



c/o Museum of Brands
111-117 Lancaster Road
London W11 1QT

Telephone: 020 7243 9800
Email: info@kcsc.org.uk
Website: www.kcsc.org.uk

registered company no. 4146375
charity no. 1087457

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Involving people in decision-making- what does good look like? • How do local people want to be involved in decision-making (borough-wide and in local areas)?

Involving the voluntary and community sector in local decision-making processes

The Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in Kensington and Chelsea play a vitally important role within Kensington and Chelsea in providing local services for residents. KCSC understands and appreciates the distinct difference between providing services for residents and ensuring that the voices of residents are integral to a decision-making process. The VCS is at the coalface and therefore ideally placed to understand and respond to local need, whilst advocating that public and voluntary sector services must be agile enough to respond to changing needs.

Voluntary sector engagement mechanisms, such as the Borough Voluntary Organisation Advisory Group and Voluntary Organisation Forums in which dialogue with Councillors, Executive Officers and Commissioners take place, are needed and should be maintained as a way of ensuring that the voice of the voluntary and community sector is not lost or goes unheard. For the reasons mentioned above, it is essential that such mechanisms be utilised so that the sector as a whole is able to feed into local decision-making.

KCSC advocates that the more decision-making processes work in a more co-productive way, the better it will be overall for residents. Co-production means allowing time for meaningful co-design of services with residents, VCS and social enterprise sector. If done well, everyone involved owns the process and is in a better and more informed position to accept the overall outcome.

Resident involvement

KCSC is aware of significant discontent from residents resulting from changes relating to out-of-school play services a few years ago. One positive aspect from this period was the Parents' Panel, set up to enable parents affected by the change to work closely with commissioners. This enabled the parents involved to feed directly into new rounds of consultations and the development of the tender specifications for the out-of-school play service.

The Panel also agreed to set up a Parents' Information sharing group to disseminate key discussion points and decisions made at the Panel to a much wider group of parents, with a feedback loop to facilitate ideas and comments informing upcoming meetings of the Parent Panel. A parent was invited to participate in the tender assessment process, scoring the questions on how the potential providers met the needs of local community. KCSC was involved by supporting the administration of the Parents' Panel.

Whilst there were, clear, issues about the final decision to put the out-of-school play service out to tender, we could argue that the involvement process following the decision went some way to ensuring parental voices were heard.



A current and potentially significant break-through in community, third sector and council decision – making lies in the exploratory work underway into the future use of Maxilla Bay 17-19, by the Maxilla Advisory Group Panel. The Panel, established to tackle this complex local situation, consists of community members (who applied to participate in the process), councillors, council officers and voluntary sector organisations. The ultimate decision-makers are those councillors who are participants in the process.

Although in the earliest of stages, this has the prospect of navigating a turbulent interface between the council and local aspirations by allowing equal voice to the community and the councillors without the filter usually applied by bureaucracy.

The community members and KCSC have undertaken to keep their own constituencies informed of developments and ensure information flows in two directions to ensure the process remains rooted in the community. This process when set alongside the rancorous process undertaken for the neighbouring unit Bay 20 (DIY SOS) has the prospect of sealing considerable community buy in.

What has not worked well

Using the previous example of 'out of school' play services it is our belief that the initial consultation process was not effective. If the process we outlined earlier had been undertaken sooner it may have avoided the level of discontent felt within the community. The consultation process was carried out mainly during the summer vacation period when many parents were unavailable to participate and the decision to remove this service outside of the council's function was an unpopular decision. This example demonstrates how not involving local people in decision making can go wrong.

The Voluntary and Community Sector Compact and a new Social Contract

The Compact between the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and the council exists to help maintain good working relations. Over the years, KCSC has worked closely with the council to engage the VCS updating it to ensure it remained current (last refreshed in 2015) in addition to maintaining oversight on how effective adherence is on both sides.

In our experience, the Compact only remains meaningful if both sides not only sign up to the key principles within the Compact but also makes efforts to review continuously how it works in practice. This is where challenges lie as staff changes take place, particularly within the statutory sector, and knowledge of the Compact and its meaning varies and diminishes. There must be a robust process of induction for new staff, from officers through to senior executives, to prevent an erosion of the Compact's importance.

KCSC is mindful of the myriad of consultation and participation initiatives that have taken place during the last 18 months, many of which like the Demsoc Listening Forums and the Ideas Day have been generally well received but which in the longer term are unsustainable as a model of engagement.

We advocate that a Social Contract, similar to the Compact, could work between residents and the Council. Achieving an agreed set of principles, rights and obligations governing how the community and their Council work together, specifically covering engagement and decision-making, would give genuine gravitas to a Contract.

As with the key principles governing the Voluntary and Community Sector Compact, residents need to believe that a Social Contract has a solid core of shared principles embedded within the very fabric of the Council, across all departments, the Council's Constitution could therefore become a new Social Contract. Alongside this, there needs to be a vibrant and live process that keeps a Contract current and continuously responsive to the needs of residents across any political changes within the Council.