



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary Note from the inquiry meeting held on 5 October 2016

Present:

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

Witness:

Colin Copus (Director of the Local Governance Research Unit)
Colin Copus is a Professor of Local Politics. His academic interests are central-local relationships and the constitutional status of local government, localism, local party politics, local political leadership and the changing role of the councillor. Colin has worked closely with policy-makers and practitioners in central and local government and he was an advisor to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee. He is working with the Communities and Local Government Committee on the role of the councillor. He has also served as a councillor on a London Borough Council, a county and a district council and three parish councils.

Colin's latest book is: "*In Defence of Councillors*", published by Manchester University Press.

Summary of Discussion

Councillors Commission

Professor Copus outlined the work of the Councillors Commission and his role in it. He explained that the Commission was launched at the beginning of 2016 and flowed from the Communities and Local Government Committee parliamentary inquiry undertaken in the last parliament. However, it sought to extend the remit and find out what was exercising councillors themselves and the messages they wanted the government, public and media to have about their work and role.

The Councillors Commission is taking evidence from councillors across the country. It recently completed the 20th round table discussion and has made contact with over 250 councillors as part of its qualitative discussion forums. It has received over 100 written submissions from councillors. The research period will finish at the end of

2016 and Commission is close to completing an [interim report](#) with key findings. A detailed report will be finalised January/February 2017.

The Commission noted that one of the key issues raised through research relates to the information and resources that councillors have. Often, leading councillors and executive members are well resourced, but there is a scattered pattern of support for other councillors from their councils. Non-executive councillors are often not receiving relevant policy information, or obtaining access to research. Councils have a role in evaluating their support to councillors, particularly around the research field. Councillors have also raised the issue of accessing information – i.e. councillors having to use FOI requests to obtain information from their councils. There's an implication that in some areas being a councillor means little.

Another issue raised by Commission is about how elected members are pulled in different directions – all ward members operate on a ward basis but there is also a broader strategic level. As well as looking inwards towards council, councillors are also drawn outwards and need to interact with host of external organisations. Non-executive members are also drawn into strategic negotiations with external bodies, but this 'plug-in' is more difficult for ward members than for executive members.

Councillors have a role in joining up the fragmented network public service provision in their communities. The network organisations have no elected mandate, yet make public policy and spend public money. The elected mandate is leverage to get access to some of these public bodies. Professor Copus suggested that there needs to be a legal obligation for public and private bodies to respond to elected members, and respect their elected mandate.

Another issue raised with the Commission is about the proximity of the councillor to their ward/community and time-consuming nature of the role in responding to people and requests in comparison to MPs for example.

Professor Copus explained that an overarching goal for the Councillors Commission is to raise the understanding that the government, media and the public have about the role of councillors.

Representative and Participative Democracy

Professor Copus suggested that there is a tendency to view neighbourhood and community participation as better than representative democracy, despite a lack of accountability. This is creating a false dichotomy. Representative democracy, which takes elements of participatory and direct democracy, should be seen as the ideal local democratic system because of the scale in which it operates. There will always be a need for someone with a democratic mandate to take an actual and final decision

There are local discussions about whether to co-produce services and co-develop policy by engaging stakeholders and considering networks of participatory mechanisms. Professor Copus' view is that someone with an elected mandate has to make final decisions on local matters. There needs to be a clear chain of command.

The Changing Role of Local Government

It's too early to say we're seeing the end of local government as a service provider, particularly in financial terms, but its role is diminishing in terms of governing through provision. There is an alternative vision for local government, through devolution. However what is being devolved is 'more stuff for local authorities to do' and there is very little constitutional change. It is more about decentralisation than about devolution.

Professor Copus explained that there has been a shift in devolving to local government through artificial large-scale entities, but it is still a shifting down of functions and responsibilities. It is not full-fiscal autonomy in the way that exists in many other countries. In the UK, we have one of the most restrictive local government finance regimes across continental Europe. Local government will not get full fiscal autonomy whilst it is funded by central government and only has one source of taxation income.

Professor Copus observed that "we have lost the idea of 'local' in local government in the UK", and there is a prevalence of the view that bigger local government is better, yet academic research does not necessarily support this. It is neither "local" (i.e. located in a real place) or "government" (i.e. can do what it want to do). Research has shown that electoral turnout, trust in councillors and officers and community cohesion is often undermined by a bigger local government. A tiered approach to organisation is a different model that can make a different kind of sense in terms of local government, as evidenced in other countries.

Professor Copus explained that the culture in the UK does not really tolerate localism, because of its centralised political culture and governing system. Local government has a role in inverting this political culture. We should encourage localities to be able to make changes rather than always looking to the centre, especially as 'the local' is where the specialist knowledge is and where the context exists.

Engagement with Citizens

Professor Copus was asked why he felt that citizens feel a sense of disengagement with their councillors. He suggested that there is a contradiction in this sense of disengagement – residents are mainly happy to approach their councillors, but on certain policy / service areas, there is a feeling that councillors aren't effective in that process. Sometimes, being 'not effective' means disagreeing. It is important to recognise that councillors can't always respond to every group in their constituencies.

