

Newham Democracy and Civic Participation Commission:

Public Engagement Findings

Findings from face to face engagement sessions which took place in Newham between 13-24 January 2020, and from online engagement between 13 December 2019 to 26 February 2020.

This report sets out what people in the London Borough of Newham said during engagement events and an online platform as part of the Democracy and Civic Participation Commission, with some ideas and recommendations they have for the council. We have sought to represent what people said and concluded as faithfully as possible without adding our own analysis or interpretation.

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to everyone who was involved in helping us access peoples' views through the engagement sessions. In particular, thank you to all the wonderful people we met, who were so forthcoming and kind in sharing their thoughts, feelings and ideas.



Youth centre workshop



Better democracy, everywhere

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The Democratic Society (Demsoc) works for more and better democracy, where people and institutions have the desire, opportunity and confidence to participate together. We work to create opportunities for people to become involved in the decisions that affect their lives and for them to have the skills to do this effectively. We support governments, parliaments and any organisation that wants to involve citizens in decision making to be transparent, open and welcoming of participation. We actively support spaces, places and processes to make this happen.



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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 2 |
| 2. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE DEMOCRACY AND PARTICIPATION COMMISSION | 3 |
| 3. WHO WAS INVOLVED? | 4 |
| 4. METHOD | 4 |
| Working with groups | 4 |
| Topics for discussion | 5 |
| Engagement Events | 5 |
| Online engagement | 7 |
| 5. WHO TOOK PART? | 8 |
| 6. FINDINGS | 9 |
| 6.1 Involving residents in local decision-making | 10 |
| How can the council do a better job of involving residents in local decisions? | 10 |
| Experiences of involvement | 11 |
| Other comments about residents being involved in local decision-making? | 11 |
| 6.2 Using digital tools for local democracy | 13 |
| Do you use digital tools to have conversations about your local community? | 13 |
| What ideas do you have about how the council can best make use of digital tools? | 14 |
| 6.3 Working in partnership with residents | 15 |
| Are there particular things that you think the council and residents should be working together on? | 15 |
| Examples and experiences of working in partnership | 16 |
| Suggestions for working in partnership | 16 |
| 6.4 Giving equal voice to all | 18 |
| How easy is it to have your voice heard in Newham? | 18 |
| How do you know the council has heard you? | 19 |
| Are there certain types of people that the council hears from more than others? | 20 |
| How can the council hear from everyone? | 21 |
| 6.5 Supporting Communities | 23 |
| What ideas do you have about how councils can best support communities to speak up and take action? | 23 |
| How can councillors support communities? | 24 |
| Other comments about supporting communities | 24 |
| 6.6 Choosing the Best Structures for Local Decision-Making | 26 |
| From these 3 options, what is your preferred decision-making structure, and why? | 26 |
| Other comments about governance structures | 28 |
| Appendix 1 – Prompt questions | 31 |

1.INTRODUCTION

During a fortnight in January 2020, The Democratic Society held 24 face to face engagement sessions in 23 locations, and spoke to over 350 people who live in, or have links to, the London Borough of Newham. The facilitation of sessions was conducted by staff from Demsoc and CfPS. The session at St. Bonaventures School was co-designed, co-facilitated and hosted by young people from Newham UK. Andy Paice, a Newham resident who has worked on several engagement projects in the borough, joined the Demsoc team as an associate for this project.

These events were a combination of dedicated 'Democracy Commission' events and attending existing groups and meetings that were already happening in communities. These included English as a Second Language (ESOL) classes, a Youth Centre and a Community Forum meeting. We also spoke with people in public spaces including the Tube station and Asda Supermarket in Canning town.

We set up an online platform accessed via Newham Councils website where people could share their comments and suggestions and 41 people shared their thoughts through this channel.

Our engagement approach was primarily focussed on trying to reach people the council is less likely to hear from during general consultation processes and to hear their suggestions for how local governance, and the participation of citizens within local democracy, can be improved.

We asked questions based on 6 topics:

1. INVOLVING RESIDENTS IN LOCAL DECISION MAKING
2. USING DIGITAL TOOLS FOR LOCAL DEMOCRACY
3. WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH RESIDENTS
4. GIVING EQUAL VOICE TO ALL
5. SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES
6. CHOOSING THE BEST STRUCTURES FOR LOCAL DECISION MAKING



Library Coffee Morning engagement

2. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF THE DEMOCRACY AND PARTICIPATION COMMISSION

Newham's Democracy and Participation Commission is an independent group of six people with different areas of expertise and was initiated by the Mayor of Newham, Rokhsana Fiaz. The independent chair (Nick Pearce) was appointed by the Mayor with advice provided by the Newham Council's Chief Executive.

The other five members of the commission were appointed by the Mayor in consultation with the independent chair. The members of the commission are: Professor Nick Pearce, Fahmida Rahman, Kush Kanodia MBA, Dr. Elke Loeffler, Kenny Imafidon, Carl Miller.

It was set up for two main tasks:

- To examine both the council's current Directly Elected Mayor system of governance (introduced to Newham in 2002) and the alternative types that exist in English local government, and to make recommendations on the best system of governance for Newham's future, and;
- To explore ways in which local residents will have opportunities to be more engaged and involved in local decision-making and the council's work.

To achieve this, the Commission decided to explore six lines of enquiry:

- What should be the model of governance for the council? What additional reforms might be needed?
- What does innovation look like in participatory and deliberative democracy? What can we learn from innovative practice around the world?
- What are the most effective data infrastructures and digital platforms to enable digital democratic participation? How can we use new technologies to improve local democratic debate and engagement?
- What is the role of co-production in planning and delivering public services especially regeneration and the built environment?
- What is the relationship of local democracy to community organising and community organisations? What is the role of the local councillor in strengthening social networks and neighbourhood-level democracy?
- How can inequalities in voter registration, turnout and engagement be tackled?

The Commission looked at evidence provided by local people who shared their views and suggestions via an online platform or by attending face to face events and discussions. As well as hearing evidence from experts on democracy and local participation at Commission hearings and from the Newham Councillors who took part in an online survey.

3. WHO WAS INVOLVED?

The Democratic Society (Demsoc), in partnership with the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS), were commissioned to provide support to the Democracy Commission by gathering residents' views through a range of engagement activities as described in this report.

DemSoc led on the delivery of engagement activities and have written this report. The facilitation of sessions was conducted by staff from Demsoc and CfPS. The session at St. Bonaventures School was co-designed, co-facilitated and hosted by young people from Newham UK. Andy Paice, a Newham resident who has worked on a number of engagement projects in the borough, joined the Demsoc team as an associate for this project.

CfPS has project-managed the work of the Newham Democracy Commission. It has supported the formal evidence gathering of the Commission and has led on the drafting of the Commission's final report.



Nick Pearce (Commission Chair) pledging to reply to young people

4. METHOD

Working with groups

The commissioners asked for a focus on engaging people whose views might not otherwise be heard. Groups mentioned included young people, people who speak limited English, BAME and Eastern European communities. We designed our approach to create opportunities for hearing from both people who are less likely to take part as well as people who were more likely to actively engage due to their particular interest in the themes of the commission.

