

Opposition Priority Business – Council - 21 September 2016

Democratic Deficit at Enfield Council

Democratic Deficit

*(Government, Politics & Diplomacy) any situation in which there is believed to be a lack of democratic accountability and control over the decision-making process**

Introduction

Opposition Priority Business is time given to the Opposition Minority Group four times a year to table important matters affecting the community and the way in which Enfield Council delivers its services. The Conservative Group therefore brings forward this paper to discuss Enfield Council's current democratic deficit.

Petitions

A petition has been submitted to this council with approximately 4000 signatures supporting the renewal of a lease for a community organisation that currently operates from a council owned shop unit in Mottingham Road, Edmonton. This has to date not been heard in public at Full Council even though it was submitted prior to the previous meeting. The current response from the Council is that the petition can be heard in public only after the legal case has concluded. This could mean that the organisation could be made to move from the premises by the time of the next meeting rendering the petition out of date. This sends out the message that Enfield Council is not interested in the views of 4000 people on this matter even though it is important to a significant number of our community. The Full Council is the sovereign body of the London Borough of Enfield and so it should be allowed to determine whether or not the Local Authority proceeds with a court case that is so unpopular with large numbers of residents in Edmonton and across the borough. The Full Council can decide to halt legal proceedings and so the sub judice rule is not a relevant excuse for preventing a petition from being heard on this occasion. It is the Mayor's discretion whether petitions are heard and so the Mayor of the Borough should ensure that 4000 residents have their say.

This is a prime example of democratic deficit because the decision to not hear the petition by the Administration at Full Council has silenced public debate on the matter. By doing this, it has removed its own public accountability on the matter which cannot be morally right in a western democracy.

Associate Cabinet Members

After the 2014 election, there was a reduction in the staff in the Scrutiny Team and there was reform in the way the Council's scrutiny function was conducted. It was one of the first actions of the council term and the rationale given was that all areas needed to share the burden of savings. This did not, of course, include the Labour majority side because it gave three more members of its Group a Special Responsibility Allowance (SRA) costing £22,842 per year. The Administration therefore reduced the scrutiny function and therefore its accountability whilst at the

*Collins English Dictionary

same time increased the power of the executive by giving three members of the majority party additional roles.

Question Time at Full Council

There are two areas relating to Question Time where there is democratic deficit:

1. The convenient and partisan altering of the order of business to make sure there is little or no chance of the getting to the agenda item within the time allowed
2. The newly imposed limit on the number of questions that can be asked

The Full Council order of business is conveniently altered to prevent the meeting getting to Councillors' Question Time. The Conservative Group believes it is simply not good enough if Councillors are not given an adequate opportunity to ask questions of Cabinet Members and Committee Chairmen in order to hold the executive to account. The public must be able to see the Cabinet brought to account in an open and transparent manner. The fact that we rarely get to Question Time sends a message that as a Council we do not care about the concerns of residents and alternative views on the strategic direction of the borough. If Enfield Council was truly open and transparent then Question Time at Full Council would be held.

The new procedures for Full Council meetings include a limit on the number of questions both Groups can ask. This change was not agreed by the Opposition the reason being that it restricts the right of any Councillor to ask questions to the Leader and Cabinet about issues affecting their ward. The limitation essentially reduces the democratic right of councillors to bring the Administration to account.

Housing Board

A further example of the democratic deficit within the Council is the way in which the Customer voice and Senate were set up. Although the Conservative Group strongly supported the establishment of tenant and leaseholder led bodies, we are concerned that members of these two bodies were appointed and not elected.

The Customer Voice and Senate were established by the Council as part of the review of housing governance following the decision to reintegrate Enfield Homes Arms length organisation back into the Council in April 2015. The Customer Voice which sends representatives to the Housing Board chaired by Cllr.Oykner, is the overarching housing representative body for tenants and leaseholders for the Borough of Enfield and has 15 members. It plays a central role in ensuring tenants' and leaseholders' views are taken into account by the Council. The Senate which comprises 12 members focuses on service quality and performance and carries out reviews and oversees estate inspections.

When these bodies were set up, the Council argued that the members needed to be appointed in order to ensure that they were collectively competent and that they should therefore be selected on the basis of skills and commitment. The length of service for members of both bodies was originally set at 3 years maximum. This is

all very well, but in practice it has meant that individuals who had made a long standing contribution and who had served on the Board of Enfield Homes were told that their services were no longer required.

The Conservative Group can see that it made sense to give these two new bodies time to bed down. Many of the new members appear to be conscientious and able to make a useful contribution to the work of the Customer Voice and Senate. Nevertheless it cannot be right for members of independent bodies whose job is to hold the Council to account to be appointed by that self-same council. We strongly urge the Council therefore to make arrangements for elections to the Customer Voice and Senate to be held as soon as possible. We would suggest that the existing members also be allowed to stand at these elections so that the expertise they have gained is not lost.

Public Transport Consultative Group

The Public Transport Consultative Group has had its membership and remit reformed. This decision went through via the guillotine system at the last Full Council Meeting and so there was no opportunity for a full and democratic debate on this change. The rationale was to broaden the membership of the PTCG so it was more reflective of the diverse nature of our borough. The Conservative Group does not think anyone would not welcome this but many see these reforms as just a mechanism in which to remove certain residents' associations/groups from serving on the panel because in the past they may not have always agreed with the Administration.

The Conservative Group does recognise that the decision states that representatives from the voluntary sector can serve on the panel as long as the Cabinet Member approves and other groups by sanction of the Chair. Membership of the PTCG, apart from the councillors, is therefore down to the chosen few. Reforms that attempt to widen the membership of the PTCG and be more inclusive have actually excluded members of the community. The Conservative Group does not believe it is right for an Administration to exclude hard working community groups from the PTCG in order to create a more amenable panel for its transport policies. Hand picking groups to make the PTCG more reflective of the Administration's views on transport is in no way democratic at all.

Trading Companies

Enfield Council has created a number of trading companies including Housing Gateway, Independence and Well Being Services Ltd and Lee Valley Heat Network Limited. The papers relating to these companies are not published and certainly not readily available for other Councillors or the public to view. Opposition members had to fight hard in order to see documentation relating to Housing Gateway. Councillors who wanted to view Housing Gateway documents were met with questions from unelected Officers about why they wanted to see them. It cannot be right that elected Councillors have experienced difficulties from viewing the papers of Council owned companies that spend tax payers' money. The public has a right to know how their money is being spent and that there is proper accountability when it comes to these trading companies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the examples given in this Opposition Priority Business show how the curtailment of public debate and a lack of accountability by the Labour Administration has produced a democratic deficit in the decision making process and the way in which the Council conducts its business. This cannot be acceptable if the residents of Enfield are to have faith in their elected representatives to listen to their concerns.

The Conservative Group recommends that the Administration implements the following as a matter of urgency to show a commitment to residents that their views matter:

1. Listen to the petition regarding the lease of 11 Mottingham Road in public.
2. Enhanced tenant and leaseholder engagement.
3. Make arrangements for elections to the Customer Voice and Senate to be held as soon as possible.
4. The limit on the number of questions asked at the Full Council meeting be abolished.
5. An agreement that we will get to Question Time at all Full Council meetings.
6. Greater transparency of council trading companies with papers published.
7. Allow additional groups to serve on the Public Transport Consultative Group and not just the chosen few.
8. The abolition of the three Associate Cabinet Member posts and the money reinvested into the Scrutiny Team.