

# Active citizens in civic society



Everything starts with the citizen.

An active citizen is someone who chooses to be active in the life of their community.

### **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.

### **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.

### **Rethinking local decision-making**

We have an opportunity to rethink our approach to local-decision making within Kirklees. We could take a more devolved approach to local influence, engagement and decision-making, from the ground up.

### **Young citizens**

We're redesigning 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 across Kirklees that nurtures young people's interest in local democracy. Young people do not currently have as much of a stake in civic society and we are keen to address that imbalance. We also recognise that we need to develop a life-long approach to active citizenship.

### **Active Citizenship is our shared goal**

Along with our partners in wider civic society, we should treat Active Citizenship as a strategic priority and take shared responsibility for supporting and developing active citizens. We believe that our partners, the press, businesses, the third sector and our local MPs all have a part to play in fostering a shared stake in our local democracy.

## Active citizens in civic society

Everything starts with the citizen. We want to design the future of local democracy in Kirklees from the perspective of our citizens – and from the ground up. It is for this reason that we've looked at the networked society, the role of councillor, local decision-making, voting and our place in the region all mainly through the eyes of our citizens. They are our lens, helping us to bring all these issues into sharp focus.

Our work is based on the experiences of citizens, and not customers. Being a citizen is different from being a customer. We need to acknowledge and understand that. If we want to improve relationships and strengthen our local democracy, we must focus on what people can offer, and what they need, as citizens. The aim of our recommendations is therefore to focus on what will create good outcomes for our citizens.

Voting is an important part of our representative democracy, but being a citizen of Kirklees involves so much more. It involves informal participation, community activity, engaging with public services, informing decisions, campaigning, petitioning, protesting and having a real stake in the place that you live, visit or are employed in. Active citizenship is an important part of a strong and healthy civic society. We know there are barriers which stop people from playing an active role in our local democracy, and we're keen to improve the opportunities for people to get involved.

Austerity has proved to be an unhelpful backdrop to the idea of being an active citizen. We don't believe the right story to tell is that citizens "should now be doing more because the council is no longer able to". This is far too simplistic, sends out the wrong message and ignores the brilliant things that our citizens have always done to contribute to wider civic society in Kirklees. It should be about building on these strengths. Our 69 councillors are active citizens too and they have an important role to play in supporting those who are already active, and encouraging others to take part.

We've explored many different things which can enable and facilitate more active citizenship. Some of these will involve Kirklees Council behaving differently. Others relate to different stakeholders in our civic society who we feel have a shared responsibility to help us build a vibrant local democracy.

## What is an active citizen?

An active citizen is someone who chooses to be active in the life of their community. This means doing something practical to help your neighbours or people in your network, or to improve the place where you live, work or visit. It's about doing something positive to improve other people's lives, in whatever way you can.

Being an active citizen also 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.

Active citizens have a stake in the community in which they live. They take responsibility for their local area and know their rights. They question the way things are done and come up with ideas for making things better.

To be an active citizen, all you need is to care about the place where you are, and the people who you share it with – and you must be willing to do something to help.

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.

Active citizens and the relationships between them are what make our communities thrive.

## A new democratic relationship: Kirklees Council and active citizens

"There is loads of community capacity about, that just does not get allowed to flourish. The whole system is risk averse, and that means that nothing will change... Democracy should be about us, our passions, what we want."

