

Growing a stronger local democracy from the ground up



Kirklees Democracy Commission draft final report

May 2017

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Executive summary:

Preparing the ground for a stronger local democracy

We want to create the conditions in which local democracy will thrive. This means starting with our citizens and with our sense of local identity – with the ground beneath our feet.

Every good gardener understands the value of co-operation. You need to know your own ground well enough to be able to get along with it. Local democracy can only happen where we are. It's about the relationships between people in the places that we feel we belong.

So our work began, and will continue, with listening to our citizens. We have unearthed a strong enthusiasm for civic society – people want to have a real stake in the places where we live and work. It is fertile ground, but not necessarily stone-free or level. People have shared their frustrations about how difficult it can be to find information, to understand how things work, and to feel that we have a genuine choice.

We have now heard from over 1,000 people about what local democracy should be like. We've gathered a huge amount of evidence and we can learn much from those who have sown the seeds of a different kind of local democracy elsewhere. Our recommendations are the beginnings of the stronger local democracy that we intend to grow.

Active citizens

We're aiming to redesign local democracy for the future and we're strongly aware of the responsibility that we have to our young citizens. We want to develop an environment and a culture that nurtures young people's interest in local democracy. This is important as young people currently don't have as much of a stake in civic life, for many reasons.

However, we also heard clearly from our citizens that people of all ages want (and need) civic and political awareness. Local democracy is unfamiliar territory for many. Citizens told us that the only way you can get involved is by understanding how local democracy works. We need to do more to explain local democracy and to develop a life-long approach to citizenship for everyone. Our schools are a good place to make a start.

If we are serious about encouraging active citizens, our democratic content must improve – it must be shareable, interesting and accessible, so that it is of value and relevance to our citizens. We need to think about the explanations we provide, the media we employ, the language we use and the ways in which we share.

Networked society

Living in a networked society offers many opportunities for strengthening citizenship. Digital technologies enable ordinary citizens to get their voices heard where others may have dominated in the past. Citizens are already using the internet as a place to collaborate and network for civic good. Our local democracy can feel very out of step. We need online spaces that are designed for citizens – not customers.

Networked citizenship is about local communities, social organisations and businesses working together, to create social good through collaboration. Civic society is wide and we want everyone to play an active part – great places develop from strong relationships. To get the best from digital technologies, we all need to be connected so that we can be part of the civic conversation. We have a shared responsibility for digital literacy. It's important for citizens and councillors alike to have the skills and confidence to be active online.

Councillors

Our citizens value the role of councillor, although many don't fully understand what councillors do. It's clear that citizens want more direct contact with local decision makers. We need to help citizens understand this changing and challenging role, and to encourage more people to come forward and stand as councillors. We need to build trust and show how being a councillor can enrich a person's life, and how councillors can enrich our local communities.

Decision-making

We need to have a much stronger focus on genuine dialogue and engagement as part of our changing relationship with citizens and communities across Kirklees. Consultation is not currently enabling active citizens – in fact, it appears to be having the opposite effect. Our citizens want to be part of an ongoing conversation, not stop-start consultation.

We've heard that it's important to give people information throughout the decision-making process. Citizens find this valuable, whether or not they personally agree with the final decision. Democracy isn't about always being the person who wins – but it is about being part of something and feeling that you have a voice. We need to share more information about how decisions are made, and not just what those decisions are.

Elections

Democracy isn't just about voting, but greater participation in local elections should be one of the features of a strong and healthy local democracy. Voters are motivated by having a competitive choice of candidates and by feeling that their vote really matters. Citizens told us that it's important to get the best people into the council, and you don't hear enough about who your candidates are and what they stand for.

Local government touches every aspect of our day-to-day lives, and yet most people do not see local elections as important. We must do more to tell the story of why local democracy matters. We need to improve people's understanding of the local political system and its importance. We also recognise that the practical aspects of running elections are becoming more challenging. The number and type of elections is growing, as are voter expectations for making the process easier and more flexible.

Regional devolution

Regional devolution is an ongoing journey with a future that is as yet unclear. We're focusing on what we can do in Kirklees to make the most of the opportunities. We believe that we should start with the local and evolve our regional democracy from there.

We need the different levels of our democracy (from neighbourhoods to towns, districts, regions and national government) to connect. What does our democratic "family tree" look like? It's not easy for citizens to understand those relationships. It should be clear who has responsibility for which decisions, how citizens can get involved, and how we can hold decision-makers to account.

Different things grow well in different conditions, and we want to work with our citizens and others to discover what approaches will work well in our local democratic environment. This means trying out practical projects, on a local level, and talking openly about what has (or hasn't) been productive – and why.

Our witnesses have shared lots of inspiring examples of ideas that have already been tried in other towns and in other countries. Our citizens have come up with new ideas of their own. We are looking forwards to working together and finding out which of these ideas will take root in our Northern climate.

We will continue to listen to local knowledge and experiences throughout our practical work, and we hope to grow new and stronger relationships as we bring our ideas to life.

In this way, we will grow a stronger local democracy – from the ground up.



Who we are

A “commission” is a group of people who have been entrusted to do something. The Kirklees Democracy Commission was brought together by Kirklees Council to gather evidence about our local democracy and make recommendations based on what we learn. We have an independent chair from the University of Huddersfield.



Dr Andy Mycock (Chair)



Councillor Andrew Cooper



Councillor Fazila Fadia



Councillor Andrew Marchington



Councillor Eric Firth



Councillor Gemma Wilson



Councillor Cathy Scott



Councillor Andrew Palfreeman

What we did and how we did it

Our principles and approach

We established the Kirklees Democracy Commission in May 2016. We had a clear and ambitious intent to take a health check on our local democracy and find ways of making it flourish. From the beginning and throughout our journey, we have asked our citizens and others to be part of helping to redesign what a strong and healthy local democracy will look like in Kirklees, for the next generation and beyond.

Local democracy is about being part of the decisions that affect our everyday lives. It's about what happens on our street, in our neighbourhoods and across Kirklees. It's important because it affects all of us. We developed a Mission Statement to help us guide the way to the thriving local democracy that our citizens deserve:

“By 2020 Kirklees is an informed citizen-led democracy with accountable elected representatives who enable communities to influence and affect decisions governing their lives”

We have focussed our research on three key themes:

- The Role of Councillors in a Representative and Participatory Democracy
- Elections and the Electoral Cycle
- Governance, Accountability and Decision-making

The more we have learned about these themes, the more we have seen how they are all interconnected parts of our local democracy ecosystem. We have also heard strong evidence on other themes relating to local democracy.

The way that we have presented our report reflects this democratic journey – starting with the citizen and our networked society, exploring representation and decision-making, then through to voting (which is not the starting point for a strong local democracy, but a healthy feature of it), and concluding with some principles for regional devolution.

Our research activities have been far-reaching and varied. We have gathered evidence locally, regionally and nationally.

Our approach has included listening to the views of local citizens, partner organisations, councillors, colleagues and local political groups, and hearing evidence from a wide range of influencers and expert witnesses. We have used a variety of methods to collect our evidence.

Over 1,000 people have talked to us about local democracy, in Kirklees and beyond.

- 88 people took part in discussions at our Local democracy roadshow events across Kirklees.
- We met with Kirklees Youth Council, the University of Huddersfield Students Union, partner organisations and other groups.
- 43 witnesses gave evidence during our public inquiries and evidence gathering sessions.
- 318 members of the Kirklees residents e-panel shared their views.
- 441 Kirklees Council staff shared their views.
- 43 citizens participated in our Preview evenings.
- We have heard from councillors and political groups in Kirklees.
- We have visited some other councils to learn from their experiences.
- We've also received comments in writing, via social media, via our web site and by email.

How the Democracy Commission worked

The Kirklees Democracy Commission was set up on a cross-party basis, with representation from all political groups in Kirklees and an independent Chair, Dr Andrew Mycock from the University of Huddersfield. From the beginning all the Commissioners agreed to a set of principles and ways of working:

- Commissioners are responsible for ensuring they are fully up to speed with all of the evidence received before deliberating and formulating findings.
- All proposals and recommendations should be evidence-led and demonstrate how they deliver the Democracy Commission's Mission Statement.
- Every attempt should be made to reach a consensus. Where this is not possible, an approach will need to be agreed to manage such instances.
- Commissioners are independent and not representing their political group view.
- Commissioners should be forward looking when undertaking deliberations and making recommendations.

- Commissioners should principally focus on Kirklees the place, not Kirklees the council, as part of their deliberations and findings.
- Commissioners will play an important part in publicly championing the Democracy Commission's work.
- The role of Commissioner is paramount – Commissioner first, Councillor second.

All of these principles have been invaluable in helping us to work in a coherent and effective way. The principle of working in an evidence-led manner has been particularly important. Our commitment throughout has been to develop recommendations in line with our Mission Statement. Our recommendations are firmly based on rich qualitative evidence and on robust quantitative data.

Working in the open

Another core aspect of the Democracy Commission's way of working is our commitment to being open and transparent throughout the whole process. Everything we have done has been shared in the public domain – and wherever possible, we have done this in real-time. This has included live-tweeting our engagement sessions with citizens and our evidence gathering sessions, in addition to live webcasting our public inquiries. Testimony to this is the fact that everything we have produced has been published on our Democracy Commission website. We have offered the opportunity for people to engage with (and be updated about) our work right throughout the journey.

Sharing our evidence

An important part of working in the open is that we have made all of Our evidence available via our website, so that anyone who is interested can explore the evidence for themselves. This comprehensive online resource includes our webcast archive but also features text summaries, short video clips with our expert witnesses, and online stories compiled from the tweets and other social media relating to each of our activities. We have aimed to collate and present this vast archive of information about local democracy in a way that's easy for people to access and to understand.

Our activities

Local democracy roadshows

We started by talking with our citizens about local democracy. From July to August 2016 we held a series of five Local democracy roadshow events across Kirklees (in Batley, Dewsbury and Huddersfield). We invited citizens to tell us what would make their everyday experience of local democracy better. We asked what would make it easier for people to participate in local decision-making, and what would encourage them to feel involved.

Participants heard an introduction to the work of the Democracy Commission, then worked in groups to answer some questions about our key themes, share ideas and say what issues are important to them. The events also included a Question and Answer session with our Commissioners and electronic voting on some of the issues. A total of 88 people took part in our roadshows.

The group discussions were facilitated by Social Marketing Gateway (SMG). They used a World Café method, with small groups of people participating in a series of table-top conversations each lasting 30 to 40 minutes. Each conversation focused on one of our three broad themes: Councillors, Decision-making and Elections.

SMG also carried out desk-based research work looking at the available literature related to the three themes, plus an analysis of conversations taking place on social media. The findings and recommendations from this phase of our work can be found in the Public engagement events report on our website.

We live-tweeted each roadshow and also created a series of online stories afterwards, featuring quotes, photographs and related information from each session. You can find these resources in the Our evidence section of our website.

We used the insights and ideas from our roadshows to guide the next phase of our work, in which we put citizens' questions to our witnesses.

Public inquiries and evidence gathering

A public inquiry is a way of investigating a particular issue, in the open. We held a series of public inquiry sessions from September to October 2016. These covered different aspects of our local democracy themes: Councillors, Elections and Decision-making.

We held 37 public inquiries and evidence gathering sessions, in which we heard from 43 different expert witnesses. The people we heard from came from a variety of organisations and areas of work, including members of not-for-profit organisations and think tanks, colleagues from other local authorities, politicians, academics and practitioners from national organisations that support democratic participation.

Our witnesses have all offered different perspectives on how local democracy can be improved. They have shared their experience and knowledge, including research projects and practical examples of doing democracy differently. The public inquiries have helped us to learn from what is happening elsewhere and to share our own local knowledge.

Our public inquiries were webcast live wherever possible and we also videoed our evidence gathering sessions. We tweeted both types of session in real time using [@kirkdemocracy](#) and people joined the debate online.

We also visited four local authorities who have relevant evidence to offer, based on changes that they have made to their own way of doing local democracy. These included councils who have changed their cycle of elections or their system of governance, or had voluntarily reduced the number of councillors. In addition, we received some written evidence submissions and background research documents relating to our key themes.

You can find all of the evidence from this phase of our work, including videos, online stories and written summaries, in the [Our evidence](#) section of our website.

Group discussions

As well as seeking evidence from national sources we have also put a strong emphasis on gathering the opinion and views of local stakeholders. We carried out group discussions with all local political groups, partner organisations, Kirklees Youth Council, University of Huddersfield Students Union and a group of newly elected councillors.

The political group discussions were facilitated by our commissioners and then turned into written evidence submissions. We followed a similar process of structured facilitation with the other groups who took part. All of the submissions can be viewed in the [Our evidence](#) section of our website.

Surveys

To increase the reach of our evidence gathering locally we carried out three surveys:

Kirklees residents e-panel survey – The first survey went to our established residents e-panel, which is made up of a representative sample of local residents and people who have an interest in the local area. The survey ran throughout August 2016 and focused on our key themes of Councillors, Decision-making and Elections. The survey included a mixture of structured closed questions and open-ended questions. We received 318 responses to this survey.

Kirklees Council staff survey – We did similar research through a survey that we shared with a random sample of Kirklees Council staff. The survey ran during September 2016. We received 441 responses to this survey.

Kirklees Councillors survey – We surveyed our local councillors to gather evidence to complement our political group discussions. The survey ran from December 2016 to January 2017. We received 49 responses to this survey.

All our survey results can be found in the [Our evidence](#) section of our website.

Deliberations and report writing

We have taken the large amount of evidence that we gathered and have carefully reviewed and deliberated this evidence in order to make our recommendations. This process ran from January to March 2017, with commissioners meeting to debate a series of themed areas that we identified from the evidence. Due to the breadth and depth of the evidence that we received, we had 11 meetings, each of four hours in length, to enable us to effectively consider and analyse all the submissions.

These deliberations have resulted in the production of a clear set of recommendations for all aspects of the commission's work. It is Important to emphasise that the meetings have been evidence-led and focused on how we can help begin to realise our Mission Statement, with a focus on practical implementation.

Preview evenings

Keeping with our principles about being open and continuing to engage our citizens, we held two **Preview evenings** (one in Huddersfield and one in Dewsbury) ahead of the publication of our draft report. 43 citizens participated.

The purpose of these events was to share some of what we have learned with our citizens, particularly about those issues that we debated during our roadshows. We shared some of the key findings of our work, showed examples of things people have told us, and explained how we used the evidence to create our recommendations. We aimed to create a concise, easy-to-understand summary of our work so far, and to generate interest in the practical work that comes next.

We invited everyone who took part in (or who expressed an interest in) our roadshows, along with members of the Kirklees residents e-panel. We then promoted the events more widely through a range of online and off-line channels. We aimed to provide feedback and continuity for those who have already participated, and also to attract new participants who might be interested in taking part in our practical work.

We timed these events to follow from our deliberation sessions, and to precede the Full Council debate about the draft Kirklees Democracy Commission report. It was important that our local citizens should be the first to hear a snapshot of our findings.

The preview evenings included an introduction to the Democracy Commission's work, group discussions, and a Question and Answer session with our Commissioners.

In the group discussions, participants were able to share their suggestions about some of the key themes of our report, and to offer to get involved in potential pilot projects to strengthen local democracy in Kirklees.

Citizens debated five themes:

- **Young citizens:**
The future of our local democracy
- **An informed local democracy:**
Creating and sharing better democratic content
- **Valuing our citizens:**
A different approach to consultation
- **Getting to know councillors:**
Who they are, what they do
- **Networked citizenship:**
Connecting residents, organisations and businesses

We gathered together all the ideas from the group discussions at our preview evenings, and considered them at a further meeting of the Kirklees Democracy Commission. Some of these ideas have been included in our report.

Local democracy in Kirklees

Whilst our work has national relevance, our main aim has always been to design a stronger local democracy for the citizens of Kirklees. This local focus means that there are a number of unique factors we had to bear in mind when considering the evidence and presenting our findings.

Local identity

Kirklees is a unique and special place, made up of towns, villages and communities with a rich and diverse history. This is a strength that our work needs to recognise and develop from. The future shape of our local democracy must grow from the places that make up Kirklees. It is therefore not a surprise that the issue of local identity has featured so strongly in our work. Local citizens, councillors and our witnesses have emphasised the importance of place as part of our local democracy.

Kirklees has been described as an artificial construction that communities and citizens do not have an affinity or identification with. There is no place called “Kirklees” within our district. The fact that Kirklees is a difficult brand may not be an issue for government, but “it matters if local people do not feel they belong” ([Adrian Lythgo, Kirklees Council](#)). Our younger citizens have a different perspective, as they have no other reference points before the creation of Kirklees Council. They do not hark back to a golden era which pre-dates the re-organisation of local government in the early 1970s.

Whilst the answer may lie somewhere in-between, there is nevertheless a pressing and urgent need for us to look again at the issue of our local identity. It is important that we learn the lessons from the past. Our approaches to local devolution over the past 17 years have not managed to fully solve the challenge of local identity. If we are going to have a different relationship with our citizens and make sure that our regional voice is rooted in the priorities of our towns, villages and communities, then this issue needs to be addressed.

Austerity and a changing council

Whilst we are proud that Kirklees has been bold in focussing on the value of local democracy rather than solely on its cost, we are aware of the financial, social and environmental challenges faced by Kirklees.

During the course of our work we have heard from a range of expert witnesses who have set out a picture for local government, the challenges it faces and the realistic way in which it needs to respond and adapt. These are all relevant to Kirklees.

“There is a need to move from leading and managing the council to leading and supporting places. This requires a new relationship between the council and its citizens, moving away from a state of paternalism and dependency to one of co-production”

Cllr Sir Stephen Houghton

Current challenges include austerity, the localisation of business rates (and the adverse consequences for Kirklees Council), shrinking resources and a growing demand for some key services. Kirklees can no longer rely on “business as usual to fix the problems... The next twenty years for local government should be about moving from commissioning services to curating places in a way that means the same level of service is not required.” ([Jonathan Carr-West, Local Government Information Unit](#))

“The idea that local government can unilaterally keep people safe and make them well is nonsense. A good life cannot be had by an outside agency doing things to and for people. The relationships of the past have not been the right relationships, however having a different conversation will be challenging.”

Cormac Russell

“It requires a rethink about what public value is and the relationship with citizens and communities.”

Roger Bushell

The changing role of the council, and in particular our relationship with Kirklees citizens, is fundamental in helping to shape and define our local democracy and the role of our elected councillors.

Kirklees in the region

It is important that Kirklees and its citizens are strongly placed to contribute to, and benefit from, our place in the region. We need to build on our “natural geographical footprint” ([Rob Vincent, former Chief Executive](#)).

Devolution presents opportunities for us to reinvigorate local democracy and deliver better outcomes for our citizens. This can only happen if:

- We are clear about the vision and priorities for our towns, villages and communities. These should be developed through ongoing engagement with our citizens and form the basis for our dialogue at a regional level.
- We support our elected councillors to lead the dialogue with their communities in order to develop, own and progress those priorities through the council and up to a regional level. This will require an improved flow of information and intelligence.
- We develop governance and accountability mechanisms in a way that builds on these principles and does not destabilise them. Decision-making should be inclusive, open and transparent and be rooted in our local context.

The national picture

Putting our work into context has helped us to shape our thinking and has informed our findings. Local democracy, and particularly local democracy in Kirklees, will be affected by national circumstances. We have sought to bear these circumstances in mind when developing our findings, although we have not been directed by them.

A centralised state

We live in a society that has the most centralised government in Europe and one which has a restrictive local government finance regime. Such factors define local government and the circumstances within which it operates ([Professor Colin Copus, Councillor Commission](#)). Our engagement with Kirklees citizens has shown a perception that “local government lacks power to really influence big decisions”, “the power of local councillors has diminished”, and “fewer people are taking part in local democracy as they feel they have little influence over what happens” ([Public engagement events](#)). Yet 77% of the public trust their council over the national government to make local decisions ([Local Government Association – What Next for Devolution?](#)). The ongoing tension between central and local government continues to be an important factor.

Regional devolution

Our work has coincided with the government’s regional devolution policy agenda. We have considered a range of evidence that has raised a variety of issues and challenges for both Kirklees and local government as a whole. It is clear that views and perspectives vary as to what this will mean and to a certain degree the future is yet to be written. Some of the key questions we need to ask are:

- Given the centralised state, is regional devolution a real opportunity for local government? “Who do you want to take the decisions – civil servants in Whitehall or locally in the region?” ([Jonathan Carr-West, Local Government Information Unit](#))
- Given that the motivations for devolution have so far been mainly economic, how can the focus of the debate be shifted to democratic, social and environmental considerations? It is these that are important to our citizens and our councillors. ([Neil McInroy, Centre for Local Economic Strategies](#))
- Will regional devolution result in a better democracy or a more remote and faceless democracy? ([Public engagement events](#))

- Do City Region Mayors provide an opportunity to reinvigorate local democracy and foster a wider public understanding of the opportunities presented by regional devolution?
- Will regional devolution see the erosion of local influence and further undermine the role of the local councillor?
- How can citizens play a part in shaping regional devolution and have a role in holding regional bodies accountable for their decisions and actions?

Whilst we do not suggest we have answered all of these questions, they have played an important part in our deliberations.

