

# **Council Constitution Focus Group**

## **Summary Report**

### **Introduction and Background**

The Council is required to have a Constitution which contains the overall set of rules governing how the Council operates.

The Constitution outlines how decisions are made and the procedures which are followed to ensure that these are efficient but also transparent and accountable to local people.

It also includes protocols and codes which set out the standards of conduct and behaviour that the Council expects of the Elected Mayor and Councillors and its staff. Some of these processes are required by law, while others are a matter for the Council to choose.

The Council began a review of its Constitution in 2022. The aim of the review is to make the Constitution more accessible to the public and provide a greater level of information to the public about the operation of the Council. Particular emphasis is being placed on how the public can become involved in the Council's decision-making processes.

### **Methodology**

A survey was sent to members of the Hackney Matters Online Citizen Panel to understand their perceptions of the Constitution, their awareness and knowledge, and to ask if they would be interested in taking part in a focus group to discuss some aspects which could help inform positive changes to the document during the review period.

Nine participants joined the focus group, covering a range of demographic backgrounds for representativeness. The focus group took place on Wednesday 21st June in the afternoon via an online video meeting.

### **Survey responses**

A total of 17 panel members took part in the survey.

The first question they were asked was "Did you know that the Council has a Constitution?", to which four respondents stated that they did.

Only those who answered "Yes" to that question were then asked if they knew how to find a copy of the Constitution. Only two answered "Yes" to this question.

## Appendix 1

They were then asked whether they had read the Constitution, to which one respondent answered “Yes”. They were then asked some follow up questions:

- How easy it was to find the information they needed - “Fairly easy”.
- Do you think that the Constitution clearly defines:
  - the roles and functions of the Elected Mayor, Councillors and Officers - “Fairly clear”
  - explains how the public can engage and participate in council meetings - “Fairly clear”
  - makes the Council’s decision-making process understandable and transparent - “Fairly clear”

### **Focus group summary**

Prior to the focus group, the attendees were sent some pre-reading material by email for them to review. As we knew those attending were not aware of the Constitution, we wanted to encourage the conversation by giving them some basic insight into some of the aspects of the Constitution.

The first question we asked was if they had the opportunity to read the material we sent them in advance, whether they had any knowledge about how they could get involved in decision-making e.g. asking questions beforehand.

There was a view by some that they could attend meetings, but were unaware of the procedure in terms of being able to participate. One participant stated that they have watched a Council meeting online, but had no idea how to find the Constitution to understand the finer details.

One of the participants was an ex-councillor, who was in post for 8 years and also a Hackney resident. They explained that they have asked questions at full Council meetings, but the process hasn’t always been clear especially as meetings went online.

We then moved onto the different sections of the Constitution, focusing on the pre-read material that we sent to participants.

**NB.** The focus group session was more informative for the participants than getting the depth of feedback around the Constitution due to their lack of prior knowledge around it. But, there were sections nearer the end around publication which gathered more feedback.

### **PART ONE - Your Council**

*“This part of the Constitution provides an overview of the Council, an explanation of the principles we apply when making decisions on your behalf and information about your rights and responsibilities as citizens.”*

## Appendix 1

The focus was on two sections:

- Principles of decision-making
- Citizen's' Rights and Responsibilities

### Principles of decision-making

There was a question around the hierarchy of officers involved, and how decisions were made as it was not clear as to who the officers were that made these decisions. The term officer does not sound very important, so it would be good to understand the level that these officers are.

An attendee asked the question about who polices conflict of interest. The policing responsibility rests with a statutory officer called the Monitoring Officer. They ensure the Code of Conduct is complied with so far as it relates to Councillors and The Mayor. In terms of staffing, it would be the Chief Executive.

Another question asked was about whether delegated decisions can be overruled, which in short is no they can't albeit with caveats for executive decisions. Only a Court can overrule as a matter of law. Councils are careful about how they grant and give officers these delegated powers. We have schemes of delegation for each respective directorate in the Council about who can make decisions. It is very clear within the Council, but not so much outside the organisation.

### Citizens' Rights and Responsibilities

We asked attendees what is their knowledge around the rights and responsibilities they have as a citizen of the borough.

