



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Outcomes of Engagement with The Green and Independent Groups, namely:

Cllr Andrew Cooper
Cllr Charles Greaves
Cllr Karen Allison
Cllr Julie Stewart Turner
Cllr Terry Lyons

- **Councillors**

The Groups recognise and acknowledge that there is a general lack of understanding by the public of the roles and responsibilities carried out by councillors. Whilst accepting that there is no simple answer to this issue it is felt that there is a need to address the challenge as part of a more structured approach to citizenship generally through local schools. Local democracy, the role of the councillor and active citizenship should form an important part of the practice of the schools in Kirklees.

The Groups agreed that whilst Kirklees is a diverse borough with differing wards, consideration should be given to looking at the feasibility of reducing the number of councillors. This should be alongside moving to a four yearly electoral cycle and a system of proportional representation with a “top up list” of 10-15. The Groups acknowledged that such a model would need to be developed having regard to due process in the context of the Local Government Boundary Commission.

In the context of councillors working with communities to do more for themselves the Groups recognised the central importance of groups like the Newsome Forum. With this in mind any support model should be focussed on support for enabling communities to access funds, write funding bids etc. This should be developed alongside a change in officer mind set which should be less process driven and more focussed on facilitating and enabling community action and delivery of outcomes.

In terms of attracting the next generation of councillors the Groups believe that the council, councillors political parties and the wider local government sector should be more proactive in promoting the councillor role in a positive way. This should involve being very clear about the totality of the role, an approach that would also assist in developing wider public understanding (see above). Sitting alongside this approach it is also important to consider the wider “terms and conditions” of being a councillor in order to present the role as a more attractive package, whilst being realistic and

honest about what is “doable”. This should include issues such as remuneration, time commitments and the balance with the councillor role and paid work / careers. In the context of looking at the number of councillors and issues such as time available and work / life balance, it is therefore particularly important to reconsider how councillors are supported by the council.

- **Elections and the Electoral Cycle**

The Groups acknowledged that voter turnout at local elections is an important issue and felt that this would be only addressed if the electorate themselves feel that the election itself is important. Moving to a cycle of elections once every four years creates an opportunity for the election to be more of an event, whereby political parties would target time and resources more intensely. Such changes should coincide with Parish elections but not national elections. Such a move would also reduce the costs for the council.

Within this context the Groups accept the importance of considering other approaches to increase interest and turnout, for example voting on a Saturday, local election hustings (with more information about candidates etc) and lowering the voting age to 16.

- **Decision Making**

The Groups feel that the current governance model (Cabinet and Scrutiny split) concentrates power and responsibility in too few people and works against wider councillor involvement in decision making, a factor which is important in a hung council. In light of these factors the Groups support a change in the governance model, for example a committee system, which allows all councillors to have a greater say and stake in the decision that are made. Any such changes should be mindful of being clear as to how statutory scrutiny functions would be carried out. It is important to look at wider issues beyond the governance model itself. Council officers should be more proactive and willing to work closely with all councillors in the context of governance, accountability and decision making. This is an important cultural issue for the council whereby officers move away from seeing councillors as a hindrance.

In terms of local decision making the Groups feel the current District Committee model lacks local identity and does not facilitate effective decision making. This is explained in part by the lack of any significant devolution of powers, a factor which has been present in all of the approaches to area based governance tried over the last 15 years or more. In response the Groups feel that there is a need to take a strategic view of the current and potential role of Parish and Town Councils in the context of local decision making and devolution within the borough. By way of an example the creation of a Town Council for Huddersfield addresses the issue of local identity whilst creating opportunities for better representation of local needs, the opportunity to lever in resources that a principal council is unable to, the flexibility to precept and popularises democracy in a way that cannot happen at a Kirklees level. Such an approach could be replicated in areas across the borough where there is an established and recognised identity. That said it is important to be clear to local people where they can, and more importantly can't, make a difference. People have

busy lives and it is therefore important to focus on opportunities where residents can get involved in local issues that they can actually do something about.

The Groups recognise that there are wider issues in terms of the public's engagement with and understanding of the councils governance and decision making processes. On one level it is important to ensure that there is clarity as to who is responsible for decisions, the majority of which are taken by Cabinet not Council. Public confusion is not helped by the behaviour of political groups and councillors in instances where their political statements do not promote wider understanding. Furthermore, the Groups believe that the Council's general approach to consultation impinges on the understanding and engagement of the public in important issues and decisions. On the one hand the term consultation is used inconsistently and on the other the approaches used can leave the public feeling that the decision has been made already and the exercise is a tick box approach. The council needs to be clear in its own understanding of when it is informing, consulting or engaging

- **Regional Devolution**

In terms of the current situation the Groups feel that the Combined Authority and associated governance arrangements have no accountability and very little visibility. Arrangements are currently fractured, lacking scrutiny and transparency. As a consequence there is a very low level of councillor influence and understanding, particularly back bench councillors, and even less understanding and awareness by the wider public. Such remoteness should be addressed through the creation of an Elected Regional Assembly which incorporates governance and accountability arrangements which are the same as those currently seen in the London model. There should be mapping and oversight of all regional decision making bodies, with clear terms of reference, sound forward planning and effective communication

- **Digital Technology**

The Groups recognise that, whilst not being a panacea, it is important that councillors and the council maximise the opportunities presented by digital technology to improve local democracy and wider representation. There are opportunities to use such technologies to open up the council's decision making processes and make associated content more accessible to local citizens.

Similarly it is important that councillors use the opportunities presented by social media to blend on-line and off-line approaches in a way that raises their profile and increases understanding of the councillor role (see above). Such technology means that councillors are better placed to get their messages directly to communities without having a traditional reliance on the local press. There needs to be a balance struck between use of such technologies and the time available to councillors to use them in a timely, effective and ongoing way. Furthermore, it is important to provide focussed guidance to councillors to facilitate appropriate and responsible usage and ensure they are protected from criticism and abuse.