We reached out through networks, and worked with the council's eight community neighbourhood managers to understand what opportunities there were for engagement in local neighbourhoods. We also worked to ensure that we harnessed the community assets that

already existed e.g. council hosted groups, council venues and independent voluntary and community groups. Including:

- 'Newham Citizens' – with whom we co-designed and co-facilitated a Young People's event
- 'Community Links' in Canning Town
- Community engagement representatives of the Royal Docks Team – to set up the Royal Docks public event. (This team is a joint venture between the Greater London Authority and Borough of Newham that seeks to give local people a greater say in large-scale regeneration taking place in the area)

To ensure as many local people and groups as possible could be involved in the January engagement, we held a planning meeting with a range of community group members and representatives on the 20th November with the support of the Community Neighbourhood managers. 42 people attended and shared their ideas and suggestions for designing and reaching people to take part in the engagement.

This was the first time many of these people had heard about the Democracy Commission and many raised questions and concerns about how it had been set up, and why residents had not been involved at an earlier stage. Their questions and comments have been [published on the Democracy Commission's website](#).

Topics for discussion

Our engagement was structured around the Commission's six lines of enquiry which we translated into six broad themes with prompt questions that would foster conversations with a wide range of people:

1. Involving Residents in Local Decision-Making
2. Using Digital Tools for Local Democracy
3. Working in Partnership with Residents
4. Giving Equal Voice to All
5. Supporting Communities
6. Choosing the Best Structures for Local Decision-Making

Participants were free to choose which topics they were most interested in discussing. For sessions involving a larger number of participants, including two sessions with younger people, we designed more visual and physical exercises based around these topics. We used a smaller set of these questions, delivered verbally, for groups with less English language. We also had some support with translation for these groups.

We have presented our findings under each theme and with reference to some of the questions used. However, discussions often moved quite freely across these themes (particularly with on-street engagement).

Engagement Events

We engaged with residents through a variety of ways:

- Stalls in public spaces – including a tube station, a supermarket entrance, a leisure centre and several libraries and community centres.
- 'Coffee mornings' where people could sit down with us in groups for a longer time with free coffee.

- Piggy backing on existing community events and meetings – including existing coffee mornings in libraries, community groups, Beckton Community Forum, a Co-production Forum meeting, an ESOL class and a youth centre.
- Three public events in the evening, and one on a Saturday afternoon
- We also ran an event for young people in St Bonaventure's School, and a workshop with staff at Community Links.

A full list of activities is shown below.

| Event | Location | Date | Time | Attendance |
|---|---|--------------|---------------|---|
| Beckton Community Forum | Beckton Globe Library | 13th January | 10.30 - 12.00 | 14 people - regular attendees at this forum. |
| Co-production forum | St Mark's Community Centre | 13th January | 12.20 - 12:40 | Approx. 30 people - we just had a slot to present information, so this number is not included in total participants. |
| Beckton Library Drop-in | Beckton Globe Library and Community Centre | 13th January | 14.00 - 17.00 | 20 people |
| Beckton ASDA Stall | ASDA Beckton | 13th January | 18.00 - 19.00 | 3 people |
| Young People's Workshop with Newham Citizens | St. Bonaventure's School | 15th January | 16.00 - 17.30 | Approx. 40 people - young people from local schools. Organised with Newham Citizens and designed with young people. |
| Canning Town Library Coffee Morning | Canning Town Library and Community Centre | 16th January | 9.30 - 12.00 | Approx. 20 people - regular attendees at the coffee morning including a large number of older people and a group with learning disabilities |
| Canning Town Underground Station Stall | Canning Town Underground Station | 16th January | 14.00 - 16.00 | 6 people |
| Public Evening Event, Canning Town | Canning Town Library and Community Neighbourhood Centre | 16th January | 18.00 - 20.00 | 6 people |
| Forest Gate Library Coffee Morning | Forest Gate Library and Community Centre | 17th January | 10.00 - 12.00 | Approx. 10 people |
| Indian Community Care Association Newham | Jeyes Community Centre Plaistow | 17th January | 13.00- 13.45 | Approx. 30 people - largely older people with an Indian background. |
| Queen's Market Stall | Queen's Market - Green Street | 17th January | 15.00 - 16.30 | 5 people |
| Stratford Library Drop-In | Stratford Library and Community Centre | 18th January | 10.00 - 12.00 | 8 people |
| Public Event, Stratford | Stratford Town Hall, Chamber Room | 18th January | 14.00 - 16.30 | 4 people |
| Custom House Library Drop-In | Custom House Library and Community Centre | 21st January | 10.00 - 12.00 | 28 people |
| English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) Class | Plaistow Library and Community Centre | 21st January | 13.00 - 13.45 | 21 people |
| East Ham Leisure Centre Stall | East Ham Leisure Centre | 21st January | 15.00 - 16.30 | 6 people |

| | | | | |
|--|---|--------------|---------------|---|
| Public Evening Event, East Ham | East Ham Town Hall, Lister Room | 21st January | 18.30 - 20.30 | 5 people |
| Community Links | Community Links | 22nd January | 12.30- 14.00 | 8 people - staff at Community Links (this was originally intended to include service users) |
| Public Evening Event, Royal Docks | Britannia Village Hall | 22nd January | 18.00 - 20.00 | 3 people |
| Manor Park Library, Drop-In | Manor Park Library and Community Centre | 23rd January | 10.30 - 13.00 | 13 people |
| 50+ Men's Group | Katherine Road Community Centre | 23rd January | 14.30 - 15.30 | Approx. 20 people - largely older men with a South Asian background |
| Jack Cornwell Community Centre, Drop-In | Jack Cornwell Community Centre | 24th January | 12.30 - 14.00 | 25 people |
| Young People's Workshop, Shipman's Youth Zone | Shipman's Youth Zone | 24th January | 18.30 - 20.30 | Approx. 30 people - young people who attend the youth centre. |

A commitment was made to participants that feedback with the commission's final recommendations would be sent to the relevant community representatives or managers to share with the groups and that findings would be published on the Democracy Commission website in the spring. We (Demsoc) also asked people to share their email addresses with us if they wanted us to contact them directly with results, making clear that their contact details would only be used for this purpose and then deleted afterwards.

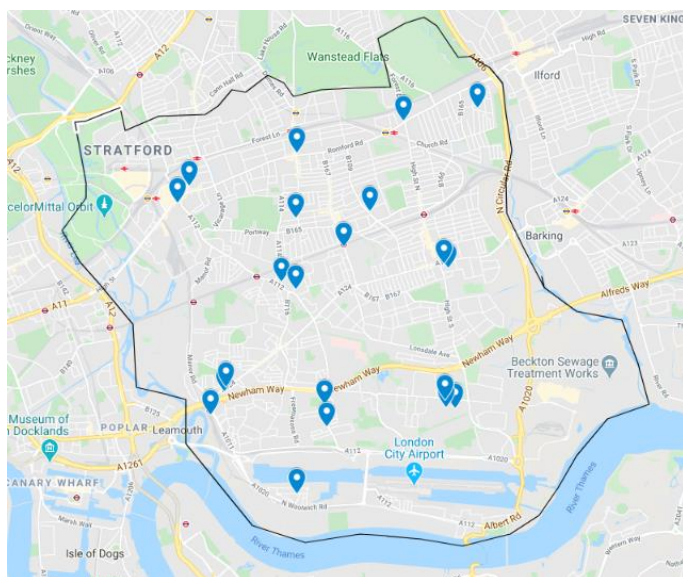
Online engagement

An online platform was created using 'Engagement HQ' software via the councils' website to provide residents with a digital option for sharing ideas and to enable more people to take part. This was live from 13th December 2019 to 23rd February 2020. Mirroring the offline engagement this was structured around the Commission's six lines of enquiry, under which participants could post comments. Participants had to register for the site using an email address to post comments. To increase participation, on the 31st January we also added a 'Quick Comments' section with a slightly streamlined form of registration.

