

## **Opposition business**

### **Openness, Scrutiny, Information, Accountability, Democracy and Engagement.**

Politics is about the exercise of power in the interests of the people but when cynicism develops it undermines the very legitimacy of the politics. Britain is experiencing heightened cynicism as demonstrated in the recent European elections results with the 2 major parties polling only 4 out of every 10 votes cast. The 6% vote for the BNP must be considered a dangerous development. The loss of public confidence in politics is a worrying trend and one that needs to be urgently addressed.

Local politics is not inviolable to the problem and we should look to create openness with the electorate that dispels any suggestion that we are out of touch, self serving or corrupt. We need to create new opportunities for civic engagement and accountability – we must bring residents more in to the heart of decision-making, and promote the values of democratic engagement.

As the Ipsos MORI poll of 2007 notes fewer residents feel informed about the work of the Council. Notwithstanding the Council decision to spend increasing sums on the communication function this is an alarming fact. The basis of the Council, the legitimacy of its operations is undermined by increasing unfamiliarity with services and functions.

Having taken soundings from a variety of sources we have identified a number of issues that need to be addressed so that the Council can help restore faith in democracy.

#### 1) Enhanced Role of Scrutiny:

The present themed scrutiny panels are poorly resourced and defined in such a way that they do not allow members to scrutinise certain areas of the Council. Scrutiny needs to be properly resourced and ensure that all areas of the Council are able to be scrutinised by members.

#### 2) Access to information:

Public access to information is far from perfect and leads to members of the public feeling that decisions are made with little understanding as to why. Attempts to ascertain information by the public are sometimes badly handled or not addressed at all.

#### 3) Accountability

Major decisions are taken by bodies such as the Enfield Strategic Partnership, the Waste authority and the Park authority, which the Council barely holds to account, and whose actions are rarely discussed or explained.

#### 4) Local Democracy and Community Engagement

Attendance at area forums is poor and partly because they are designed to have no power and the Council does not effectively consult with individuals, groups and organisations over a variety of issues that effect them ranging from fees, charges and rents to environmental and street scene issues.

We have a number of proposals to address the issues identified above and ensure a greater degree of openness, scrutiny and accountability, which should pervade the entire Council. Here are some our proposals:

This Council therefore resolves:

- a) To establish a scrutiny panel with powers to scrutinise decisions over £250,000 made under delegated powers but which do not go to Cabinet or Council.
- b) To publish monthly lists of freedom of information requests and the actions of the Council in response.
- c) To publish monthly complaints data and actions taken by the Council. The Ipsos MORI poll of 2007 indicated some declining customer service factors.
- d) To publish the salaries of all officer posts earning in excess of £100,000 and all gifts and hospitality received over a value of £25. Residents have a right to be assured about ethics, and understand the level of remuneration paid to senior officers.
- e) To hold twice yearly people's sessions at Council meetings where local residents can directly ask leading councillors questions about the performance of the Council. In addition on a monthly basis each service area will hold an open house session where the lead member and senior officers will answer questions from the local residents and local press.
- f) To hold on a rolling basis at each Council meeting a briefing and questioning session for the Enfield Strategic Partnership, the Waste authority and the Park authority and any other such body.
- g) To publish all expenses claimed by all councillors and their attendance records at Council meetings, and make accessible the register of members interests on-line.
- h) To ensure that the automatic right of opposition motions to be discussed be enshrined in the constitution.

- i) To ensure that there is proper political balance on Council panels, committees and working groups and to respect the will of the people and the role of the opposition.
- j) To fund a political assistant for the opposition.
- k) To engage with local residents on a ward basis on priorities determined by local people and give regular updates and progress reports on those priorities to residents and members.
- l) To fund the youth parliament and local friends of parks groups.
- m) To ensure that there is meaningful and real consultation on all individuals, groups and organisations, which experience an adverse impact with fees, charges and rents in advance of any such impact.

This list is by no means definitive but we believe that only when such measures have been taken will the public begin to have their confidence in local democracy restored.