Local democracy in a networked society

A strong local democracy grows
from the connections between people.

A networked society

Our networked society has much to offer local democracy. Digital technologies enable ordinary citizens to get their voices heard. They also present opportunities for us to work together, to create social good through collaboration. Civic society is wide and we want everyone to play an active part – great places develop from strong relationships, online and off-line.

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.

An informed local democracy

Our democratic information is quite traditional, in fixed formats and is often difficult to find. If we are serious about encouraging Active Citizenship, our democratic content must improve – it must be shareable, interesting and accessible, so that it is of value and relevance to our citizens.

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. Catherine Howe put it succinctly when she said "We are moving from an industrial society to a networked society". There are many opportunities for local democracy in our digitally networked society and this is a key part of our work.

Information from the Good Things Foundation shows that there were approximately 40 million people online and 12.6 million off-line in 2016. This means that the opportunities for connecting with people online are huge, yet around 23% of all adults in Britain don't have the basic digital skills they need to be able to benefit – and nearly 6 million people have never used the internet. What's more, it's those already at a disadvantage – through age, education, income, disability, or unemployment – who are most likely to be missing out.

We cannot separate this issue from local democracy. We need to see it as an opportunity to redesign what we do and how we do it. It's important that we do not see digital technologies as a panacea that alone can improve local democracy for everyone. This cannot be simply about digitising what we do already and we don't want to lose sight of the excellent things that happen off-line.

During our Public engagement events citizens told us they feel there's a danger that key parts of the population (the less affluent and older residents) who have less access to the internet may be further excluded in future. They said that electronic voting, on its own, is unlikely to get more people involved. If e-voting is introduced, our citizens are worried that it may reduce the sense of responsibility for the council to get the population engaged in elections.

The members of Kirklees Youth Council we spoke to in our group discussion told us that they are reluctant to share their views via social media. They said that facebook is good for talking to your friends, but not for expressing your political views, which can be twisted by others. They were fearful of being judged.

@kirkdemocracy

Our youth councillors expressed a clear preference for face-to-face discussions with ward councillors. However, they also recognised that it's important for elected representatives to use social media to reach people, especially young people who will find this method easier.

"Even though I use my phone 99.9% of the time, I would still rather talk to a councillor or an MP face-to-face."

Kirklees Youth Councillor

67% of our Kirklees residents e-panel survey participants emphasised the importance of regular face-to-face councillor surgeries.

It's important to stress that digital technologies are an area of relative strength for us. Kirklees Council has a national reputation for our work relating to digital democracy and a significant number of our councillors are already digitally active. We have a leading role in the national debate about digital technologies in local democracy, through initiatives such as Notwestminster, a network through which people share and create new ideas for "doing local democracy, with digital".

These are all strengths we can build from as we look at what the digital agenda means for our citizens, our councillors and our council in the context of local democracy.

Networked citizens

As part of our evidence gathering we received a very powerful presentation on Disrupting Democracy from FutureGov's Tony Browne, who vividly explained the difference between how the private and public citizen experiences and "does" democracy. Tony explained that privately citizens regularly and routinely get the opportunity to vote, rate, complain and comment on a variety of issues and experiences online. Compare this with the public citizen who occasionally gets a chance to vote (but not electronically), go to a council or political party meeting or respond to a council consultation.

The difference between the private and the public citizen is stark and this illustrates an important part of the "democratic deficit." We feel this is incredibly important context when looking at local democracy from a citizen perspective – a citizen whose experiences and expectations are richer and higher privately than publicly in terms of the options they're currently provided with.

This is not therefore a technology issue, but a cultural one. Catherine Howe explained that there is a growing expectancy for "real time change" which is equally relevant to the concept of "real time democracy". There is currently a lack of real time democracy.

Citizens involved in our Public engagement events were open to the opportunities digital technology presents for local democracy. They thought residents should be given as many ways to vote as possible, including online voting and potentially also electronic voting booths in supermarkets, libraries and schools. They felt that more use of digital technologies could make voting easier and could also create cost-effective ways for citizens to get more involved in decisions outside of elections, through online engagement. It's important to recognise that this isn't just about voter expectations and turnout, but about how our local democracy could be stronger in a digital society.