**Kirklees citizen at our Local democracy roadshow**

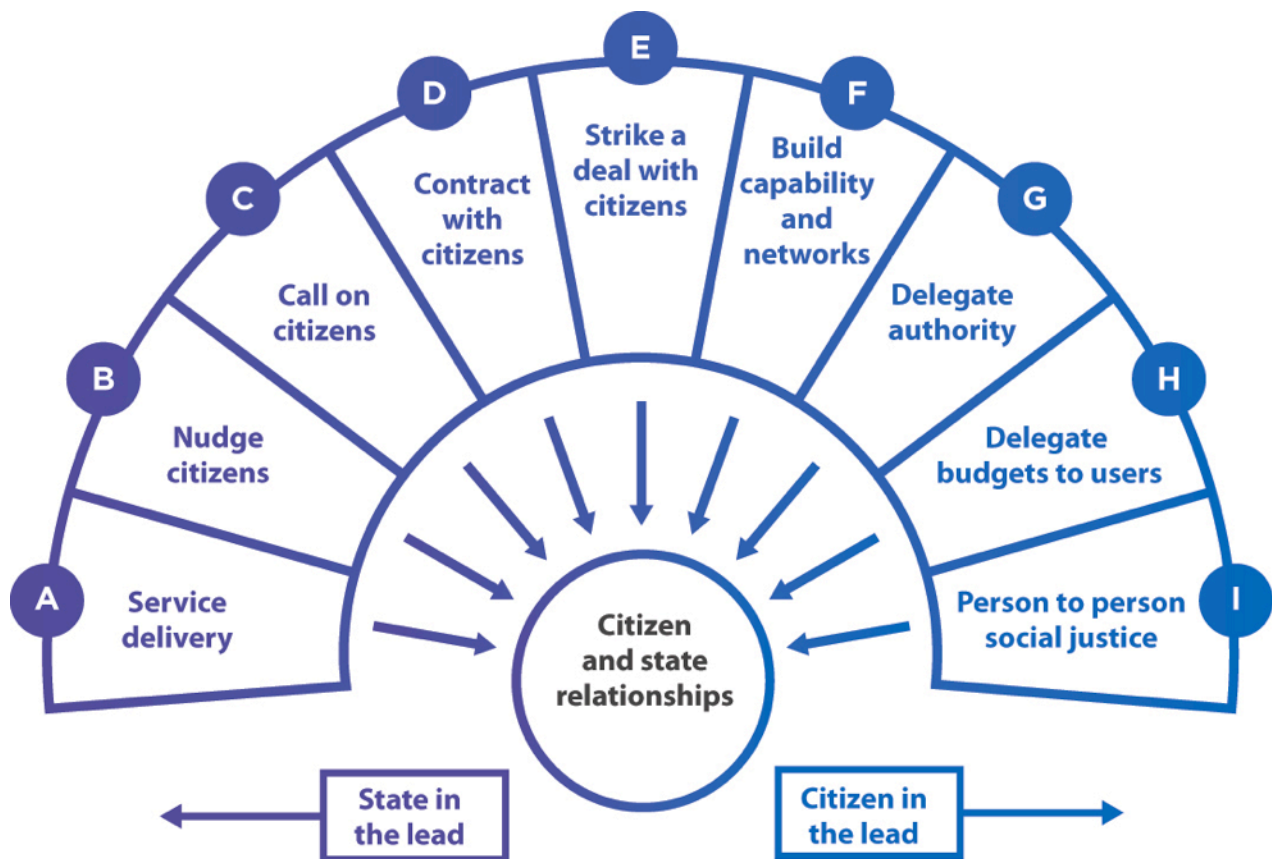
It's important for us to focus on what Kirklees Council can do to enable and facilitate active citizens. As part of our research we found the evidence provided by [Roger Bushell](#) to be particularly helpful in setting the wider context for this area of our work. The 'Citizen and state relationships' diagram is a good summary of the changing relationship between the citizen and the state. This provides an important framework for our work in Kirklees. It illustrates the issues we need to consider when thinking about the current and future role of the citizen. These include the changing relationships that are involved in participatory democracy, representation, decision-making and the role of the councillor.

We believe that our starting point should be to recognise the importance of active citizens and their relationship with the council. We recommend that Kirklees Council should make Active Citizenship a shared strategic priority and use this as a basis for developing a new democratic relationship with citizens.

"Local contracts between communities and providers need to be established, along with the sense of community responsibility. We need to start in the community and work outwards"

**Adrian Lythgo**

This should involve looking at the roles, responsibilities and relationship between citizens and the state, and articulating what this means in our neighbourhoods and communities.



