



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary Note from the meeting held on 31 August 2016

Witness: Kenny Imafidon

Kenny Imafidon is a 23 year old political commentator, social entrepreneur and activist.

Kenny is the co-founder & Managing Director of ClearView Research Ltd, which is a leading-edge youth-led research company. He is a trustee of the S.W.I.M Foundation (a charity that works with girls and women on domestic violence). Kenny also leads on research and advocacy at Bite The Ballot. In 2014, Kenny was awarded the number one position of Rare Rising Stars 2014 and acknowledged for being the most outstanding black student in the UK.

Kenny is a firm believer in the mantra 'if you don't do politics, then politics will do you', and his influential & award-winning publications entitled: "The Kenny Reports" has marked him out as one of the most relevant young political commentators of the moment. Kenny has led on innovative partnerships with global brands such as Uber, Tinder and Deliveroo on campaigns to get young people registered to vote. His work has taken him to countries such as Spain, Belgium, Tunisia, Israel, Germany and Austria. Twitter: @KennyImafidon #ZeePolitics

Summary of Discussion

Young People and Active Citizens

Kenny explained that the most significant barrier to young people being engaged in local democracy is the lack of political education throughout the course of their school lives. There is a fear of teaching politics. It is important to overcome the fears that are associated with political education as teaching such subjects properly fosters and facilitates critical thinking. It is important to give people this responsibility. A further barrier to engagement is one of relevance - a lot of people have other issues affecting their lives and therefore democracy and politics is not at the top of their agenda. People's time is often taken up with bigger more important issues like paying bills and the realities of everyday life. In the local context, there

are real opportunities to get engaged and actually "see the change". This is not the case when engaging with government at a national level where it is hard to influence to the point of seeing real change quickly. This is an important factor when we consider that we live in an instant gratification generation and local democracy change can be quick and visible.

Kenny explained that schools are a well placed to address these issues from the outset by embracing a democratic culture. There are opportunities to involve young people in decision making by identifying what decisions can be passed to young people in schools. Such power sharing is important as it can become habit forming and will allow young people to develop the attributes that will make them active citizens.

Kenny also emphasised the importance of working with community leaders in this context, particularly with young people who are outside of the school system. Within this context it is important that "decision makers" coming down into communities in order to gain a stronger understanding of the issues. This should be characterised by transparency and honesty, particularly if you want young people to understand the difficulty and responsibility associated with decision making. Kenny provided an approach used by Bite the Ballot which has been used to facilitate this issue with young people.

Kenny emphasised the importance of creating a platform for continuous dialogue, particularly given that many communities are well placed to solve their own problems. Everyone's issues relating to democracy will be different but there is enough social capital in communities for people and services to come together to solve those problems.

Young People and Decision Makers

Kenny acknowledged that there is a disconnect between young people and local decision makers, whilst explaining the reasons and steps that could be taken to begin to address this issue. This situation is partly explained by the extent to which young people are able to make a distinction between local and national issues. Young people need support to understand the system and the landscape if they are going to engage in those local issues and as a consequence local democracy. One solution involves local councillors going to the places where young people are as this provides an opportunity for young people to see that councillors exist and they are "normal". Kenny felt that councillors do passionately care about what they do and are really well placed to deal with the local issues that matter to young people.

Kenny explained that some councils are better than others at engaging young people in decision making although youth initiatives only work if they are resourced properly as a lot of effort is required, particularly with those who are "not involved." There are opportunities, for example, to use youth councils to engage with their peers although it is important to understand the limitations of youth councils in terms of engaging young people who are "not like them". All activities need to be solutions focussed and honest and transparent – young people need to understand that they will not always get their way as part of any decision making process. Language is very

important, and there should be a greater emphasis placed on making the complex simple. “Does it pass the Grandma test”? Kenny provided details of where young people have been effective in these areas. The findings of the research are set out in this [report](#).

Kenny went on to emphasise the importance of youth clubs and shared initial findings from a recent UK wide [study](#) looking at the effectiveness of youth provision. Kenny explained that youth clubs are an important point of engagement for other services which should be seen as an opportunity for local councils. They provide an opportunity to engage young people in a wide range of issues such as politics, employment, housing, mental health etc. Youth clubs are safe spaces for young people to congregate and engage and are very simple wins for councils.

Young People and Voting

Kenny advocated a number of proposals in the context of improving electoral registration for young people as follows:

- Automatic registration for 16 and 17 year olds;
- A single online register whereby anyone can vote at any polling station and such a facility provides the ability to check on line if you are registered to vote;
- EROs and schools partner up and register young people in their places of education;
- Making a virtue of existing Bite The Ballot resources;
- Creating spin off initiatives arising from being registered e.g. use the register as a pull to encourage young people to be part of a Citizens Jury.

In the context of digital opportunities Kenny explained that councils currently waste a lot of money sending a variety of letters which is neither effective or the best use of resources. Digital provides opportunities to use the places where young people are to encourage registration and is an approach that should be widened. Such approaches should also work alongside traditional methods, such as community leaders who have access to wider networks of young people.

Kenny explained that on-line voting is one method to make the process easier, particularly if we acknowledge that people have very busy lives. This should be as part of a package and would be something that could be effectively explored through a pilot approach.

In addition Kenny emphasised the importance of giving people the right information via the best and most appropriate channels in order to improve voter registration and turnout amongst young people. Channelling information through the people that young people trust is a very important consideration. Beyond such approaches it is important to understand that young people are less likely to vote for candidates who they do not trust – “voting for the best of the worst is not how politics should be”

With regards to the voting age, Kenny advocated a move to lowering the threshold to 16 due to a number of practical and logical reasons. They are already registered, they can get into the habit of voting and in the context of an ageing population should

an approach would balance out the voter demographic – this is an important fairness aspect and a point of principle.

Young Councillors

Kenny discussed the opportunities and considerations in respect of encouraging more young people to become councillors. Kenny explained that it is really important to be clear in terms of what the role actually consists of particularly with the confusion that exists between the role of the councillor and the MP. If young people want to complain or ultimately stand, they need to understand what they are accountable for and what they are responsible for.

In addition to clarity regarding the role, which could be addressed by having a generic job description, it is also important to ensure that young people are properly remunerated and have the resources to do the job properly. Those who are interested could be supported through initiatives such as bursary schemes and be mentored by existing councillors.