

Growing a stronger local democracy from the ground up

June 2017



A taster of the ideas from the
Kirklees Democracy Commission

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Preparing the ground for a stronger local democracy



We want to create the conditions in which local democracy will thrive. This means starting with our citizens and with our sense of local identity – with the ground beneath our feet.

Every good gardener understands the value of co-operation. You need to know your own ground well enough to be able to get along with it. Local democracy can only happen where we are. It's about the relationships between people in the places that we feel we belong.

So our work began, and will continue, with listening to our citizens. We have unearthed a strong enthusiasm for civic society – people want to have a real stake in the places where we live and work. It is fertile ground, but not necessarily stone-free or level. People have shared their frustrations about how difficult it can be to find information, to understand how things work, and to feel that we have a genuine choice.

We have now heard from over 1,000 people about what local democracy should be like. We've gathered a huge amount of evidence and we can learn much from those who have sown the seeds of a different kind of local democracy elsewhere. Our recommendations are the beginnings of the stronger local democracy that we intend to grow.

Who we are

The Kirklees Democracy Commission was brought together by Kirklees Council to gather evidence about our local democracy and make recommendations based on what we find out. We are a cross-party group of Kirklees councillors: Cllr Cathy Scott, Cllr Andrew Cooper, Cllr Andrew Marchington, Cllr Eric Firth, Cllr Gemma Wilson, Cllr Fazila Fadia and Cllr Andrew Palfreeman. We have an independent chair, Dr Andy Mycock from the University of Huddersfield.

What we're doing

We've been investigating what a strong and healthy local democracy should look like in Kirklees – for the next generation and beyond. We have gathered evidence from citizens, community organisations, young people and councillors. 43 expert witnesses gave evidence during a series of public inquiries, and several other councils shared their insights.

We made a firm commitment to “working in the open”. Everything that we have done has been shared. Wherever possible, we have done this in real-time, including live-tweeting all our events and webcasting our public inquiries.

We've published all our evidence on our website for others to explore and learn from. This comprehensive online resource includes our webcast archive but also features text summaries, short video clips with our witnesses, and online stories compiled from the tweets and other social media relating to each of our activities.

**On 30th June 2017 we published a full report of our findings:
“Growing a stronger local democracy, from the ground up”**

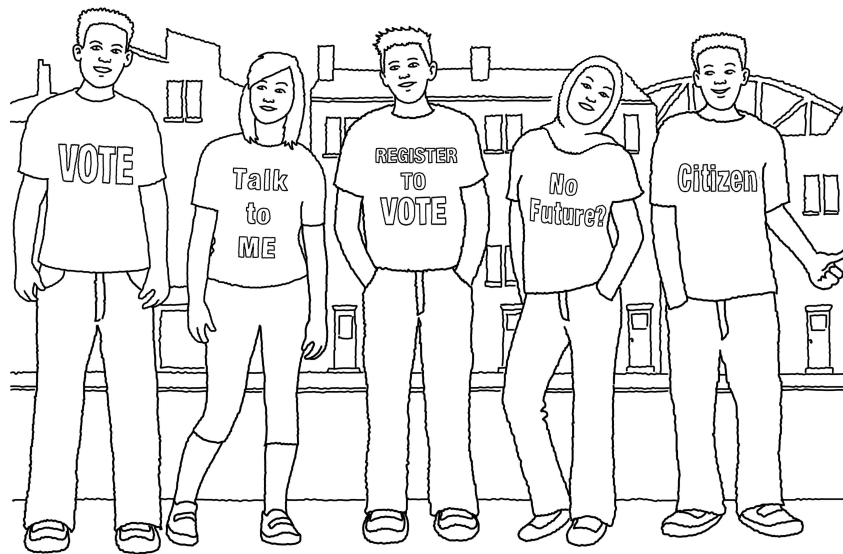
You can download the full report from our Democracy Commission website:

www.democracycommission.org.uk

This booklet gives a taster of the ideas from our full report.



Active citizens in civic society



We're aiming to redesign local democracy for the future and we're strongly aware of the responsibility that we have to our young citizens. We want to develop an environment and a culture that nurtures young people's interest in local democracy. This is important as young people currently don't have as much of a stake in civic life, for many reasons. Our schools are a good place to make a start.

What is an active citizen?

