

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**

A changing role

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 – and whatever you think should be on it, our witnesses have told a consistent and compelling story about the changing role of councillor.

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.

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.

Attracting the next generation of councillors

Few people are currently interested in becoming a councillor. We need to be clear about what the role is, communicate it effectively, resource it properly and make it achievable. The council alone cannot make this happen. Political parties also have a role to play.

The price and the value of representation

Citizens have told us they value the role of councillor. It is a vital part of our representative democracy. We've explored whether we should have fewer councillors, more councillors or retain our current number. To do this, we have considered both the price and the value of representation.

Councillors

We think that councillors are at an important crossroads.

Our citizens have told us that they value the role of councillor, although many people have little or no direct contact with their local councillors and would like to have more. Strikingly, there's a lot of misunderstanding and confusion about what councillors are responsible for. Our citizens often do not know what the role of councillor actually involves, who their councillors are or how to make contact. Experiences of councillors are also inconsistent across Kirklees. Yet our citizens agree that councillors can help strengthen our local communities.

Our witnesses have told us about the changing and challenging role of being a councillor. We've heard that councillors are enablers, change makers, problem solvers, connectors and much more. We recognise that it's essential for us to do more to explain the role of councillor and to support councillors effectively in their changing role. Our evidence suggests that our overall support for councillors is currently out of step. Both the council and political parties must also do more to attract the next generation of councillors.

We have explored the ongoing and evolving debate about councillors very directly and in detail. We have looked at the demands on councillors, their changing role, increasing expectations, the need to have a different kind of relationship with local people, and the implications of the digital age. We've taken a rigorous approach, looking at wide-ranging evidence from the perspective of our local citizens and circumstances. We believe this brings a stronger sense of realism and relevance to our recommendations and suggested ways forward.

Our starting point was to understand our own history here in Kirklees ([The Role of Councillors in a Representative and Participatory Democracy](#)). We have looked at how the councillor role has evolved in Kirklees and the ways in which our council has developed and supported councillors, particularly since the Local Government Act 2000.

For the most part Kirklees Council have been innovative and forward thinking in our approaches to supporting councillors. Successes include:

Councillor development – national recognition for our approach.

Role profiles – defining the role of councillor through a collection role profiles (an exemplar approach which has been used as a template by many other councils).

Review panel – A mature and proactive Members Allowances Independent Review Panel whose work keeps pace with the dynamic nature of local government and the changing role of the councillor.

Digital councillors – leading the way in terms of supporting councillors to operate effectively in a digital age.

Whilst we should be proud of such achievements, the recent trend shows a change in the way that councillors are supported and developed. These changes have been influenced by the wider financial challenges facing councils like Kirklees. Our councillors now have more generic support and we have less focus on specialist approaches. These factors are relevant for our work.

A changing role

The councillor role is of fundamental importance within our communities. Councillors are an essential point of connection between those communities and our public services and agencies. They are at the heart of local relationships. We want to emphasise the importance of the democratic mandate which all councillors have by virtue of being elected to represent the citizens in their wards. This is a core aspect of the councillor role and is the starting point for looking at how it is changing.

There are many reasons for why the role of councillor is changing:

- Austerity means that councils and councillors have less scope and flexibility to resolve issues and fix problems in the traditional way.
- Citizens expect councillors to be more responsive in a digital age.
- There's a growing tension between participatory and representative democracy and the relationship between the citizen and the state is changing.
- Governance arrangements for ward, council and region are becoming ever-more complex, which creates extra expectations and challenges for councillors.
- There is a real or perceived erosion of power, particularly in terms of the actual decisions that councillors take.

Throughout our evidence gathering, we have heard strikingly consistent messages about the changing councillor role. Whilst the specific descriptions may differ, our witnesses have told a consistent and compelling story – and one that we are supportive of. This view of what a councillor does is different from how we currently describe the role in our profile for a Kirklees Councillor.

We received evidence from [Dr Catherine Needham](#), one of the authors of the [21st Century Councillor](#) report which explores the roles of a modern councillor and the skills and competences that are required to carry them out. The report identifies a number of key roles – Steward of place, Advocate, Buffer, Sense maker, Catalyst, Entrepreneur and Orchestrator.

