



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Engagement session with newer councillors, facilitated by councillors Fadia and Wilson, held on 14th November 2016

Present:

Councillor Sheikh Ullah
Councillor Bernard McGuin
Councillor John Taylor
Councillor Mussarat Pervaiz
Councillor Richard Smith
Councillor James Homewood
Councillor Carole Pattison

NOTE: Given the time limitations the engagement session focussed solely on the role of the councillor and did not cover the other themes included as part of the Commission's work. All councillors will have an opportunity to discuss these within their political groups and individually through use of an online questionnaire.

As part of the initial discussion, councillors Fadia and Wilson provided background to the Commission's work so far, the purpose of the session and in particular addressed concerns in respect of the robustness and representative nature of the wider engagement undertaken by the Commission.

The Role of Councillor

- **Public Understanding of the Councillor Role:**

New councillors observed that, for the most part, there is not a wide understanding amongst the public of what a councillor does on a day to day basis, both in their communities and within the council. The traditional public view often takes little account of the pressures faced by councillors when balancing council duties, holding down employment and managing a family. That said, there was an acknowledgement that most residents have very busy lives themselves and therefore will engage when they have an issue that matters to them. New councillors discussed the ways in which public understanding of the role could be improved, which might include:

- More mail shots to residents, although there was an acknowledgement that this would be a cost;

- Citizenship education in schools, with a stronger focus on local government and the councillor role;
- The extent to which the Kirklees approach to having the majority of meetings during the day means that local people find it difficult to engage with the council's decision making processes. Extending this point, meetings need to be held in a way that has regard to local identity. The example of planning applications for the Kirkburton ward being considered in Dewsbury was given;
- Greater promotion of the Councillor role profile;
- Sharing real examples of councillors "doing the job". Showcase the councillors who are doing a good job.

New councillors discussed the three principal roles carried out by a councillor – in their community, in the council and in the political group. There was an acknowledgement that the diversity of Kirklees will inevitably mean that councillors will work in different ways in different parts of the borough and in so doing will face different challenges and problems to solve. The financial challenges faced by the council has meant that there is now less scope for councillors to "throw money or officers at a problem". This is an important consideration in the context of the public perception of councillors and the changing relationship between them.

- The Number of Councillors

New councillors discussed the principal considerations associated with reducing the number of councillors in Kirklees, which included:

- Councillor workload, which overall seems to be increasing;
- The extent to which significant savings would be made as a result;
- The potential benefits arising from having smaller single councillor wards, particularly in the context of issues that can emerge currently in cross party wards;
- The importance of other mechanisms being put in place should there be a reduction in number to ensure that residents are able to address and solve issues. New councillors particularly discussed the council website and the extent to which this is currently fit for purpose in this context.

Overall new councillors felt that it is not possible or sequentially correct to answer this question at this point in time. The starting point should be to be clear what is expected of councillors moving forward and then come to a view as to how many there should be.

- Communicating with Residents

New councillors shared the range of online and offline approaches that they use to communicate and engage with local residents which includes:

- Static, impromptu and street surgeries;
- A range of social media tools including Facebook, Twitter, Skype, Instagram, Snapchat and Streetlife;
- Email;

- Regularly attending village and community meetings in their wards;
- Door knocking;
- Letter and calling cards

It was acknowledged that one size does not, and should not, fit all given the diversity of the wards represented. This should be acknowledged in the wider context when considering the changing role of the councillor.

- Communities Doing More for Themselves

New councillors recognised the changing expectations of their role in the context of working with communities although they were mindful of the fact that communities are already doing an awful lot. Some wards have a long standing ethos of communities doing more for themselves as they have not had access to the range of services that are available on other wards. An important part of the councillor role now involves understanding the restrictions in terms of what is possible whilst managing expectations and being honest with residents.

Within this context new councillors discussed the opportunities and barriers to communities doing more for themselves. On one level there was an acknowledgement that there are some good online tools in place for residents but there needs to be wider awareness – street light reporting and Comoodle were given as examples. That said, moving to online approaches is not a solution in itself as this tends to result in a rise in demand which cannot always be met if there is insufficient officer infrastructure sitting behind the systems. Also, there are some things which readily lend themselves to online approaches (bin reporting) and others that do not (Local Plan).

On another level new councillors discussed the barriers that the council puts in front of residents which can often work against creating opportunities for more involvement. The current approach to District Committees was given as an example. Furthermore, new councillors felt that the council's general approach to consultation is not one that facilitates an effective relationship with citizens and communities. Current approaches give the impression that the decision has already been made and does not involve a realistic and honest presentation of the options. This issue applies equally to consultation that take place with councillors.

- The Next Generation of Councillors

New councillors were keen to acknowledged that Kirklees should recognise the diverse and representative profile of its 69 councillors. In terms of attracting the next generation of councillors, discussion focussed on a number of issues, including:

- The important role played by political parties in proactively recruiting candidates. Reference was made to the importance of “recruiting on merit, not habit”;
- The difference between the perception of what a councillor does and the reality. Given that the reality of the role is one that is very demanding and time consuming it is sometimes difficult to present the role in an attractive way.

Within this context it is important to demonstrate to the public exactly what councillors do for the allowance they receive;

- How best to address the challenges that young people would face in becoming a councillor, particularly in terms of pursuing a career and having a family;
- The extent to which the council creates barriers, especially in terms of time commitment. The example given was the Kirklees approach to holding the majority of its meetings during the day and not making a greater virtue of technology to allow councillors to meet “virtually” instead of having to travel to meetings;
- The importance of having an understanding and supportive employer who will allow councillors time off to undertake council duties;