Being an active citizen involves informal participation, community activity, informing decisions, campaigning, engaging with public services, petitioning, protesting and having a real stake in the place where you live. It means taking an interest in what happens locally and having a voice. You should feel able to influence your community's future and be willing to share what you know.

We also recognise that we need to develop a life-long approach to active citizenship. We heard clearly from our citizens that people of all ages want (and need) civic and political awareness. Local democracy is unfamiliar territory for many. Citizens told us that the only way you can get involved is by understanding how local democracy works. We need to do more to explain local democracy and help our citizens understand why it matters.

If we are serious about encouraging active citizens, our democratic content must improve – it must be shareable, interesting and accessible, so that it is of value and relevance to our citizens. We need to think about the explanations we provide, the media we employ, the language we use and the ways we share.

There are lots of ways you can be an active citizen:

Have a voice – be part of your local democracy. Start a campaign, get to know your councillors, help to inform a decision, vote in local elections, set up an information stall, sign a petition, take part in a community meeting, be an activist, speak up for someone else, contribute to community research, give feedback, get involved.

Be part of something – connect with people who share your interests. Join a community group or start a new group, take part in a community activity, get together with neighbours to tidy your street, organise an event, discuss local issues, lend something to a local group, collaborate, make plans for the future, do something fun.

Be a councillor – stand for what you believe in. If there are things that you want to change, support or improve in your neighbourhood, you could make it happen by becoming a local councillor. No other role gives you a chance to make such a huge difference to people's quality of life in your local area.

Be a good neighbour – do something simple to help a neighbour. Fetch someone's shopping, make time to stop and say hello, take a neighbour to a community event, let people know what's happening in the area, share a leaflet about local services, check in on vulnerable neighbours in the winter, start with a small act of kindness.

Volunteer – give a little time, get a lot back. Volunteer with a local organisation, share your skills, be a charity trustee, become a school governor, be a mentor, give an hour a week to a befriending scheme, make connections with people of other ages, join a panel or committee, find the role that's right for you.

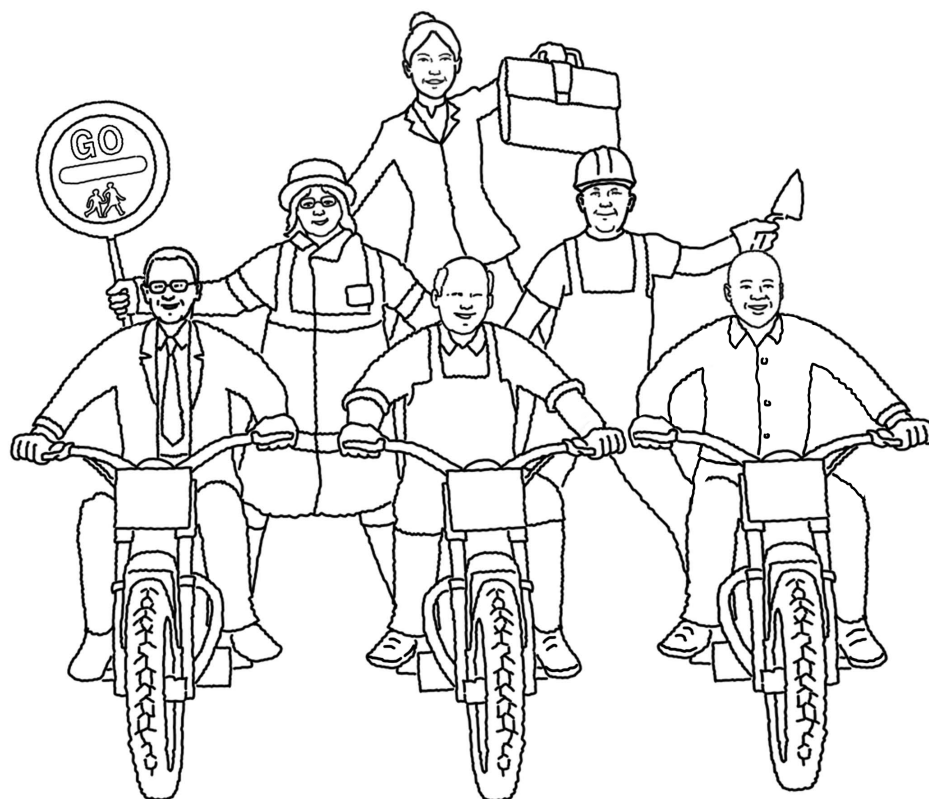
A new democratic relationship

Our culture as a council is to only engage when we have problems or challenges. We need to change this culture as part of a new democratic relationship with our citizens. We should be clear about our roles and responsibilities, and about what our democratic relationship means in our neighbourhoods and communities.