A changing political narrative

During the course of our work we have witnessed the EU Referendum and the American Presidential election. Whilst neither of these events has necessarily influenced our findings, they indicate a changing political narrative that is relevant to our work. This has been borne out in the evidence we have received. For example we have found that:

- There is a broad dissatisfaction with the UK's political culture.
([Public engagement events](#), p30)
- There is a perceived lack of honesty from politicians during campaigns.
([Public engagement events](#), p45)
- 84% believe that political party doesn't matter when dealing with a councillor.
([Kirklees residents e-panel survey](#), p3)
- Many people feel distanced and disengaged from politics and democracy.
([Public engagement events](#), p15)

What we are seeing is a shift in citizen expectations with regards to party politics, how people wish to be represented and the institutions of government, including those at a local level.

A networked society

There are incredible opportunities for local government and our citizens as a result of the continuing growth of a networked society. Citizen expectations in a digital age are legitimately changing as they experience a different form of democracy privately to the one that they experience from public institutions like local government ([Tony Browne, FutureGov](#)).

It is important that we look to disrupt our approaches to representation, consultation, engagement and decision-making in the online civic space whilst retaining the off-line approaches that continue to be valued by our citizens. This will involve engaging with residents as active citizens rather than principally transacting with them as customers. Such a culture change is crucial if we are to develop a different relationship that involves working collaboratively to solve shared challenges and issues.

Representative and participatory democracy

We have heard that “Classic representative democracy is currently under pressure” ([Dominic Campbell, FutureGov](#)) and that “The traditional model of representative democracy, based around the power of the town hall, is in abeyance - there is a growing need for synergy with participatory democracy.” ([Neil McInroy, Centre for Local Economic Strategies](#)).

The changing relationship between the citizen and the state has at its heart the tensions and opportunities of balancing representative and participatory democracy in a way that harnesses the strengths of both. Our work and our findings have been strongly influenced by how we put the building blocks in place to move to a state of “participatory representation” ([Anthony Zacharzewski, Democratic Society](#)) that has active citizens at the heart.

Active citizens in civic society

What is an active citizen?

Being an active citizen involves informal participation, community activity, informing decisions, campaigning, engaging with public services, petitioning, protesting and having a real stake in the place where you live. It means taking an interest in what happens locally and having a voice. You should feel able to influence your community's future and be willing to share what you know.

A new democratic relationship

Our culture as a council is to only engage when we have problems or challenges. We need to change this culture as part of a new democratic relationship with our citizens. We should be clear about our roles and responsibilities, and about what our democratic relationship means in our neighbourhoods and communities.

Rethinking local decision-making

We have an opportunity to rethink our approach to local-decision making within Kirklees. We could take a more devolved approach to local influence, engagement and decision-making, from the ground up.

Young citizens

We're redesigning local democracy for the future and we're strongly aware of the responsibility that we have to our young citizens. We want to develop an environment and a culture across Kirklees that nurtures young people's interest in local democracy. Young people do not currently have as much of a stake in civic society and we are keen to address that imbalance. We also recognise that we need to develop a life-long approach to active citizenship.

Active Citizenship is our shared goal

Along with our partners in wider civic society, we should treat Active Citizenship as a strategic priority and take shared responsibility for supporting and developing active citizens. We believe that our partners, the press, businesses, the third sector and our local MPs all have a part to play in fostering a shared stake in our local democracy.

What is an active citizen?

An active citizen is someone who chooses to be active in the life of their community. This means doing something practical to help your neighbours or people in your network, or to improve the place where you live, work or visit. It's about doing something positive to improve other people's lives, in whatever way you can.

Being an active citizen also means taking an interest in what happens locally and having a voice. You should feel able to influence your community's future and be willing to share what you know.

Active citizens have a stake in the community in which they live. They take responsibility for their local area and know their rights. They question the way things are done and come up with ideas for making things better.

To be an active citizen, all you need is to care about the place where you are, and the people who you share it with – and you must be willing to do something to help.

There are lots of ways you can be an active citizen:

Have a voice – be part of your local democracy. Start a campaign, get to know your councillors, help to inform a decision, vote in local elections, set up an information stall, sign a petition, take part in a community meeting, be an activist, speak up for someone else, contribute to community research, give feedback, get involved.

Be part of something – connect with people who share your interests. Join a community group or start a new group, take part in a community activity, get together with neighbours to tidy your street, organise an event, discuss local issues, lend something to a local group, collaborate, make plans for the future, do something fun.

Be a councillor – stand for what you believe in. If there are things that you want to change, support or improve in your neighbourhood, you could make it happen by becoming a local councillor. No other role gives you a chance to make such a huge difference to people's quality of life in your local area.

Be a good neighbour – do something simple to help a neighbour. Fetch someone's shopping, make time to stop and say hello, take a neighbour to a community event, let people know what's happening in the area, share a leaflet about local services, check in on vulnerable neighbours in the winter, start with a small act of kindness.

Volunteer – give a little time, get a lot back. Volunteer with a local organisation, share your skills, be a charity trustee, become a school governor, be a mentor, give an hour a week to a befriending scheme, make connections with people of other ages, join a panel or committee, find the role that's right for you.

Active citizens and the relationships between them are what make our communities thrive.

Active citizens in civic society

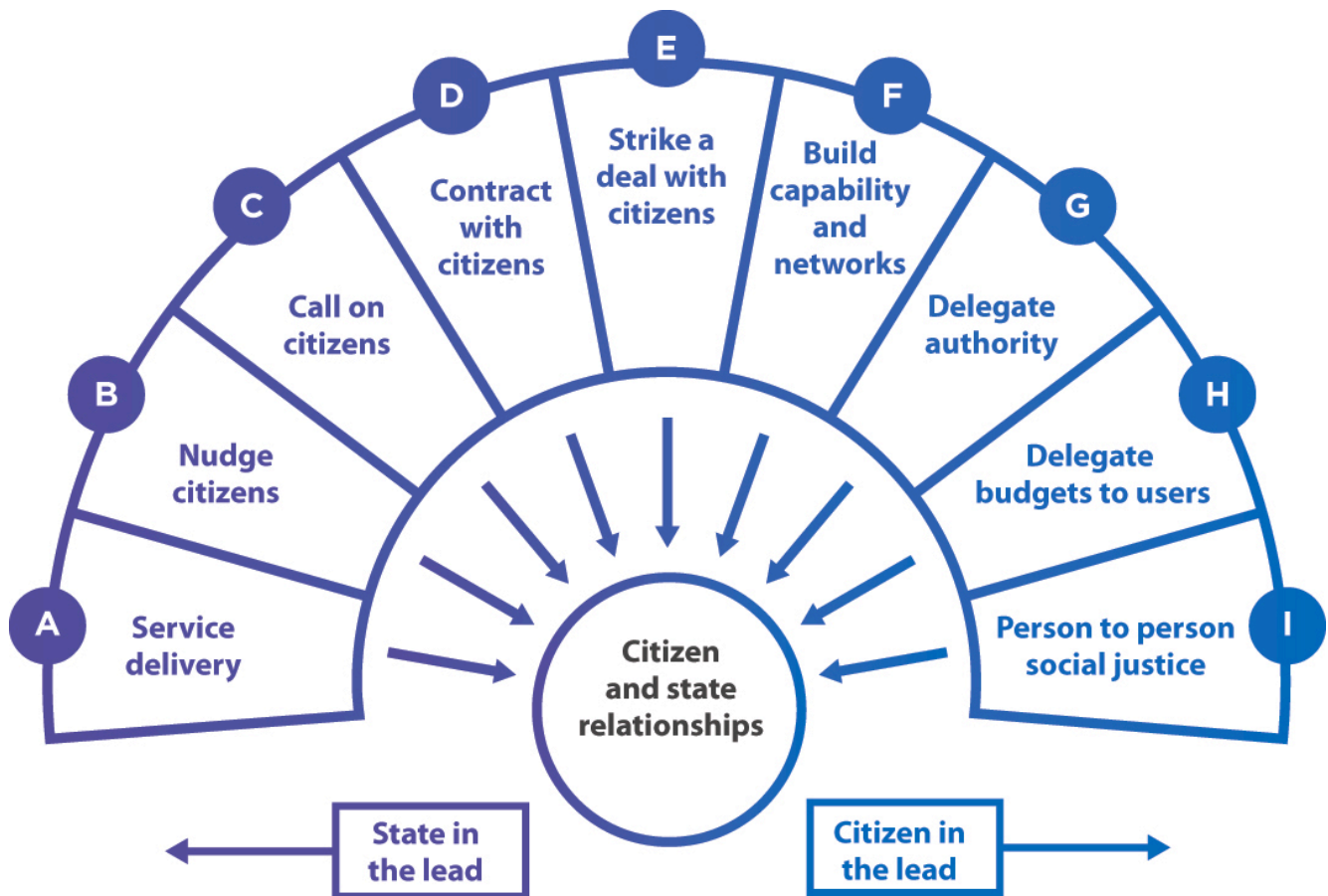
Everything starts with the citizen. We want to design the future of local democracy in Kirklees from the perspective of our citizens – and from the ground up. It is for this reason that we've looked at the networked society, the role of councillor, local decision-making, voting and our place in the region all mainly through the eyes of our citizens. They are our lens, helping us to bring all these issues into sharp focus.

Our work is based on the experiences of citizens, and not customers. Being a citizen is different from being a customer. We need to acknowledge and understand that. If we want to improve relationships and strengthen our local democracy, we must focus on what people can offer, and what they need, as citizens. The aim of our recommendations is therefore to focus on what will create good outcomes for our citizens.

Voting is an important part of our representative democracy, but being a citizen of Kirklees involves so much more. It involves informal participation, community activity, engaging with public services, informing decisions, campaigning, petitioning, protesting and having a real stake in the place that you live, visit or are employed in. Active citizenship is an important part of a strong and healthy civic society. We know there are barriers which stop people from playing an active role in our local democracy, and we're keen to improve the opportunities for people to get involved.

Austerity has proved to be an unhelpful backdrop to the idea of being an active citizen. We don't believe the right story to tell is that citizens "should now be doing more because the council is no longer able to". This is far too simplistic, sends out the wrong message and ignores the brilliant things that our citizens have always done to contribute to wider civic society in Kirklees. It should be about building on these strengths. Our 69 councillors are active citizens too and they have an important role to play in supporting those who are already active, and encouraging others to take part.

We've explored many different things which can enable and facilitate more active citizenship. Some of these will involve Kirklees Council behaving differently. Others relate to different stakeholders in our civic society who we feel have a shared responsibility to help us build a vibrant local democracy.



Citizen and state relationships

- A Service delivery - state as provider, citizens as recipients
- B Nudge citizens - "state knows best" (behaviour change)
- C Call on citizens - state stimulates philanthropy and altruism
- D Contract with citizens - state confirms something for something
- E Strike a deal with citizens - state and citizens agree new visions
- F Build capability and networks - citizens supported to give and receive help
- G Delegate authority - citizens agree trade-offs & solutions in their communities
- H Delegate budgets to users - citizens control personal budgets
- I Person to person social justice - state as platform, citizens as designers

Source:

[Changing the Narrative: A New Conversation Between the Citizen and the State](#) - Roger Bushell

A new democratic relationship: Kirklees Council and active citizens

“There is loads of community capacity about, that just does not get allowed to flourish. The whole system is risk averse, and that means that nothing will change... Democracy should be about us, our passions, what we want.”

Kirklees citizen at our Local democracy roadshow

It's important for us to focus on what Kirklees Council can do to enable and facilitate active citizens. As part of our research we found the evidence provided by [Roger Bushell](#) to be particularly helpful in setting the wider context for this area of our work. The 'Citizen and state relationships' diagram is a good summary of the changing relationship between the citizen and the state. This provides an important framework for our work in Kirklees. It illustrates the issues we need to consider when thinking about the current and future role of the citizen. These include the changing relationships that are involved in participatory democracy, representation, decision-making and the role of the councillor.

We believe that our starting point should be to recognise the importance of active citizens and their relationship with the council. We recommend that Kirklees Council should make Active Citizenship a shared strategic priority and use this as a basis for developing a new democratic relationship with citizens.

“Local contracts between communities and providers need to be established, along with the sense of community responsibility. We need to start in the community and work outwards”

Adrian Lythgo

This should involve looking at the roles, responsibilities and relationship between citizens and the state, and articulating what this means in our neighbourhoods and communities.

Although we don't want to pre-determine this work, we feel there are a number of areas from our research that are of particular relevance:

Councillors must be at the heart of the relationship between the citizen and the state. They are crucial in making the connection between civic action and public service. This is part of the changing councillor role and we are recommending a shift in the support for councillors, in a way that has greater focus on their wards.

Local identity is an important issue for our citizens. We see this as key in helping us to strengthen our local democracy – from community, to district, to region.

Consultation is not enabling or facilitating active citizens - in fact it appears to be having the opposite effect. There needs to be a much stronger focus on genuine dialogue and engagement as part of our changing democratic relationship.

Democratic content can be difficult to understand. Council bureaucracy is often a barrier to citizens engaging in important issues both locally and strategically.

Our culture as a council is to only consult or engage when we have problems or challenges. We need to change this culture as part of a new democratic relationship. Similarly, the council needs to develop a sense of awareness about when to get out of the way and let citizens in their communities do what they know is best. This complements representative democracy and acknowledges the importance of building from the strengths that already exist.

“Neighbourhoods are where lots of good things happen and the best change happens where local authorities have a stewarding role to look after the village or community”

Cormac Russell

We've explored some of these issues in more detail elsewhere in this report.

Next we are focussing on two other areas in more detail, as we feel they are key for developing active citizenship.

Rethinking local decision-making

The opportunities for citizens to have meaningful local engagement, to have influence and to be part of decision-making are strong themes that we have heard about regularly during our work. These issues are clearly relevant for active citizens. At one level, this is about the informal opportunities in our wards and communities, but it's also about more formal methods for setting priorities and making decisions.

Residents who took part in our [Public engagement events](#) often talked about the ways in which citizens can make a greater contribution to decision-making. They made a range of suggestions, including:

- the right to reverse council decisions
- quality indicators for local decision-making
- USA style jury systems
- local people panels
- greater use of local referenda
- participatory budgeting
- a realistic and meaningful model of local decision making
- a menu of issues so that citizens can choose how to be involved

In our [Kirklees residents e-panel survey](#) we asked "Should councillors have less control and local communities have more?" 51% said "Yes" and 33% said they were "Unsure". When we asked the same question in our [Kirklees Council staff survey](#), 45% said "Yes" and 45% said they were "Unsure".

In our [Kirklees Councillors survey](#) 80% of those who responded agreed that "Communities should have a greater role in the local democratic process, working more collaboratively with councillors", although 56% disagreed with the suggestion that "Councillors should have less control and the local community should have more". 78% agreed that "more decisions should be made more local in Kirklees".

We also asked our councillors to select up to three options which they felt would be most likely to encourage more direct public and community involvement in decision-making:

80% chose improving communication about decisions and their implications
51% chose engaging more with community and voluntary sectors
49% chose introducing more locally devolved decision-making structures
47% chose providing ways to enable more local people to get involved

As part of our discussions with political groups, councillors consistently raised the issue of a more devolved and localised approach to decision-making.

The [Labour Group](#) agree that decision-making in Kirklees should include some devolution of resources to a local level. This should work alongside making sure that citizens are better connected to decision-making, and giving more decision-making powers to individual councillors in their wards.

The [Conservative Group](#) have a long-standing view that local councillors should take decisions on local issues. The group find the lack of real local devolution to local areas and wards to be frustrating.

The [Liberal Democrat Group](#) emphasise the importance of small blocks of governance and accountability which should be built from the bottom up. This allows for decision-making at a local level and enables citizens to relate to local politics more easily.

The [Green and Independent Groups](#) have referred to a lack of any significant devolution of powers locally. The groups feel that Kirklees Council has failed to resolve this issue in any of our approaches to area-based governance over the last 17 years. They would also like Kirklees Council to take a strategic view of the current and potential role of town councils.

We feel we have found a general appetite for having a more devolved approach to local influence, engagement and decision-making, from the ground up. From a Kirklees Council perspective, we have an opportunity to begin to address this as part of a review of our governance and decision-making arrangements (which is covered elsewhere in this report). We believe that such work should have a strong focus on the needs and expectations of the active citizen and that we should learn from past experience and from practice elsewhere.

For example, [Councillor Sir Stephen Houghton](#) provided us with details of the approach to local devolution in Barnsley. This involves six Area Councils, each with a commissioning budget that they decide how to spend. Each Area Council also has a Ward Alliance, made up of ward councillors and at least six community representatives. The alliances each have a small budget of £10k. The ward alliances channel the views and opinions of the community and share these with the area councils, so that citizens' views are considered when budget priorities are being set. Barnsley's Ward Alliances won an LGC award for Community Involvement in 2017.

We have also received evidence from [Justin Griggs](#) from the [National Association of Local Councils](#). Justin gave us a national overview of the differing approaches that Parish and Town Councils are taking. We were interested to hear that there is currently a growth in the number of Parish and Town Councils and also a rise in councils who are choosing onward devolution to parishes and towns. Justin explained the opportunities that such councils have in terms of accessing funding mechanisms that are not available to principle authorities. Some innovative and flexible approaches have been taken in particular parts of the country. These are all relevant considerations as part of our wider discussion about models of local devolution in Kirklees.

We also received evidence from [Peter Macfadyen and Mel Usher](#) from Frome Town Council, where the focus is strongly geared towards openness and citizen engagement. We were impressed by the innovative ways in which Frome has adopted an approach based on releasing power and “enabling the best decisions to be made locally, from the bottom up.”

We know that active citizenship is about much more than how the council chooses to devolve its power, resources and decisions, but we feel this is an important consideration. We have an opportunity to rethink our approach and to develop some new arrangements as part of our new democratic relationship with active citizens.

Young citizens

We’re seeking to redesign local democracy for the future and we’re strongly aware of the responsibility that we have to our young citizens. We make no apologies for focussing heavily on how we can develop an environment and a culture across Kirklees that nurtures young people’s interest and engagement in local democracy. This is a long-term goal, which makes it even more important for us to begin to develop strong foundations now.

We know that our participants agree with the need to focus energy on our young citizens. We heard this clearly from citizens during our roadshows, from partners and councillors in our group discussions, and from witnesses during our public inquiries and evidence-gathering sessions. So we are confident that this is the right approach.

Young people do not currently have the same stake in civic society and we are keen to address that imbalance. However, we also recognise that we need to develop a life-long approach to active citizenship. Citizens who took part in our roadshows asked us to build new relationships with a wider body of active citizens, and young people in particular. We want to grow stronger relationships between active citizens of all ages, through mentoring, shadowing and collaborative social activism.

We have tried to make sure that the thread of supporting young citizens is weaved throughout our recommendations. We have considered the changing councillor role, access to decision-making and voting in local elections with young citizens in mind. In the context of active citizenship we feel it's important to do more – and our evidence has given us an insight into ways in which we can do that.

In our group discussion with [Kirklees Youth Council](#), our young participants highlighted a strong concern that young people are often stereotyped and they feel that young people's views are not valued as a consequence of this. They commented that young people are seen as a social problem rather than as citizens who have something to contribute.

"We're in the background and they don't really see us. They see all young people as problems – young people are meant to do bad things, but some of us don't. Some of us want to help our community."

Kirklees Youth Councillor

Our Youth Councillors told us that young people would like to be more involved in decision-making. Suggestions for this included having a conference to talk about youth issues, making space for young people to speak at Full Council or District Committee meetings, and councillors visiting schools to ask young people what things they would like to see change.

The [University of Huddersfield Student Union](#) feel that they can play an important role in educating and informing students. However, they told us that among students there is a clear lack of understanding about how decisions are made in the council. The students are unsure about what powers the council has in general, and they don't know whether council services would be of interest or relevance for students.

We received very powerful evidence from [Kenny Imafidon](#) from [Bite the Ballot](#) who helped us to understand the challenges and opportunities faced by young people when trying to engage in local democracy. Kenny explained that the most significant barrier to young people being engaged in local democracy is the lack of political education throughout the course of their school lives. There is a fear of teaching politics. Kenny believes it's important to overcome the fears that are associated with political education, as teaching such subjects fosters and facilitates critical thinking.

Kenny explained that schools are well placed to address these issues from the outset by embracing a democratic culture. There are opportunities to involve young people in decision-making by identifying what decisions can be passed to young people in schools. Such power-sharing is important as it can become habit forming and will allow young people to develop the attributes that will make them active citizens. Young people need support to understand the system and the landscape if they are going to engage in those local issues and get involved in local democracy.

Other witnesses similarly highlighted the central importance of creating opportunities for young citizens to understand and experience local democracy. [Sarah Allan](#) from [Involve](#) explained that there is a strong case for political education in schools. This would help to remove one of the barriers to equality of participation. Sarah also told us that it's important to focus on relevant issues as a starting point for engaging young citizens, as this means young people can get involved without needing to understand how local democracy works first.

[Anthony Zacharzewski](#) from the [Democratic Society](#) emphasised the importance of giving young citizens a close up view of what happens in order to demystify the way that decisions are made. Anthony explained that it is important to give young people the opportunity to have their say on the things that matter to them. This could be as simple as putting democratic procedures in place at schools or in communities where young people are present. It could also involve creating opportunities for young citizens to have their say in a format that works for them, and for young people to know that they are being listened to without being patronised.

