Kirklees Democracy Commission

Outcomes of Engagement with Labour Group:

- **<u>Councillors</u>**

The Group agree that describing and defining the role of a councillor is difficult, this makes it particularly difficult to qualify and quantify to the public exactly what that role is. The changing demands now being faced by councillors only goes to enhance this. People now expect you to be all things to all people; such is the diverse nature of the role. It is also true that these demands can differ depending on the geography and demography of your ward. Therefore defining the role is also the key to understanding and changing demands mean this first has to be acknowledged and understood by councillors themselves. As a group, we do acknowledge this.

Once defined, how we communicate that role to the wider public becomes the key. Councillors and their party can do this, but the local authority also has to support positive promotion of that role through their media channels; website, publications, showing more of what councillors do via wider promotion of webcasted meetings. Is there a place for promoting the role of councillor in the school curriculum (tying in with promotion of voting and elections)?

The Group also held the view that, as experienced officers leave it becomes ever more evident that staff have little experience or understanding of the role of councillors. More attention needs to be paid to this in staff training and development.

The Group expressed a definitive no to suggestion of a reduction in councillors for Kirklees. There is already an increase in demand for councillors' time and set this alongside a reduction in officer number, where support was once abundant their capacity now is also being stretched, will mean the demand on councillors will continue to increase.

Highlighting a monetary value to councillors time, works out on a standard allowance of 37pence per hour, with no pension and on 24hr call out. On the other side of this, it is highlighted that some councillors across all political parties could do more and there should be ways to measure and ensure each is doing their bit.

The collective view of the Group was that there is a strong indicative need that more interaction is required with communities, so people know what changes there are to the local authority and what services we have available for people, eg Comoodle, which is there to support the community. A large part of the councillor role is to be active in the community and work with community groups. The need for this type of support, hands-on actively encouraging groups through working with them, is increasing and as a result communities are doing more for themselves.

Helping communities in this way is only part of the support our councillors can offer and on the other hand it is about being clear as to the difficult situation we are in due to austerity. It is about developing and portraying a consistent message that there are no funds available like there were several years ago, that services are being cut and the simple fact is that we will all have to do more if we want our communities to survive and thrive.

How affluent/deprived areas are can be dependent on whether communities will work for themselves; although no assumptions should be made because capacity to come together on an issue exists in different types of communities. Having availability of volunteers who are dedicated to work is a key element.

The group feel that more training is required for councillors to be able to help them better understand and demonstrate to the public what money there is (or isn't). If there is something IT based which can be used, this would help.

The emerging themes from the Group as a whole are that it needs to be demonstrated to the public that the make-up of the council is a true reflection of our communities and what our public role is within that. Education of our own members is important; mentoring the next generation through getting them involved in party activity is useful. Councillors currently advocate the role to people in the community and encourage them to get involved.

There needs to be an understanding of what work is involved in the role of being a councillor, without focus on the political role. At the same time, individuals need to identify what party politics, social value and true reason is as to why they want to go into politics.

Context of the role is important and potential candidates should not be unduly misled into becoming a candidate, so the vulnerability of becoming a political member, especially after the Jo Cox murder should not be ignored.

The group believe more information needs to be provided within a realistic timescale, as potential candidates need to balance off the rewards being a councillor can bring; between low financial reward for hard work and that reward they may find greater value in through supporting their local communities.

- **Elections and the Electoral Cycle**

There is a general consensus across the Labour Group that voter turnout is relatively stable. However, it is suggested that voter turnout can be affected by who is standing, that it can increase if there is a particular issue in an area or ward, or that where there is real political competition in an area this can make a positive difference to turnout. The group believes also that if people don't feel their vote will make a difference, then they don't vote.

The group explored a number of ideas as to how increased voter turnout may be generated, much of which were around improving information, convenience and accessibility; more publicity, connecting with residents via internet solutions, extending voting over more than one day, with consideration given to Saturday and Sunday voting. Having polling booths in supermarkets was considered as to going where the voters are, along with having an increased number of polling stations in larger geographic areas or those places where greater travel is currently required.

Whilst there was reference to online voting being a potential factor to increasing turnout, the other consideration was postal voting; the group believe that postal voting increases turnout. Paradoxically, reference was also made to the postal vote system being complicated, particularly so if English is not your first language.

Schools should also be encouraged to hold elections, so whilst the immediate voter turnout would not necessarily increase, education of democracy in the citizenship element of the curriculum, elections and voting at a younger age is something the group see as important.

The Group's general view is the more traditional approach of door knocking to make contact with voters was prevalent in discussion and whilst time consuming, this human contact was clearly held in high regard. The use of focus groups was suggested as a similar approach undertaken by one member, to achieve the face to face contact.

Street surgeries and leaflets were suggested as useful tools to promote understanding of elections, including short or word limited statements of candidates standing for election. This approach is something that could be undertaken from a neutral perspective by the local authority, via their own media channels.

Away from the more traditional engagement methods, or non-partisan street surgeries, better presentation of online materials and use of social media tools to engage younger people have been clearly cited by the group: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp.

Additionally, it was stated that there were no hustings or debates. Having these would further support increased understanding of elections, or what different political groups and candidates stood for. These could take place in town or village halls as public meetings, or livestreamed to afford greater access for members of the public.

The overall Group view is strongly in favour of reducing the voting age to 16. Despite some concern that 16 year olds were still children, should be enjoying their youth, are too young to understand and could be under considerable pressure from exams, the counter arguments to this were strong.

