



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary Note from the meeting held on 30 August 2016

Witness: Katherine Sladden and Kajal Odedra, Change.Org

Katherine is a campaigner at Change.org, the world's largest petition platform. Change.org empowers people everywhere to start and win campaigns on issues they care about. Prior to joining Change.org Katherine was Media Manager for anti-poverty campaign group ONE and worked for the National AIDS Trust.

Kajal is Senior Campaigns Advisor at Change.org. She has supported petition starters of some of the biggest people powered campaigns in the UK - from Lindsey Garrett's petition to save the New Era Estate to Iman Ghavami's campaign to free his sister Ghoncheh from prison in Iran. Kajal also supports corporates, politicians and councils to respond to and engage with petitions on the site. Kajal has previously campaigned for NGOs including Macmillan, Crisis and UK Youth Parliament, and is an advisor for tech group Ada's List.

Summary of Discussion

Representative and Participatory Democracy

Katherine explained that one of the main tensions experienced by Change.org petitioners embarking on a process is that “decision makers” often see them as an attack or it becomes a “them versus us” situation. It is important that this is a dialogue and it is therefore important to make it easier for decision makers to hear and respond on the platform.

Kajal added that in light of the above experience work has taken to develop the Change.org platform to allow the decision maker to respond to ALL of the petitioners. This has really helped campaigners feel that they are being listened to whilst improving the experience for the decision maker. Kajal acknowledged that this is an ongoing process and it is important to continue to improve the tool based on what decision makers need. By way of an example the Mayor of London team have developed a very effective way of engaging with petition starters.

Katherine was keen to emphasise that petitions are not about how many signatures you get, but about the quality of the campaign that you run and the arguments put

forward. It should not be about a number or a threshold as it is about the issue and a number or a threshold can be off putting to the petitioner if they felt that they can never achieve it. Katherine explained that it is important to re-educate petition starters that they should use petitioners as a community and how they work with those people rather than just a list of names. Kajal added that it is important that petitioners are clear that political participation does not always mean that Government is the target. An important consideration is to be clear who is the right person or organisation to target.

Within the context of representative democracy Katherine explained that people often start petitions because they feel they haven't been heard. The online tools provide a place where they can build movements and engage with organisations in a different way. Every council does not have the resources to build such tools and there is an opportunity to see this as a service to decision makers and petition starters alike. For the office of the London Mayor Change.org provides a tidy and quick way of responding and managing issues. Petitioning is as old as democracy, although it has evolved in a way which means harder to reach people are now able to have their voices heard.

Katherine explored the extent to which the online process potentially devalues the petitioning process and explained that it should be easy to be involved in democracy and this is often the start of their journey and this will mean that more people are involved generally. That said it is important that petition starters take the people who have been bothered to become involved on a journey. The decision maker equally has an important role in informing the discussion by adding context and explaining policy as part of the response which increases the value of the approach. Katherine explained that there are a number of different ways for decision makers to respond, including video, which improves speed, responsiveness and the quality of engagement. For decision makers there is a greater likelihood to reach more people than with other, more traditional forms of media. Katherine confirmed that communication with site users is an ongoing process, particularly in terms of how to use the site well and to full effect.

Katherine explained that there is a role for organisations in welcoming petitions as this forms an important part of the cultural change with petition starters. For example some councils (Hackney / Oxford) start petitions on the Change.org site or use it as a tool for consultation. This sets a different culture. In terms of the receptiveness of decision makers, Katherine explained that petitions are but one step on the campaign journey which forms part of the "golden path of retreat" which often involves regrouping and revisiting. The petition alone should not be the decider but provides an opportunity to keep people involved and engaged in one place and there is a mechanism to continue contacting them. The people and the issue are gathered in one place.

Katherine addressed to the suggestion that petitions can focus on single issues and therefore run the risk of "pedalling false hope" as often their point will not be accepted by decision makers. In response Katherine explained that in the context of engaging more people in democracy, most people's political involvement begins with a single issue at the start of their journey. They often work because they are small and specific and stimulate a dialogue. Petitions give people confidence in what they

are doing which often exceeds their expectations at the outset. Kajal explained that experience has shown that the process is empowering, stimulates involvement in democracy and can be a route for getting people into politics.

In the context of the representative role Katherine explained that sites like Change.org should be seen as evidence that people are emerging who would not sign up for a political party or put themselves forward for election. This provides opportunities to reach out to people who care about something locally on a regular basis and provides an opportunity to bring them into the fold. In addition it is important for decision makers to go to the places where people are organising and send out positive messages that “you are open.” Katherine explained that it is also important not to underestimate the power of email (as well as social media) and also video as tools for sharing information and engaging people on an ongoing basis in-between elections. Petition starters can become community champions and as such presents an opportunity for decision makers to engage with them on similar and other issues. Change.org can provide support in facilitating this process and connect people up.

Katherine acknowledged that the context of decision making is important as part of the petitioning process. The site includes a guide for petition starters as well as opportunities for the context to be included as part of the process.

The Commission explored the extent to which petition starters could play a positive role in assisting political parties to identify and recruit the next generation of councillors. Katherine explained that, for example, there is clear evidence that young people are not apathetic and are prepared to actively get involved although there is no clear evidence that this translates into them becoming elected representatives. Kajal confirmed that Change.org would be happy to work with Kirklees to explore this piece of work.