Professor Copus explained that it is possible to solve this issue through council roles – for councillors to represent their 'patch' and to govern the locality. Overcoming the idea of ineffectiveness is to ensure those members of the public participating in any local civic activity are aware that someone has to join things up as part of an 'elected mandate'. The public have a low understand of what councillors can and can't do.

There is a need to raise public awareness of the councillor role as part of the dialogue and wider consultation.

In promoting civic literacy, Professor Copus said there is a long-term goal to raise awareness of democracy as part of a child's education using innovative approaches. In the immediate future, it is important that local government takes the opportunity when it is undertaking participatory/consolatory activities to help people understand the link to a wider strategic view and the complexities of the decision-making process in the context of the councillor role. It may be helpful for consultation to be more inquisitive of the public – i.e. 'how would you do this?' in order that people feel that the democratic process is genuine and informs a final decision. The councillor has a role in explaining processes and facilitating feedback. Councillors need to be properly supported to do this effectively.

Public Engagement in Decision-Making

Professor Copus explained that Councillors have a role in taking people through the decision-making process. The role of the elected member is to explain to people and to act as a gatekeeper, allowing people to get access to information. The work of councillors is enormously time-consuming, and also difficult without adequate resources and support.

Too often the problem becomes the council, rather than the problem you are trying to solve. This needs to be articulated so people understand this. There is a question of expectation – if the public go into participatory events with realistic expectations of the outcome, which elected members and the council are able to shape and make expectations reasonable, then the outcome will be less unsatisfactory. There is a role for councillors to manage public expectations.

The Commission explored the potential tension between the influence of back bench councillors in the context of a Cabinet model of decision making. Professor Copus suggested that councils could devolve and decentralise (decision-making, budget and resources) to ward levels, and allow individual councillors to make certain decisions. This would stop centralisation and stop the excuses that councillors have no power to affect change. However, this change demands a more radical decentralisation model to the current model of area committees. There is a need to look at the scheme of delegation – how can you position councillors as real community leaders in this context?

The Next Generation of Councillors

Across Europe, the UK has some of the oldest and longest-serving councillors. The experience mix in councils is vital. The challenge is getting new young councillors while at same time keeping the 'institutional memory'. Flooding councils with new blood is not a virtue in its own right and it is important to think about how councillors who are standing down can provide a mentoring role for prospective candidates and new councillors. Professor Copus suggested there are a number of ways of attracting new people to become councillors. For instance, there is a need to

consider what is possible for individual councils to do and what is possible to change nationally.

There needs to be discussions about remuneration – i.e. leadership/cabinet as full-time salaried posts. However, the professionalisation of these posts could cause negative public reaction and exacerbate the separation with non-executive, unsalaried councillors.

Professor Copus posed the question “Why would young people give up career opportunities and their time to be councillors?” He felt that there is a need to lighten the load for councillors and rather than fewer councillors, there needs to be more councillors, but doing different things in different ways. By lightening the load, and having more councillors, this would make it more attractive for people to be councillors. Furthermore, it is important to identify the positives that are associated with the role as a means of promoting it in an attractive way.

Party Politics

Professor Copus observed that part of the above problem is the issue of party politics – 90% of councillors in England come from Tories, Labour and Lib Dems, so local government is controlled by national political parties. Yet only 1% of the population in the UK has joined a political party, so non-members of political parties are unrepresented as a group. Local government needs political parties to take the heat out of local politics.

Professor Copus explained that parish councils cover smaller areas, so are able to encourage people who are not members of political parties to stand to be elected or to be co-opted and they do behave in a different way. This is an important consideration in the context of the wider discussion whereby people who are not affiliated to political parties have an opportunity to become involved. Political parties have a responsibility to recruit candidates who are talented and not see them as a threat.

Professor Copus observed that party political labels can make voters lazy, so it becomes more about the party rather than specific individuals. Local elections have been nationalised by political parties which poses the wider question of what people are looking for when they vote.

Because of the centralised political system there can be a loss of council identity and a dissolving political culture, where the sense of civic duty to vote is dissolving as demonstrated by fewer people voting in local elections.

Electoral Cycles

Professor Copus explained that he had mixed views about electoral cycles. All-out elections every 4 years create a big gap for the electorate in terms of determining who will be in control for that period and being in a position to influence a change.

However, there is a virtue of certainty and consistency that allows decisions to be made and implemented in the context of stable and strategic leadership.

The virtue of elections by thirds is there is a “permanent state of revolution” and the electorate has a greater opportunity to make decisions. There could be a compromise e.g. all-out elections on 3 year terms or perhaps executive members elected every 4 years and non-executive members elected every 2 years. To be imaginative and devolution should provide an opportunity for local councils, an opportunity to experiment with new structures, approaches and models.