Our recommendations about active citizens are:

- ▶ Kirklees Council should make Active Citizenship a shared strategic priority and use this as a basis for developing a new democratic relationship between Kirklees citizens and the state.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should ensure that schools play a central role as local democratic hubs as part of the delivery of an Active Citizens Strategy. This should involve designing (and putting into practice) a range of approaches which will create pathways for young citizens to become involved in civic society, including raising awareness about being a councillor. These should include:
 - Designing local democracy resources for Kirklees schools to be used in the context of civic education.
 - Strengthening the links between local councillors and the schools in their wards through programmed “school surgeries” as part of citizenship education.
 - Working with the National Citizen Service to develop a mentoring scheme, to be piloted in Kirklees.
 - Working with the Local Government Association (LGA) to develop a young councillors apprenticeship scheme, to be piloted in Kirklees.
 - Working with the University of Huddersfield and local colleges to develop a structured approach to work placement.
 - Developing a mentoring scheme between Kirklees Councillors and Kirklees Youth Councillors.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should work with local businesses to develop the idea of “Business Citizenship” as part of delivering an Active Citizens Strategy with our partners.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should develop a strategic approach to working with the local media, one that seeks to develop a shared responsibility and understanding of the contributions that the media can make to nurturing local civic society.
- ▶ We should clarify the roles and relationships of MPs and local councillors in the context of Active Citizenship and arrange Constituency Contact Meetings annually to discuss key strategic issues for the area.

You can find more ideas about active citizens in our full report



Local democracy in a networked society

A strong local democracy grows from the connections between people. We all need to be part of the conversation if we are to share ideas, make choices and feel that we have a stake in the place where we live. This means not only having good access to information, but being able to easily understand and share that information – and to contribute your own ideas. It means being able to find like-minded citizens, to create social connections, to collaborate for social good and to have confidence in a digital world.

Living in a networked society offers many opportunities for strengthening citizenship. Digital technologies enable ordinary citizens to get their voices heard where others may have dominated in the past.

Networked citizens (not customers)

Being a citizen is different from being a customer. It's about ongoing relationships, not transactions. We've created local government websites that are designed to enable people with busy lives to get specific tasks done quickly and easily – but that isn't going to help us to encourage active citizens or to change our democratic relationship. We need different online spaces that are designed for citizens – not customers.

Real time democracy

Our experience of local democracy can feel very out of step with our lives as private citizens. We expect to be able to interact, comment, challenge, collaborate and vote on issues in real time. The technology is readily available for us to be able to do this for many aspects of our lives. So why can we not "do democracy" in the same way?

Growing the civic conversation

It's important for us all to have ways of connecting, so we can be part of the civic conversation. Citizens already use the internet as a place to collaborate for civic good. There are opportunities for our council and our councillors to work with existing civic networks and active citizens online. We have a responsibility to not just be part of the civic conversation, but to help it grow.

Our recommendations about a networked society are:

- ▶ Kirklees Council should review our approach to creating and sharing democratic content. This should involve exploring different and innovative ways of developing content to facilitate dialogue and engagement before, during and after the formal decision-making process.
- ▶ Working with key providers, Kirklees Council should develop a democratic digital literacy pilot as part of a wider civic education programme for young citizens.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should support all our councillors to understand and embrace digital technology. Digital literacy should be a core expectation of the councillor role. It should be part of new councillor induction and councillor development, so that we support councillors in developing their digital skills and confidence, and enable them to play an active part in explaining our decision-making processes to our citizens. Commission members should pilot this approach.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should provide our councillors with a live social media audit that provides details of social media use, online networks and connectivity for the ward they represent.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should provide our councillors with the appropriate IT hardware that they need to be effective in their role.
- ▶ Working with key partners and providers, Kirklees Council should use the learning from international examples to develop an approach for blending online and off-line engagement processes, as part of strategic planning, policy making and decision-making. This should form part of a pilot that will explore innovative approaches to planning and priority setting in a particular area of Kirklees.

