

Unlock Democracy Council
Saturday 6 July 2019
5th Floor, 9 King Street, London EC2V 8EA
MINUTES

Present:

Debbie Chay, Vicky Seddon, Alex Runswick, Tim Rouse, Sam Coates, Jack Maizels, Mike Trace, John Ferguson, Peter Hirst, Andrew Blick, Rachel Collinson, Danny Zinkus.

Present by phone:

Jessica Metherringham, Stephen Carter, Phil Starr

1. Apologies, minutes and matters arising

a) Apologies

Ian Driver & Andrew Manning.

b) Matters arising

Malcom MacIntyre-Read suffered a serious head injury leading him to resign from Council. A card was signed for him from Council members.

c) Minutes of the last meeting

DECISION: The minutes were approved nem con.

d) Minutes of the last Management Board meeting

These were noted pending matters arising to be discussed elsewhere in the agenda.

2. Finance

As there were no Council meetings before the start of the new financial year, it was necessary for the Chairs to approve the new budget and strategy. This is in line with the organisation's constitution. In taking this step they consulted with the Management Board and brought this to Council as soon as possible for ratification.

Vicky Seddon asked if the Management Board-approved budget needed to be approved by this meeting. Alex responded that a new budget comes to every Council meeting and needs to be approved.

Alex Runswick reported that there had been no significant changes to the budget since the Management Board meeting. It was noted that the presentation of internal financial information has been changed to more explicitly link income to expenditure.

Alex Runswick reported that the Brexit Civil Society Alliance currently had 2 years of funding from 2 funders, with the hope of additional funding from the Goldsmith Foundation. This work was ongoing, including approaching other funders to secure the gap in the current budget.

Alex Runswick reported that the staff team's current funding priority was telemarketing, but that it would shift back towards grant applications and other types of fundraising after the new team were in place. The intention is to move to a 2 year budget setting process.

Vicky Seddon said that the decision made by Management Board was a big one and was happy to see the debate mapped out in detail in the minutes. She thought it was the right decision, but that the risks are big. Alex clarified that UD's reserves had been growing, and that these were paying for the planned deficit.

It was clarified that the budget presumed a delay in letting the vacant floor in Cynthia Street, but that if it was still empty in December the budget would need to be revisited.

ACTION: Alex to produce a 2 page summary of the new strategy and budget timeline, to keep a close eye on progress and when Council would need to reconsider the budget.

There was a general discussion about the growth budget decided by Management Board, with broad agreement. Tim outlined how grateful staff team were for the support from MB and Council in this risky but exciting time.

DECISION: The budget was approved nem con.

3. Rodell

a) Office Move

Alex Runswick reported that the organisation would be moving to a new office near Old Street. It was expected that the move would take place on the last weekend of July.

The negotiations with Hansard over repayment of back-rent were ongoing. Having initially agreed to 2 year repayment period, their board had requested payment of all back-rent by December. Despite contingency planning, Rodell is not in a position to do this without additional financing.

Phil Starr felt that a meeting with Hansard's Chair should be attempted to negotiate a longer repayment period.

Rachel Collinson suggested that, while a risky decision, UD could consider fundraising to cover this shortfall.

Jack Maizels said that in this situation, negotiations should not insist on a 2 year payment period, but that we need longer than 5 months.

Vicky Seddon reassured the staff team that they should feel that we have their backing and that we have acted reasonably in this situation.

Phil Starr commented that it is critical that there is not a charge on the assets as this would impact on the redevelopment of Grays Inn Road.

DECISION: Council expressed its concern about the sudden move to a very short repayment period and delegated responsibility to Phil Starr, Danny Zinkus Sutton and Debbie Chay to negotiate with the Hansard Society to seek to extend the repayment schedule. It was confirmed that if this was not possible it would be necessary for Rodell to seek additional financing to meet these commitments and that Council, as Rodell's shareholder, would recommend this course of action to the Rodell Board should negotiations not be successful.

ACTION: Alex to give Debbie a copy of the previous office lease regarding the back-rent situation.

b) Cynthia Street

Alex Runswick reported that one floor remained vacant, however the asking price has been reduced which has increased viewings.

c) Grays Inn Road

Alex Runswick informed Council that the planning application had been submitted. The tenders for work had been received, and permission was expected to be granted in 4 weeks although delays in this process were common. She added that Simon would be contacting RBS about financing the redevelopment shortly and that the Rodell Board would be sent the relevant information as soon as possible.

Stephen Carter said that it would be helpful for Rodell meetings to have an overview timeline of expected developments, to make it easier for Management Board planning.

Phil Starr and Simon Howard were thanked for their work on this issue so far.

ACTION: Simon Howard to circulate a timeline for the different stages and decision points of the redevelopment of 37 Grays Inn Road.

4. New Constitution campaign

Sam Coates spoke to the paper that had been circulated. He stated that the new campaign approach focuses on gaining public backing in order to exert pressure on politicians, meaning that there would need to be significant work outside of Parliament. This political opportunity led to proposals for extra staff capacity that were proposed in the budget.

He added that the staff team had reviewed the organisation's campaigning approach over the last 10 years, which he described as a 'half-think-tank, half-campaign' approach, and concluded that this hasn't worked well, and was not a viable approach going forward.

A review was produced of the campaigning landscape which showed that UD needs to shift its mentality from an institution to a platform for people with a voice. It was clarified that this voice could be staff or new campaigners from a diverse range of backgrounds, involving more emphasis on content generation. It was stated that we need to invest in grassroots organising capacity, and build relationships with the post-crash left.

