



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary notes from the meeting held on Tuesday 27 September

Present:

Dr Andrew Mycock
Cllr Andrew Marchington
Cllr Gemma Wilson

In Attendance:

Carl Whistlecraft, David Bundy, Spencer Wilson, Diane Sims, Andrea Woodside

Witness:

Adrian Lythgo was appointed Chief Executive of Kirklees Council in July 2010.

His external focus has been to strengthen the Council's focus on the local economy and relationships with business, particularly with manufacturing and engineering companies which drive the local economy, and to modernise the Council's approach to commissioning and service delivery. A key feature of that focus is to strengthen the relationship between schools and local communities including employers with relation to skills and employability and to foster more strategic commissioning of outcomes in health and social care for both children and adults.

He is passionate about the difference that effective community leadership can make to local people's quality of life. He continues to pursue the Council's established approach of celebrating the diversity of Kirklees in all its different aspects.

He has also been Head of Paid service for the West Yorkshire and York Combined Authority which has helped cement Kirklees influence at a regional and sub regional level including working closely with local authority Leaders and Chief Executives on a collaborative approach to devolution.

Internally he oversees the Council's journey to become a "New Council" which balances the need to achieve priorities such as those set out above with significantly reduced resources.

Prior to joining Kirklees, Adrian spent 10 years with KPMG where he was an Associate Partner in Leeds where most recently he was responsible for the firm's

public sector offer, advising Universities, NHS bodies and Colleges as well as providing services to local authorities. He was the national lead for the firm's assurance advisory services.

Previously he had a broadly based career in the public sector, including time at the Audit Commission where he was involved in the development of inspection and policy development in addition to statutory audit responsibilities for public sector clients. He is also Honorary Secretary of the Society of Metropolitan Chief Executives.

Summary of Discussion

Regional Devolution

Adrian Lythgo explained that there are issues around devolution and how our councillors influence the sub-regional agenda. Linked to this is the devolution from Kirklees council to local areas – you cannot discuss one without the other. In terms of regional devolution, it is crucial that districts are clear about their priorities in a way that resonates with all the towns, communities and political parties. – Kirklees is many different communities, towns, villages – establishing overall priorities to resonate with parties and towns is very difficult.

The sub-regional agenda needs clarity, plans and benefits for local people. We need to be clear what needs to be brokered in individual communities. In the context of New Council and economic resilience and health and well-being we need to work with communities to reduce demand for services in the longer term. We need to engage councillors in what this means and engage with the views of the local populations at the next level down.

Councillors have shared values in terms of what is important in being a local councillor. That said there is a growing need for all councillors to be community leaders and community brokers locally and district wide as part of the sub-region. Furthermore there is also the important issue of representative democracy which is about taking important decisions on behalf of the electorate and we need to find the right balance. In this context the crucial role is community engagement, community brokering and being able to distil what that means for the districts.

Adrian Lythgo explained that regional devolution should not disempower local democracy at a Kirklees level given the current governance and accountability of the WYCA. It is a collaboration of district councils and the LCR enterprise partnership. That said it is important that Leaders collaborate in a different way, with a focus on their shared values and objectives. There is clearly potential for Mayoral devolution to destabilise this relationship. Whilst Kirklees does welcome devolution and accepts having a Mayor providing there is a connection with local councillors i.e. an elected assembly. So far devolution is based on the subsidiarity principle which works.

The Changing Role of the Councillor

Adrian explained that the council is trying to support communities and residents to understand the changing councillor role through initiatives involving co-production, e.g. the Cities of Service programme. We are proactively seeking to find ways of involving local communities in decision making. The real dilemma is that when people speak about representative democracy they are often talking about councillors “doing what I want”

The brokering role is a facet of Kirklees democracy, with many different populations, towns and villages which maps across into party politics. This can be resolved through co-production and being clear at what level you can resolve issues.

In terms of resources Adrian Lythgo explained that it is important to have a level of ambition for councillors to recognise that they are at the forefront of the engagement and debate. The Council needs to support this and recognise that councillors will require a level of support. Councillors need to be at the forefront of the community dialogue and then come back with a clear picture of what needs to be done. This should inform what needs to be put in place, not the other way round.

Cllrs have an important role in developing new ways of working in a way that benefits citizens. One way in which this could be achieved / progressed is through the creation of a forum to discuss common priorities across the district between different communities. The starting point for this is that councillors want to have this conversation and have the time and space to do it. This will require agreement

Adrian Lythgo discussed the issues set out in the Shelbrooke Report, particularly in terms of the mix and role of councillors. Adrian felt that there is a mix of councillors now and moving to a model of a full time councillor would mean that they couldn't be an effective broker as they would be part of the corporate body. “It is important they remain in a unique position between the public and the council. There is a real need to have all councillors in a community brokering role. I would not support full time councillors fulfilling this function – it would miss the point.” In terms of changing roles, both councillors and the council need to be clear about outcomes that really matter at a strategic and community level. Intelligence, strategically and locally, is crucial to making this happen.