You can find more ideas about local democracy in a networked society in our full report

Councillors



“Think of a network with the councillor at the centre...
There’s a whole web of activity out there... and councillors
are the fishermen who look after the net.” **Neil McInroy**

Our citizens value the role of councillor, although many don't fully understand what councillors do. It's clear that citizens want more direct contact with local decision makers. We need to help citizens understand this changing and challenging role, and to encourage more people to come forward and stand as councillors. We need to build trust and show how being a councillor can enrich a person's life, and how councillors can enrich our local communities.

A councillor is a...

Steward of place, Advocate, Buffer, Sense maker, Catalyst, Entrepreneur, Orchestrator, First line of triage, Enabler, Conduit, Facilitator, Broker, Change maker, Problem solver, Influencer, Negotiator, Connector, Networked leader, Civic educator, Talent spotter, Mentor, Service co-designer and Civic builder. It's an ever-growing job description.

A misunderstood role

Our citizens and staff are confused about what a councillors do and what they are responsible for. There are a variety of reasons, including confusion with the MP role, a lack of visibility and accountability between elections, broken links between councillors and decision-making in the areas they represent, a lack of clear information and a lack of local civic education.

Supporting councillors, supporting communities

The principal focus of a councillor's time and energy should be on working closely with the citizens and communities they represent. Councillors should be developing dialogue and networks in their wards, from the ground up. They should have the time and support they need to be able to do that, but the overall package of support for councillors is out of step with the changing role.

Our recommendations about councillors are:

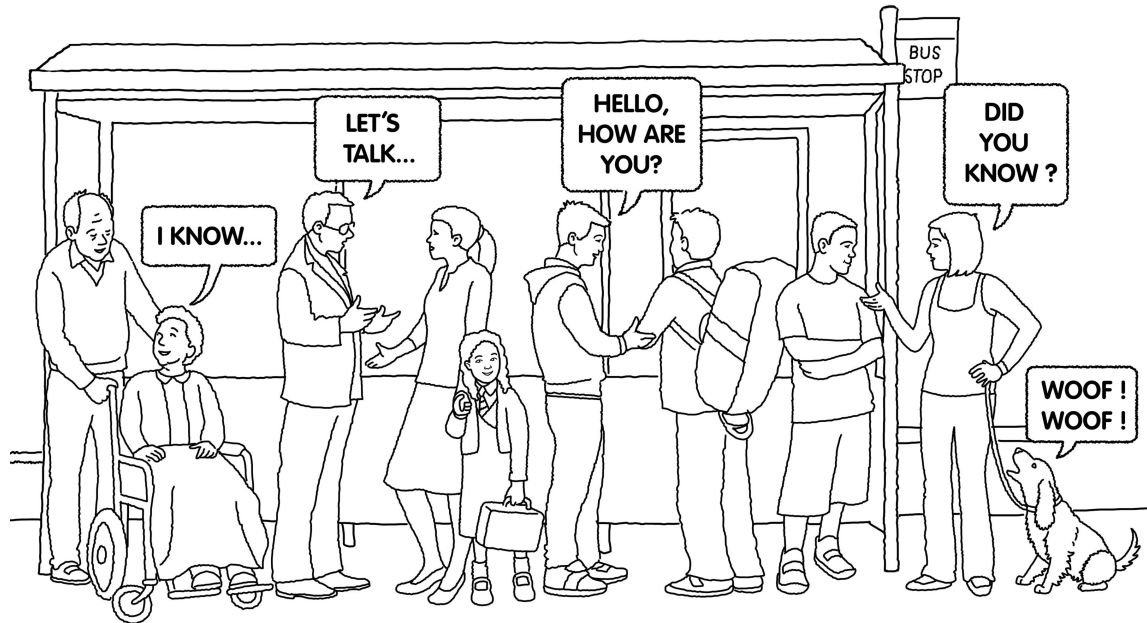
- ▶ Kirklees Council should use the evidence gathered by the Democracy Commission to re-define the role profile for Kirklees councillors, so that this reflects the changing and long term expectations and needs of the role. The revised profile should include core expectations, linked to ongoing performance. These should be used to demonstrate the impact that councillors are having, particularly in their wards.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should make performance evidence about what councillors do available to the public, in an easy-to-digest format.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should promote the role of councillor to help Kirklees citizens understand the role and to encourage citizens to come forward and stand as councillors. We should positively promote the councillor role based on the real life experiences of our councillors, and demonstrate how being a councillor can enrich a person's life.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should promote the role of councillors to staff members in a structured and ongoing way, as part of wider cultural changes both with the council and in our communities. Our staff should understand the importance of the councillor role and how it is an invaluable asset as part of changing and redesigning services.
- ▶ The Local Government Association (LGA) should develop a core national framework for councillors' allowances, which councils can use now as a basis for determining the rates of allowances locally.