The powerful growth and potential of the online civic society is striking. Nick Booth from Podnosh explained to us the importance of understanding the ways in which citizens are now using the internet as a place to collaborate and network for civic good. Nick provided examples from Birmingham where hyper-local communities have developed in a way that has created a different relationship between the local citizen and the council. Neil McInroy gave us a brief overview of work that is being done in Manchester by citizens who are collaborating to develop the People's Plan in direct response to regional devolution and the Mayoral election. This is an example of civic-led engagement and activity in the context of an important issue for the citizens of Manchester.

Dr Paul Hepburn explained to us that technology now allows ordinary citizens to get their voices heard above those that usually dominate the political discourse. We also received evidence from Katherine Sladden and Kajal Odedra from Change.org who explained the ways in which online petitioning is increasingly being used as a tool to build movements and engage with organisations in a different way. We've heard how councils like Hackney and Oxford and the Office of the Mayor of London are using such platforms and approaches in a proactive way, to lead or be the advocate on important issues.

Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira shared work that she has carried out as part of the Digital Democracy Commission. Cristina explained that one of the major findings was the importance for organisations to "go where the people are". Citizens are organising and collaborating online which therefore provides opportunities for councillors and councils to tap into, and work with, established civic networks.

All of this encourages us that there is significant scope for our council and our councillors to harness the opportunities presented by a networked society and work collaboratively with citizens to find solutions to common problems and challenges. We are also aware of a number of issues that we need to consider:

Accessibility, connectivity and digital literacy – Not all citizens are online and digitally active, nor do they necessarily have the skills and confidence to operate in such spaces effectively. Some, including young people, don't always want to. The quality of connectivity can often depend on where citizens live. These are all issues that we need to bear in mind when thinking about how we redesign our local democracy in a digital age. It is important to blend online and off-line approaches in a way that makes a virtue of both.

Citizens or customers – As Catherine Howe pointed out, council website design is based around a customer persona. If we want people to behave like citizens it is important that we begin to treat them as citizens and look at how we develop online civic spaces to facilitate this happening. This has implications for both the council and its councillors.

Democratic content – Our democratic information is quite traditional, in fixed formats and is often difficult to find. It is important that we begin to make this content more interesting, accessible and sharable, so that it is of value and relevance to our citizens. Residents already receive a wide flow of information and if we are serious about encouraging active citizens our democratic content must improve. Citizens need bite-sized information that is focussed on what is most relevant for them. This is what the Notwestminster network have called "digestible democracy".

Networked councillors

Digital and social technologies have proved to be something of a double-edged sword for councillors. The potential benefits for councillors in being effective in a networked society are often counter-balanced by the lack of confidence to use the tools available and the challenges in being able to manage citizen expectations in a digital age. Councillors have raised issues of time and the demands of managing an increasing volume of case work in this context.

Whilst we acknowledge these issues we feel it is important to focus our efforts and recommendations on finding ways in which our councillors can operate as effectively as possible in this environment.

The benefits for them individually as representatives and collectively as members of the council are potentially significant.

The Conservative Group have suggested that councillors need the most up-to-date technology to support them in their role. The Labour Group have stated that using more technology could help improve the transparency of decision-making and assist all councillors to be more involved. It could also enable all councillors and the public to better understand local decisions.

75% of the councillors who responded to our Kirklees Councillors survey are in favour of using technology and social media. 63% agree that mobile technology in general would make the community leadership role of a councillor more effective. 61% believe mobile technology could make decision-making more open.

58% of our Kirklees residents e-panel felt that councillors should be using social media when interacting with residents, whilst 23% advocated the use of digital communication tools such as webchat and Skype.

