



Kirklees Democracy Commission Cross Party Working Group – 7 August 2019

Kirklees Question Time Events

Purpose of Report

This report attempts to evaluate the quarterly Kirklees Question Time events that have been held since the Democracy Commission report was produced in June 2017. It also as puts forward suggestions and recommendations for continuation and improvement of these events going forward.

Background

The Kirklees Democracy Commission report recommendations include:

“Kirklees Council should organise quarterly question time events involving all group leaders. The content and agenda for these events will be set by the citizens of Kirklees. The events will be broadcast and allow the facility for questions to be taken online as well as in person”.

The aim was that an ongoing, rolling programme of events, would contribute towards the Council having “a much stronger focus on genuine dialogue and engagement as part of our changing relationship with citizens and communities across Kirklees”.

The Question Time events would be part of the “menu of options” for citizens on how they can get involved. They would help contribute to a “change in meetings culture”. They would be open to all, accessible, well organised and informative.

Citizens would get to know that they have a regular opportunity to raise key issues with their politicians, and in an arena that would enable and support meaningful dialogue and debate.

They would provide an additional opportunity for citizens to hold the Council to account on key decisions and policies, as well as an additional opportunity for politicians to set out rationales behind those decisions and policies.

They could provide an additional means for the Council to become aware of key and recurring concerns of citizens; through the nature and content of the questions asked, and the ensuing debate held.

Key Questions

- Have the events to date achieved any or all of these objectives?
- Are these the correct objectives?
- How will success be measured going forwards?
- Have the events to date reflected the core principles from the Commission, such as adopting a citizen-led approach?
- How can they be refined and improved?

Review of Events and Outcomes to Date

Since the Democracy Commission report was published in June 2017 there have been three Kirklees Question Time (KQT) events and two Budget information events. It was intended that each of the five dates would be for the quarterly KQT events, but then the Leader and Director of Finance asked that the January dates be used to provide an opportunity for citizens to raise questions specifically about the Budget.

The KQT events took place on; 12th October 2017 in the Oastler Building in Huddersfield as part of a week long programme of events to mark Local Democracy Week, then on 16th July 2018 in Dewsbury Town Hall, and on 23rd October 2018 in Holmfirth Civic Hall.

The two Budget information events took place on 25th January 2018 and then on 22nd January 2019; both in the Council Chamber, Huddersfield Town Hall.

104 people attended the Oastler building Question Time event, and 160 viewed the webcast. 38 people attended the QT event in Dewsbury Town Hall and 159 watched the webcast. 24 people attended the QT event in Holmfirth Civic Hall and 52 watched the webcast. This is a total of 537 engaged; 166 attending and 371 watching the webcast.

42 people attended the January 2018 Budget event, plus 125 viewed the webcast. 24 people attended the January 2019 Budget event, and 52 watched the webcast. This is a total of 243 engaged; 66 attending and 177 watching the webcast.

780 people have therefore engaged overall, across the five events.

Feedback to Date

Everyone who signed up for an event in Local Democracy Week 2017 was asked to provide feedback on how important they felt it would be to include certain key elements in future Question Time events. 63 % of respondees felt it "very Important" that party leaders and deputy leaders be included on the panel, and 31% felt it quite important.

67% however felt it very important to have a range of different councillors, and 31% felt that quite important.

57% felt it very important to include Cabinet members on the panel, and 36 % quite important.

43 % felt it very important to include Youth Councillors on the panel, and 31% thought this quite important.

50% considered it very important that the events be held at different venues across Kirklees, and 39% felt this quite important.

We also received a raft of comments and suggestions about the Question Time events, including:

“This type of event should be held on a frequent basis.”

“Party leaders/Councillors/Cabinet members need to be prominent in all this so that people are aware who they are and what they stand for. People relate more to people when they can put a face to a name.”

“There were a large number of questions submitted but never discussed – yet were obviously important to the person asking. An answer (including different opinions from different councillors) should be provided to all questions that are submitted but not dealt with on the day. These could be published after the event.”

“Are the questions raised and points made assessed at all and taken any account of in policy and decision making”?

“Improve the sound system in the venue and on the webcast. It is really difficult to hear what is being said properly and some panel members are clearer than others”.

