



## **Kirklees Democracy Commission**

### **Summary Note from the meeting held on 3 October 2016**

#### **Witness: Sir Stephen Houghton, CBE**

Sir Steve has been an elected member of Barnsley Metropolitan Borough Council for 28 years and Leader of the Council for 19 years. He has a Masters Degree in Local Governance from the University of Birmingham. Previously, Sir Steve led a Government Review into the role of local authorities and partnerships in tackling long term unemployment and worklessness, which was published in 2009. Sir Steve has recently been asked to sit on the Rotherham Improvement Board after sitting on Improvement Boards for both Doncaster MBC and Wirral MBC in the past.

Sir Steve holds a number of positions including Chair of the Sheffield City Region, Chair of the Barnsley Local Strategic Partnership; Chair of SIGOMA and Regional Peer of the LGA. He was awarded the CBE for services to Local Government in the 2004 New Year's Honours List and a Knighthood in 2013 in the Queen's Birthday Honours.

Present: Cllrs Andrew Marchington, Gemma Wilson and Andrew Cooper

In Attendance: Carl Whistlecraft, Spencer Wilson, Diane Sims, David Bundy, Richard Dunne

#### **Summary of Discussion**

**NOTE:** Councillor Houghton made reference to slides during the course of his evidence giving. A copy of the slides is attached for reference and should be considered alongside this note.

### **The Future of Local Democracy and the Wider Context**

Councillor Houghton explained the wider contextual challenges that have meant, over the last five years, that there has been a recognition that local government cannot continue as it is. There is a need to ask the question – “What is the point of councils and councillors?” Austerity means that local government cannot stand still.

Councillor Houghton explained that there are positive aspects to the challenges faced by local government but only if Councils and councillors are prepared to change and work in a different way. The questions that councils need to ask:

- Are we moving from Corporate to Community Governance?
- Are we moving from Leading/Managing the Council to Leading and Supporting Places?

Councillor Houghton explained that as the council shrinks the role of councillors is increasingly being re-directed from an emphasis on council oversight with some community focus, to much more focus on communities and places.

In the wake of ongoing austerity and budget reductions it is unlikely that local government will benefit from any loosening of central government budget restraint. It will be a difficult challenge to change public expectations of local government although there is a pressing need to do so in order to take demand out of the system.

The regional context is an important consideration and at some point the signing of a devolution deal will bring new forms of governance. This will have implications for councils and the roles of councillors.

Overall there is a compelling need to establish a new relationship between the citizen and the state, moving from a state of paternalism and dependency to one of co-production. This will have implications for council services and councillors alike.

## **Financial Challenges and Changing Services**

Councillor Houghton acknowledged that the budget reductions faced by councils are the largest in history and councils cannot continue to salami slice services, instead they must look at more sustainable delivery models. The changes to the way services are delivered will inevitably impact on councillors.

Looking ahead, councils will see the localisation of business rates by 2020 which is a significant challenge for some northern. This will mean that councils will be forced into a greater economic focus and will need to find ways of making the local economy more sustainable.

Councillor Houghton explained that services will need to change and reduce to become more targeted, with the focus moving towards the delivery of mandatory services'. Councils will need to have agreed a core offer by 2020/25.

There will be increasing expectation for more personalisation and choice for service users which could mean more services moving to private sector providers. Councils will need to work with local communities to provide bespoke services to different areas. Consideration could also be given to providing funds to communities to facilitate the move toward communities solving their own problems.

## **Regional Devolution**

Councillor Houghton explained that regional devolution will require more integrated working across councils and sub-regional strategies and decision making. The

question is, is it devolution or evolution or both? The structural and governance arrangements at a regional level could potentially result in the significant majority of councillors becoming increasingly isolated and consequentially less influential.

The wider governance landscape remains complex and unclear - elected mayors, combined authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships, Executive Boards, regional scrutiny and audit etc.

The Commission noted that Leaders of councils will be involved in the new arrangements although most councillors will not be involved or engaged in the design and development process which exacerbates the isolation of most councillors. "There is a risk that councillors end up in a vacuum and that this will get bigger."

Councillor Houghton acknowledged that the Mayoral model in the context of the Combined Authority is an area that, by its design, is more about accountability than it is about engagement with communities. This requires local councils to have effective governance models within their own boroughs to ensure that their voices and priorities are reflected and presented at the Combined Authority. Within this context it is important to ensure that the right scrutiny model is in place at the Combined Authority level and in order to work effectively this should be designed by involving local scrutiny expertise, including being scrutinised by those respective councils. Councillor Houghton explained that structures and mechanisms will need to be put in place to allow communities and service users to feed into the Combined Authority structures and processes.

## **Governance and Accountability**

With regards to the wider governance context Councillor Houghton explained that governance models are likely to be more diffuse in the future. Increasingly the governance will change in the context of services being delivered either in partnership, by community groups or by other private providers. This changing context will mean that there will need to be a careful balance between tight and loose governance arrangements, particularly where councils will increasingly be looking to community groups to play a more proactive and prominent role. There needs to be a balance between good and proportionate governance whilst not stifling innovation.

## **The Future of the Council and Councillors**

Councillor Houghton explained that as a consequence of austerity it is increasingly likely that more councils will growingly focus on the delivery of core services which will see a further erosion of councillor influence.

