



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary notes from the meeting held on 5 October 2016

Present:

Dr Andy Mycock
Councillor Andrew Cooper;
Councillor Andrew Marchington;
Councillor Andrew Palfreeman;
Councillor Gemma Wilson

Witness:

Cllr David Harrington and Cllr Gillian Corr (Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council)

First elected to Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council in 2005, Councillor Harrington represents the community of Ingleby Barwick. As part of his strategy in the run-up to the Local Elections in 2005, Councillor Harrington led a successful digital marketing campaign using email, alongside an exceptionally active online community forum in the days prior to the social media revolution.

Throughout his social media journey, Councillor Harrington has engaged with a key audience online, including those who are first time/absent voters and a disengaged electorate who have never voted before or fallen out with the political system for a variety of reasons. Despite the active social media presence, none of this online engagement has replaced traditional methods in the community. Social media has played a huge part in enhancing the level of representation constituents can expect to receive as standard.

Councillor Harrington is an advocate of sharing good practice including the digital skills that he has pioneered. In recent years, Councillor Harrington has been an attendee at #NotWestMinster, delivering a number of social media training sessions to members across the UK, including to Kirklees Council earlier this year. Training has also been provided online via Skype to small groups of local authority members and officers.

Summary of Discussion

Digital Democracy

Councillor Harrington explained the potential impact that digital technologies can have in the context of local democracy by referring to [Tinder Foundation](#) document, with a snapshot of the UK as an online nation. Last year in the UK, approximately

40,000,000 people are online, and approximately 12,600,000 are offline. The snapshot illustrates the popularity of digital technologies and the role that it can play as a tool in local democracy. Cllr David Harrington reported that he has worked in local government for 28 years and argued that the political future of democracy has changed dramatically and needs to be reviewed. Local authorities are good at engaging people “on the doorstep”, but some people want to be engaged in other ways. At a council level, digital technologies provide greater scope for councils, services and councillors to reach out to communities instead of expecting communities and residents to come to the council.

As early as 2004, IBIS members in Stockton Council were utilising digital technologies and community forums to engage a wider range of people and deal with local ward issues. In 2007/2008, the group started using social media, like Facebook and Twitter. The Commission noted that through their roles as ward councillors, Cllr Harrington and Cllr Corr explained that they could engage with a wider audience and involve a wide range of people through digital technologies. Members of the public can contact them in different ways, and the use of digital technology, like social media, has helped to raise their profiles in their wards. The example was given of Myton Way, a carriageway improvement scheme, and an on-going issue in Stockton-on-Tees, social media has been helpful to councillors and the local authority in helping to deliver authoritative information to the public.

Councillor Harrington explained that social media can help to tackle hearsay and misinformation within wards, as illustrated by the fact that partner agencies have used Councillors social media pages to be informed about infrastructure works in the community. While IBIS councillors have used digital and mobile technologies to engage people, they have not replaced other traditional methods of engagement, such as door knocking. Councillor Harrington explained that councillors should not ‘do digital by default’ – they need to consider their constituency and the levels of digital inclusion/exclusion within those areas. It is important that individual Councillors need to use the medium that they feel comfortable with as digital is a personal preference which depends on the individual and local circumstance within wards and communities.

Citizen Awareness and Engagement

The Commission explored the above mentioned points from the perspective of the local citizen, and in particular the ways in which awareness can be raised in terms of engaging with councillors in the on-line and off-line context.

Councillor Harrington explained that work had taken place in Stockton as part of their web site development to ensure that there are links from councillor profiles to their individual social media profiles. This allows citizens, in particular younger citizens, to access other platforms which opened up wider opportunities to contact and engage with their elected councillors. The cultural challenges which existed in the past in terms of the reluctance by councils to support councillors in using social media has improved over time, particularly where younger councillors have come onto the council. This has meant that issues such as security and on-line identity for councillors have begun to be addressed.

