| | Information | ☐ |
|---|---|---|
| | Action | ■ |
| | Consultation | ■ |

**Local Democracy Review**
**Chair of Council Submission**

20 December 2018

## Introduction

The Chair of Council has extensive experience of public participation and council decision making in both her current role at full council, but also as a ward councillor and community leader of many years standing. To inform her submission, the Chair has spoken to peers from across London in recent months to gain insight as to how other councils approach public participation in decision making meetings. As a result of her experiences, and the insight from her discussions with mayors, lead members and speakers from across London; the Chair has a number of suggestions she wishes to make for the working group to consider when agreeing its recommendations for change or further consideration.

## Council meetings

The Chair feels there are some practical limitations to public engagement at council meetings currently that the review should look to address where possible. The Chair has the following suggestions for the working group to consider:

Public questions at Full Council
The Chair feels that given the limitation of the design of the Council Chamber, the entire PA system should be refreshed and improved with a better sound system and microphones so everyone in the chamber and gallery can clearly hear everything that is said. A static microphone(s) stand should be in place in the public gallery as the current "roaming" mic is intermittent and having to be passed around members of the public can lead to frustration, confusion and wasted time.

The process for managing supplementary public questions should be improved as, with the current process and microphone issues, there are often frustrations, confusions and delays as to who wishes to speak, whose "turn" it is, how long people take to ask a question/make a point and time running out for supplementary questions. The Chair suggests that an alternative process is introduced to attempt to better manage contributions and expectations of those wishing to ask a supplementary question to that which they asked in advance. The Chair suggests that the alternative process should require those wishing to ask a supplementary question to register before the start of the meeting, and be given a number perhaps, and the Chair then be given a list in advance of who wishes to speak, so that there is clarity for all at the start of the meeting of the number of people wishing to speak, the order of speakers and the time available for all/each person with people then able to come to the static microphone in order.

## Public Speeches at Full Council

When asking supplementary questions, members of the public are told they can't make a speech. The Chair would like to suggest that in line with some other boroughs, in addition to the public question process with the amendments suggested above; the Council also consider introducing a mechanism to allow public speeches at Full Council.

The Chair suggests the working group consider introducing a ballot for making a 3 minute speech to full council on a topic the member of the public wishes to address the Council about (to be specified in the application). The Chair suggests that through the ballot process, one man and one woman are selected in advance of each Council meeting to be invited to make a speech, the subject matter of which must be relevant, appropriate and in line with the usual rules around not inciting hatred etc. People could enter the ballot as many times as they like on as many topics as they like, but to ensure a range of voices are heard, each person can only make a speech to council once each municipal year.

This would enable people to address the Council publicly on a topic they are passionate about without the requirement of raising a petition first, opening up another channel through which members of the public can engage with Council meetings and share their views on issues that matter to them with the Council.

## Right to speak at all Council meetings

In addition to Full Council meetings, there are a number of other Council meetings held in public which have a range of responsibilities. All are meetings held in public, not public meetings, at which members of the public are permitted to speak at the discretion of the Chair. Whilst there are currently varying levels of public attendance and engagement with the various meetings that take place, and in practice Chairs always permit requests from the public to address the Committee if received; the Chair of Council feels that more could be done to promote and enable appropriate participation in those meetings where public participation is not already enshrined in Law (Planning and Licensing) and therefore governed by separate processes.

Therefore the Chair suggests that consideration be given to introducing a period of time at the start of every appropriate committee agenda (say up to half an hour) for members of the public who wish to address the committee on any (open) item on the agenda. This would require a clear process and management by the Chair, however members of the public could then address the Committee about any item on the agenda, and raise any points they would like to bring to the committees attention before it considers the item on which it is taking a decision/reviewing to take a view on as part of pre-decision scrutiny. This practice change, if ably managed, communicated and promoted, could enable the council to go further in its aims of openness and transparency and public participation in decision making. It would facilitate the smooth running of meetings, ensure all voices are heard initially rather than be determined by the length of the agenda and who is able to stay till the end of the meeting. It could also assist in preventing interjections and frustrations boiling over on contentious issues.

