



Kirklees Democracy Commission focus group with Huddersfield Students Union

Eight participants attended a focus group in August 2016 to help inform the work of the Kirklees Democracy Commission. The group was made up of a mixture of full time paid student representative officers, full time students who had a role representing their course and staff members at the Students Union.

The group were asked questions in each of the Democracy Commission's three themes. Many of the questions were the same as those asked at the democracy roadshows and on the e-panel survey to allow for cross comparison, with some additional questions targeted to the specific audience. Throughout the two hour discussion some clear themes in each area emerged.

Summary

Decision making:

- There is an issue of citizenship – the Student Union could perform an important role in educating and informing students.
- There is a clear lack of understanding of how decisions are made in the council, as well as more generally the powers the council has, and which of the services it offers would be relevant or of interest to students.
- Participants were unanimous that the right to vote at 16 is a good idea.

Councillors:

- There was a lack of understanding about what councillors do, what they are responsible for and what their role entails.
- There is a need for councillors to engage students more.
- Councillors that have been a representative for a long period of time may put others off running and be less effective in their role.

Elections:

- Participants unanimously believed e-voting was a good idea and would increase voter turnout amongst young people.

- Any savings made from changing the election cycle should be re-invested into democratic engagement.
- Having to vote at a specified polling station can be offputting for students, who may not know the geographical area and may prefer to vote on campus.
- The Students Union does a lot to promote voter registration and general elections but not as much for local elections because it's felt to be of less interest to students.

Decision making

Do you know about how Kirklees Council makes decisions?

All participants were unsure of the exact process for decision making. Participants thought there was a certain amount of back and forth between committees and there was some understanding that there were levels of delegation in the council.

Are you interested in the decisions made by the council? How do you think most students feel?

- Most participants agreed that the perception of local democracy is that it's not something students would be interested in. For example they believed area committees were *'all about grit bins and flowerbeds'*.
- It was mentioned that powers have been taken away from Local Authorities, so it's limited what they can do. It was also argued that often *'hands are tied'* in the decision-making process.
- One participant commented about District Committees that it's just *'Usual suspects there and same issues chewed over'* and the expectation is that citizens and students have to go to them instead of going out and engaging with citizens, which is wrong.
- It was said that there is a need to clarify the role of councillors, and understand what is expected in relation to their role. For example what they can do and what is and isn't in their control.
- There was a feeling that decisions made by the council don't feel relevant *'It doesn't feel relevant to me, I wouldn't go out of my way to find out how these decisions are made'*. One participant suggested that the council could benefit from intermediary bodies to help with engagement e.g Students Union, parent and school bodies etc.
- There was also acknowledgement that councillors are often volunteers and it's a big commitment.
- Perceived barriers were discussed by participants, for example it was felt that councillors assume students aren't invested in the local area and think they all go home outside of term time which isn't true and many remain after their studies. The group confirmed that a lot of students live with their parents in the area, are mature students or part-time and own a home and reside in the Kirklees area. Other stereotypes and perceptions about the student community were felt to have an impact on the relationship between the council and the university. It was felt by the majority of participants that students might be perceived as an invisible community and therefore councillors don't really engage with them. This is despite the fact that students are often local and from the area and are often mature – the average age is 26.
- Staff members commented that there are lots of avenues for consultation and perhaps students could feed into specific networks. There may be some specific service areas that students are interested in, it's just about making the link and being

more targeted in our approach. For example, they know from their own surveys that students really care about recycling. They also suggested that they could help promote to students how and why students could contact the council or their councillor, for example with posters in halls or each hall at the university could have a directory – i.e. for issue 'x', contact 'x'.

- However it was mentioned that most council services are probably of less interest to students than health services.
- One of the attendees reflected that there is an induction process as part of the first year, which includes information about key local services at the university. It was suggested that the induction could encompass democracy and specifically information about the council and its services.
- There were also some comments about ward sizes being too big and therefore people don't know which councillor to go to. It was discussed that each councillor in a ward should be responsible for a specific third of the ward. There is an issue of how councillors cover their constituencies effectively.

Would you like to see local communities, and possibly people like yourself, more involved in local decision-making?

