



Kirklees Democracy Commission Cross Party Working Group

Wednesday 28 November 2018

Democratic Content and Citizen Awareness

1. Background

The work of the Kirklees Democracy Commission has shown that there are many factors to consider if we are to improve the citizen experience of decision-making. Some of these relate to our democratic content, the language we use and the extent to which we make full use of the technologies that are available to us.

In the Kirklees Councillors survey 80% of those who responded felt that improving communication about decisions and their implications would encourage more direct public and community involvement in decision-making. Kirklees Youth Council feel that the jargon used in decision-making can exclude young people from the process. The Labour Group and Liberal Democrat Group feel that we can make more use of digital technology to improve the ways in which we present and share our democratic content.

In our Kirklees Council staff survey only 10% of those who responded feel that they fully understand the council's decision-making process. At our public engagement events citizens said they wanted more understandable information and to be more involved in decision-making. They put forward ideas such as setting quality indicators for local-decision-making, showing where the public can make a greater contribution. Participants were also keen for us to provide more civic education and awareness. They said it would be a positive step for us to offer training to adults and young people about their rights and responsibilities in society, and to inform people about how they can get involved in local decision-making.

The Commission considered how we present and communicate our local democratic content. It was concluded that it is not just about reports and minutes of meetings, although this is an important area. It is about the explanations we provide, the media we employ, the language we use and the ways in which we share. It is about being

better at telling the local democratic story in a way that is engaging and human – and using technology to enable us to do it better and in real time.

It is important for us to change the public meeting narrative in Kirklees. We need to make a positive statement that says “we’re open for business and you’re welcome”. Meetings provide an ideal opportunity for the council and councillors to engage, share and foster a wider understanding of how our local democracy works. Meetings should not be something that is hard to follow or engage with. They should be something that contributes to wider civic engagement and involvement, particularly for our young citizens.

The Commission has sought to address all these issues through its recommendations (see below), whilst at the same time recognising the need for the council to discharge its statutory responsibilities in terms of publicly accountable decision-making.

Democracy Commission Recommendation:

“Kirklees Council should develop online and offline interpretive information for the public relating to all out public meetings. Such information can be used at meetings but can also be part of wider civic awareness about the Council and our democratic processes”

Linked areas of work:

- Develop a set of democratic standards as a basis for all content that we produce and publish as part of decision making. Clear language to make sure our content is based on citizen’s needs
- Work with political group leaders to develop video narratives in advance of significant issues being discussed and decided and similar narratives after the decision has been made.
- Explore the additional capabilities of our webcasting technology , beyond purely broadcasting

Proposed Project Areas:

- To develop a set of democratic content standards based on citizens needs
- To pilot the use of video narratives in advance of a significant issue being discussed and decided, followed by similar narratives once a decision has been
- To prototype online and off-line interpretative information for the public relating to one of our public meetings. Thereafter the learning to be used as a basis for wider roll out.
- To fully explore and implement the full capacity of webcasting technology. This should be on a pilot basis.

2. Information : Current work

Aspects of this piece of work cut across other mandate areas specifically the work stream looking at the Networked Councillors strand of work.

A report entitled Opening up our Meetings was considered by the working group on 29th August and set out an approach to testing ideas out for opening up our democratic processes to citizens and a bitesize approach to breaking information down. Work has included a video on “What happens at Full Council” which was shared through various social media channels in the week before the Council meeting on 11 July and had a total of 1,698 views.

The content ideas included:

- Five ways to participate in Council Include webcast tips, attending, deputations, questions, petitions.
- Bitesize Council web page with a video explainer for each kind of agenda item.
- An introduction to Scrutiny*. An explanatory video, ideally involving Scrutiny chairs.
- Working with Scrutiny* Video featuring officers and councillors.
- Advice for councillors about webcasting Useful tips, including making sure you are heard clearly by citizens.
- Advice for everyone about webcasting step by step advice, including how to find a meeting, look at the archive, jump to a specific agenda item, use timestamps, download and share.