As part of our evidence gathering we heard from Cllr David Harrington and Cllr Gillian Corr who provided first-hand experience of the tangible benefits they have seen as a result of using digital approaches in their ward councillor role. They provided examples of ways in which digital tools have assisted them in campaigning, communicating and engaging with residents on a range of different issues and challenges. In particular they emphasised the importance of joining up their online activities with the traditional activities that they undertake off-line in their wards.

Cllr Harrington and Cllr Corr were also honest in their recognition that digital approaches are by no means a panacea. It is important that councillors understand the digital footprint within their wards in order to understand where such approaches can best be used and targeted. It is for this reason we are recommending that all Kirklees councillors are provided with a live social media audit that provides details of current social media use, online networks and connectivity for the ward they represent.

Both Nick Booth and Dr Catherine Needham referred to the growing importance of humanising the councillor role, in a way that widens understanding, breaks down barriers and assists in attracting the next generation of councillors. We have also heard about the growing development of online civic spaces and the opportunity for councillors to engage in such spaces as part of their community leadership role.

We believe that social technologies provide an opportunity for councillors to connect effectively, although this requires a level of support, skills and confidence that does not fully exist at present. It is for this reason that we recommend Kirklees Council should make digital literacy a core expectation of the councillor role and support councillors to develop confidence in this area.

Digital literacy should be part of new councillor induction and ongoing councillor development. This is not just a councillor responsibility – officers must play an important part in both understanding the networked society and in supporting councillors to operate effectively as part of it.

"Social media is how people get information. As councillors, if we're not using that, we lose a way of connecting with people."

Cllr James Homewood

Whilst we feel that digital literacy skills are the priority area of focus, it is equally important that councillors have access to the IT hardware that enables them to play a positive role. We recommend that the cross-party working group who are currently looking at future IT provision for Kirklees councillors should consider our findings when determining what councillors will be provided with in the future.

A networked council

Whilst it is important to enhance the councillor role as part of a networked society, there are wider implications for the council as a whole. If we are serious about developing a different relationship with our citizens it is crucial that we are clear about the part that the council has to play in growing the civic conversation. We need to facilitate ongoing dialogue with citizens as part of our policy development and decision-making processes. This requires a different approach to the one we have now – one that focusses more on engagement and less on consultation.

In our evidence gathering, we have seen some approaches which have been developed in other countries where they have successfully blended online and off-line methods in a way that effectively engages citizens as part of an ongoing journey. This differs from the traditional approach to consultation that we have heard a great deal about during the course of our work.

Most of the feedback we've had about consultation has been negative and paints a picture of citizens feeling that they have been picked up and dropped. Citizens believe that often the decision has already been made anyway, and that the consultation is therefore "meaningless".

We feel there are opportunities to learn from the experiences of projects in other countries, particularly in terms of decisions relating to important issues or strategic priority setting for our towns and villages.
Elsewhere in this report we explore the challenges faced by the council and our citizens in the context of regional devolution.

An approach to priority setting that is based on citizen engagement, from the ground up, is a principle that we advocate. This should involve making a virtue of existing civic networks and focusing our efforts on growing networks, both online and off-line, where they do not currently exist. This is an effective way in which we can begin to realise the benefits of participatory and representative democracy, using digital as one of the tools for breaking down the barriers to participation.

We therefore recommend that, in partnership with key 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 development and decision-making. This should form part of the pilot we are recommending to explore innovative digital approaches to planning and priority setting in a particular area of Kirklees.

The way in which the Democracy Commission have conducted our work provides a useful template to consider when blending online and off-line engagement as part of developing the civic conversation. We have aimed to be open, to share content in a range of formats, to encourage interaction and dialogue and to take citizens on the journey with us. We have sought to develop relationships, not conduct transactions. Whilst we may not yet have the perfect civic space as described by Catherine Howe, the online presence we've already established provides an important starting point for future work. The Kirklees Council website is not suited for this purpose, although it is important to acknowledge that it has not been designed for this purpose.

Elsewhere in this report we have looked at our governance and decision-making processes. Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira has provided us with an insight into how our own national government are wrestling with the issue of making their democratic content and processes more understandable. As a result we have

been self-critical of our own democratic content and thought about the extent to which it is accessible, clear and informative.