[Jonathan Carr-West](#) from the [LGiU](#) (Local Government Information Unit) gave us a clear and concise summary, which we found relevant and accurate. Jonathan described the changing councillor role as:

- Being a facilitator for a community rather than a decision maker for it.
- Representing the community in the structures of the council whilst helping that community to find solutions for itself.
- Knowing where the civic energy is.
- Being the voice of the community whilst helping it to find its voice.
- Being the first line of triage between the community and public services.

Similarly, other participants described the councillor role using terms such as: Enabler, Conduit, Facilitator, Broker, Change maker, Problem solver, Influencer, Negotiator and Connector. To these we can also add:

Digitally literate – [Cllr David Harrington](#) and [Cllr Gillian Corr](#) presented a compelling case for digital literacy being a core part of the councillor role. They told us about the tangible benefits, both politically and as representatives, in blending off-line approaches with online techniques. To be effective, councillors need a core level of digital literacy that's comparable with the communities they represent.

Networked leader – from [Nick Booth](#) we heard about the importance of councillors having the skills to nurture and support networks, online and off-line.

Civic educator – Our councillors have an important role to play as civic educators. Engagement with our [Youth Council](#) has shown the important role that councillors can play in widening interest in, and understanding of, local democracy.

Talent spotter and mentor – Existing councillors have an important role in spotting and nurturing talent, so that we can attract the next generation of councillors. Their experience, expertise and knowledge are assets that need to be rooted in the role and used in a way that encourages and supports future councillors.

Service co-designer – [Dominic Campbell](#) explained that councillors can play an important role when councils and others are redesigning services. Their organisational knowledge, awareness of the needs and expectations of service users and ability to advocate changes with residents makes them well placed to contribute. This should not involve councillors becoming involved in operational service delivery, but they can be a valuable part of prototyping and service redesign.

Civic builder – [Dr Paul Hepburn](#) described councillors as the glue that holds networks together and as such they have an important role in building civic society and providing a bridge between citizens and organisations.

In addition to defining the role, we have received evidence about the importance of councillors being accountable between elections. This involves councillors demonstrating their effectiveness in delivering the role. Whilst democratic accountability through the ballot box remains a fundamental principle, it is clear that citizens would like to see councillors demonstrating the impact they are having.

Raising the profile of councillors and being clear about what the role involves will help with this. We need to do more to show the impact councillors are having. This issue has been raised by councillors as well as citizens.

Suggestions from the public included councillors engaging in more community-based debate, more interactive two-way communication, and looking at the competencies of the modern councillor to develop training that can support them in their current and future roles (for example, using new technology to communicate).

Therefore, we recognise that we need to do further work to define the councillor role in Kirklees. We also need to do more to demonstrate and communicate the impact of the role.

Supporting councillors, supporting communities

The councillor role is becoming increasingly complex, diverse and demanding. We have acknowledged the importance of being clear about what the role should involve in the future. There are other important factors that we should bear in mind:

Priorities – We need to have a sense of priority, to be clear what we want from councillors and what we can realistically expect.

Demands – We need to create the time and space for councillors to concentrate on what is important.

Support – We need to develop a package of support and development that reflects those priorities and demands.

Terms and conditions – We need to address national and local issues in respect of the “terms and conditions” for being a councillor.

We’ve heard a range of evidence and perspectives that demonstrate how the councillor role is growing more complex and often has unrealistic expectations and demands. Part of the intention of the Local Government Act 2000 was to free up time to enable councillors to do more work in their wards, but this goal has not been fully achieved. Some of the explanations for this are national, whilst others are local.

In light of the broader approach we’re taking in our work we believe that now, more than ever, 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 from the ground up, within their wards – and they should have the time and support they need to be able to do that.

[Professor Colin Copus](#) shared the [Councillor Commission’s interim findings](#) as part of his evidence giving. The Councillor Commission have analysed the experiences of over 250 councillors and have identified a number of issues that are relevant for our work. The local and national evidence reveals a pattern of councillors being pulled in a variety of directions – community and ward, strategic within the council, by partners, by external bodies and increasingly within the region. Councillors are also expected to play an active part in their council’s governance and decision-making processes.

“The world that the councillor inhabits is a turbulent one and as well as the constant themes, new and emerging challenges develop which test old assumptions and working practices. Austerity, devolution, government policy change and the demands on councillors to engage in complex networks of public, private and third sectors bodies at the level of the ward or strategically at the level of the council and beyond – are all reshaping expectations on councillors and their expectations they hold of their office.”