- Other than MP candidates at election time, councillors don't come onto campus, however it was recognised by participants that it can be hard for canvassers to get into halls of residence.
- Participants said students are interested in a lots of topical issues (such as recycling), but don't turn up to meetings about these issues. Students Union sees their engagement drop off when students are busy. Council is so removed that not sure they would be that engaged even if they were more involved. Although several participants stated it's young people's voices that aren't heard currently.
- One participant had a very different experience back where they grew up. They said local councillors went into school, visited all the small villages and were known to locals. They believed it was the responsibility of councillors to go out and engage with their constituents.
- It was also mentioned that Kirklees Council could frame its services better, to make it more identifiable to students.
- One participant questioned to what extent is it a good thing to be pushing decisions out to people or do we elect people to make good decisions for us?
- It was mentioned in passing if the group thought the name Kirklees Council was confusing for students. Most in the group all thought the name Kirklees did not cause a problem with engagement or sense of feeling attached. One participant did comment though that it is hard to conceptualise Kirklees, particularly under one banner. There is an issue of identifying with the sense of place.
- One of the attendees said that they wouldn't know what to contact their councillors about, and would probably speak to their MP first.
- It was reported that there are often misconceptions of local council and the powers it has. For instance, when the A&E closure was discussed and condemned by the council, there was a misunderstanding from a number of students about what the council could do and influence on that topic. It was also queried whether local authorities have the right powers to be relevant to people.

Do you think the voting age for local elections should be lowered to 16 to encourage more young people to participate in local politics?

- The group unanimously agreed this would be a good thing. One participant felt that *'young people's voices are getting squashed out by the grey vote.'*
- The Students Union staff mentioned that during this year's freshers week they will be asking all students this question and recording responses. They normally have very good interaction when they have run similar things in the past. They said they would be happy to share the results with us.
- Several participants did add that votes at 16 would have to be coupled with civic engagement. If it's not taught in school young people won't know how to use the vote.
- One participant queried that it could be reckless to give 16 year olds the vote if there isn't an education. Young people need to know what they're voting for and the consequences. However, one participant stated by lowering the voting age without changing the political system, this might result in young people becoming disillusioned at a younger age.
- It was mentioned that it's easier to educate young people about democracy and voting when in school and together than at 18 when in higher education or out in wider society.

Councillors

Would you say you have a good understanding of what councillors do?

- One participant said that she feels she has a good understanding of the role of councillors as her dad is a local councillor (outside Kirklees). She suggested that one of the problems, or complete misconceptions, is that councillors are often seen as unrepresentative of their communities - as *'old white men'*.
- One participant said that although he is studying for a politics degree, the course content does not include local politics, so they have little understanding of what councillors actually do. It was his view that many councillors are there solely to gain experience to be an MP.
- One participant also commented that we don't hear about good news stories and that there's an opportunity to share good news and successes. It was also discussed that there needs to be an investment in a digital presence and councillors should be encouraged to produce digital literature and have a social media presence, with Snapchat being mentioned favourably.
- Most participants had little understanding and or negative perceptions that the quality of local councillors is poor. This was accredited to seeing negative portrayals in the press and thinking that ward councillors are only interested in *'small scale, unimportant'* decisions like village flower beds and grit bins.
- Participants briefly discussed a rebranding for councillors – *"sometimes I'm a social worker, sometimes a CSO, sometimes an advocate..."* Why do they become a councillor? They would like to see more sharing of good news and successes.

If you wanted to interact with your local councillor what do you think would be the best way of contacting them?

- The student officers discussed how students contact them. This was through a wide variety of methods for example on social media, facebook messenger, whatsapp, email and just popping in for a chat. They mentioned though that they do get contacted round the clock and with these more informal methods quick responses are expected. Do councillors have the capacity to respond if they used all these methods? They presumed local councillors didn't use social media much, presumed they'd take a more formal approach like an email or written letter.
- The participants believed ideally there would be different avenues for different issues – i.e. emails are more professional, while social media could be used more informally. If the issue is immediate, a call would be the best option.

What would you like to see councillors do differently to help strengthen local communities?

- All participants agreed councillors need to do more outreach. The student officers struggled with this question until they were encouraged to consider themselves and what councillors could do for the student community. There was a call for an increased presence, so long as the topics were felt to be relevant to students. There was also recognition that councillors should be decision makers, not community workers – so they should be making good decisions on the community's behalf.
- One participant stated that councillors often had to choose a side, for example will a councillor defend council decisions, or will they champion the local people. They also mentioned issues like budget decisions that can often divide the community and recognised that it is impossible to please everyone.
- It was mentioned again that perhaps there could be a 'People's chamber', as well as an Executive and Council chamber. There is a need for people to understand better whether councillors are representatives or decision makers.

