



CO-OPERATIVE COUNCIL COMMISSION

Thursday 29th July 2010

MINUTES

PRESENT: **Commission Members:** Cllr Steve Reed (Chair), Cllr Jackie Meldrum, Cllr Paul McGlone, Martin Green, Matthew Taylor

Officers: Sophia Looney, Mike Wiltshire, Thomas Man, Mark Picksley, Ofordi Nabokei and Joanne Tutt

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1 INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES

The Chair of the commission welcomed everyone to the meeting. He explained that following a brief presentation, residents would be invited to comment or ask questions about the proposals for a Co-operative Council. The feedback provided to the commission would be used to create a report that would be presented to Cabinet in December. This report would set out recommendations as to how Lambeth could become a co-operative council.

2 PRESENTATION

The Chair explained that the idea of the Co-operative Council was being undertaken in the context of the Council facing cuts of between 25% to 40%.

Experience has shown that providing more power and choice to citizens results in improved services. Examples of projects which used co-operative approaches in Lambeth include: The X-it Programme, The Weir Link community run children's centre and the Community Freshview regeneration scheme. The Council is eager to pursue

working with residents much further in order to provide cost effective, higher quality public services.

The Chair was keen to point out that the Co-operative Council work is not about trying to cut vital services and that using co-operative approaches would not be appropriate for every service.

Currently the proposals in the Co-operative Council White Paper are being reviewed by the Co-operative Council Citizens' Commission. Currently the Commission is taking evidence from a range of stakeholders in the borough. To support the Co-operative Council programme the council will begin a number of pilot projects by January 2011. These pilots will deliver some services using different co-operative approaches. The aim of these pilots will be to find out which co-operative approaches works for certain services, before rolling the scheme out across services in the borough.

3 DISCUSSION

The Chair opened the session up to questions and comments from those attending the meeting. Most of the speaker generally welcomed the proposals but had a number of questions and queries which they wanted to explore or the Commission to consider.

The example of PCTs handing commissioning over to GPs was cited as an example of the largest upcoming co-operative arrangement. It was noted that it is not yet known how the co-operative council will be organised but that it should look at improving its commissioning capabilities. The importance of correct auditing was also emphasised.

Another example put to the Commission members was the co-operative work already undertaken in the housing sector with residents. It was suggested the Council should look at the successes, resourcing and problems of organisations such as TMOs as models for learning.

Whilst one stakeholder welcomed the proposal as a timely idea, they noted that best results would be achieved if the scheme was undertaken at an appropriate pace. Pilot projects were welcomed as a good method of developing the scheme.

It was also noted there should be a sense that the Co-operative Council belongs to the community who are involved in it.

The commissioners were in agreement that lessons should be learned from relevant projects already being undertaken and that a critical mass is needed to ensure success.

Further detail was requested about which service areas the Council intends to include in the scheme. The Chair responded that the consultation is being held to feed into that decision making process.

The Council cannot impose a co-operative model from the top down and it will be offering estates a range of options.

One resident voiced to commissioners the perspective that paying taxes is already a form of co-operating with the Council. They therefore welcomed the opportunity to have an input into how that money is spent, although noted planned government cuts are regrettable.

Concern was expressed over ensuring genuine consultation with everyone who lives and works in the borough. It is also important to ensure there is an appropriate culture within the co-op and that the council is a strong leader.

It was emphasised by a resident that the Council needs to be both listening to its residents and acting on the information it receives. To do this the Council needs to be genuinely co-operative and empower its communities. It was noted this is particularly important in terms of community care.

The question was asked of how the council is going to consult with the wider community, particular where language barriers are an issue. It was noted that some residents regularly attend council meetings but most people are not engaging with the council. The council needs to ensure it is hearing from a broader base of opinions. It was asked if the council needs to be holding different meetings to attract more representative feedback.

The issue of the commissioning of council services was also raised as it was felt the process is very lengthy. It was noted the council should not just consult with the leaders of communities but go to the 'grass roots'.