Councillor Commission interim report

Councillors could be facing a perfect storm. When set against increasing citizen expectations in a digital age and the consequences of austerity, the current role of councillor is in real danger of being undeliverable and unachievable. This is particularly the case where councillors are balancing family life with holding down employment ([Recently elected councillors](#)). As Professor Copus observed, “we need to lighten the load”. We agree with this point and we want to emphasise the need for us to have a stronger sense of priority in terms of what councillors should be focussing their time on.

We heard from [Councillor Sir Stephen Houghton](#) about the importance of ensuring that councillors have the new skills, resources, staff and money to fill the gaps when officers are no longer there: “Sending them out of the door naked won’t work”.

We feel that our starting point should be to focus on what the council can control and change in terms of both creating time and space, and improving support and development. It is for this reason we recommend that we review these activities and make changes where needed:

Meetings – As part of the full review of our governance and decision-making arrangements, we should consider the frequency of meetings, the time of day they take place and membership requirements. We should look at the full range of meetings we have and decide if they are actually necessary. Meetings are a draw on precious councillor time and should therefore only take place if they are absolutely essential.

Boards and outside bodies – We should review the full complement of boards and outside bodies that councillors are currently involved in, with a view to

reducing the number. Where councillors continue to be part of boards and outside bodies, we should do more to support councillors in carrying out those roles and responsibilities.

Officer support – We should redesign officer support in a way that has a greater focus on supporting councillors in their wards.

Information and intelligence - As part of our Intelligence Vision, Kirklees Council should provide councillors with timely information and intelligence at a ward and neighbourhood level to support councillors in working effectively and proactively with their communities. Providing timely information to councillors should be a priority.

Training and development – We should learn from our past experiences when commissioning councillor training and development. This should involve a changed approach to new councillor induction, special responsibility development, and IT provision which is more effective in supporting councillors in their changing role.

The payment of councillors is clearly relevant to this area of our work. During the course of our evidence gathering we have heard from some key witnesses whose perspectives on the councillor role and how it is rewarded have been helpful in informing our findings. The evidence of [Professor Andrew Taylor](#), Chair of the Kirklees Members Allowances Independent Review Panel (MAIRP), has been particularly helpful, as have the direct experiences of councillors and [Adrian Lythgo](#).

We are encouraged that Kirklees Council has a fresh and forward thinking approach to determining the [allowances payable to our councillors](#), based on our role profiles and bandings. There are regular reviews to make sure that the scheme keeps pace with the evolving councillor role. The most recent evidence which demonstrates this process is the review that took place in November 2015. There is a lack of public understanding about what a councillor does and also about the payment councillors receive for carrying out their role. Citizens are uncertain as to whether the role is full time and professional or part time and voluntary. By way of clarity, the current expectation is that councillors dedicate 20 hours per week to the role, plus 20 hours per month voluntarily. From an Allowances Scheme perspective we do not have full time professional councillors.

Whilst these time commitments may be the expectation, our evidence has painted a very different picture. [Professor Andrew Taylor](#) observed that over the 17 years he has chaired the Review Panel he has seen a “professionalisation” of

the role in terms of expectations and demands. Nevertheless, neither Professor Taylor nor the Democracy Commission think the councillor role should become professional and full time. This would undermine the legitimacy of the role and would narrow the diversity of citizens who can become a councillor. It is important that we give every opportunity to encourage the next generation of councillors.

At our [Public engagement events](#) some participants recognised that the job of a councillor is demanding and hard. In some people's eyes, the role of a councillor on Cabinet is a highly professionalised job, and akin to that of a high-powered businessman.

We need to understand and resolve the tensions of the role, particularly for those who combine being a councillor with having a family and career. With this in mind, some of the aspects we need to consider are:

Councillors and MPs – Unlike MPs, local councillors are rooted in their communities and are often responsible for taking or influencing significant decisions that affect those communities. At the very least, councillors should be given equal status to MPs.

Councillors are "on call" – The councillor role, done properly, is 24/7. Councillors are effectively "on-call" all the time and therefore it is acceptable to describe it as a full time role.

Working councillors – It is important that central government does more to acknowledge the challenges faced by councillors, particularly those in employment. Government should put in place changes that assist both councillors and their employers, so that neither is disadvantaged. The removal of pensions for councillors is a backward step, and one that further demonstrates an inconsistency when councillors are compared with MPs. This is particularly important if we want to attract a diverse next generation of councillors.

