



## **Kirklees Democracy Commission Cross Party Working Group**

### **29 August 2018**

**Present:** Cllr Cathy Scott  
Cllr David Sheard  
Cllr Rob Walker  
Cllr Robert Light  
Cllr Andrew Cooper

**In Attendance:** Carl Whistlecraft – Head of Democracy Service  
Kate McNicholas – Strategy and Policy Service Manager  
Phil Longworth – Health Policy Officer  
David Bundy – Policy Officer  
Diane Sims – Senior Communications Officer  
Spencer Wilson – Group Support & Development Officer  
Penny Bunker – Governance & Democratic Engagement Manager

**Apologies:** Cllr John Taylor  
Cllr John Lawson

#### **1. Chair of Working Group**

It was agreed that Councillor Scott would chair the meeting.

#### **2. Notes of Last Meeting**

The notes of the meeting held on 18 July 2018 were agreed as a correct record.

In respect of the agreed action to share details of the evidence considered by the Democracy Commission with regards to Parish and Town Councils, Carl Whistlecraft advised that this item would be included on the agenda for the October meeting of the Working Group. The information regarding elections had been circulated to the Working Group Members.

#### **3. Putting the Council at the Heart of the Organisation**

Carl Whistlecraft reported back on discussions at Executive Team on the findings of the officer and councillor workshops. The Executive Team supported the importance of giving permission for officers to routinely liaise

and interact with Councillors. It was felt this needed to be done in a managed and supported way in order that officers could be confident and competent to work effectively with Councillors. Building on this it was considered important to ensure effective developmental support was put in place for officers in the context of the Council's People's Strategy.

It was noted that the Executive Team fully supported all the priority actions that were identified and in order to maintain momentum it was considered important that the priority actions were included as part of the corporate campaign to facilitate the desired culture for change. Attached at appendix 2 of the submitted report was a campaign proposal for consideration by the working group.

In considering the information it was felt important that storytelling content was included within promotional information. It was acknowledged that there was a wider piece of work concerning democratic content and accessible meetings that would be brought forward to a future meeting of the working group.

Councillor Walker, as a relatively new councillor, indicated that the language of the Council could be a barrier to citizen's understanding. Even at engagement events there had been issues about officers using jargon and those attending being unable to fully engage in the process due to the language barriers.

Councillor Light emphasised that the Council needed to get better at engaging at an earlier point and making processes more open so the public could see proposals as they developed. It was acknowledged that all organisations have a level of jargon and approach that is not fully accessible to the public.

Councillor Cathy Scott welcomed the suggested information and support for councillors that included bite size /right size information about electoral wards available online and through direct contact.

The working group continued to discuss external promotion of the role of councillors and how in particular the next generation of councillors could be identified. It was suggested that there was a need to be more proactive in communicating the positive aspects of being a councillor. It was also agreed that storytelling was also important in positive promotion of the role.

**Agreed:**

That the working group supports the proposals set out in the paper and agrees that the actions outlined be progressed, with further detail being submitted to the working group as part of future progress reports.

#### **4. Progressing Priority Recommendations**

##### **A. Networked Councillors**

Diane Sims provided a progress report on the strand of work looking at Networked Councillors – Digital Skills, Confidence and Content for Civic Good. The submitted paper set out 4 proposals to take forward the recommendations of the Democracy Commission, these were:

### ***Understanding what we have and what we need***

It was proposed that the first step would be to explore the current status of local networks, councillors' current use of digital technologies, and attitudes towards developing skills, confidence and content.

Officers would use a combination of gathering insights from all councillors, and conducting some more in-depth interviews with councillors who have different levels of engagement with digital technologies. An audit of current activity will be produced, including a series of anonymised case studies to illustrate the different stages at which councillors what would help to progress.

Alongside this work would be an audit of current democratic management content including web, social media, and third party systems. This would provide a starting point for more in-depth discussions with citizens about setting new standards and developing the Council's approach.

### ***Working with citizens to develop our democratic content***

It was proposed to bring together a group of citizens interested in working with the working group to improve democratic content. It was suggested that the Council involve citizens who have different levels of understanding and engagement, actively recruiting to avoid using the 'usual suspects'. The panel would only meet when there was a specific task or activity to complete.

It was also proposed to ask for feedback via online channels on a regular basis, to act as a check and balance to the work on democratic content. It was hoped that once the citizens group was established it would become a useful source of insight for the wider democracy commission work programme.

### ***Piloting different ways of learning and collaborating***

The proposal involved testing different ways of learning digital skills, which would be a benefit for both councillors and citizens. Activities would be outcome focused and involve informal learning, peer to peer learning and networking where possible. A number of practical pilots would be developed in response to identifying the needs.

After the pilot each activity would be evaluated with the aim of identifying successful activities that could form part of a menu of learning options for Councillors.

### ***Creating new tools and approaches***

It was proposed that in learning from initial research and ongoing work with citizens and pilots, there would be an opportunity to develop useful tools and approaches. Products would include contents guidelines, a live social media audit, and learning options for councillors.

The working group discussed the proposals and recognised the fast changing nature of digital technology and how difficult it was to remain up to date rather than 'falling behind the curve'. It was suggested that the benchmark should be that the Council communications were as effective as how Kirklees citizens communicated themselves. Whichever approach was taken needed to be done well and different groups required messages in different accessible formats.