Concerns were expressed with regard to the co-operative proposals, in the context of the number of cuts in finances proposed. It was pointed out that there are already numerous problems in relation to housing, which will be exacerbated by cuts.

It was noted people are being asked to make personal sacrifices at a time of dwindling resources. It is important to ensure those who are most disadvantaged are not overlooked.

One contributor made reference to the fact that 70 per cent of the savings made through the scheme would be returned to central government while 30 per cent would be retained within the local area. It was felt to be unfair that the local residents should only receive a 30% local return on the work they were being asked to undertake.

Councillor Meldrum noted the complexity of the proposals being explored. She commented that undertaking such a large cultural change would need time, to progress and find out, through pilot

schemes, what worked. She acknowledged the difficulties of capacity building, particularly when less funding is available. Although the proposals are partly a response to the current financial climate, which the council needs to adapt to. It was also acknowledged that some officers don't work well with the community and this is part of the cultural change needed.

Martin Green noted the proposals are not about political imperatives and explained we need to look at how the infrastructure enables the community.

Councillor McGlone added that the council is a complex organisation that needs to reconcile competing demands. He was keen to note that the council is looking to a more ethical model of achieving outcomes than the 'Big Society' idea.

The Chair also pointed out that there is a need for a relationship of equals between the council and the community. He noted that this is a values driven process and welcomed the points made about ensuring wide consultation. In order to try and do this the council is holding a series of public meetings, themed consultations and road shows in local communities. Groups of service users are being put together for feedback sessions and meetings are also being held in particular neighbourhoods. In addition the council will hold deliberative events, as the commission reports its findings and will be testing out what emerges, from the pilots. He pointed out that the idea of the co-operative council is not about rolling back the state, but about building support that allows communities to have some control over their services.

The next question to come from the floor related to if this will work on a regional basis, as they felt working on a small scale produced positive outcomes. The example of the Fenstanton site was quoted and the council were requested to be open to all ideas rather than focussing on their preferred options.

Some concern was expressed over the statement made on page 19 of the consultation document that "Lambeth will help you resolve the problems life throws at you". It was pointed out to commissioners that this is a wide statement and a difficult commitment to make in the context of current funding cuts. It was asked if this would include a commitment to tackle the inequalities and disadvantages experienced by older members of the community. There was also a request for the authority to help communities to influence central government policy.

It was noted that much of the work proposed in the white paper is already being undertaken by communities, but the council may lack an awareness of activities they are not funding. The council should be aware of the resources the borough already has.

Another contributor to the debate wished to challenge the notion that small scale co-operatives worked best, noting that most of the small scale co-operatives in Lambeth had gone. It was noted co-operatives needed financial and managerial capacity for growth, in order to have the resources to develop.

Matthew Taylor agreed that there is an enormous amount of unseen and unexploited resources. The council needs to create a framework that will allow networking to take place amongst the voluntary sector and the various communities. Many individuals working in the heart of their community are not connected to any agencies. Innovations such as websites can help promote these activities.

Councillor Meldrum noted the need to look into the way businesses are set up. The scale of the co-operatives is an important point, particularly in a borough with a mobile population. She was keen to point out the increasing engagement work the council is undertaking, such as working with faith communities. Cllr Meldrum agreed the council does have role to play in lobbying central government and is already doing so on issues such as Housing Benefit.

It was noted the Lambeth Local Involvement Network is keen to work jointly with the Council and other organisations and has already held a meeting with the Council to examine ways to do this.

There was a request for the council to ensure the mental health sector is not overlooked in either the consultation process or the provision of services within a co-operative framework. It was also asked what opportunities the council would provide for speakers of other languages to engage in the consultation process.

Questions were asked about what cultural changes will take place in terms of the council members and council staff, in order to facilitate change to a co-operative way of working. There was criticism made of the managing of housing offices, despite the goodwill of frontline staff. It was noted the experience of service users and service providers in working with the council should be sought. A request was made for the council to be genuine in it's commitment to working co-operatively and that the attitude of council staff should reflect this.

