

Draft letter for:

Rt Hon David Lidington CBE MP, Cabinet Office – 29 August 2018.

An open letter from the Kirklees Democracy Commission Cross-Party Working Group

The Kirklees Democracy Commission have been working with our citizens and partner organisations to investigate what a strong and healthy local democracy should look like – for the next generation, and beyond. We have gathered ideas for practical ways that we can help our local democracy to flourish, which we are now putting into action. We would like to invite you to be part of this work.

The Democracy Commission published our landmark report, "[Growing a stronger local democracy, from the ground up](#)" on 30th June 2017. The report is based on evidence gathered from over 1,000 participants and includes 48 recommendations for strengthening our local democracy.

The majority of the Democracy Commission's recommendations are for Kirklees Council to respond to. Our Full Council agreed to progress the work, and our Cross-Party [Working Group](#) are now overseeing the practical activities, along with a wider programme team. Many projects and activities are already well under way.

Some of the Democracy Commission's recommendations are for other organisations to respond to. At our [meeting on 18 July 2018](#), we agreed to write to these organisations, to highlight the Commission's recommendations for other organisations and to openly ask for a response.

It's important that our activities continue to be open to our citizens, so meetings of our group are webcast live and shared on twitter, and we are publishing this letter on our website and will share it via our social media and communications networks.

The Kirklees Democracy Commission recommended that:

"National government should amend legislation to introduce the compulsory registration of young people at the age of 16."

"National government should continue to explore all options (for example, online voting, early or weekend voting and registration on polling day) to increase voter registration, accessibility and turnout."

"National government should consider the importance of local democracy when it is planning and legislating in respect of the timing and sequencing of elections. Local elections are important events and should be recognised as such. We do not wish to see a further dilution of local democracy."

These recommendations were based on [evidence gathered by the Democracy Commission](#), Some of the key evidence we considered is:

Electoral registration:

- We recognise that registration is the first step on the journey to voting. It's important for us to do as much as we can to support our young citizens in making that step as early as possible. Our own electoral outreach and engagement activities have been important for supporting young citizens (and those from under-represented groups) with registering to vote.
- We heard evidence from Kenny Imafidon of Bite the Ballot, who advocated automatic registration for 16 and 17 year olds, as a way of reducing barriers to democratic participation. He also recommended having a single register, so that citizens can easily check online whether they are registered or not.
- John Turner, Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators, and Andrew Scallan and Tom Hawthorn from the Electoral Commission shared advice and suggestions for improving voter registration. We heard about the feasibility and benefits of developing a national database and single register, and the option of linking registration to issuing National Insurance numbers to 16 year olds.

Voter engagement:

- Our citizens told us that voting-related information should be available through a wide variety of channels, and that people should be given the opportunity to vote in as many ways as possible, including online.
- Our research showed that the mechanics of voting, and the extent to which the current approach fits in with the diverse and busy lives that citizens lead, has an impact on whether people feel motivated to vote.
- We found a good level of support for online voting (50% in our residents' survey, 63% in our staff survey, 39% in our councillors' survey, and unanimous support from our University of Huddersfield focus group). However, we also heard a strong consensus that the technology is not yet sophisticated enough to address real or perceived issues of security, fraud and challenge.
- The Electoral Commission shared the findings of their previous voting pilots with us, including online and electronic voting, and early or weekend voting. This helped us to understand the challenges and benefits that each of these options presents in terms of accessibility, security, voter confidence, cost, ease of administration and practical application. Although none of these approaches is a clear panacea, our overall conclusion is that government should continue to explore all of these options, with the aim of increasing voter registration, accessibility and turnout.

The timing of elections:

- Our research showed that the profile and importance given to local government elections when compared to national elections has an impact on whether people feel motivated to vote.
- We have observed an increase in different electoral episodes and a growing tendency to combine those episodes on the same day. Does this create more opportunities for citizens to vote or does it result in confusion and therefore dilute the importance and profile of local elections? Does this create increasing challenges for the administration of elections or does it assist councils in bearing the cost of those elections as a result of combining different elections? We feel these issues warrant careful consideration.

What action we'd like you to take

We are keen to work with other organisations to help strengthen our local democracy, so we'd like to invite you to:

- Share your response to the Democracy Commission's recommendations. We would like your response to be open to our citizens, so please also let us know if you're happy for us to share your response online via our digital and social media communications.
- Tell us about any work already happening that might contribute to achieving these recommendations. This could be something you are doing, or examples from elsewhere that you are looking at.
- Let us know whether you'd like to work with us, so that jointly we can respond to the recommendations.

Please respond to:

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Carl Whistlecraft, Head of Democracy, Kirklees Council

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

The Kirklees Democracy Commission Cross-Party Working Group