

Democracy Seekers: What do councillors do?

Discussion session on 2nd October 2019 and online task

Participants

20 citizens participated in the task

7 attended the workshop session

13 people took part in the online task

Participants were from **at least 10 different Kirklees wards**: Almondbury, Ashbrow (Bradley), Batley East (Soothill), Denby Dale, Dewsbury (East and/or West, not specified), Kirkburton, Crosland Moor & Netherton (Lockwood), Greenhead (Birkby and Marsh), Huddersfield (ward not specified), Liversedge and Gomersal, Newsome (Lockwood and Taylor Hill). One participant works in Kirklees (Newsome ward) and lives outside Kirklees.

Age groups where known:

17 to 24 = 1 participant

25 to 34 = 1 participant

35 to 44 = 1 participant

45 to 54 = 6 participants

55 to 64 = 5 participants

65 to 74 = 5 participants

Experiences of participants, where known:

- 18 have voted in a local election
- 14 know who their councillors are
- 9 have used Kirklees.gov.uk to find out about democracy
- 6 have attended a council meeting
- 6 have watched a council webcast
- 4 have been a member of a political party
- 3 have taken part in a Kirklees Question Time or a Democracy Commission event
- 0 have been a candidate or a parish councillor
- 0 are a member of council staff

What participants said

What do you think councillors do?

Set the budget and prioritise the council's spending. ("Isn't 90% of this pre-determined? What's discretionary?")

Make you aware of decisions that affect you – bringing information from the council into the community.

Represent local constituents.

Listening, finding out, discovering and then being an advocate and representing people.

Elected representative and decision maker (informed by who?)

Represent their constituents.

Deal with casework and individual problems – ward work.

Attend Council meetings.

Stand for election.

Get involved in hustings – during and after.

Take things up on behalf of their ward residents.

Citizens can ask councillors to do things.

Hold ward meetings or surgeries.

Attend ward partnership meetings.

Attend committee meetings.

Be part of other organisations, for example: Fresh Horizons and the Chestnut Centre.

Councillors are facilitators and enablers.

Online responses:

Help people, particularly the vulnerable, but my experience is that they don't.

Make key local decisions, attend full council meetings, attend relevant sub-groups or committees that they are nominated to, represent their constituents, resolve local issues working in conjunction with appropriate agencies and council services.

Make decisions about where budget will be spent and take up local grievances and problems.

They represent the community they work with

very little except when it comes to election time

Look after budgets keep civil servants honest represent their voters

Help with problems relating to local area.

"Planning, Roads and Transport, Local Public Spaces, Refuse, Car Parking, Allotments, Social Housing, Social Care, Street Cleaning, Refuges, Child Services, Schools and much more.

The government hand you the tax payers money and you decide what to do with it. Therefore I vote to have my say about what you do with my money.

I had originally thought that they ran the council and helped individuals, particularly vulnerable people, but found that they don't do the latter.

Work as part of the whole Council to improve Kirklees

Act on behalf of their constituencies to make concerns known to the Council eg. about a housing development or a road scheme

Act on behalf of individual constituents who have a concern such as one councillor did when for an 86 year old when the refuse collections 'blacked' her green bin because she found a single carrot in it! "

Represent their local communities, scrutinise the decisions of officers, ratify officer decisions, implement party policy at a local level

Work for the community

Listen to the people in their ward and take those views to the rest of the Council

What do you think councillors *should* do?

Councillors should be genuinely engaging to citizens at the planning stage – not just wheeled out to announce a policy that's already been made.

Think independently – not just be party political. "The problem is that the council is almost by definition political."

Be more engaging.

Share more information – don't hide behind commercial sensitivity.

Give feedback to constituents.

Councillors should have more power, instead of it being with the directors.

Do more local volunteering.

Harness the power of local communities.

Be visible in local communities.

Councillors should have more power.

Present council policy and decisions.

Bring decision making to local communities. For example, policy changes, service changes and out of council chamber).

Need to be more in tune with their local area and what is happening.

Bring people together, using their resources and assets.

Find creative ways of engaging. What's the hook?

I want what they discuss in Council meetings to reflect my views.

A reply from a councillor which suggests they have read what I've said. Not 100% certain if it is optional or they are expected to reply.

I would want a personal response showing what you have said has been read, rather than a generated response.

I expect more than answering emails.

Not be driven by national party politics.

Be concerned about what's going on in their area.

Different parties should be working together. Party politics not getting in the way of serving Kirklees.

Look at national issues from a local perspective and the impact on local people, as opposed to the party line.

Raising the profile of their places (everything is London focussed).

Parliament doesn't reflect what I want for the local area – take things up but don't deliver

Everything is London focused. The country is dominated by London. Interested in ways to change this.

Higher profile for people in other areas – councillors raising their profile more.