- ▶ The Kirklees Members Allowances Independent Review Panel (MAIRP) should consider linking annual changes in the rate of councillors' allowances to the pay rate for local government officers.
- ▶ National government should revisit the legislation relating to councillors allowances, in light of the increased expectations now placed on the role and the tensions associated with the current approach to determining allowances.
- ▶ National government, in the context of corporate social responsibility, should address the real challenges faced by councillors who are employed.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should redesign support for councillors in a way that has a greater focus on their wards. This should enable councillors to provide better support for communities in developing effective facilities, programmes and social networks to improve people's quality of life.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should provide timely information and intelligence at a ward and neighbourhood level to support councillors and communities in working effectively.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should ensure that councillors have the correct tools to carry out the changing councillor role. This involves:
 - Building new councillor induction around the core expectations set out in the revised role profile. This should be compulsory for all new councillors but should also be open to all councillors.
 - Ensuring that any councillors who hold a position of special responsibility are fully briefed about the role, the expectations and the core knowledge required to effectively carry it out.
 - Implementing the findings of the councillor group who are currently looking at IT provision for councillors.
- ▶ Political groups (and in particular Group Leaders and Group Business Managers) should be responsible for the personal development of their members beyond what Kirklees Council can support or provide.

You can find more ideas about councillors in our full report



Decision-making



We need to have a much stronger focus on genuine dialogue and engagement as part of our changing relationship with citizens and communities across Kirklees. Consultation is not currently enabling active citizens – in fact, it appears to be having the opposite effect. Our citizens want to be part of an ongoing conversation, not stop-start consultation.

We've heard that it's important to give people information throughout the decision-making process. Citizens find this valuable, whether or not they personally agree with the final decision. Democracy isn't about always being the person who wins – but it is about being part of something and feeling that you have a voice. We need to share more information about how decisions are made, and not just what those decisions are.

One size does not fit all

Citizens would like to have a menu of options for how they can get involved. Decisions shouldn't just involve "the usual suspects" – we need to value the knowledge of our citizens and be clear about who we need to hear from for each decision. We can't consult on every decision, but we can be more selective in our methods – and get better informed decisions as a result.

Changing our meetings culture

Our meetings should not be hard to follow or engage with. Meetings provide an ideal opportunity for the council and our councillors to engage, share and foster a wider understanding of how our local democracy works. We need to say "we're open for business and you're welcome".

Our recommendations about decision-making are:

- ▶ Kirklees Council should carry out a full review of our governance and decision-making arrangements. The review should be based on the issues and core design principles that are set out in this report.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should revisit our approach to consultation. We should place a greater emphasis on timely, selective citizen engagement as part of the policy development and decision-making process. We should test this on a pilot basis to begin with, and consider models of good practice from elsewhere.
- ▶ Kirklees Council, in partnership with key providers, should develop a set of democratic content standards which should be used as a basis for all content that we produce and publish as part of decision-making. These should include using clear language, helping people to understand what point we're at on the decision-making journey and making sure that our content is based on citizens' needs.
- ▶ Kirklees Council, working with political group leaders, should develop video narratives in advance of a significant issue being discussed and decided, followed by similar narratives once a decision has been taken. This should include independent reporting from citizen journalists.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should organise quarterly question time events involving all group leaders. The content and agenda for these events will be set by the citizens of Kirklees. The events will be broadcast and allow the facility for questions to be taken online as well as in person.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should develop online and off-line interpretive information for the public relating to all of our public meetings. Such information can be used at meetings but can also be part of wider civic awareness about the council and our democratic processes.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should now take the opportunity to fully explore and implement the full capability of our webcasting technology, beyond purely broadcasting meetings. Taking advantage of the interactive technology that currently exists should be a priority.

