRACY WORKING GROUP

Wednesday, 23 September 2020 at 7.30 pm

PRESENT: Councillors Kevin Bonavia, Chris Best, Patrick Codd, Sophie Davis, Colin Elliott and Silvana Kelleher

ALSO PRESENT: Councillor Bill Brown

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Juliet Campbell

1. Minutes Of The Meeting Held On 12 February 2020

RESOLVED: The minutes of the last meeting were agreed as a true record.

2. Declarations Of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Delivering The Recommendations Of The Local Democracy Review - Current Position & Next Steps

Rosalind Jeffrey (Principal Officer – Policy, Service Design & Analysis) introduced the report and the key points to note:

- The 57 recommendations made by the Local Democracy Review were grouped into eight ‘thematic areas’ (within the three overarching themes of the review) with a member of the working group acting as LDWG Champion for each area, supported by officers
- Key achievements for each theme included:
 - *Openness and transparency* – a detailed report outlining options for the development of a Council-wide open data approach, the introduction of webcasting for Council meetings and a new template and guidance for all Council reports
 - *Public involvement in decisions* – improvements to the Council’s consultation processes, a review of different engagement models (including People’s Panels and Citizens’ Assemblies) and an Appreciative Inquiry with voluntary organisations to better understand needs of seldom-heard residents and groups
 - *Effective decision-making* – an interim report outlining options to improve the quality of decision-making in Planning, a detailed review of the Council’s scrutiny functions and changing the title of Chair of Council to Speaker
- The final LDWG meeting was scheduled for March 2020, but was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the LDWG has now been extended in order to complete its outstanding work and review the impact of COVID-19 on the three overarching themes of the review

The following was noted in discussion:

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Council services have been delivered virtually, but it is important to recognise that not all residents are online – affordability is an issue and many people are dependent on free internet access (e.g. in libraries)
- Building on the new report template, there is an opportunity to explore different ways of providing information (e.g. providing digests of committee reports/Council decisions in Lewisham Life)
- The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the delivery of the LDR's place-based recommendations. The online Commonplace platform has been used as a place-focused consultation tool by a number of Council services, but it needs to be part of a wider approach to virtual engagement
- The local response to the pandemic has presented opportunities for the Council to work with voluntary and community organisations in a different way – this will be key to the next phase of the seldom-heard voices work

RESOLVED: Members of the LDWG noted the work undertaken to deliver the review's recommendations (until March 2020) and the current status of each recommendation. They agreed the proposed next steps for the LDWG between October 2020 and January 2021 and also provided guidance in relation to the various areas of activity (including the completion of outstanding work and the review of COVID-19's impact on the three overarching themes of the review).

4. Theme 1: Openness & Transparency

4A) Improving Online Communications (Recommendations #6 & #8)

Rosalind Jeffrey (Principal Officer – Policy, Service Design & Analysis) introduced the report and the key points to note:

- A number of improvements have been made to the Council's online communications offer, specifically in relation to email marketing, social media and the Council website:
 - Email marketing – the introduction of targeted Lewisham Life e-newsletters and alerts and the greater use of one off single issue emails
 - Social media – the introduction of LinkedIn, the development of online videos to promote events and the use of social media advertising for high priority campaigns
 - Council website – a major refresh of the council's website in spring 2019, alongside the development of a 'find my nearest services' citizen portal and the increased use of mapping tools

The following was noted in discussion:

- Council communications (internal and external) have improved recently, but further work is required around the Council website (including the review of all website content to ensure it meets accessibility standards)
- More widely, there is a need to communicate and engage with residents 'where they are' – potential opportunities for doing this include the use of

noticeboards in key locations across the borough, the use of local apps (such as 'Next Door') and more creative approaches to social media (e.g. mapping ward-based Facebook pages)

- The COVID-19 pandemic has also meant that the community leadership role of councillors has become even more important, with councillors supporting local communities 'on the ground'

RESOLVED: Members of the LDWG noted the work undertaken until March 2020 to improve the Council's online communications offer (including email marketing, social media and the Council website). They agreed that further work to deliver the recommendations related to online communications should be taken forward by officers, with oversight from the LDWG.

