



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary notes from the meeting held on 29 September 2016

Present:

Dr Andrew Mycock
Cllr Fazila Fadia
Cllr Cathy Scott
Cllr Gemma Wilson

In Attendance:

Beth Wiltshire, Carl Whistlecraft, Diane Sims, Yolande Myers

Witness:

Anthony Zacharzewski set up the Democratic Society and runs it day-to-day.

He worked as a civil servant for the British government between 1996 and 2006, working in the Department of Health, Cabinet Office, Treasury and the Privy Council Office. During that period he worked primarily on strategy and futures issues.

Between 2006 and 2010 he worked for Brighton & Hove City Council as Head of Policy and later acting Director of Strategy and Governance, responsible for the city's strategy and planning, its partnerships, legal and governance and organisational development.

Since 2010 he has been Director of the Democratic Society. In that time, he has led the organisation from a one-person company to a team of ten, delivering projects with government from parishes up to European level. He has built an international reputation on democracy, participation and government reform, participating in high-level conferences at European and UK level, including the Club of Venice, Digital Agenda Europe and the Commission on the Future Role of the Councillor.

During his time leading the Society, it has worked on projects at local level with the Zero Heroes waste recycling programme in Lewes; developing an infrastructure for local participation with Coventry City Council; and working on a Europe-wide Democracy Incubator with the Council of Europe and the Paris-based partner organisation Démocratie Ouverte.

At national level, the Democratic Society has created reports on open policy making and collaborative government, has led a project making recommendations on digital consultation for the Government Digital Service, and designed a participation model for England's National Health Service. In Scotland, the Society has led nationwide work on digital participatory budgeting and involving the public in decisions on fairness policy. In the UK, the Democratic Society is part of the Open Government Partnership civil society network, and Anthony sits on the UK Open Government Partnership steering group.

The Society's work is growing at European Union level, with a research project on open policymaking in the UK, the use of networks in European Union decision making, and running an unconference on public participation and communications in the EU.

Summary of Discussion

Representative and Participatory Democracy

Anthony explained that he has seen over the last few years growing pressure for more participation and more engagement. He advocates that we should work towards a more participatory representation rather than pure participation or pure representation. This can be done through a range of different approaches which looks for different audiences.

- It could be a light touch by asking the public for their views and comments:
- At the other end of the spectrum is a more involved model such as utilising a citizen's panel approach, which needs much more commitment and time. This gives a more detailed response from a more representative audience.

Anthony acknowledged that there is a problem with the public not trusting institutions or the government, and the response to this could be to 'double down' on technocracy with local authorities treating public opinion as another source of evidence to weigh the decision. Alternatively a local authority could go towards a referendum model or preferably something more creative which requires a more open model of participation. This involves varying degrees of engagement, knowing who is in the room and thinking about presenting information in a very different way.

With this in mind Anthony explained that one of the difficulties is preparing the information, that has a tendency to be quite complex, into a short briefing note that can be used for a short term interaction. The Democracy Society is looking and investigating how you can create a best information environment in which participation can happen. This needs to happen in two ways, firstly a with a base line of knowledge, and secondly trying to find ways of translating complicated background information from the political space into something that people can understand. This can be done in different modes, rather than just producing a briefing paper – it can be done via video, or the telling of stories. If this is done right, you will grasp something more like a conversation and less like a single point of engagement. The challenge with traditional consultation is that an audience is picked up and dropped and therefore does not build a continuous relationship involving audiences who can follow issues through. There needs to be a continuous relationship, more likened to an 'Amazon approach' where large organisations follow things through, perhaps using consultees for other consultations they might be interested in.

Scotland is moving to this model, where they are trying to build audiences that can roll forward. Also, in Barcelona the city council, is starting to see informal large committees of people who follow issues through. These models have real merit, as a half-way house between elected members making the decisions and the public taking on too much of the direct control on a single point decision, without forcing them into a large time commitment.

Switzerland has a referendum model, with the most common use being to overturn decisions that have been taken by elected officials. Well-structured information is given to citizens that the government can defend, and for the opposition to challenge. There is good and bad in the Swiss model, but it can be a safety valve, and could be a more reasonable use of referendums.

Citizen Engagement and Consultation

Citizens feel a lack of appetite to get involved, and they are not sure how to get involved outside of election time. Anthony suggested that local authorities can experiment with ways to create more engagement opportunities, but some approaches (those similar to the governments 'Public Reading Stage') are more resource intensive than others.

