Unlock Democracy Council Meeting Minutes

20th July 2024

The Council meeting was held on zoom and in person.

1. Introductions

Council members and Jane Reed (JR) from the Rodell Board introduced themselves, followed by staff introductions from Grace Barnett (GB), Shaun Roberts (SR), Tom Brake (TB).

2. Strategy outline

Strategy V3.2

TB took people through the strategy. This is a slightly revised version (compared to that last presented to Council) with new deadlines in Appendix 1.

He explained that UD's strategy and campaigns have to sit within the framework set out by UD's constitution. UD's main focus is firstly on a written constitution and then on transparency in decision making, power close to the people and democratic accountability.

A discussion re devolution followed. TB confirmed that whilst the new government's plans represented some progress, there will still be work for UD to do as powers may only be granted to local authorities if they agree to a directly elected mayor. This isn't genuine devolution.

TB referred to two reports UD commissioned on local government and devolution. They can be accessed here:

https://unlockdemocracy.org.uk/resources-research/2024/4/10/power-to-the-people-the-route-to-english-devolution

https://unlockdemocracy.org.uk/resources-research/2021/6/17/local-government-in-england-40-years-of-decline

On the question of local accountability TB referred to the impact PR would have on breaking up one party states in local government. UD also works with organisations that are pushing for an improvement in the audit of local government.

A review of the strategy will be undertaken in roughly 6 months. This should consider in particular any changes to the strategy triggered by the new government's policy stances. **Action TB to include an item on the strategy review in February's Council agenda.**

Action TB to ascertain what campaigning UD could do on the electoral system for trade union elections (they are apparently required to conduct their elections using First Past the Post).

Action TB to ensure a teaching pack for UD is available to be used by any Council member going into a school to talk about UD.

3. Updates from Chair and staff

Chair's report

Jess Metheringham (JM) tabled her report for information.

240720 - Chair's report

Director's update

TB's report was tabled for information. He highlighted in particular the work UD is doing with the National Campaign for PR (NC4PR).

240720 - Director's report

Director of campaigns

SR walked people through the campaigns UD are running. He flagged areas of UD's campaigning where he expects to make progress (using traffic lights Red, Amber and Green as indicators).
SR explained that our campaigns will focus on: systemic change, ensuring fairness and safeguarding our democracy (see slide 8 of the Powerpoint presentation below)

SR was asked various questions on data protection/privacy and automatic voter registration (this is a key consideration in our campaign for AVR), think tank regulation (they could be subject to rules similar to lobbying rules) and cleaning up politics (government statements on cleaning up politics need to be matched by action for the traffic light to go green).

On AVR and Votes at 16, it is possible that these were not included in the King's Speech because electoral registration officers are already under significant pressure linked to the Elections Act 2022, and/or because these changes, to have the biggest impact, only need to be in place before the next general election and therefore could be in the next couple of King's Speeches. On AVR, the government may be waiting to see the impact of the AVR trials in Wales before proceeding.

council july 24.pptx

SR also tabled the written report below.

240716 Council Campaigns update

Media Manager

Since the last Council meeting, Steve Gilmore (SGilmore) has worked on a range of media assignments, including photo voter ID, Automatic Voter Registration, the General Election etc.

Membership Update

GB highlighted the significant progress over the last 3 years in membership (it has doubled). A discussion re the cost of signing up a new member ensued. GB confirmed this is relatively low cost, as normally we 'upgrade' supporters to members, so the 'journey' to membership is short/cheap.

240717 Membership Report to Council July 2024

Campaigns officer

Alice's report was tabled for information.

240719 - Campaigns Officer report

Dashboard

The dashboard reports on key indicators that UD tracks to measure whether UD's strategy is proving effective. June's dashboard is provided below.

UD dashboard - 2024-2025

4. Get to know each other - session 1

Jane Reed led session. People moved into small groups and introduced themselves and set out what they wanted to achieve at UD.

5. Formal council business

Apologies

Council members
Lee Jasper (LJ), Stephen Carter (SC)

Rodell
Andy Manning

Staff
Steve Gilmore (SG), Alice Jeffrey (AJ), Simon Howard (SH), Ralph Hall (RH)

Attendance

Council members

In person
Catherine Bearder (CB), Stephen Gosling (SG), Stuart Hill (SH), Jess Metheringham (JM), David Schley (DS), Rebecca Warren (RWarren), Sam Wheeler (SM), Luke Williams (LW)

Online
Ian Driver (ID), Deborah Manzoori (DM), Chante O'Shaughnessy (CO) (departed early), Vicky Seddon (VS), Mary Southcott (MS), Richard Wood (RW) (departed early)

NB not all attendees were present for the whole meeting

Rodell

In person
Jane Reed (JR)

Staff

Tom Brake (TB), Grace Barnett (GB) (morning) and Shaun Roberts (SR) (morning)

Minutes

Council

It was agreed that in future the chair should not move a vote.

In section 14 of the minutes, ‘JS’ has been amended to ‘JM’, to now read ‘JM proposed the use of OpaVote as the polling application’

The minutes were approved, subject to the change above, by those present at the meeting of the 240413 (LW, CB, RWarren, JS, SG, SH, VS), with those not present on the 240413 abstaining.

240413 - Council Minutes

TB confirmed that the Rodell/MB/Council minutes and Management Board minutes links to which were provided in the agenda were in fact the same set of minutes.

Rodell/MB/Council

The minutes (240617 Rodell/MB/Council meeting minutes) were approved by Council members present at the meeting of the 240617 (LW, JS, SG, VS), with those not present on the 240617 abstaining.

Matters arising

Action JM/TB to send ‘thank you’ letters from the Council and TB to Antony Frost, Peter Hirst, Jacob Webb and Maggie Nelmes.