Would you consider becoming a councillor yourself in future?

- One attendee said that they wouldn't consider it, because they are not political. *'I don't know enough about politics'*.
- Another participant said they wouldn't because they don't think they could make the changes they want and the role is too restrictive. *'They're restricted in what they can do, but get shit for it. Prime Minister yes, but local councillor no.'*
- The participant whose father was a local councillor said they would consider it because *'I want to make a positive change.'*
- They felt it would be a difficult role to take on at the start of adult life and there wouldn't really be the time to give to the role. Also there was some feeling that it is important to gain some life experience before considering representing others, with career politicians being viewed negatively by one participant.
- One of the student officers said they knew they could make the changes they wanted to as a student officer as the Students Union budget is healthy but that's not the same in local authorities.
- The conversation veered onto length of elected member terms, and their own experience within the university. The Education Act limits student officer terms to two years and many only do one as they are often out of touch with the student body after any longer than a year. One of the participants had been a student officer

and got negative feedback by the end of his second year that he was just making decisions he thought were right instead of consulting.

- It was discussed that when councillors have been in position for long periods it puts people off - if there was a limit or compulsory term off etc it would open it up to more people. One participant described it as the '*political equivalent of bed blocking*'
- There was also a suggestion about having a random lot or selection of representative citizens '*mixed membership chamber*' that goes to a meeting and votes or as an advisory panel or consultative body. The Students Union is trying a new way of structuring their council. They have removed all elected representatives and each meeting they will invite a random selection of students and ask them to make decision by consensus.

Elections

Have you voted in a local election in the last 3 years? (please don't count the recent EU referendum) - If yes, did you cast your vote here in Huddersfield or at a different permanent address?

- All participants regularly vote.

Do students know they can be registered at both home and term time address, vote once in generals but at both locations in locals?

- They understood this, and the Students Union promotes this especially if elections fall around exam time. They said they also to encourage students to vote in the area their vote will have the most weight.

Does the students union or university promote the local elections to students?

- Participants said they did promote the referendum and generals more than they would local elections. This was partly because they got funding to do so and also because they felt it was something that affected students more and they would be more engaged with.
- They do have a registration drive every year. Students Union staff mentioned that IER (Individual Electoral Registration) has made this harder for them though.
- It was suggested that the Students Union could do more to engage with councillors to come in and promote their messages. They would be keen to record videos and put it on their social media feeds.
- One participant stated students maybe struggle with the concept that you have to register a month in advance of the election and it would be better if you could register and then vote on the day. It may also be confusing because students don't have to register to vote in student elections.
- Participants mentioned difficulties with getting students to vote when their polling station locations are confusing or far away and different depending on which block you live in. It was suggested a student polling station on campus could increase turnout.

Do you think students would be more likely to vote if they were able to do so electronically?

- The group unanimously thought this was a good idea and it would increase turnout in the younger population. There was general belief from most participants that eventually this will happen but it would be great if Kirklees could pioneer it. If we can trust online banking why not voting? Technology has a role in creating a voting system which is secure. If the Democracy Commission does not consider the role of technology, it will have failed.
- One participant commented that young people want results instantaneously - e-voting would provide this as they don't have to sit and wait for votes to be counted.

It would save money for us to elect Kirklees councillors only once every four years, but this would mean you would get to exercise your right to vote less often. How would you feel about this?

- It was commented by one attendee that a four year cycle would be good, although voters would need to know who they're voting for, which could be less likely with infrequent elections. Another participant said if we are voting more often it's getting people used to voting and therefore suggested there could be a drop if people vote less frequently. Another person challenged this and said it could be a good thing as it's made into more of a big deal.
- The group discussed the issue of accountability and one participant commented that they would want a mechanism to remove a councillor if they aren't effective.
- It was mentioned that at the minute electing in thirds means you can't change the colour of the council and therefore all out elections might be seen as preferable to some.
- One of the benefits mentioned of elections every year was that councillors are out campaigning and therefore engaging more regularly.
- There was a lot of agreement that it would be good if savings go into supporting better engagement and consultation. There may be an opportunity to invest in new services as a result, although there may be perceptions about 'cutting down on democracy'. Participants felt it was important that the public know where the savings are going so it doesn't appear that democracy is being cut as part of austerity. It was also mentioned that a 4 year cycle could alienate a whole cohort of students, as some wouldn't be able to vote.