



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Submission of Danny Lockwood

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- **What do you feel is the role of the local press in relation to the council and its councillors?**

A: Multi-faceted. We are here to act as a positive conduit for news, activity and information on behalf of the authority and its elected representatives. We are a direct and impartial line of communication between KMC and the people of North Kirklees. Beyond that and just as importantly our role is to scrutinise policy and performance both of the authority and the individuals responsible for forming/implementing strategy. And, as successive political leaderships have learned since John Harman and via Kath Pinnock, Robert Light, Mehboob Khan and now David Sheard, we perform that scrutiny robustly and regardless of party political affiliation. A fundamental principle of what we do is to hold authority to account.

- **Does the local press have a positive part to play in civic life in Kirklees?**

A: Absolutely. We provide a broad and (believe it or not) impartial platform for people of all political allegiances and none to have a voice, be that on our busy letters pages or via stories highlighting issues of concern to different communities. Communication is key to the Council understanding its constituents especially where elected members are in 'sleep' mode as so many tend to be – until their re-election year rolls around. But the local press is also there as a free and cooperative partner for the Council to convey useful and positive news and information to engaged constituents. This is probably the biggest if least noticed example of our partnership.

- **Our engagement with the public has revealed that party politics is a turn off and the issues are what matter. What are your views on this?**

A: For reference I suppose we look to Brexit and Donald Trump. There is an anti-establishment mood across the western democratic spectrum so your findings are no surprise. Do I agree? Mostly. The public in my experience are tired of being deceived, patronised and having their hard-earned money used to pursue narrow and divisive agendas. The current Kirklees Council administration is a living, breathing and culturally destructive example of this.

- **Our engagement with the public indicates that councils and councillors are not good at communicating decisions. How could this be improved and what could the local press do to help?**

A: As a journalist of 39 years I have witnessed all public organisations become increasingly defensive, protective and cynically self-interested. I would say that West Yorkshire Police and Kirklees Council are right at the pinnacle of bad practice in this regard. I do not put that down to the staff at the sticky end of trying to work with us, but the over-politicised, us-and-them attitudes of the officer/management class. There is a public perception of deception/evasion because the defensive structures prevent the directorate from engaging with, empathising with, and explaining policy and action. No one will put their head over the parapet. There is no sense of ownership, leadership or responsibility. Trust between the public institution generally and the public/press is at an all time low ... and then executives wonder why they are increasingly criticised by us, despite resolutely refusing to engage. Improve things? Easy. Honesty and individual contact.

- **Our engagement with the public suggests that not all councillors are effective at engaging with their communities. Why do you think this is and what could the local press do to help?**

A: We do already help. We try to embarrass and weed out the feckless shysters who are in it for self-aggrandisement and small-minded political ends, as opposed to public service. And there are plenty of them. This by no means applies to all. Honest hard-working councillors get lots of mileage out of the local press, because apart from public appearances and cheque presentations, they also return difficult calls, comment on topical stories and engage with us. And they come to us with stories as well, besides PR. Others (I could list them) either only want half of this deal (the PR) or for personal/political reasons they have already disengaged. For many it is suspicion of our motives or in the case of The Press more specifically, my motives as newspaper publisher/owner. Actually, the editor David Bentley is the first and key point of contact and I have very little to do with directing the editorial content of the newspaper except with occasional stories and my personal column, which unfortunately for some cynics has come to define the paper itself. It shouldn't. They don't give themselves a chance. In order to improve this it might help for councillors to be better informed/educated in what we're actually about. As a former President of the Yorkshire Guild (now Society) of editors and a Director of the UK Guild of Editors, I'm available for training days at a reasonable rate.

- **Our engagement with the public indicates that there would be less cynicism about local politicians if they were more accountable in terms of their impact achievements and successes. What do you think what could the local press do to help?**

A: We are always happy to cooperate and offer a platform for good news stories – we don't get enough of them and I can get as fed up as anyone else of reading about doom and gloom. The better informed and involved our readers are regarding matters and decisions important to them, the more relevant we are as a newspaper and the better business I own. It's a win-win situation if councillors all engage, so long as they take the occasional rough with the smooth. The inherent problem there is the matter of lazy and ineffective councillors who would struggle to get involved

with the local press because they actually do so little and are so ineffective. If they are exposed by their silence, inactivity and ulterior motives (for reference see recently 'retired' Dewsbury South Cllr Abdul Patel) then all the better.

- **Our engagement with the public indicates that the local press tends to focus on negative aspects of the council and councillors which makes people jaded with democracy. What are your views on this?**

A: See all of the answers above, but entirely understandable and frustrating for all concerned. When you hit a brick wall of at worst silence and at best obfuscation, then it's difficult to provide the light and shade that makes all forms of journalism valid, relevant and trustworthy. It wasn't always like this, but the newspapers I've edited/published over the past 23 years have always been consistent in our open-minded approach. We've never been phone hacked or entrapped. But when we have carried out professional, meticulous and if I say so myself courageous investigations into fraud and corruption involving officers and members of Kirklees Council specifically, then we have witnessed explicit deceptions and cover-ups. KMC is living, breathing proof that even the Freedom of Information Act isn't worth the paper it's written on when officers are protecting their own. I refer expressly to repeated instances of voter fraud, the council's relationship with the Savile Town Community Centre and various supposed groups attached to it and its alter ego the Taleem Training & Community Centre, and the privately run (by then-Labour councillor Abdul Patel and former Labour councillor Ghulam Maniyar) Muslim Mosque Burial Committee. I could go on.

- **How do you balance getting a good story with giving people a wider understanding of the issues and pressures behind Council decisions?**

A: There's a basic principle to everything we do – we try to get both (or all) sides of any story, and be reasonably circumspect in exploring people's motives for going public. A 'good' story is not one that's all noise, but one that has a positive outcome. If decision makers were less dogmatic within the confines of the council chamber, if they were all more honest and open about how/why decisions are taken and priorities given, then everyone would feel more involved. I have always said this – people can handle bad news far better than no news. They do not appreciate being treated on a need to know basis. Trust them and whether they agree with you or not, they will at least respect the people and the process. Right now they don't.

- **How do you ensure that local decisions and issues are put in the context of the national government policies and direction that determine them?**

A: An impossible task, because it is by nature of the question a matter of adversarial politics. But it would help the process if individual cabinet members/Council directors actually attempted to explain the difficulties. Certainly my paper would enjoy being able to have a 'sit down' and get the full breadth of a story as opposed to a sound bite. They might be surprised by the public's response. Just be aware that both we/they will smell party political BS if it's laid on thick, something our new Batley & Spen MP Tracy Brabin is currently in the process of discovering. Talk to people, not down to people.