# Democracy Commission Report: Some Personal Commentary and Critique

## Table of Contents

I've read the report once and plan to read it again over the next few days. I'm picking out broad brush themes in this, rather than arguing in depth about details, so this text may be expanded later. I've subdivided the commentary into the Good, the Bad and the Missing. There's now a final speculative section called Что делать?[1], perhaps that can be called 'Building' or 'Filling the Gaps', since such a report cannot cover everything in detail.

I haven't commented on some sections, BAME non-involvement, future organisation of the council, for example. I know very, very little about these, I've chosen areas where I have had some participation, previous experience in other boroughs, knowledge or both.

Currently, *this document is a mess*, sometimes rambling and patchy at the moment, but in the great open source tradition of release early, release often[2], I'm circulating now, rather than spend months on a more elegant rewrite. I had my cousin, a PhD student at Nottingham and (clearly) an 'outsider' take a skim, she said it was *robust* (that wasn't the actual form of words that she used) but since this is, to some extent, a *truth to power* document, I'm leaving it as it is, sorry.

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1    [One of the best questions about anything...](#)
2    [Release Early, Release Often](#)

## The Good

So first of all, the Good. It's clear and thorough, covers a great deal of useful ground. The language and layout is clear. There's the usual idiocy with aspirational pictures and graphics, now found in any official public document. Why oh why? A good bit of folklore about this (untrue, certainly), a New York police station had one of these smiling, police and citizens of every creed and colour, everyone so, so happy murals on a station wall. But underneath, one dark night, a graffiti artist had written in a fine cursive hand, *this is a damnable lie.* This seems like a superficial point, but I'll come back to it much later, under the banner of De-Orwellisation.

It's also progressive (but see later), although, for example, the Port Alegre and Curitiba[3] (not really touched on, but interesting) ideas and example have been around since the 1980s, they've only just managed to filter into Great Britain, possibly because 'we know best', British exceptionalism and, of course, Not Invented Here.

It's concrete too, there are 'do' items, rather than quickly dissipated Sir Humphreyesque abstractions. These can be measured, examined and can succeed or fail.

There are a great many details that I've 'enjoyed' too, since my view is bottom-up, rather than top-down.  I believe I spent about three days in total in the panel part of the exercise.

## The Bad

Now, as a critical friend, rather than an adversary, the Bad. It's a little timid, rather than particularly radical. I think we expected that from something piloted by the great and good, and here it is.

However, Covid-19, Climate Change, Brexit, Poor Economy, Pollution, Poor Diet and Health, suggest that something more radical and responsive may be needed. I'll try and talk about that at the end of the document.

The timidity shows first in the organisation of the commission, no permanent citizen panellists or contributors on an 'equal footing' with the experts. This would have been simple, also, since the citizens would be vastly outnumbered, so it would not have been particularly 'dangerous'. They've actually understood this, from 'comments made from the floor':

*– saying that the way that the Commission had been established did not demonstrate a commitment on the part of the Council to genuinely work alongside local people in making decisions.*
And in one appendix:

*The view that the Commission's work itself (including the hearing) should have involved more opportunity for the voice of local people to lead it;*

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3    https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curitiba  Incidentally, have spoken to a black Brazilian friend about Curitiba, it's far from perfect for BAME residents.

Most of the panel work, that I attended, felt like 'panel to panel', public squashed in breathlessly at the end.

As a result, the recommendations are fairly top-down, static and large grain. A good example of this is the twice a year, large scale citizen's assemblies, not a bad thing, but probably unfocused (subject, geographical area in the borough), perhaps sprawling and ineffective. Some of this can be remedied by good Rojava[4] style feeding 'up'. Assemblies are always good for networking, incidentally, if only for that.

Also, as later, the immediate call out to the universities to deal with data. Not a bad thing, but I believe we should 'trust' our residents *first* and secondly go to academia for technical help. The suggestions for smaller scale initiatives at ward (for example) level, I believe, are more important but underdeveloped, there's a gap (or opportunity to choose and build) as with the 'new systems'.