There were also calls for some gender balance on the panel as well as for representatives from the community and voluntary sector; sports and arts organisations or health. Indeed, at all but the Holmfirth event, the panel has been male only (given all our leaders are male).

This feedback has been taken into consideration in relation to each the key aspects of the events; the design, planning, delivery and ongoing evaluation. Each aspect is outlined below as regards what has happened to date; success or otherwise of this approach, together with a suggested approach going forward.

Key Aspects of Kirklees Question Time Events:

a) Overall Format and Content of Event:

The aim to date has been to mimic as far as practicable the BBC Question Time format, in terms of overall format and time allowed for questions, opportunity for response across the panel, plus allowing for audience interaction, participation and voting/opinion gathering. This is a format that most television viewers are familiar with (and therefore local citizens), and the rationale is that it is a tried and tested, engaging and entertaining format, that ‘usually’ enables a range of views to be heard and debated by and between the panel and the audience. The agenda is audience (or citizen) led in that the audience submit the questions, and the programme

editorial team selects which questions to put to the panel. With 90 minutes per KQT event, this allows time for 7 to 8 questions to be asked per event. For the July'18 and October'18 events, the facilitator grouped questions with common themes or links, and so enabled many more questions to be considered in the time available.

Suggested Approach:

Feedback has been that the overarching format works and it is suggested should therefore be retained for the forthcoming year, (or round of quarterly KQT events). It is a format citizens are familiar with, and can be explained relatively easily to participants both attending the event, and to those viewing via webcast. The specifics of the format could and would be one of the subjects for feedback and suggestions from audience, panel and facilitator.

b) Panel:

For each of the events to date, all the Group leaders have been invited to form the panel. This reflects the wording of the Democracy Commission recommendation, that all the group leaders be invited to form the panel. This has not provided either the gender mix, or variation in group representation to include Cabinet members and /or back bench councillors (both requested via feedback). It will not allow for representation from the community or voluntary sector or from key bodies that might have expertise and authority on certain key or current topics, (such as would be needed if a 'themed' event were to be piloted).

The DC Cross Party Working Group meeting in June agreed that the panel could be diversified, and Hilary Thompson from Third Sector Leaders/Age UK was then invited to take part in the Holmfirth event. All five Group leaders agreed to take part in Holmfirth, and so there was a panel of 6. Despite being briefed that not all panel members would get a chance to answer all questions, each Leader asked to answer each question. This resulted in the panel answers being too long and even repetitive, and time and opportunity for audience participation virtually nil.

Suggested Approach:

That a panel of 6 is too large, and that a panel of five people be the optimum/maximum. There would need to be agreement /acceptance that not all Groups would be represented at all events.

In the course of the next year, (or for each one of the next four quarterly events), different panel make- ups be tried out. This could include:

- ***A themed event, at which the relevant Cabinet Member would be included on the panel and /or relevant subject spokespeople from the other political Groups. There might also be a representative such as the CEO of the relevant public organisation such as the police or Clinical Commissioning Group (dependent upon the theme chosen).***

- ***A panel made up of a maximum of three Groups, plus two members taken from, one each, of the community and voluntary sector and/or a local celebrity of some description (such as appear on the BBC Question Time panels).***
- ***All Groups be invited to take part, but the Leaders be asked to nominate a substitute, if possible a female councillor or party member. If this is not feasible, possible, then the relevant Leader can take part. A female Youth Councillor could be invited to take part in this event.***
- ***An event with all the political Group Leaders invited.***

The make-up of these panels would need to be organised and negotiated in alignment with the wider programme, in particular if there is a themed event or events in the programme for the year.

Panel members also need to be aware that audience concentration and interest can be limited. There is a need for answers to be short, to the point and in as plain as possible language, avoiding jargon and repetition of points. It might be useful for panel members to take part in a very informal feedback/review session where there is an opportunity for impartial observers to give feedback on panel member clarity and impact. Additionally or alternatively panellists could undertake to self-review their panel performance.

c) Facilitation:

Facilitation is all about making things easier, smoothing the way, making the most of the time, and reaching desired objectives. This requires an understanding about how people can behave in groups and ensuring that human tendencies like straying off the subject, failing to listen to others, dominating, avoiding engagement or going over time are carefully, firmly, but sensitively managed.