In the context of devolution and the sharing of services, the remaining council services will potentially have decisions relating to them taken elsewhere, further reducing councillor influence. Such developments will inevitably result in a greater focus being placed on the numbers of councillors required to carry out the remaining functions and tasks. Furthermore, the flexibility for councillors to fix problems for

residents will become increasingly challenging with less resources, resulting in residents questioning the need for councillors. There will be an increasing need for councils and councillors to find new ways working with residents to solve problems.

In light of the above Councillor Houghton emphasised the importance of redefining the councillor role and proactively addressing the question around the overall number of councillors that will be appropriate moving forward.

Councillor Houghton observed that there will need to be consideration of the future role of the Council. The Council will remain the provider of reduced number of services, with a focus on the provision of a “core offer.” The council will continue to have a leadership role for the borough and councillors have continue to have a democratic mandate, giving councillors legitimacy, which should be valued and seen as an area of strength.

The Council will provide a vision for the district and a sense of direction, councillors will have an important role in translating that vision to the communities they represent. The Council will continue to be a regulator of certain areas such as planning and councillors will still be involved in this important role. Moving forward the Council will increasingly become a facilitator and a partner working alongside agencies and communities. The Council will also have a strong role in managing behaviours and community safety. The civic role of the Council is important as it can demonstrate and foster examples of good behaviour and responsibility. These are all important considerations in the context of the changing role of councillor.

In terms of the future councillor role Councillor Houghton explained that councillors will continue to play an important role in being local leaders of their place and setting the direction for the places they represent. This will increasingly mean that councillors will need to become effective problem solvers and find answers locally. This will require councillors to resolve issues by direct action themselves and with the help of volunteers. Councillors will need to develop skills to become effective negotiators and influencers with and between people, groups and agencies.

Councillor Houghton explained that the most difficult but most important element of the future role is building participation and collaboration. Councillors will need to encourage active communities and volunteers although it should be recognised that not all participation will be free and councillors will need some funds in order to facilitate this area of work.

With regards to governance arrangements Councillor Houghton advocated that new governance models should be developed around the councillor role as opposed to around service structures and silos as is traditionally the case in most councils. Given that councillors will increasingly have less direct influence over many services (see above) it is therefore timely and sensible to redesign governance arrangements in a way that is built around the key councillor roles. Within this context Councillor Houghton advocated detailed consideration of effective “double devolution” models within councils, thus providing more influence and power to localities and the councillors that represent them.

In terms of local devolution Councillor Houghton explained that the Barnsley model now includes 6 Area Councils and each area will operate at different scales depending on size. Each area council will deliver on local priorities and will have a commissioning budget (the equivalent of £100k per ward) and where services are stopped or reduced by the Council each area could if they wish backfill these services or commission new services. Councillors are at the heart of the Barnsley approach to devolution. The Commission noted that each area council must have a ward alliance made up of ward councillors and at least 6 community representatives which have a small additional budget of £10k. The area council can add additional funds and each area council are supported by at least 2 full time staff.

Councillor Houghton explained that Barnsley Council needs the community alliances to do things rather than tell the Council what needs to be done and therefore the decisions should be based on the activity of the alliances. Councillor Houghton acknowledged that there was initially some scepticism but councillors have been fully supportive and are now taking decisions in their areas. Councillors have received a lot of training and support but are now engaged and it has given councillors a sense of importance and value, resulting in some great outcomes.

Councillor Houghton explained that the council performance manages each area, with each being required to develop an area plan and commissioning plan to include outcomes which can be performance managed against the outcomes that the area councils have set for themselves. The communities' views and opinions are channelled through the ward alliances which feed into the area councils when setting priorities. While this is being done it is still important for the Council to continue with its own public perception surveys at a borough-wide level. Councillor Houghton explained that Area Councils try and develop relationships with parish councils with a view to facilitating co-funding approaches. Parish Councillors have places on the ward alliance and there is a desire to try and integrate with parish councils as part of ongoing process.

The Commission noted that the new model has been well received and the Council runs award evenings for volunteers. There is no direct involvement from Cabinet although one Cabinet member has oversight as part of their portfolio. Cabinet continues to focus on "core council" and leaves the area councils to be run by local councillors. Barnsley is careful about the relationship between core council and area councils. It is important to get good information from core services about an area and core council needs to understand what services are being carried out in the various areas.

In terms of supporting the changing councillor role Councillor Houghton emphasised the importance of councils having a strategic approach to supporting and resourcing councillor development. In the context of the changes to the councillor role it is crucial that councillors are supported – "sending them out of the door naked won't work". Councillors will need new skills, resources, staff and money if they are going to be playing a part in filling the gaps that will be left when officers are no longer there.

Councillor Houghton acknowledged the importance of promoting and "selling" the new councillor role (job), although the starting point is being absolutely clear as to

what the role actually is. Historically councils and political parties have not been effective at promoting the role and the changing environment provides an opportunity to do this in a way that can present the role as new, exciting and challenging. It is important to sell the positives. This will assist in attracting the next generation of councillors. Furthermore, political parties will need to be clear about how they go about selecting candidates and may be able to find people who are already involved in community participation and more in tune with the new role. This is likely to be the place where the next generation of councillors can be found as they are already working in a collaborative way although it will be important to support them in taking the next step up.