* This work is ongoing with the current focus and the quick introduction to Scrutiny video will be published imminently followed by video discussion with Scrutiny Lead Members.

As the different strands of the meeting based work progress, there will be ongoing dialogue to ensure a consistent and integrated approach in terms of what is being delivered.

3. Taking project areas forward:

This section of the report proposes how other aspects of the original mandate relating to accessible decision making might be taken forward. This includes the following:

- Explanatory information that supports citizens trying to engage in the decision making process,
- Demystifying the language and process of decision making
- Underpinning all of the above in how we use both on line and off-line information to open up decision making and make processes more citizen friendly.

2(a)

In order to progress this work it is recommended that we initially pilot approaches to test what works, focussing on a specific area of the decision making process. In looking to identify an appropriate area, officers reviewed the feedback from recent councillor/officer workshops. Scrutiny emerged as an area highlighted by both councillors and officers as needing clarification both internally and externally. The headline findings of discussions with senior officers and councillors highlighted;

- A need to address the attitudes and perceptions of Scrutiny for both officers and councillors.
- The need to have early and effective officer engagement with Scrutiny. Clarifying expectations and standards. (Tools / information for demystifying scrutiny and being clear about “what good looks like”).
- The need to improve the quality and timeliness of information. Address any systems issues, but also identify and address any other reasons that might be acting as a barrier to good practice.

In previous discussions on the findings of the workshops, the Democracy Commission Working Group has also highlighted the need not to ensure that the comments regarding Scrutiny are not lost given the priority placed on it by councillors and officers.

The following broad areas of work are put forward as a progression of the interpretive information work.

A. To prototype online and off-line interpretative information for the public relating to one of our public meetings. Thereafter the learning to be used as a basis for wider roll out.

In line with previous discussions in the working group, it is suggested that an initial piece of work is to produce cross cutting introductory online and offline information to support citizens understand processes as they currently exist and how they can get involved. This work would include:

- Undertaking benchmarking to identify public and private sectors good practice and innovative approaches to citizen information. Drawing on network sources such as the LGA , Association of Democratic Support Officers (ADSO) and APSE to sign post areas of good practice.
- Working with the citizen’s group (to be recruited as part of the Networked councillors work), young people, the University and other appropriate groups, to understand, gather ideas and insight about what is required and the appropriate language / approach to open up our decision making processes.
- Draft initial product proposals and allow for feedback before piloting. This may be a number of pilots depending on what sort of products / media is used. Seek further citizen group feedback.
- Seek the views of the Democracy Commission Working Group to inform the final products prior to sign off and implementation

- Initial on line and offline information will be piloted which may involve a number of pilots depending on what sort of products / media is used. A final evaluation will be produced to inform the final redesign in line with the redefined democratic content standards.

B Following the initial “this is now” piece of work , continue to look at information relating to one public meeting (proposal is a Scrutiny meeting) and look in more depth at the process, approach and information supporting that meeting including identifying what might be enhanced. This piece of work will cut across all the areas within the mandate:

- Analysis of benchmarking and research work on other organisation approaches.
- A range of engagement activity - to include citizens group to gauge understanding and what is needed to make our approach and content more citizen friendly and accessible.
- The development and piloting of possible meeting approaches and content, considering activity and information before, during and after the meeting including;
 - the written information format and accessibility ,
 - the integration of technology to promote and inform,
 - the conduct of the meeting and the “what happens next”.
- The development of external and internal information using a range of media (video narratives, webcasting with the public audience in mind etc.)
- Analysis of the pilot will be used to inform the development of democratic content standards and provide information to help to understand Scrutiny.

4. Recommendation

The Cross Party Working Group is asked to:

- (1) Consider and agree the proposals set out in section 3 of the report as the next steps in online and off-line interpretative information for the public relating to one of our public meetings.
- (2) Agree the pilot area of focus, the suggestion being Scrutiny
- (3) Agree to receive the outcomes of the phases of work once completed
- (4) Agree representative(s) of the working group to act as strategic lead(s) for the work.

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