This all requires quite a particular skill and qualities set, including effective public speaking, confidence, empathy and understanding, patience, firmness, planning, time management, political awareness, sense of humour, ability to entertain, tact, articulateness, impartiality, translation and summing up of key points and arguments. He/she needs to support the audience to feel engaged and involved.

There are a limited number of facilitators with such a mix of skills, and we are lucky to have had both Dr Andy Mycock, and Rose Condo as facilitators who, although very different in style, have a really good mix of these necessary skills. Availability of a suitable facilitator is a key issue, with a need for their availability on dates coinciding with all the other required key participants. Facilitation can make or break an event.

Suggested Approach:

A mini job description and person specification be developed for the Question Time facilitator role.

Contacts are approached to help identify a wider pool of potential facilitators for the KQT events.

Recognition is given that a small budget may be needed to secure and pay for the necessary facilitation.

d) Questions:

To enable the 'citizen-led approach' and 'citizens setting the agenda', anyone can go online via Eventbrite, register an interest in the KQT event, and put forward their question. Attendees at events also get the chance to submit a written question in the half hour before the event starts. There have been 160 questions submitted online to date, and 12 questions submitted in writing (this has been across the three KQT events, as the online submission option was not available for the Budget information events). Within the advance publicity, a contact officer phone number is provided to allow for calls for questions about the events, or for anyone who is unable to register or submit a question online. Two questions have been submitted by phone, and one was asked in the event. 174 questions have been submitted in total, over the three events.

Questions have been wide ranging; from concerns about access to dental and other health services, to roads maintenance and safety, to town centre regeneration, and fly tipping and recycling facilities, the reduction in visible policing on the street, to developments under the Local Plan. A few have been about larger national or international issues, or very specific ward based. The ward based have been passed on to the relevant ward councillors.

One suggestion from the DC Cross Party Working group is that there be a request for a "focus on issues that are topical at the time of the event". This would mirror what happens in the BBC Question Time events where audience members arrive in advance of the start time and are asked to submit a question reflecting current or recent news topics. These are sifted and chosen just before the event begins.

Suggested Approach:

At the same time as promotion for the next event starts, the existing method of seeking questions online should be continued. There would however be additional guidance provided for potential questioners on potential topics; there might be examples given of previous questions asked and /or that current local events or issues citizens have read about or are concerned about might make a suitable topic for a question.

The format of 90 minutes with 7 or 8 questions or grouped questions works well and should be retained. There is a need to make sure that less time is taken up by panel answers, to enable more audience input and participation. This would include audience reactions and additional questions prompted by

the initial panel replies, and on occasion a straw poll of audience views on a topic.

Citizens could be asked to suggest/propose what the theme might be for the proposed themed meeting. The most popular/requested theme would be picked. This type of meeting would require some additional preparation; sharing advance background information online; explanations of key decision/s to be taken, including the how, why and when. There could be an accompanying video setting out the decision making process, and how citizens could input. The panel could include the relevant Cabinet portfolio holder, an alternative/other Group spokesperson, and /or key lead officers from the Council and /or relevant public body, plus possibly a/voluntary and community groups' representatives.

This might take the events more into the realm of 'public conversations' ; a form of dialogue designed to tackle potentially divisive or difficult topics, aimed at increasing mutual understanding, improving communication and building more constructive and collaborative relationships.

e) Audience:

The audiences to date have been made up of citizens from right across Kirklees and from a range of different ethnic groups. Concern was raised by the DC Cross Party Working Group that there may have been the 'same faces' at each of the Question Time events. This has not been the case.

A very small number; four or five of the same citizens attended events both in Huddersfield and Dewsbury, but those same citizens did not then attend in Holmfirth.

There has also been a good age range of attendees at events. The majority will have been age fifty plus, but there have also been good numbers of young people, especially at the event in the Oastler building and the budget event in January'19.

There was some feedback after the Oastler building event to the effect that the audience was perceived to be predominantly "politically biased and disruptive". This has not been the feedback since, especially after attending councillors were asked by their respective Groups to desist from putting questions; that the events are aimed at offering citizens, rather than councillors the chance to ask questions.

Suggested Approach:

A Communications and Promotions plan is developed to support the next four quarterly events, with the aim of encouraging wider involvement from citizens who have not previously participated in these or indeed other Council meetings or events.

