



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary Note from the meeting held on Friday 4 November 2016

Witnesses:

Joe Mitchell

Joe thinks that our most tricky political problems are systemically linked by weak democratic engagement. He thinks digital tools can begin to empower everyone - even those who don't use them directly - to make democracy better. He has a background in public engagement, advocacy and public sector marketing. He previously worked at Purpose, one of the world's leading online organising consultancies, on projects relating to global health and the environment. He also has a range of experience across the public and third sectors, including in marketing and communication for the UK Government, and advocacy and research for NGOs.

Sym Roe

Sym is a developer and has worked in the open / government space for years. He runs Democracy Club partly by writing code and partly by working with others to build a community of organisations who want to work together.

Present:

Cllr Andrew Palfreeman
Cllr Eric Firth
Cllr Andrew Cooper
Cllr Gemma Wilson
Cllr Andrew Marchington

In Attendance:

Carl Whistlecraft, Diane Sims, Spencer Wilson, Alaina McGlade

Summary of Discussion

Better Elections Report

By way of context Joe and Sym provided an overview of their "[Towards Better Elections](#)" Report. Joe explained that public engagement at elections is something that Democracy Club has been involved in since 2009 in readiness for the 2010 election. The principal aim from the outset was to close the gap between voters and

their candidates. This proved to be a challenge, as the digital infrastructure did not exist at the time. For example, when volunteers first embarked on co-ordinating the data, a list of emails for candidates wasn't readily available which meant it was not possible to connect candidates with their constituents.

Moving forward to 2015 Joe explained that the digital world had now become part of everyday life and therefore provided a greater opportunity to bridge the above mentioned gap. As a result, Democracy Club developed the "[Your Next MP](#)" website which became the starting point for further work. As a result the work carried out in 2016 was more ambitious and saw the creation of data on who has what elections and where. Democracy Club went onto crowd source information on all candidates involved in the 2016 election which resulted in "[Who Can I Vote For](#)" which included the details of candidates for all elections (13,000 candidates) being available in one place for the first time. In 2016 Democracy Club also expanded their polling station finder facility "[Where Do I Vote](#)", which is an ongoing project where learning will be gained from electoral episodes leading up to the next General Election. Such tools should complement existing processes such as polling station details on polling cards etc. Joe explained that Democracy Club are confident there is a voter demand for this type information and want to be ready to provide improved services by the next General Election when they anticipate there will be a spike in demand. The elections in between will be used to test their work on an iterative basis.

Public Awareness

Sym explained that both Democracy Club and councils want the same thing i.e. better information for people, although both are coming at it from a different angle. There is a real challenge in finding the information that already exists on council web sites and combining this into a single place, although some are better than others in terms of what is there and the quality of the information.

Sym explained that Democracy Club's starting point when considering who uses the information is to expect the users to be unaware of who their local council is. Democracy Club then pull this information together and put it where people already are i.e. Twitter, Facebook and Google etc. The first task is to get all of the information into one place and then put it where people can readily access it.

The Commission explored the important considerations for councils when presenting and sharing their information. Sym suggested that the following could form a set of Core standards for councils:

- Having a predictable and consistent URL on every council web site in respect of elections;
- A list of polling stations being kept at the same URL and kept up to date;
- Candidate information is more complex but a starting point would be individual web pages or a central repository rather than PDF documents which make it difficult to aggregate information.

The Commission suggested that the above standards could be pulled into a "Democracy Club Charter" which councils like Kirklees could sign up to.

In terms of candidate information Sym advised that there he was not any data to prove that being aware and getting to know candidates impacted on the turnout at elections. However, removing the barriers / excuses to voting and increasing awareness would result in a better informed and more trusting electorate, which is, by its nature a better thing.

The Commission discussed the feasibility of providing more details about candidates as part of the nomination process which could be included on the council's web site. Joe explained that Democracy Club felt that an email address should automatically be provided for a candidate when their nomination form is accepted. Sym highlighted the important issue, in the context of the above, of the importance placed on councils to ensure the equal prominence being provided to each candidate.

The Commission discussed how Democracy Club would suggest communicating with members of the public who do not have any digital access. Democracy Club explained that the benefit of contributing to the ability to provide elections information in a single place would enable a number of public organisations to help members of the public who are not on-line e.g. Citizens' Advice Bureau providing elections information to their clients when they attend the bureau etc.

Accountability and Public Perception

The Commission explored the notion that public engagement shows cynicism with politicians and questioned whether the principles of the "They Work for You" programme could be adapted to produce something of benefit to local councillors. Joe advised that he was not aware of anything similar being produced currently and it would require sophisticated data to be co-ordinated across 300 local authorities. Sym explained that ModernGov may be of some help and that to start a prototype would involve pushing out information like meeting details, minutes etc.

The Commission explored the use of jargon and "council speak" and the extent to which it acts as a barrier to citizens. Joe explained that he agreed and felt it was beneficial to always keep it as simple as possible e.g. not polling station finder, but "where do I vote?" Joe explained that it is important to think of your intermediate audience who can cope with more jargon and use them to convert that into information that is more understandable and accessible.

The Commission explored the extent to which there is any evidence to demonstrate that public engagement provides better decisions or more confidence in the decisions that are taken. Joe explained that his instinct is that knowing more about what is happening and having the ability to comment gives more trust in the process. Better information provides more confidence in the process. Sym went on to explained that there is an issue regarding the "type of person" getting involved - better information might help those that are interested but don't have the time to investigate the issues in detail.

Public Education and Voter Turnout

With reference to the report findings the Commission discussed the wider issues associated with civic education and citizenship which should go beyond schools. Joe explained that the top google searches during the referendum were fundamental questions that we presume people should know the answer to. Sym explained that evidence shows that few council's see this as a real issue which may require a national approach.

In the context of the above the Commission explored what could be done, on a pilot basis, to increase awareness and consequentially turnout. Joe suggested the following steps that could be considered as part of such a pilot:

- Sending everyone in the ward a booklet with details of all candidates in a 100 word statement;
- Sending everyone in the ward a text message on Election Day, reminding to vote and detailing candidate and voting information;
- Carrying out hustings, providing voters with the opportunity to meet candidates face to face;
- More candidate posters.

Sym explained that this is a very challenging area which is predicated on an increased amount of information for voters provided by the council. Clearly this would have to be non- partisan information which would need to be very basic and factual. It would become more complex if presenting info regarding where candidates stand on specific issues. This could still be kept non-partisan although there would be legal considerations.