There are some issues that young people should be consulted on and not all exist under the same pressures. There can often be a higher turnout from younger people and Scotland demonstrates that issue based voting was done by many young people.

Where it is considered that they may be too young to understand indicates more should be done in schools, which links back for example to the groups suggestion of holding elections in schools by way of increasing understanding of democracy, elections and voting. Young people could be anxious about how you physically vote, so reducing anxiety through education should be addressed. Since 16 year olds can work and leave home at that age, should they not have the same rights as other working people?

The group put forward a number of points both for and against changing the electoral cycle, but the overall view of the Group rejected the idea of a 4 yearly election cycle.

The group perceived that a 4 yearly cycle would reduce costs to the authority of running elections, plus the significant theme of an ability to plan long-term; working toward objectives over 2 to 3

years, rather than only a few months at a time, which allows the authority to plan and move forward enabling greater stability. Also, there was a view that the excitement of elections every four years may increase voter turnout, as well as offering a better quality of democracy; it is also a lot of hard work every year, for political groups and the local authority. Contrary to this view was that the electorate could actually lose interest, if only engaged in elections every four years.

Despite these views, there is a pronounced sense in the group that the political make up of Kirklees means having elections 3 out of every 4 years, can result in significant change which gives the electorate a greater say; rather than being stuck for 4 years with one ruling party. Reducing the ability of the electorate to change its mind, suggests a 4 year cycle is less democratic and further distances local people from local democracy, despite indication the 3 in 4 year cycle makes things politically more volatile.

- ## **Decision-Making**

The Group would like to evolve the current Cabinet system of decision making and whilst this is being referred to as a Cabinet-hybrid system (implying a cross between Cabinet and the old Committee System) it is the principles of this which give it significance.

The current Cabinet system means policy decisions are taken only by a few councillors, this being the Leader and their Cabinet, with a Scrutiny function holding them to account. This has removed most councillors from direct involvement in decision-making, except for voting on the annual budget, which has left a number of councillors feeling disenfranchised. On the other hand, the Committee System operated whereby Committees and sub-committees deliberated on council policy, which could be debated by other councillors and across all parties in full meetings. It is felt a return to a full committee system would potentially be problematic, through lack of resource and the changing role and additional pressures on councillors.

The overriding principle is that there should be a greater opportunity for members to be involved or have input in decision making. There is a view that decision making under the Committee System, in reality, was more transparent. The interaction which took place in the old Committee System meant a greater shared knowledge and debating of views, which are seen to hold a value when it comes to informed and transparent decision making.

More time should be given to an open forum for the public to ask questions of leaders and other councillors in different roles which could be webcast.

Investigating the use of technology in being able to achieve greater connectivity around decision making for the public and all councillors. Using more technology could help improve the transparency of decision making and assist all councillors to be more involved as well as enabling all councillors and the public to understand the information around the decisions being taken.

Pros and cons would have to be looked into; partly by exploring what other authorities who use this are applying it and examining resource implications.

The Group feels we as a local authority need to communicate more clearly to the public what councillors can and can't do; what are the restrictions and difficulties we face with decision making? A significant part of this is members being more informed and able to communicate with constituents and citizens, of how the decision making structure functions.

Plain English interpretation of decisions should be considered. Clear information on what decisions Cabinet have made, or whatever a future decision making body looks like, need to be clear.

It would be better for the public if they could see what the decision making process was, diagrammatically if possible. Tied to this, how they could also see what decisions had been made on an issue or as to a geographic area, eg an upcoming decision which may affect the area they live, work, or where their children go to school. Additionally, being able to understand whether they could influence or appeal a decision through being consulted or be more informed in the first place, would be positive.

The Group is concerned that local councillors and therefore the public could be distanced from another layer of decision making at a regional level such as the Combined Authority. Whatever structure is put in place at a regional level needs to be accountable to local people and their councillors - one way to support this would be to have an elected assembly.

It was agreed that there needs to be a better understanding by citizens that we have a representative democracy and also what bodies like the Combined Authorities are trying to achieve. Nonetheless, local decision making needs to be maximised wherever possible and there needs to be a better explanation of the role of elected representatives. Devolution needs to be exercised in a way that the decisions are coming from government to the region and then to a local level. This may be difficult in terms of how the devolution is set out by the government but councillors will have an important role to play in this.

The Group feels that evolving the current governance and decision making model, should include an element of devolution of [decision making] resources to a local level. Currently, the most local decision making structure are the District Committees, but whether it is this model or another, improving public connectivity with decision making should be investigated alongside and in context of available resources. There was a general view in the Group about giving more decision making powers to individual councillors in their wards.

It is also through this local decision making that enhancing the public input would help support the public's involvement and understanding of it relevant to them and the area they live.

The Group recognises this as an important aspect and wants more video conferencing [webcasting and in ways other than just Council or Cabinet meetings?], creating more opportunity and interactivity when it comes to decision making and transparency. Use of web based apps in decision making, although referenced in concept only, could maybe be investigated from both a member and citizen point of view and include published results, votes and plain English context.

The Group recognises the move to more people accessing information online, however the platforms used by Kirklees (e.g. the website) could be more accessible and easy to navigate - a good example of this is the Planning portal.

It was agreed that councillors have an important role to play in using new technology to help inform citizens about decisions and developments that affect them.