



## **Kirklees Democracy Commission**

### **Summary Note from the meeting held on 20 September 2016**

#### **Present:**

Dr Andy Mycock  
Councillor Andrew Palfreeman  
Councillor Cathy Scott  
Councillor Eric Firth  
Councillor Andrew Cooper  
Councillor Fazila Fadia

#### **Witness: Robert Light**

Councillor Light has served on Kirklees Council for 24 years and for some of that time has been Leader of the Council and Leader of the Conservative Group. He has held a number of roles at regional level including being the first Chair of the Leeds City Regions 2007 – 09 and sitting on the Environment Agency Board for 6 years. Most recently he has chaired the West Yorkshire Combined Authority Scrutiny Committee.

#### **Summary of Discussion**

##### **Changing role of the Local Authority - Regionalism and Local Devolution**

The discussion explored the changing role of local authorities in devolved and regional structures. Cllr Light saw one of the drivers for change as the ongoing challenge for national Government to maintain an effective relationship with 364 principal local authorities. A more practical relationship is required. Other political parties all supported devolution in some form.

Devolved structures will differ from place to place. The Government's preferred model is a structure underpinned by a set of common aims and a strategic agenda for a specified area, based around cities. There are key strategic areas - economy, transport and skills. The approach requires local authorities to work together in a collaborative way, cooperating with each other. Current models, i.e. Manchester, have shown it is a more effective way of working. Comparison was made with the

former Transport Fund approach, where authorities competed with each other, with the result that some authorities felt marginalised.

Councillor Light emphasised that Regionalism is not about power going upwards. It is about local government engaging with a broader range of agencies and partners to deliver a more joined up approach to governance, e.g. Health, Environment Agency etc. It can create many previously unavailable opportunities. It is leading to a change in the role of councillors and requires a different way of administering locally. It was questioned how residents of Kirklees who already perceived a north/south divide, would buy into any move towards regional decision making. It is important that the district voice is heard at the City Region level, but the current arrangements do not deliver this. Cllr Light explained that he favoured a Mayoral model at the regional level. The London model, with an elected assembly, is the preferred model of governance to ensure that the district voice is heard. Any model needs to be kept simple and build on the trust that local councillors already have with local residents and communities.

The lack of democratic mandate of the majority of public bodies was identified. Councils had an opportunity to engage partners through regional structures and tap into the opportunities that such partnership can bring.

Strategic governance structures need to be counter balanced by more devolution to local communities. Ensuring local people have a voice and are represented in discussions.

Kirklees as a place does not exist and is considered by some to be an artificial body. Many residents do not identify with the idea of Kirklees. However, citizens do recognise their own communities. The current governance structures in Kirklees do not recognise the communities of Kirklees. Local governance structures (District Committees) have limited decision making powers and are largely seen as “talking shops”. Communities are not empowered to make decisions.

It is very difficult to represent all views and all communities but there is an opportunity to develop a localised model so the district voice can be heard. Despite the challenges faced in the context of austerity, it is possible to implement a decentralised model at a local level as has been done successfully elsewhere. The example given was Wiltshire, formerly a unitary authority of about 20 districts, where a new model has been introduced, giving power at a community level. The London model was also highlighted as it includes independent elected people from within communities to provide scrutiny and local challenge.

The effects of austerity should not be a reason for not considering devolution. All councils have faced similar financial challenges and seen the benefits of moving to a new model of governance.

## The Role of Councillors

Councillor Light felt that the current governance arrangements meant that there was no collective oversight, with most councillors feeling they had little or no oversight of strategic issues. The current governance structure meant a minimal number of councillors are involved in decision making and the remainder feel marginalised. The majority of power is vested in 9 councillors who are given an impossible task as they cannot represent all views and communities in the borough. Councillor Light felt that the power of most councillors was being further eroded by the increase in the number of decisions that were delegated to officers. Some Councils have sought to address the delegation issue, for example Oldham.

