



## Kirklees Democracy Commission

Outcomes of engagement with Kirklees Liberal Democrat group, namely:

Cllr Andrew Marchington  
Cllr Andrew Pinnock  
Cllr Cahal Burke  
Cllr Christine Iredale  
Cllr John Lawson  
Cllr Kath Pinnock  
Cllr Linda Wilkinson  
Cllr Nicola Turner  
Cllr Richard Eastwood

- **Councillors**

The group acknowledge that there is a public lack of understanding about the role of councillors in this country. In improving public awareness and a better understanding of the role of councillors, the group emphasised the role of schools and education in this process. Education in schools is important, because it teaches children about how democracy works and also how councils and the decision-making process works. School councils can perform an important role in promoting this. It was noted that some schools in Kirklees previously held a 'Democracy Week', whereby local councillors attended schools and spoke to pupils about their work. It was suggested that this could be potentially adopted as part of the school curriculum. However, it was also acknowledged that education and a focus on schools is a medium to long-term change and goal.

There was a consensus in the group that there should be no reduction in the number of councillors in the authority. Kirklees wards are too big already, with councillors increasingly being asked to do more. The Council is shrinking and there are fewer Council officers in post, so there's a greater need for councillors now. Furthermore, Kirklees has some of the largest wards in the country, and this needs to be reflected / represented in the number of councillors. Councillors provide a human presence, which becomes more important as we approach the digital age. Consequently, the role of the councillor is more significant than ever in engaging with communities.

In considering how to attract the next generation of councillors, it was queried who would be attracted to becoming a councillor in the present climate. Some members

of the public have a misconception about councillors and often see them all as greedy. The culture of resentment towards councillors and politicians needs to be reversed in order to attract more people to become councillors. However, this culture is not unique to Kirklees and this is a national deep-rooted problem. The media are partly responsible for creating a negative perception of councillors and other politicians. Some councillors, who do things which are publically viewed as selfish / immoral, give all councillors a bad name, so that councillors are tarred with the same brush. It was noted that there has been a successful campaign to attract people in to the legal profession (magistrates), and it was suggested a similar campaign could be effective in attracting more people to want to become councillors. It was pointed out that there has been an affective national campaign to encourage ethnic minority groups to become councillors. Councillors are now managing decline, so it's a bad time to be a councillor. This will impact on the number of people who will want to be a councillor.

It was argued that there needs to be a more proportional voting system in place to encourage a more diverse range of people. The political system in Scotland, which uses a Single Transferable Vote (STV), is more responsive. The public need to stop vilifying councillors, who are normal people, although it was suggested that councillors and local politicians are seen by some as more respected by the public than MPs. There needs to be greater clarity and openness about the role of the councillor – what they do, how much they earn, etc...

In considering how communities can be helped to do more for themselves, particularly in the context of Kirklees Council, a number of suggestions were put forward by the group. It was argued that the Council needs to have a clear volunteer strategy in place, with greater officer support for volunteers. It was pointed out that Kirklees does have Camoodle, but that there still needs to be greater support from council officers. There's a need for councillors to know who to contact for different issues – i.e. who to contact in the council about grants / help and support for voluntary and community groups. The signposting needs to be better. There's a need for a list of points of contact on a ward basis, so councillors know who to contact for specific issues. It would be helpful for all councillors to know who their Volunteer Co-Ordinators for their wards are, for instance. Effective communication and sharing information is essential in helping communities to do more for themselves.

- **Elections and the Electoral Cycle**

The group considered a question about voter turnout in local elections and it was argued that voting numbers fluctuate, so there shouldn't be an assumption that voting turnout is progressively declining. However, it was acknowledged that there are ways to help improve election turnout, and the Single Transferable Vote (STV) was provided as a good example.

There was an agreement from the group that the age of voting should be lowered to 16.

In addressing a question about whether Kirklees should change its election cycle, the group argued that the election cycle should only be changed to once every four years if the STV is introduced. Elections once every four years don't result in financial savings, and it can also lead to fewer people turning up to vote. Changing the election cycle could generate concerns about long-term decision-making. Other local authorities have turned down the opportunity to change their election cycle to every four years. Ideally, Kirklees Council should be aligned to election cycles in neighbouring local authorities, such as Leeds. Unless neighbouring local authorities change their election cycle, Kirklees should maintain the current arrangements.

- **Decision-making**

The group argued that Kirklees' model of governance and decision-making would be more effective if the committee system was adopted.

There was a discussion about local and regional devolution and the implications for governance and accountability. It was argued that council functions are being taken away – across the country. There should be a greater focus on the smaller block for governance and accountability and a need to build bottom-up. It was argued that devolution is not working effectively in this country. It was also pointed out that in many other countries, such as France, even small towns have mayors and the decision-making process is made at a local level. There are smaller building blocks in place and people can relate better to local politics. However, there is less identity in the local political system in the UK and argued that local people don't feel connected to Kirklees as a local authority. In the UK, the public often don't know who is making decisions – i.e. local authorities, public bodies, national government. It was noted that there are hundreds of parish councils in Derbyshire, whereas Batley doesn't even have its own parish council.

- **Digital Technology**

It was argued that technology can't make decision-making more open for those who haven't got it – i.e. residents who don't have access to computers and digital technologies.

The Council is shrinking, with council offices closing and fewer council officers in place. Communication is increasingly automated, so people are increasingly becoming cut-off from the decision-making process. The public need support and guidance in using digital technologies as part of the decision-making process. People need support to allow them to improve their skills set and to be able to utilise digital technologies. Video broadcasting needs to be improved at Kirklees Council meetings. It was suggested that an app could be created to show the public how councillors have voted, as part of council meeting decisions. Digital technologies need to complement and not replace other forms of engagement. In complementing other mediums, digital technologies could increase the level of access. It was suggested that an audio could be set up for future Kirklees Council meetings. It was also suggested that there might be an opportunity for Council meetings to be broadcast to local residents on the TV. The University of Huddersfield is a good

example, as it currently has a TV channel. It was also noted that surgeries could potentially be carried out by councillors using Skype.