Allowances – In the wake of the MPs expenses scandal, councillor allowances are understandably a high profile and potentially contentious issue for local people and councillors alike. We also need to consider wider austerity and the price of representation. Such circumstances often prevent us from having a measured and independent public discussion that weighs up the breadth of all the relevant issues.

It is for this reason we advocate a national members allowances framework, designed by the Local Government Association, which local councils can use as a

basis for determining local rates. In the interim, we believe that the Kirklees Members Allowances Independent Review Panel should link annual changes in the rate of councillors' allowances to the pay rate for local government officers.

A misunderstood role

A stark headline from our engagement with citizens and staff alike was that people clearly lack understanding of the councillor role and they don't know what is involved in being a councillor. We have found that the information we currently have on our Kirklees.gov.uk website is not addressing this issue, nor do we have a fully informed officer and councillor culture.

The fact that citizens misunderstand the role of councillor has implications for a range of other factors that are relevant to our work, including:

- What citizens can legitimately expect from their councillors, particularly in times of austerity. We have shown that the role is changing so it is therefore important that citizens are aware of those changes and the impact of them.
- The extent to which officers and councillors can work together as part of an effective partnership if there is a lack of understanding and opportunity.
- How the council and political parties promote and communicate the role both online and off-line.
- How we are able to attract the next generation of councillors.
- The work we need to do with young citizens as part of wider civic awareness and engagement.

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

Kirklees Youth Councillor

We have realised that developing a shared understanding of the role has strong links to wider citizenship and how we attract the next generation of councillors. Our recommendations should be considered with this in mind.

We have made a coherent and connected package of recommendations which addresses the immediate and longer term challenges.

As part of this process we have considered practice from elsewhere. For example, the [Be A Councillor](#) campaign, run by the Local Government Association (LGA), provides a helpful template when considering the actions that we might take locally to promote the role and generate interest. This may involve working in partnership with the LGA as we develop and refine our approach.

One of the very helpful suggestions we received from citizens at our Preview events was that it would be useful for us to develop a “family tree” for local democracy in Kirklees. Citizens are frustrated at not knowing who does what. They have told us that not being able to understand how the local political system works is one of the things that prevents people from taking part.

We think a family tree could be a good way of describing our local democracy, as it would enable us to demonstrate relationships rather than hierarchies, and would help to explain the councillor role. This might also help us to get away from the presumption that MPs are “senior partners”, which can create unrealistic expectations of who is able to do what.

Another striking aspect of our evidence is the importance of humanising the councillor role. We heard this from our [Recently elected councillors](#) and from both [Catherine Needham](#) and [Nick Booth](#). We believe we should take the opportunity to bring the refreshed councillor role to life through real life case studies that tell the story of how being a councillor can enrich your life and enable you to do something valuable for your community. We should also create more face-to-face interactions between councillors and citizens through shadowing initiatives and by creating closer links with schools and with our Youth Council.

Key suggestions from citizens who took part in our [Public engagement events](#) include:

- More opportunity for regular face-to-face contact with councillors – for example, 6-monthly ward meetings.
- Holding a Kirklees question time.
- Making more information available about who the councillors are, what they do and how to get in touch.
- Greater use of the internet and digital technology to communicate – for example, a monthly email update or a regular short video on YouTube.

We have included some of these suggestions as part of our recommendations, focusing on what we feel we can achieve and what will add value by creating a wider understanding of the councillor role.

There are also challenges for local democracy within Kirklees Council, and we recognise the importance of being aware of this. We need to have a strong organisational focus on the culture that currently exists between officers and councillors in Kirklees. 52% of respondents to the online [Kirklees Council staff survey](#) said that the councillor role needs to be clearer, whilst 59% believe that councillors should take more time to understand what officers do. 38% believe there should be more opportunity for staff to meet with councillors.

Similarly, the responses we received from councillors taking part in our survey and from political groups in Kirklees indicate that staff have an inconsistent understanding of what councillors do and the challenges they face. This is partly explained by a gradual loss of “corporate memory” as officers leave our organisation, and by councillors and officers having less opportunity to work together and develop relationships based on mutual understanding and respect.

This is also an important issue for most of our political groups. The [Labour Group](#) observed that, as experienced officers leave the council, it becomes ever more evident that staff have little experience or understanding of the role of councillors. They advocate that we should pay more attention to this issue as part of staff training and development.