SH asked how much did we save using OpaVote? **Action GB to provide an answer.** [The answer is a saving of £1,100 compared to the cost in 2022.]

Dates of next meetings

The next MB meeting date is tbc
The next Council meetings will be: Sept 28th (it had been proposed originally for Sept 21st) online in the morning and Feb (tbc)
The next AGM will be on 16th Nov 2024 (hybrid meeting) in London

6. Finance

See the Director’s report for links to the relevant reports.

TB drew attention to the largest likely variances in UD’s budget. These relate to predictions about grant funding (grant applications are all speculative), the budget for attending party conferences (UD hadn't expected to attend conferences in the autumn because that was when the general election was expected, UD is now attending as the conferences are being held in the autumn). There is variance in staff salaries. This relates to the fact that UD has hired Ralph Hall on behalf of the NC4PR with his salary costs covered by contributions from a number of organisations. Another variance that could occur would be related to UD being required to find new (potentially more expensive) premises should the development at 55 Broadway proceed. It has just been confirmed that this is unlikely before 2026.

TB drew attention to the fact that his 3 year UD budget (24/25, 25/26, 26/27) is predicting a deficit in each of the 3 years, but he intends preparing a 3 year budget which will no longer depend on Rodell funding in 3 years time (or reduce dependence significantly). Currently UD receives £72k per year in management fees and £66k per year in dividends from Rodell and financial support to cover office and utility costs.

TB also highlighted that the UD budget, whilst it reflects these Rodell contributions, does not reflect some additional financial support that is expected after the completion of the development project, and rental income that could be derived from the shop unit in Grays Inn Road (£35k?).

On the subject of redundancies, should UD fold, DM confirmed that the government would provide some minimal redundancy if UD hadn't made the necessary provision. Currently UD holds the equivalent of just under 3 months of salaries in the current account.

On the subject of conferences, TB explained it was the UD staff team who decided which conferences (party conferences or others) UD reps attend. Council members can suggest conferences, but the cost of attending conferences is significant and attendance may not be financially justified or affordable.

7. Governance

Elections

The following induction pack (which contains role descriptions for the Chair and Vice-Chairs) was provided to council candidates and provides details about Unlock Democracy and its activities

2024 New Council Member Induction Pack

These documents below are provided for information purposes only. TB recommended that Council members re-read them occasionally. All Council members have provided their eligibility declaration and code of conduct forms.

Council candidate/member eligibility declaration form

Code of Conduct for Council members.docx

TB confirmed that half of the Council members have returned the Conflict of Interest form. **Action remaining Council members to return it. [As at 26/9/2024 they have all been returned]**

6 - Conflict of interest Policy and Form

Risk management strategy

Risk management strategy

Action MB to discuss and agree who will review the risk areas set out in the risk management strategy. SG recommended that the areas covered should be regularly switched around.

It was agreed at DM's request that Health and Safety should be a standing item on each council agenda. **Action TB.**

8. Rodell

SG gave a verbal report (and tabled a written report 240717 Rodell Chair's Report) and answered a number of questions including:

- what's the liability for Rodell Directors? £1
- what are the plans for the commercial unit? selling or leasing is an option.

SH asked whether it would be possible to have a by-election to fill the unfilled Rodell places. TB pointed out that there has just been an election to Rodell and sufficient candidates didn't come forward. **Action TB and the new Chair of the Rodell Board to consider approaching people to ask them whether they would be happy to be appointed to the Board.**

Action TB: to ask JRRT whether they would consider giving us a loan

9. Get to know each other - session 2

The following ideas for making the Council work more effectively as a team emerged from the afternoon's breakout session:

Organise break out sessions during online meetings - to enable more informal policy discussions. **Action TB**
Set up a Whatsapp group (or a number) for Council members. **Action new Chair of Unlock Democracy**
Make a small investment in improved conference equipment (more mics for instance). **Action TB to investigate**
Meet in person for Council members who live close together - London based members could join Jane's dinner discussion group for instance. **Action JR and other council members**
Publicise the expenses policy (to encourage more people to attend in person). **Action TB**
Hold every second meeting in person. **Action TB**
Make more use of Council members, including helping them to work together with local UD members. **Action TB**
Provide list of emails, addresses and telephone numbers to Council members. **Action TB**
All present agreed to have their details shared (CB, LW, JR, RWarren, SH, SG, DS, SW, JM, DM, VS, MS) with other Council members only. **Action TB** to circulate details to all council members who have agreed to have their details shared.

10. Explanation of the Elections to Chair/Vice Chair and Management Board

TB took council members through the election process

240717 - Elections for Chair/Vice Chair and Management Board

11. Size of management board

240718 - Size of Management Board

SH proposed that the Council should agree that 7 should be the size of MB. This was seconded by SG. This was approved by 10 votes with 1 abstention and no votes against.

12. Co Optees

CB proposed that the Council should ask TB and Management Board to look at the appointment of co optees and youth ambassadors: why, what would be the purpose etc. This was seconded by SH and agreed by Council. **Action TB and MB to bring proposals to September's meeting.**

240717 - Co optees

13. AOB

Mark Kieran was thanked for acting as returning officer. He had to take no action during the elections. **Action TB to pass on our thanks.**

It was agreed to ask Helena Kennedy whether she will remain as our Honorary President.
Action TB

Action TB to ensure how we feed back to our members is on the next agenda.

TB confirmed that the minutes for Council meetings are on Unlock Democracy's website.
Action MB to discuss whether draft Council meeting minutes can be circulated to Rodell Board members for information.

Action TB to circulate expenses form - by email to all Council members.

UD's thanks to Geoff Woodcock for his longstanding support for UD was noted.
Action TB to ensure Geoff is thanked in writing.