Alex Runswick added that it was important that the organisation moved to speaking about democracy in terms of values rather than rules and institutions.

Danny Zinkus Sutton commended the staff team's moral courage in identifying these changes and stated that Council had been asking the staff to go in this direction of working for years and emphasised that this is Council's last opportunity to vote down this direction.

Jessica Metherringham agreed that placing democracy in a values context is precisely right, as well as giving a platform to different voices. She asked for more detail about how we planned to get our content and voices 'out there' and suggested we could work with groups like NEON who are good at engaging with marginalised communities.

Sam Coates responded that the team are doing development work and identifying growth areas. The team were already in contact with NEON but would extend the scope of conversation to how to centre marginalised voices.

Andrew Blick asked whether Unlock Democracy is still a cross party organisation. What we are perceived as being will affect who we can work with.

Alex Runswick said that Unlock Democracy remains a cross-party organisation and will remain open to anybody who shares our values but that the type of rights and protections we would want to be included in a constitution would be more appealing to some groups than others.

Vicky Seddon said the team had done a brave evaluation of where we've gone wrong. She approved of talk of a 'new democratic settlement' - 'constitution' doesn't have the same public resonance. She also suggested that themes that could exist in a new constitution could help guide how we build partnerships.

John Ferguson asked success would be measured and how quickly plans could be adapted to respond to successes or failures. He argued that it must be an evolving process.

Danny Zinkus Sutton asked when Council would get a paper on Key Performance Indicators for the new campaign strategy. Tim Rouse replied that there was a detailed internal staging document. The test is for when we hit each stage of each stage, not the difficulty of getting from any stage to the next.

Mike Trace commented that promoting abstract constitution is difficult, but we also can't write one and impose it. The question was posed "What is attractive to most people?" and gave a solution of 'here are the problems, a constitution would resolve or address those questions.' Another question was asked on how to attract the most people and suggested a focus on elites and money, representative democracy where politicians are serving own interests and are dishonest and Unrepresentative systems. He agreed we should be non-aligned.

Jack Maizels expressed concern about the usage of 'written constitution' in internal documents and suggested that this may not encourage a values-based discussion. Tim Rouse clarified that this was an internal organisational handout that does not reflect how the team communicates in public.

Alex Runswick said this campaign strategy is not about choosing between talking to MPs or building movement, both were necessary but in different stages. In the initial period staff resources would be spent on building a movement. It was stated that over time, MPs will become more and more important to the campaign.

ACTION: Alex to prepare Key Performance Indicators paper for Council.

5. Pamphlet

Alex Runswick introduced the item speaking about the excellent work that had been done by Sarah Clarke. She emphasised that the approach outlined in the summary document, is building on decisions Council has been making since March 2017.

There were a number of comments on the current wording of the pamphlet – including the uses of 'neoliberal' ideology and the elite, and whether the same arguments could be presented using less loaded language.

Jack Maizels said that links between problem and the structures isn't entirely clear and asked for clarification.

Mike Trace asked about the fundamental purpose of the pamphlet. Alex Runswick responded that it was to have an evidence-based policy position on why we need a new constitution now and clarified that the imagined audience is already engaged in politics.

Stephen Carter said it was well written, although reads as a 'labour campaign for democracy' paper and suggested that we can be radical while being a 'broader church' than this. He made the statement that power is central, but isn't central enough in the document.

Andrew Blick asked how the pamphlet would pass the "Conservative MP representing Cornwall" test. He stated the idea that big change should require a larger consensus than at present needs to be a function of a new constitution. Jack Maizels added that the document should be acceptable to either a centrist Labour or left-wing Lib Dem MP.

Rachel Collinson expressed approval of talk of dark power and new politics rules and suggested we use visual metaphors.

Alex Runswick responded to many of the concerns and agreed that the team will reflect on feedback. She reiterated that the positions taken are a reflection of the balance of political forces, and who we can hope to recruit to a movement for democracy.

Jessica Metheringham suggested that things that sound radical could be presented as collected from grassroots voices. The document could be a basis for a broad discussion in public about how to fix our broken constitution.

Stephen Carter suggested focusing on a 'people's process' not a constitution but that he was impressed with the overall scope of the pamphlet.

8. Expenses policy

Alex introduced the draft policy and stated that it encouraged people to book things in advance as possible to save costs, but that UD would be understanding if plans changing that lead to increased costs. The spirit of the policy is to allow for flexibility rather than assuming that unreasonable claims will be made.

DECISION: The policy was agreed and it was further agreed that it would be reviewed after one year.

9. Director's report

Alex Runswick spoke to her report and took questions. She also reported that UD was seeking Living Wage accreditation.

ACTION: Alex to circulate the organisational structure including the new staff.

Vicky Seddon asked whether the BCSA project has generated contacts and relationships or a better reputation for UD. Alex Runswick agreed that this had been the case although it had not yet led to joint projects.

A question was raised about the level of applications for new posts, and it was asked whether a move from application forms to CVs should be considered. It was agreed that there were strong equality reasons for not doing this.

9. AOB

Stephen Carter informed Council that he had written an article for the Fabians calling for democratic reform, and that he was in conversations with an ex-Supreme Court judge about possibly building an elite consensus for reform along the lines of Make Votes Matters' Good Systems Agreement.

Jack Maizels mentioned that possible constitutional amendments to the AGM were being worked on. He will be in contact with members to follow this up.

The date of the next meeting is Saturday 14th December 2019.