The aim would be to start promotion of the events at an earlier stage, and include communications about the aim of the events, and how citizens can

take part/make use of them. It would be worth planning an optimum time when schools and school councils could be approached and invited to formulate questions, as well as key civic societies and organisations across the District. In relation to the themed event, then there would be a proactive approach to all interested stakeholders to take part and pose questions.

It is suggested that other and additional ways be explored to enable ongoing dialogue between citizens and the Council. This will be cross cutting with other work streams such as Civic Pathways and Democratic Content and Citizen Awareness.

In relation to the Budget process consultation, the ‘Budget Simulator’ residents were asked to use, came from the Delib simulator tool: https://www.delib.net/budget_simulator/, but did not make use of the more generic Delib ‘Citizen Space’ facility. How can questions and concerns raised through the Question Time events feed into other relevant consultations and discussions and vice versa, and become part of the wider network or “menu of options” for citizens to access for ongoing dialogue?

One feedback request was that all questions (not just those asked at the event), should receive a response from across the political Groups. It is suggested that our response might be that BBC Question Time, ‘Any Questions’ and other similar question time type events do not undertake to give such responses. It is suggested this would be too time and resource intensive for all. There could be an undertaking however that anonymised questions and concerns raised do get fed into the different Group discussions and considerations on policy development and key decisions? They might also be passed on to the relevant Council services?

f) Venue and Location:

The DC Cross Party Working Group suggestion was that we “move the KQT events around the District.” This was also a request made through the online feedback from citizens.

In relation to events to date; October 2017 was in Huddersfield, Oastler building. January 2018 we were asked to hold the Budget event again in Huddersfield and in the Council Chamber. This was also the requested location for the Jan 2019 Budget event. The event was then moved to Dewsbury in July’18, and Holmfirth/Rural in October’18. The January ’19 event was planned for Batley Town hall, but we were asked to relocate to Huddersfield Council Chamber for the focus on the budget.

Suggested Approach:

The 2019/20 programme of events will move between what were the four Districts. June’19 in Batley & Spen (either Batley or Cleckheaton Town Hall), Sept/Oct ’19 in Huddersfield – possibly Oastler again, Jan’20 in Dewsbury & Mirfield again, and then in March’20 in a Rural location.

It is suggested that expectations in relation to numbers of attendees and webcast viewers at events in some locations will remain lower. It will be important for us to better understand why, and how and if this can be better addressed. Input from Groups would be appreciated on how and if they consider numbers in such locations could be boosted.

It is suggested that additional reasons to attend an event might be needed; such as a range of information stalls providing details of local services and community and voluntary initiatives. Community Plus for example has requested they attend, and it is proposed this be trialled at one of the initial KQT events in the forthcoming year.

There will be different and additional approaches to promotion and marketing to better target citizens via communication routes in the relevant parts of the District. Local newspapers have already been used, but we need to better use locally known and well established networks. The evaluation/feedback requested will also try to track impact on numbers and audience make-up in relation to the panel composition and whether the event is themed for example.

g) Frequency of Events, Dates and Times:

Preparation and forward planning required for the events is considerable. It is suggested that capacity allows for a maximum of four larger/Kirklees wide events per annum.

There will be additional thought and planning required for the variation in format and content proposed for the 2019/20 programme. The Cross Party Working Group asked that dates be avoided that clash with other events. Every attempt is made to make sure all potential clashes are avoided. Council key dates are checked first, as well as Town Hall bookings, and each Group is asked if they are aware of any other key events on the proposed dates. School holiday dates are avoided, as well as the pre –election period.

The 7:00pm -8:30pm slot was aimed at enabling as many as possible to attend after a working day and tea time for example.

Suggested Approach:

The 2019/20 programme of Question Time events retains the frequency of once a quarter, or four per annum. Any more would be logistically and resource wise difficult to accommodate, and any less would dilute the potential impact of enabling dialogue with key politicians at reasonably frequent intervals on Kirklees wide matters.

Key holiday periods for schools and pre –election periods will continue to be avoided.

