



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary Note from the meeting held on 31 August 2016

Witness: Catherine Howe

Catherine is an expert in digital innovation, focusing on the area of digital democracy and social change. She has a background in technology delivery having run a successful SME, Public-i, Group Ltd, before moving to Capita to develop a new practice focusing on developing new models of engagement – online and offline. She has worked with online communities and social networking tools for over 15 years. Initially developing learning applications, including one of the first eLearning community sites, at the London Business School, she was founder director of Etribes.com – an online community consultancy which specialised in working with large third sector organisations.

Since 2001 Catherine has worked with Local Government across the UK and Europe, looking at how new technologies can deliver innovative democracy and engagement solutions for the Networked Society and helping clients understand the strategic and organisational implications. Working across the public sector she is currently working on projects such as the ground breaking NHS Citizen initiative as well as digital leadership programmes within local government.

Her research interests cover digital civic space, citizenship and systems linking. Her PHD Research looked at building civic architecture in cyberspace and the implications for democracy of increasing levels of civic participation online.

Summary of Discussion

Representative and Participatory Democracy

Catherine explained that contextually it is important to understand that we are moving from an industrial to a networked society which strongly impinges on the notions of both representative and participatory democracy. Representative democracy and decision making therefore needs to be seen in the context of “real time change” in a networked and digital society. There is therefore a need for “real time” democracy alongside representative democracy as the latter needs to maintain a responsibility for taking difficult and accountable decisions as part of a democratic

mandate. The question is therefore, “what democracy do we need in a networked digital society which is constantly changing?”

The issue is therefore how best to balance between the two as part of a [“democracy stack”](#). This would allow for participatory democracy for closely bound decisions whilst recognises that there are other issues that will need to be resolved at a representative level.

In resolving the above issue it is important to consider how democratic accountability and engagement is built into the way we are thinking about the design and delivery of public services at a more granular level. For example functions such as communications, co-design, democracy and decision making need to come together as part of a multi-disciplinary approach. This is a means of creating connectivity between small front end changes and elected accountability.

An important challenge within this context is understanding the boundaries of participative democracy and how we put in place a deliberative process as part of the next stage where there will need to be trade-offs between communities. This is traditionally carried out by either a councillor or a committee. It is therefore important to be clear as to what decisions are taken directly in communities (direct democracy), what should be the subject of deliberative decision making and what decisions are taken as part of a representative democracy.

Catherine explained that it is important to organise democracy around natural communities. People know where they live and it is unlikely that this will fit neatly into artificially created boundaries. For participatory democracy to work, it needs to operate out of natural communities. This makes it easier to “get people involved” but more importantly the deliberative democracy / decision making is therefore anything which falls outside of the scope of this geography as it is likely to involve trade-offs with other natural communities. In terms of a borough the size of Kirklees place is the key delineator although it is important to accommodate this with communities of interest. If we want more participation we need to understand that most people are motivated by a wish to make the place where they live a better place.

Digital Democracy

Catherine explained that people who are “digitally included” receive a varied flow of information and content. The real challenge for local government is to make its content interesting in a way that results in citizens including and valuing it as part of their wider flow of information.

Whilst there are social, commercial and transactional spaces on-line, local democracy does not have an on-line civic space. This is a really important issue and consideration in the context of the Commission’s work. On-line spaces often create segmented communities which is naturally at odds with the considerations relating to a civic space. It is easier to know “who is not there” in a digital civic space. If we are serious about developing a digital solution in relation to democracy there is a need to build civic architecture on-line and the council web site should not be the vehicle for

this. Catherine explained that it is therefore important to design places on-line where people can and will come together based on natural civic hubs e.g. libraries.

Catherine shared her thinking in respect of the development of a “civic passport” approach which would cover transactional parts of the relationship with the council but more importantly forms the basis of a local citizens identity covering involvement in other activities e.g. participatory budgeting, school governor etc. This would foster a relationship between the citizen and the state that is not wholly based on the services they receive.

Digital also provides an opportunity to have a direct connection between the citizen and the elected representative as representatives of the “natural place”. Councillors have a real opportunity to be visible in that on-line civic space.

With regards to citizen Catherine explained that digital exclusion is very much a different issue and challenge compared to before. The challenges of affordability and access have decreased and it is now more about motivation, trust and skills. Catherine explained that in moving to a networked society there is a real danger that a whole host of people risk being left behind in terms of being digitally competent and confident to participate in the 21st century. This is really important in the context of local democracy.

In the context of digital exclusion Catherine acknowledged the wider importance of issues around literacy skills and the use of plain language. For example committee minutes and reports, which should be a route into local democracy, are often inaccessible. As we design new approaches and civic spaces it is important to do things differently and consider a multi-media approach incorporating video, images etc.

As an approach it is important to “design in democracy” as part of things like website design. Catherine explained that customer personas are often the basis of website design which is very different to a citizen persona. If democracy is designed into the process it will be implicit that people would and should expect to be treated like citizens not customers. People will not behave like citizens if we treat them like consumers. Taking this approach will require a significant change in the role of the elected representative whereby there will be a stronger need to listen to the contributions to the deliberative space. “You are creating an environment where you can’t ignore the citizen. You can’t design in more democracy and not expect more interaction.”

In the context of councillors, Catherine shared details of the work she had carried out in respect of the Networked Councillor project. One of the learning points was the need to have a greater focus on digital literacy as opposed the tools.