

Draft letter for:

Kit Malthouse MP, Minister of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and Lord Porter of Spalding, CBE, LGA Chairman – 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:

"The Local Government Association (LGA) should develop a core national framework for councillors' allowances, which councils can use now as a basis for determining the rates of allowances locally."

"National government should revisit the legislation relating to councillors allowances, in light of the increased expectations now placed on the role and the tensions associated with the current approach to determining allowances."

"National government, in the context of corporate social responsibility, should address the real challenges faced by councillors who are employed."

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

The changing councillor role:

As part of our work 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.

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. We found that 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.

When set against these issues, 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.

Supporting and enabling councillors:

Kirklees Council has a 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.

Our research showed that 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.

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. 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.

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 that we believe should be considered include:

- 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.

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 recommendation. 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:

carl.whistlecraft@kirklees.gov.uk

Carl Whistlecraft, Head of Democracy, Kirklees Council

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

The Kirklees Democracy Commission Cross-Party Working Group