## Citizen and state relationships

- A** Service delivery - state as provider, citizens as recipients
- B** Nudge citizens - "state knows best" (behaviour change)
- C** Call on citizens - state stimulates philanthropy and altruism
- D** Contract with citizens - state confirms something for something
- E** Strike a deal with citizens - state and citizens agree new visions
- F** Build capability and networks - citizens supported to give and receive help
- G** Delegate authority - citizens agree trade-offs & solutions in their communities
- H** Delegate budgets to users - citizens control personal budgets
- I** Person to person social justice - state as platform, citizens as designers

### Source:

[Changing the Narrative: A New Conversation Between the Citizen and the State](#) - Roger Bushell

Although we don't want to pre-determine this work, we feel there are a number of areas from our research that are of particular relevance:

**Councillors** must be at the heart of the relationship between the citizen and the state. They are crucial in making the connection between civic action and public service. This is part of the changing councillor role and we are recommending a shift in the support for councillors, in a way that has greater focus on their wards.

**Local identity** is an important issue for our citizens. We see this as key in helping us to strengthen our local democracy – from community, to district, to region.

**Consultation** is not enabling or facilitating active citizens - in fact it appears to be having the opposite effect. There needs to be a much stronger focus on genuine dialogue and engagement as part of our changing democratic relationship.

**Democratic content** can be difficult to understand. Council bureaucracy is often a barrier to citizens engaging in important issues both locally and strategically.

**Our culture** as a council is to only consult or engage when we have problems or challenges. We need to change this culture as part of a new democratic relationship. Similarly, the council needs to develop a sense of awareness about when to get out of the way and let citizens in their communities do what they know is best. This complements representative democracy and acknowledges the importance of building from the strengths that already exist.

"Neighbourhoods are where lots of good things happen and the best change happens where local authorities have a stewarding role to look after the village or community"

**Cormac Russell**

We've explored some of these issues in more detail elsewhere in this report.

Next we are focussing on two other areas in more detail, as we feel they are key for developing active citizenship.

## Rethinking local decision-making

The opportunities for citizens to have meaningful local engagement, to have influence and to be part of decision-making are strong themes that we have heard about regularly during our work. These issues are clearly relevant for active citizens. At one level, this is about the informal opportunities in our wards and communities, but it's also about more formal methods for setting priorities and making decisions.

Residents who took part in our [Public engagement events](#) often talked about the ways in which citizens can make a greater contribution to decision-making. They made a range of suggestions, including:

- the right to reverse council decisions
- quality indicators for local decision-making
- USA style jury systems
- local people panels
- greater use of local referenda
- participatory budgeting
- a realistic and meaningful model of local decision making
- a menu of issues so that citizens can choose how to be involved

In our [Kirklees residents e-panel survey](#) we asked "Should councillors have less control and local communities have more?" 51% said "Yes" and 33% said they were "Unsure". When we asked the same question in our [Kirklees Council staff survey](#), 45% said "Yes" and 45% said they were "Unsure".

In our [Kirklees Councillors survey](#) 80% of those who responded agreed that "Communities should have a greater role in the local democratic process, working more collaboratively with councillors", although 56% disagreed with the suggestion that "Councillors should have less control and the local community should have more". 78% agreed that "more decisions should be made more local in Kirklees".

We also asked our councillors to select up to three options which they felt would be most likely to encourage more direct public and community involvement in decision-making:

80% chose improving communication about decisions and their implications  
51% chose engaging more with community and voluntary sectors  
49% chose introducing more locally devolved decision-making structures  
47% chose providing ways to enable more local people to get involved

As part of our discussions with political groups, councillors consistently raised the issue of a more devolved and localised approach to decision-making.

The [Labour Group](#) agree that decision-making in Kirklees should include some devolution of resources to a local level. This should work alongside making sure that citizens are better connected to decision-making, and giving more decision-making powers to individual councillors in their wards.

The [Conservative Group](#) have a long-standing view that local councillors should take decisions on local issues. The group find the lack of real local devolution to local areas and wards to be frustrating.

The [Liberal Democrat Group](#) emphasise the importance of small blocks of governance and accountability which should be built from the bottom up. This allows for decision-making at a local level and enables citizens to relate to local politics more easily.

The [Green and Independent Groups](#) have referred to a lack of any significant devolution of powers locally. The groups feel that Kirklees Council has failed to resolve this issue in any of our approaches to area-based governance over the last 17 years. They would also like Kirklees Council to take a strategic view of the current and potential role of town councils.

