

# **Newham Democracy and Civic Participation Commission**

## **Initial Executive Response**

**Monday 6<sup>th</sup> July**

We welcome the report of the Democracy and Civic Participation Commission, and we would like to extend our thanks to the Chair, Prof. Nick Pearce, and the members of the Commission for the work they have done. We look forward to hearing residents' and councillors feedback on the report as it gets digested across the borough in the coming weeks prior to a fuller response that we will provide at a Full Council meeting in the autumn.

The establishment of the Commission formed part of the delivery of a commitment when the Mayor was elected to extend and expand democratic engagement with residents across the borough. It was necessary to restore and build trust between residents and the council, and to develop transparency and a change in culture in the way the council works.

The past few months have seen an immense effort across both council and residents to meet the challenge of Covid-19, and all of our plans in relation to greater democracy and participation in Newham are shaped in that context. We would like to thank the Commission for being able to finalise its report in recent weeks during this public health emergency.

The global movement for greater democratic engagement has blossomed in recent years. In large part, this has been a response to complex challenges facing democracies and the impact that this is having on people and communities around the world. Social justice, racial injustice, economic instability, climate change, nationalism on the rise; and the threat posed by corrosive forces operating in the dark web or through fake social media accounts that is putting the very essence of democracy at risk.

Added to this, growing numbers of people are feeling disconnected to those big decisions being made that affect their lives. They feel they are not listened to by politicians, policymakers and institutions making choices and policies that can have profound consequences.

We want Newham, to become part of this burgeoning global movement: a beacon for participatory democracy in this country.

This work, to make fundamental change to the way that we do business began on day one of this administration; taking immediate steps to widen participation, delegate powers, engage in co-production, and ensure greater transparency and scrutiny of council processes. This has included:

- Delegating the Mayor's Executive powers to Cabinet and introducing collegiate decision-making
- People's Budget Forums giving residents a say in how we set the council's budget
- Citizens' and Community Assemblies creating new ways for residents to shape how we take forward policy on important issues such as the Climate Emergency and community plans
- Resident Steering Groups and legally binding Residents' Charters ensuring future development plans, such as Carpenters Estate and Custom House, are resident-led, with co-production
- Tenant and Leaseholder Forums giving our 16,000 tenants and 7,000 leaseholders a greater voice in housing services
- Giving young people a stronger voice through Youth Movements, Youth Citizen Assemblies and involving them in the Mayor's Youth Safety Board
- Supporting citizen journalism and the creation of Newham Voices, an independent news and information service

The Democracy Commission has formed part of this process. Made up of independent experts in this field, it has looked at methods of

governance, including the current governance model of the Directly Elected Mayor, ideas around deliberative democracy and how we can ensure that all of our residents are involved in designing and taking forward our plans and policies.

The report and recommendations are welcome, and include some interesting proposals and ideas. This was an independent Commission and as such, it can never be expected to be adopted wholesale. The engagement and consultation with residents, which formed part of the Commission's work, will need to be considered further to ensure they reach and reflect the diversity of all of Newham's communities, including within faith organisations and other parts of the community and voluntary sector.

And we too would like to have further conversations with our residents, including our young people, to understand what they think about the recommendations that have been made - as we carve a path towards bringing participatory democracy to life in Newham.

The recommendations on governance and the Directly Elected Mayor model are interesting, and we hope that over the last two years we have restored confidence in the position. However, we are not sure the report sufficiently conveys the local concerns that developed over the previous sixteen years and reflected in the expectation of an alternative to the Directly Elected Mayoral model being put to the electorate, as the Mayor committed to when elected.

There are a number of ideas and proposals that are similar to work we have already started – in particular around participatory practices, co-production, and deliberative processes such as Citizen's Assemblies and forums. Some of the proposals around these areas are very helpful and ones which we can take forward straight away, or in the short and medium term. Others need further consideration, interrogation and much more work and

development in order to consider taking them forward, or shaping them for the Newham landscape.

On the governance model, we remain absolutely committed to a referendum in line with the Manifesto pledge made and the council will bring forward timetabling options as the pandemic crisis eases. In addition there will need to be a decision on the alternative option presented to the people in that referendum.

We have ambitious plans for extending democracy and involving residents in how we run our borough, and the proposals in this report will be incorporated into that work. The context of the Covid-19 health emergency makes this collaborative, transparent working even more vital as we look towards recovery and the health and economic challenges that are ahead of us.

In conclusion, the next steps will be a careful consideration of the Commission's recommendations, and a more detailed response to the recommendations will be brought forward in the autumn. We look forward to hearing residents' and councillors' feedback on the report as it gets digested across the borough in the coming weeks.

We hope this conversation will provide a seminal moment for Newham in how it adjusts its democratic and participatory framework, and we would like to once again record our thanks to the Commission for helping us on that journey.