It was felt important to acknowledge that councillors work in many different ways and councillors who are not actively using digital communication should not feel penalised. It was suggested that it might be helpful to understand the communication metrics at a local level.

It was further suggested that consideration should be given to the skills councillors would need to develop as part of councillor induction and councillor development activity. Learning activities should be made as practical as possible.

**Agreed:**

- (1) That the objectives and proposed approach for undertaking the project, in particular the key activities set out in suggested approach, be agreed.
- (2) That Councillor Andrew Cooper and Councillor Rob Walker be the strategic leads for the working group in this area of work.

**B. Opening up our meetings**

The Working Group continued to look at the work stream on opening up our meetings which aimed to:

- Make our meetings more open and easier to understand for our citizens
- Develop new approaches to creating and sharing content
- Consider and measure the impact of the work

The types of content being developed would include:

- Helping citizens to understand meetings, how things work, what's happening and how to get involved
- Sharing the experience of councillors, citizens and staff
- Explaining the issues that the Council is making decisions on

The working group noted that officers had begun to look at the format of council meetings from a citizen perspective. Officers had begun with a very broad video introduction to Council, describing the format of the agenda, who was in the room and ways of participating in the meeting. The video was

shared via social media channels in the week of 11 July 2018 Full Council meeting, and had a good level of response. The statistics indicated 652 views on the Twitter for @KirkDemocracy and in total across Twitter, Facebook and YouTube there were 1698 views.

The report explained how officers have mapped ideas for future content about Council meetings and had begun to look at other meetings such as Cabinet and Scrutiny. It was suggested that over time a collection of materials would be available to share as appropriate. The materials would help citizens to understand how local decision making works and encourage participation. The report continued to set out content ideas which included bite size Council webpage information, an introduction to Scrutiny explanatory video, working with Scrutiny video, and advice for councillors about webcasting.

In considering the ongoing approach to opening up meetings, it was noted that understanding should not just be about citizens but also about officers in the Council.

Councillor Light suggested that sometimes the rigid process at meetings, such as starting with constitutional items rather than the items of public interest, was frustrating to the public. It was agreed that meeting Chairs should be empowered, with training where appropriate, to manage meetings in a way that is best suited appropriate to their audience.

**Agreed:**

That the ongoing work concerning opening up our meetings be supported.

**C. Regional Devolution – Supporting Councillors and Citizens**

Kate McNicholas presented a paper setting out an approach in respect of the recommendations on regional devolution and supporting councillors.

The report indicated that the support for senior councillors would include monthly discussion at Leadership Management Team, quarterly discussion at the Cross Party Regional Engagement Group and working briefings for key meetings. This offer would include councillors who represent Kirklees on various regional bodies, including those not on the Cabinet.

It was noted that in respect of the information flow to all councillors, West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) had rolled out a district specific newsletter, on a monthly basis, to detail programmes of activity. There had been a full Council discussion on devolution, and an Overview and Scrutiny discussion was scheduled for January 2019. In addition briefings had been offered to political groups.

The information flow to citizens was supported by the council's communications team and WYCA, with weekly communications planning

meetings and a shared programme of messaging. A communication plan for the devolution agenda was under development.

The Working Group noted the range of activity and that the intention was to test approaches to see if they were achieving the desired outcomes.

Kate continued to outline proposed future actions and work that was already underway or completed.

There followed a discussion on how all councillors might play a part in the direction of the Combined Authority, rather than the few councillors who sat on Committees and Boards. It was suggested that the sign off of the business plan could be something that was opened up all Councillors, perhaps in the form of an annual meeting.

**Agreed:**

- (1) That the objectives and proposed approach concerning regional devolution, supporting councillors and citizens be welcomed and supported.
- (2) That the working group's suggestion for an event, open to all councillors, to sign off the West Yorkshire Combined Authority business plan be progressed.

## **5. Progressing other recommendations**

The working group received an update on specific recommendations which referred to informing or influencing external bodies.

The working group considered a draft letter to Rt Hon David Lidington CBE, MP, on recommendations relating to electoral registration, voter engagement and the timing of elections. The letter invited the Minister to share his response to the democracy commission's recommendations and advise on work already happening which might contribute to them. The letter also asked whether the Minister would like to work with Kirklees to jointly respond to the recommendations.

The working group also considered a draft letter to Kit Malthouse MP and Lord Porter of Spalding CBE, LGA Chairman, concerning recommendations on a national framework for Councillors allowances.

**Agreed:**

The working group supported the content of the draft letters for submission to the appropriate Ministers/Chair of LGA.

## **6. Annual Local Democracy Summit**

The working group discussed how it wished it to progress the commitment of the democracy commission to check and celebrate success on progressing recommendations through an annual local democracy summit.

It was noted that in democracy week in October there may be an opportunity to update on the work of the democracy commission, however many recommendations were in the progress of being implemented rather than at a point of completion. The working group concluded that it was appropriate that there was some communication and update through an interim event, despite the work not being at the point where a full summit was appropriate.

**Agreed:**

That an interim event to update on the progress made in implementing the recommendations of the democracy commission be considered to ensure that there is some communication on the anniversary of the democracy commission findings report launch.

**7. Date of next meeting**

The working group noted that the next meeting would take place on Wednesday 24 October 2018 from 10.00am until 11.30am in the Leadership Conference Room, Civic Centre 3, Huddersfield.