# The Missing

Now, the Missing. Whether via timidity, courtesy or a mixture of both, the report does not deal with two of the toxic Newham horsemen, democratic deficit (word search in the document has not shown me this phrase, at all) and complacency (also, not found, not a polite word, but, a common word 'on the street').

## Democratic Deficit

The suggestions for sortition may go a little way towards addressing some of the democratic deficit (but not 'further down' see Gatekeeping and Privileged Interlocutors, later), but this is and has been a single party chamber for decades, so no contrary opinion is represented. This is *democratic deficit as culture* rather than election cycle contingency.  There is a high extra cost for one party councils too[5]. This, of course, is difficult to correct via the chamber, though there's a recommendation to do so, but needs to be radically addressed elsewhere, see the end of the document.

Reluctance to scrutinise (or 'rock the boat' or 'adopt the wrong tone'), is one of the most toxic by products of this, this turns up in the appendix comments, as well:

*Only 25% and 21% wanted to do more scrutiny, or more*

Opposition councillors will, of course, often want to scrutinise, as part of their oppositional stance. Deficit probably produces great deal of 'street level' cynicism in the borough, almost Emma Goldman[6], 'if voting changed anything it would be made illegal'. I met someone in the Canning Town library on my way into a panel, she said, angrily "I'm not interested, nothing ever changes" when I told her where I was going and invited her to come and take a look.

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4    https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-amid-syria-s-darkness-a-democratic-egalitarian-and-feminist-society-emerges-1.7339983
5    Cost of one party councils: Electoral reform society
6    Emma Goldman

## Complacency

This leads to the second horseman, complacency. Since Newham is resolutely one party, not that much effort is needed to be elected or re-elected. Length of service can be fairly elevated too, though I haven't current statistics on the number of terms etc. within the current chamber. As with other councils, much of the work is 'transactional' addressing and fixing people's personal problems within the wards, but, until recently, not much work on the direction, the broader vision of the borough. Incidentally, this isn't just a 'Newham' thing. It's easier to brush away or patronise the troublesome (people like me?) from this position too and, also, from this secure position, game theory says 'do not do anything significant in case you mess up'. Incidentally, people's tolerance for 'messing up' is greater than most politicians believe, it's usually (as in marriages) the dishonesty that hurts more.

There also isn't any 'deep hanging out'[7] rather than surgeries and other structured meetings and interactions, which may reveal some of the deeper problems. I suspect, but do not know, that some of the under represented groups would find informality of place and organisation more welcoming too. In 'big meetings' at work, people are often afraid to speak, which is why technical people like myself in technical settings constantly chant 'no such thing as a stupid question'.

One could argue that this discussion is not missing, in the sense that there's quite a lot of emphasis on 'member development', acknowledging that there is a gap here, but I'm not sure that's the right kind of (or the only) stuff to fill it or the right direction. Constant, unquestioning re-election, *not their fault, is clearly 'not helping'* however. Limiting to two terms as a voluntary act perhaps, might help, that's already nearly a decade (ex-councillors could, Singapore-style, be valued mentors in the great afterwards, so the experience is not lost).

## Embedded Top-Down-ness

Next, I believe, with the best of intentions (I mean that) there's non-radical 'top-down-ness' everywhere leaving un-navigated 'space' at the bottom[8]. For example, there's a (potentially, good) suggestion that there be local ward panels to unearth and correct some lower level problems and, hopefully, find opportunities. However up to 2013, I lived in Tower Hamlets and participated in the Local Area Partnership[9] meetings that became quickly 'councillor controlled' (the resident became a vice-chair, therefore, powerless after a very short time) after a brief period (unsatisfactory for the council, clearly) of 'free thought'. The rules and structure became byzantine and no-one much attended, after a while. Here's[10] a quote.

