



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary of a group discussion held on 2nd November 2016

Witness: Kirklees Youth Councillors

Matthew Barnett – Shelley College

Constantine Turibamwe – All Saints Catholic College

Emily Warrillow – Whitcliffe Mount School,

Stanley Lawson – Whitcliffe Mount School

Alex Durkin – Manor Croft Academy

Summary of Discussion

Councillor engagement with young people

The Youth Councillors told us that Kirklees Council impacts on their lives through day-to-day things that keep the community running, such as roads, bin collections and planning. They also associated the council with support that some people need, such as social services and mental health services.

Our Youth Councillors felt that young people can influence politicians by sending an email, going to face-to-face meetings or joining groups like Kirklees Youth Council. However, they emphasised that it isn't clear to young people how they can get in touch with a councillor, what councillors do, or how young people can get involved in things. Those who had met councillors face-to-face said this was beneficial, but that the meetings were more by luck than through understanding of how to make contact. They questioned why young people aren't told how to get in touch with councillors.

The Youth Councillors expressed strong concern that young people are stereotyped and said they felt that young people's views are not valued as a consequence of this. They commented that young people are seen as a social problem rather than as citizens with something to contribute:

“A tiny minority are the ones people see in the press, especially the local press. They see young people as a social problem rather than seeing the opportunities.”

“We’re in the background and they don’t really see us. They see all young people as problems – young people are meant to do bad things, but some of us don’t. Some of us want to help our community.”

The Youth Councillors felt that the jargon used in decision-making can also exclude young people from the process.

“We don’t understand the language, so people think we aren’t qualified to participate in discussions about the local community.”

Some of the Youth Councillors said that young people find it difficult to communicate their issues, as others perceive them as inexperienced and don’t give them the confidence to say what they think. They felt that Kirklees Youth Council have a role to play in proving that young people can be educated and are interested in democracy.

One participant said that her experience of sharing views at a Council meeting was positive, but highlighted that not many young people get the chance to do this and it’s seen as remarkable for a 13 year old to attend a Council meeting:

“They do like to hear from young people, but you kind of have to go to them, instead of them coming to you.”

There were two differing views from the Youth Councillors about what councillors do. Some said that councillors are remote, desk-based and only active in communities during election campaigns. Others said they know that councillors are part of committees, outside bodies and regional boards, and are involved in their own party, but they also have a responsibility to listen to people. Some participants said that this is the most important aspect of the role.

Access to information

The Youth Councillors were clear that politicians need understand young people’s interests more, but also that young people need to have better access to information about local decision-making. They felt that it should be much easier to get basic information and that young people should know where to start if they have an issue:

“It’s hard. Before I got involved, I didn’t know what an MP was or what a councillor was. I didn’t know that if you have local issues you can go straight to your councillor.”

One participant had been given a card by a councillor at a local meeting, sharing their contact information, and said that this was very helpful and made him feel valued. However, he felt that this was the exception rather than the rule.

There was consensus amongst the Youth Councillors that there should be some sort of political awareness in schools. They also said that it's very important for councillors to visit schools and talk about local issues. None of the Youth Councillors giving evidence were getting citizenship education at school. They told us that they want lessons at school about how to get involved:

"It would be helpful for young people to learn the basics, to learn the system and about local democracy. And about national politics – they are both important."

The Youth Councillors highlighted the EU Referendum as an issue that they felt should have been discussed and debated more in schools. One participant said that the Referendum had passed by with little comment in school, then fellow students were left asking what happened.

"People at school were asking me 'what is it'? It's going to affect us when we grow up, buy a house or get a job – our rights might change. I just think it's important to debate it and know what's happening around us."

Another participant had organised an EU debate in her school, as she felt it was really important that young people knew what was happening and heard a balanced view of both sides of the debate. The Youth Councillors said that when there are issues that lots of young people are questioning, these issues should be discussed in school – and that schools should create the space and time for these debates.

Young people and decision-making

The Youth Councillors told us that young people would like to be more involved in decision-making. Suggestions for this included having a conference to talk about youth issues, making space for young people to speak at Council or District Committee meetings, and councillors visiting schools to ask young people what things they would like to see change.

Votes at 16

The Youth Councillors were in favour of votes at 16. They told us that people would respect young people's views more if they had the vote and that it would give those who want to use their voice an opportunity to speak up.

"If I could vote it would be like we had a voice."