The [Green and Independent Groups](#) believe that council officers should be more proactive and willing to work closely with all councillors and not see them as a hindrance.

The [Conservative Group](#) said that officer understanding of the way councillors work is “patchy” and many officers do not interact with councillors in the way that they once did. This has been a gradual process. The group would like to see a “happy medium” where there is greater flexibility from officers and an understanding of the pressures and commitments that councillors have.

An idea from citizens at our Preview events was that all council staff should be “ambassadors for local democracy”. We support this idea and we think it makes a good statement about what we should expect of our staff from day-to-day.

What is apparent is that we need to revisit and recalibrate the officer and councillor relationship in the context of wider change.

The current divide between officers and councillors is not contributing to a healthy local democracy. Councillors in a representative democracy are one of the key parts of local government and as such it's important that officers understand this wider context in terms of their roles and responsibilities. Part of this is about raising awareness, and part of this is about having the opportunity to work collaboratively as part of a newly defined relationship. We have addressed these issues in our recommendations.

Finally, given the forward looking nature of our work, we are aware of the need to help young people understand and value the role of councillor. Our young citizens are the future of our local democracy and will hopefully become the councillors of the future. It is for this reason that we advocate awareness-raising with young people in particular (including practical opportunities to meet councillors) as part of a wider citizenship package. We have included details of this elsewhere in our report.

Political parties and the next generation of councillors

We've heard about many issues with attracting the next generation of councillors. [Councillor Sir Stephen Houghton](#) explained the challenges faced by most political parties whose traditional "recruitment markets" (for example, the Trade Union movement) no longer exist in the same way as in the past. [Anthony Zacharzewski](#) explained that whilst people do want to become councillors, they do not necessarily want to go through the party political process to become one.

Another perspective was provided by [Nick Booth](#) who explained that there are many citizens who are active in civic spaces, which may prove to be great places for finding future candidates. Similarly, [Katherine Sladden and Kajal Odedra](#) from [Change.org](#) explained the ways in which petitioning platforms can be a place to find active citizens who may be interested in becoming a councillor, given that they are already actively campaigning about local issues.

Traditional pathways to becoming a councillor are changing, in need of change or disappearing, although there are opportunities to look at different and more innovative ways of nurturing and attracting new talent. We can put many of the jigsaw pieces in place to help us recruit the next generation of councillors, but there are other factors to consider. Kirklees Council should do all that is in our gift to make the councillor role attractive, understood and deliverable – but political parties and other providers and agencies also have a crucial role to play.

Although we have received a wide range of evidence about the merits or otherwise of party politics, our focus here is on the role of political parties in attracting and recruiting candidates and future councillors. Some of the issues are cultural, whilst others relate to perception and process. If the ultimate outcome is to attract the best candidates, we feel it is important to begin to address some of the issues that we have found. As [Kenny Imafidon](#) pointed out: “Voting for the best of the worst is not how politics should be”

We cannot comment on the recruitment processes of each political party, but we can share some of the issues that we have learned from our own political groups:

The [Labour Group](#) acknowledges the importance of “educating” their members and mentoring the next generation through involvement in party activity. They believe that there needs to be an understanding of what work is involved in the role of being a councillor.

The [Conservative Group](#) advocated the importance of clearly defining the councillor role, considering how the role is rewarded and demonstrating the results that councillors can achieve. They also emphasised the need to increase councillor influence by enabling councillors to take more decisions locally. They feel that we can further improve respect for the councillor role by punishing ill-discipline and bad conduct.

The [Liberal Democrat Group](#) emphasised the importance of addressing public misconceptions about councillors and reversing the culture of resentment that currently exists. We believe that this is a barrier to attracting more people to become councillors. The group would like to see a campaign aimed at attracting more people to want to become councillors, which should include greater clarity in terms of what the role involves and what councillors earn.

The [Green and Independent Groups](#) believe that the council, councillors, political parties and the wider local government sector should be more proactive in promoting the councillor role in a positive way. This should involve being very clear about everything that’s involved in the role. We should also consider the wider “terms and conditions” of being a councillor in order to present the role as a more attractive package, whilst being realistic and honest about what is “doable”

With all these issues in mind, we’d like to make a number points about candidate recruitment. For the most part, these are also reflected in our recommendations:

Recruiting effective candidates – As part of candidate selection it is important that political parties attract and recruit candidates who can carry out the role effectively. It would be a positive step to make use of our revised councillor role profile and the core expectations for councillors as a basis for recruitment. This approach should be supplemented with open days and taster sessions to promote the councillor role.

