



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary Note from the inquiry meeting held on 6th October 2016

Present:

Andy Mycock
Cllr Andrew Marchington
Cllr Gemma Wilson
Cllr Andrew Palfreeman
Cllr Andrew Cooper

In Attendance:

Carl Whistlecraft, Spencer Wilson, Diane Sims and Helen Kilroy

Witness:

Neil is CEO of Centre for Local Economic Strategies, a charity and the UK's leading member and research organisation dedicated to economic development and local governance. In all of CLES's work, the need to ensure that a local economy works effectively for local people and social inclusion is central.

At present he is driven by a range of economic, social and environmental challenges, in a context of public sector austerity. In this, he is focused on thinking through and applying a new economic model for places which includes ideas around economic resilience, collaboration, networks and new forms of public service delivery.

Over the last 20 years has gained multi-disciplinary knowledge, skills and experience having worked extensively in the UK and more occasionally in Europe, Asia, US and Australasia. He has a regular column in New Start Magazine, and is a frequent blogger on the Local Government Chronicle pages. He is an Honorary Fellow at the Centre for Urban Policy Studies, University of Manchester, and a Visiting Fellow at the Edge Hill University and on the editorial board of Local Economy. He chairs the Greater Manchester Poverty Action Group and was a Salford Cooperative Commissioner.

Representative and Participatory Democracy

Neil explained that in "great places" (here and abroad) there is interdependency between the public, social and commercial sectors which means that the relationship between representative and participatory democracy is of fundamental importance if we want successful and sustainable places. The traditional model of representative democracy, based around the power of the town hall, is in abeyance and there is a growing need for synergy with participatory democracy. This is fundamental to creating great places and dealing with the challenges of

austerity. By way of an example Neil explained that current forms of voluntary activity looking after children and elderly relatives, at the edges of formal service delivery, is worth in the region of £90 billion in the UK. If this did not exist there would be a consequential cost to the public purse. Such neighbourly and participatory acts therefore need to be augmented and supported.

Neil provided the Commission with the experience in Portland USA where the mantra is "Its about the people", where officers and officials are there to enable civil society to do things, based on a relational as opposed to a transactional relationship. The "state" needs to civil society to do this. Making a shift in this relationship is about changing behaviours and attitudes of the council, councillors and officers. This requires a humility and acknowledgement that, for example, councillors are conduits and enablers sitting in the middle of a powerful network of activity. "Councillors are the fishermen who look after the net".

Neil believes that the representative role provides one of the key spinal connections with citizenry but it is not the only one. There are other relationships which can influence many other types of connections and forms of power that the representative role enables. Neil reflected on the importance of councillors earning power and influence in areas where there is no contractual relationship e.g. with the local business sector. Councillors are an enabler, connector and conduit in this context and therefore this needs to be built into the modern councillor role. This will increasingly be a necessary feature moving forward.

For further information please see:

[Creating Good City Economies in the UK](#)
[Forging a Good Local Society](#)

Public and Business Perception

Neil observed that public perception towards councils and councillors varies across the country. An important consideration in terms of perception is the extent to which the things that happen and the services that are delivered in a place are co-designed with the people of that place. It is important to make people feel that they are involved at the early stages of service design / delivery and how things function. This involves early relationship building. Furthermore, the distribution of power and decision making to a local level, through ward budgets that are co-designed and co-produced, is another important consideration. This works well when the process begins early using a partnership approach as opposed to a transactional or paternalistic relationship. Such an approach requires bravery and a cultural change. At a wider level Neil explained that local authorities need to change the narrative in a way that residents and businesses can see "what you get for their money"

In terms of communicating with citizens Neil emphasised the importance of being open and transparent, particularly in the context of the challenges faced by councils. Surfacing these issues early, with stakeholders like local businesses, will result in better decisions. Neil explained that in other countries the trade organisations are part of a social contract relationship based on co-design with the local authority which provides a stronger basis to move forward effectively as a locality. Neil explained that "Business citizenship" as a concept is interesting, whereby core businesses are anchors in the area and their staff are seen as citizens as well as employees.