In terms of digital accessibility and digital exclusion Councillor Harrington emphasised that it is important to replicate and mirror on-line activity with off-line activity. One cannot replace the other in the context of councillors engaging with local residents although there is a noticeable growth in on-line interaction with and expectations for such interaction from local communities. That said it is important to recognise that barriers to accessibility are reducing e.g. grandparents are the fastest growing demographic on Twitter. The Commission acknowledged that, as part of their community leadership roles, councillors could have an important role in supporting residents to become more confident and capable of using on-line tools.

Councillor Harrington explained that an important challenge for both the council and councillors is to improve its approach to reporting back to residents who have raised issue or problems. Local authorities have not been wholly successful in managing the full cycle of customer care in the process driven environment in a way that organisations like Amazon have. Given that residents are expecting more and councils have less money, this is an area that could improve service delivery and save money.

With regards to specific digital tools, the Commission discussed the merits and effectiveness of blogs and Facebook in the context of communicating and engaging with citizens. Councillor Harrington, with reference to statistical research, explained that whilst a blog is excellent in providing a chronicle of councillor activity, Facebook has far greater reach in terms of accessibility and usage. This is an important consideration for councillors in thinking about the best approach to take. Councillor Harrington explained that it is both possible and important to link across platforms to maximise reach and access to content. For example placing a press release on a blog and linking it to Twitter and Facebook is good practice and increases the likelihood of extending reach. Councillor Harrington concluded that overall the most important thing is that councillors use the platform and media that is best for them and what they are most comfortable with.

Councillor Harrington shared an example of how digital can work in a practical example relating to local planning matters. For example Facebook groups have been used as a tool by community activists to harness views for and against particular applications. The Commission noted that finding community activists is important and tools such as Google forms can be used to assist them in putting across their views and developing a more informed approach in the context of engagement. Whilst this can mean extra work for councillors, it is a highly effective tool in turning negative views into positives.

Councillor Harrington acknowledged that there are challenges in terms of taking views from social media and thereafter effectively bringing them into the council's wider deliberative and policy making process. The petitioning process, for example, can instigate digital campaigns which complement and run alongside.

Engaging with Young People

Councillor Harrington explained that 50% of Facebook users across the world are under the age of 30 which is an important consideration along with an

acknowledgement that young people are “doing politics differently”. This is relevant context for councillors and councils who traditionally struggle to effectively engage with young people.

Councillor Harrington provided an example of the Stockton Youth Parliament where candidates using social media as part of their campaigning approach were more successful than those who did not. Within this context youth councillors are engaging and debating on-line as part of their representative role. Councillor Harrington explained that there are some examples of councillors taking this approach, using different platforms in different and innovative ways whilst having regard to the demographic of those platforms. Whilst there are pockets of good practice it is not a widespread feature.

The Commission acknowledged that when engaging with young people in a social media context it is important to think about how to make the content and message engaging. The use of images and video media are far more likely to generate interest and be shared to their wider networks. Within this context Councillor Harrington explained that Instagram is a useful platform and Periscope has some real potential in terms of accessible video content.

The Councillor Role

Councillor Corr explained that digital technologies have played an important part in enhancing the community leadership role of the councillor. It is important that councillors strive to reach the widest audience possible and such technologies assist in that process. The experience in Ingleby Barwick has made councillors stronger in the community, particularly in blending on-line and off-line. It has proved to be an important means by which important information, particularly in emergency situations, is shared quickly and effectively with citizens. This is an important part of the community leadership role that local people expect from their councillors. It also provides an opportunity to provide factual context to emotive issues.

Councillor Harrington explained that social media widens a councillor’s accessibility which has both positives and negatives. Whilst some residents and groups might seek to misinform or be problematic on-line it is nevertheless important to continue pushing out factual information from reliable sources and engage with a range of groups on-line. In terms of trolls, Councillor Harrington advised that the best course of action is to take the moral high ground and ignore them.

In terms of the correlation between digital use by councillors with voter turnout Councillor Harrington explained that he has seen an increase in his personal vote since adopting social media, particularly with young voters.