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7    Deep Hanging Out
8    Plenty of Room at the Bottom This footnote is totally irrelevant, but important for the history of science, fun too.
9    Local Area Partnerships in Tower Hamlets
10   Each LAP will have a Chair who will be one of the ward Councillors and a ViceChair who will be a resident

So, even if a little rowdy and sometimes unfocused (I do believe in the serendipity of ideas and meetings, however), these probably need to be resident-led with councillors sitting in the 'audience'. When a meeting is set up as a panel (panel on raised platform or front of room) the dynamic will always change. At time of writing, I have a resident's association Zoom in my inbox where there are three (!) councillors present, not sure whether that was by invitation though.

There's a good suggestion about experiments with parish councils too. In fact, I campaigned for one in Limehouse, about a decade ago. But there are also difficulties (to declare interest I commented on this, during the panel, it is mentioned, briefly) of hijack by a single ethnic group or a particular class interest. In the case of Limehouse, it was white middle class, from the Canary Wharf 'side' and as a cure for ASB problems, patiently trying to make the local Bangladeshi youth 'invisible' (to them). There is actually an approach to this that I/we discussed with NALC[11], that of *shadow parish councils* that have the same format, some influence but are not elected, formally empowered and can't (clearly) raise a precept. They operate with a limited remit but they also prefigure[12] and educate.

## Data and Systems

Turning (nearly said Turing, well him, as well) toward data and systems. I agree that the report cannot double in size, but here we have a canary or two in the mine of the Missing:

*in oversight, in setting direction, and in representing community views – needs to be designed throughout into new systems*
and here they are again:

*support new deliberative systems for policy-making, including being the conduit for recommendations and proposals arising from the new standing citizen's assembly*

As above I believe there is need for reactive rich sources of ideas 'further down' than the standing citizen's assemblies. There is no need to be afraid of this, if there's *honesty about the status of ideas*, that is, not everything gets passed to the policy and execution mill.

There is a disconnect between discussion, criticism and choice, the 'new systems'. There are suggestions on the deliberative side (pol.is[13], decidem[14] which feels 'better').  However the data exposure side from council, touched on b) discussion about data 'choices' and data creation, a key part of deliberating. Certainly, all the meta-question(s) 'what would you, like data about, when, how much detail?', 'would you help to make some?'. And, maybe before even reaching that, 'what's that and what is it good for?'. As an example of simple systems and informality, it would be interesting to see a Newham Twitter, a borough stream of consciousness provided, for example via Mastodon[15].

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member. This was added 'later', I seem to recall.
11   NALC website
12   Prefigurative Politics
13   Polis participatory democracy tool
14   Decidem civil participatory tool
15   Mastodon Microblogging

I don't believe the grab for academia, with regard to data is going to be particularly helpful either, thorough but also slow, opaque and probably intimidating. I've had a great many side discussions during the pandemic about natural experiments[16], linked, of course to citizen science too. John Snow's original experiment is very 'modern' too, since map based.

An example, from my own life on an estate in Tower Hamlets. Most estates are maintained by expensive, non-responsive third party contractors, Mitie, Mears et al. and residents (both rental and leasehold) live in a state of permanent dissatisfaction. Yet, it would be technically *easy to expose the maintenance and trouble ticket system to residents and resident's associations*, for example. Better, if there are comment fields, the victim (yes, yes) of the repair can comment, as we do daily on Amazon and Ebay. In fact, I had a side discussion about this during the flytipping meetings.

## Gatekeeping and Privileged Interlocutors

I'm slightly off-piste here, except that I feel there is a symbiosis between the 'existing players' in this space and the council. A desire for the familiar. Otherwise, hopefully, this is a useful micro-rant.

One of the problems of local organisations and charities is 'place' and 'gatekeeping'. For example, friend who teaches music asked (charity name deleted) about room rental, the reply was £55 per hour, thus meaning that the project was not feasible. Anything and everything that provides physical meetings and thus informal (pre-formal) groupings suffers from this and from tribal (religious, ethnic, class-based etc.) gatekeeping to some extent.

This, I believe, is to some extent in symbiosis with static council and, thus, embedded, unexamined and rigid relationships, school governors, resident's associations. There is very little (either physical or intellectual) space for new things to form, flourish and associate, except under the watchful eye and within infrastructure provided by the status quo. One part of a 'cure' that we applied in Brussels to the 'usual suspects' was to make existing contractors apply as consortia, so that they would cooperate rather than compete as they often do within the current grants system. How about some 'mystery shopping' too?