Commission members were also asked specifically if the council is interested in working in the new development in Stockwell. It was also noted that a lot of work in the youth services is commissioned out, which does not necessarily provide good value for money. It was asked if this should be devolved to the voluntary sector.

Martin Green noted there is a need for the council to shift its focus from the process to the outcomes. Changing the way success is monitored would contribute to that change.

Councillor Meldrum questioned if we need to reward people for their involvement in community work as a motivational tool. It was noted that schemes such as Timebank and LETS worked well, but that many people get involved in schemes because they are interested in service delivery.

The Chair noted that actions to try and widen the scale of engagement with residents including writing a more accessible version of the co-operative council white paper. He noted the council were open to suggestions about how best to reach those communities that were difficult to engage.

He agreed that youth services were a good example to work on a co-operative model and that council staff had to understand the importance of working with communities.

Another resident wanted to note the problem of how to maintain services when cuts were being made. Council staff needed to be engaged, but asking them to work more closely with volunteers while jobs were being cut could be difficult.

One West Norwood resident welcomed the co-operative proposals as a way of addressing much of the degeneration of the area.

Another contributor raised the issue of third sector organisations such as Tenant Resident Associations and Safer Neighbourhood Panels and asked how they linked in to the proposals outlined in the paper.

Poor quality service provision and the structure of social services were also raised as issues for the commissioners to look at.

Co-operative housing associations were quoted by one resident as a bad example of how to run a co-operative. They felt that the needs of minorities were overlooked and the co-operatives tended to be dominated by a vocal minority.

Specific questions around the sustainability of council services were raised by one resident:

What will the future budget be and what is the gap in funding? How is the current budget spent? What is the value of Lambeth's assets? Which of the councils services are they legally obliged to deliver? What is the minimum delivery expectation the councils expects to be met when outsourcing?

It was also noted by attendees that civic participation is a positive thing and there is already a demonstrated amount of involvement and interest.

It was asked how the council planned to engage young people in the borough. Commissioners responded that a version of the white paper is being specifically designed for young people. Consultation will also take place with the Youth Mayor as part of the process of securing young people's opinions on the proposals.

Matthew Taylor agreed that the point about the cuts was an important one to make, but noted that funding restrictions does not mean we don't have choices and can't discuss options.

Martin Green agreed that we need to use networks to disseminate information and allow people to come up with creative solutions. He noted LVAC may be able to assist with this.

The Chair addressed the raised of the proposed job cuts by the council. He noted that worklessness is an issue in the borough and stated the council's job is to minimise the impact of cuts. Looking at more flexible forms of working is one solution being looked at. He was keen to emphasise the council is working with the Unions as 'critical friends' to the commission.

It was suggested to the commissioners that in order to increase engagement of people who are not currently involved through methods such as online communication and organised groups, people should be able to come to the Town Hall to speak to officers. This idea was welcomed by the Chair, as was the suggestion of the creation of 'Co-operative Council Champions' to take the message out to those less engaged or harder to reach.

It was noted by one attendee that many authorities are reluctant to listen to people and that Lambeth's willingness to listen was to be welcomed. The scheme needs wide involvement in order to be successful.

It was suggested that a more sophisticated way of soliciting opinions needs to be sought than 'voxpops'.

Lambeth Voluntary Action Council agreed there is a big role for them to play in this process, but noted this cannot be done on the basis of diminishing resources. Sufficient funds will provide the means for capacity building on an individual and a wider basis.

In summarising the meeting, the Chair noted that there appeared to be general support for the approach the Council is taking. He noted that appropriate resources need to be allocated and that the council needs to ensure services are open to everyone.

The Chair concluded the meeting by thanking everyone for their involvement and informing them that their ideas would be taken forward.

The meeting ended **8.30 pm**

CHAIR
Co-operative Council Commission
29/07/2010

Date of Despatch:

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