Adrian observed that there are challenges in terms of attracting the next generation of councillors and officers. Particularly with regards to councillors, it is not currently perceived as ‘the way to change things’ in the way that is once was. In this context Adrian explained that he would not support a limitation on terms of office as there may be situations where councillor has 40 years’ experience and still have high levels of motivation. Councillors need to be supported to be like that and, without introducing formal performance management for councillors, there is a feedback mechanism which demonstrates the impact that councillors are having. This is not an issue for officers to resolve, but for the political groups. We should be supporting councillors to undertake development whilst making sure that there is a feedback mechanism in place.

In terms of councillor remuneration Adrian explained that he felt that councillors are not currently remunerated appropriately. Where people put themselves forward they need to be rewarded for the impact that they have. If we accept that the community broker role is important councillors should be better remunerated, on the proviso that there is a check on impact against a framework. Adrian reminded the Commission of the evidence he had given to the Members Allowances Independent Review Panel where he advocated the need to attract a range experiences and professions to the council which involves (amongst other things) the need to make it easier for people to be released from work. Issues such as these can only be properly addressed by a national debate.

The Relationship Between the Citizen and the State

Adrian Lythgo explained that the current landscape is complex and inaccessible to many citizens. There is an increased divergence between young people who live in an information age and the older generation who have access to the same information but want to work in a different way, through relationships – they need to be good at both. The majority of councillors are in the latter category and it is difficult for them to articulate how people can access information on social media and share information when they lack the skills or knowledge to do so.

Adrian Lythgo explained that he believed citizens were clearer in terms of accountability but less so about governance and decision making. Most people intuitively know to go to their local councillor to get an issues resolved, whilst MPs tend to get involved where there is “market failure”. Furthermore residents tend to approach MPs with more complex issues where people need help navigating the system.

Adrian explained that governance is incredibly complicated in the UK – Leaders, Mayors, PCCs, Councillors, MPs, 3 levels of local NHS – some of which the Council has interface with and some that it doesn't. We need to simplify this as best we can although the basic building block must be the local councillor. Community brokers have a role at the front edge of this relationship. The answer is to declutter the system and be clear about national and local democracy. The council's role is to explain this in relation to particular issues NOT structures and processes.

Adrian explained that, in the context of communities having solutions to problems, there is an assumption that money is the resource and that is not always the case. There is an awful lot of resource in the community. Local contracts between communities and providers need to be established, along with the sense of community responsibility. “We need to start in the community and work outwards.”

The Role of the Press

Adrian explained that he recognised and accepted that all of the media is a business and needs to generate turnover in addition to sharing news. The free press needs to fund its news capacity. In this context the council needs to be transparent and to be clear about sending out rational messages. We have significantly reduced our

management structure and have been very transparent about where we spend money. We need to have a good relationship with the press that we can. For a place like Kirklees, it is really important for the fabric of society that there is a local paper, although we need to tell the story rationally, better and more. It is relationship based, whilst not relying entirely on the press to get the message across. Most importantly councillors need to be at the forefront of that interaction. Local press is organised and structured and is mediated, which is not the case with social media which is almost wholly unregulated.

Councillors and Officers

Adrian explained that the changing role of the councillor has profound implications for how public servants fulfil their roles. As local councillors become more focussed on a community brokering role it COULD lead to officers setting the policy agenda with less resource without links back to local communities. It is important that we guard against this. In this context local intelligence and evidence become more important and means that we have to put the officer resource into a different space, with a greater focus on supporting community based conversations. Adrian explained that the only way to address this need is to shift officer resource out of decision making and into practical support for those conversations. As part of this process decision making needs to become much slicker whilst still complying with the legal framework.

Elections and the Electoral Cycle

Adrian explained that in his capacity as Returning Officer, he felt that it is unhelpful to run multiple elections on one day. The Kirklees experience has been that voters are predominantly there for one election and seek advice and guidance in terms of other ballot papers. This often leads to a high volume being spoilt papers. Adrian explained that he does not agree with running a parliamentary with a local election – it's a real frustration for councillors that their votes are determined by national politics and dilutes local democracy.

Adrian explained that when elections are held is governed by convention and could be subject to change. That said, the starting point should be seeking to increase turnout and it is important to consider all factors which might improve this. This includes lowering the voting age to 16, changing the day of elections and exploring other considerations such as technology. In terms of online voting, Adrian explained that it raises issues over the integrity of the poll, but if adequate security could be ensured it would probably be more secure than postal voting, and potentially increase voter turnout

Adrian confirmed that, in respect of the cycle of elections, it is important to focus on clear long term strategic outcomes which need time to be delivered and achieved. The current cycle of elections affects the capacity of the council to affect change and achieve its strategic outcomes. Elections three out of every four years encourage incrementalism and putting issues off to the next year. If an Administration could stand on a four year ticket, local government could have far more impact on people's

lives than it does now. If you accept that local government is about outcomes and having an impact on people's lives then elections should be one every four years.

Civic Identity and Citizenship

Adrian acknowledged that civic identity with Kirklees is an issue for some residents and that a civic connection is very important. Kirklees as a brand is not an issue for government but it matters where communities and places don't feel that they belong, and look back to a past that they think was better. The success of Kirklees is a collection of places where the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. Adrian conceded that Kirklees may be an artificial construct, but "so was every other council at some point in history."

Adrian recognised that young people have a sense of frustration, with a willingness to engage but not knowing how to. As an organisation Kirklees should work more closely with schools if this is a political priority, resources permitting.