The council set up a democracy commission email address. This was advertised as a means to ask questions rather than comment, though four comments were received this way, and included in our analysis.

Online and offline engagement opportunities were promoted through social media, the headline banner on the Newham council website, a dedicated Democracy Commission website, leaflets and posters in public libraries, the Newham Magazine and through e-bulletins to engaged residents. Participants at the Stakeholder Workshop who wanted to be kept in touch were also emailed with details

5. WHO TOOK PART?



Places in Newham where we held events or ran engagement activities: ([google map](#))

We collected just under **2100** comments from over **350 people**¹ throughout our engagement fortnight, plus a further 205 comments from 41 people on our online platform.

Geographical coverage of the borough was relatively good with the exception of areas such as West Ham (mainly residential) and North Woolwich (sparsely populated.).

We tried to balance monitoring demographic information about our reach alongside not making this too onerous for participations. As such we only recorded a small amount of data about the age, disability, ethnicity, and gender of people we spoke with. These figures are included in full in a separate engagement evaluation report.²

Through the use of coffee mornings and drop-ins in libraries and community centres, we were able to reach and talk with a fairly diverse range of people who live in Newham. However, the timing of these sessions mean that people who work during the day are under-represented. Some people came along specifically to speak to us, but the majority of participants were people we approached as they were coming in and out of these centres.

Piggybacking on existing community activities helped us reach groups who might otherwise not have taken part. Examples included:

- A session with an English as a Second or Other Language (ESOL) class in Plaistow;
- A session with the Indian Care Community of Newham;
- Talking with people with learning disabilities during coffee mornings.
- Two well-attended events with young people at St. Bonaventure's School and Shipman's Youth Zone.

Attendance at the public evening events was low. Those who did attend tended to be people who were already actively engaging with the council and were disproportionately White British.

¹ We spoke to approximately 180 people at coffee mornings and at groups we piggybacked on, and 176 people across other events. Full details are shared in the activities list above.

² 'Newham Democracy and Civic Participation Commission: Public Engagement Evaluation'.

Available online at: <https://www.newhamdemocracycommission.org/wp-content/uploads/Newham-Democracy-and-Civic-Participation-Commission-Public-Engagement-Evaluation-.pdf>

Lower than hoped numbers of people took part through the online platform, and the registration data shows that there was a greater use by residents of White British ethnicity. The platform reached 367 visitors. Of these, 152 visited more than one page or clicked one or more links. There were 41 visitors who contributed to the discussions and 205 comments were added to the site.

Fewer people spoke with us at the street stalls compared to other activities - however those we did speak to included people who'd had much less contact with the council in the past and people who we would have struggled to reach through other means.

Unfortunately, there were some sections of the community that we did not reach – due to a short engagement window of two weeks in January and no response from direct attempts to make contact. These were the Roma community, young working people, East European community and a variety of faith groups.

6. FINDINGS

Peoples comments and ideas have been analysed and themed against the 6 topics and presented alongside some of the prompt questions used. However, discussions often moved freely across these questions, so on some occasion have had to make a judgement decision about where to assign particular comments. Some comments related to more than one theme and so have been included in our analysis under more than one heading. For each theme we've included online comments as a separate section.

Key findings against each topic are listed below.

1. [Involving Residents in Local Decision-Making](#)
2. [Using Digital Tools for Local Democracy](#)
3. [Working in Partnership with Residents](#)
4. [Giving Equal Voice to All](#)
5. [Supporting Communities](#)
6. [Choosing the Best Structures for Local Decision-Making](#)



[Library stand interviews](#)

6.1 Involving residents in local decision-making

How can the council do a better job of involving residents in local decisions?

We recorded 158 comments in answer to this question.

The largest share of comments (39%) were about the council and councillors being **more visible, getting out and listening to residents**. Many of these were about having regular local face to face forums or meetings. Partly people wanted this to ensure that councillors will give feedback about what progress they've made on issues that they've been told about. Specific suggestions included: coffee mornings, on street engagement, street walks, a drop-in office for getting in touch, and using an unconference format in events. There were also several comments about going out to community groups and using community centres or schools.

'Come to talk to us... take a personal interest'

'Council to be visible and meet local communities to address our issues. Know our people and our issues.'

'Councillors step up and make themselves known... People to be aware of who they are, what they do etc. through every type of media to reach all types of people'

Roughly a third of comments (33%) were specifically connected with **involving people more in decisions and developing services**, with an emphasis on identifying local priorities and hearing insights from service users. Suggestions for what this should look like, included:

- Being continuous
- Involving people by informal drop-ins as well as larger meetings
- Bringing different stakeholders together for particular topics e.g. police or local landlords
- Bringing communities together, instead of relying on elected officials
- More citizenship education in schools, including visits to the council after school
- Using different approaches in different areas, trailing things, and sharing good practice across London boroughs

'They should have different ways of involving people and communities based on their different needs.'

Reflecting on how the Democracy Commission was set up, one person expressed concern that the council is 'Not empowering local people' but instead 'bring 'experts' from outside to do the work.'

The remainder of comments (28%) mentioned the need for **transparent communication, feedback and accountability** and **accessible information and promotion**. This was about hearing what action had been taken on issues raised, more information about what decisions are being made, and more understanding and promotion of opportunities to have your say. People also wanted more information about how the council works, what the council and councillors do, and how to access services and ways of having your say. The need to communicate in a range of formats was highlighted.

There was a sense that the council should be more transparent about its performance and about challenges it might face. There were suggestions about publishing standards for responding to complaints and repairs, and publishing information about complaints received.

One person gave an example of an issue with repairs that was broken by the local press instead of the council. One person called for more open data as a way of improving transparency and allowing others to pick things up rather than assuming the council has all the answers.

'Council had issues with repairs, it was in the Newham Recorder - instead of waiting to be put out, why not put it out themselves.'

'Newham Mag ... total propaganda, only shows good things. Why not also show things we still need to look at. An example of lack of transparency.'



Library Domino & Bingo Club

Experiences of involvement

We recorded 82 comments about people's previous experiences of being involved in local decision-making.

Just under a third (29%) were about **a lack of interest in being involved or having no experience of involvement.**

Other people were able to give examples where they'd been involved - such as taking part in a local taskforce, getting help with resolving a local issue, or going along to a local meeting. We heard positive examples of young people being involved - such as discussing knife crime with the Mayor. Although we also heard a number of concerns that involvement had not led to change.

Neighbourhood assemblies came up in several comments. While some people praised these, there were also calls for more feedback about what has happened with things that had been raised there. There were also comments about a need for more reflection in these sessions, greater prioritisation of relevant experience, that the themes were restrictive, and not all points weren't taken on board.

Other comments about residents being involved in local decision-making?

We recorded 155 comments here. Many echoed points made in other sections.

Comments included:

The Newham Mag (30% of comments). The Newham Mag was often raised as a place that people were getting information from, but there were concerns that the content is too promotional and lacking in more useful information. Comments wanted to have greater visibility around debate and to know more about what councillors are thinking. One person said that

authenticity needs to start with 'speaking plainly'. A number of people weren't receiving the Newham Mag, and some people thought it was no longer being delivered. One person pointed out that the Newham Mag is 'buried' within the website if anyone tries to access it this way. We also heard suggestions that it could include more community news and events.