Feedback requests will include questions re preferred times and locations for events. One of the trial panel and content alternative formats in the

forthcoming year could include an alternative day/time, such as a Saturday morning?

h)Future Promotion:

Promotion of the KQTs to date has been eye catching and professional looking, thorough and effective. Even so feedback included claims from individuals that they had one week's notice, or that they only found out about the event by chance. It is suggested this is almost unavoidable.

There is a need as previously suggested, for a year- long communication and promotions campaign for the range of events proposed. This will include attempts to raise general awareness of the existence of the events and their purpose; what citizens might get from taking part. There will be requests to key partners for help in wider and more effective promotion.

There is an assumption that citizens in increasing numbers are familiar and comfortable in the use of Eventbrite to register for events, and to submit questions and comments.

Suggested Approach:

A communication and promotion plan for the year of events is developed and implemented as part of overall project management of the events. The plan will include key messages at regular intervals to raise the general awareness across the District about the events and what they are being organised for; how citizens can take part in an ongoing dialogue with their politicians and other key leaders on key issues that affect Kirklees citizens.

Social media will be used in much the same way as for BBC Question Time; promoting the events, the panel, and showing short clips after the event of the questions raised, and key points made by panel and audience.

i)Webcasting:

The larger numbers electing to watch the events by webcast, evidence that this is an increasingly important means of engagement. There has been feedback to the effect that the sound quality can be patchy and poor, and that the experience is limited by the fact that the panel only can be filmed, and not the audience and their input and reactions.

There is an upgrade of webcasting equipment underway. Hopefully this will enable improved sound quality and broadcast reliability.

Suggested Approach:

To explore the potential to increase the impact of the webcast of the events through potential for filming of audience interaction and participation, as well as the panel responses.

In advance of the radio 'Any Questions' broadcasts there is a 'warm up act' to familiarise the audience with what will happen during live broadcast. A trial question is asked, and an explanation made of the ground rules for the panel and audience. Humour and entertainment are deployed to engage and enthuse. It is proposed this approach be added to the start-up of the events, possibly engaging local drama students and /or Creative organisations such as Creative Scene, or local drama groups. This could be trialled at one or two of the events and feedback requested.

J)Feedback and Ongoing Evaluation:

To date all feedback has been requested via an e-mailed request to attendees, about one week after the events have taken place. Attendees were specifically asked what they think should be included in future events, rather than specifics about their experience of taking part in the one they attended. They were invited to make general comments and suggestions as well.

Suggested Approach:

Feedback should be both online, (aimed primarily at those taking part via webcast), but would also be requested at the end of each of the events, with individuals taking part (both audience and panel), getting the chance to complete a very short paper based feedback form there and then.

Questions would be geared to providing insight as to whether the events are achieving their intended outcomes; "that citizens feel the events can help towards genuine dialogue and engagement as part of the changing relationship with citizens and communities across Kirklees" – although wording would be very different; "Did you feel you had the chance to make a contribution, or put across a point to the panel"? for example. They could be asked how events could be improved or changed to help this happen.

Attendees could also be asked what else they think would attract people to take part/attend.

Some attendees might be interested in forming a group that could help review feedback, steer, or even co-produce the events going forward?

k) Costs:

These are kept to a minimum. They have varied, according to the venue required, and the anticipated numbers for refreshments. The venue fee was saved when the Oct'17 event was developed in partnership with Huddersfield University. The Council paid for refreshments, staff time, and printing and publicity costs. A Council venue is free of charge, however there is the potential loss of rental income. To move the event around the District, there is usually a room hire and sound system rental cost.

If the facilitator requests a fee, that to date has been £250 (twice for Rose Condo). There is staff time for the event itself x 4 officers max, plus the planning, preparation, promotion, and evaluation issue, and analysis. The most expensive event was Holmfirth Civic Hall as room and sound system hire were required. The total cost for the Holmfirth event was £1,200.00.

Suggested Approach:

Costs will continue to be kept to a minimum, and carefully monitored. Wherever possible Council venues will be used, and partnership working on an event might result in an alternative venue being secured free of, or at a reduced charge.

Recommendation

The Cross Party Working Group is asked to:

- (a) Consider information provided on the key aspects of, and outcomes from the Kirklees Question Time events that have happened to date,
- (b) Consider and agree the suggested approaches for the KQT events over the forthcoming year.

Report produced by: Jackie Ingham in consultation with Carl Whistlecraft and the Programme Board.