Anthony added that there is scope to delegate some decisions that specifically affect young people, at least as a "first draft" of those decisions. Given that democracy is changing to something that people want to participate in and given that young people have grown up with this change, this could be a good opportunity to experiment with new models of politics.

We could try some more participative approaches and explore how they fit into our more traditional models of decision-making.

The evidence that we should redesign our local democracy with a strong focus on the young citizen is compelling. We think this should be a core part of an Active Citizens Strategy and we should focus on how key stakeholders can collaborate to make this happen. We believe this should not be a Kirklees Council agenda alone as it has an impact on our wider civic society in the borough and also has implications for local and national government as a whole. That said, we particularly feel that our schools have a crucial role to play in supporting this culture change and we've made our recommendations with this in mind.

To effectively support and develop our young citizens, we believe all local schools should play a central role as local democratic hubs. This should involve designing (and putting into practice) a range of approaches which will create pathways for young citizens to become involved in civic society, including raising awareness about being a councillor. This is particularly relevant in light of the changing role of councillor in a representative democracy.

We specifically recommend that Kirklees Council develops these initiatives as part of a wider Active Citizens Strategy:

- Designing local democracy resources for Kirklees schools to be used in the context of civic education.
- Strengthening the links between local councillors and the schools in their wards through programmed "school surgeries" as part of citizenship education.
- Working with the National Citizen Service to develop a mentoring scheme, to be piloted in Kirklees.
- Working with the Local Government Association (LGA) to develop a young councillors apprenticeship scheme, to be piloted in Kirklees.
- Working with the University of Huddersfield and local colleges to develop a structured approach to work placement.
- Developing a mentoring scheme between Kirklees Councillors and Kirklees Youth Councillors.

Wider civic society

Active citizens should be a shared goal - one which has the support of wider stakeholders in Kirklees civic society. We believe that our partners, the press, businesses, the third sector and our local MPs all have a part to play in fostering a shared stake in our local democracy. It is for this reason that we want to focus on some parts of that civic society in particular, as they have featured in our work.

Business in civic society

Businesses have a crucial role in helping us to maintain a strong local economy and create investment in Kirklees. We believe there are opportunities to develop a wider relationship that builds on the Democracy Commission's work.

Local businesses, particularly small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) are quite often close to the communities within which they are based. There could also be opportunities for us to have a different kind of relationship with the larger businesses that operate in Kirklees. We'd like to explore the ways in which we can work together to create civic and social good in the context of active citizenship.

We received some helpful evidence from [Neil McInroy](#) from the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES). Neil explained that in "great places" (here and abroad) there's an interdependency between the public, social and commercial sectors. This means that the relationship between representative and participatory democracy is of fundamental importance in creating successful and sustainable places. Councillors and the council have an important role in earning power and influence in areas where there is no contractual relationship – for example, with the local business sector.

Neil explained that in other countries the trade organisations are part of a social contract relationship based on co-design with the local authority, which provides a stronger basis to move forward effectively as a locality. Neil also introduced the concept of "Business Citizenship", in which core businesses are anchors in the area and their staff are seen as citizens as well as employees.

We strongly support the idea of Business Citizenship and in particular we recognise the importance of developing a different relationship with large Kirklees businesses, which focusses on a wider social contract. This should form part of our Active Citizens Strategy and make a virtue of the ways in which a different approach to collaborative working can deliver social as well as economic benefits.

Press and media in civic society

The press and media are an important part of wider civic society. We wanted to make sure that the voices of our local press were heard as part of our evidence gathering. With the exception of [Danny Lockwood](#) from The Press News Ltd, we have been disappointed by the response. Despite our attempts to involve local newspaper editors, none have come forward to provide evidence that would help to inform our thinking and recommendations. We are therefore grateful to Danny Lockwood for taking time to provide written evidence. We are also grateful to [Nick Golding](#), editor of the Local Government Chronicle, who provided us with a useful national perspective. We hope other local editors will be part of our future work.

[Nick Golding](#) explained that it is important to see the wider press context in order to understand what happens locally. Widespread use of the internet and the resulting ability for people to advertise online, often at no cost, has had an impact on the advertising revenue that local newspapers can generate. This has resulted in impact both on the number of journalists who are employed and on wage levels. This has meant that journalists, who in some instances are relatively inexperienced, have to cover a greater breadth of issues and have less time to focus on council issues in general and on local democracy specifically.

By way of a local perspective [Danny Lockwood](#) explained the varied nature of the role of the press, which involves being a “free and co-operative partner” to convey useful and positive news, a means of publicly scrutinising policy and performance, and broadly holding the council accountable for its actions to the wider public. [Nick Golding](#) added that it is important for councils to understand that the local press will report issues from the perspective of the public. This places a greater responsibility on the council and councillors to provide timely and relevant information. It is also helpful for the council to focus on outcomes for local people, as opposed to individual decisions about service delivery.

We have also heard from Mr Lockwood about the council’s part in the relationship and the extent to which it is reactive, evasive and defensive. There is a perceived lack of trust, and a lack of honesty and individual contact, which contributes to the current quality of the relationship.

We accept that there is a real or perceived tension between the council and the local press. We nevertheless believe that the press and media form an important part of the civic fabric and it is a relationship that requires careful consideration and development.

The council has an important part to play in making the relationship an effective one and clearly benefits from a situation where citizens are “better informed and involved”. It is therefore important that Kirklees Council revisits our approach to communications, with a view to developing a more proactive, collaborative and effective relationship with the local press. In developing a more strategic approach, based on some core principles, there should be greater opportunity for us to understand and progress the ways in which the press can work with us as part of an Active Citizens Strategy.

MPs in civic society

During the course of our work, our citizens and other participants have often talked about the role of local MPs. It’s clear that citizens are confused about the differences between the roles and responsibilities of an MP compared with those of a councillor. Yet we have also heard about the important role that MPs have to play as part of our local democracy, particularly in the context of citizenship.

Our local MPs are an invaluable representative link between the constituencies of Kirklees and national government in Westminster. As such we feel that it is timely to redefine this relationship in the context of an Active Citizens Strategy. The relationship needs to be based on a stronger partnership approach, more coherent and easier for our citizens to understand.

It is important that we take time to work in a much more collaborative way in order to enhance local citizenship and maximise our position in the wider region. It is for this reason that we recommend a more structured approach to that relationship. This should involve annual Constituency Contact Meetings between councillors and MPs, which can be used as a basis for clarifying roles and responsibilities and developing a partnership approach to delivering an Active Citizens Strategy.

Local democracy in a networked society

A networked society

Our networked society has much to offer local democracy. Digital technologies enable ordinary citizens to get their voices heard. They also present opportunities for us to work together, to create social good through collaboration. Civic society is wide and we want everyone to play an active part – great places develop from strong relationships, online and off-line.

Networked citizens (not customers)

Being a citizen is different from being a customer. It's about ongoing relationships, not transactions. We've created local government websites that are designed to enable people with busy lives to get specific tasks done quickly and easily – but that isn't going to help us to encourage active citizens or to change our democratic relationship. We need different online spaces that are designed for citizens – not customers.

Real time democracy

Our experience of local democracy can feel very out of step with our lives as private citizens. We expect to be able to interact, comment, challenge, collaborate and vote on issues in real time. The technology is readily available for us to be able to do this for many aspects of our lives. So why can we not "do democracy" in the same way?

Growing the civic conversation

It's important for us all to have ways of connecting, so we can be part of the civic conversation. Citizens already use the internet as a place to collaborate for civic good. There are opportunities for our council and our councillors to work with existing civic networks and active citizens online. We have a responsibility to not just be part of the civic conversation, but to help it grow.

An informed local democracy

Our democratic information is quite traditional, in fixed formats and is often difficult to find. If we are serious about encouraging Active Citizenship, our democratic content must improve – it must be shareable, interesting and accessible, so that it is of value and relevance to our citizens.

Local democracy in a networked society

A strong local democracy grows from the connections between people. We all need to be part of the conversation if we are to share ideas, make choices and feel that we have a stake in the place where we live. This means not only having good access to information, but being able to easily understand and share that information – and to contribute your own ideas. It means being able to find like-minded citizens, to create social connections, to collaborate for social good and to have confidence in a digital world. [Catherine Howe](#) put it succinctly when she said “We are moving from an industrial society to a networked society”. There are many opportunities for local democracy in our digitally networked society and this is a key part of our work.

Information from the [Good Things Foundation](#) shows that there were approximately 40 million people online and 12.6 million off-line in 2016. This means that the opportunities for connecting with people online are huge, yet around 23% of all adults in Britain don't have the basic digital skills they need to be able to benefit – and nearly 6 million people have never used the internet. What's more, it's those already at a disadvantage – through age, education, income, disability, or unemployment – who are most likely to be missing out.

We cannot separate this issue from local democracy. We need to see it as an opportunity to redesign what we do and how we do it. It's important that we do not see digital technologies as a panacea that alone can improve local democracy for everyone. This cannot be simply about digitising what we do already and we don't want to lose sight of the excellent things that happen off-line.

During our [Public engagement events](#) citizens told us they feel there's a danger that key parts of the population (the less affluent and older residents) who have less access to the internet may be further excluded in future. They said that electronic voting, on its own, is unlikely to get more people involved. If e-voting is introduced, our citizens are worried that it may reduce the sense of responsibility for the council to get the population engaged in elections.

The members of [Kirklees Youth Council](#) we spoke to in our group discussion told us that they are reluctant to share their views via social media. They said that facebook is good for talking to your friends, but not for expressing your political views, which can be twisted by others. They were fearful of being judged.

Our youth councillors expressed a clear preference for face-to-face discussions with ward councillors. However, they also recognised that it's important for elected representatives to use social media to reach people, especially young people who will find this method easier.

"Even though I use my phone 99.9% of the time, I would still rather talk to a councillor or an MP face-to-face."

Kirklees Youth Councillor

67% of our [Kirklees residents e-panel survey](#) participants emphasised the importance of regular face-to-face councillor surgeries.

It's important to stress that digital technologies are an area of relative strength for us. Kirklees Council has a national reputation for our work relating to digital democracy and a significant number of our councillors are already digitally active. We have a leading role in the national debate about digital technologies in local democracy, through initiatives such as [Notwestminster](#), a network through which people share and create new ideas for "doing local democracy, with digital".

These are all strengths we can build from as we look at what the digital agenda means for our citizens, our councillors and our council in the context of local democracy.

Networked citizens

As part of our evidence gathering we received a very powerful presentation on [Disrupting Democracy](#) from FutureGov's [Tony Browne](#), who vividly explained the difference between how the private and public citizen experiences and "does" democracy. Tony explained that privately citizens regularly and routinely get the opportunity to vote, rate, complain and comment on a variety of issues and experiences online. Compare this with the public citizen who occasionally gets a chance to vote (but not electronically), go to a council or political party meeting or respond to a council consultation.

The difference between the private and the public citizen is stark and this illustrates an important part of the "democratic deficit." We feel this is incredibly important context when looking at local democracy from a citizen perspective – a citizen whose experiences and expectations are richer and higher privately than publicly in terms of the options they're currently provided with.

This is not therefore a technology issue, but a cultural one. [Catherine Howe](#) explained that there is a growing expectancy for “real time change” which is equally relevant to the concept of “real time democracy”. There is currently a lack of real time democracy.

Citizens involved in our [Public engagement events](#) were open to the opportunities digital technology presents for local democracy. They thought residents should be given as many ways to vote as possible, including online voting and potentially also electronic voting booths in supermarkets, libraries and schools. They felt that more use of digital technologies could make voting easier and could also create cost-effective ways for citizens to get more involved in decisions outside of elections, through online engagement. It’s important to recognise that this isn’t just about voter expectations and turnout, but about how our local democracy could be stronger in a digital society.

The powerful growth and potential of the online civic society is striking. [Nick Booth](#) from [Podnosh](#) explained to us the importance of understanding the ways in which citizens are now using the internet as a place to collaborate and network for civic good. Nick provided examples from Birmingham where hyper-local communities have developed in a way that has created a different relationship between the local citizen and the council. [Neil McInroy](#) gave us a brief overview of work that is being done in Manchester by citizens who are collaborating to develop the [People’s Plan](#) in direct response to regional devolution and the Mayoral election. This is an example of civic-led engagement and activity in the context of an important issue for the citizens of Manchester.

[Dr Paul Hepburn](#) explained to us that technology now allows ordinary citizens to get their voices heard above those that usually dominate the political discourse. We also received evidence from [Katherine Sladden and Kaja Odedra](#) from [Change.org](#) who explained the ways in which online petitioning is increasingly being used as a tool to build movements and engage with organisations in a different way. We’ve heard how councils like Hackney and Oxford and the Office of the Mayor of London are using such platforms and approaches in a proactive way, to lead or be the advocate on important issues.

[Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira](#) shared work that she has carried out as part of the [Digital Democracy Commission](#). Cristina explained that one of the major findings was the importance for organisations to “go where the people are”. Citizens are organising and collaborating online which therefore provides opportunities for councillors and councils to tap into, and work with, established civic networks.

All of this encourages us that there is significant scope for our council and our councillors to harness the opportunities presented by a networked society and work collaboratively with citizens to find solutions to common problems and challenges. We are also aware of a number of issues that we need to consider:

Accessibility, connectivity and digital literacy – Not all citizens are online and digitally active, nor do they necessarily have the skills and confidence to operate in such spaces effectively. Some, including young people, don't always want to. The quality of connectivity can often depend on where citizens live. These are all issues that we need to bear in mind when thinking about how we redesign our local democracy in a digital age. It is important to blend online and off-line approaches in a way that makes a virtue of both.

Citizens or customers – As [Catherine Howe](#) pointed out, council website design is based around a customer persona. If we want people to behave like citizens it is important that we begin to treat them as citizens and look at how we develop online civic spaces to facilitate this happening. This has implications for both the council and its councillors.

Democratic content – Our democratic information is quite traditional, in fixed formats and is often difficult to find. It is important that we begin to make this content more interesting, accessible and sharable, so that it is of value and relevance to our citizens. Residents already receive a wide flow of information and if we are serious about encouraging active citizens our democratic content must improve. Citizens need bite-sized information that is focussed on what is most relevant for them. This is what the [Notwestminster](#) network have called "digestible democracy".

Networked councillors

Digital and social technologies have proved to be something of a double-edged sword for councillors. The potential benefits for councillors in being effective in a networked society are often counter-balanced by the lack of confidence to use the tools available and the challenges in being able to manage citizen expectations in a digital age. Councillors have raised issues of time and the demands of managing an increasing volume of case work in this context.

Whilst we acknowledge these issues we feel it is important to focus our efforts and recommendations on finding ways in which our councillors can operate as effectively as possible in this environment.

The benefits for them individually as representatives and collectively as members of the council are potentially significant.

The [Conservative Group](#) have suggested that councillors need the most up-to-date technology to support them in their role. The [Labour Group](#) have stated that using more technology could help improve the transparency of decision-making and assist all councillors to be more involved. It could also enable all councillors and the public to better understand local decisions.

75% of the councillors who responded to our [Kirklees Councillors survey](#) are in favour of using technology and social media. 63% agree that mobile technology in general would make the community leadership role of a councillor more effective. 61% believe mobile technology could make decision-making more open.

58% of our [Kirklees residents e-panel](#) felt that councillors should be using social media when interacting with residents, whilst 23% advocated the use of digital communication tools such as webchat and Skype.

As part of our evidence gathering we heard from [Cllr David Harrington](#) and [Cllr Gillian Corr](#) who provided first-hand experience of the tangible benefits they have seen as a result of using digital approaches in their ward councillor role. They provided examples of ways in which digital tools have assisted them in campaigning, communicating and engaging with residents on a range of different issues and challenges. In particular they emphasised the importance of joining up their online activities with the traditional activities that they undertake off-line in their wards.

Cllr Harrington and Cllr Corr were also honest in their recognition that digital approaches are by no means a panacea. It is important that councillors understand the digital footprint within their wards in order to understand where such approaches can best be used and targeted. It is for this reason we are recommending that all Kirklees councillors are provided with a live social media audit that provides details of current social media use, online networks and connectivity for the ward they represent.

Both [Nick Booth](#) and [Dr Catherine Needham](#) referred to the growing importance of humanising the councillor role, in a way that widens understanding, breaks down barriers and assists in attracting the next generation of councillors. We have also heard about the growing development of online civic spaces and the opportunity for councillors to engage in such spaces as part of their community leadership role.

We believe that social technologies provide an opportunity for councillors to do this effectively, although this requires a level of support, skills and confidence that does not fully exist at present. It is for this reason that we recommend Kirklees Council should make digital literacy a core expectation of the councillor role and support councillors to develop confidence in this area. Digital literacy should be part of new councillor induction and ongoing councillor development. This is not just a councillor responsibility – officers must play an important part in both understanding the networked society and in supporting councillors to operate effectively as part of it.

Whilst we feel that digital literacy skills are the priority area of focus, it is equally important that councillors have access to the IT hardware that enables them to play a positive role. We recommend that the cross-party working group who are currently looking at future IT provision for Kirklees councillors should consider our findings when determining what councillors will be provided with in the future.

A networked council

Whilst it is important to enhance the councillor role as part of a networked society, there are wider implications for the council as a whole. If we are serious about developing a different relationship with our citizens it is crucial that we are clear about the part that the council has to play in growing the civic conversation. We need to facilitate ongoing dialogue with citizens as part of our policy development and decision-making processes. This requires a different approach to the one we have now – one that focusses more on engagement and less on consultation.

In our evidence gathering, we have seen some approaches which have been developed in other countries where they have successfully blended online and off-line methods in a way that effectively engages citizens as part of an ongoing journey. This differs from the traditional approach to consultation that we have heard a great deal about during the course of our work. Most of the feedback we've had about consultation has been negative and paints a picture of citizens feeling that they have been picked up and dropped. Citizens believe that often the decision has already been made anyway, and that the consultation is therefore "meaningless".

We feel there are opportunities to learn from the experiences of projects in other countries, particularly in terms of decisions relating to important issues or strategic priority setting for our towns and villages.

Elsewhere in this report we explore the challenges faced by the council and our citizens in the context of regional devolution.

An approach to priority setting that is based on citizen engagement, from the ground up, is a principle that we advocate. This should involve making a virtue of existing civic networks and focusing our efforts on growing networks, both online and off-line, where they do not currently exist. This is an effective way in which we can begin to realise the benefits of participatory and representative democracy, using digital as one of the tools for breaking down the barriers to participation.

We therefore recommend that, in partnership with key providers, Kirklees Council should use the learning from international examples to develop an approach for blending online and off-line engagement processes, as part of strategic planning, policy development and decision-making. This should form part of the pilot we are recommending to explore innovative digital approaches to planning and priority setting in a particular area of Kirklees.

The way in which the Democracy Commission have conducted our work provides a useful template to consider when blending online and off-line engagement as part of developing the civic conversation. We have aimed to be open, to share content in a range of formats, to encourage interaction and dialogue and to take citizens on the journey with us. We have sought to develop relationships, not conduct transactions. Whilst we may not yet have the perfect civic space as described by [Catherine Howe](#), the online presence we've already established provides an important starting point for future work. The Kirklees Council website is not suited for this purpose, although it is important to acknowledge that it has not been designed for this purpose.

Elsewhere in this report we have looked at our governance and decision-making processes. [Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira](#) has provided us with an insight into how our own national government are wrestling with the issue of making their democratic content and processes more understandable. As a result we have been self-critical of our own democratic content and thought about the extent to which it is accessible, clear and informative.

If we are serious about engaging our citizens in local democracy we need to work harder to look at innovative ways of presenting and sharing our content. This is consistent with the views we have received from our councillors and their political groups. We believe that digital technologies provide us with the opportunity to prototype different ways of working and this is reflected in our recommendations.

The issue of digital literacy for our citizens is not wholly in the gift of our council to address and resolve, but we want to make a number of points on this subject. We have heard that accessibility to devices for our citizens is not the principal issue. The main considerations are digital literacy and the need to provide democratic content that is shareable, interesting and accessible.

As a council it is important for us that our citizens have the skills and confidence to be active citizens online as well as off-line. We cannot, and would not, seek to control or direct the whole issue of digital literacy, but it is important that we do as much as we can to provide advice and support.

This should include an expectation that digital literacy forms a core part of the skills set for all council officers, in the same way that we have recommended this for councillors. This will put the council in a much stronger position to play a confident part in growing a networked society across Kirklees and to be active in nurturing the civic conversation. In addition, we believe it is important that democratic digital literacy should form an important part of the civic education programme that we have advocated elsewhere in this report. This is also reflected in our recommendations.

Councillors

A changing role

A councillor is a... Steward of place, Advocate, Buffer, Sense maker, Catalyst, Entrepreneur, Orchestrator, First line of triage, Enabler, Conduit, Facilitator, Broker, Change maker, Problem solver, Influencer, Negotiator, Connector, Networked leader, Civic educator, Talent spotter, Mentor, Service co-designer and Civic builder. It's an ever-growing job description – and whatever you think should be on it, our witnesses have told a consistent and compelling story about the changing role of councillor.

Supporting councillors, supporting communities

The principal focus of a councillor's time and energy should be on working closely with the citizens and communities they represent. Councillors should be developing dialogue and networks in their wards, from the ground up. They should have the time and support they need to be able to do that, but the overall package of support for councillors is out of step with the changing role.