One way is to build on existing approaches and this could be done through digital means. However, there is a danger on relying solely on digital, and it should be used in a more supportive way. The public often say they want to get engaged, but in reality, life gets in the way, and it becomes more of an aspiration. It depends on the local authority being able to build up a 'network of networks'.

Anthony was asked how to help the public feel like they are being consulted and decisions are not a 'done deal'. Anthony explained that it was an issue of trust – any form of trust is built up slowly over time. Consultation should be done earlier with a larger mix of approaches and should be clear at the outset what the boundaries of the decision are. There needs to be a build up to consultation and account for why the decision flows from the consultation and the evidence. It is important to convey at the start what the strategic options would be, what the differences are and what might happen etc.

Anthony explained that local authorities need to find the right format for people to participate and a lot of this doesn't have to be so formal, using for example peer networks. It is also important to consider the nature of the conversation you want to have which can be informal. The challenge is that such approaches result in a wide range of data and it is important to extract the data and how to balance the voices. This is where the elected councillor can play a really important role. It is important to tell the story back to the public as feedback is often forgotten. Local Authorities need to broaden their audience so that messages are resting on more shoulders and give a convincing sell to the public that makes it easier to participate. In terms of feedback often all is needed is a 'headline' - a couple of lines of summary about what is happening, so the public can skip to the items that interest them.

The Role of the Councillor and the Council

Anthony explained that the human story behind councillors motivations for seeking office often gets lost which does begin to explain public perceptions. Most councillors are motivated by wanting to make a difference for their communities and it is really important to humanise them. In this context Councillors need to be careful not to become 'super-officers' and it is a difficult line to walk. The challenge is to let Councillors be themselves a little bit more and giving them the resources to do it. Councillors need the skills to lead in networks and the resources to do it, and in particular the information you need to do it. This is really important as the public are reaching a level of expectation where they expect a short concise answer within a short time of raising their complaint or concern. Councillors don't have the structure around them to answers queries quickly enough and are then seen as not responding to concerns and being out of touch.

Anthony suggested that Councillors could be given a 'point person' within the council who might have information as to all places where information might be found, allowing them to get out a quicker response.

In dealing with residents and their issues, Councillors need to be clear as to when they are decision makers and when they are advocates. There needs to be education so that the public understand what Local Authorities are and **are not** responsible for and who is taking the decision and where. This can be done through supporting people to have a better understanding and ensuring that systems are in place to redirect to the right organisation / pathway in order for residents to make the right representation in the right place.

Anthony recognised that there is public confusion around how councillors interlink with MP's, with the public often not wanting to appear 'stupid' if they don't understand the subtleties. This can prevent citizens from engaging. Anthony added that sometimes the public don't want to engage as they feel they don't know enough about a subject. There is a language of citizenship that could be encouraging, rather than discouraging, and if that language can be found it will break down many barriers to citizenship and participation.

In the context of councillor performance and accountability Anthony addressed the issue of minimum requirements for standing (and engagement). Anthony felt that this is a dangerous road to go down and has a level of risk to it. Minimum standards constrain public opinion although councillors being required to make representations back to their public about what they have done on an annual basis is a more useful approach. It is more about making accountability real.

Digital Approaches

In the wider context of digital democracy Anthony explained that digital should be used for what it is good for:

- Time shifting i.e. enabling the public to "watch" (e.g. webcasts etc) when it is convenient for the;
- Allowing information to be presented in a simple way, with the ability to click through for more detailed information if required;

- Allows for different voices to be heard or represented who are unwilling to engage through more traditional means;
- Linking in with rich data which provides the ability to build a bigger picture of the circumstance or context.

Anthony explained that conversely digital is not good for building representative audiences due to the ease of clicking away from a conversation that a citizen may find unpleasant. This can result in a negative environment being created. As a consequence there is a risk of giving more power to those who already have power / stronger voice. Anthony explained that the ideal is to still have something that is face to face. Similarly it is very important to “always know who you are talking to”, someone who is unknown should be less significant than someone known in the context of representation and engagement..

Anthony explained that important questions need to be asked as to who are the citizens in Kirklees? Are those who do not live in the area entitled to comment and participate digitally in something? There are multi-levels of citizenship, depending on what the decision being made is and this needs to be considered as part of looking at decisions in a networked way.