I've recently (apart from the library, they haven't answered the simple 'core' question yet) had a 'full and frank exchange of views' with one of the local cycling groups. I do not own a car and have cycled in London (Paris, Brussels and elsewhere) since 1976. It was actually about the Low Traffic Neighbourhood that encompasses where I live, they were a little surprised that a) I felt that they were inward looking (though I value their work) and b) more surprised that I am not an unconditional LTN supporter.  It was cooked up in private and then presented fully formed to the area as unalloyed goodness to be commented upon. It would have certainly benefited (though the car opposition would have been very vocal) from a wider co-productive consensus at the start, we're back to: *saying that the way that the Commission had been established did not demonstrate a commitment on the part of the Council to genuinely work alongside local people in making decisions* or a fortiori: *a wider public helping form and coproduce some the prefigurative ideas.*

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16   Natural Experiments

Incidentally, commonplace[17] the tool used is top-down (and rather patronising, over simplifying too, do we really need emoticons as 'answers'?) in that residents cannot see the total stream of commentary, can only click on the individual pins. No apparent way to submit overarching 'non-pin' commentary either. I include this to show assumed, embedded power balance in many digital tools.

# Что делать? What is to be Done?

The first is finding ways to substantially balance the democratic deficit, complacency and cynicism outside the chamber. I'm currently part of the initiative that will produce a local community based newspaper[18], one of the suggestions in the report. I believe that will 'help' but since it will have to have broad appeal it's unlikely to be very critical or controversial, it will (understandably) occupy the 'centre ground'. We'll need more than that and 'different'.

Some of the rest, in my opinion, is an active, vigorous civic society full of debate and ideas, some of which can be captured (by 'systems') and acted upon. I believe there are three bits of this, civic education (part of my current battle with the contents of the library), systems and spaces. These, I believe, will act as a *partial counterbalance* to the single party chamber. More uncomfortably (but actually 'better' for the borough) they may eventually lead to the election of opposition councillors.

## Systems and Initiatives

I try to avoid catchphrases and marketing messages, but let's start, anyway, with 'informal, incremental, interstitial and (finally) integrated'.

### *Informal*

Apart from 'listening' to civil society, heat waves, new pandemics, food and water crises are going to need quick and networked responses, the assemblies and formal deliberative tools are not going to deal with that particularly well or at all.

There is a good precedent and example for this in the Occupy Sandy[19] initiative that combined and meshed a great many informal systems to provide an integrated relief effort. I'm aware, that Newham has done well in informal cooperation with Covid-19, but this is an area where more informal, less academic or institutional systems would be very useful.

An anecdote from the City. My group, the systems engineering group was called after a problem with 'failed transactions'. After a while (a story involving ping[20]), we found 'failed transactions' under a desk, a cleaner had unplugged it to polish the floor. It was improvised, since getting central IT to build things was slow and annoying. We built them a nicer one. The Google sheets in the third sector during the crisis show simple but unaddressed needs and coproduction opportunities too.

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17  Commonplace: the software
18  Newham Voices
19  Occupy Sandy
20  Ping

### Incremental and Interstitial

Incremental and interstitial are probably companion plants. One maddening example is the little patches of grass everywhere in the borough that subcontractors are paid to mow and mow again. These are clearly 'interstitial', but there is a conceptual and political form of interstitial discussed here[21]. These are areas of activity that can be reclaimed and repurposed incrementally too without too much upset at the core.

Incremental also means 'small grain size', the contents of post-its that are lost (I asked for the flytipping ones, didn't get them, so far, they're probably binned) when looking for some larger goal. The *smaller goal or idea may well be pivotal* and may scale up into something larger too. There are usually 'clues' in the current workflows too.

I already put some jostaberries for general consumption[22] on the patch near my house, the contractors probably try to kill them, but I believe we've reached a compromise now. Again, a tiny map system beckons.