A misunderstood role

Our citizens and staff are confused about what a councillors do and what they are responsible for. There are a variety of reasons, including confusion with the MP role, a lack of visibility and accountability between elections, broken links between councillors and decision-making in the areas they represent, a lack of clear information and a lack of local civic education.

Attracting the next generation of councillors

Few people are currently interested in becoming a councillor. We need to be clear about what the role is, communicate it effectively, resource it properly and make it achievable. The council alone cannot make this happen. Political parties also have a role to play.

The price and the value of representation

Citizens have told us they value the role of councillor. It is a vital part of our representative democracy. We've explored whether we should have fewer councillors, more councillors or retain our current number. To do this, we have considered both the price and the value of representation.

Councillors

“Think of a network with the councillor at the centre... There’s a whole web of activity out there... and councillors are the fishermen who look after the net.”

Neil McInroy

We think that councillors are at an important crossroads.

Our citizens have told us that they value the role of councillor, although many people have little or no direct contact with their local councillors and would like to have more. Strikingly, there’s a lot of misunderstanding and confusion about what councillors are responsible for. Our citizens often do not know what the role of councillor actually involves, who their councillors are or how to make contact. Experiences of councillors are also inconsistent across Kirklees. Yet our citizens agree that councillors can help strengthen our local communities.

Our witnesses have told us about the changing and challenging role of being a councillor. We’ve heard that councillors are enablers, change makers, problem solvers, connectors and much more. We recognise that it’s essential for us to do more to explain the role of councillor and to support councillors effectively in their changing role. Our evidence suggests that our overall support for councillors is currently out of step. Both the council and political parties must also do more to attract the next generation of councillors.

We have explored the ongoing and evolving debate about councillors very directly and in detail. We have looked at the demands on councillors, their changing role, increasing expectations, the need to have a different kind of relationship with local people, and the implications of the digital age. We’ve taken a rigorous approach, looking at wide-ranging evidence from the perspective of our local citizens and circumstances. We believe this brings a stronger sense of realism and relevance to our recommendations and suggested ways forward.

Our starting point was to understand our own history here in Kirklees ([The Role of Councillors in a Representative and Participatory Democracy](#)). We have looked at how the councillor role has evolved in Kirklees and the ways in which our council has developed and supported councillors, particularly since the Local Government Act 2000.

For the most part Kirklees Council have been innovative and forward thinking in our approaches to supporting councillors. Successes include:

Councillor development – national recognition for our approach.

Role profiles – defining the role of councillor through a collection role profiles (an exemplar approach which has been used as a template by many other councils).

Review panel – A mature and proactive Members Allowances Independent Review Panel whose work keeps pace with the dynamic nature of local government and the changing role of the councillor.

Digital councillors – leading the way in terms of supporting councillors to operate effectively in a digital age.

Whilst we should be proud of such achievements, the recent trend shows a change in the way that councillors are supported and developed. These changes have been influenced by the wider financial challenges facing councils like Kirklees. Our councillors now have more generic support and we have less focus on specialist approaches. These factors are relevant for our work.

A changing role

The councillor role is of fundamental importance within our communities. Councillors are an essential point of connection between those communities and our public services and agencies. They are at the heart of local relationships. We want to emphasise the importance of the democratic mandate which all councillors have by virtue of being elected to represent the citizens in their wards. This is a core aspect of the councillor role and is the starting point for looking at how it is changing.

There are many reasons for why the role of councillor is changing:

- Austerity means that councils and councillors have less scope and flexibility to resolve issues and fix problems in the traditional way.
- Citizens expect councillors to be more responsive in a digital age.
- There's a growing tension between participatory and representative democracy and the relationship between the citizen and the state is changing.
- Governance arrangements for ward, council and region are becoming ever-more complex, which creates extra expectations and challenges for councillors.
- There is a real or perceived erosion of power, particularly in terms of the actual decisions that councillors take.

Throughout our evidence gathering, we have heard strikingly consistent messages about the changing councillor role. Whilst the specific descriptions may differ, our witnesses have told a consistent and compelling story – and one that we are supportive of. This view of what a councillor does is different from how we currently describe the role in our profile for a Kirklees Councillor.

We received evidence from [Dr Catherine Needham](#), one of the authors of the [21st Century Councillor](#) report which explores the roles of a modern councillor and the skills and competences that are required to carry them out. The report identifies a number of key roles – Steward of place, Advocate, Buffer, Sense maker, Catalyst, Entrepreneur and Orchestrator.

[Jonathan Carr-West](#) from the [LGiU](#) (Local Government Information Unit) gave us a clear and concise summary, which we found relevant and accurate. Jonathan described the changing councillor role as:

- Being a facilitator for a community rather than a decision maker for it.
- Representing the community in the structures of the council whilst helping that community to find solutions for itself.
- Knowing where the civic energy is.
- Being the voice of the community whilst helping it to find its voice.
- Being the first line of triage between the community and public services.

Similarly, other participants described the councillor role using terms such as: Enabler, Conduit, Facilitator, Broker, Change maker, Problem solver, Influencer, Negotiator and Connector. To these we can also add:

Digitally literate – [Cllr David Harrington](#) and [Cllr Gillian Corr](#) presented a compelling case for digital literacy being a core part of the councillor role. They told us about the tangible benefits, both politically and as representatives, in blending off-line approaches with online techniques. To be effective, councillors need a core level of digital literacy that's comparable with the communities they represent.

Networked leader – from [Nick Booth](#) we heard about the importance of councillors having the skills to nurture and support networks, online and off-line.

Civic educator – Our councillors have an important role to play as civic educators. Engagement with our [Youth Council](#) has shown the important role that councillors can play in widening interest in, and understanding of, local democracy.

Talent spotter and mentor – Existing councillors have an important role in spotting and nurturing talent, so that we can attract the next generation of councillors. Their experience, expertise and knowledge are assets that need to be rooted in the role and used in a way that encourages and supports future councillors.

Service co-designer – [Dominic Campbell](#) explained that councillors can play an important role when councils and others are redesigning services. Their organisational knowledge, awareness of the needs and expectations of service users and ability to advocate changes with residents makes them well placed to contribute. This should not involve councillors becoming involved in operational service delivery, but they can be a valuable part of prototyping and service redesign.

Civic builder – [Dr Paul Hepburn](#) described councillors as the glue that holds networks together and as such they have an important role in building civic society and providing a bridge between citizens and organisations.

In addition to defining the role, we have received evidence about the importance of councillors being accountable between elections. This involves councillors demonstrating their effectiveness in delivering the role. Whilst democratic accountability through the ballot box remains a fundamental principle, it is clear that citizens would like to see councillors demonstrating the impact they are having.

Raising the profile of councillors and being clear about what the role involves will help with this. We need to do more to show the impact councillors are having. This issue has been raised by councillors as well as citizens.

Suggestions from the public included councillors engaging in more community-based debate, more interactive two-way communication, and looking at the competencies of the modern councillor to develop training that can support them in their current and future roles (for example, using new technology to communicate).

Therefore, we recognise that we need to do further work to define the councillor role in Kirklees. We also need to do more to demonstrate and communicate the impact of the role.

Supporting councillors, supporting communities

The councillor role is becoming increasingly complex, diverse and demanding. We have acknowledged the importance of being clear about what the role should involve in the future. There are other important factors that we should bear in mind:

Priorities – We need to have a sense of priority, to be clear what we want from councillors and what we can realistically expect.

Demands – We need to create the time and space for councillors to concentrate on what is important.

Support – We need to develop a package of support and development that reflects those priorities and demands.

Terms and conditions – We need to address national and local issues in respect of the “terms and conditions” for being a councillor.

We’ve heard a range of evidence and perspectives that demonstrate how the councillor role is growing more complex and often has unrealistic expectations and demands. Part of the intention of the Local Government Act 2000 was to free up time to enable councillors to do more work in their wards, but this goal has not been fully achieved. Some of the explanations for this are national, whilst others are local.

In light of the broader approach we’re taking in our work we believe that now, more than ever, the principal focus of a councillor’s time and energy should be on working closely with the citizens and communities they represent. Councillors should be developing dialogue and networks from the ground up, within their wards – and they should have the time and support they need to be able to do that.

[Professor Colin Copus](#) shared the [Councillor Commission’s interim findings](#) as part of his evidence giving. The Councillor Commission have analysed the experiences of over 250 councillors and have identified a number of issues that are relevant for our work. The local and national evidence reveals a pattern of councillors being pulled in a variety of directions – community and ward, strategic within the council, by partners, by external bodies and increasingly within the region. Councillors are also expected to play an active part in their council’s governance and decision-making processes.

“The world that the councillor inhabits is a turbulent one and as well as the constant themes, new and emerging challenges develop which test old assumptions and working practices. Austerity, devolution, government policy change and the demands on councillors to engage in complex networks of public, private and third sectors bodies at the level of the ward or strategically at the level of the council and beyond – are all reshaping expectations on councillors and their expectations they hold of their office.”

Councillor Commission interim report

Councillors could be facing a perfect storm. When set against increasing citizen expectations in a digital age and the consequences of austerity, the current role of councillor is in real danger of being undeliverable and unachievable. This is particularly the case where councillors are balancing family life with holding down employment ([Recently elected councillors](#)). As Professor Copus observed, “we need to lighten the load”. We agree with this point and we want to emphasise the need for us to have a stronger sense of priority in terms of what councillors should be focussing their time on.

We heard from [Councillor Sir Stephen Houghton](#) about the importance of ensuring that councillors have the new skills, resources, staff and money to fill the gaps when officers are no longer there: “Sending them out of the door naked won’t work”.

We feel that our starting point should be to focus on what the council can control and change in terms of both creating time and space, and improving support and development. It is for this reason we recommend that we review these activities and make changes where needed:

Meetings – As part of the full review of our governance and decision-making arrangements, we should consider the frequency of meetings, the time of day they take place and membership requirements. We should look at the full range of meetings we have and decide if they are actually necessary. Meetings are a draw on precious councillor time and should therefore only take place if they are absolutely essential.

Boards and outside bodies – We should review the full complement of boards and outside bodies that councillors are currently involved in, with a view to

reducing the number. Where councillors continue to be part of boards and outside bodies, we should do more to support councillors in carrying out those roles and responsibilities.

Officer support – We should redesign officer support in a way that has a greater focus on supporting councillors in their wards.

Information and intelligence - As part of our Intelligence Vision, Kirklees Council should provide councillors with timely information and intelligence at a ward and neighbourhood level to support councillors in working effectively and proactively with their communities. Providing timely information to councillors should be a priority.

Training and development – We should learn from our past experiences when commissioning councillor training and development. This should involve a changed approach to new councillor induction, special responsibility development, and IT provision which is more effective in supporting councillors in their changing role.

The payment of councillors is clearly relevant to this area of our work. During the course of our evidence gathering we have heard from some key witnesses whose perspectives on the councillor role and how it is rewarded have been helpful in informing our findings. The evidence of [Professor Andrew Taylor](#), Chair of the Kirklees Members Allowances Independent Review Panel (MAIRP), has been particularly helpful, as have the direct experiences of councillors and [Adrian Lythgo](#).

We are encouraged that Kirklees Council has a fresh and forward thinking approach to determining the [allowances payable to our councillors](#), based on our role profiles and bandings. There are regular reviews to make sure that the scheme keeps pace with the evolving councillor role. The most recent evidence which demonstrates this process is the review that took place in November 2015. There is a lack of public understanding about what a councillor does and also about the payment councillors receive for carrying out their role. Citizens are uncertain as to whether the role is full time and professional or part time and voluntary. By way of clarity, the current expectation is that councillors dedicate 20 hours per week to the role, plus 20 hours per month voluntarily. From an Allowances Scheme perspective we do not have full time professional councillors.

Whilst these time commitments may be the expectation, our evidence has painted a very different picture. [Professor Andrew Taylor](#) observed that over the 17 years he has chaired the Review Panel he has seen a “professionalisation” of

the role in terms of expectations and demands. Nevertheless, neither Professor Taylor nor the Democracy Commission think the councillor role should become professional and full time. This would undermine the legitimacy of the role and would narrow the diversity of citizens who can become a councillor. It is important that we give every opportunity to encourage the next generation of councillors.

At our [Public engagement events](#) some participants recognised that the job of a councillor is demanding and hard. In some people's eyes, the role of a councillor on Cabinet is a highly professionalised job, and akin to that of a high-powered businessman.

We need to understand and resolve the tensions of the role, particularly for those who combine being a councillor with having a family and career. With this in mind, some of the aspects we need to consider are:

Councillors and MPs – Unlike MPs, local councillors are rooted in their communities and are often responsible for taking or influencing significant decisions that affect those communities. At the very least, councillors should be given equal status to MPs.

Councillors are "on call" – The councillor role, done properly, is 24/7. Councillors are effectively "on-call" all the time and therefore it is acceptable to describe it as a full time role.

Working councillors – It is important that central government does more to acknowledge the challenges faced by councillors, particularly those in employment. Government should put in place changes that assist both councillors and their employers, so that neither is disadvantaged. The removal of pensions for councillors is a backward step, and one that further demonstrates an inconsistency when councillors are compared with MPs. This is particularly important if we want to attract a diverse next generation of councillors.

Allowances – In the wake of the MPs expenses scandal, councillor allowances are understandably a high profile and potentially contentious issue for local people and councillors alike. We also need to consider wider austerity and the price of representation. Such circumstances often prevent us from having a measured and independent public discussion that weighs up the breadth of all the relevant issues.

It is for this reason we advocate a national members allowances framework, designed by the Local Government Association, which local councils can use as a

basis for determining local rates. In the interim, we believe that the Kirklees Members Allowances Independent Review Panel should link annual changes in the rate of councillors' allowances to the pay rate for local government officers.

A misunderstood role

A stark headline from our engagement with citizens and staff alike was that people clearly lack understanding of the councillor role and they don't know what is involved in being a councillor. We have found that the information we currently have on our Kirklees.gov.uk website is not addressing this issue, nor do we have a fully informed officer and councillor culture.

The fact that citizens misunderstand the role of councillor has implications for a range of other factors that are relevant to our work, including:

- What citizens can legitimately expect from their councillors, particularly in times of austerity. We have shown that the role is changing so it is therefore important that citizens are aware of those changes and the impact of them.
- The extent to which officers and councillors can work together as part of an effective partnership if there is a lack of understanding and opportunity.
- How the council and political parties promote and communicate the role both online and off-line.
- How we are able to attract the next generation of councillors.
- The work we need to do with young citizens as part of wider civic awareness and engagement.

"Councillors should go out of their way to meet people at school and inform them what's happening and how it works. That's the only way everyone can get involved – by understanding how local democracy works."

Kirklees Youth Councillor

We have realised that developing a shared understanding of the role has strong links to wider citizenship and how we attract the next generation of councillors. Our recommendations should be considered with this in mind.

We have made a coherent and connected package of recommendations which addresses the immediate and longer term challenges.

As part of this process we have considered practice from elsewhere. For example, the [Be A Councillor](#) campaign, run by the Local Government Association (LGA), provides a helpful template when considering the actions that we might take locally to promote the role and generate interest. This may involve working in partnership with the LGA as we develop and refine our approach.

One of the very helpful suggestions we received from citizens at our Preview events was that it would be useful for us to develop a “family tree” for local democracy in Kirklees. Citizens are frustrated at not knowing who does what. They have told us that not being able to understand how the local political system works is one of the things that prevents people from taking part.

We think a family tree could be a good way of describing our local democracy, as it would enable us to demonstrate relationships rather than hierarchies, and would help to explain the councillor role. This might also help us to get away from the presumption that MPs are “senior partners”, which can create unrealistic expectations of who is able to do what.

Another striking aspect of our evidence is the importance of humanising the councillor role. We heard this from our [Recently elected councillors](#) and from both [Catherine Needham](#) and [Nick Booth](#). We believe we should take the opportunity to bring the refreshed councillor role to life through real life case studies that tell the story of how being a councillor can enrich your life and enable you to do something valuable for your community. We should also create more face-to-face interactions between councillors and citizens through shadowing initiatives and by creating closer links with schools and with our Youth Council.

Key suggestions from citizens who took part in our [Public engagement events](#) include:

- More opportunity for regular face-to-face contact with councillors – for example, 6-monthly ward meetings.
- Holding a Kirklees question time.
- Making more information available about who the councillors are, what they do and how to get in touch.
- Greater use of the internet and digital technology to communicate – for example, a monthly email update or a regular short video on YouTube.

We have included some of these suggestions as part of our recommendations, focusing on what we feel we can achieve and what will add value by creating a wider understanding of the councillor role.

There are also challenges for local democracy within Kirklees Council, and we recognise the importance of being aware of this. We need to have a strong organisational focus on the culture that currently exists between officers and councillors in Kirklees. 52% of respondents to the online [Kirklees Council staff survey](#) said that the councillor role needs to be clearer, whilst 59% believe that councillors should take more time to understand what officers do. 38% believe there should be more opportunity for staff to meet with councillors.

Similarly, the responses we received from councillors taking part in our survey and from political groups in Kirklees indicate that staff have an inconsistent understanding of what councillors do and the challenges they face. This is partly explained by a gradual loss of “corporate memory” as officers leave our organisation, and by councillors and officers having less opportunity to work together and develop relationships based on mutual understanding and respect.

This is also an important issue for most of our political groups. The [Labour Group](#) observed that, as experienced officers leave the council, it becomes ever more evident that staff have little experience or understanding of the role of councillors. They advocate that we should pay more attention to this issue as part of staff training and development.

The [Green and Independent Groups](#) believe that council officers should be more proactive and willing to work closely with all councillors and not see them as a hindrance.

The [Conservative Group](#) said that officer understanding of the way councillors work is “patchy” and many officers do not interact with councillors in the way that they once did. This has been a gradual process. The group would like to see a “happy medium” where there is greater flexibility from officers and an understanding of the pressures and commitments that councillors have.

An idea from citizens at our Preview events was that all council staff should be “ambassadors for local democracy”. We support this idea and we think it makes a good statement about what we should expect of our staff from day-to-day.

What is apparent is that we need to revisit and recalibrate the officer and councillor relationship in the context of wider change.

The current divide between officers and councillors is not contributing to a healthy local democracy. Councillors in a representative democracy are one of the key parts of local government and as such it's important that officers understand this wider context in terms of their roles and responsibilities. Part of this is about raising awareness, and part of this is about having the opportunity to work collaboratively as part of a newly defined relationship. We have addressed these issues in our recommendations.

Finally, given the forward looking nature of our work, we are aware of the need to help young people understand and value the role of councillor. Our young citizens are the future of our local democracy and will hopefully become the councillors of the future. It is for this reason that we advocate awareness-raising with young people in particular (including practical opportunities to meet councillors) as part of a wider citizenship package. We have included details of this elsewhere in our report.

Political parties and the next generation of councillors

We've heard about many issues with attracting the next generation of councillors. [Councillor Sir Stephen Houghton](#) explained the challenges faced by most political parties whose traditional "recruitment markets" (for example, the Trade Union movement) no longer exist in the same way as in the past. [Anthony Zacharzewski](#) explained that whilst people do want to become councillors, they do not necessarily want to go through the party political process to become one.

Another perspective was provided by [Nick Booth](#) who explained that there are many citizens who are active in civic spaces, which may prove to be great places for finding future candidates. Similarly, [Katherine Sladden and Kajal Odedra](#) from [Change.org](#) explained the ways in which petitioning platforms can be a place to find active citizens who may be interested in becoming a councillor, given that they are already actively campaigning about local issues.

Traditional pathways to becoming a councillor are changing, in need of change or disappearing, although there are opportunities to look at different and more innovative ways of nurturing and attracting new talent. We can put many of the jigsaw pieces in place to help us recruit the next generation of councillors, but there are other factors to consider. Kirklees Council should do all that is in our gift to make the councillor role attractive, understood and deliverable – but political parties and other providers and agencies also have a crucial role to play.

Although we have received a wide range of evidence about the merits or otherwise of party politics, our focus here is on the role of political parties in attracting and recruiting candidates and future councillors. Some of the issues are cultural, whilst others relate to perception and process. If the ultimate outcome is to attract the best candidates, we feel it is important to begin to address some of the issues that we have found. As [Kenny Imafidon](#) pointed out: “Voting for the best of the worst is not how politics should be”

We cannot comment on the recruitment processes of each political party, but we can share some of the issues that we have learned from our own political groups:

The [Labour Group](#) acknowledges the importance of “educating” their members and mentoring the next generation through involvement in party activity. They believe that there needs to be an understanding of what work is involved in the role of being a councillor.

The [Conservative Group](#) advocated the importance of clearly defining the councillor role, considering how the role is rewarded and demonstrating the results that councillors can achieve. They also emphasised the need to increase councillor influence by enabling councillors to take more decisions locally. They feel that we can further improve respect for the councillor role by punishing ill-discipline and bad conduct.

The [Liberal Democrat Group](#) emphasised the importance of addressing public misconceptions about councillors and reversing the culture of resentment that currently exists. We believe that this is a barrier to attracting more people to become councillors. The group would like to see a campaign aimed at attracting more people to want to become councillors, which should include greater clarity in terms of what the role involves and what councillors earn.

The [Green and Independent 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 everything that’s involved in the role. We should also 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”

With all these issues in mind, we’d like to make a number points about candidate recruitment. For the most part, these are also reflected in our recommendations:

Recruiting effective candidates – As part of candidate selection it is important that political parties attract and recruit candidates who can carry out the role effectively. It would be a positive step to make use of our revised councillor role profile and the core expectations for councillors as a basis for recruitment. This approach should be supplemented with open days and taster sessions to promote the councillor role.