We feel we have found a general appetite for having a more devolved approach to local influence, engagement and decision-making, from the ground up. From a Kirklees Council perspective, we have an opportunity to begin to address this as part of a review of our governance and decision-making arrangements (which is covered elsewhere in this report). We believe that such work should have a strong focus on the needs and expectations of the active citizen and that we should learn from past experience and from practice elsewhere.

For example, [Councillor Sir Stephen Houghton](#) provided us with details of the approach to local devolution in Barnsley. This involves six Area Councils, each with a commissioning budget that they decide how to spend. Each Area Council also has a Ward Alliance, made up of ward councillors and at least six community representatives. The alliances each have a small budget of £10k. The ward alliances channel the views and opinions of the community and share these with the area councils, so that citizens' views are considered when budget priorities are being set. Barnsley's Ward Alliances won an LGC award for Community Involvement in 2017.

We have also received evidence from [Justin Griggs](#) from the [National Association of Local Councils](#). Justin gave us a national overview of the differing approaches that Parish and Town Councils are taking. We were interested to hear that there is currently a growth in the number of Parish and Town Councils and also a rise in councils who are choosing onward devolution to parishes and towns. Justin explained the opportunities that such councils have in terms of accessing funding mechanisms that are not available to principle authorities. Some innovative and flexible approaches have been taken in particular parts of the country. These are all relevant considerations as part of our wider discussion about models of local devolution in Kirklees.

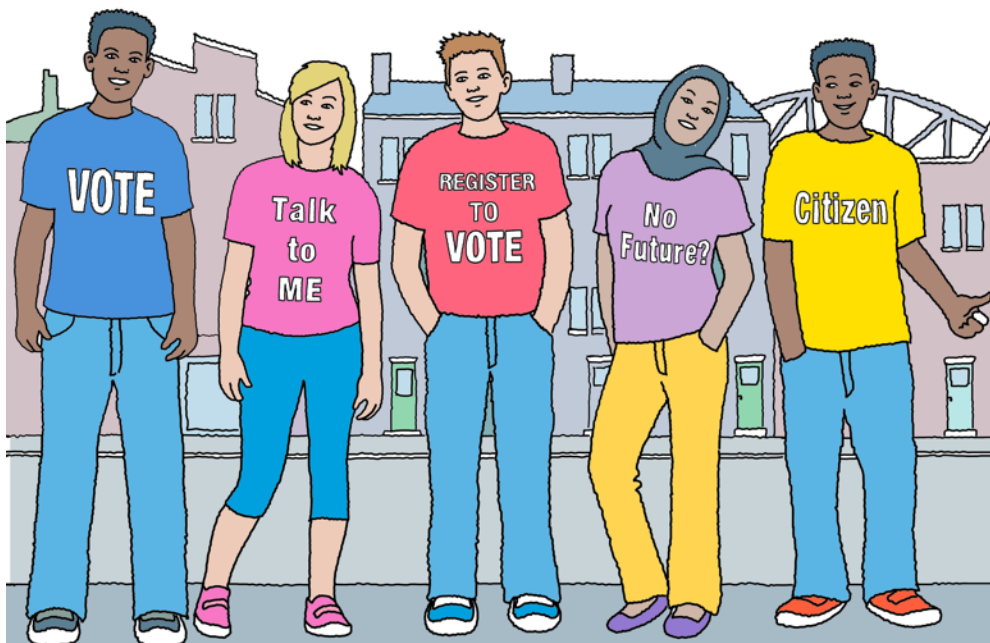
We also received evidence from [Peter Macfadyen and Mel Usher](#) from Frome Town Council, where the focus is strongly geared towards openness and citizen engagement. We were impressed by the innovative ways in which Frome has adopted an approach based on releasing power and “enabling the best decisions to be made locally, from the bottom up.”

We know that active citizenship is about much more than how the council chooses to devolve its power, resources and decisions, but we feel this is an important consideration. We have an opportunity to rethink our approach and to develop some new arrangements as part of our new democratic relationship with active citizens.