In terms of advanced manufacturing Neil explained that it is important that its strength ripples through local supply chains the local authority should think about how it can support those supply chains to, in turn, support that manufacturing base and maximise the gain for Kirklees.

Similarly there are issues in respect of skills and local employment that are relevant in this context whereby the council works in partnership to maximise opportunities for local people to gain jobs in those sectors. To be effective the economic development functions within councils need to be “less clunky”. Neil referred to a business in South Korea whose focus is on early years and developing the next generation of workers. The local council had a role and a stake in this relationship and facilitating the delivery of this objective. Comparatively in the UK businesses often say that childcare is nothing to do with business or economic development.

In terms of local business and local economic resilience Neil explained that shocks and changes can create opportunities as well as challenges. The role of the locality in such circumstances is principally to provide a ballast to such shocks. All resilience is predicated on the strength of the connections between agencies, the locality and local people. Neil explained that it is fundamentally about recalibrating the relationships you have in the place. Ensuring the place functions effectively requires public, social and commercial sectors operating equally and effectively. Elected councillors need to adapt their role and their attitudes to play a part in achieving this.

Regional Devolution

Neil observed that thus far the devolution process has been centrally controlled with a focus on the economic rather than the democratic, social or environmental perspectives. Devolution, it seems, has become “a new centralism” with a narrowness in terms of Combined Authority centralisation in terms of the concentration of power. Neil advocated that it is now crucial to widen the horizons in terms of the purpose of devolution which is an important issue for council leaders and politicians to begin to address. It needs to shift away from a purely economic focus to one that addresses and includes democratic, social and environmental issues and considerations. Neil believes that unless these factors are addressed devolution will fail. At one level council Leaders need to focus on the wider narrative of devolution whilst local councillors need to shine their torch on the flaws of devolution and be less compliant.

In terms of the devolution deal making process Neil acknowledged that thus far this has been carried out behind closed doors with a lack of wider engagement with citizens and local councillors. Using Manchester as an example Neil explained that there is a realisation that there are flaws in the existing devolution model which has seen moves to extend the scope of the devolution narrative and who it is / should be for. As part of this process it is important to engage with participatory democracy and civil society to provide wider opportunities for local people to have their say. [The People's Plan](#) approach in Manchester was cited as an example. The Commission noted the opportunities and potential for a big “Kirklees Conversation” about the opportunities of regional devolution which could be used as an approach to engage local residents in this important issue.

Neil stressed the importance of focussing on the potential devolution outcomes when undertaking citizen engagement in this area. Devolution is a means to an end and therefore it is the outcomes that are important. With this in mind it is the democratic parts of devolution that should be the principal focus as it is this area that should make people closer to power and decision making. This should mean that there is more influence in terms of regional policy development that affects your area. The worry is that this is not the focus at the moment.

In terms of the councillor role, Neil observed that the potential centralisation of power within a Combined Authority could see a hollowing out of individual borough, services and departments. Councils will no longer be determining strategic policy but will be left overseeing service delivery which will have implications for governance and accountability at a local level. We therefore

need to advance an approach to devolution that ensures devolution is distributed and where councils and councillors are a key part of that given their relationship with businesses and citizens. In this context Manchester is now looking at architecture that will protect the role of councils and councillors although it is not well developed and thought through at this stage.

Neil explained that the current model of devolution, because of its focus on the economic point, is weaker. He believes that as the discussion develops the social, democratic and environmental issues will begin to be addressed. This has started in some places e.g. Bristol and Greater Manchester which provides an opportunity to learn from their journey.

Neil stressed that the building blocks of great places are public, social and commercial relationships and local democracy facilitates such relationships. The great places of the world have this and these factors should be borne in mind when considering the relationship and interaction between local areas and Combined Authorities. The building block of place should be the main focus of the discussion.

In terms of local identity, particularly in the Kirklees context, Neil explained that there are many examples of artificial geography and the best way to deal with such administrations is to put in place governance mechanisms that allows those places to “sing”. The individual place identities are important and the overall council needs to augment and be respecting of those local identities. IN place terms the competitive advantage is not Kirklees but the distinct parts of the borough.