'The Newham Mag only has photos of the Mayor'

17% of comments were about **disinterest, distrust or a lack of involvement** amongst citizens. We heard this most frequently at the street stalls, where we were talking to whoever was walking past rather than people already accessing council services or people who had come specifically to talk to us. We often heard a concern that speaking up wouldn't make a difference, and that this put others off of getting involved or speaking up.

10% were about **disingenuousness or poor listening**. This included concerns that decisions have been made before consultations happen, that the council wasn't listening, and that citizen input was seen as a barrier with views not taken on board. One person said:

'When you raise issues, you should not be seen as a trouble-maker'

8% were about calling for the council to **better serve the residents of Newham** - often this was linked with development. Some people phrased this as councillors being self-serving whereas others talked about a lack of expertise and confidence at standing up to developers.

Other comments included:

- Issues with communication within the council and a need for engagement to be better joined up. Including: the importance of ongoing relationships rather than seeing someone just once; a concern that there is lots of engagement happening and it can be hard for residents to tell what's most important to take part in.
- Concerns about voting in the borough. One person talked about a Councillor getting support from a large family block, another raised concerns about whether people understand enough about who they are voting for, was concerned that there is fraudulent voting happening, and told us about an instance of tellers being allowed into the polling station against regulations.
- The importance of setting realistic expectations. There was a concern that currently the loudest voices get heard, and that the council risks making promises it can't keep. It was felt that managing expectations is important to avoid making people disillusioned, and that more could be done to educate people about the restrictions the council faces.



'World Cafe' Event

Online comments

We received 30 comments related to this theme through the online platform.

Points and suggestions raised included:

- A need for greater scrutiny and transparency of the council's performance, with the ability to hold people to account. Related comments including the need to share information about past financial irregularities and to publish Freedom of Information requests. There was also a call for more sharing more information online about the council's plans along with ways of responding to these.
- Comments about councillors, and also officers, not replying. And calls for councillors to be more proactive and do more to pass on residents' views. One person described being told by a councillor that the ballot box was their chance to have their voice heard.
- Concerns about not being listened to, and a need to seriously take on board citizen input. Including a concern that the budget consultation was ingenuine, with decisions already having been made. One person said they felt:

'...an immense feeling of not being listened to and also feeling patronised for not understanding the processes.'

- Using a range of channels to reach out. Suggestions included: regular online surveys with feedback; community forums for large planning decisions; daytime or weekend meetings for those who don't go out in the dark; using casework interactions and outreach at supermarkets to reach a wider range of voices.
- More honesty about challenges faced and what citizen input can actually change.
- Support for tenants and residents' associations and giving them real power.
- A call to look beyond the borough for best practice in how to collaborate with citizens, including a 'Festival of Ideas' bringing practitioners and the public together.
- The importance of rewarding volunteering and recognising that not everyone can do this.
- A concern that assemblies don't encourage people to take action on very local issues, and that there's a need for regular local meetings for feedback and accountability.
- A call for 'a community-driven news and information service that is independent of the Council and that can provide, through online and occasional hard-copy platforms, detailed information about Newham life.' This was accompanied by praise for opening up Newham Mag to citizen input.

6.2 Using digital tools for local democracy

Do you use digital tools to have conversations about your local community?

In general, people were less interested in talking about this theme compared to the other topics. We asked people about which tools people use to have conversations about their local area. Examples people told us about included:

- Gathering local issues through a WhatsApp group
- Sharing information about local opportunities and resources, and volunteering with local community groups to improve their promotion
- Using Nextdoor
- Accessing local news online
- Using the Newham App to report things and interacting with services online - which were generally as useful tools that were straightforward to use.

What ideas do you have about how the council can best make use of digital tools?

We recorded 82 comments about this.

We also asked people how the council could get involved in existing conversations, how conversations could happen safely for everyone, and for any other comments on the theme of digital tools. We've combined these responses in the analysis below.

Just under a third of comments (30%) were about using digital tools for **communication and sharing information** and **promotion and outreach**. Young people made a number of comments about social media, suggesting using this to communicate about upcoming proposals; politicians' views; what is going on locally; local job opportunities; and encouraging people to vote. One person felt there was a lack of social media awareness in the council, and that this was a barrier to young people. Another emphasised that digital tools aren't just about people expressing an opinion on things but can also be about things like message boards and mailing lists. It was felt that social media could help the council reach further and promote opportunities to have your say, including by researching and reaching out through local Facebook groups. It was also felt that online communication could be an important part of improving feedback. There were some comments about not realising how much information is already on the council's site and calling for digital services to be better advertised.

A similar portion of comments (29%) were about giving local people **ways of speaking up online**. Suggestions included: surveys, polls, petitions, forums, and web chat. As well as: encouraging online communication with councillors; using QR codes on planning notices to make it easier to respond; using snapchat for questions and answers; using Instagram to help people talk together about local issues; and allowing young people to share views through videos or having a Newham Youth YouTube channel. There were also comments about how online channels can be more accessible for people with disabilities or who may otherwise find it hard to attend and speak up at meetings.

A fifth of comments (19%) were about **digital barriers**. These were mainly concern that digital channels shouldn't be the only way of getting in touch, particularly with regards to accessing services or reporting something. There were also some concerns about a reliance on social media for communication and that this can create a barrier for those who don't use it. One person phrased this as the council being too interested in digital channels that don't work for many residents instead of investing in people.

Other points included:

- Interest in digital ways of accessing services and reporting issues, which can be much easier to use.
- Concerns about safety online, including concerns about Islamophobia on the council's website and interest in learning more about online safety.
- The importance of translating online content into different languages.
- Frustration with broken links
- A concern about people being banned from the council website.

Online comments

There were 10 comments on this theme on the online platform.

These included:

- The risk that digital channels can exclude some people and need to be combined with other channels.

- There were also some concerns about the quality of the site used for this consultation, which are picked up in the evaluation section below.
- That there should be more online conversations, with one person suggesting an app called 'crowdocracy'.
- The council should make more use of open source tools.
- A suggestion of creating webinars about how to access council and community services
- The importance of live streaming events (particularly as many are in working hours) which can be accessed later on. Previously streams have been poor quality with a lack of facility to comment. It was felt that seeing others speaking up could encourage people to get involved.



ESOL class workshop

6.3 Working in partnership with residents

Are there particular things that you think the council and residents should be working together on?

We recorded 65 comments about things residents wanted to work with the council on.

The main topics were:

- **Public spaces** (15%). Cleanliness, and a lack of council action on this, was often raised; one person suggested a councillor goes on a walkabout with them to see the issues for themselves; others talked about working together on how an area looks and improving green spaces.
- **Youth services** (14%). This was raised both by young people and by adults – it was often linked with giving young people better opportunities and tackling knife crime. There was an appetite for working with the council to improve this.
- **Community Safety** (14%). Key points include knife crime, as well as anti-social behaviour. Suggestions mentioned alongside this included making reporting easier, supporting neighbourhood watch, and young people using rap to tackle knife crime.
- **Housing and Homelessness** (11%). Partly this was about issues with housing repair and overcrowding. One person suggested involving tenants in oversight boards as a response. It was also about tackling homelessness, with one person suggesting a need to change public attitudes.
- **Environment and Climate change** (9%). People were interested in how we can each play our part, in improving recycling, and in using a citizen's jury and referendum on the issue of climate change.