“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.”

**Kirklees Youth Councillor**

## Young citizens



We're seeking to redesign local democracy for the future and we're strongly aware of the responsibility that we have to our young citizens. We make no apologies for focussing heavily on how we can develop an environment and a culture across Kirklees that nurtures young people's interest and engagement in local democracy. This is a long-term goal, which makes it even more important for us to begin to develop strong foundations now.

We know that our participants agree with the need to focus energy on our young citizens. We heard this clearly from citizens during our roadshows, from partners and councillors in our group discussions, and from witnesses during our public inquiries and evidence-gathering sessions. So we are confident that this is the right approach.

Young people do not currently have the same stake in civic society and we are keen to address that imbalance. However, we also recognise that we need to develop a life-long approach to active citizenship. Citizens who took part in our roadshows asked us to build new relationships with a wider body of active citizens, and young people in particular. We want to grow stronger relationships between active citizens of all ages, through mentoring, shadowing and collaborative social activism.

We have tried to make sure that the thread of supporting young citizens is weaved throughout our recommendations.

We have considered the changing councillor role, access to decision-making and voting in local elections with young citizens in mind. In the context of active citizenship we feel it's important to do more – and our evidence has given us an insight into ways in which we can do that.

In our group discussion with [Kirklees Youth Council](#), our young participants highlighted a strong concern that young people are often stereotyped and they feel 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 who have something to contribute.

Our 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 Full Council or District Committee meetings, and councillors visiting schools to ask young people what things they would like to see change.

The [University of Huddersfield Student Union](#) feel that they can play an important role in educating and informing students. However, they told us that among students there is a clear lack of understanding about how decisions are made in the council. The students are unsure about what powers the council has in general, and they don't know whether council services would be of interest or relevance for students.

We received very powerful evidence from [Kenny Imafidon](#) from [Bite the Ballot](#) who helped us to understand the challenges and opportunities faced by young people when trying to engage in local democracy. Kenny explained that the most significant barrier to young people being engaged in local democracy is the lack of political education throughout the course of their school lives. There is a fear of teaching politics. Kenny believes it's important to overcome the fears that are associated with political education, as teaching such subjects fosters and facilitates critical thinking.

Kenny explained that schools are well placed to address these issues from the outset by embracing a democratic culture. There are opportunities to involve young people in decision-making by identifying what decisions can be passed to young people in schools. Such power-sharing is important as it can become habit forming and will allow young people to develop the attributes that will make them active citizens. Young people need support to understand the system and the landscape if they are going to engage in those local issues and get involved in local democracy.

Other witnesses similarly highlighted the central importance of creating opportunities for young citizens to understand and experience local democracy. Sarah Allan from [Involve](#) explained that there is a strong case for political education in schools. This would help to remove one of the barriers to equality of participation. Sarah also told us that it's important to focus on relevant issues as a starting point for engaging young citizens, as this means young people can get involved without needing to understand how local democracy works first.

Anthony Zacharzewski from the [Democratic Society](#) emphasised the importance of giving young citizens a close up view of what happens in order to demystify the way that decisions are made. Anthony explained that it is important to give young people the opportunity to have their say on the things that matter to them. This could be as simple as putting democratic procedures in place at schools or in communities where young people are present. It could also involve creating opportunities for young citizens to have their say in a format that works for them, and for young people to know that they are being listened to without being patronised.

Anthony added that there is scope to delegate some decisions that specifically affect young people, at least as a "first draft" of those decisions. Given that democracy is changing to something that people want to participate in and given that young people have grown up with this change, this could be a good opportunity to experiment with new models of politics. We could try some more participative approaches and explore how they fit into our more traditional models of decision-making.

The evidence that we should redesign our local democracy with a strong focus on the young citizen is compelling. We think this should be a core part of an Active Citizens Strategy and we should focus on how key stakeholders can collaborate to make this happen. We believe this should not be a Kirklees Council agenda alone as it has an impact on our wider civic society in the borough and also has implications for local and national government as a whole. That said, we particularly feel that our schools have a crucial role to play in supporting this culture change and we've made our recommendations with this in mind.

