



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary Note from the meeting held on 30 August 2016

Witness: Justin Griggs

Justin has responsibility for NALC's policy and parliamentary activity as well as improvement and development programmes.

Through several roles since joining NALC in 2000 he has advocated and championed local councils at national level on a wide range of issues, securing significant funding investment in the sector.

Local government journal LGC has previously included Justin in their LGC50 publication on the most influential voices in local government.

Areas of work in recent years include influencing the role of local councils in the Coalition Government's localism and decentralisation plans, including the Localism Act and Open Public Services white paper.

Justin has been spearheading NALC's campaign to promote grassroots democracy and set up local councils in unparished and played an instrumental role in the successful campaigns to establish London's first local council in Queen's Park, Westminster and England's largest council in Sutton Coldfield in Birmingham.

Summary of Discussion

Representative and Participatory Democracy

Justin acknowledged that in addition to representative and participatory democracy it is also important to consider the growth of direct democracy in this context. NALC is very much rooted in the "local" and have seen a continuing growth in the number of Parish and Town Councils year on year which is clearly relevant in the context of an evidential need for more representative democracy that is "truly local". Justin explained that as part of this process there has been a visible improvement and modernisation of representative democracy, with parish and town councillors improving their skills and knowledge and reimagining how things can be done at a local level within the constraints of the democratic body. There is a visibly more

subtle and collaborative way of getting things done which also sits alongside forms direct democracy (e.g. parish polls, neighbourhood planning, local referendums) that are being seen as powerful tools for getting local perspectives for elected representatives. Justin explained that there has been a recent growth in the use of parish polls as a means of bridging the gap between direct and representative democracy at a parish and town level. Such approaches complement the representative role as parish councillors are already very rooted in their communities.

Justin explained that whilst polls are currently conducted in a traditional way there is real scope for digitising these processes. The Commission explored the financial implications of undertaking parish polls although Justin was clear that democracy does and should have a cost and cost alone should not be something that drives thinking, especially where people are prepared to pay for it. It is important to be clear that such approaches are adding value and value for money does need to be challenged and proven.

In terms of the cost of democracy Justin explained that there has been some interesting trends in terms of how the wider public service landscape has influenced the approach taken by Parish and Town Councils. In preceding years precepts have fallen whilst in the last year there has been a noticeable rise as a consequence of onward devolution from principal authorities and areas proactively wanting to be more active. Justin acknowledged that this is a good thing providing that it is based on engagement with local people to establish the issues that matter. The precept is the most direct form of funding in local government.

The Commission went onto note that, in the context of resources, Parish and Town Councils can also access funding mechanisms that would not normally be available to principal authorities. Justin explained that some councils are very successful at levering in resources from other sources and set themselves targets in such areas.

Quality Parish Councils

In the context of value Justin provided the Commission with details of the Quality Parish Councils initiative which has sought to strengthen the role of Parish and Town Councils and introduced a range of measures showing “what good looks like.” The initiative includes training for councillors, understanding the law, ways of improving the area to deliver a local vision, communication and engagement. Justin explained that it is a sector-led approach based on a shared commitment to improve Parish and Town based on three levels of improvement which is regularly refreshed. NALC plays an important role in supporting Parish and Town Councils on their improvement journey which involves working closely with principal authorities in the respective areas and other partners. Promoting improvement provides parish and town councils something to aim for with a view to providing better services and value for money for local people.

Public Accountability

Justin explained that the ballot box is the ultimate accountability mechanism and as such acknowledged that at a Parish and Town level there is an issue in respect of too many uncontested elections which clearly has issues in respect of the democratic mandate. It is important that the councils and councillors have a range of mechanisms at their disposal to account and report back to local people on what they are doing. NALC has recently produced a report which explores issues of representation and democratic mandate. In most cases Parish councillors have a collective responsibility to local people and will take decisions on behalf of the area and consequent achievements are communicated and fed back on this basis. There is less prevalence of independent reporting back by individual councillors at a Parish and Town level although there is no reason why individual councillors could not report back on an annual basis.

Councils, Councillors and Communities

Justin explained that an important factor in explaining the strengths of Parish and Town Councils is that they are the fulcrum and glue that bind a number of organisations together through the democratic mandate they have. The more successful Parish and Town Councils have partnerships with local bodies which means that they straddle the community and local government to deliver a vision for the local area. Justin explained that austerity and devolution are beginning to drive more collaboration with principal authorities in terms of onward devolution and an acknowledgement that it is a natural partnership that provides leverage to continue to provide services in the future.

Justin explored the varying types of representative roles (principal authority and parish and town councillor) and the extent to which this is confusing for the public. Local people don't understand how the system works and who is the councillor with particular responsibility for specific functions and areas of governance. Justin acknowledged that local authorities are in the process of trying to explain how their areas are governed which needs to be developed in a seamless way. There is a growing responsibility on all councils to address this issue in order to make it easier for citizens to engage with councillors and councillors at all levels, It is a very complicated landscape which therefore puts the onus back onto the public bodies to make this seamless.

Justin explained that NALC has an important role in supporting areas and communities who wish to explore establishing a parish and town councils. This can be from a standing start or in circumstances where thinking is more developed. NALC can support and advise on the direction of travel, key considerations and the processes involved in looking to establish a parish or town council. This does involve, on occasions, the principal authorities having the foresight and boldness to "let go". This is always the main challenge. In terms of sustainability, Justin explained that all of the more recently established councils are still going and the trend is one of growth. This is because there is thorough work carried out in advance of councils being established. Justin confirmed that there is no evidence of councils withering on the vine - people are coming forward and replacing those who

are ceasing to be involved. Parishes are changing, modernising and can be an important vehicle for improving the local area.

Party Politics

Justin explained that in the main Parish and Town Councils are not political (mostly independent) although party politics is growing in the sector. This is evidenced by research over a ten year period. Most recently e.g. Sutton Coldfield and Bingley, the political parties are increasingly keen to field candidates and take control of Parish and Town Councils. By way of a general point Justin confirmed that NALC were keen to see less co-options, it is really important that there is greater involvement with an institution that can make a real difference in a local area. Justin acknowledged that NALC and the LGA are doing as much as they can to address this issue, although it is important to acknowledge that of the 10,000 Parish and Town Councils there is real diversity.

Relationships with Principal Authorities

Justin explored the differences and characteristics of areas that are fully parished with those that are not, and in particular with regards to the relationship with principal authorities in those areas. Justin explained that fully parished areas tend to be fully aligned with areas that have reorganised as a result of local government reorganisation e.g. Cornwall and Northumberland. There are very different experiences of the ways in which Parish and Town Councils work with their principal authorities. The variation from place to place often depends on people and relationships which are often influenced by the extent to which the role of the parish is valued and where a vision has been set by leadership which sets the tone for those relationships.

In terms of the parish and town council demographic Justin explained that the characteristics of the type of people who are parish and town councillors is similar to those on principal authorities. Nevertheless over recent years there are “newer faces” coming forward to become parish and town councillors although more work needs to be done in this area to widen out the opportunity.