



Kirklees Democracy Commission Cross Party Working Group – Tuesday 26 June 2018

The Changing Councillor Role and How it is Supported

1. Background and Context

As part of its work the Commission undertook detailed work looking at the changing role of the councillor and what this means for the way in which councillors could / should be supported moving forward.

By way of a reminder Council have agreed the following outcomes in the context of the work covered by this paper:

- ***Councillors have the confidence, skills, support and capacity to lead the changing relationship between the council and local citizens. They are placed at the heart of the Council;***
- ***The councillor role is clear, widely communicated and universally understood;***
- ***Councillors are accessible and confident in their role in a digitally networked society;***

The Commission's work demonstrated that the councillor role is changing for a number of reasons:

- 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 is 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.

The Commission 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) provided the Commission with 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 the Commission 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](#) the Commission 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, the Commission received evidence about the importance of councillors being accountable between elections. This involves councillors demonstrating the impact they have 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 in some way.

In light of the above the Commission made the following recommendations:

- Kirklees Council should redesign support for councillors in a way that has a greater focus on their wards. This should enable councillors to provide better support for communities in developing effective facilities, programmes and social networks to improve people's quality of life. **WORKING GROUP PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION**
- Kirklees Council should use the evidence gathered by the Democracy Commission to re-define the role profile for Kirklees councillors, so that this reflects the changing and long term expectations and needs of the role. The revised profile should include core expectations, linked to ongoing performance. These should be used to demonstrate the impact that councillors are having, particularly in their wards; **WORKING GROUP PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION**
- Kirklees Council should make performance evidence about what councillors do available to the public, in an easy-to-digest format; **WORKING GROUP PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION**
- Kirklees Council should provide timely information and intelligence at a ward and neighbourhood level to support councillors and communities in working effectively. **LINKED RECOMMENDATION**

The remainder of this paper sets out a series of proposals as to how the above mentioned recommendations could be progressed.

That said it is important that the Working Group is aware that much work has already taken place (or is underway) that will inform the progress of the above mentioned recommendations. This includes:

- Information and insight already captured following dialogue with Democracy Service staff and the Voice of the Councillor events;
- Feedback from New Councillor Induction 2018;

- Emerging findings from the Putting Councillors at the Heart of the Organisation workshops which some members of the Working Group have been involved in.

The Theme Leads for this project will be Deborah Nicholson and Vina Randhawa.

2. Information

Since the last meeting of the Working Group officers have been undertaking work to develop ideas as to the ways in which this project could be progressed. In so doing officers propose that the project should seek to create products and approaches which will achieve the following objectives:

Supporting Councillors in their Wards:

To set out strategic and operational proposals for a redefined approach to supporting councillors in their Wards. This should include direct support from a Democracy Service perspective but more importantly the wider council

Suggested Approach:

- Undertake face to face Ward-based engagement with all councillors to better understand ward based support aspirations and needs; July – mid-August
- Undertake detailed engagement with key officers to understand the extent of the current offer and the scope for changing that offer having regard to the above; mid-August – mid-September
- Undertake parallel desk top and face to face research to understand the approaches adopted by other authorities in this context. This will principally focus on authorities in the region; July – August
- Present findings and recommendations to the Cross Party Working Group with a view to determining the way forward; September - October

NOTE: In delivering the above mentioned approach it is the intention to involve a wide cross-section of officers, particularly in the meetings with councillors. This is in direct response to the themes coming out of the councillor workshops where there is an explicit wish that councillors have the opportunity to meet and work with more officers.

The Councillor Role and the Impact They Have:

To produce a revised role profile for a Kirklees councillor;

To develop and communicate performance information that demonstrates to citizens the impact a councillor is having.

Suggested Approach:

- A cross party group of councillors (this could be an existing group) undertakes a time limited piece of work which incorporates the following phases:
 - Consider relevant evidence gathered by the Democracy Commission and use as a basis for informing the next stage of work (below); July

- Using a workshop-style approach develop a draft role profile for a Kirklees Ward Councillor and develop draft proposals of the ways in which councillor impact can be captured and shared with Kirklees citizens; August - September
- Report back findings and recommendations to the Cross Party Working Group who will thereafter agree the next steps. September - October

3. Recommendation

The Cross Party Working Group is asked to:

- Consider (and sign off?) the objectives and proposed approach for undertaking this project as set out at section 2 of this paper. **Are they the right ones and are you happy with how the work will be progressed?** In particular the Working Group is asked to comment on the pace and sequencing of the work;
- Identify and agree a member from the Working Group to take strategic lead responsibility for this area of work.

Report produced by:

Deborah Nicholson, Vina Randhawa and Carl Whistlecraft in consultation with the wider Programme Team.