Anthony acknowledged that real care needs to be taken so that digital doesn't overwhelm as it reduces the barriers to participation so much. It can become unmanageable for both councillors and officers. “If you create a new site, then it gets congested quickly, whereas if you use existing communities and networks that are already well established, people are less likely to behave in an abusive manner as they have already built up a reputation that they don't want to lose.” In the context of the Council, Anthony acknowledged that it is important to create opportunities for services to draw from those conversations whilst also creating environments where people can be “fuller citizens”. The approaches are distinct and different but both equally valid

With regards to digital in the context of the councillor role Anthony explained that there are a number of factors:

- Training – Councils have a role in this area although peer support is a key area.
- Networked Leadership – Whereby senior officer and councillors go through the same digital learning processes together. Networked leadership is something that council officers and councillors need to think about together as senior officers will shape organisational redesign. Local Authorities will then be able to align the way in which councillors behave and the way councils need councillors to behave in order to effectively fulfil their role as representatives.

Councillors and Party Politics

Party politics does have an important future – a vote says that a councillor is a person who would take decisions in a way that I approve of in the circumstances I think are likely to arrive – it is a soft delegation of power to a person or a party.

Anthony conceded that people do have a negative impression of politics and Councillors get tarred with that brush. He observed that some of the public would like to become Councillors if they didn't have to go through the political process to become one. In terms of Independents standing for office there is a real issue that the public don't have the time to investigate who the Independents are which goes some way to explaining why they are in the most part unsuccessful. This can change once they are established.

Young People and Local Democracy

Anthony explained that in terms of getting younger people engaged, it is important to give them a close up view of what happens – demystifying the way decisions are made. Furthermore it is important to give young people the opportunity to have their say on the things that matter to them, which could be as simple as putting democratic procedure in place at schools and communities where young people are present. It is important to create opportunities for them to have their say in a format that works for them and for them to know that they are being listened to without being patronised.

Anthony added that there is scope to delegate some decisions that specifically affect young people, at least a “first draft” of those decisions. Given that democracy is changing to something that people want to participate in and given that young people have grown up with this change, there is scope to experiment with new models of politics in those groups. There are therefore opportunities to experiment in more participative approaches and explore how they fit into more traditional models of decision making. In this context it is important to recognise the council's judicial role and an importance in ensuring the same decision is made to a similar decision a number of years ago i.e. the council as civic arbiter.

Elections and the Electoral Cycle

Anthony explained that he is in favour of lowering the voting age to 16 for local elections as this would mean that their first vote would take place whilst they are in an education environment. Furthermore it is important to recognise voting is a habit forming activity – “if a person votes 3 times, they are likely to continue voting.”

In terms of broader electoral issues, Anthony explained that the German model that mixes the continued representation of place with a more proportional system may be more useful in terms of the way in which local government works. Some Local Authorities have a mono-culture, not just in terms of a single political party, but in saying this is the way our Local Authority does politics - this is not always healthy.

In terms of online voting Anthony explained that the main issue is one of security and we are not at a point where security can be guaranteed. The evidence suggests that it online voting does not as much of an impact as people think it will. Some research was carried out in Bern / Geneva around 3 years ago, which revealed that the only increase in turnout related to ex-pats. A reasonable level of security should be the aim rather than perfect security. “A vote defrauded is terrible but a 1000 votes discouraged is much worse”.

With regards to the decline of voter turnout, Anthony explained that this is an issue that occurs across all advanced democracies, and there seems to be a correlation between people thinking that it is their civic duty to vote rather than any immediate political consequences. In Switzerland there is very low turnout for elections, although there are equally many opportunities to engage and participate in decision making processes outside of the electoral process. This may be the way to effectively address this issue.

Regional Devolution

Anthony explained that he feels that City Regions are being set up like “super councils”, which doesn’t fit from a democratic perspective. Regional bodies that are currently being established do not have the same “sense of self” compared to London, which is a real issue. One of the consequences of Combined Authorities being treated as “super councils” is that the behaviours that they are starting to express are some of the worst parts of local council democracy i.e. where leadership takes its decisions sitting around tables with backs turned to the public. .

Anthony explained that DemSoc has run a citizens panel in West Midlands Combined Authority with people in Coventry. The public had no fixed view on the Combined Authority other than ensuring their town had a voice. Any conversation must not start with the how to engage in the Combined Authority – it should start at a broader level and then move on to a bigger conversation. There is a need to make the conversation a two-way one, think about how to phrase the questions and how the question is framed. For example in France there are government departments that by statute are independent that exist in order to create consultation. It has a statutory duty to run a consultation on every project of 300,000,000 euros that has any environmental or infrastructural impact and it does that in a traditional way, but independently and on the basis of the statute. There are a host of approaches and Combined Authorities can start a new level for that conversation given the powers they will have.

In closing Anthony explained that the key is understanding what people think democracy is – they think it is ‘how can I have my voice heard?’ If the Council can frame the conversation in this way, they will get a much richer set of views.