Councillor terms – On balance, we are against the principle of fixed terms for councillors, although we acknowledge the importance of striking a balance between retaining experienced councillors and developing the next generation. Experienced councillors should form part of the solution and they have an important role to play in supporting and mentoring new councillors and raising the profile of the role with young people.

Networks – It's important for political parties to tap into civic and participatory networks (some of which will be online) when recruiting future councillors. The council should assist in this process where appropriate.

Civic awareness – The wider issue of civic education and awareness is a theme throughout our report and one that we feel is very relevant in attracting the next generation of councillors. It is for this reason that our recommendations include a strong focus on creating civic pathways for our young citizens. Where we can do this in Kirklees or in partnership, we will. But we feel that this is an issue which goes beyond the boundaries of Kirklees. We'd like to see a national acknowledgement of the importance of supporting the development of young citizens.

Representation and the number of councillors

Our work coincides with the challenges of austerity and the increasing need for the public sector to make considerable savings. As part of our remit it is therefore important for us to bear in mind the price of representation as well as its value.

We have explored what is required for us to ensure that citizens are effectively represented. This involves looking at the number of councillors we have now and the number we may need in the future.

We have received some useful advice from our witnesses and we have also visited two councils who have made changes to their number of councillors.

We also received these responses from the political groups on Kirklees Council:

The [Labour Group](#) are against reducing the number of councillors for Kirklees. They believe that there is an increased demand for councillors' time, alongside a reduction in the number of officers.

The [Conservative Group](#) did not express an overall view although they noted that reducing the number of councillors (and thus increasing electorate to councillor ratios) without addressing councillor roles and allowances is not feasible. The group are open-minded to the possibility of reducing the number of wards or councillors in Kirklees, dependent on the proposals brought forward by the Democracy Commission in terms of councillor roles. Any reshaping of wards would need to equalise electorates as much as possible, and take account of the implications of the Kirklees Local Plan in terms of ward size.

The [Liberal Democrat Group](#) believe there should be no reduction in the number of councillors. The specific reasons given are:

- Kirklees has some of the largest wards in the country, which needs to be reflected in the number of councillors.
- Councillor workloads are increasing.
- The council is shrinking and there are fewer council officers in post, meaning that there is a greater need for councillors.
- Councillors provide a human presence, which becomes more important in the context of the digital age. The role of the councillor is more significant than ever in engaging with communities.

The [Green and Independent Groups](#) believe that whilst Kirklees is a diverse borough with differing wards, the council should look at the feasibility of reducing the number of councillors. This should be alongside moving to a four yearly electoral cycle and having a system of proportional representation.

As part of our [Kirklees councillors survey](#) we asked whether there should be a reduction in the number of councillors. Of those who responded, 12% agreed or strongly agreed, whilst 73% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Whilst it has been helpful to understand the perspectives of our own councillors, we have also recognised the importance of understanding the process and considerations when seeking to reduce the number of councillors. We have spoken to [Professor Colin Mellors](#), Chair of the [Local Government Boundary Commission for England](#) (LGBC), who are responsible for governing and

overseeing the electoral review process, which includes consideration of the number of councillors.

In terms of the process, Professor Mellors explained that the LGBC looks at electoral forecasts on a four yearly basis and uses these forecasts in a forward looking way. The aim is to achieve equality in terms of the relationship between the electorate and councillors (so that each councillor in an area represents roughly the same number of people). The LGBC, as part of an electoral review process, will balance three other criteria when putting forward their proposals:

- The number of councillors required for decision-making.
- The number of councillors required for accountability purposes.
- The councillor capacity to provide representation (community leadership and linkage of local communities).

Professor Mellors explained that whilst the trigger for a council to reduce the number of councillors may be financial, this is not a consideration for the Boundary Commission. The LGBC would need to be satisfied with the motivations for an electoral review. We noted that the best reviews are the ones where local authorities have thought about it carefully, are positively involved in the process, and where officers are empowered to think aloud with the LGBC.

As part of our evidence gathering we spoke to councils who have had first-hand experience of the electoral review process and have reduced their number of councillors as a result of going through that process.

Knowsley Council went through a voluntary process to reduce the number of councillors from 63 to 45. One of the main motivations for the change in councillor numbers was the smaller ward sizes compared to neighbours in Merseyside. Knowsley had an average of 5,000 electorate per 3 ward members, whereas other areas in Merseyside had between 7,000 and 11,000 electorate for the same number of councillors. The positive changes that came out of the review were:

- Changing governance arrangements, with less committees.
- A review of Outside bodies.
- A review of polling stations, resulting in a cost saving for the council.
- £250k savings on member allowances.
- Savings on reductions in Governance staff.
- Younger councillors being elected.
- Improved IT offer for councillors, including laptop, tablet and smart phone.

The [London Borough of Bexley](#) currently has 63 councillors, with 21 wards, each with three councillors who are elected on a four year cycle. The baseline electorate is 179,000, with a projected electorate of 181,000 by 2021. At the time of our visit, the council was going through an electoral review process, which saw the Local Government Boundary Commission publish proposals including a reduction to 45 Councillors. An Order to implement these recommendations was made on 30th March 2017 and will come into force at the local elections in 2018.

As part of our visit we were able to gain an insight into the process Bexley went through. Officers and councillors explained that the reasons for the review were the financial impact of a reduction in the number of councillors and the opportunity for councillors to work smarter and embrace new technology. The council anticipated that a saving of £200k to £400k would be achieved through a reduction in Councillors Allowances.

We found that, in general, residents agreed to the proposed changes in Bexley, although there was some fear about the impact on response times from councillors dealing with ward enquiries and casework. An important issue has been the local geography in terms of determining wards and ward sizes, in light of the Boundary Commission's guidance on ratio of councillor to electorate. We have also gained a valuable insight into the level of resources required to manage and deliver an electoral review process. At times this has proven to be intense and time consuming, particularly from an officer perspective.

Turning to Kirklees it is helpful to remind ourselves of the current representative landscape in respect of ward size. Kirklees is a large and diverse authority – and the examples we looked at elsewhere are very different. This is summarised in the table and provides important context when considering the electoral review criteria.

How Kirklees compares now to councils that have already been through a review:

Council	Wards	Councillors	Electorate	Electors per councillor
Kirklees	23	69	312,812	4,533
Bexley	17	45	179,439	3,988
Knowsley	15	45	113,462	2,512

How many people do councillors in Kirklees represent?

Ward	Cllrs	Population	Electorate	Electors per cllr	Under 18s per ward*
Almondbury	3	18,348	13,874	4,625	3,755
Ashbrow	3	20,202	14,221	4,740	4,832
Batley East	3	19,396	13,078	4,359	5229
Batley West	3	19,917	13,549	4,516	5,239
Birstall & Birkenshaw	3	16,701	12,766	4,255	3516
Cleckheaton	3	17,476	13,315	4,438	3328
Colne Valley	3	17,655	13,584	4,528	3,632
Crosland Moor & Netherton	3	19,318	13,287	4,429	4,708
Dalton	3	17,599	12,828	4,276	3,910
Denby Dale	3	16,737	13,140	4,380	3,360
Dewsbury East	3	19,263	13,676	4,559	4,363
Dewsbury South	3	19,308	13,345	4,448	5,154
Dewsbury West	3	21,113	13,523	4,508	6,502
Golcar	3	18,433	13,856	4,619	3,853
Greenhead	3	20,597	13,893	4,631	4,449
Heckmondwike	3	17,540	13,577	4,526	4,174
Holme Valley North	3	16,944	13,104	4,368	3,565
Holme Valley South	3	19,170	14,859	4,953	4,143
Kirkburton	3	16,742	12,054	4,018	3,408
Lindley	3	19,836	14,827	4,942	4,097
Liversedge & Gomersal	3	19,941	14,145	4,715	4,321
Mirfield	3	19,852	15,689	5,230	3,846
Newsome	3	22,233	12,622	4,207	3,484
Totals	69	434,321	312,812		96,868

Source: 2017 electoral register & *2011 Census data

By way of example, if we had two councillors per ward in Kirklees (instead of the three that we have now), each councillor would represent 6,800 electors.

Although we have compared the number of electors per councillor, we should also recognise that councillors represent the children and young people in their wards.

In considering the number of councillors for Kirklees we have been strongly mindful of a number of issues:

- The pressing need to fully consider the price of democracy and not just its current and future value.
- A shrinking council and the implications that this has for the expectations placed on councillors in terms of their time and workloads.
- The size of our wards and the extent to which Kirklees circumstances are directly comparable to those in other councils.
- The uncertainty that currently exists with regards to regional devolution. As we present our report it is still unclear how issues of geography, governance, accountability and decision-making will be resolved. This will inevitably have implications for Kirklees and how our citizens are represented.

Having weighed these factors up in the balance, alongside the evidence we have received, we have not found a compelling case to reduce the number of councillors in Kirklees at the current time.

As a Commission we could not reach a consensus and therefore we recommend continuing with our current arrangements, with 69 councillors representing 23 wards (with three councillors representing each ward).

It is important that Kirklees Council sees this as a very live issue, and one that should be revisited when some of the “unknowns” become much clearer. This should be when changing councillor roles are better defined, when the future size and shape of the council is clear and when we have more clarity about our place and role in the region.

We feel our work provides important foundations for the number of councillors in Kirklees to be revisited in the future.

Decision-making

Public consultation has become meaningless

Consultation is not currently enabling or facilitating active citizens. In fact, it appears to be having the opposite effect. We should have a much stronger focus on genuine dialogue and engagement as part of our changing relationship with citizens and communities across Kirklees. We need to develop continuous relationships, instead of stop-start consultations.

One size does not fit all

Citizens would like to have a menu of options for how they can get involved. Decisions shouldn't just involve "the usual suspects" – we need to value the knowledge of our citizens and be clear about who we need to hear from for each decision. We can't consult on every decision, but we can be more selective in our methods – and get better informed decisions as a result.

The how, not just the what

Democracy isn't about always being the person who wins. It's unlikely that everyone will agree with every decision, but it's important for citizens to know what's happening at every stage – whether or not they agree with the ultimate decision. It's vital for citizens to know how decisions are made, and not just what those decisions are, as this helps to build trust. We need to involve people in the whole journey.

Councillors as interpreters

Councillors can do much to explain local democracy to our citizens. They can play an important role in interpreting and sharing information about decision-making. This could help to create opportunities for citizens to engage with councillors (both online and off-line). We know that citizens of all ages want more civic awareness.

Changing our meetings culture

Our meetings should not be hard to follow or engage with. Meetings provide an ideal opportunity for the council and our councillors to engage, share and foster a wider understanding of how our local democracy works. We need to say "we're open for business and you're welcome".

Governance, accountability and decision-making

Everyone wants to feel that they have a strong voice in the decisions that affect their everyday lives. Our citizens have told us that they want our decision-making to be easier to understand, they'd like to be more involved in the process and to have more contact with decision makers. They also want decisions to be made at as local a level as possible.

Governance, accountability and decision-making are fundamentally important features of local government. Elected representatives take decisions in public on matters that directly affect local citizens. This continues to be a strength and a cornerstone of our local democracy. Yet we've learned that often our citizens don't realise that decisions are being taken in public, and many people aren't aware of the things we already do to make this process more open.

We've had the chance to hear a range of perspectives that have helped us to understand both the opportunities and challenges we face in making our culture, systems, processes and structures relevant in the 21st century.

Whilst it would have been easy for us to solely focus on structures, we have taken a broader view. We've tried to understand decision-making from both a citizen and a councillor perspective, whilst also thinking about wider issues such as the opportunities presented by digital technology, our approach to consultation, and wider engagement activities as part of the decision-making journey.

Citizen engagement

We have identified a number of themes as part of our [Public engagement events](#), through feedback from our political groups and via our survey for councillors:

- Citizens think public engagement in decision-making and policy development is often tokenistic. Many councillors also feel distanced from the process and feel they are limited in terms of their ability to influence and challenge decisions.
- The council's approach to consultation makes this problem worse.
- The council's democratic content and the way in which it is currently communicated is not helpful for citizen awareness and engagement.
- Citizens find the format of council meetings, and the supporting processes, hard to follow and engage with.
- Decisions should be taken at the most appropriate and local level.

Consultation, engagement and decision-making

We recognise that decision-making, especially in the current climate, is complex, varied and challenging. It should involve weighing up a rich mixture of data, information, intelligence and insight, with a view to taking the best decision possible. During the course of our work, participants have frequently commented on the issue of engagement and consultation as part of the decision-making process. The evidence we've received shows that we need to revisit our approach in these areas.

We know that the council is not in a position to engage or consult about every decision, but we need to consider how we can use consultation and engagement techniques effectively, selectively and proportionately as part of the decision-making process. In order to do this, it is important for us to understand the position we're starting from and the issues behind people's attitudes to consultation.

We've heard a wide range of evidence that has helped us to explore and understand the distinction between genuine engagement and consultation. We have also heard a variety of perspectives that try to diagnose the current problem.

Councillor Robert Light observed that: "the public are cynical because the council leads them to believe there are not a range of options being considered and the decision has already been made. If the role of councillors is as community leaders then they need to be in a place to put options to communities at an early stage so we can understand what they want. Citizens want to feel that there are a range of options they can influence, not be presented with a *fait accompli*. When their voice seems deliberately ignored then they will lose faith in the decision-making process."

Anthony Zacharzewski explained that: "the challenge with traditional consultation is that an audience is picked up and dropped and therefore does not build a continuous relationship involving audiences who can follow issues through... Consultation should be done earlier with a larger mix of approaches and it should be clear at the outset what the boundaries of the decision are. There needs to be a build up to consultation and account for why the decision flows from the consultation evidence. It is important to convey at the start what the strategic options would be, what the differences are and what might happen."

Our [Partner organisations](#) asked that in future the council should only carry out “real” consultations as opposed to those where there is no real choice, as this gives the impression that the decision has already been made. This view was shared by citizens at our [Public engagement events](#), who highlighted the issue of “meaningless public consultation”. Local people’s involvement is essential, but we need to do this effectively and include different people, not just the usual suspects. Citizens are keen to put their views forward and increase their engagement in decision-making. People are very interested in knowing how decisions are made, not just what those decisions are. It’s important that we help citizens to understand all stages of our decision-making processes, as this helps to build trust.

We accept this analysis and we believe it’s time to rethink Kirklees Council’s approach to consultation. We should begin to place a stronger focus on genuine engagement with citizens and local councillors. Citizens said they have an appetite for greater involvement whilst not necessarily wishing to take the decisions themselves. Citizens still acknowledge the importance of elected representatives taking those decisions.

We believe this provides an opportunity to make a virtuous connection between participatory and representative democracy. We can design new approaches that bring citizens with us as part of the decision-making journey. Democracy isn’t about always being the person who wins. It’s unlikely that everyone will agree with every decision, but our witnesses have emphasised that it’s important for citizens to know what’s happening at every stage – whether or not they agree with the ultimate decision.

[Sarah Allan](#) from [Involve](#) explained that there is real space for more citizen engagement in decision-making. This involves us recognising that citizen knowledge exists, accessing it and designing the most appropriate approaches to facilitate engagement. The fact that decisions are usually issue-based provides a real opportunity to effectively engage, as participants are more likely to understand issues as opposed to processes and structures. We believe that [Involve’s 9 Steps to Getting Public Engagement Right](#) provides a helpful reference point.

[Katie Ghose](#) from the [Electoral Reform Society](#) provided us with examples from Holland and Canada. These demonstrate a more engaging, collaborative and deliberative approach which involves citizens working alongside elected representatives to work through a topic or decision in a different way. Katie also shared details about the [Citizens' Assembly](#) pilots in Sheffield and Southampton which provided another model of engagement, albeit a more resource-intensive approach. We have also heard from [Anthony Zacharzewski](#) about approaches in Scotland and Barcelona which involve “building audiences” to take on the decision-making journey, through to implementation and beyond.

In summary, we feel that the council's current approach to consultation is not helpful for citizens and councillors alike – this includes decision makers. Kirklees Council should revisit our approach. Citizens are unclear about the options and about whether there is an ongoing dialogue. This has created a real or perceived view that the decision has already been made and that the council is merely going through a tick box exercise.

We need to have a much greater focus on ongoing citizen engagement, designed in a way that takes citizens along the policy or decision-making journey. We should learn from successful practice from elsewhere. If we are serious about developing active citizens it is important that we work harder to harness the knowledge and energy they have. It is for this reason that we recommend a shift away from our current approach to consultation, towards genuine engagement. We should selectively pilot some new approaches that are relevant for our local area.

Democratic content and public awareness

Our research has shown that there are other 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 our [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.

Our evidence has prompted us to think about how we present and communicate our local democratic content. This 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.

Whilst we feel that this is a real challenge for Kirklees Council, we do have a good starting point. We are an early adopter of webcasting and we use social media to curate some of our public meetings content. We have a track record in seeking to be innovative and transparent. Whilst we recognise that we can do more, this is a strength from which we can build. We can also do more to raise awareness about the live content that we already provide.

We heard from [Catherine Howe](#) and [Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira](#) who both provided helpful insight, particularly in light of the work that has taken place at a national government level as part of the [Digital Democracy Commission](#). Both shared some important issues for us to consider when looking at democratic content, including: adopting a multi-media approach, providing information in different formats, creating channels and opportunities for different types of audiences and thinking about the language that we use.

We should also recognise that councillors can do much to explain local democracy to our citizens. They can play an important role in interpreting and sharing information about decision-making. This could involve greater opportunities to engage with councillors as part of our decision-making processes (online and off-line). We could create opportunities for more publicly broadcast councillor debates or question time sessions on issues that are important to local citizens.

Councillors could explain what is happening as part of the democratic decision-making process in the same way that political correspondents report on significant discussions in Parliament. These points link with the notion of “civic educator” as part of a councillor’s changing role.

In terms of our traditional democratic content, we recognise that there are a number of barriers that we need to overcome:

- The language of decision-making is difficult for people to understand and this becomes a barrier to engagement and involvement.
- The scope of a decision-making process is often unclear, and citizens don’t know what stage we are at along that journey. This can erode trust as citizens are unclear about what they can and cannot influence, and it leads to people feeling that decisions have already been made.
- Content should be based more on citizens' needs. Much democratic content is not written in this way or made available in alternative formats that citizens would find easier to access.

We aim to address all these issues through our recommendations, whilst at the same time recognising the need for the council to discharge its statutory responsibilities in terms of publicly accountable decision-making.

In the future we therefore recommend:

- **Developing of a set of democratic content standards** that we can use as a basis for all content we produce and publish as part of decision-making. We aim to do this in partnership with the wider sector.
- **Using video narratives** before and after significant issues are discussed, to help explain what’s happening. This should include independent reporting from citizen journalists.
- **Quarterly question time events** involving all group leaders, the content and agenda for which will be set by the citizens of Kirklees. These will be broadcast and allow questions to be taken online as well as in person.
- **Supporting all councillors with digital technology** so they can understand and embrace different ways of explaining the council’s governance and decision-making processes to our citizens. Commission members should pilot this approach.
- **Doing more with our webcasting technology** to make use of its full capability, beyond purely broadcasting meetings. In particular we should take advantage of the interactive technology that currently exists.

Our meetings culture

Whilst local decision-making is not all about committee meetings, it's still an important area which we want to cover. Elsewhere in this report we have shared the feedback we've received from councillors about the pressures placed on their time. One of these pressures relates to the time they spend in meetings, both inside and outside the council.

The [Conservative Group](#) have observed that it seems bureaucracy has replaced democracy, with a growth in the volume of meetings particularly during office hours. Our [Recently elected councillors](#) also highlighted the tradition for the majority of Kirklees meetings to take place during the day. This is by no means ideal for councillors who are in employment or indeed our citizens who may wish to attend public meetings. We recommend that the review of our governance arrangements takes account of these issues.

Looking beyond volume and timing, we have also considered the conduct of our meetings, our meeting culture and whether our meetings are accessible and engaging for our citizens. Whilst some of this is about our democratic content it is also about changing the tone and the story – it is about the “meeting experience”.

As part of our work we have heard about some different ways in which meetings can be run. [Peter Macfadyen and Mel Usher](#) explained the unique approach in Frome, where all meetings are café style, with councillors sitting alongside residents. This has required a different approach to chairing meetings but it has been positive in terms of making the council part of the wider community. We have also heard from [Theo Bass](#) and [Katie Ghose](#) who shared some different examples from other countries. These models make a virtue of digital technologies or adopt a more deliberative approach with citizens. We feel that we can learn from these examples.

We feel 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.

Being proactive in inviting young people to our meetings (and actively involving them) is something that we believe should be a strong feature in the future. It is for these reasons we recommend that Kirklees Council should look at the format and culture of our public meetings as part of our overall review of governance arrangements.

We also recommend that Kirklees Council should develop online and off-line interpretive information for the public relating to all of our public meetings. Such information can be used at meetings but can also be part of wider civic education about the council and our democratic processes. This fits with our approach to civic awareness.

Our governance, accountability and decision-making structures

In looking at our current governance structures we have recognised the importance of understanding our local context. The background research we received ([Governance, Accountability and Decision Making](#)) provided a thorough account of the ways in which our governance arrangements have changed over the years.

