Democracy Commission – councillor survey
How should we do democracy here in Kirklees?

49 councillors took part in this online survey about local democracy. The survey ran December-January 2017.

Where councillors, Kirklees Council staff, and e-panel results are referred to in this report, we recognise that results may not be representative of these groups, due to the self-selecting nature of the surveys.

Role of councillors

How can you improve a lack of understanding about the role of councillors? Please select up to three options you could commit to, to improve communication:

36 (75%)	**Using technology and social media**
24 (50%)	Building relationships with local press and radio
22 (46%)	Councillor visits to local schools
15 (31%)	Holding 6 monthly local meetings to discuss progress
14 (29%)	Ad-hoc councillor drop in sessions
9 (19%)	Holding more regular surgeries
8 (17%)	Something else:

11 comments received for 'something else', covering getting out into the community, regular electronic updates, and having local meetings more frequently than 6 monthly. One commenter felt that the council should also be responsible for helping residents understand the role, while another felt that if residents are uninterested we cannot force them.

How much do you agree or disagree that..?

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Communities should have a greater role in the local democratic process, working more collaboratively with councillors	20 (43%)	17 (37%)	5 (11%)	3 (7%)	1 (2%)
	80% agree			9% disagree	
There should be a reduction of numbers of councillors in Kirklees	3 (6%)	3 (6%)	7 (14%)	10 (20%)	26 (53%)
	12% agree			73% disagree	
Councillors should have less control and the local community have more	0 (0%)	2 (4%)	19 (40%)	14 (29%)	13 (27%)
	4% agree			56% disagree	
Mobile technology in general (such as social media, using apps to report issues, Skype for surgeries) would make the community leadership role of a councillor more effective	8 (17%)	22 (46%)	11 (23%)	5 (10%)	2 (4%)
	63% agree			14% disagree	

Interestingly, while 8 in 10 councillors felt the community should have a greater role and work more collaboratively with councillors, only two respondents agreed that the community should have more control – implying that while councillors would be happy to work with communities, they don't agree with sharing greater decision making power. Unsurprisingly, three quarters of respondents disagreed with reducing the number of councillors.

Many respondents noted the importance of reaching out to the next generation rather than expecting them to come to us – for example by getting into schools, youth groups, working with the Youth Council, as well as using social technology.

Some commenters felt that we need to be truly honest about what the role entails: how much of a commitment it is, what responsibilities it involves, as well as the difference a councillor can make. This could include highlighting the kind of character traits and skills needed to be a good councillor.

Some felt this was less of a job for individual parties at a local level and more a national agenda, while others felt it key that we ensure the practicalities work for more people, e.g. by making sure meetings are outside of general work hours.

Elections

There is a decline in voter turnout in local elections.
With this in mind, which of the following options do you feel would be most likely to increase the number of people that vote?

17 (39%)	**Using online voting**
11 (25%)	Having more polling stations in different locations e.g. supermarkets, university campus
9 (20%)	Improving the information available about candidates
7 (16%)	Something else:

Additional comments relating to methods included an increase in postal voting / all out postal voting; compulsory voting; being able to vote at any polling station. Many comments mentioned improving the information about the importance of voting and the difference it can make; and more generally for our local councillors to hold themselves to a higher standard of behaviour and be positive role models.

How would you feel about changing the election cycle to once every four years?

10 (21%)	It sounds like a great idea in principle	47% in favour of 4 year voting
12 (26%)	Sounds okay but I would need to know more	
5 (11%)	It sounds like it would be a bad idea to me	**54% against changing**
20 (43%)	I would be totally against changing to four yearly elections	

There was a relatively even split of those for and against changing the election cycle, though there was stronger feeling from those against (a greater proportion being 'totally against' it). For comparison, 78% of council staff were in favour and 61% of our residents' e-panel felt the same way.

In line with the split result above, comments here were very mixed, with respondents noting various pros and cons:

Pros mentioned can be summarised as:
- ✓ Four yearly voting would be viewed as more of an event, with potential for higher turnout.
- ✓ More stability for a four year term: more long term planning, decisions less influenced by trying to appeal to voters.
- ✓ Councillors and residents would feel less election-weary.
- ✓ Less time would be taken up with campaigning.
- ✓ Likely to save money.