You can find more ideas about decision-making in our full report

Elections



Democracy isn't just about voting, but greater participation in local elections should be one of the features of a strong and healthy local democracy. Voters are motivated by having a competitive choice of candidates and by feeling that their vote really matters. Citizens told us that it's important to get the best people into the council, and you don't hear enough about who your candidates are.

Standing for something

Voters want bite-sized and easy-to-access information. There is strong public demand for better information on candidates, especially about “where they stand”. We need to make sure that citizens can easily find accurate, timely, trustworthy, relevant information that is based around their needs.

Local government touches every aspect of our day-to-day lives, and yet most people do not see local elections as important. We must do more to tell the story of why local democracy matters. We need to improve people’s understanding of the local political system and its importance.

We also recognise that the practical aspects of running elections are becoming more challenging. The number and type of elections is growing, as are voter expectations for making the process easier and more flexible.

The first step

Registration is the first step on the journey to voting. It's important for us to do as much as we can to support our young citizens in making that step as early as possible. We must also continue our outreach and engagement activities to support citizens with registering to vote.

The ticking time bomb

Elections are an area of growth. The number and complexity of elections are increasing. Changes such as Individual Electoral Administration have created extra pressures. This means that it's challenging for councils to run elections and it's difficult to maintain numbers on the electoral register. Without more support or better ways of doing things, the situation is unsustainable.

Votes at 16

Our young citizens told us that they feel invisible in local politics. They want to have more of a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. Many of the young people we heard from are strongly in favour of votes at 16. They feel this will encourage decision-makers to consider young people more and to seek out their views. However, not all our young participants agreed with this view. What they did agree on is that young people should have a say about it, and that voting (for all ages) needs to be accompanied by democratic education.

Voting is an important part of the journey for an active citizen, and we believe in encouraging participation. In light of our evidence as a whole, we recommend that government should legislate to lower the voting age to 16.

Our recommendations about elections are:

- ▶ Kirklees Council should continue to support the innovative approaches we have developed to electoral outreach work as a means of ensuring that registration levels are maintained and continue to rise beyond the period of central government funding for Individual Electoral Registration (IER).
- ▶ National government should amend legislation to introduce the compulsory registration of young people at the age of 16.

- ▶ Kirklees Council should work collaboratively with schools to develop an optional local approach to registering young people at the age of 16.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should work with the University of Huddersfield and local colleges to integrate electoral registration as part of the existing student registration process.
- ▶ National government should lower the voting age to 16 and agree that such arrangements be piloted in Kirklees in order to fully evaluate the benefits and implications.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should work in partnership with Democracy Club to pilot the ways in which data can be used to increase voter awareness and engagement. The learning should be used to develop a national standard that all councils should aspire to achieving.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should improve access to voter information by making polling districts and polling station data available to Democracy Club, in a format that meets their GoldPlus technical standard, in addition to sharing other essential elections data in recommended formats (candidates and election results).
- ▶ All schools in Kirklees should make their premises available to be used as a polling station on the day of an election.
- ▶ National government should continue to explore all options (for example, online voting, early or weekend voting and registration on polling day) to increase voter registration, accessibility and turnout.
- ▶ National government should consider the importance of local democracy when it is planning and legislating in respect of the timing and sequencing of elections. Local elections are important events and should be recognised as such. We do not wish to see a further dilution of local democracy.
- ▶ National government and the West Yorkshire Combined Authority should plan and sequence Mayoral elections for the region in a way that does not have a negative impact on local democracy.

You can find more ideas about elections in our full report



Regional devolution



Regional devolution is an ongoing journey with a future that is as yet unclear. We're focusing on what we can do in Kirklees to make the most of the opportunities. We believe that we should start with the local and evolve our regional democracy from there.

Devolution must be rooted in local communities

The top-down, economic focus of regional devolution must change. We want a democratically focussed devolution that starts with local communities and grows from the ground up. It should be rooted in the priorities and outcomes that are important to citizens in our towns and villages.

We need the different levels of our democracy (from neighbourhoods to towns, districts, regions and national government) to connect. What does our democratic "family tree" look like? It's not easy for citizens to understand those relationships.

