



## **Kirklees Democracy Commission – Round Table Discussion with Partners on 8 November 2016**

### **Present:**

Angela Williams – Principal, Huddersfield New College  
Tom Taylor – Chair, Third Sector Leaders  
Laura Ellis – Head of Governance & Corporate, NHS Greater Huddersfield CCG  
Liz Cook – CEO, Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing  
Alistair Conn – Site Manager, Syngenta  
Helen Severn – North Kirklees CCG  
Paul Bridges – Manager, Huddersfield Mission

### **In Attendance:**

Dr Andy Mycock – University of Huddersfield  
Carl Whistlecraft – Kirklees Council  
Diane Sims – Kirklees Council

### **Democratic Legitimacy and the Role of the Councillor**

Partners discussed the role of councillors in the wider partnership context and in particular roles and responsibilities of councillors who are involved in a variety of boards such as the KNH Board, the Health and Well Being Board, charitable trusts etc. Specific reference was made to the following:

- Sometimes there is a lack of clarity as to who exactly councillors are representing on those boards. Moving forward it is important to clearly define the role;
- The opportunities and tensions between councillors and other members of the boards and their respective representative roles;
- The need to strengthen and clarify the role of councillor on such boards;
- The importance of having councillors on boards who are interested in, and understand, the relevant context and issues;
- The extent to which some boards actually require councillors to be members;
- The valuable democratic insight and perspectives that councillors can bring, particularly in terms of an understanding of the council's decision making processes and their ability to influence within the council. They provide valuable legitimacy;

- The ongoing importance of councillors on boards being proactive in providing influence back into the council;

In terms of the wider councillor role there was an acknowledgement that the national context places additional pressures and challenges on councillors. The erosion of power and influence locally by successive national governments has meant that the role of councillor has become increasingly difficult, particularly in the context of austerity.

Partners recognised that this has meant changes to the role of councillor from one that can no longer be paternalistic in terms of the interaction with residents and communities. Currently the role is “verging on the impossible” with increased expectations in terms of time and responsibility alongside an erosion of the resources that support the role. Consequently this means that the role is becoming growingly unattractive. It is important to make the role “doable” if it is to be desirable and attract people who want to do it for the “right reasons”. Party politics is an issue within this context, with the need for political parties to select candidates based on the skills required to carry out the role.

From a partnership perspective there was an acknowledgement of the importance of the linkages with councillors in the context of the wider advocacy role played by partner organisations. This is seen as an important and legitimate part of the democratic process and one that should be strengthened in the future as part of the changing councillor role.

### **Governance, Accountability and Decision Making**

Once again partners acknowledged the wider national issues which continue to influence the decision making powers of local government. National government continues to reduce the scope of local responsibility which inevitably impacts on the flexibility to make strategic decisions for the area.

At a local level, specific reference was made to the following;

- The ongoing issues relating to the relationship between the council and CCGs in respect of changes to health provision;
- The extent to which the council’s decision making processes and structures are clear, accessible and easily understood. There are perceptions that systems can be used to “deny people a voice” and the distinction is not clear as to what decisions can and can’t be made locally. This should be made clear in the context of the decision making powers available to councillors;
- The need to move to a more collaborative model of decision making given the challenges faced by the council and its partners. Whilst the democratic mandate is fundamentally important it should not be a barrier to achieving this;
- The need for greater clarity in terms of accountability for decision making i.e. councillors or officers;

- The importance of considering the ways in which the council can move away from traditional ways of conducting meetings in order to facilitate wider engagement and involvement.

## **Citizen Engagement**

Partners discussed the wider issue of active citizenship in the context of the Commission's work and made specific reference to the following points;

- There is an important issue in relation to the council's approach to consultation. Some consultations are undertaken when there is no real choice (or presentation) of available options which give the impression that the decision has already been made. "Only carry out real consultations";
- For engagement to be meaningful and worthwhile it is important to "tell the story" in a way that facilitates such engagement. This should involve being clear as to who is making the decisions, on what basis and how they can be influenced. Such approaches allow people to express views on what they want rather than what they won't accept. This should be complementary to the councillor role as it facilitates the growth of social capital and trust;
- The importance of developing a wider understanding of what the council is, what it does and equally what it is not responsible for. This should be strongly linked to local government citizenship education for young residents.