One attendee knew about their statutory rights, but did not know that the Constitution contained this information. They thought that the Constitution was just a list of members and officer responsibilities, so this was a surprise to them. They would also like to see a list of rights as a citizen to be made more widely available.

A question was asked about how the Constitution is stored. It was explained that the existing version is radically different to the current version due to the changes being made. It is currently one PDF document over 400 pages, but is being split up into sections to make ease of reference better for the user. The Council is required by law to provide a printed version should it be requested.

It was asked whether the Council consults residents on the changes being made, and it was explained that this is the first major review for 4 to 5 years and is also the first time any formal public engagement has been carried out on the Constitution.

## Appendix 1

### **PART 4 - Council Procedure Rules**

We asked attendees if they know that they can ask questions directly of the Elected Mayor and Councillors at some of our Council meetings. The majority of attendees stated that they did not know this, with a couple stating that they did.

They were then asked if there was anything they could think of that the Council can do to make this more widely known. Some suggestions that were mentioned:

- Emails
- Leaflets
- Postal letters
- Noticeboards
- Shopping Centres/Supermarkets
- Libraries

A suggestion was made about having a unified day where Councillors can be visible for residents to be able to talk to, whether at a Community Centre or other local places. A question was asked about what happens if a Councillor or the Elected Mayor is not present at the meeting to answer a question. It was mentioned that every Councillor tries to get to every committee and full Council meeting that they can and that in those rare circumstances where they are not able to be present, questions can be answered by another person or their behalf or a written response could be provided if requested.

Another good suggestion was for Councillors to engage more with local publications like Hackney Citizen to shed light on the Council's democratic processes and encourage residents to get involved. Similarly, 'You asked, we listened' type posters may be useful to show the impact of involvement in such a meeting.

Attendees were asked if they are connected to their local Councillor and whether they know how to contact them. There was a general consensus that people were aware but have not had much contact with them. They have found that MP's are easier to approach and more visible, so people will go to them rather than their local Councillor.

### **PART SIX - Public Participation**

*"This is a new Part for our Constitution which explains how the public can get involved in Council meetings, seek to influence decision-making via deputations and petitions, access information about our meetings and explains the Council's expectations about behaviour of attending our meetings."*

## Appendix 1

We asked attendees if they knew how to find details of our meetings, including agendas and reports for meetings. One attendee stated that they are aware because they work for a local authority, and they know that they can attend certain meetings by checking online to see when it is. But they stated that they have not seen any information from Hackney directly, and that a wider scope is needed to push that information out to people who work or live in Hackney.

We asked again around attending meetings held by the Council, and the issue around hierarchy came up again with not knowing what each Councillor is responsible for, and whether they can contact them before coming to the meeting. It was also mentioned that it would be good to see the outcomes of the meetings as to whether they agree or disagree with a decision that has been made.

One attendee mentioned how they feel it can be quite intimidating coming into a Council meeting with the Mayor and Deputy, and would feel more at ease if there was someone to guide them through the procedure of the meeting and what will happen. As they said "I may need a bit of hand holding to get past the feeling of intimidation". The arrangements that are in place to support people were explained, but further information about this would be useful.

None of the attendees knew that the Council meetings were livestreamed on YouTube, and felt that more communication is needed to make people aware of this.

We then asked them about whether they knew that they could submit a petition or deputation to the Council. None of the attendees were aware of this, and we explained to them how petitions work in terms of the minimum number of people, and how many signatures are required to trigger a debate at full Council or Cabinet meetings.

### Publication

*"As part of our future development work, we are thinking about producing a short guide to the Constitution written in plain English. This will hopefully make it easier and more understandable, as well as providing better accessibility to the areas that are important to you."*

We asked attendees to give their views on how this can be achieved to make improved accessibility and easier to understand.

One attendee mentioned the idea of more people on the ground to have some of the knowledge around aspects of the Constitution, where they can help to promote it more widely, be able to answer basic questions, and be a point of contact. The idea of a short guide was welcomed, giving a top line summary of residents rights and responsibilities, and the use of a QR to be able to access the Constitution online.

## **Appendix 1**

There was also a suggestion around making the Constitution more fun to engage with, for instance a pop quiz, crosswords around your rights. Also some bits for children to introduce them to what goes on.