To effectively support and develop our young citizens, we believe all local schools should play a central role as local democratic hubs. 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.

This is particularly relevant in light of the changing role of councillor in a representative democracy.

Our Youth Councillors recognise that it's seen as unusual for young people to take an interest in local democracy – and their aspiration is for it to be the norm.

“There's an idea that being 18 is the gateway to democracy, but it isn't – you can get involved at any age.”

**Cllr Gemma Wilson**

**We specifically recommend that Kirklees Council develops these initiatives as part of a wider Active Citizens Strategy:**

- 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.

## Wider civic society

Active citizens should be a shared goal - one which has the support of wider stakeholders in Kirklees civic society. We believe that our partners, the press, businesses, the third sector and our local MPs all have a part to play in fostering a shared stake in our local democracy. It is for this reason that we want to focus on some parts of that civic society in particular, as they have featured in our work.

### Business in civic society

Businesses have a crucial role in helping us to maintain a strong local economy and create investment in Kirklees. We recognise that good work is already happening in our business community, which contributes to civic life in Kirklees. We believe there are opportunities to develop a wider relationship that builds on the Democracy Commission's work.

Local businesses, particularly small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) are quite often close to the communities within which they are based. There could also be opportunities for us to have a different kind of relationship with the larger businesses that operate in Kirklees. We'd like to explore the ways in which we can work together to create civic and social good in the context of active citizenship.

We received some helpful evidence from [Neil McInroy](#) from the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES). Neil explained that in "great places" (here and abroad) there's an interdependency between the public, social and commercial sectors. This means that the relationship between representative and participatory democracy is of fundamental importance in creating successful and sustainable places. Councillors and the council have an important role in earning power and influence in areas where there is no contractual relationship – for example, with the local business sector.

Neil explained that in other countries the trade organisations are part of a social contract relationship based on co-design with the local authority, which provides a stronger basis to move forward effectively as a locality. Neil also introduced the concept of "Business Citizenship", in which core businesses are anchors in the area and their staff are seen as citizens as well as employees.

We strongly support the idea of Business Citizenship and in particular we recognise the importance of developing a different relationship with large Kirklees businesses, which focusses on a wider social contract. This should form part of our Active Citizens Strategy and make a virtue of the ways in which a different approach to collaborative working can deliver social as well as economic benefits.

## **Press and media in civic society**

The press and media are an important part of wider civic society. We wanted to make sure that the voices of our local press were heard as part of our evidence gathering. With the exception of [Danny Lockwood](#) from The Press News Ltd, we have been disappointed by the response. Despite our attempts to involve local newspaper editors, none have come forward to provide evidence that would help to inform our thinking and recommendations. We are therefore grateful to Danny Lockwood for taking time to provide written evidence. We are also grateful to [Nick Golding](#), editor of the Local Government Chronicle, who provided us with a useful national perspective. We hope other local editors will be part of our future work.

[Nick Golding](#) explained that it is important to see the wider press context in order to understand what happens locally. Widespread use of the internet and the resulting ability for people to advertise online, often at no cost, has had an impact on the advertising revenue that local newspapers can generate.

This has resulted in impact both on the number of journalists who are employed and on wage levels. This has meant that journalists, who in some instances are relatively inexperienced, have to cover a greater breadth of issues and have less time to focus on council issues in general and on local democracy specifically.

By way of a local perspective [Danny Lockwood](#) explained the varied nature of the role of the press, which involves being a “free and co-operative partner” to convey useful and positive news, a means of publicly scrutinising policy and performance, and broadly holding the council accountable for its actions to the wider public. [Nick Golding](#) added that it is important for councils to understand that the local press will report issues from the perspective of the public. This places a greater responsibility on the council and councillors to provide timely and relevant information. It is also helpful for the council to focus on outcomes for local people, as opposed to individual decisions about service delivery.

We have also heard from Mr Lockwood about the council's part in the relationship and the extent to which it is reactive, evasive and defensive. There is a perceived lack of trust, and a lack of honesty and individual contact, which contributes to the current quality of the relationship.