During this period Kirklees has operated both a committee system and a model of executive governance incorporating Cabinet and Overview and Scrutiny. Since 2000 we have also operated some form of local decision-making structure. There have been many changes to our structure and governance processes over the years, some of which were made voluntarily, some of which were driven by legislation. These factors explain how we got to where we are today.

We've gathered evidence so we can understand people's perceptions about the effectiveness of our current governance arrangements. We have also researched perspectives from elsewhere as part of our public inquiries and through visits to councils who have different arrangements in place.

We are grateful to the [Association of Democratic Services Officers](#) (ADSO) who explained that good governance should be based on the principles of transparency and accountability, underpinned by robust rules and procedures which should govern how decisions are made. In order to be effective, governance processes need to be clear and accessible to both the public and councillors alike. They also need to be flexible so that organisations can adapt to changing circumstances.

We have also heard from [Craig Wright](#) who provided us with information about the principles of good governance as set out in the [UK Corporate Governance Code](#). His perspectives on both public and private sector governance considerations were incredibly helpful.

We gathered local insight about the effectiveness of our current governance arrangements. As part of our [Kirklees Councillors survey](#) we asked councillors how effective they think our current model of governance and decision-making is. The response was:

4% felt it was highly effective
29% felt it was fairly effective
19% felt it was neither effective nor ineffective
27% felt it was fairly ineffective
21% felt it was highly ineffective

The overall message we've received via comments is that more councillors need to be involved. Those who commented generally feel that Scrutiny is not performing its role effectively, and needs to be more politically independent. Most comments about Cabinet imply that this system affords a relatively small group of councillors too much influence. Respondents suggested that we should move to a structure where all councillors (or all those that are interested, and have time) are involved. Councillors also noted that backbenchers currently have little influence and that this should change.

We also asked whether more decisions should be taken locally in Kirklees. 78% of those councillors who responded either agreed or strongly agreed with this.

In terms of the feedback from political groups, the [Labour Group](#) believes that the current Cabinet system means that policy decisions are taken by only a few councillors. This has removed most councillors from direct involvement in decision-making, which has resulted in many councillors feeling disenfranchised. The group advocates the development of a Cabinet-hybrid system.

The [Conservative Group](#) points to the ineffectiveness of the current model in light of the weakening of the Scrutiny role, whilst acknowledging that the answer does not lie in a return to a committee system. The overall consensus was that the correct decision-making format lays somewhere between the existing Cabinet and Scrutiny system and the old committee system. The group have a strong feeling that local councillors should take decisions on local issues. They think that Kirklees

Council's attempts at devising real local devolution to local areas or wards have been poor.

The [Liberal Democrat Group](#) believes that the Kirklees model of governance and decision-making would be more effective if we adopted the committee system. There should be a greater focus on local governance and accountability which should be built from the ground up.

The [Green and Independent Groups](#) feel that the current governance model concentrates power and responsibility in too few people and works against wider councillor involvement in decision-making. This factor is important in a hung council. The group supports a change in the governance model, for example to a committee system, which allows all councillors to have a greater say and stake in the decisions that are made. In terms of local decision-making the groups feel the current District Committee model lacks local identity and does not facilitate effective decision-making.

There is also an opportunity for us 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.

For our councillors there is clearly a growing consensus that our current arrangements are misfiring, with a common theme being the lack of real or perceived opportunity for all councillors to be involved in the governance and decision-making of the council. Whilst views about the potential solutions differ, there is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed.

In terms of the structural considerations we have heard different perspectives about the merits or otherwise of differing governance models. [Ed Hammond](#) from [CfPS](#) (Centre for Public Scrutiny) explored in detail the respective strengths and weaknesses between executive governance and a model based on the committee system. Ed described the strengths and weaknesses of the committee system as:

Strengths:

- It's an opportunity for more councillors to be involved in decision-making.
- It encourages a more formal and reliable approach to business planning. The Cabinet system can result in a sloppy approach to decision-making.
- It requires officers to think more carefully about how to involve and brief councillors.

Weaknesses:

- It doesn't always deliver a consensual approach. Committee systems can still deliver dictatorial approaches, where committee chairs can continue to manage the work and the discussions.
- There's a need for a political safety valve which works against the opportunity to have a balanced decision-making system.

Ed was very clear that neither model is necessarily better than the other, as it strongly depends on leaders, councillors and the culture within particular authorities. He explained that it is not possible to draw conclusions on a national basis, but more important to place an onus on councillors and communities to determine what will work in a particular council. Ed advised that it would not be possible or advisable for Kirklees Council to switch over to an approach that may work elsewhere without first considering what will work locally. The most important thing is for councils to reflect on what they do. This will force thinking on wider issues about democracy and decision-making. It is only at this point that councils should then think about structures, processes and models. We are supportive of this point, which is reflective of the approach that Kirklees Council have taken in developing the Democracy Commission.

[Rob Vincent](#) provided us with an insight into governance models by sharing his experience as a Chief Executive. Rob explained that, based on that experience, the Cabinet model has on the whole been better for Kirklees. Rob observed that the committee system has a "complexity and fuzziness" in terms of responsibility, with committees referring the majority of decisions to Council.

Looking to the future, [Councillor Sir Stephen Houghton](#) provided a different perspective when he explained to us that governance models are likely to be more diffuse. Increasingly, services will be delivered either in partnership, by community groups or by other private providers, which will mean that our methods of governance will change. This will require a careful balance between tight and loose governance arrangements, particularly where councillors will be looking to community groups to play a more proactive and prominent role. There needs to be a balance between good and proportionate governance, whilst not stifling innovation.

This is an issue that our [Partner organisations](#) have also raised. They agree that it's important for us to move to a more collaborative model of decision-making in light of the challenges faced by both the council and our partners. This should build on the democratic mandate, which should not be a barrier.

We visited the [London Borough of Kingston-Upon-Thames](#) where we had the opportunity to speak with senior councillors and officers who explained how (and why) they moved from a Cabinet model to a committee system. The main reason for change was a growing feeling amongst backbench councillors that they were not involved in decision-making. This is also an issue for many councillors in Kirklees. The first stage of the process involved a move to a hybrid system, followed by a full blown committee system. This includes four strategic committees and four neighbourhood committees. In terms of the impact, we found that fewer decisions are now being made by councillors as more decisions are being delegated to officers, and some operational functions are being transferred to outside organisations through commissioning arrangements.

Having considered all of the evidence, our conclusions are:

- Our current governance arrangements are not working to the satisfaction of the majority of our councillors. This is an issue across the political groups. Whilst this is not the same as a rejection of the current model, it is nevertheless an issue.
- By its nature the Cabinet model concentrates decision-making in the hands of the few. This has strengths, although the real or perceived lack of opportunity for councillors to genuinely become involved and influence decision-making is a consistent theme and a real issue in a hung council.
- Our findings show that Scrutiny isn't proving to be fully effective in engaging councillors in decision-making. This is an important issue, particularly if Kirklees Council chooses to retain a Cabinet model of decision-making.
- The public and councillors alike want to see more decisions taken locally. It appears that current models of "double devolution" have not fully satisfied that need, particularly in terms of citizens feeling they have real influence.
- Our overall focus should not be on structures but on the outcomes that we want to achieve, the culture we are seeking to develop and our local context.

With the last point in mind we will not be focussing on structures and processes as part of our recommendations. Our work has shown that there is no perfect model to be plucked off the shelf. We need to develop the perfect model for Kirklees and this requires detailed consideration. We believe that our role is to set a series of design principles that should be used as a basis for a full review of our governance and decision-making structures and processes. This review need not be a long process as we have already carried out much of the preparatory work.

Our design principles for governance and decision-making are:

Be open and engaging – we should start by saying “we’re open for business and you’re welcome”. Our decision-making should be open and transparent, and we should be encouraging and welcoming to citizens.

Actively involve all our councillors – we should make sure that all councillors have the opportunity to participate – to influence and inform decisions at an early stage. Councillors have responsibility for understanding the processes of decision-making, engaging constructively and representing their communities effectively. They should be sensible and responsible contributors to the governance of the council. There is a responsibility on the decision makers to share information as early and openly as possible, to listen and not to come with a closed mind.

Based on dialogue, not consultation – we should make decisions in a way that focusses on dialogue and engagement with citizens and councillors, rather than on consultation.

Built around the needs of the citizen – we should take decisions at the most appropriate, relevant and sensible level. This should include decisions delegated to officers as well as decisions at a more local level within Kirklees.

Create opportunities for young citizens – we should create opportunities for active engagement with young people and aim to foster a wider understanding of decision-making in a local democracy.

Has effective checks and balances – we should make sure we have effective ways of scrutinising decisions. If we continue the Overview and Scrutiny function we need to change our approach, culture and the profile of Scrutiny within the council. This is an issue for officers and councillors alike. We should have a greater focus on the scrutiny of strategic priorities, early dialogue as part of the decision-making process and much greater citizen involvement in the scrutiny process. This should build on the current scrutiny co-optee arrangements, which are a strength.

Lightens the load – we should aim to reduce the pressures on councillors as part of governance and decision-making. Any new arrangements should aim to make the role of the councillor easier and free up time from attending meetings.

Makes the most of regional devolution – we should make sure that our governance and decision-making arrangements are aligned in a way that allows Kirklees Council and our communities to fully realise the opportunities and benefits of regional devolution.

In coming to these conclusions we are strongly aware of the importance of the officer and councillor relationship, which is at the heart of effective governance and decision-making. For any new arrangements to be effective it is crucial that this partnership is a strong one, where both understand each other's context and contribution. This is a cultural issue for Kirklees Council, which requires different officer and councillor relationships from those that we have now.

Elections

The first step

Registration is the first step on the journey to voting. It's important for us to do as much as we can to support our young citizens in making that step as early as possible. We must also continue our outreach and engagement activities to support citizens with registering to vote.

The ticking time bomb

Elections are an area of growth. The number and complexity of elections are increasing. Changes such as Individual Electoral Administration have created extra pressures. This means that it's challenging for councils to run elections and it's difficult to maintain numbers on the electoral register. Without more support or better ways of doing things, the situation is unsustainable.

Standing for something

Voters are motivated by having a competitive choice of candidates and by having a sense that your vote will count for something. Our citizens told us that it's important to get the best people into the council. There is strong public demand for better information on candidates, especially about "where they stand". We need to make sure that citizens can easily find accurate, timely, trustworthy, relevant information that is based around their needs.

Local elections matter

Local government touches every aspect of our day-to-day lives, and yet most people do not see local elections as important. Citizens have greater trust in local politicians than in national government, but we don't see this reflected in voter turnout at local elections. We must do more to tell the story of why local democracy matters. We need to improve people's understanding of the local political system and its importance.

Votes at 16

Our young citizens told us that they feel invisible in local politics. They want more of a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. In light of our evidence as a whole, we recommend that government should legislate to lower the voting age to 16.

Elections

We want to develop a vibrant local democracy where all citizens have a stake in their place, a stake which translates through to democratically-elected local councillors through the ballot box.

Our work is firmly grounded in the fundamental principle of representative local democracy. So it's vital that we look at elections in detail – including electoral registration, voter accessibility, engagement and turnout, and the electoral cycle. We've explored all the different issues about elections as a whole, beyond purely the mechanics of voting.

The background information ([Elections and the Electoral Cycle](#)) that we have considered has proved helpful in setting both the national and Kirklees context. Some of the key points for us to consider are:

- **Election trends** – Elections are an area of “growth”. Electoral episodes are increasing in both their diversity and complexity. There is an increasing tendency to combine different elections on the same day.
- **Electoral Law** – The Law Commission has described electoral law as “complex, voluminous and fragmented”. This currently includes 17 statutes and 30 pieces of secondary legislation.
- **Responsibilities** – Electoral Services are responsible for electoral registration and the conduct of all elections and referendums.
- **The electoral cycle** – Kirklees is a Metropolitan District Council. Our councillors are elected for a four year term, by thirds. This means that at each election a third of the council (23 seats, one in each ward) is elected. We hold local elections (formally called District Elections) in three years out of every four. This means that in one year of the cycle there is no local election. We call this a “fallow year”.

We have looked at elections from the perspective of our citizens, in order to better understand the barriers and motivations to democratic engagement and voting.

Through our [Public engagement events](#) we've developed a more detailed understanding of some of the issues that citizens feel are important. These include the need for trustworthy, timely, accessible and valuable information about what is being done by local politicians and what their plans are. Citizens would like a fairer voting and campaigning system, to help get the best people into the council. They feel that voting-related information should be available through a

wide variety of channels, and that people should be given the opportunity to vote in as many ways as possible, including online.

We have explored these issues, along with others, and looked at how we can improve the voter experience as a whole.

Electoral registration

Registering to vote is an important step on the journey to voting. It is not just about processes and systems. It needs to involve engaging, educating and raising awareness about the value of participation. It is therefore right that we look at electoral registration in the wider context of local democracy. In particular, we need to look at ways in which we can improve current arrangements in order to maximise take up. This involves continuing to reach out to those who feel socially excluded and to empower citizens to have their say, removing any barriers (perceived or real) and working with both our young citizens as well as those who are already of a voting age.

Individual Electoral Registration (IER) was introduced as part of the Electoral Registration and Administration Bill 2012, placing a requirement for each person to register to vote individually, rather than by household. As part of our evidence gathering we heard from [Sharon Salvanos](#), Electoral Services Manager for Kirklees, who told us about the local implications of the introduction of IER.

In terms of registration, we recognise that IER has generally been a positive development although it is not the finished product. There are clearly issues in terms of bureaucracy and increased cost of registration (particularly due to the volume of letters, postage and duplicate applications). Some of this was inevitable in light of the move from a household system of registration to a model based on the individual.

Whilst central government funding has helped the transition, we are encouraged by the hard work that has taken place locally to manage the move to IER. We have maintained our levels of people who are registered to vote in Kirklees, at pre-IER levels. One of the important factors explaining this success is our development of an innovative approach to electoral outreach, an approach that has been shared as an exemplar of good practice by the Cabinet Office.

Outreach work in Kirklees since 2014 has involved the delivery of a range of events, joint working with organisations and community groups to raise public awareness and an ongoing drive to promote and maximise registration across the borough. Whilst these arrangements have been temporarily funded (by the council and government) we recommend that arrangements are put in place to make the Electoral Outreach Officer posts permanent once government funding runs out.

The allocation of funding provided by the government for IER continues to reduce year-on-year, in line with ongoing development of the system. However, we are concerned that the annual reduction may not be balanced by the efficiencies realised. Electoral administration (registration and elections) continues to be an area of growth and whilst the government has invested money, this might not continue.

The outreach role should be expanded to include a strong focus on relevant work to support a wider Local Civic Education programme in Kirklees. This is an important part of the council's role in doing as much as we can to encourage and maximise registration.

We have also heard about other initiatives that could be developed locally to maximise registration. Given our large student population there are real opportunities to work collaboratively with colleges and the University of Huddersfield to integrate electoral registration with the student registration process. We recommend that we develop this kind of approach in Kirklees, building on the successful work that has already taken place in Sheffield.

A strong theme throughout the course of our work has been the focus on including our young citizens in local democracy. We've heard from [Kenny Imafidon](#) of [Bite the Ballot](#) who explained the work that has taken place nationally to raise awareness amongst young people about the importance of politics, democracy and voting.

Kenny advocated a number of proposals that could improve electoral registration for young people, including:

- automatic registration for 16 and 17 year olds
- closer partnership working with schools to register young people in their places of education
- channelling information through people that young people trust
- making greater use of the opportunities presented by digital technology

Given that registration is the first step on the journey to voting, we believe it's important that Kirklees Council and central government do as much as we can to support our young citizens in making that step as early as possible. It is for this reason we recommend that government legislates to introduce compulsory registration at the age of 16. Furthermore, we recommend that Kirklees Council should work collaboratively with schools to develop an optional approach to registering young people at the age of 16, pending a change in legislation.

We have also heard a national perspective on voter registration from [John Turner](#), Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators, and [Andrew Scallan and Tom Hawthorn](#) from the Electoral Commission. We learned about a number of issues that we believe are important for increasing the opportunities for voter registration:

- the feasibility and benefits of developing a national database and a single register
- a single point of entry to the register, linked to a unique identifier (for example, National Insurance number)
- registration on the day of polling
- linking registration to issuing National Insurance numbers to 16 year olds

Whilst there may be legislative or technical barriers to achieving some of these proposals, we encourage government to actively pursue them in order to deliver the objective of as accurate and complete an electoral register as possible.

Looking ahead we have also heard about what [John Turner](#) has described as the "ticking time bomb" with regards to resourcing electoral administration once transitional funding from government runs out. [Andrew Scallan and Tom Hawthorn](#) explained that the registration process is now more expensive for Electoral Registration Officers and the demographic profile of areas means that it is increasingly difficult to maintain numbers on the register.

We share the Electoral Commission's concern that this situation is not sustainable. We call on government to explore the ways in which more cost-effective and less bureaucratic ways of undertaking IER can be found. This should involve better and more innovative use of available data and giving local Returning Officers the tools to do the job more effectively.

Voter engagement

Clearly an important aspiration of representative democracy should be to maximise voter turnout, particularly at local elections where citizens have an important stake in influencing what happens in their area. Issues of accessibility, engagement and voter awareness are important factors that affect citizen behaviour in the context of voting.

It is important to note that our work has coincided with the [government response](#) to Sir Eric Pickles' [review of electoral fraud](#). In light of the voter experience, some of these recommendations are relevant, particularly those relating to the introduction of voter identification. This would mean that every person who is voting at a polling station would need to show a form of ID.

We know that the government's recommendation for voters to show ID at the polling station is likely to create additional challenges for Returning Officers. For example, it could push more voters towards requesting a postal vote, which would add to the financial costs of managing elections. We also recognise that it may have serious implications in terms of discouraging voter engagement and turnout.

Episodes of electoral fraud are relatively low, but the perception of fraud is higher. This is important because these perceptions can undermine people's confidence in the voting process. If people feel there is a problem with the system, they may be less likely to vote.

"A vote defrauded is terrible
but a thousand votes discouraged
is worse"

Anthony Zacharzewski

We believe it is important for us to strike a balance between retaining confidence and integrity in the voting system, and encouraging turnout.

Our research has revealed that there are a wide range of factors which influence a citizen's motivation to vote. These include:

- The profile and importance given to local government elections when compared to national elections.
- The quality of candidates and the availability of information about them.
- The quality, accuracy and accessibility of information relating to the election.

- The mechanics of voting and the extent to which the current approach fits in with the diverse and busy lives that citizens lead.
- The wider issue of civic education and engagement for our young citizens.

It's important for us to focus on what Kirklees Council can do to help, and then look to government to address some of the wider issues that are not in our gift.

Voter information

As part of our evidence gathering we heard from [Joe Mitchell and Sym Roe](#) from [Democracy Club](#). They shared the findings of their [Towards Better Elections](#) report on the May 2016 elections and the future of digital services for democracy.

Sym and Joe explained that one of the most effective ways of closing the gap between voters and candidates is by providing better information. They discovered a lack of nationwide knowledge about what elections were happening and where. They also learned that there is strong public demand for better information on candidates, especially about "where they stand".

As part of Democracy Club's work, they have independently crowdsourced candidate data with a view to making it available and accessible to the voter. This resulted in the development of the "[Who Can I Vote For?](#)" website, which in 2016 made the details of candidates for all UK elections (13,000 candidates) available in one place for the first time. They have also created a polling station finder facility "[Where Do I Vote?](#)"

Democracy Club have based their work on citizen needs. The top five Google searches in the UK on the day of the 2015 elections were:

- Who should I vote for?
- Who are my local candidates?
- How do I vote?
- Where do I vote?
- Where is my polling station?

Whilst information provision is not solely a council issue, Kirklees Council has an important role to play in providing good quality information about elections and voting. This includes the information we place on our website, blogs and social media channels, and how we make our data available for people to share and

re-use in other ways. This point is supported and acknowledged by the Electoral Commission, who are advocates of Democracy Club's work.

With this in mind we recommend that Kirklees Council should work in partnership with Democracy Club to pilot the ways in which data can be used to increase voter awareness and engagement. The learning should be used to develop a national standard that all councils should aspire to achieving. This work should involve making polling districts and polling station data available to Democracy Club, in a format that meets their [GoldPlus technical standard](#), in addition to sharing other essential elections data in recommended formats.

Voter turnout

We have discovered that voter turnout is a complex issue - one that is explained and informed by a number of factors. These include the motivations for people to vote, the combinations of elections, the quality of candidates and the extent to which national and local issues dominate as part of each electoral episode.

For example, [Katie Ghose](#) from the Electoral Reform Society explained to us that, whilst there is greater trust in local politicians, we don't see this reflected in voter turnout at local elections. [John Turner](#) explained that there are different motivations for citizens to become engaged with politics in the British model than in other countries. For example, people in Africa will walk for eight hours to vote because they believe local politicians can change the way they will live their lives. People do not have the same belief or incentive in the UK. The average turnout for local elections in the UK is around 30%.

John Turner further explained his belief that politics has to matter to people. If politicians do something (or are perceived to be able to do something) that will drive change or affect someone's lifestyle, then this will increase voter involvement and responses. Citizens will vote if they think it is worthwhile, whether there is some gain or incentive for them to vote.