Councillor terms – On balance, we are against the principle of fixed terms for councillors, although we acknowledge the importance of striking a balance between retaining experienced councillors and developing the next generation. Experienced councillors should form part of the solution and they have an important role to play in supporting and mentoring new councillors and raising the profile of the role with young people.

Networks – It's important for political parties to tap into civic and participatory networks (some of which will be online) when recruiting future councillors. The council should assist in this process where appropriate.

Civic awareness – The wider issue of civic education and awareness is a theme throughout our report and one that we feel is very relevant in attracting the next generation of councillors. It is for this reason that our recommendations include a strong focus on creating civic pathways for our young citizens. Where we can do this in Kirklees or in partnership, we will. But we feel that this is an issue which goes beyond the boundaries of Kirklees. We'd like to see a national acknowledgement of the importance of supporting the development of young citizens.

Representation and the number of councillors

Our work coincides with the challenges of austerity and the increasing need for the public sector to make considerable savings. As part of our remit it is therefore important for us to bear in mind the price of representation as well as its value.

We have explored what is required for us to ensure that citizens are effectively represented. This involves looking at the number of councillors we have now and the number we may need in the future.

We have received some useful advice from our witnesses and we have also visited two councils who have made changes to their number of councillors.

We also received these responses from the political groups on Kirklees Council:

The [Labour Group](#) are against reducing the number councillors for Kirklees. They believe that there is an increased demand for councillors' time, alongside a reduction in the number of officers.

The [Conservative Group](#) did not express an overall view although they noted that reducing the number of councillors (and thus increasing electorate to councillor ratios) without addressing councillor roles and allowances is not feasible. The group are open-minded to the possibility of reducing the number of wards or councillors in Kirklees, dependent on the proposals brought forward by the Democracy Commission in terms of councillor roles. Any reshaping of wards would need to equalise electorates as much as possible, and take account of the implications of the Kirklees Local Plan in terms of ward size.

The [Liberal Democrat Group](#) believe there should be no reduction in the number of councillors. The specific reasons given are:

- Kirklees has some of the largest wards in the country, which needs to be reflected in the number of councillors.
- Councillor workloads are increasing.
- The council is shrinking and there are fewer council officers in post, meaning that there is a greater need for councillors.
- Councillors provide a human presence, which becomes more important in the context of the digital age. The role of the councillor is more significant than ever in engaging with communities.

The [Green and Independent Groups](#) believe that whilst Kirklees is a diverse borough with differing wards, the council should look at the feasibility of reducing the number of councillors. This should be alongside moving to a four yearly electoral cycle and having a system of proportional representation.

As part of our [Kirklees councillors survey](#) we asked whether there should be a reduction in the number of councillors. Of those who responded, 12% agreed or strongly agreed, whilst 73% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Whilst it has been helpful to understand the perspectives of our own councillors, we have also recognised the importance of understanding the process and considerations when seeking to reduce the number of councillors. We have spoken to [Professor Colin Mellors](#), Chair of the [Local Government Boundary Commission for England](#) (LGBC), who are responsible for governing and

overseeing the electoral review process, which includes consideration of the number of councillors.

In terms of the process, Professor Mellors explained that the LGBC looks at electoral forecasts on a four yearly basis and uses these forecasts in a forward looking way. The aim is to achieve equality in terms of the relationship between the electorate and councillors (so that each councillor in an area represents roughly the same number of people). The LGBC, as part of an electoral review process, will balance three other criteria when putting forward their proposals:

- The number of councillors required for decision-making.
- The number of councillors required for accountability purposes.
- The councillor capacity to provide representation (community leadership and linkage of local communities).

Professor Mellors explained that whilst the trigger for a council to reduce the number of councillors may be financial, this is not a consideration for the Boundary Commission. The LGBC would need to be satisfied with the motivations for an electoral review. We noted that the best reviews are the ones where local authorities have thought about it carefully, are positively involved in the process, and where officers are empowered to think aloud with the LGBC.

As part of our evidence gathering we spoke to councils who have had first-hand experience of the electoral review process and have reduced their number of councillors as a result of going through that process.