5. Theme 2: Public Involvement In Decisions

5A) Effective Engagement: Young People & Older People (Recommendations #7, #15, #40 & #41)

Rosalind Jeffrey (Principal Officer – Policy, Service Design & Analysis) introduced the report and the key points to note:

- The work undertaken to ensure the Council engages effectively with older people and young people covered four key areas:
 - A review of the Council's current approach to online communications with young people (which is focused on general rather than service-specific engagement)
 - An online survey of young people to better understand their needs (developed with the Young Mayor's Team)
 - The piloting of Councillor Question Time sessions in schools (to give young people a better understanding the role of councillors in local democracy and how local decision-making processes operate)
 - The mapping of current mechanisms for engaging with older people (to ensure that officers have an understanding of all the different ways in which it is possible to communicate and engage with older people)

The following was noted in discussion:

- The learning from the online survey of young people should be shared with the Council's Communications service, but there is also a need to gather insights and ideas from young people on an ongoing basis
- Some members of the LDWG took part in the pilot Councillor Question Time sessions and considered them to be an effective way of engaging with young people – the learning from these pilot sessions should be used to further develop the approach

RESOLVED: Members of the LDWG noted the contents of the report and agreed that:

- The School Councillor Question Time programme should be rolled-out across all schools

- The 'Methods for Engagement With Older People Guide' (Appendices A & B) should be appended to the Corporate Engagement Guidance
- The proposed approach for updating and maintaining the 'Methods For Engagement With Older People Guide' should be adopted

LDWG members confirmed that the above activities should be taken forward by officers, with oversight from the LDWG. They also requested that learning and insights regarding younger people gathered as part of the work be shared formally with the Council's Communications service in order to inform future communication and engagement activity.

6. Theme 3: Effective Decision-Making

6A) Delivering The Recommendations Of The Barriers To Politics Review (Recommendation #46)

Rosalind Jeffrey (Principal Officer – Policy, Service Design & Analysis) introduced the report and the key points to note:

- In April 2019, it was agreed that the 31 recommendations made by the Barriers To Politics Working Group should become part of the ongoing responsibilities of the LDWG as there was significant crossover with the Local Democracy Review's recommendations, particularly in relation to councillor roles and responsibilities
- The Barriers To Politics recommendations were mapped against the eight thematic areas and included in the oversight responsibilities of the relevant LDWG Champion. Appendix A of the report sets out in detail how each of these recommendations have been delivered to date

The following was noted in discussion:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on councillors, particularly in terms of an increase in casework
- It is important that prospective councillors are fully aware of what the role involves – the member role profiles provide key information about different positions available to them once they have been elected (as well as providing information for officers and residents), but the Council should consider what additional information might be useful
- Similarly, the Council should publicise the support available to councillors (e.g. allowances) more effectively in order to encourage a broader range of residents to consider becoming councillors

RESOLVED: Members of the LDWG noted the delivery of the recommendations made by the Barriers To Politics Working Group and agreed that any further work required (including the wider dissemination of information about councillor roles and responsibilities) be taken forward by officers, with oversight from the LDWG.

6B) Update On Proposals To Introduce Hybrid (Public) Committee Meetings

Suki Binjal (Director of Law, Governance & HR) introduced the report and the key points to note:

- The report sets out a proposal to introduce hybrid committee meetings in March 2021 and recommends that further work to develop this proposal is overseen by the LDWG
- The changes made to the regulations relating to Council meetings which allow virtual meetings to take place are only temporary (until May 2021), but local authorities are lobbying central government for an extension and/or permanent change

The following was noted in discussion:

- Hybrid committee meetings will need to be introduced in a careful and measured way – it is vital that IT systems used for meetings are effective and secure, the technology can support the requirements of different committees (e.g. multiple presentations at Planning committees) and the buildings are COVID-safe (for as long as social distancing rules are in place)
- Virtual and hybrid committee meetings have potentially significant benefits for residents (e.g. allowing people who are not able to attend an evening meeting in a physical location to participate in local democracy) and councillors (e.g. providing them with the ability to manage the various commitments of their role more effectively)
- There is an opportunity to extend the virtual/hybrid meetings approach to councillor surgeries – this has been trialled by some councillors during the COVID-19 pandemic, so evidence/insights should be gathered about their experiences to inform any future work

RESOLVED: Members of the LDWG noted the contents of the report and agreed that the LDWG should oversee the Council's move to hybrid meetings from March 2021 as part of its continued work programme. They requested that that a report be presented to the next formal meeting in December 2020 outlining the timetable and resource implications.