

REINVIGORATING LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN HOUNSLOW

12 ways to increase citizen participation and trust in local government

1. **Greater Executive accountability**
 - Introduce an Annual Executive public question time, as well as questions at public executive meetings.
 - Executive members and other councillors should declare meetings with businesses and lobbyists. These could be logged and listed online on a monthly basis.
 - Executive portfolio holders should report annually on their work with an opportunity for follow-up questions.
2. **Reinvigorate full council**
 - Rotate full council meetings around local areas to increase awareness and public attendance (Lib Dem local manifesto 2006)
 - Change procedures to allow interventions and two or three 2 minute responses by each group so full council becomes a debating chamber again. At the moment councillors can only speak once on a report before full council, unless they are presenting a motion in which case they have a right of reply.
 - Outside speakers should be allowed in full council.
 - Accept written answers to members' questions.
3. **Signpost how decisions are made and how citizens can influence decisions**
 - "Statement of community involvement in planning" and "Voluntary sector compact" are all very piecemeal. An easy to navigate route map should be developed for hounslow.gov.uk (and in hard copy) explaining how members of the public can exercise their input in decision and policy-making in the Borough.
 - This could be branded as a "Democracy hub" both online (hounslow.gov.uk) as well as by making resources available through local access points to council services.
4. **Revise the concept of "consultation" to a new process of "reaching agreement through dialogue"**
 - The council and local people would be obliged to reach a decision by dialogue on issues that local people are currently only consulted on.
5. **100 citizen scrutiny call-in**
 - As in Kingston 100 citizens could call any council decision into scrutiny. At the moment it takes agreement between two political parties to trigger a call-in.
6. **More online democracy**
 - Citizen(s) could attach their name to a petition (published on Hounslow.gov.uk) just like the Number 10 website allows. These e-Petitions (primarily aimed at councillors) could act as an initiator of new policy development (or changes to existing policy) if a critical mass of support was achieved.
 - Introduce online polls and forums on Hounslow.gov.uk

7. **Strengthen links to Youth Council**
 - Introduce six-monthly reports from Youth Council to Full council.
8. **Transparent links to and monitoring of outside bodies**
 - Map out local quangos and other local public bodies to clarify and renew lines of accountability between elected and unelected authority.
 - Review which outside bodies councillors sit on (appointed by full council), why and when (if) they report back to a council body.
 - Give a scrutiny panel clear responsibility for monitoring work of Executive members and councillors on outside bodies.
9. **Empower local area committees**
 - Increase devolution and control of budgets to local area committees.
 - Use participatory budgeting – i.e. actively involve local people in deciding how a portion of the council's budget is spent in their area.
10. **Put the environment at the heart of local government decision-making**
 - Environment, food and energy strategies should be included in the list of strategies come to full council for sign-off.
11. **Fair allowances and annual reporting**
 - Councillors should have the choice of shaping a part time or full time role. Their allowances should reflect the time they put in.
 - Members should be expected to report on their activities on an annual basis for the benefit of colleagues and the wider community.
12. **Establish a convention on relations between political parties**
 - Codify arrangements for councillors' confidential access and dialogue with officers for policy development.
 - Establish clear guidance for council PR/media as an appendix to the borough's constitution.

Through the Sustainable Communities Act Hounslow should explore proposing changing the local voting system:

1. Change the voting system for local elections so that the election of councillors is via proportional representation rather than first-past-the-post.
2. Alternatively, allow each local authority to hold a referendum on which voting system it wishes to employ for local elections. This already happens and is popular in New Zealand.

Background notes

Written replies to questions

Members should be able to request written rather than oral replies to questions.

In Bromley's constitution (<http://www.bromley.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/F4746750-EEB3-4EA0-BEA6-951630239A90/0/Constitution2006.pdf>) this is worded:

"10.7 Written replies

Notwithstanding the provisions for other forms of questions, Members may put down questions requiring a written reply, at Full Council Meetings, where the question requires a fuller or more in depth answer than can be accommodated in an oral response."

Online forums

This can be seen in action at Uttlesford.gov.uk -- Forums should not compete with, but compliment existing online forums. The issue of forum moderation would need to be resolved, but we are keen to at least pilot online forums.

Convention on relations between political parties

We remain keen to see a Hounslow version of the "Cheshire Convention", relevant to new local government arrangements, developed. We believe this should focus on codifying arrangements for access to officers for policy development and also establishing clear guidance for council PR/media. If there are additional issues that other groups would like to see covered, we remain very interested in any suggestions.

Local democracy fund

Establish a "local democracy innovation fund" and/or an officer post to support the above proposals. Key performance measures should be increased public participation between and at local elections.

Andrew Dakers

May 2009