It should be clear who has responsibility for which decisions, how citizens can get involved, and how we can hold decision-makers to account.

We welcome regional devolution

We welcome the idea of devolution beyond Westminster. Done well, it can provide opportunities and potential solutions to the challenges we face.

Local identity matters

Our history, and the history of our places, is important to local people and to councillors. Citizens feel a real sense of concern that towns and villages have lost their identity and lost their connection with the council when becoming Kirklees. Local people are worried that devolution may further weaken our sense of identity. This is why devolution must be rooted in our communities.

Citizens need to know what's happening

Many of our local citizens, and many councillors, are unclear about what regional devolution is or what it will mean for them in the places where they live and represent. Public understanding of the opportunities and implications of regional devolution is minimal. Over time this needs to change.

Councillors should lead the dialogue

Local councillors should be leading the dialogue with, and on behalf of, our citizens. In this way, we will make sure that Kirklees is strongly placed to influence and access the opportunities presented by devolution.

Democratic accountability is essential

Whilst the focus should be on outcomes, we want to emphasise the importance of democratic accountability and transparency as part of regional devolution. Any decision-making model should be democratically legitimate.

Our recommendations about regional devolution are:

- ▶ National government should provide clearer information about the purpose of (and processes for) regional devolution. This should:
 - Be clear about the outcomes that national government is seeking to achieve through regional devolution.
 - Provide greater clarity about the role, responsibilities and expectations of an Elected Mayor.
 - Provide greater clarity in terms of the power and responsibilities that exist at the relevant tiers of governance (region, district and local). This should involve more transparency about financial issues.
- ▶ The West Yorkshire Combined Authority should improve the quality and flow of information in order to help citizens and local councillors understand (and have better awareness of) regional issues and their relevance. This should include improving the way in which its democratic content is produced, published and communicated.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should review and improve the ways in which we support senior councillors to carry out their role in the context of the wider region. This should involve improving the information flow, in both directions, between the City Region and local areas. We should also make sure that all our councillors receive timely information about the wider regional devolution agenda.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should engage with local citizens to address the issue of local identity. Local devolution and governance are an ongoing challenge. We should be clearer about our local identity so that we can make a strong and powerful contribution to regional discussions.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should develop local approaches to strategic planning and priority setting (within different parts of Kirklees), based on the findings of our engagement work with citizens on local identity.
- ▶ Kirklees Council, together with our partners, should do some pilot work to explore innovative approaches to planning and priority setting in a particular area of Kirklees. This work should make use of some of the successful practice that the Democracy Commission have discovered as part of our work.

You can find more ideas about devolution in our full report



It's all about what happens next

Our work has created a rich picture about what a stronger local democracy should be like. But this is a beginning – it must always be about what happens next.

Different things grow well in different conditions, and we want to work with our citizens and others to discover what approaches will work well in our local democratic environment. This means trying out practical projects, on a local level, and talking openly about what has (or hasn't) been productive – and why.

Our witnesses have shared lots of inspiring examples of ideas that have already been tried in other towns and in other countries. Our citizens have come up with new ideas of their own. We are looking forwards to working together and finding out which of these ideas will take root in our Northern climate.

We will continue to listen to local knowledge and experiences throughout our practical work, and we hope to grow new and stronger relationships as we bring our ideas to life.

In this way, we will grow a stronger local democracy – from the ground up.

Delivering our recommendations:

- ▶ Kirklees Council should make sure that the core principles set out in the “Concluding remarks” section of our full report are used as a basis for progressing our recommendations. Specifically these are:
 - Adopting a citizen-led approach.
 - Being open and transparent and continuing to use the Democracy Commission’s website as a focal point.
 - Adopting a partnership approach where relevant.
 - Continuing a cross-party, councillor-led way of working.
 - Checking and celebrating progress via an annual Local Democracy Summit.
 - Retaining experience, knowledge and continuity by giving the Head of Democracy at Kirklees Council the strategic responsibility for delivering our recommendations.



Our overall message is that
local democracy should be valued.

Our mission:

**"By 2020 Kirklees is an informed citizen-led democracy with
accountable elected representatives who enable communities
to influence and affect decisions governing their lives"**



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Download our full report &
Review our evidence for yourself at:

www.democracycommission.org.uk

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