## Chair to Speaker

The Chair also suggests that the title of "Chair of Council" is changed to "Speaker" to better reflect the role in a way that is in line with national political structures in the Houses of Parliament, and also in line the political structure of Lewisham Council. The Chair's role in Lewisham undertakes the civic and dignitary role often assigned to Mayors in other authorities that do not have a directly elected Mayor: changing the name of the role to Speaker would prevent some of the confusion that can arise and be clear about the different role of a Speaker to a Mayor/Leader.

## Local assemblies

The Chair feels that the working group should review the purpose, aims, structure and benefits of the Local Assembly programme. It is an important vehicle for local engagement, however some considered scrutiny as to how it works overall and how it is currently working in each ward would be timely. A lot of flexibility has been shown in developing the approach in each ward, but because of this there isn't a clear "Lewisham structure" to be tweaked for each ward with clear guidance as to the aim and purpose of the programme, which was originally the democratic redistribution of money decided on by local people for the benefit of the wider community within the ward. For example, in Bellingham Ward, the local assembly fund works well in providing small grants to fund small projects for the benefit of the community, often enabling events aiming to bring people together to happen by the provision of some seed-funding/pump-priming for a range of events to benefit a range of residents such as older peoples Christmas lunches, gospel choirs, community events – the same is not true in all other wards. Local groups and organisations are often best placed to understand and meet local needs, and the support of the local assembly fund can help them get going and bring in further sponsorship to events and activities they want to deliver.

The Chair feels that more guidance and uniformity about the purpose of Local assemblies should be developed, along with guidance ensuring that the funding available is used in line with the strategic priorities of the Council, with a clear expectation of bids showing a clear wider benefit to the local community. The Chair feels there should be a refreshed focus on community benefit, social cohesion, tackling exclusion, loneliness and the impact of poverty, ensuring that the local assemblies programme and funding decisions do not inadvertently lead to polarisation.  More should also be done to widen participation so that more local assemblies better reflect the local social economic and demographic profile of the area in terms of both attendance and involvement and projects supported.

And finally, the Mayors Question Time is a great initiative and seems to attract more people, and more younger people, to local assemblies both of which are to be welcomed. This should be continued/extended/formalised as the working group think appropriate.

## Engaging with people appropriately: ensuring all voices are heard

The Peoples Parliament is run by Speaking Up Lewisham and the Chair attended a recent parliament and witnessed a panel discussion where discussion was in part around engaging with local councillors and understanding council decision making. It is clear to the Chair from this and other interactions over the years, that the council's ability to communicate effectively with people with learning disabilities to inform and involve them, and also to understand and take account of their views is limited and could and should be improved. This is particularly relevant given the proportion of the council's budget that is spent on

both children's and adult social care, and the ongoing financial challenges the council faces necessitating further cuts which may well directly impact on many people with learning disabilities.

The Chair would like to suggest that a different, more appropriate approach is developed to effectively engaging and involving people with learning disabilities. The council and councillors need to ensure that people with learning disabilities feel that they are given adequate and appropriate information about decisions that might affect them, and opportunities to share their opinions and to be heard.  The Chair is keen to work with the working group to test out a method of the council and councillors engaging with people with learning disabilities, building on the peoples parliament, where people can express their concerns about things that affect them, and engage with the Council and its councillors and be heard in a way that facilitates everyone's understanding and everyone's voice being heard.

## Engagement with Councillors

And finally, the Chair notes that it feels like some local people have lost the feeling that a local councillor is a local "person down the street" who takes up an issue for them with the council. Councillors are increasingly viewed as a "removed part" of a formal political process that local people are excluded from.

Changing the structure of all meetings as suggested to better facilitate direct public engagement should help in part to address this, however fundamentally all councillors individually and collectively should be proactive at engaging directly with those they represent at places and events that local people are already using (schools, community centres etc) rather than waiting for people to seek them out at a surgery once or twice a month, so that all local councillors are visible, approachable and familiar members of the local community to local people. Notably some councillors do this routinely and have built strong relationships with local organisations and schools so that they are familiar and trusted members of the local community and people feel comfortable engaging with them routinely, but the Chair feels that further clear guidance and expectations of councillors should be developed by the Council that includes making themselves available for regular and routine engagement with local people in times and places that suit local people, to further address the perceived barriers that exist in relation to engaging with local councillors and understanding what their role is and how it forms part of decision making at the Council.

This shift in approach should help with some of the re-engagement that is needed between councillors and local communities and give more opportunities for people to feel that they are heard and their local councillors actively want to hear their views on what matters to them, when it matters to them.