[Andrew Scallan and Tom Hawthorn](#) explained that research shows that higher participation in voting is driven by having a competitive pool of candidates, alongside a feeling that "your vote matters". When these drop away, so does turnout. As part of our [Public engagement events](#) we heard a sense of frustration in terms of a lack of knowledge about candidates. Our citizens don't know what

candidates stand for or what existing councillors have achieved, and they have few opportunities to hear candidates debating issues in the run up to an election.

In terms of Kirklees, it's difficult for us to directly compare turnout figures across the country, as councils are on different electoral cycles (so we are not comparing like with like in all cases). However, we have looked at turnout for local elections across West Yorkshire over the past four years. All councils in West Yorkshire are currently on the same electoral cycle, with local elections being held three years in every four.

Council	Turnout in 2014	Turnout in 2015	Turnout in 2016
Bradford	38.00%	65.00%	38.00%
Calderdale	36.39%	65.15%	37.80%
Kirklees	35.83%	66.22%	36.41%
Leeds	34.66%	71.33%	36.14%
Wakefield	30.17%	57.60%	30.30%

It's worth noting that in all three years, the local elections were held on the same day as another election, and this has an effect on turnout.

- 2014 - local elections were combined with European Elections.
- 2015 - local elections were combined with the General Election, and also Parish and Town Council Elections took place in some areas.
- 2016 - local elections were combined with the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections.

The most recent stand-alone local election in Kirklees was in May 2012 and the turnout was 35.03%.

We recognise that the council alone cannot address all of these issues. The quality and visibility of candidates, public debate of important and relevant issues, and an overall sense that voting matters are all issues that present complex challenges. Candidate selection is an issue for political parties, which we have addressed elsewhere in this report. In terms of the opportunities to know more about candidates, we hope our work with Democracy Club will begin to improve this.



We also acknowledge the importance of citizens having the opportunity to meet and hear from their candidates in the run up to a local election. We've heard that there is some degree of support for having local hustings as one way of making this happen.

Schools and young voters

Continuing the theme of what the council can do to help involve more people in elections, we heard from [Sharon Salvanos](#) about the growing pressure to find accessible and acceptable polling stations across Kirklees. This is mainly a result of ever-fewer council and community venues being available, some of which are closing or being sold. Under current voting arrangements, it is of fundamental importance that our polling stations are conveniently placed and accessible.

Elsewhere in this report we have discussed the importance of stakeholders in wider civic society. Local schools are an important part of this. We think the "Schools as Community Hubs" initiative could provide an opportunity to emphasise the civic responsibility that schools have towards local democracy. We therefore recommend that all schools in Kirklees should make their premises available to be used as a polling station on the day of an election. This sends out a strong message that schools are at the heart of our local democracy.

We have also looked in detail at the importance of civic education and civic responsibility for our young citizens. The links with schools are therefore very important, providing opportunities for young people to experience and understand local democracy in a way that we hope will translate into voting.

Whilst our work is rooted in the local context, it has also coincided with the recent Scottish Independence Referendum, where 16 year olds were given the vote. In light of this significant development we felt it important to test local feeling, particularly given our strong focus on young citizens.

In our [Kirklees Council staff survey](#) 46% said the voting age for local elections should be lowered to 16, to encourage more young people to participate in local democracy.

"If I could vote it would be like we had a voice."

Kirklees Youth Councillor

However our [Kirklees residents e-panel survey](#) was divided on this issue, with 51% saying no to lowering the voting age and 33% saying yes.

In our [Kirklees Councillors survey](#) the question divided councillors, with 45% saying yes and 45% saying no.

The [University of Huddersfield Students Union](#) members we heard from unanimously agreed that lowering the voting age would be a good thing. One participant felt that 'young people's voices are getting squashed out by the grey vote'. Several participants did add that votes at 16 would need to be coupled with civic engagement.

[Kirklees Youth Council](#)

members who took part in a group discussion said they are in favour of votes at 16. They told us that people would respect young people's views more if they had the vote and that it would give those who want to use their voice an opportunity to speak up.

"Lots of decisions that are being made now will affect us as adults, as students taking out loans or as apprentices looking for jobs. It's our futures that will be decided by what's going on right now."

Kirklees Youth Councillor

The Youth Councillors said that if young people could begin voting at age 16 or 17, they would benefit from having the support of their teachers as well as parents, and would therefore be more likely to get into the habit of voting.

They told us that 16 year olds are mature enough to know what they want. They also felt that votes at 16 would encourage candidates to consider young people more when campaigning.

The Youth Councillors felt that voting at 16 could be trialled for local elections. They described this as a good place to start, as local elections affect you more directly.

We conclude that lowering the voting age is clearly and understandably an issue which divides opinion. We have approached this issue in the context of our wider work. We have consistently made the case for the importance of active citizenship and the need to have a strong focus on designing local democracy with our young citizens at the heart.

Whilst voting alone is not a panacea, we feel that it is nevertheless an important part of the journey for an active citizen and as such we place a strong emphasis on widening the opportunity for more of our residents.

It is for this reason we recommend that government should legislate to lower the voting age to 16.

Voting methods

Another area we want to consider relates to the actual mechanics of voting and the extent to which current arrangements are in tune with citizens in the 21st century. We have heard lots of views about the ways in which the voting process could be modernised, including online voting, holding elections on different days, voting at any polling station and all-postal votes.

Our [Kirklees residents e-panel survey](#) revealed that 50% of the residents who took part believe they should be able to vote electronically using a smartphone, tablet or laptop. This figure was even higher in our Kirklees Council staff survey, where 63% said they should be able to vote electronically using a smartphone, tablet or laptop.

Our [Kirklees Councillors survey](#) showed that 39% of the councillors who responded would advocate the use of online voting. 25% would support having more polling stations in different places, such as supermarkets.

Our discussion with [University of Huddersfield Students Union](#) members revealed a unanimous view that being able to vote electronically would increase turnout in the younger population.

Whilst we're looking for ways to maximise turnout, it has been helpful for us to understand that no single approach appears to be a panacea. [Andrew Scallan and Tom Hawthorn](#) shared details of the voting pilots which took place ten years ago.

The Electoral Commission's evaluation report considered the impact that each of these pilots had on voter turnout. The headline findings were:

Online voting and electronic voting increased convenience and accessibility but did not attract new voters in significant numbers. There were issues in respect of set up costs and concerns about security and integrity.

Early and weekend voting increased convenience and accessibility but did not attract new voters in significant numbers. The Electoral Commission concluded that this approach would be worth implementing, although there would be a cost to the Returning Officer who would need to provide facilities in a range of locations across the area.

All-postal votes (with no polling stations) improved turnout although voters who preferred to vote in a polling station were unhappy at having this opportunity removed. It is for this reason that the Electoral Commission did not recommend this as an option moving forward.

We have discovered general support for maximising the benefits of technology, be this online voting or voting at any polling station. People's reasons for supporting this include convenience and the idea that if you can bank online, why can't you vote online? However, there is also a strong consensus that the technology is not yet sophisticated enough to address real or perceived issues of security, fraud and challenge. As [John Turner](#) explained, the current paper-based system, whilst being simplistic, provides an effective audit trail which addresses these issues.

In terms of the other options, we are broadly supportive whilst being mindful of the practical considerations, not least from a cost and administration perspective. We see the benefits of holding elections at the weekend but equally we recognise some of the issues that this may create. For example, there may be additional staffing costs, polling stations might not be available, and the approach may clash with citizens' hobbies, interests and religious activities.

Whilst postal votes do appear to have a positive effect on turnout, there is a significantly greater cost compared to voting at the polling station. The option to move more people to postal votes would be very costly at around £1.59 per postal vote pack, compared to 8p or 9p for votes done in person. The voting experience is also important. Some voters prefer to vote at polling stations.

We have developed a wider understanding of the challenges that each of these options presents in terms of accessibility, security, voter confidence, cost, ease of administration and practical application. Our overall conclusion is that government should continue to explore all of these options with the aim of increasing voter registration, accessibility and turnout.

The electoral cycle

Our electoral cycle determines how often we have local elections. In Kirklees, we currently have local elections in three years out of every four. We've looked at a range of evidence in order to fully explore and understand the issues, benefits and risks associated with changing our current pattern of elections in Kirklees. This has included talking to other councils who have moved to a cycle of all-out elections, where there is a local election once every four years, and all seats are therefore up for election at the same time.

At our [Public engagement events](#) we found that any changes are unlikely to have a significant influence on levels of engagement in elections across the population of Kirklees. We had a very interesting debate with citizens about the pros and cons of changing our current system. We heard mixed views about whether it would be a good idea to change to a four-year cycle or to maintain our current arrangements. Generally, citizens were more interested in what councillors do between elections than in the actual electoral cycle itself.

Arguments raised for changing to a four-year electoral cycle are that it would:

- be more cost effective
- reduce the number of pre-election periods
- result in more continuity – less chopping and changing of “key team members” both in Cabinet and in the “backbenches”
- make councillors more accountable as the whole council would be “judged” at the same time at the end of a four-year term
- make elections more of an event, which will catch more people’s attention
- give people time to consider the “bigger issues”
- be easier to understand & easier for the public to get involved in campaigning

Arguments for keeping the current arrangements are that it is:

- less party political than with a four-year system – the results of a once every four-year election are mainly dictated by the perceived success and popularity of the parties who are in power and opposition in Westminster
- provides the option to change – for example, voters get the chance to change councillors if policies are not working or are not what people want
- provides the opportunity for more ongoing engagement – whilst councillors should be encouraged to think about getting constituents more involved on a continual basis, not just at election times, elections do focus the minds of

candidates and give residents more opportunity to exercise their democratic rights

- provides the opportunity to refresh the idea of annual elections – if this can be done, creating a new buzz around this as an exciting annual event, then it could help “make voting more of a habit”

In our [Kirklees residents e-panel](#) survey we asked the question “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 do you feel about this?” The response from residents was:

22% - It sounds like a great idea in principle

39% - Sounds okay but I would need to know more

15% - It sounds like it would be a bad idea to me

23% - I would be totally against changing to four-yearly elections

Our [Kirklees Council staff survey](#) asked the same question and the response from staff was:

31% - It sounds like a great idea in principle

47% - Sounds okay but I would need to know more

12% - It sounds like it would be a bad idea to me

10% - I would be totally against changing to four-yearly elections

The [Labour Group](#) have acknowledged that a four-yearly cycle would reduce costs to the authority of running elections and would provide the ability for us to plan over the long-term which would increase stability. The group also acknowledged that it could potentially generate more interest and therefore may increase voter turnout, although conversely the electorate could actually lose interest if they are only engaged in elections once every four years.

Despite these views, the group believe that the political make up of Kirklees Council means that having elections in three years out of every four can result in significant change. This gives the electorate a greater say and the opportunity to “change its mind” more regularly than once every four years. Reducing this opportunity would be less democratic and would further distance local people from local democracy. The group therefore believe that the current cycle of elections should continue.

The [Conservative Group](#) agree that moving the electoral cycle to every four years, and all out elections, is not an option that should be pursued at this time and under present political arrangements. Any such change would disengage the public, discourage participation in elections, and remove accountability from the democratic process. The group feel it would result in the public having less opportunity to express their views, and allow councillors to ignore public opinion and push through controversial decisions without the need for democratic accountability or explanation.

The [Liberal Democrat Group](#) believe that the election cycle should only be changed to once every four years if the Single Transferrable Vote (STV) system is introduced. The group believe that elections once every four years do not result in financial savings, and can also lead to fewer people turning out to vote. Changing the election cycle could generate concerns about long-term decision-making. The group feel that Kirklees Council should be aligned to electoral cycles in our neighbouring local authorities, such as Leeds. Unless neighbouring local authorities change their election cycle, Kirklees Council should maintain our current arrangements.

The [Green and Independent Groups](#) believe that 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. It would also reduce the costs for the council.

In our [Kirklees Councillors survey](#) we asked "How would you feel about changing the election cycle to once every four years?" The response from councillors was:

- 21% - It sounds like a great idea in principle
- 26% - Sounds okay but I would need to know more
- 11% - It sounds like it would be a bad idea to me
- 43% - I would be totally against changing to four-yearly elections

We have also sought other perspectives:

[Adrian Lythgo](#), in advocating a move to a four-year election cycle, emphasised the need for councils to focus on clear long-term strategic outcomes which by their nature need time to be delivered and achieved. The current cycle of elections affects the capacity of the council to affect change and achieve our strategic outcomes. Current arrangements encourage doing things bit by bit, rather than making significant changes.

Councillor Robert Light, in also advocating a move to four-yearly elections, explained that typically a Cabinet comes into place in late May and begins to agree their priorities and programme of work. Progress is then interrupted by the summer holiday which disrupts continuity at both officer and councillor level. As a result, the actions of any Cabinet do not begin to be approved and implemented until the Autumn, by which time the budget preparation conversations begin and continue through until the budget is agreed in February. Councillor Light estimated that the equivalent of one year in four is lost as a result. A change in the electoral cycle would play an important part in addressing these issues.

Rob Vincent explained that, from an officer perspective, there are strong arguments for having all-out elections once every four years. Rob argued that it provides a long period of brave engagement with strategic challenges, allowing space to address and discuss difficult issues over a period of time. It also means that politicians, in the context of accountability, have something more substantial to take back out to the public at election time. Rob acknowledged the counter argument is that four years is a long time and councillors and the council can find themselves running beyond their natural mandate.

Cormac Russell explained that there are benefits in moving to a four-yearly cycle, not least because it allows time for relationships to be developed between councillors and communities. It allows councillors to facilitate neighbourhood planning at a grass roots level, which means that citizens will “start picking out who is doing what, who is playing politics and who is really behind the neighbourhood plan.” People would be voting for what it is they prioritise rather than who they have an affinity for. Cormac acknowledged that this is very important for an elected councillor who will be judged as an advocate of their neighbourhood plan rather than as part of a “beauty contest”.

Professor Colin Copus told us that he had mixed views about electoral cycles. All-out elections every four years create a big gap for the electorate in terms of determining who will be in control for that period and being in a position to influence a change. However, there is a virtue of certainty and consistency – a four-yearly cycle allows councillors to make decisions with stable and strategic leadership. The virtue of elections by thirds is that there is a “permanent state of revolution” and the electorate has a greater opportunity to make decisions.

We also considered the practical implications of changing the electoral cycle.

John Turner told us that from an electoral administration point of view there are cost savings associated with all-out elections, although the actual cost of an election is shared when electoral episodes are combined.

All-out elections may lower the accuracy of the electoral register, if elections are less frequent, which could lessen the reasons for citizens to register on an annual basis. With a change to all-out elections, there is a risk that those people and staff who are involved in the running of elections will not retain the same skill set or they may not be available. This could result in additional costs to retain staff and maintain training. John explained that if asked he would advise Kirklees Council to retain our current electoral cycle.

[Sharon Salvanos](#) provided us with details of the practical considerations from a Kirklees perspective. Sharon told us that Kirklees Council could change to a four-yearly cycle, which would result in savings of approximately £900k. It would take approximately eight years for us to fully make these savings. The costs of making this change would initially be significantly higher as there would be a need for an all-out election. Although the costs for polling stations and staff would remain the same, costs for printing would be significantly higher due to a much longer ballot paper. Any change would have to be scheduled to coincide with parish elections. The next opportunity for this change would therefore be in 2019.

[Lord Kerslake](#) provided us with an insight into the work he has carried out in Birmingham and shared some findings of the related report ([The way forward: an independent review of the governance and organisational capabilities of Birmingham City Council](#)). He explained some the benefits that can be realised by moving to a four-yearly cycle of elections. These largely relate to the certainty a four-year administration gives and the ability to develop a strategy and implement change over a longer time frame. That said, he made the point that he does not advocate a move to four-yearly elections in all areas, as it's something that needs to be considered in the context of a council's own circumstances.

We are grateful to councils like [Bassetlaw](#) and [Waveney](#) who provided us with an insight into the motivations and circumstances that governed their decision to change their electoral cycle.

On our visit to [Bassetlaw](#) we heard from senior councillors and officers who explained that their main reason for changing to all-out elections was the financial savings that could be made. Councillors identified that changing the cycle of elections would help to contribute to the overall savings required across the council. Whilst [Bassetlaw](#) has only delivered one district election in 2015 since the change, we have found their experience to be helpful.

In particular, we'd like to highlight these points:

- There have not been any issues in terms of the potential loss of staff or the availability of buildings used for polling stations.
- The change has enabled the council to extend the cycle of council meetings from four to six weekly as a result of not having a delay to decision-making during the pre-election period.
- The council received a higher number of customer queries during the 2015 election, as some electors were confused at having up to three choices on the ballot paper.
- Some electors had chosen not to block vote and there were a higher number of "unused votes".
- All standing councillors were re-elected.
- There had been no impact on electoral staff due to the fact that an election has still been held each year since the change to the district council electoral cycle. There has also been an increase in electoral work (Individual Electoral Registration) which means that staffing numbers have stayed the same.
- The financial savings have amounted to approximately a 50% saving, with the majority of savings being achieved from staffing at polling stations, accommodation, postal vote printing and postage.
- The consistency of leadership resulting from the change to the election cycle has enabled officers to understand and respond to the longer term direction of travel as determined by Cabinet. This has resulted in a more stable environment and the opportunity for consistency to achieve long-term plans.
- The council feel they have become a stronger council following the move to all-out elections, as the struggle to make decisions through the pre-election period has been reduced.

We also heard from [Arthur Charvonia](#), Joint Strategic Director for Waveney District Council and Suffolk Coastal District Council. Arthur told us that the change process began in 2005, following a Comprehensive Performance Assessment which highlighted, amongst other things, that electing in thirds was holding the performance of the council back.

Another reason for the change relates to the nature of the politics in Waveney. Electing in thirds could mean that a change in the leadership landscape was a high possibility at every election, which could discourage the administration from doing anything unpopular. Arthur explained that this made it increasingly difficult for the administration to plan over the long term or to make difficult and unpopular decisions which were essential in the context of the wider performance issues.

In relation to the performance issues, there was a clear message delivered by the Audit Commission that the council's ability to improve performance would be made easier if they moved to four-yearly elections.

In particular we'd like to highlight these points:

- The council anticipated an increase in by-elections but this has not been the case.
- Turnout depends on the combination of elections and increases if combined with General Elections or Referenda.
- The council is not confident that the public are fully aware of the change, as there has still been an election of some form each year since the changes. That said, the council feel that the issue of confusion has reduced due to fewer ballot papers being issued at each election.
- There has been a reduction in the cost of elections (staffing on the day and postal votes) although this has not resulted in a reduction in the size of the Elections team given the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) and the continuing mixture of electoral episodes.
- Electing every four years allows councillors to focus on the electorate and their concerns outside of election periods.
- There has been a significant turnover of councillors (approximately a third remain) although this is as much to do with the shifting age profile as the change to the cycle.
- The council believes that the changes have resulted in stronger leadership who are confident in their direction and are able to provide a longer term political vision and action plan.
- Officers are able to establish a clear position in terms of the challenges and opportunities for the organisation, which helps with staff understanding and buy-in over the longer term. It has assisted in addressing the performance and finance issues that were identified by the Audit Commission.
- The Leader and Cabinet have developed a much stronger platform, one which they could be held accountable for by both the opposition and the electorate.

The Kirklees electoral cycle

In terms of the Kirklees position, we have found this particular area of our work the most challenging to resolve. We've heard many different views and perspectives on issues of cost and administration, leadership, continuity, strategic governance, representation, voting being habit-forming, making elections an event and maximising clarity for the voter. We've considered all of these issues carefully.

We have also been made aware of the dynamic nature of the electoral landscape, characterised by an increase in different electoral episodes and a growing tendency to combine those episodes on the same day. Does this create more opportunities for citizens to vote or does it result in confusion and dilute the importance and profile of local elections? Does this create increasing challenges for the administration of elections or does it assist councils in bearing the cost of those elections as a result of combining different elections?

We have not been able to resolve whether these are collectively positive or negative developments, although we do recognise that they are very relevant when considering the electoral cycle.

In terms of our own cycle of elections, we have fully debated the arguments for and against making a change. A strong focus of our deliberations has been on the points made with regards to leadership, governance and continuity. We debated the potential savings that could be made by changing our electoral cycle (the initial additional costs of holding an all-out election and the overall savings over an eight year period). We weighed up all these considerations against the importance of providing regular opportunities for our citizens to vote in elections. Voting is habit-forming and something that we should encourage.

We also considered the potential implications of an all-out election in terms of the possible loss of experienced councillors at a time when the council is going through a period of significant change.

We are mindful that we're considering this issue at a time when there is considerable flux both nationally and regionally in terms of current and potential electoral issues. Currently general elections are every five years, which is potentially helpful if we wanted to plan our electoral cycle in a way that avoids combining elections. This would give us an opportunity to make local elections an important, stand-out event.

However, these arrangements do not rule out the possibility of any government calling a snap election, which could have an impact on this aspiration. Recent events have brought this issue into sharp focus.

We must also consider the dynamic nature of regional governance and the potential of a Mayoral election in the near future. This may also have implications for the Police and Crime Commissioner election, if a regional Mayor takes on these responsibilities as part of their role. This all creates uncertainty and means that we could be potentially making changes to our own electoral cycle at a time when we are unclear as to how this landscape will be mapped out.

Having weighed these factors up in the balance, alongside all the evidence we have received, we have not found it possible to reach a consensus. We have not found a fully compelling case for us to change our cycle of elections at the current time.

