



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary Note from the meeting held on 16 November 2016

Present:

Dr Andy Mycock
Councillor Cathy Scott
Councillor Eric Firth

Witness: Lord Kerlake

Lord Kerlake is Chair of Peabody, Chair of London's King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, Chair of the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS), Chair of London CIV, and is President-Elect of the Local Government Association.

A former Head of the Civil Service, Lord Kerlake led the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) from November 2010, stepping down in February 2015.

Prior to his DCLG role, Lord Kerlake was the first Chief Executive of the Homes and Communities Agency, where he was responsible for promoting new and affordable housing supply; supporting the regeneration of cities, towns and neighbourhoods; improving existing housing stock, and advancing sustainability and good design.

Before joining the Civil Service Lord Kerlake received a knighthood for his services to local government, spending eight years serving the London Borough of Hounslow and then a further 11 years leading Sheffield Council. In early 2015, he was made a life peer, taking the title Baron Kerlake, of Endcliffe in the City of Sheffield.

Summary of Discussion

Lord Kerlake was asked for his view on the Government's commitment to the post EU Referendum Governments policy on devolution. His view was that, whilst there wasn't a sense that it was a distinct policy of the current Government, he still saw Mayors as part of the devolution deal though, in terms of future direction and pace, there was some uncertainty.

In terms of the challenges faced in achieving a deal Lord Kerslake highlighted the following issues:

- The absence of a clear ambition and outcomes to be achieved will mean it is difficult to negotiate a deal with Government
- For devolution to be effective it is essential that money and resources come together with additional powers
- Devolution is driven from an economic perspective and, therefore, there is a focus on Cities.
- Mayors are not the best approach in all circumstances and a 'one size fits all' approach to this issue can put devolution at risk
- Consideration needed to be given to the way regional governance arrangements would be perceived by the public.

There was some discussion about the possibility of a Yorkshire deal and the viability of such a proposal. A major potential stumbling block would be the need for a Mayor and how this would resonate across the County as a whole as this could undermine the model as a whole. A better approach could be for the devolution of some powers to allow partnerships and relationships to develop.

There also needs to be some transparency around the negotiations for devolution so there is clarity, for both Local Government and the public at large, in what devolution will mean in terms of decision making and service delivery. Whilst total transparency can be difficult, it's possible to take clear soundings on outcomes to be achieved.

Local Government Finances

Whilst Local Government has a good record at managing and implementing budget reductions in the climate of austerity which has prevailed for the last six years, there has to be an understanding that maintaining the same scale of reductions will be unsustainable, particularly in light of the challenges faced nationally regarding demand and funding for social care. The need to maintain funding levels to support social care, and children's services places a disproportionate pressure on other none personal services.

There is evidence that a number of Local Authorities are at risk of being unable to balance their books in the near future due to their shortfall in funding against the cost of services they provide.

Role of Councillors

Lord Kerslake stated that there had been a change in the role of Councillors in the recent past which had been influenced by a number of factors, including the move to a Cabinet/Leader model of governance, which puts responsibility for the majority of day to day decision making on a small number of Councillors, and the increasing emphasis on the representational role of Councillors, driven to some degree by austerity. Also, increasingly Councillors had a greater role to play in challenging service providers and Health Services are an important consideration in this context.

He stated that, to assist Councillors in their role of representing their communities and local problem solving, if budgets allowed, an area based budget for use by Councillors would be advantageous to provide an opportunity for them to make some impact in their local areas.

In terms of the tools that are available to Councillors to effectively communicate with the public Councillors need to take advantage of the communication streams that are now available through social media and other electronic forms of communications.

It was also important to maintain and improve the community sense of civic importance and a key way of doing this is to ensure that it is part of the curriculum within schools

Overall, in terms of the roles undertaken by councillors and the support provided to them to fulfil their roles, Lord Kerslake was of the view that Kirklees has been at the forefront of developments in this area for some time.

Elections and the Elections Cycle

Lord Kerslake talked to the commission about the unique circumstances relating to Birmingham City Council in terms of its size (The Council had 120 Councillors) and went on to explain some the benefits that could be realised by moving to a four year cycle of elections. These largely related to the certainly a four year Administration gave and the ability to develop a strategy and implement change. That said, he made the point that he did not advocate a move to four yearly elections in all areas as it was something that needed to be considered in the context of a Councils own circumstances.

There was also some discussion about the possibility of reducing the age limit for voting to 16 years. Lord Kerslake's view was that, after assessing the impact of the Scottish Independence Referendum where there was no evidence of a negative impact, he supported a reduction in the age limit – 16 year olds were able to take decisions, work and paid taxes. On the question of 16 year olds becoming Councillors his view was that they were too young.

Conclusion

Lord Kerslake was of the view that Kirklees were taking the right approach in having a comprehensive review of its democratic processes. Councils should never stand still and should be continually looking to ensure their democratic arrangements are set up to fit in with local circumstances.