



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary Note from the meeting held on 10 October 2016

Present:

Dr Andy Mycock
Councillor Fazila Fadia
Councillor Andrew Marchington
Councillor Andrew Palfreeman
Councillor Cathy Scott

Witness: Rob Vincent

Rob Vincent has been the Chief Executive at two metropolitan district councils. At Kirklees Council, Rob led the organisation through a period of community tensions and began the major change programmes made necessary by the public spending reductions. Under his leadership, Kirklees achieved four stars on the CPA rating and was awarded The Local Government Chronicle “Council of the year” award.

Rob was appointed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to become the Chief Executive of Doncaster MBC following a highly critical corporate governance inspection. He retired from full time appointments at the end of that contract.

Rob was a non-executive director on the main DCLG board for two years and co-led a capability review update of the department.

Since leaving full time roles, Rob has been the local government adviser to the Department of Health and Public Health England as they managed the transition of the public health function from the NHS to local government. He also acted as the Implementation Director for the West Yorkshire Combined Authority. He is now an electoral commissioner. He is also Deputy Chair of the Bradford Community Health Trust, and Chair of the Kirklees Theatre Trust.

Summary of Discussion

Regional Devolution

Rob explained that an important starting point is to acknowledge that it is important to have a model of governance at a City Region level which allows the issues, that have to this point been largely addressed by national government, to be addressed at a more appropriate and relevant level. In this context City Regions are important and could help to fill in the gaps following the abolition of the former West Yorkshire County Council. There is nevertheless a tension in the model in relation to the public appetite for regional government. This has resulted in a somewhat “messy” arrangement.

In terms of the devolution of powers Rob explained that, thus far, the deal making process has not seen the delegation of significant powers. It is notable that there is a backing away from structural planning arrangements in the context of City Deals, with a lack of clarity in terms of the wider framework.

The Commission explored the role and function of local government in the context of the City Region. Rob explained that in Kirklees there is a strength and identity in the sub-towns that form the borough. There are three levels with a natural geographical footprint – City Region, Kirklees and Towns and Valleys – which require distinct levels of decision making. Rob indicated that thus far the deal making process has not had regard to the geographical footprint. At a West Yorkshire level the discussion as to the geography and the contents of a deal remain unclear. Until such a time as this is resolved it is difficult to discuss and determine what subsidiarity will look like at a City Region level.

Rob observed that the City Region has currently given too little thought to how their strategies are exposed to discussion at a local level with local councillors, something which has not been done very well so far. Once there is greater clarity as to the geography and functionality of the City Region it should involve wider engagement with councils and councillors at a local level. Given that Combined Authorities are not directly elected it is important to work hard at making the linkages back to the discreet democratic bodies in the region. This requires accountability and high quality information flows.

The Commission went onto explore the governance, accountability and decision making considerations in the context of regional devolution. In terms of the Mayoral model Rob drew on his direct experience of mayoral models in councils such as Doncaster and Rotherham. Rob explained that, on occasions, the Mayor has been part of the problem. For example, there has been conflict between the Mayor and the interpretation of his / her mandate, decision making powers and the strategic decision making by Council. Also, Mayors who are elected for a whole borough are not always rooted in to a local patch. These are design faults of the system which have led to the Mayor becoming further distanced from the rest of the councillors and the council.

Rob explained that there are mayoral systems that work well. Being a mayor attracts individuals who relish personal leadership and responsibility but not the complexity of

the wider democratic mandate. Mayors are appropriate for City Regions and it is helpful that the Mayor is separate from the Leaders unless you have a directly elected body at City Region level. This nevertheless requires hard work to ensure proper accountability back to local democratic structures and links back to the individual boroughs. At the moment there is a gap in this area which could be addressed by strengthening the role and scope of overview and scrutiny.

In terms of the City Region and local decision making Rob acknowledged that for the core functions at a City Region level there has already been a legitimate transference of decision making responsibility from local authorities to the regional level. Rob explained that the impacts of austerity on local councils will inevitably affect the role of the councillor and it is this that is more immediate and visible. In this context it is important that councillors retain and develop their role in holding services and functions to account and ensure that they are influenced and informed by local residents. Overview and scrutiny is an important consideration in this context, particularly in the pre-exploration of discussion in a way that provides space for public dialogue and engagement.

Public Engagement

Rob welcomed the general principle of a wider wish by the public to become more involved and engaged in the wider decision making processes. Within this context Rob emphasised the importance of bearing in mind that nurturing discussion and being influenced by it is part of a process that should not mean delegating the final decisions. Most issues, and subsequent decisions, are on “contested ground” where there are different interests and perspectives and as such there is a need for decision making based on democratic accountability.

In order to address issues of public remoteness from decision making Rob emphasised the importance of equipping and supporting councillors effectively to engage with their constituents using a wider range of techniques and by ensuring that the information flows at all geographical levels are improved. In terms of specific examples Rob reiterated the importance of supporting councillors in the overview and scrutiny context and to enable councillors to become more effective in making a virtue of digital tools and on-line debates.

The Role of the Councillor

Rob shared experience of his work in Doncaster and reflected on a move by the Mayor of Doncaster to reduce the total number of councillors. Rob explained that he was against the approach and acknowledged the importance of considering wider factors, not least the strengths that are derived from having multi-member wards. Whilst Rob would not advocate reducing the number of councillors in Kirklees he was of the view that any increase in the current numbers would be very unlikely.

In terms of public accountability Rob explained that it is important to consider the nature of the relationship between ward councillors and their citizens. At one level this can be engaging at a very superficial level although there is a growing need to

engage over the real issues that the council and communities face. This involves a more discursive approach using a variety of tools and approaches.

In terms of the councillor role it is important to set out the expectations of the role but it is fundamentally important to ensure that they are supported to fulfil this role. It is equally important in the context of ensuring that prospective candidates are clear what the role will involve should they be successful.

The Next Generation of Councillors

Rob observed that he was optimistic having seen much younger councillors coming through who have different values and habits in terms of how they will operate. In terms of creating circumstances for this to happen Rob emphasised the importance of making local decision making relevant and accessible thus stimulating interest in what is going on. Alongside this it is equally important to improve clarity as to how ward councillors can influence such decisions.

Rob added that it is also about harnessing the energy of single issue politics and campaigning which remains an important starting point for many councillors. The intensity of people's interest in issues is still there and often enhanced by the opportunities to become more informed and develop networks making a virtue of social media.

Decision Making Models

Rob explained that, based on his experience, the Cabinet model has on the whole been better for Kirklees. Rob observed that the committee system had a "complexity and fuzziness" in terms of responsibility with the majority of decisions being escalated to Council for decision. Debate in committees often had some of the characteristics of a Full Council meeting, characterised by posturing. That said Rob acknowledged that Cabinet can be much better and more effective, with an important feature being the need for overview and scrutiny to operate well.

In terms of connecting the public more effectively to decision making Rob emphasised the ongoing importance of communicating effectively. This needs to have regard to the ways in which society is changing. In this context it is important to understand the digital tools and opportunities that can assist in this process and support councillors to operate in these areas.

The Electoral Cycle

Rob explained that, from an officer perspective, there are strong arguments for all out elections every four years. It provides a long period of brave engagement with strategic challenges, allowing space to address and discuss difficult issues over a period of time. It also means that politicians, in the context of accountability, have something more substantial for politicians to take back out to the public. The counter

argument is that four years is a long time and councillors and the council can find themselves running beyond their natural mandate.