If we are serious about engaging our citizens in local democracy we need to work harder to look at innovative ways of presenting and sharing our content.
This is consistent with the views we have received from our councillors and their political groups. We believe that digital technologies provide us with the opportunity to prototype different ways of working and this is reflected in our recommendations.
The issue of digital literacy for our citizens is not wholly in the gift of our council to address and resolve, but we want to make a number of points on this subject.
We have heard that accessibility to devices for our citizens is not the principal issue. The main considerations are digital literacy and the need to provide democratic content that is shareable, interesting and accessible.

As a council it is important for us that our citizens have the skills and confidence to be active citizens online as well as off-line. We cannot, and would not, seek to control or direct the whole issue of digital literacy, but it is important that we do as much as we can to provide advice and support.

This should include an expectation that digital literacy forms a core part of the skills set for all council officers, in the same way that we have recommended this for councillors. This will put the council in a much stronger position to play a confident part in growing a networked society across Kirklees and to be active in nurturing the civic conversation. In addition, we believe it is important that democratic digital literacy should form an important part of the civic education programme that we have advocated elsewhere in this report. This is also reflected in our recommendations.
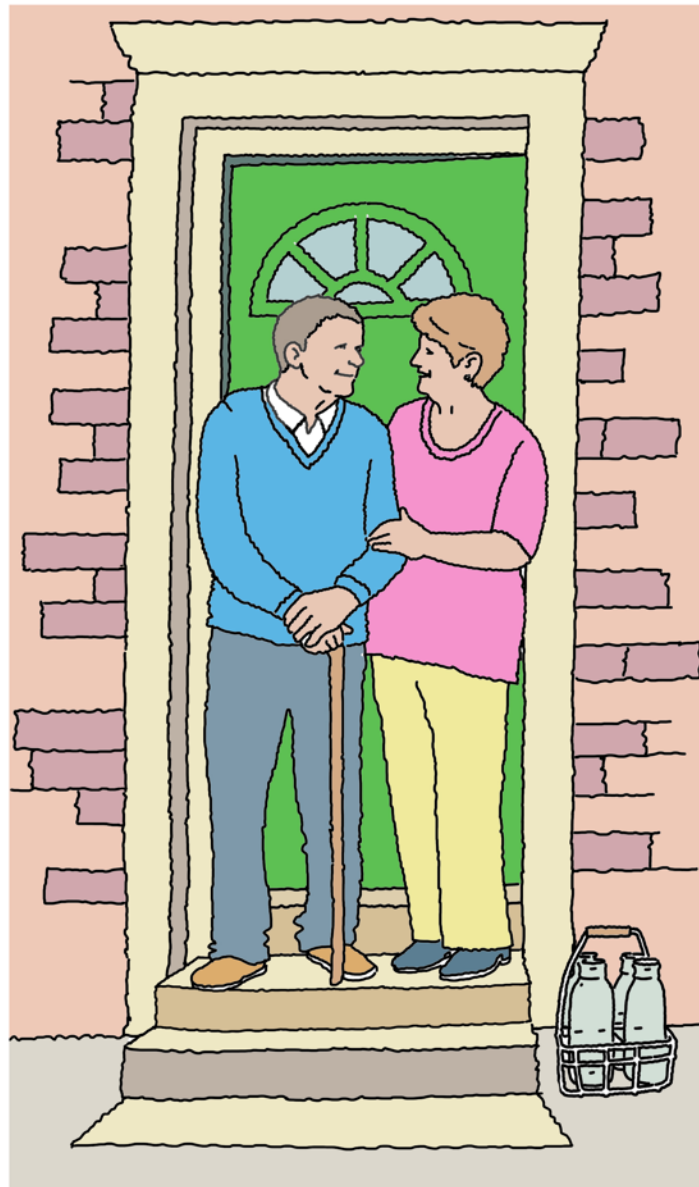
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