We accept that there is a real or perceived tension between the council and the local press. We nevertheless believe that the press and media form an important part of the civic fabric and it is a relationship that requires careful consideration and development.

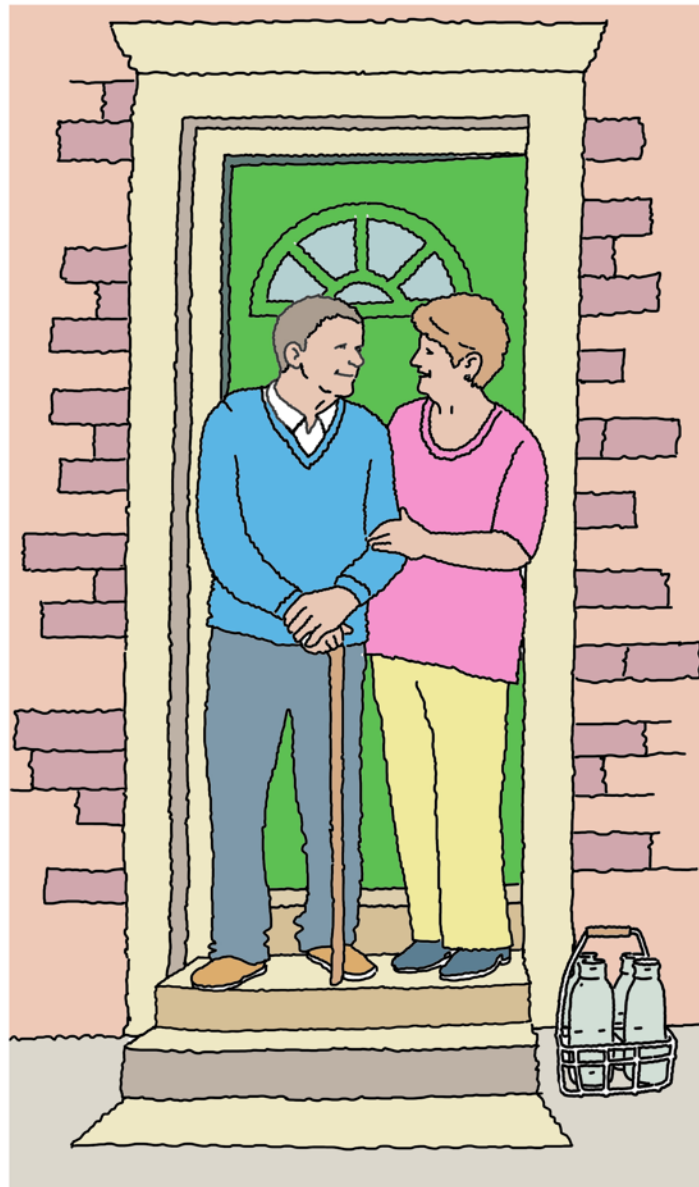
The council has an important part to play in making the relationship an effective one and clearly benefits from a situation where citizens are "better informed and involved". It is therefore important that Kirklees Council revisits our approach to communications, with a view to developing a more proactive, collaborative and effective relationship with the local press. In developing a more strategic approach, based on some core principles, there should be greater opportunity for us to understand and progress the ways in which the press can work with us as part of an Active Citizens Strategy.

## **MPs in civic society**

During the course of our work, our citizens and other participants have often talked about the role of local MPs. It's clear that citizens are confused about the differences between the roles and responsibilities of an MP compared with those of a councillor. Yet we have also heard about the important role that MPs have to play as part of our local democracy, particularly in the context of citizenship.

Our local MPs are an invaluable representative link between the constituencies of Kirklees and national government in Westminster. As such we feel that it is timely to redefine this relationship in the context of an Active Citizens Strategy. The relationship needs to be based on a stronger partnership approach, more coherent and easier for our citizens to understand.

It is important that we take time to work in a much more collaborative way in order to enhance local citizenship and maximise our position in the wider region. It is for this reason that we recommend a more structured approach to that relationship. This should involve annual Constituency Contact Meetings between councillors and MPs, which can be used as a basis for clarifying roles and responsibilities and developing a partnership approach to delivering an Active Citizens Strategy.



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