Play strategy example – “Having to scrap it all because they didn't talk to people. How much did it cost?”

Online responses:

To respond to emails from those that they are supposed to serve would be a good start.

I expect them to be visible and approachable and willing to listen to local concerns. I would expect them to support the allocation of funds fairly.

Help me with a local problem

Being more accessible for people in need, and be more available

A more reactive approach to day to day problems

Be honest properly represent their voters not their self interests

To be able to answer questions about what is being planned in the local area such as housing and amenities such as libraries.

I expect them to seek out voters opinions and represent them in council meetings and committees. I know that all expectations can not be met but they must be represented and taken into consideration.

Help, but most emails were simply ignored by [councillor name] and [councillor name].

I would like them to campaign for more affordable housing both rented and to buy. Ideally to get the Council to start building council houses and flats again

Get involved with the community, be available via surgeries, hold officers to account, work hard for the benefit of the community.

Regular contact and demonstrations of work that they have carried out.

Be honest, genuine and truthful and work for the good of the people they represent and not for their own financial gain or ego! Why are there 3 elected members for each Ward? Cutting this down to 2 members would make inroads into cutting budgets rather than services!

How do you find out what councillors do?

“I need to know who my councillor is first, so that I can try find them online.”

It's not easy to find councillor information.

Arrange to meet them and hear in person.

Online – but I'm not necessarily sure where to look.

From news sources (but these can be skewed).

Some councillors are very active on social media, others are more passive.

Council website, but it's not the easiest to navigate if you want a particular item / report.

Webcasts – but you need to know about the meeting in the first place. Need the basic info.

Direct contact by email or phone (get the details from the council website).

Social media: twitter and facebook.

Personal networks and who you know.

Word of mouth.

It's difficult for people new to the area who don't understand local government structure.

I don't check – might get a newsletter or a mention in a newspaper.

I would like an agenda to see what they are doing – for them to have a higher profile.

Google the councillor's name or look at Facebook or Twitter.

Go to MP with any issues, some of which should be considered locally (because I don't know who my local Councillor is)

Online responses:

Party newsletter.

I attended a local residents meeting and I work for Leeds City Council.

From the local media or word of mouth.

Local newspaper

newspapers

Internet

I don't.

I watch live council meeting on Kirklees Council web site, I get news letters from local councillors and their party's online and printed versions. I watch local and international news. Recently local councillors have knocked on my door and I have had interesting conversations with them.

Internet and political party newsletters.

I look in the Examiner and sometimes go on line. I also watch. TV local news

Via a leaflet from the local green party.

Facebook, Newsletters

Read about their "exploits" in the press and media.

How could we make more use of digital to help us connect with our councillors?

All councillors need to use digital tools to let people know what they do.

"It's about having a relationship, like businesses do with their customers, Have a simple weekly email to update people, sent to a local list (in their ward)."

We need timely information. "It can't be called democracy if you only find out when it's too late to do anything."

"The council should go to where people are, not expect them to come to you."

Have a board at libraries to tell you what councillors are doing.

“Every community has pro-active people who are close to councillors – they are near the middle of the concentric circles. They are conduits who can help boost the signal.”

Community newspaper / zine / blog for the local area, to boost the signal from councillors.

Councillors to have their own area on Kirklees.gov.uk for their neighbourhood, with useful information feeds for that area.

Have a “Contact your councillor” box on the Kirklees.gov.uk homepage. “Don’t make me look for it.”

Write To Them is easier. It has a clean, simple interface and it’s quick to send your message straight from the website.

Ward apps.

More direct and regular mechanisms to have dialogue and contact with community. For example, Kirklees Question Time (but this alone is not enough).

Digital makes it easier to share.

Communication should be brought up to the twentieth century. “I don’t know anyone who doesn’t have an email address or a mobile phone.”

Regular “town hall” style meeting in their community.

How quickly do councillors find out about things? Is that where things start to go wrong?

There’s a difference between Cabinet members and councillors. Not all get to make decisions. Cabinet is not like having a board, where you rotate people after a fixed amount of time.

We lost the district committees. Need ways of engaging that are not bureaucratic.

Citizens, councillors and council officers to collaborate – use project management tools such as Trello, Asana, Monday and Ayoa.

Advisory polls. Online polls = instant answers (but not always the answer we want!)

The starting point would be the council website.

“Ticket” system. Online forums to share solutions to known community problems.

Using existing online platforms. One to many (rather than one to one) responses to issues, so you can see what issues others have already raised and what’s happening as a result.

Build relationships with the community to share solutions, for example through facebook or online forums.