As for the political and societal space, for example advice and support from the council to establish smaller projects and social enterprises and then (if competent, of course) using them.

As for experiments with ward level and small group engagement formats and systems. There are many, many open source tools that will support this, some may have found their way to the G-Cloud[23] too, I haven't investigated, so far. In principle, this was the preferred direction of central government also.

### Integrated

That may be too ambitious a word, 'joined[24]' or 'associated' are other relevant words in the area of the 'design of new systems'. Two examples, one feeding down and the other feeding up.

Before starting this document, I took a look at the borough Climate Action Plan. Actually I wanted to make a rough comparison with Hackney climate action which I felt to be more radical and more supported by depth of research. However, one simple thing that can  be done, easily, is to expose the plan as a series of acts that are either achieved or not, the structure is already in the table like format of the plan itself[25].

| 1.3 Tree Canopy Cover • Address any current tree management issues. |
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Uncomfortable, perhaps, but better than masses of verbiage, see De-Orwellisation, below.

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21   Interstitial revolution
22   Incredible Edible
23   G Cloud, especially the Digital Marketplace
24   As in 'small pieces loosely joined' from the days of Unix.
25   Newham Climate Emergency Action Plan

Feeding up. Rojava and Ocalan, inspired by Bookchin[26] envisage small assemblies that feed into larger ones and are, also networked (or federated) amongst themselves. Newham and the whole commission may recoil in horror to find that some of their ideas and concepts (especially the assemblies) were posited most often and recently by 'anarchists' (later 'muncipalists'). Maybe they already knew. But, see also  *A liberating technology. Social ecology is not opposed to modern technologies but is in favour of developing them to put them at the service of human beings.* These ideas suggest (to me) two forms of integration:

- Upwards, so that ward activity, idea activity, borough stream of consciousness activity is connected to deliberation on the broader, more abstract decisions and directions.

- Sideways so that organisations and initiatives in the borough have a common meeting and cooperation point, *whilst retaining their autonomy*.

In fact, as for sideways, I was one of the founders of Sustainable Hackney[27] or HEN (as it started out) and we produced an organisation and website that provided links to and with all the constituent organisations, event calendars, messages and contact points. It's still active. Originally this was done with a piece of software called Elgg[28], used by universities. In my opinion, (especially since it immediately crashed my browser upon opening), OneNewham would certainly benefit from this kind of approach.

### De-Orwellisation

I've already touched on informal, previously.  I'd add 'authentic' too, since the 2019 assemblies had something of the game show or the Debordian 'spectacle'[29] about them, officials as hosts with microphones, large screens with computer graphics and agenda push from the top, council and officials. Only the light show was missing.

There's a spectrum of informality in exchange, ranging from court and council chamber to street shouting match. I've already said, in the first Zoom, that I'd like to see some adoption of unconference[30] techniques in meetings. But, as a personal comment choice, I'd also prefer that none of these look and sound like game shows. Let's not 'dumb down' rather 'inform and educate up' (I've broken my promise again).

More controversially, as part of the battle against cynicism, I'd also like to see a removal of comms slogans, photo-ops and jpg logos (which are a waste of bandwidth and energy too). Outside, I haven't met a single person who likes 'at the heart of what we do' because like 'in the DNA of our organisation' and all the other usual suspects, they don't mean anything or have any concrete consequences. Same-same for 'empower'[31] often a synonym for 'patronise'.

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26  Social Ecology
27  Sustainable Hackney
28  Elgg Social Network Software
29  Debord's Spectacle
30  Unconference styles
31  Dilbert on Empowerment

## Conclusions

Sorry, there aren't any, I hope though this is more a set of resources that may permit a deeper discussion and, to some extent it is 'truth to power' document. So, how about a lovely quote that I used at the end of my last bit of 'academic' work:

*"Much that is terrible we do not know. Much that is beautiful we shall still discover. Let's sail till we come to the edge."*[32]

Hugh Barnard  August 2020

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32  Thomas Disch: From Camp Concentration