The role of councillors is changing but broadly falls into the 3 areas set out below. Councillors have a role at all levels, with a major emphasis on commissioning.

- (1) Local – within and on behalf of the communities they represent – putting forward local views to influence budgets and policies.
- (2) At a local corporate services level i.e. local highways provision, education support etc.
- (3) At a West Yorkshire level - ensuring policy will benefit the whole of West Yorkshire.

There is an ongoing challenge to promote the role of councillors and for the role to be seen in a positive light, particularly in the context of attracting the next generation of councillors. The councillor role is not well understood and neither are the opportunities it presents. This situation is not helped by working patterns and remuneration. The LGA “Be A Cllr Campaign” was cited as a good example that should be supported and promoted. There are both positive and negative implications for career progression if a full time career in politics is not what is sought.

It was suggested that a regional model would continue to marginalise most councillors. Cllr Light said that if a regional model was supported by a decentralised model at a local level then the risk to marginalising local councillors would be mitigated. In the current model of governance, most councillors do not have strategic oversight.

Councillor development is important to ensure councillors have the appropriate skills to carry out their role. Councillors need the organisation to continue to provide support rather than take it away. New councillors need a group of officers who understand the role and the skills they need. The council risks making it so hard that some councillors walk away from the role. Supporting councillors and their role in the context of good governance costs money, but it is important and ultimately it will save the public purse and drive efficiencies.

## **Elections and the Electoral Cycle**

Cllr Light felt that there is a general scepticism with regards to “what difference voting makes”, “local elections don’t matter”, a situation that is exacerbated by the media. We need to get our messages over and make local government more relevant to local people. Another problem in developing local government is the role of the MP, only 100 of whom are actually involved in decision making. This has implications for voter engagement and voter turnout locally.

Currently the Council is elected by thirds with councillors elected for a four year terms of office. Councillor Light supported one all out election every four years. It was argued that an Administration comes into place in late May and starts to agree its priorities and programme of work then the summer holiday disrupts continuity at both officer and member level. This means that the actions of the administration don’t start to be approved and implemented until the Autumn. Then in October/ November the budget preparation conversations start and go through until the budget is agreed in February. Councillor Light estimated that equivalent of one year in four is lost. Four year terms allow councillors to get on with their differing roles be it in Administration or in opposition.

## **Engagement with Citizens / Consultation**

It was suggested that for many citizens devolution was currently a complex and confusing issue. There appeared to be a lack of clarity on exactly what it means for local people. In response Councillor Light said that whatever model of governance is adopted, the Council needs to keep it simple and ensure it empowers local councillors. Currently local councillors lack the information to be able to keep their communities informed or to discuss issues with local residents.

Any governance structure needs to have at the heart, the opportunity for local people to express their views and feel they have been listened to. The public are cynical because the way we consult leads them to believe there are not a range of options being considered and the decision has already been made. This is also a problem for councillors when options are insufficiently aired. All options should be “on the table”.

If the role of Councillors is as community leaders then they need to be in a place to put options to communities at an early stage so we can understand what they want. Citizens want to feel that there are a range of options they can influence, not a fait accompli. They will be more accepting when their views cannot be taken forward if there is an explanation why. When their voice seems deliberately ignored then they will lose faith in the decision making process.

Cllr Light explored the issue of local identity and the extent to which residents across the borough identify with the notion of Kirklees. Kirklees provides a strategic level approach which is important, although the real challenge would be to pull off a local system of decision making that gives people that affinity and sense of place.

Keeping residents updated on issues is a challenge but there are now an increasing range of communication channels through which information can be disseminated. It is important to use all of the mechanisms available. Some of the channels can also be used to engage and gather views. The use of referendums was identified as a different way of engaging citizens in significant decisions.

In terms of developing informed citizens Cllr Light supports a more focussed approach to civic / citizenship education for young people in schools.