- **Planning and Regeneration** (9%). People wanted more of a say on the regeneration of the borough and on planning decisions, including licensing and what shops are on the high street.
- **Traffic and Parking** (6%). Points were mainly about the council not responding to concerns raised.
- **Local Businesses** (6%). These were about improving Queens Market where we held one of our stalls.

Examples and experiences of working in partnership

We received 53 comments about this

This included **positive examples**, such as:

- Working with residents on re-design of the council website,
- Involving residents in interview panels,
- Citizens assemblies and youth assemblies,
- Working together on local issues such as local fly tipping.

Alongside this were comments about **a lack of co-production**, including concerns that citizens are involved once decisions have been made. The Democracy Commission itself was raised as an example of an approach that lacked coproduction. One person complained about having to 'fit into council structures and vocabulary'. There was a concern that citizen involvement isn't as well joined-up as it could be – an example given was given of an event organised for Mental Health Day by a neighbourhood assembly that clashed with a much better attended one run by another group.

'There are so many events where people share their views and they are taken away - feels like starting a conversation that is already happening'

There were some concerns about how the council works with partners in the community, including this being a 'transactional' and 'asymmetric' relationship rather than thinking together about issues with those working on the ground, and that there is a lack of funding to support involvement in co-production. There was a concern that sometimes funding is cut once energy has been invested into getting things set up and it isn't always clear why. There were also concerns raised about how well the council supports community-led activity, including a lack of support for campaigns and other community-led activities and funding being unpredictable.

Suggestions for working in partnership

We recorded 78 comments in connection to this.

Just under half of comments (46%) were about **calls for greater coproduction, partnership or involvement**. People talked about the importance of being seen as equals; there being a relationship between the council and communities; feeling ownership over issues; and being involved throughout the process. It was felt that too often partnership happens 'selectively and cynically' and once decisions have been made. Without ongoing involvement there was a concern from a few people about being perceived as 'moaners and nimbys'.

'Working together only works when the council and residents are seen as equals and all views are important'

'Councillors should have meetings at least once a month in the community, so the community can come together and talk about problems and solutions.'

There were a small number of comments stressing that **co-production needs to be done in an appropriate way** - including that the council needs to think clearly about what this means, that it should be focussed on those with lived experience, and that co-production should not be the only form of democracy. There was also concern that the council tends to work with groups they already know rather than reaching those who are disillusioned.

A fifth of comments (22%) were about **empowering bottom up action**. Largely this was about concentrating on identifying and supporting groups that are already making a difference in communities. One person set out a vision for this with working groups voted on by residents to identify who would get support. It was felt that engagement often happens on the council's terms rather than focussing on supporting existing activity and that too often energy dissipates after individual projects finish, instead of supporting existing groups to do more.

'Step back and let people do things rather than having too many meetings'

There were a small number of comments about how the council should work with other organisations. This included:

- A need to work more closely with community partners - thinking together about issues and giving funding for this work.
- Joining up different services.
- Working with groups in the community to reach out better - schools were one example of this, but it was also felt the council could do more to reach out to other networks like local mosques or community Facebook groups. One person said the onus for involving people shouldn't fall just on the council.

Other points included the importance of communication, feedback and transparency within relationships, and that to do this: *'weak processes in the council need to be tidied up'*. Pointing out that the council can work with existing campaigns even on issues where it doesn't have the final say. Specific suggestions included: involving council tenants in an oversight board to tackle issues with housing repairs and setting a citizen's charter that lays out standards of service.



Community centre drop-in

Online comments

There 15 comments relating to his theme on the online platform

Comments included:

- The need to tackle a culture of 'we know best' among council staff, 'recognize it does not have all the answers' and move from paternalism to sharing power and supporting each

other. It was recognised that this shift can be hard in organisations, and there's a need to: 'Resource, capacity build, skill and empower citizens to support each other in partnership with you.'

'Officers need to stop assuming that they know better than us service-users about how things work...need to take in what we tell them instead of automatically not believing us.'

- A concern about a 'deeply ingrained culture of ignoring input from residents and other stakeholders.' Including a concern that there is lots of jargon about how citizens are involved without enough substance: 'There is plenty of 'focus group speak' but not a lot of reaching out to engage, nay, speak with residents.' This comment was connected with a lack of reply to correspondence from a councillor:

'Some four months later, after numerous letters (some sent recorded delivery), various emails and telephone messages, I still have not had the courtesy of a reply! ...This unprofessional behaviour needs to be addressed now, otherwise protestations about the need for 'engagement' and 'change' are mere window dressing.'

- Calls for partnership included for neighbourhood development and parking decisions and that: "The detailed way each aspect of council services works should be regularly updated in the light of feedback & experience.'
- One person talked about being successful in getting funding for a community initiative and said: 'I'd like to see Newham kick start many more community groups with training on how they can help themselves and apply for realistic support.' Despite having concerns about asking the community to do more they felt:

'...not everything can be prioritised by the council with a decreasing pot of government funding, so assist communities and make it easier for them to help themselves.'

- A suggestion to set up community level co-production projects such as a community space makeover, school allotments or a wildlife project in a local park. With the hope this would build trusted relationships and capacity for tackling bigger issues.
- Involving people who are representative of different communities and 'mandated' by the community through formal groups like tenants' associations.
- Hold regular meetings at a local level to improve access for those who are excluded, isolated, or poorer.
- Set up a partnership between local universities and communities around developing a sustainable city.

6.4 Giving equal voice to all

How easy is it to have your voice heard in Newham?

146 comments recorded in response.

Just under a third of comments (30%) were people telling us about **issues with reporting something, accessing services or making routine contact with the council**. Concerns included:

- Feeling forced to use the website, which was a barrier for some older people or those with language barriers.
- Issues with using phone lines:

'I spent an hour on hold then they told me to go online'.

'People put the phone down when you take too long to explain - rude towards us - don't listen.'

- Feeling 'pushed from pillar to post', with internal systems not being up to scratch. It being unclear what route to use to get something sorted, and hard to find the right person (with high staff turnover being a barrier to this). And being complicated to access services – 'It's a 15-page booklet to get dial a ride!'

'There is a gap between what the mayor says and the reality of experience communicating with the department. You have to keep starting all over again.'

'You jump so many hurdles - they don't hear from you direct, so messages get diluted'

'Lack of consistent process. Council ducks not in order...'

- Nothing happening when issues are raised, and not hearing back. Housing repairs was a topic that came up on several occasions. One person told us about being unable to resolve an issue with being overcharged council tax.

13% were about **not listening, or poor listening**. People talked about being perceived as a troublemaker or 'nimby' if they speak up; that it's easier to be heard if you agree with the council; and you 'have to use their language'. People talked about feeling their views weren't taken seriously and that there was 'unconscious bias towards residents'. One person complained that when they tried to escalate a concern to the mayor it was directed back to staff. There were concerns about some staff not being good at helping and being nonchalant towards problems raised. Within one group we heard concerns of feeling unheard and unsafe.

7% of comments were specifically about **inaction and a lack of reply**. This included nothing happening with things that have been reported, including housing repairs. One person said they 'rarely get a result' from their councillor, others talked of being passed from councillors to officers who are unable to help, and one person talked about being told no rather than exploring what solutions there might be.

6% of comments expressed **satisfaction or positive experiences** of being heard, these were mainly about times the council had helped someone, or about a belief that there are ways to have your voice heard if needed.

How do you know the council has heard you?

We recorded 73 comments in response to this topic.