Cons can be summed up as:
- ✖ The potential for an all-new administration every four years could mean no continuity, a sudden loss of experienced councillors, or a swing in political leadership – it could be very destabilising.
- ✖ Residents may feel less connected; like they only see their councillors once every four years, particularly if councillors become less active over the four years.
- ✖ The new councillors we are trying to attract would have to wait up to four years before running.
- ✖ Young people may have to wait until they are nearly 22 before they vote; discourages the habit of regular voting
- ✖ Less frequent opportunity for residents to get involved.

Do you think it's a good idea to lower the voting age to 16?

22 (45%)	Yes
5 (10%)	Unsure
22 (45%)	No

This question divided councillors down the middle. When we asked a similar question of council staff, 46% agreed with lowering the voting age, while our e-panel felt more strongly with just 33% agreeing.

Decision making

Please select up to three options you feel would be most likely to encourage more direct public and community involvement in decision making:

39 (80%)	**Improving communication about decisions and their implications**
25 (51%)	Engaging more with the community and voluntary sectors
24 (49%)	Introducing more locally devolved decision-making structures
23 (47%)	Providing tailored ways to encourage and enable more local people to get involved
3 (6%)	Something else:

Four comments received for 'something else', which noted that residents are more likely to want to be involved if they feel the issues are relevant to them; that councillors should listen more to residents without judgement; and noting possible flaws of community involvement in that they have not been chosen to speak for residents (as councillors have) and so may not represent local views.

As a local councillor how can you help residents be more involved and influence decisions?

Lots of comments here noted the importance of councillors being available, accessible and keeping up regular dialogue with residents and community groups, both by getting out there in person, and by using technology. Being open and honest, and trying to counter myths about local councillors, was seen as important.

Others felt that they already do a lot and don't have time to do any more as they already struggle with competing workloads and work/life balance.

Some noted that not all residents want to be involved, though that this could increase if we were able to give local groups more autonomy to make decisions.

Some respondents felt there were issues to address within political groups, with backbench councillors needing to get more involved in decision making, and councillors needing a better understanding of the links between local and strategic decision making.

In your opinion, how effective is our current model of governance and decision making (Cabinet and Scrutiny split)?

2 (4%)	Highly effective	33% effective
14 (29%)	Fairly effective	
9 (19%)	Neither effective nor ineffective	
13 (27%)	Fairly ineffective	**48% ineffective**
10 (21%)	Highly ineffective	

It is concerning that of those councillors that took part in the survey, only a third felt the current model is effective and almost half felt in ineffective. The comments received in relation to this below) demonstrate some strong opinions and on the whole, a collective view.

And how could our current model be improved?

The overall message coming through from comments here was that more councillors need to be involved.

Those that commented generally felt that Scrutiny is not performing its role effectively, and needs to be more politically independent. Some commenters felt we should move towards a Committee system instead, or a coalition. Most comments on Cabinet imply that it affords a relatively small group of councillors too much influence, and that we should move to a structure where all councillors (or all those that are interested, and have time) are involved. It was noted that backbenchers currently have little influence and that this should change.

Some also called for better communication in terms of explaining why decisions have been made.

How much do you agree or disagree that..

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
More decisions should be more local in Kirklees	24 (49%)	14 (29%)	8 (16%)	3 (6%)	0 (0%)
	78% agree			6% disagree	
Mobile technology could make decision making more transparent and open	9 (19%)	20 (42%)	15 (31%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)
	61% agree			8% disagree	

There was strong support for increasing decisions being made at a local level, and for mobile technology being used to help those decisions be open to all. This continues an overall positive view on technology as a tool for effective community leadership, and to improve residents' understanding.

What do you think will be a direct impact of devolution on your role as a local councillor?

The majority of comments here pointed to devolution having a negative impact for local councillor roles. This ranged from reduced councillor influence and ability to make decisions; a more onerous process and additional bureaucracy; more meetings and less resident involvement; right through to the local councillor role ceasing to exist.

Many also felt that it is difficult to say until more information is known about devolution and what it would entail, with some mistrust and concern over the lack of clarity.

A few respondents felt more positively, noting that devolution many lead to more interest from residents; ease existing pressures of the role; allow them to achieve more for their area; or even that it may have no impact at all.