Knowsley Council went through a voluntary process to reduce the number of councillors from 63 to 45. One of the main motivations for the change in councillor numbers was the smaller ward sizes compared to neighbours in Merseyside. Knowsley had an average of 5,000 electorate per 3 ward members, whereas other areas in Merseyside had between 7,000 and 11,000 electorate for the same number of councillors. The positive changes that came out of the review were:

- Changing governance arrangements, with less committees.
- A review of Outside bodies.
- A review of polling stations, resulting in a cost saving for the council.
- £250k savings on member allowances.
- Savings on reductions in Governance staff.
- Younger councillors being elected.
- Improved IT offer for councillors, including laptop, tablet and smart phone.

The [London Borough of Bexley](#) currently has 63 councillors, with 21 wards, each with three councillors who are elected on a four year cycle. The baseline electorate is 179,000, with a projected electorate of 181,000 by 2021. At the time of our visit, the council was going through an electoral review process, which saw the Local Government Boundary Commission publish proposals including a reduction to 45 Councillors. An Order to implement these recommendations was made on 30th March 2017 and will come into force at the local elections in 2018.

As part of our visit we were able to gain an insight into the process Bexley went through. Officers and councillors explained that the reasons for the review were the financial impact of a reduction in the number of councillors and the opportunity for councillors to work smarter and embrace new technology. The council anticipated that a saving of £200k to £400k would be achieved through a reduction in Councillors Allowances.

We found that, in general, residents agreed to the proposed changes in Bexley, although there was some fear about the impact on response times from councillors dealing with ward enquiries and casework. An important issue has been the local geography in terms of determining wards and ward sizes, in light of the Boundary Commission’s guidance on ratio of councillor to electorate. We have also gained a valuable insight into the level of resources required to manage and deliver an electoral review process. At times this has proven to be intense and time consuming, particularly from an officer perspective.

Turning to Kirklees it is helpful to remind ourselves of the current representative landscape in respect of ward size. Kirklees is a large and diverse authority – and the examples we looked at elsewhere are very different. This is summarised in the table and provides important context when considering the electoral review criteria.

How Kirklees compares now to councils that have already been through a review:

Council	Wards	Councillors	Electorate	Electors per councillor
Kirklees	23	69	312,812	4,533
Bexley	17	45	179,439	3,988
Knowsley	15	45	113,462	2,512

How many people do councillors in Kirklees represent?

Ward	Cllrs	Population	Electorate	Electors per cllr	Under 18s per ward*
Almondbury	3	18,348	13,874	4,625	3,755
Ashbrow	3	20,202	14,221	4,740	4,832
Batley East	3	19,396	13,078	4,359	5229
Batley West	3	19,917	13,549	4,516	5,239
Birstall & Birkenshaw	3	16,701	12,766	4,255	3516
Cleckheaton	3	17,476	13,315	4,438	3328
Colne Valley	3	17,655	13,584	4,528	3,632
Crosland Moor & Netherton	3	19,318	13,287	4,429	4,708
Dalton	3	17,599	12,828	4,276	3,910
Denby Dale	3	16,737	13,140	4,380	3,360
Dewsbury East	3	19,263	13,676	4,559	4,363
Dewsbury South	3	19,308	13,345	4,448	5,154
Dewsbury West	3	21,113	13,523	4,508	6,502
Golcar	3	18,433	13,856	4,619	3,853
Greenhead	3	20,597	13,893	4,631	4,449
Heckmondwike	3	17,540	13,577	4,526	4,174
Holme Valley North	3	16,944	13,104	4,368	3,565
Holme Valley South	3	19,170	14,859	4,953	4,143
Kirkburton	3	16,742	12,054	4,018	3,408
Lindley	3	19,836	14,827	4,942	4,097
Liversedge & Gomersal	3	19,941	14,145	4,715	4,321
Mirfield	3	19,852	15,689	5,230	3,846
Newsome	3	22,233	12,622	4,207	3,484
Totals	69	434,321	312,812		96,868

Source: 2017 electoral register & *2011 Census data

By way of example, if we had two councillors per ward in Kirklees (instead of the three that we have now), each councillor would represent 6,800 electors.

Although we have compared the number of electors per councillor, we should also recognise that councillors represent the children and young people in their wards.

In considering the number of councillors for Kirklees we have been strongly mindful of a number of issues:

- The pressing need to fully consider the price of democracy and not just its current and future value.
- A shrinking council and the implications that this has for the expectations placed on councillors in terms of their time and workloads.
- The size of our wards and the extent to which Kirklees circumstances are directly comparable to those in other councils.
- The uncertainty that currently exists with regards to regional devolution. As we present our report it is still unclear how issues of geography, governance, accountability and decision-making will be resolved. This will inevitably have implications for Kirklees and how our citizens are represented.