Just under half of these (49%) were about a **lack of feedback or response**. Including examples of not hearing back once views had been shared, in addition to not seeing a response to issues that had been raised. There was also a suggestion that people aren't seeing how resident input is being used in general, and that there is not enough transparency of how answers to consultations are considered. One person noted the challenge of giving feedback on issues that are harder to solve. One suggestion raised was for neighbourhood assemblies to be more involved in communicating about what the council is doing; allowing councillors to be held to account.

44% of comments were about **not listening or inaction**. Many of these were about views being ignored or not taken on board. There were concerns about not seeing results once views are shared. In some cases, there was a recognition that it may be hard to act on points raised where these are being heard.

10% of comments were about **positive examples of feedback** – one person cited community teams as possible champions for improving feedback within the council, the example of boards in the library sharing feedback from citizens assemblies was given, as was the work that Citizens UK have done in publicising whether councillors have stuck to pledges they've made.



Community Forum workshop

Are there certain types of people that the council hears from more than others?

We received 132 comments.

23% were about **ethnicity**. Often, concerns were about particular groups being given preference above others, particularly where councillors were of a different ethnicity. Other concerns included:

- Getting worse treatment from staff who were of a different ethnicity. One person said: 'Our culture is less valued and listened to on issues like 'rats, parks etc.'.
- That some groups are not represented at the highest level in the council.
- That racism is not addressed well and that there have been cases of Islamophobia on social media and the council website.
- A lack of appropriate kitchen facilities for different cultures at community centres came up as a barrier to integration.
- A lack of sensitivity around multiculturalism. One person said that their concerns about a lack of cultural diversity in local food shops were not properly heard at meetings and they had been accused of racism. Another told us how historical schemes to address marginalisation of ethnic groups had got in the way of groups coming together.

It's not possible to draw conclusions from our engagement activities about the treatment particular ethnicities in comparison to others, beyond BAME groups feeling disadvantaged in general and the fact that some groups feel a compounded sense of disadvantage within this. However, we did hear from several independent sources that the Eastern European community is currently not well reached – which was also mirrored in this piece of engagement.

13% were about hearing from the **loudest voices**. This was expressed as:

- Those who are active and shout loudest
- The council having 'cliques' and favoured areas
- 'Organised groups get heard, others don't speak up'
- One person said: it shouldn't '...just be those they know and agree with them'.
- The same small number of people engaging in structures like community forums, though it was felt they do pass information onto their groups.
- One person said Labour members are heard from more than others.

10% were about **language barriers**, including being a barrier for accessing services, there being a lack of translation, and language being a barrier for speaking up about things that are important to people.

8% were about barriers faced by **people with disabilities**, including:

- that it can be hard to attend meetings so digital engagement is important,
- that digital can be a barrier for some people with disabilities
- that people with learning disabilities face exclusion because of people not taking the time to speak to them or not respecting their views and not listening to them in meetings.

There were a smaller number of comments about:

- Barriers for older people. Digital barriers were frequently raised. One person said that as an older, working class person they felt less confident speaking up in meetings.
- Some areas having a worse deal than others, particularly poorer parts of the borough in contrast to conversation areas.
- Younger people being less heard – this was often linked with a feeling that their views are taken less seriously.
- Other groups including: homeless people; isolated people who lack family members to help them access services; migrants and asylum seekers; people who use the borough but don't live here; parents, working people; and those who are transient or have recently moved here; services users who have useful insight but are less likely to engage.

There were specific issues about leaseholders being treated worse than council tenants and about a care service provider feeling cut off from contact with the council since going private. There was also a concern that those who are otherwise politically engaged are not taking the same interest in local government.

There was a feeling that the council goes for the 'low hanging fruit' of groups classed as harder to reach. For instance, one person talked about needing to consider how 'outsiders' from within the LGBT community can be helped rather than relying on groups they are marginalised within to support them.

How can the council hear from everyone?

We recorded 156 comments in connection with this

28% of comments were about **using a range of formats and responding to specific needs**. Many were about not forcing people (particularly older people) to use digital tools, and instead maintaining ways of talking to someone face to face or on the phone. Different formats suggested included:

- Having online options alongside meetings,

- Smaller groups being easier for some than larger meetings,
- Making meeting more accessible; evenings are a barrier for some
- Having a physical place where people can give their opinion,
- Using door knocking to build more positive 'asset based' conversations,
- Having someone you can ask a question of rather than relying on busy councillors.

17% of comments were about **reaching out through networks**. Using schools and youth centres often came up amongst young people. Other points included using faith groups, community centres, charities and local businesses. People talked about the importance of ongoing conversations and how community groups play a key role in communication.

There were a further 10% of comments about **getting out into communities** and **bringing conversations to people**. People talked about the importance of councillors sitting down with local community groups, of reaching out through events like the Newham Show, and using pop-up stalls. People also talked about feeling more comfortable in familiar settings.

'Encourage the council to come to us to hear us, so they hear us in our communities... so we are less shy and stronger'

'I wish they'd come to mosques like they come to libraries - I go there more often. It's also a public space for me.'

8% of comments were about **tackling language barriers** through translating materials and using interpreters.

8% of comments were about **better communication** - this was largely about the promotion of opportunities, as well as the importance of feeding back once people have shared their ideas.

6% of comments were about **a need for changed attitudes**. This included giving greater respect to the voice of young people and tackling discrimination of people with learning disabilities. There were suggestions for someone with learning disabilities to have a role within the council, for an older person's champion on the council, and to bring back a youth mayor.

'Old people are always thinking negative things about young people- we are not all the same!'

'There is an issue with who people speak to - asking carers rather than the person with learning disability. There is a need for more learning disability awareness.'

Other comments included having **more meetings**, particularly at a local level, and giving **information and training about local democracy** to groups less likely to be familiar with this, like particular ethnic groups.

Online comments

There were 17 comments related to this theme on the online platform

Comments included:

- Digital channels being a barrier for many groups; and printed materials are being lost
- Concerns about a lack of reply to emails
- Consultations are not advertised and there's a lack of action.
- A need for a cross-party advisory group to bring a range of views into Newham's one-party council. And a suggestion to: *'Nominate non-political, peoples' representatives to listen, collate and forward the opinions of the people.'*
- Influence should be less about how well connected you are, with more emphasis on

hearing from those most affected by issues.

- Making community events, venues and polling stations fully accessible, with step-free access, hearing loops and microphones for the hard of hearing, and accessible toilets.
- Having ways to follow events online for those who struggle to make it, like those with long-term health conditions, such as video streams, live tweeting, or encouraging posting on an online platform.
- Go out and talk to people in small groups.
- The importance of building people's confidence to speak up, for instance by supporting regular social events in the community or starting with young people. Supporting the work of schools 21 in giving students a voice was one example - it was felt that it can be hard to get the council to support projects like this.
- Engagement should be ongoing and based on 'co-production'.

6.5 Supporting Communities

What ideas do you have about how councils can best support communities to speak up and take action?

We recorded 47 comments in response to this question.

Two thirds (66%) were about the need to focus on **supporting what community members are already doing**, recognising what's already working, and enabling these activities, rather than starting with council priorities.

It was felt that support should involve ongoing funding, not just start-up funding, as well as other types of support. Suggestions included: directories to help match up assets like empty properties or willing volunteers with groups in need; and opening up staff training to members of community groups. One person set out a vision for involving the community in identifying groups that should receive funding. They suggested that successful groups could also help mentor others as they'd be more approachable and know more about their challenges than someone in the council, and that there should be funding for this.