The Youth Councillors said that if young people could begin voting at age 16 or 17, they would benefit from having the support of their teachers as well as parents, and would therefore be more likely to get into the habit of voting. They told us that 16 year olds are mature enough to know what they want. They also felt that votes at 16 would encourage candidates to consider young people more when campaigning.

“Lots of decisions that are being made now will affect us as adults, as students taking out loans or as apprentices looking for jobs. It’s our futures that will be decided by what’s going on right now.”

The Youth Councillors emphasised that young people would want to know who they can vote for and what those candidates stand for. They recommend encouraging conversations in schools on issues of concern, along with visits from candidates.

“The average voter votes on issues that are important to them and I feel that young people would also vote on issues that are important to us.”

When asked for their views about having “no representation without taxation”, participants were clear that voting should be inclusive. They highlighted that not everyone who currently votes pays tax, and that citizens shouldn’t be judged on that.

“It’s dangerous when you start excluding large swathes of society on the grounds that they don’t pay tax. That’s the way you narrow the field.”

We discussed that the age of responsibility is being pushed up (for things like alcohol and tobacco), but the voting age seems to be being pushed down. Our Youth Councillors said that this isn’t a fair comparison, because democracy is different:

“I’m not bothered by not being able to buy tobacco. Those things are quite inherently dangerous. Being able to buy a firework at 16 is not a human right, but being able to vote is... Nowhere in the UN Charter does it say you must be able to buy a cigarette.”

The Youth Councillors felt that voting at 16 could be trialled for local elections. They described this as a good place to start as local elections affect you more directly.

The geography of decision-making

We discussed whether young people identify with Kirklees as a place. The Youth Councillors said they do recognise that they are in Kirklees, but are more likely to tell someone that they are from a more local area, such as Denby Dale or Cleckheaton. One participant commented that the press and media can represent some of our areas in a very negative way, and he is reluctant to use his town’s name because of that. Our Youth Councillors associated Kirklees more with Huddersfield and felt that more decisions are taken there.

One participant said that Kirklees Council works better than a council covering a larger area would do, but that it doesn't have the same sense of identity as a town.

Digital technology and democracy

Perhaps surprisingly, our Youth Councillors are reluctant to share their views via social media and they expressed a clear preference for face-to-face discussions. They were concerned that things said on social media can be twisted and said that they are fearful of being judged by others. They said that facebook is good for talking to your friends, but not for expressing political views.

"People are wary of social media – it's there and it's open, it can come back to haunt you."

However, they recognised that it's important for elected representatives to use social media to reach people, especially young people who will find this method easier. Our Youth Councillors were keen to emphasise that social media and digital technologies shouldn't be seen as an alternative to meeting people face to face.

"It's a good way to engage a large audience, but real engagement comes from talking to people. It's a good way to draw people in, but to actually get people involved you've got to talk to them, which is why councillors are so important."

One participant described meeting her MP in person and said how this inspired her. She felt that you can't get the same sense of connection with someone online.

"Even though I use my phone 99.9% of the time, I would still rather talk to a councillor or an MP face to face."

The Youth Councillors said that availability in the community is important, rather than just being available via digital channels. They can see the usefulness of online communications for representatives – for example, social media helps young people to find Kirklees Youth Council and ask questions that they can act upon. They also highlighted online video, especially vlogs, as a good medium, as this can be quite direct, popular and more personal than some other media.

What is the one thing that Kirklees Democracy Commission can do to help young people get involved in local democracy and get their voice heard?

To conclude our discussion, each participant from Kirklees Youth Council told us one thing that they'd particularly like commissioners to do:

"Tell councillors to take more time to talk to us and to listen to us – they are a bit distanced from us, in the same way that we are distanced from people we represent,

but we are still with them every day in school, whereas councillors can be very secret. Talk to us."

"Set up suggestion boxes in schools and use assemblies to give young people time to think about what they want to say."

"Councillors should go out of their way to meet people at school and inform them what's happening and how it works. That's the only way everyone can get involved – by understanding how local democracy works."

"Give some time in meetings to talk about our issues. Somebody, like a youth representative for us, could come and talk about what we want or what needs changing. Make time for us in some way. We do need to put some effort in, but they need to put some effort in. And it should be the same amount of effort. We shouldn't put extra effort in to go and meet them. They should make extra effort to come and meet us."

"I think they should come into school and do like a work station – sit down and talk but maybe with a map of the local area so we can find out what they do."