Having weighed these factors up in the balance, alongside the evidence we have received, we have not found a compelling case to reduce the number of councillors in Kirklees at the current time.

As a Commission we could not reach a consensus and therefore we recommend continuing with our current arrangements, with 69 councillors representing 23 wards (with three councillors representing each ward).

It is important that Kirklees Council sees this as a very live issue, and one that should be revisited when some of the “unknowns” become much clearer. This should be when changing councillor roles are better defined, when the future size and shape of the council is clear and when we have more clarity about our place and role in the region.

We feel our work provides important foundations for the number of councillors in Kirklees to be revisited in the future.

"Attending meetings is dead easy – if you can go, you can go. But that doesn't make you a good councillor. What makes you a good councillor is getting out there and actually doing something about it."

Cllr Nicola Turner

"We need a new culture of respect in this organisation. Respect can be the glue that holds us together and helps us to go forwards... Everybody does politics – it's not a dirty word... Political debate is about the exchange of ideas. It's a good thing."

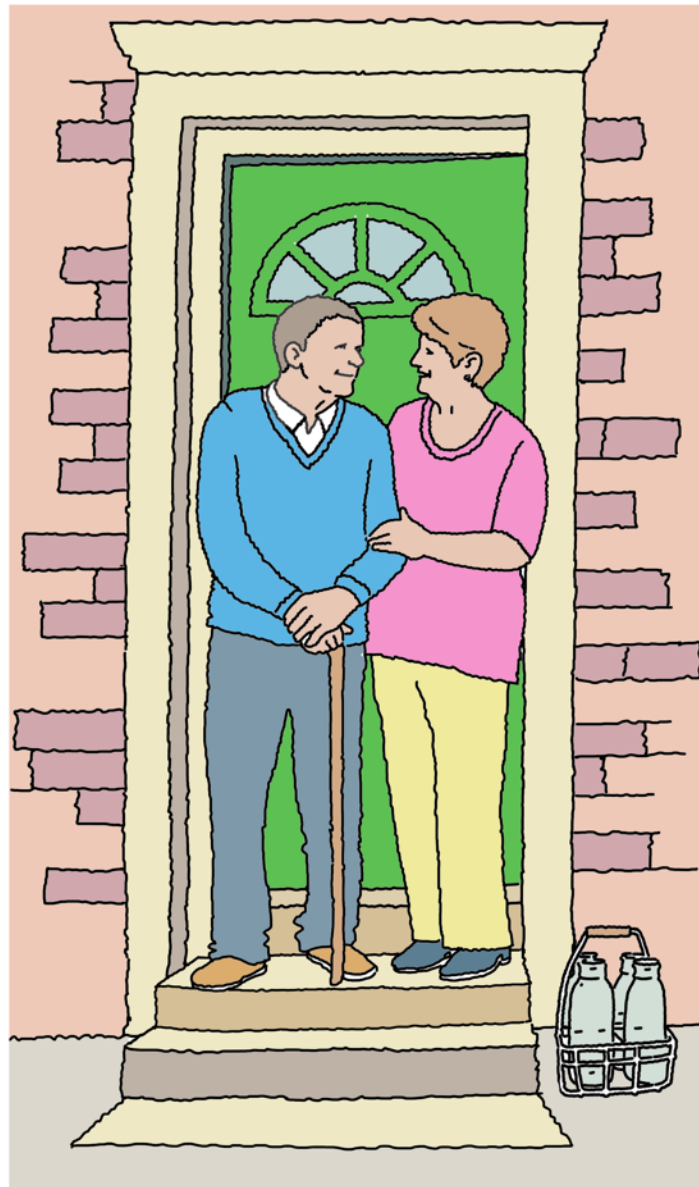
Cllr Robert Light

"My first job was sweeping floors at Aspley when I was 16. Being a Cabinet member was the best job I've ever done... I went dancing with ladies in Purwell... I witnessed crackhouse closures... It's a brilliant job and if people can see that they will want to do it."

Cllr Andrew Marchington

"I strongly believe that there's the will and the talent out there, if we can find a way to channel it. We shouldn't leave the next generation of councillors to chance."

Cllr Erin Hill



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”