'Start from where people want to start and how the council can facilitate and support - not from consultation alone.'

It was felt there should be: '...more awareness of events and groups already here rather than making new ones' - partly because people are more likely to get involved if they don't think everything will be up to them. There were calls for more communication about what's already happening in the community, rather than communication focussing on promoting what the council is doing:

'There is not enough knowledge of people doing good things in the community - this should be in Newham Mag rather than so much about mayor'

'Community news: Give news about people in the community doing good work (so it is not all about the mayor and what them and their teams are doing)'

There were a number of comments about supporting tenants' associations - helping them get set up, encouraging people to get involved, and giving resources and a place to meet. One person phrased this as a need to prioritise funding tenants' associations over more housing officers. It was felt that this could help accountability.

21% were about calls for the council to listen more to residents, communicate, and involve them in decisions or other activities. This included one comment calling for the council to speak up more about key issues and where it stands.

13% were about providing education and training about local democracy, rights and activism.

'Explain power structure in steps - from your street to the queen, and how to get attention and garner change.'

21% were about calls for the council to listen more to residents, communicate, and involve them in decisions or other activities. This included one comment calling for the council to speak up more about key issues and where it stands.



Community centre drop-in

How can councillors support communities?

We recorded 43 comments in response to this question.

Most (58.1%) were about **a need to raise the profile of councillors, getting out into communities, listening to residents and responding**. This included responding to emails, being more welcoming to people's views, and speaking more with local groups and charities. There were also comments about councillors being too complacent or inactive - 'Our councillors seem very passive.'

There were also a group of comments about **a need to stand up for Newham** (14.%), in particular it was felt that councillors lack the ability to stand up to developers.

Other comments included a need to see campaigns as assets rather than obstacles, to fund community activity, and give more funding to the police.

Other comments about supporting communities

We recorded 116 further comments about this theme.

Half of these comments (50.9%) were about **supporting community centres or activities**. Alongside calls for more clubs, activities and classes, there were a number of comments about the importance of community centres and the need for more places where people can come

together: 'Lack of places where you can meet and share activities and concerns.' One person called for: 'Routines - regular social events - well publicised - so communities feel confident coming together, so they can then think about how they want to get more involved with the council.' There were a number of comments about needing more activities for young people, this wasn't just from young people themselves, and was often linked with often linking with tackling violence.

A quarter of comments (26.7%) were about **more cohesion**. Some people described a: 'lack of sharing between different groups' and a need '...to bring different communities together'. There were particular concerns about tensions between different communities. Echoing this, within our conversations a number of different communities talked about feeling that different ethnic groups were getting better treatment than them, or that certain groups were treating them differently because of their ethnicity. One person talked about the importance of the council improving cohesion and needing to 'break down air of suspicion between communities'.

'Facilitate conversations to break down the barriers. We have to talk!'

We also heard comments about loneliness and a lack of community. One person said that most people don't consider themselves 'insiders' in the borough.

'We have lost community spirit. Society in generally is more individualistic.'

'It feels difficult to act collectively - there is a an issue of individualism.'

Other comments included:

- The need for better communication about local activities, resources or events. In one case someone suggested the library could give room for community groups to meet, only to be told this was already the case. One person from a care provider said that since going private they'd stopped receiving information about local activities.
- Concern about the loss of local press and interest in restarting local papers like the 'Forest Gate Times'.
- Expressions of interest in volunteering but being deterred by the amount of commitment or not knowing where to start.



Library drop-in workshop

Online comments

There were 9 comments on this topic online

Suggestions and comments included:

- 'Community ambassadors' in each ward to work with each other and local councillors to tackle local issues like antisocial behaviour or clearing up waste
- A civic collaboration fund.
- Starting an upcycling scheme.
- Supporting communities to get projects going - giving training or a template on things like identifying needs, and estimating costs and benefits. It was felt this would help residents engage more constructively instead of having a more antagonistic relationship with the council.
- The need for the councillors and mayor to reply to emails and participate in strategic planning meetings.
- The importance of well-designed public spaces for democracy.
- The important role of councillors, who were described as: '...fully aware of the issues, concerns, challenges and opportunities in the wards they represent and so are well-placed to encourage dialogue, resolve issues, obtain resources and facilitate service delivery.'
- Better use of Neighbourhood Plans, Neighbourhood Development Orders or Community Right to Build Orders.
- Concern that a lack of mechanisms or willingness amongst certain officers or departments means that engagement is only possible for the 'hard skinned'. And a need for building people's confidence and capacity to speak up.

'Citizens assemblies were fantastic but how do they reach people who don't feel belong there.'

6.6 Choosing the Best Structures for Local Decision-Making

From these 3 options, what is your preferred decision-making structure, and why?

We generally put this question to people in events where we had a chance to sit down with people for a length of time to explain and discuss each structure before asking them which they preferred. Some said they didn't have enough information and others stressed that wider considerations were more important than the choice of system. Only a small number of participants chose to vote. First preferences were as follows³:

Committee System: 8 votes

Elected Mayor and Cabinet: 29 votes

Leader and Cabinet: 4 votes

Comments about each of the three systems are summarised below.

³ In some settings we just asked people for their favourites, in others we used preference voting which allowed us to then get more detail about people's views. The tallies shown combine votes for people's favourite choices alongside participants' first preferences (in cases where ranked ballots were used)

The Committee System

| Positives (11 comments): | Negatives (9 comments): |
|--|--|
| These were mostly about the way this system spreads power . Some talked about bringing in a range of views – in one case highlighting that the diversity of Newham makes this particularly important. Others talked about the importance of collaboration and felt that this was a more democratic approach. There were a couple of comments suggesting that residents could join committees alongside councillors. | All but one of these was about the risks of indecision and slowness . One person disliked that there would not be one clear person with responsibility. |

There were a number of questions about this system, including how committee members are chosen and whether the committee system is used elsewhere.

Elected Mayor and Cabinet

| Positives (30 comments): | Negatives (18 comments): |
|--|---|
| <p>Roughly three quarters (76%) were about democratic control. This was often expressed in terms of the people deciding and feeling in control. People also talked about accountability - including having someone to complain to, having one person directly accountable, and being able to put pressure on them. One person said the mayoral system was a good balance between accountability and delegation.</p> <p>There were also comments about having strong leadership – which included being able to make decisions, having a long enough term to make a difference, and having a clear spokesperson or figurehead.</p> <p>There were a couple of comments about positive experiences of the current mayor influencing this choice – one person expressed this by saying that the current mayor has swayed them towards this model but ‘there is no guarantee’ their successor will be good.</p> | <p>The majority were about the mayor having too much power, including concern about a lack of oversight, that other councillors are on their payroll, that one person can change a lot, and that its open to abuse if they are untouched for four years. One person expressed this as the mayor having too much responsibility, with their job being too hard for one person to do.</p> <p>There were some comments about it being too ceremonial a role – one person talked of too much pomp and ceremony while another said that the mayor lacked power and was just a figurehead.</p> <p>Other comments included previous negative experiences with a mayor in Newham and concern about what happens if the mayor is a different party to other councillors.</p> |

There was also a neutral comment about the mayor needing the right people around them to do their role and expressing concern that this is not happening.

