



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary notes from the meeting held on Tuesday 27 September

Present:

Dr Andrew Mycock
Cllr Andrew Marchington
Cllr Gemma Wilson

In Attendance:

Carl Whistlecraft, David Bundy, Spencer Wilson, Diane Sims, Andrea Woodside

Witness:

Andrew Taylor is professor of politics at the University of Sheffield, before that he was lecturer and professor at the University of Huddersfield. He specialised in modern British politics and the theory and practice of governance. He is Chair of the Members Allowances Independent Review Panel and has undertaken a number of individual projects related to governance for Kirklees Council.

Summary of Discussion

Representative and Participatory Democracy / Changing Cllr Role

Professor Taylor explained that there is a fundamental tension between representative and participatory democracy. Representation is accountable through elections and is about speaking on behalf of communities. There is debate over whether representatives should take decisions determined by referenda, which in itself illustrates the powerful tension between representative and participatory democracy. Building on this point Professor Taylor observed that the future shape of democracy will be messier than it has been in the past, characterised over the past 20 years by a change in the role of local government, with a shift in local governance and councillor activity from “rowing to steering”.

This is a big change for Councillors as their roles are evolving and fundamentally changing, with a greater a focus on engaging in governance rather than purely governing. Councillors need to be resourced to allow them to perform the role of an effective enabler, but the resource provision for them is shrinking. As a consequence Councillors are faced with a complexity of role – are they representatives or change makers who are in a position to steer communities and construct networks? This is a

challenging task and translating this message to the public is also very difficult. The Government's job is to now engage in governance, and representatives are only one part of this.

In terms of the devolution of power from central government the process of hiving off functions from the centre is an attractive proposition. That said the best level of any decision taken is at the closest to those affected. The important issue is whether the resources need to be provided for de-centralisation are put in place for it be effective. If not properly resourced, Councillors will be blamed for failure of service provision. This is a really difficult position for Councillors who have a responsibility for areas, but not control, (ie, areas of health provision) which creates a difficult and complicated process. In addition they can no longer depend upon a well resourced officer support structure. Councillors are the visible element and are perceived as responsible for failing services.

In Kirklees there is a Huddersfield based focus, but the structure is geographically devolved. There is therefore a case for multi-tasking teams throughout districts. The physical solution is devolving out to where services are delivered. Devolving responsibilities in communities gives a better connection between Councillors and officer support. The physical structure of local government reflects the rowing model although it could be argued that the central bureaucratic structures are no longer required, and should be devolved out to where services are delivered.

Communities Doing More for Themselves / Engagement with the Public

How do you improve the public image of Councillors and politicians in general? In many respects you are on a hiding to nothing if you try. Changing perceptions is a very long term process that is probably not achievable. What do we mean by effective? – what we usually mean is someone who solves a problem? In the new climate one measure is going to be the ability to say 'I'm sorry, that can't be done in this climate'. Councillor roles need to become "exchange mechanisms" and it is a role that a lot of Councillors and public aren't comfortable with. It is a very different and more complex way of working.

One of the most interesting models of community engagement is in New England where there is a tradition of town meetings, very specific to the region. It's a very established process of participative and representative democracy whereby Councillors work intensely in the locality with the community on a much wider basis. It's easier in some wards than others to generate and access social capital. In other areas it is very difficult to get people to go to meetings about anything, and this is an issue for which there is no quick solution and requires investment of resources. People want simple solutions to complex problems and a good working relationship between communities and representatives is key in the transition from "rowing to steering."

Party Politics

Party politics plays less significance in the New England Model to the prominence that it plays in UK local government. I don't see a problem with party politics, it's a good thing which provides a free market place of ideas that is fundamental to democracy and doesn't inhibit progress. Politicians recognise things need doing. If you are a single party ward Cllr you have to work with the system to achieve influence. Are wards with councillors all from one party more effective? – that would be an interesting piece of research.