What’s App is too personal – would be able to see online profiles/photo and is not professional. Responses are too informal and different to a business interaction – using emojis 😊

Facebook possibly as can set restrictions

email definitely

Discussion boards are a good idea – one person raises an issue and others join in

Phone calls or emails – will be an age thing

For a quick response would text or make a phone call

If a Councillor has a Twitter presence and uses it fairly regularly might be tempted to send a message but this would be a public message rather than expecting a response

I know that councillors have surgeries but the timing of surgeries in work time is not good – they should be on an evening or weekend. Street surgeries are a good idea.

Different approaches from councillors

Would use email, twitter, Facebook

Would go to the Council meeting if issues they were interested in were on the agenda.

It's not fair to set expectations of Councillors who are doing it (the role) part time and not being paid very much to do it

Managing expectations – understand that Councillors are not available 24/7

Online responses:

By checking and responding to their emails.

Social media pages, twitter pages, a time where they do online chats - maybe during quiet periods in their surgeries? Or an online surgery every now and then.

Local Facebook or email newsletter

They should use an email address and let it public. They should be able to answer within few days

A quicker, more accurate response to questions

e-mail what they are doing and actual reply to correspondence and act not be lazy

Facebook twitter Local library

Councillors might canvas immediate opinions and reactions to local issues on line via their local party websites. I always welcome an email and respond when appropriate.

By checking and answering their emails.

I would read emails of what councillors have been up to

There could be a portal on the Kirklees website (perhaps there is). Use of twitter and publicising their twitter address would help.

Not sure

Do they use digital tools to connect with us? They currently appear to be 69 unknown people I don't know and definitely 2 out of the 3 in my Ward who I know about

Other comments from the workshop discussions:

What does “democracy” actually mean?

What's happened as a result of the Democracy Commission? Share the progress.

Consultation isn't working. *(We explained how we're working with communities to have conversations, not consultations. Participants said we need to communicate this more, as people hadn't made the connection).*

You vote locally for the person that gets the job done. Not always the same for local, national and the EU elections.

With regards to the allowance paid – not very much considering the amount of work that goes into it

Would not stand as a councillor - it is a thankless job and would be a target for extremists.

Experience of Councillors to date was very positive

Specific comments about the councillor role profile:

Don't make it so narrow it is off-putting

Needs to include initiative, skills dealing with people, encouraging Councillors to crack-on and get things done. Soft skills and not meeting the language

Council leaders should be inclusive not exclusive

Don't let language be a barrier

Representing the electorate locally and nationally

We contribute to the overall picture so our views should

Using political language will put people off – need to get the balance right

Comment that the language on the two councillor role slides was very different, with the broad definition from the Democracy Commission “looking much more interesting” than the headlines from our staff workshops. The second slide looked like “you've stepped outside the bullet points, sorry we can't help”.

Request for the role profile to be ambitious.

Do you have any other ideas for helping councillors and citizens to connect?

Online responses:

Training in customer care and disability issues for [councillor name] and [councillor name] and any others that need it. [councillor name] urgently needs training in how to properly investigate complaints. Simply replying with "I have spoken to them and they say that they have done all that they can to help you" (they clearly hadn't) in response to a complaint about a suicidal man being ignored is simply not good enough.

Most people I would dare to say, do not know who their councillor is so that would be a start. Mail shot, electronic or otherwise, with details after an election perhaps.

Yes, a public webchat for people ask and get answers straight away once a week

Elections for councillors should be every 2 years

no

Meetings in local libraries with information

The live broadcast council meetings are one instance of an inept amateur effort. The poor sound and visual quality and not even the pretence of public interaction display a poor public interface. Ask younger voters about quality public broadcast they do it everyday with a smart phone. I've seen better quality smart phone videos on national news filmed by terrified Kurdish women running away from bombings carrying their children.

Why don't councillors grasp the importance of these broadcasts and use the opportunity to interact with their voters? Or is any feeble effort to involve the tax payer merely a token gestures, virtue signalling, a pretence? I fear 'Democracy Seekers' may be more of the same.

On average in English council election only 35% of registered voters turn out. When asked why, as a tax payers, they don't vote the main reason is because they don't think their vote will make any difference? This apparent voter apathy lets many local councils off the hook and the sceptic in me wonders why local councillor desires more voter interaction? If they can be seen to be trying to involve the voters but failing valiantly in the attempt then the status quo continues and councillors get to do as they please.

Tell tax payers you're spending their money, then perhaps they will take notice of what you do. Then if the tax payer decides you could do better they may become a vote because they want a say about how their money gets spent, even if the intricacy of town planning remains baffling.

Training in customer care and disability issues is urgently needed.

Make regular visits to local libraries at times when groups such as craft or coffee groups are meeting and chat to them

Councillors could attend community events and have them publicised in advance. Also where possible connect with local schools as they are often at the heart of the community.

More outreach and more awareness of what they do. They are really important to our community but the current status of the government doesn't help really. It's such a shame.

Tell people what they actually do and how they are working to support and represent the electorate