Leader and Cabinet

| Positives (11 comments): | Negatives (8 comments): |
|--|---|
| There was a wide range of points made. Some were about spreading power – including bringing in a wider range of voices and improving scrutiny. Some were about this system giving a balance between being able to take action and maintaining collaboration and scrutiny. There were also comments about that this being easiest to understand, being easier to change the leader than a mayor, and that councillors would work together better under this system. | There were some comments about being less democratic than an elected leader (within this there was some uncertainty about exactly how a leader would be chosen). Other comments included concern that giving councillors a vote on a leader each year did not give leaders enough time; that this system could encourage horse-trading amongst councillors; and that previous negative experiences of a mayoral system argued against a leader-based system. |

Other comments about governance structures

We recorded 141 comments about what was important for choosing the right governance structures

The lack of opposition or challenge was most often raised (20%). Mainly respondents talked about a lack of choice, and the limitation this placed on accountability and democracy. One person pointed out that even beyond the council there are no Newham politicians who you could go to who are not Labour. Beyond this, there were concerns about cronyism and councillors just doing as they are told. One person expressed a need for a ‘...structure that stops the mayor or leader giving jobs to their supporters’. Another said if the system is changed Newham will still have ‘the same power structures’, which would be hard to change while 100% Labour without external influence. Raising doubts about the impartiality of the Democracy Commission someone commented that the council ‘don’t like things that go against them’. It was felt that whatever system is chosen it’s important to avoid hierarchy and be open to challenge.

15% of comments were about **transparency and scrutiny**. Concerns about a lack of scrutiny were often linked to one party dominance, with decisions being made behind closed doors. One person said there isn’t awareness of different factions within the labour party as there would be for opposition parties. Suggestions to improve scrutiny included:

- Empowering community partners as critical friends, with enough visibility and financial autonomy to perform this role.
- Using sortition to randomly select residents to take part in scrutiny.
- Regular reviews, scrutiny of spending, and evaluation of whether councillors have done what they promised.
- Better evaluation of engagement, beyond just numbers reached.

13% of comments were about the importance of **resident involvement**. At times this was linked with the lack of political opposition, meaning that resident involvement is particularly important for scrutiny and accountability.

10% of comments were about **having the right people**. Comments included the council not standing up for Newham, a lack of action or response from councillors, the lack of councillor turnover, and some concerns about racism and bullying amongst councillors. Someone suggested changing how candidates are selected and giving more scrutiny of their experience.

9% of comments were about **devolution and delegation**, including the importance of a range of voices being heard, spreading the work, and empowering backbenchers. Calls to move decision-making to the most local level were closely connected with taking a more bottom-up approach. At the same time, people noted that leadership was still important, with a need to combine a Newham-wide perspective with local needs.

There was a concern raised about **the mayor having both an executive role and a ceremonial role as first citizen of the borough**, which is different to many other elected mayors. This was raised during our engagement activities by a councillor who felt that the Democracy Commission would be a good route to raise concerns about this arrangement in confidence. They were concerned that this was placing too much work on one person. In other councils a separate office typically deals with enquiries about the ceremonial roles of a first citizen such as attending public events. It was felt this dual role may also be confusing for citizens. This seemed to chime with points we heard elsewhere, such as a concern about the amount of pomp and ceremony around the mayor and how much they are shown opening things rather than delivering.

Other points included:

- The need for checks and balances,
- The importance of different forms of expertise in decision-making structures,
- A call for the council to campaign for voting reform,
- The need for flexibility for different types of decisions.
- A suggestion of prototyping new approaches in small areas and starting by understanding peoples' needs.
- The importance of accountability and trust, which cut across many of the points raised.
- Suggestions of a hybrid system between the mayoral and leader systems, or something between leader and committee. In both cases scrutiny was highlighted as particularly important to whatever is chosen.

There were questions raised about the process that will follow from the commission – including how long it would take if the governance system was changed, and how voters would be given enough information in advance of a vote.

Online comments

There were 22 comments relating to this theme published on the online platform or received by email.

Comments and suggestions included:




- Concern that a directly elected mayor gives one person too much power. Including encouraging: 'corruption and fake transparency', concerns about patronage under the mayoral system, and that councillors are staying in place too long. There were concerns about concentration of power in the leader and cabinet model.
- Support for the mayoral system as the mayor can be directly voted out.
- One person said that the leader and cabinet system places too much power in the hands of political parties, and that the committee system can give too much power to officers; instead emphasising the importance of cultural change in the council and suggesting a strengthened role for Citizen Assemblies in improving accountability.
- Exploring hybrid models, including a role for greater public involvement.




- The importance of scrutiny and accountability, including calls for resident involvement in this. One person welcomed the mayor's delegation of power and increased citizen involvement. One person called for:

'A method where councillors are not afraid to speak on behalf of their people rather than towing their particular party line.'

- Concerns about the dominance of one party, including calls to involve other parties in holding the council to account or to adopt a more proportional system.
- A call for more information about how different systems have worked elsewhere, and for clear information about different systems ahead of a vote.
- Comments welcoming the forthcoming referendum, saying this was important to maintain trust and goodwill, and calling on the mayor to honour her manifesto pledge to remove the current directed elected mayor role.
- Splitting up the borough more, as it's hard to represent such a diverse area. One person talked about creating smaller wards where councillors would know residents better.

Appendix 1 – Prompt questions

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| <p>Involving Residents in Local Decision-Making</p>  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How can the council do a better job of involving residents in local decisions? 2. Have you had any experience of being involved in local decision making? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If yes, what was your experience, what happened? • If no, would you want to be? And how? 3. Do you think the council should support local people to talk to each other about important local issues? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • And if yes, how? • If no, what needs to happen? 4. Anything else that you want to say about residents being involved in local decision-making? |
| <p>Using Digital Tools for Local Democracy</p>  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you use digital tools to have conversations about your local community? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If yes - which ones? 2. How can the council get involved and listening to these conversations? 3. How can online conversations happen safely for everyone, and in a way that takes account of different people's needs? 4. What ideas do you have about how the council can best make use of digital tools? 5. Anything else that you want to say about using digital tools? |
| <p>Working in Partnership with Residents</p>  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Are there any particular things that you think that the council and residents should be working together on? 2. Do you know of any examples where the council is or has worked together with residents? 3. Have you had any experience of working together with the council? If yes, what was it like, what happened? 4. What ideas do you have about how the council can better work with residents? 5. Anything else that you want to say about working in partnership? |

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| <p>Giving Equal Voice to All</p>  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How easy is it to have your voice heard in Newham? 2. How do you know the council has heard you? 3. Are there certain groups or types of people that the council hears from more than others? 4. How can the council reduce any barriers for all people to have a voice? 5. How can the council make sure they hear from the community as a whole? 6. Anything else that you want to say about giving equal voice to all? |
| <p>Supporting Communities</p>  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What community activities near you do you know about, or take part in? 2. What ideas do you have about how the council can best support communities to speak up and take action? 3. Sometimes the way councils work can get in the way of community activities – are there any changes the council needs to make? 4. How can local councillors support communities? 5. Anything else that you want to say about supporting communities |
| <p>Choosing the Best Structures for Local Decision-Making</p>  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What would be your ideal way for taking part in local decision-making? 2. From these 3 options, what would be your preferred decision-making structure, and why? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. The Mayoral system – the system that Newham currently operates, with a Mayor who is directly elected by local people. b. The leader/cabinet system - where councillors choose a person from their number who then goes on to select a cabinet of others, who then work together to make executive decisions. c. The committee system - under which committees involving a large number of councillors work together to make decisions. 3. Do you have any thoughts or ideas about what would improve formal decision-making by the council? 4. Anything else that you want to say about structures for local decision making? |