Councillor Roles, Remuneration and Support

In reference to role on Members Allowances Independent Review Panel and attracting a new generation of Councillors, Professor Taylor explained that the Panel has created role profiles for the generic councillor and others for additional areas of responsibility. Much time has been spent over the years reviewing and recasting the roles. Kirklees has a clear and transparent and effective set of profiles. The Ward Councillor profile sets out common expectations. The real challenge is how we communicate this and get the public to recognise what Councillors do. Putting information on the website alone will not achieve this. Communities do need greater familiarity with what individual Councillors do within wards and relationships with constituents. It is more a personal relationship than a political one.

With regards to Councillor remuneration Professor Taylor explained that the process / system in place works. It is another issue in terms of whether councillors are paid enough. The MAIRP debates and reviews this. In the West Yorkshire area, Kirklees payments are at the lower end. A series of basic principles has been built into the Scheme at the beginning. The Panel has been keen not to create a system of bolt-on allowances and has avoided creating professional councillors. In this context the Alec Shelbrooke report is "deranged" as creating professional councillors will further erode the weak basis of legitimacy that exists now. A lot of MPs are career politicians which helps evidence full time political classes are a bad idea.

Professor Taylor acknowledged that the Council should look at better support for part time elected representatives. That said, since MAIRP was created, Professor Taylor believes that Councillors have become more professional i.e. the IRP has helped to professionalised councillors. It now needs to bring together the idea the idea that we are clear what councillors need to do their job. In the current climate what does this mean? It should be a combination of devolving centralised services to ward level and improving councillor use of IT. It will be important to revisit the role profiles in light of the Democracy Commission, New Council, and the context of the environment that councillor are expected to work in, and how we support it. Ward profiles need to reflect the change from being a representative to an enabler. They are in transitional form and the MAIRP need to not run ahead of what councillors think is do-able. This will still need to address the support for councillors issue.

In terms of attracting the next generation of councillors Professor Taylor explained that the MAIRP was asked to look at how the scheme could be used to attract a broader range of councillors. The MAIRP did have some ideas (e.g. induction, taster

sessions etc) although concluded that this is principally a responsibility for the political groups. The body of councillors will never be an exact representation of its community but it could be closer than it is and it is due to political recruitment by the groups.

Citizenship Education

Professor Taylor explained that he is broadly sceptical about the formal teaching of politics. It is something that has to be learned and more importantly impinge on people's day to day lives. A lesson that needs to be drawn from the EU Referendum outcome is the dissatisfaction expressed with politics and people seeing communities around them changing. Given an opportunity voters will respond with the tools given to them.

It is more about a longer term process which involves demonstrating that democracy is good which requires effective national and local government doing things that people recognise as being important.

Regional Devolution

Professor Taylor explained that he "did not 'get' the City Region model. "It's a mess politically and organisationally." When confronted with such a degree of mess people lose interest. It's a natural reaction for anyone other than political junkies. Parishes in Kirklees have suffered from past political battles. In terms of building from the bottom up it is a very long journey from Parish to City Region. I despair at how the City Region has developed and I think an opportunity has been lost. It has worked in Manchester because the process was controlled by one person who has a vision, putting many Local Authorities together to create a coherent entity. Here there has been a lack of leadership, vision and strategic thinking. We have seen something more akin to medieval baronies fighting it out.

Identity is an issue here as Kirklees lacks a civic identity and there are tensions of identity. Greater Manchester works as a civic space, even though there are fragmented identities within it. If it doesn't emerge, a common identity needs imposing. It's a massive space with smaller pockets of identity within it. There is a sense in West Yorkshire that there is a zero sum game, there is a not a sense of 'let's all join in and we can do better'.

Voting and Elections

Professor Taylor explained that voting is currently an incredibly easy process – if people don't choose to vote that's fine, it is a democratic choice. Low turnouts do not concern me, we live in a democracy and people choose not to vote. People will engage if they see the relevance of politics to their lives, this is more likely to increase turnout and engagement. It is about addressing the symptoms rather than the cause.

In terms of the electoral cycle Professor Taylor felt that the current cycle of elections works well and should not be changed.