



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary Note from the meeting held on 31 August 2016

Witness: Katie Ghose

Katie Ghose is a barrister and campaigner. Chief Executive of the Electoral Reform Society since 2010, she has established the Society as the UK's leading campaign for a better democracy. Previously Katie was Director of the British Institute of Human Rights (2005-2010) where she pioneered new initiatives to bring human rights to life for everyone in the UK. In 2009 she was awarded Pro Bono Lawyer of the Year by the Asian Lawyers' Association.

Katie has worked in parliamentary and public affairs for organisations including Age UK and Citizens Advice and for seven years served as a trustee for LGBT rights charity Stonewall. Katie is a Board member of Fair Vote, a US organisation campaigning for electoral and democratic reform and in 2015 became an Independent Council member at the University of Sussex.

Katie's first book *Beyond the Courtroom: a lawyer's guide to campaigning* was published by Legal Action Group in 2005.

Summary of Discussion

Representative and Participatory Democracy

Katie explained that, in her view, both representative and participatory democracy are complimentary and should facilitate better decision making as a result of a richer involvement by the public. Within this context it is important to recognise that society has moved from an established set of representative institutions, coupled with a huge amount of socio-economic change, which has resulted in a more politically and socially diverse society. This has meant that people are more fragmented and politically diverse and have become less hierarchical and deferential. This will inevitably affect society's views of representative democracy and representative models.

Katie acknowledged that this provides opportunities for more legitimacy for decisions, better decisions and a wider understanding by the public of the challenges

and trade-offs faced by local decision makers. From the public perspective, done well and done to scale, participation can result in a more informed public who are more enfranchised and who are more effectively connected to their elected representatives. That said there is still a large public knowledge gap as to how local democracy works and participatory pilots provide a means by which this gap can be bridged. It is growingly important to develop a culture of collaborative politics which is a challenge in a climate where people are increasingly less trusting in politicians. The recent work carried out by the Electoral Reform Society (ERS) using Citizens Assemblies as a deliberative approach should be seen within this context.

Katie went onto consider the redefined role of the councillor when adopting deliberative approaches. For example in Canada deliberative exercises are used when the issue results in a clash between the representative decision makers and the public. In Canada they are used as a means of finding a way forward to resolve a thorny issue. It is important to understand that such approaches are not about handing over responsibility to citizens but working alongside elected representatives to work through a topic or decision in a different way using a collaborative model.

In terms of selecting citizens Katie explained that in the ERS pilots every effort was made to ensure that the sample was representative which had succeeded in some respects and not in others. It is possible to get a representative sample but it does take hard work and could include approaches such as face to face contact and remuneration for attendees.

Voting and Elections

Katie recognised that whilst the evidence demonstrates that there is greater trust in local politicians, this is not manifested in terms of voter turnout at local elections. At a macro level one way that this issue could be addressed would be by giving more meaningful fiscal powers to local government that would drive up turnout.

Another factor to consider is that “people feel they don't see local representatives that look like them” which is particularly issue for the political parties in the context of ethnicity, age and gender. The adoption of fairer voting systems are also another relevant consideration and the experiences in Scotland show that STV has resulted in politicians campaign in streets / places that they would not normally go to secure second and third preference votes. This is relevant in the context of the further devolution of powers and the extent to which there is potentially an accountability gap, particularly in places where one party is always in control without an effective opposition. Furthermore, experiences in Scotland show that voters are able to adapt well to different systems.

Katie explained that the ERS is supportive of lowering the voting age although is against compulsory voting. The experiences in Scotland and the recent EU referendum show the importance of giving 16 year olds the vote. Evidence showed that in the Scottish referendum young people accessed more information sources than any other group and played a part in influencing their parents to vote. Votes for 16 year olds should go hand in hand with good quality citizenship education and

modernised registration. Pilot work is now beginning in Fife Council looking at how to open up better democratic spaces in local democracy.

Furthermore there is much work that can be done in the context of modernising electoral registration such as giving a stronger role to schools and using all government interactions to trigger getting residents on the electoral register. Katie explained that the ERS is supportive of tying in registration to a range of activities e.g. issuing NI numbers and the adoption of same day registration and voting.

In terms of electoral cycles Katie explained that this is an important issue although it has complexities for the public in terms of the benefits and implications or otherwise in which particular approach that a council might take.

Councils and Communication with Residents

Katie acknowledged that this is a very difficult area for local councils as we live in a demanding age where communication is expected in a targeted and tailored way. The challenge is to look at how the council's digital communication matches up with off-line communication, although it is really important to consider the topics communicated whatever the medium. Within this context it is also important not underestimate the knowledge gap amongst the electorate in terms of what a council and its representative are and do.

Katie explained that through the work that the ERS had done with the Citizen Assemblies experience shows that people with no knowledge are thirsty for it. By way of a general point, most people are interested but there can be low levels of informedness.

Councillors

Katie explained that one of the consequences of the first past the post system is that it can give an inequality of attention to certain areas in terms of seeing politicians at election time. There is a natural tendency for politicians to target those seats that are marginal or winnable which means that it is a physical reality that residents may not see politicians much at election times or in some instances between elections. Furthermore, there is an issue of scale as we have less representatives per head of population compared to other countries.

In terms of examples of practice between elections Katie provided details of the G1000 Citizen Summits in the Netherlands which involves a day of deliberation after the election to help set priorities for the incoming councillors, involving citizens, councillors and officers. Furthermore, The Grand View Woodland Citizens Assembly in Vancouver which involved 48 people chosen from 500 volunteers worked with councillors to develop a 30 year City Plan. All such models of participation should link to the political process and circumstances. In the context of austerity and limited choices, Katie explained that this would need to therefore be the focus of the participation. Bite the Ballot carry out similar exercises with young people, designed to confront people with the difficult circumstances. Katie explained that the

experience of such deliberative exercises show that people become more informed about the choices and better understand how the decision was made and will be more trusting if there has been a process of deliberation. The **purpose** of the agenda is the key consideration when involving the public in such approaches

In terms of the next generation of councillors Katie explained that an important factor is the role to be played by schools in the context of citizenship – explaining what a council is and what a councillor does should be part of the basic nuts and bolts. Also political parties have an important role to play, particularly in respect of equality and diversity. In addition councillors themselves have an important role to play in talent spotting and thereafter becoming a role model and a mentor.

Regional Devolution

Katie explained that the main issue is that devolution is top down and is moving at a pace in some areas whilst not in others. The economic focus of devolution has meant that there has been less attention paid to democracy which has meant some people feel left behind, possibly resulting in monolithic mayoral models in some areas without any real consultation. The shape of local and regional democracy has not been thought through which will inevitably have implications in terms of the relationship between councils and local councillors. Katie explained that the ERS sought to explore the range of possible models as part of the Citizens Assembly work.