It is clear that we are currently operating in a fluid electoral landscape. To recommend changes now would be akin to aiming at a moving target. We therefore recommend continuing with our current electoral cycle of having local elections three years out of every four. Nevertheless it is important that Kirklees Council sees this as a very live issue, one that should be revisited when there is greater clarity, especially in terms of regional governance.

In the meantime we feel it is important for us to make some wider recommendations based on what we have found. We believe that national government has an important role to play in considering the importance of local democracy when it is planning and legislating in respect of the timing and sequence of elections. Local elections are important events and should be recognised as such. We do not wish to see a further dilution of local democracy.

We also recommend that Mayoral elections for the region should be planned and scheduled in a way that does not have a negative impact on local democracy.

Regional devolution

We welcome regional devolution

We welcome the idea of devolution beyond Westminster. Done well, it can provide opportunities and potential solutions to the challenges we face.

Devolution must be rooted in local communities

The top-down, economic focus of regional devolution must change. We want a democratically focussed devolution that starts with local communities and grows from the ground up. It should be rooted in the priorities and outcomes that are important to citizens in our towns and villages.

Local identity matters

Our history, and the history of our places, is important to local people and to councillors. Citizens feel a real sense of concern that towns and villages have lost their identity and lost their connection with the council when becoming Kirklees. Local people are worried that devolution may further weaken our sense of identity. This is why devolution must be rooted in our communities.

Citizens need to know what's happening

Many of our local citizens, and many councillors, are unclear about what regional devolution is or what it will mean for them in the places where they live and represent. Public understanding of the opportunities and implications of regional devolution is minimal. Over time this needs to change.

Councillors should lead the dialogue

Local councillors should be leading the dialogue with, and on behalf of, our citizens. In this way, we will make sure that Kirklees is strongly placed to influence and access the opportunities presented by devolution.

Democratic accountability is essential

Whilst the focus should be on outcomes, we want to emphasise the importance of democratic accountability and transparency as part of regional devolution. Any decision-making model should be democratically legitimate.

Regional devolution

Regional devolution is an ongoing journey with a future that is as yet unclear. Our focus is on what we can do in Kirklees to maximise the opportunities. We want to see an emphasis on democratic accountability and legitimacy, and we need the different levels of our democracy to connect.

The issue of regional devolution has loomed large during the course of our work. We have heard many perspectives on this as we have explored the policy context, the government's approach, the deal-making process, governance models and public awareness and understanding.

At the time of writing, we don't know what the devolution "deal" for our region actually is, who it is for, or how it will be governed. However, we have tried to put forward a narrative that looks at regional devolution from a Kirklees perspective, whilst bearing in mind the wider issues that we have discovered.

Citizens, councillors and local identity

We want to see a regional democracy that evolves from the ground up. It is therefore important for us to place our citizens, towns and villages at the heart of our analysis and our subsequent proposals.

Our starting point is public awareness and understanding.

"Devolution is not a technical exercise, but one that should be about democracy, politics, identity and what people want their communities to be"

Jonathan Carr-West

We know that many of our local citizens, and many councillors, are unclear about what regional devolution is or indeed what it will mean for them in the places where they live and represent. At our [Public engagement events](#) we saw a lack of awareness at one level, and at another we heard concern about the weakening of local democracy and a further erosion of local power and decision-making.

[Jonathan Carr-West](#), as part of his evidence giving, explained that the pace of the government timetable for devolution has meant that citizens and most councillors have been left behind.

Similarly, [Rob Vincent](#) confirmed that the top-down approach to deal-making has meant that, thus far, there has been very little regard for the towns, villages and communities that are part of a region's geographic footprint.

We accept that this is an ongoing process and as [Ed Hammond](#) pointed out to us, the deal-making process will develop in stages and, over time, will become more strongly based on public need and local vision. That said, we found [Professor Andrew Taylor](#)'s observation that it is "a very long journey from parish to City Region" very striking. We feel that this is very important as it clearly describes the gap that currently exists between regional devolution and localities within Kirklees. Our focus is on working out how we can best bridge this gap from a Kirklees perspective.

We need to make sure that the voices and needs of our citizens are heard in the region, and our elected councillors are best placed to represent those views. This will involve addressing issues of local identity, being clear and confident with regards to the priorities for our towns and villages, and putting the local councillor at the heart of the connection between their place, Kirklees and the wider region. Taking this approach means that we will need to confront a number of important and long-standing issues.

In our discussions with political parties, councillors highlighted the importance of decisions at a regional level being meaningful, understandable and accountable to citizens and councillors locally. The political groups also said it will be vital for us to illustrate how decision-making locally is impacting on regional issues. They emphasised that we will need greater clarity on the representative role of councillors at the Combined Authority level.

One of the most striking characteristics of our work has been the importance placed by citizens, councillors and expert witnesses on the issue of place and local identity. Kirklees is an artificial construction arising from local government re-organisation – there is no place called "Kirklees" within the Kirklees district. Many of our citizens have commented on this fact during our work, although it appears to be less of an issue for our young citizens. What is clear is that our history, and the history of our places, is important to local people and councillors. This is particularly important in reference to regional democracy.

Our [Public engagement events](#) highlighted a real sense of concern amongst citizens that our towns and villages have lost their identity and lost their connection between the people and the council when becoming Kirklees.

Citizens are concerned that regional devolution might worsen this situation, on the basis of an already weakened democracy and identity.

For some, the idea of local decisions for local people would be undermined by regional devolution. People also feel uncertain about whether it would lead to better democracy or a more remote democracy. Regardless of the balance between regional and local levels, we will need to strengthen local communities if we are serious about enabling our communities to take a stronger lead on local issues. This will also be needed if we want to enable the public to engage with decision-making at a regional level.

[Adrian Lythgo](#) has emphasised the importance of districts being clear about their priorities in a way that resonates with towns and communities. [Councillor Robert Light](#) has emphasised the importance of the need to build on the trust that local councillors already have with their residents and the communities they represent.

“The individual place identities are important and the overall council needs to augment and be respecting of those local identities. In place terms, the competitive advantage is not Kirklees but the distinct parts of the borough.”

Neil McInroy

Whilst citizens may not wholly identify with the idea of Kirklees, they do nevertheless recognise their own communities. This is an important starting point. As [Neil McInroy](#) explained, the local places should be the main focus of the regional discussion.

We also feel it is important to accept that, despite many attempts to administratively resolve the issue of local identity, our findings suggest we have been unsuccessful. Whilst this is by no means intended as a criticism, evidence indicates that Kirklees has struggled in developing a model of local devolution that effectively squares the circle of local identity. We have heard from citizens and councillors who have emphasised the importance of local identity and local decision-making, whilst at the same time acknowledging that attempts to effectively marry the two at a Kirklees level have not worked. Various versions of area or district-based decision-making have served some valuable purpose, but they have failed to address this issue in a way that would put citizens and communities in a strong position to realise the potential benefits of regional devolution.

It is for this reason that we advocate a citizen-led approach to determining local identity in a way that is designed by, and resonates with, the citizens of the towns and villages of Kirklees. Local identity can only be determined from the ground up. Local councillors should be at the heart of leading this dialogue with, and on behalf of, the communities they represent. The outcomes of this work should form the basis of a different approach to local priority setting and local devolution. Importantly, it should also help us to be clear about the issues we want to see addressed as part of the opportunities presented by regional devolution.

Developing locally owned identity is an important building block and one that is in our gift to develop irrespective of the discussions that are taking place at a regional level. Once this is in place we should develop an approach to local visioning and priority setting in a way that resonates with local citizens and councillors alike. We should learn from the past but also consider the innovative approaches that have been successfully used elsewhere.

We have had the opportunity to find out about the different methods of engagement used in other countries as part of local visioning and priority setting. [Katie Ghose](#) from the Electoral Reform Society provided us with a summary of the work that has taken place in the Netherlands as part of the [G1000 Citizens Summit](#) initiative and the [Grandview-Woodland Citizens' Assembly](#) approach in Vancouver. [Theo Bass](#) explained the work that has taken place as part of the [Decide Madrid](#) initiative.

We believe that initiatives such as these provide powerful evidence of the ways in which Kirklees could take an entirely different approach to developing citizen-owned priorities that are firmly rooted in local identity. We advocate working with partners and providers to pilot an approach in a particular area of Kirklees. The emerging learning should then be used as the basis for developing a strategic approach.

It's important for elected councillors to be the bridge, conduit and voice of their citizens in conversations about regional devolution. We are convinced that this is a fundamental principle in effectively joining up local place, district and region. At the moment we feel that this is a principle that has been overseen or ignored. We believe it is important for us to look in more detail at the role of the councillor and local representation in the context of regional devolution.

As part of our evidence gathering [Adrian Lythgo](#) emphasised the central importance of councillors being strongly placed to influence the sub-regional agenda. [Councillor Sir Stephen Houghton](#) discussed the potential for a significant

majority of councillors becoming increasingly isolated and less influential, ending up in a “vacuum which could get bigger”. [Neil McInroy](#) called upon local councillors to “shine their torch on the flaws of devolution and be less compliant”. [Rebecca Cox](#) from the [Local Government Association](#) acknowledged the tensions that may result in representing the ward perspective whilst at the same time working across boundaries. This is likely to present challenges, requiring councillors to think on a much broader level beyond their own ward and neighbourhoods.

Whilst these perspectives differ, it is fair for us to conclude that the challenges presented by regional devolution provide a further dimension to what we have already agreed is a changing and complex role. It is for this reason that our recommendations need to be looked at as a whole, given that we are seeking to emphasise the ongoing importance of the councillor role in representing their citizens at all levels.

At a national level we feel it is right that there should be a greater recognition of the important part to be played by local councillors in developing and delivering regional devolution. The top-down process has so far been a barrier to the democratic approach that we advocate, which should be happening from the ground up. Whilst we understand why the top-down approach has been the case so far, we feel that there is an opportunity for us to begin to redress this imbalance.

At a regional level the deal-making process has done little to alter this trend. [Anthony Zacharzewski](#) has described the process as demonstrating some of the worst parts of local council democracy, where “leadership takes its decisions sitting around tables with backs turned to the public.” We believe that there are opportunities to address this democratic deficit by acknowledging and equipping local councillors with the opportunity and tools to play a constructive part.

We feel that an important starting point would be to address the quality and flow of information from a regional to a district level and through to local councillors representing their communities. This should include improving the way in which the Combined Authority produces, publishes and communicates its democratic content. The information about regional devolution needs to be timely, digestible and in a format that supports councillors to play a proactive and meaningful role.

Kirklees Council and our leadership also have an important responsibility in ensuring that councillors have timely information and intelligence that is designed to allow them to lead the dialogue with their communities.

This is partly a responsibility for our leadership but we are also mindful of the need to look at our own governance structures and processes in the context of regional devolution. We have heard from Councillor Sir Stephen Houghton, Rob Vincent and Ed Hammond who have all explained the importance of considering local governance and accountability arrangements with reference to the wider region.

We accept that it is important to align our own structures in a way that allows us to be responsive and flexible. Therefore we recommend that this issue is picked up as part of a wider review of our current governance and decision-making arrangements.

Democratic and accountable governance

Starting principles and considerations

Our focus is very much on the important principles for regional governance and accountability, as opposed to structural models. If we start with the principles and get them right, we are of the view that effective structural design should follow. Building democracy into regional devolution should be an important consideration as part of the design of any governance and accountability mechanisms.

As part of our work [Professor Robin Hambleton](#) shared some useful research that he has undertaken, as captured in his report [English Devolution: Learning Lessons from International Models of Subnational Governance](#). Professor Hambleton explored the models for regional governance that are used in other countries. He has identified six principles of good governance that should be used for designing structural models:

- civic leadership
- effective decision-making
- transparency and efficiency
- accountability
- public involvement
- business engagement

[Ed Hammond](#) emphasised the importance of governance structures being designed in a way that assists the Mayor or Combined Authority to provide a framework where councils can do things in a way that makes sense for them.

We support these principles and we also want to emphasise the importance of:

- local flexibility in determining the most effective model of governance
- a bottom-up approach to design
- the sharing of ideas and responsibilities at regional, district and local level
- strong emphasis on elected accountability, as evidenced by the models that are used in other countries

We believe that taking such an approach will help us in addressing the current disconnect between regionalism and localism. Sadly, this has not been the approach taken thus far.

Regional devolution and elected mayors

We agree with the Local Government Association's position that elected mayors are not the only answer and that there should be more scope for local determination. This is borne out by [Professor Robin Hambleton's](#) research. We are also mindful of the result of our local Mayoral Referendum on 4th October 2001, which rejected the proposal for an Elected Mayor for Kirklees. The extent to which there is any public understanding, appetite and support for this model in Kirklees is at best unclear.

We have approached the issue of mayoral devolution from a practical position, in light of the government's focus on this model as part of the deal-making process. We have tried to understand the potential implications and consider what they could mean from the perspective of the council, our councillors and most importantly the citizens of Kirklees. We accept that this is likely to be a gradual process, which is why we have tried to focus on what we should be doing at a Kirklees level, although it is important to explore this model in more detail.

As part of our evidence gathering we have heard a range of perspectives on the merits or otherwise of elected mayors. [Jonathan Carr-West](#) provided us with an interesting insight into the potential benefits of having a Mayor in the context of operating in a global economy. [Rob Vincent](#) shared his personal experiences of working in local authorities with elected mayors. In some cases, this can work well, whilst in others the Mayor can become distanced from the rest of the councillors and the council. [Adrian Lythgo](#) explored the potential for an Elected Mayor to destabilise the current Combined Authority arrangements.

All of the points raised are relevant when considering the potential opportunities and implications of an Elected Mayor for the region, although we want to focus on two points:

The mayoral role – Whilst central government has been clear in imposing the Elected Mayor model it has been less clear in explaining the role itself and the powers and expectations that should go with it. This has not helped the discussions at a Combined Authority level, and it has been a barrier to wider understanding by citizens and councillors.

It is for this reason we recommend that government provides a detailed explanation of the roles, responsibilities and expectations of an Elected Mayor.

We feel that this should emphasise the important principles of sharing ideas with others in the region, inclusivity, understanding the place they represent, and recognising the importance of the democratic mandate held by local councillors. Where mayoral models have been unsuccessful or unpopular in the past, a striking characteristic has been an unwillingness or failure to engage with local elected representatives. Whilst it is important that this is built into governance design, we also feel it should be implicit as part of the mayoral role.

Layers of accountability – We have looked at representation and accountability on three levels – the region, our district and the local areas within Kirklees. We have made recommendations with the aim of being clearer about the ways in which Kirklees and our communities can play an active and constructive role in regional devolution. In order to fully realise the potential of devolution it is crucial that we have greater clarity in terms of the power and responsibilities that exist at the relevant tiers, particularly in terms of decision-making power and fiscal responsibility and transparency. This is mainly an issue for national government and is one that would assist in fostering wider citizen engagement and understanding as part of a democratic approach to devolution.

We would also like to see more attention given to how the different layers of democracy can be connected into a coherent whole. This is about the relationships between representatives in different democratic tiers. We know that currently our citizens do not fully understand what different elected representatives do – for example, citizens are unclear about how the roles of councillor and MP differ and what they involve. There's a danger that regional devolution may only add a further layer of confusion. This is something that we can only improve in collaboration.

Next steps for regional devolution

We acknowledge that regional devolution is an ongoing journey with a future that is as yet unclear. Our focus is on what we can do to maximise the opportunities for our citizens, whilst being clear as to our expectations of national government, the Combined Authority and a future Elected Mayor.

We believe that regional devolution needs to follow the principles of democratic accountability and legitimacy, and to be developed organically, from the ground up. The structural design of regional devolution should flow from these principles, and from the other core principles that we've set out in our report.

Concluding remarks:

It's all about what happens next

We have explored, and learned from, the entire local democracy ecosystem. We've looked at some inspiring ideas and aspirations in detail, and we've seen how many aspects of our local democracy are interdependent. We've tried to learn from the past and to look towards the future. Our work has created a rich picture about what a stronger local democracy should be like. But our report must not be an end in itself. It must always be about what happens next.

We have already begun working with our citizens and others to turn these strategic, far-reaching ideas into something that works in our local environment.

Our recommendations are rooted in Kirklees and as such are mainly in our gift to progress at pace. Some of our recommendations are designed to grow widespread democratic cultural change for our citizens – and this will take time to nurture and take hold. This should not be an excuse for slow progress. We believe that we've already prepared the ground so that we can begin to develop this cultural change now.

Some of our other recommendations are more practical or involve testing and prototyping new and different ways of "doing local democracy". We need to get on with making these changes happen so we can begin to make a visible difference.

Our overall message is that local democracy should be valued.

We expect Kirklees Council to treat our recommendations with the level of priority and resources that they deserve. We have a shared sense of responsibility for growing a stronger local democracy, along with our partners in civic society, who we encourage to get involved in the practical work of making it happen.

For the next stage of our work, we want make some final recommendations.

We emphasise that these things are essential if we are to bring our ideas to life effectively and create the kind of local democracy that our citizens want and deserve:

- The approach that the Kirklees Democracy Commission have taken in our work so far should continue as part of delivering on our recommendations. This should involve an ongoing approach to citizen engagement and openness and, in particular, continued use of the Democracy Commission website as a resource and focal point for our work.
- Where Kirklees Council are best placed to progress our recommendations, we should do so. Where the work is best done by others or in partnership, this should be embraced and seen as an opportunity. Our work has revealed that we do not have the monopoly on good ideas.
- The collaborative approach we have used is a real strength for us to build on. Councillors from across the political groups and citizens have worked together effectively. This is a feature that can (and should) continue as part of the next stages of our work.
- The Democracy Commission should have a level of responsibility beyond the life of our report. We feel it is important that there is an annual Kirklees Local Democracy Summit where we can check on the progress we've made.
- Experience, knowledge and continuity are crucial to making change of this scale happen. It is for this reason that we emphasise the importance of the Head of Governance and Democratic Services retaining strategic overview, accountability and responsibility for the delivery of our recommendations and for leading the next stages of our work within the council and with our partners.

In closing this chapter of our work, we would like to once again thank everyone who has contributed to the Kirklees Democracy Commission. In particular, we'd like to thank the citizens of Kirklees, whose honest insight and ideas have been invaluable. In return we hope that our work will be fundamental in growing the strong and healthy local democracy that our citizens want and deserve.

List of recommendations

Active citizens in civic society

- ▶ Kirklees Council should make Active Citizenship a shared strategic priority and use this as a basis for developing a new democratic relationship between Kirklees citizens and the state.

- ▶ Kirklees Council should ensure that schools play a central role as local democratic hubs as part of the delivery of an Active Citizens Strategy. This should involve designing (and putting into practice) a range of approaches which will create pathways for young citizens to become involved in civic society, including raising awareness about being a councillor. These should include:
 - Designing local democracy resources for Kirklees schools to be used in the context of civic education.
 - Strengthening the links between local councillors and the schools in their wards through programmed “school surgeries” as part of citizenship education.
 - Working with the National Citizen Service to develop a mentoring scheme, to be piloted in Kirklees.
 - Working with the Local Government Association (LGA) to develop a young councillors apprenticeship scheme, to be piloted in Kirklees.
 - Working with the University of Huddersfield and local colleges to develop a structured approach to work placement.
 - Developing a mentoring scheme between Kirklees Councillors and Kirklees Youth Councillors.

- ▶ Kirklees Council should work with local businesses to develop the idea of “Business Citizenship” as part of delivering an Active Citizens Strategy with our partners.

- ▶ Kirklees Council should develop a strategic approach to working with the local media, one that seeks to develop a shared responsibility and understanding of the contributions that the media can make to nurturing local civic society.

- ▶ We should clarify the roles and relationships of MPs and local councillors in the context of Active Citizenship and arrange Constituency Contact Meetings annually to discuss key strategic issues for the area.

Local democracy in a networked society

- ▶ Kirklees Council should review our approach to creating and sharing democratic content. This should involve exploring different and innovative ways of developing content to facilitate dialogue and engagement before, during and after the formal decision-making process.
- ▶ Working with key providers, Kirklees Council should develop a democratic digital literacy pilot as part of a wider civic education programme for young citizens.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should support all our councillors to understand and embrace digital technology. Digital literacy should be a core expectation of the councillor role. It should be part of new councillor induction and councillor development, so that we support councillors in developing their digital skills and confidence, and enable them to play an active part in explaining our decision-making processes to our citizens. Commission members should pilot this approach.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should provide our councillors with a live social media audit that provides details of social media use, online networks and connectivity for the ward they represent.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should provide our councillors with the appropriate IT hardware that they need to be effective in their role.
- ▶ Working with key partners and providers, Kirklees Council should use the learning from international examples to develop an approach for blending online and off-line engagement processes, as part of strategic planning, policy making and decision-making. This should form part of a pilot that will explore innovative approaches to planning and priority setting in a particular area of Kirklees.

Councillors

- ▶ Kirklees Council should use the evidence gathered by the Democracy Commission to re-define the role profile for Kirklees councillors, so that this reflects the changing and long term expectations and needs of the role. The revised profile should include core expectations, linked to ongoing

performance. These should be used to demonstrate the impact that councillors are having, particularly in their wards.

- ▶ Kirklees Council should make performance evidence about what councillors do available to the public, in an easy-to-digest format.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should promote the role of councillor to help Kirklees citizens understand the role and to encourage citizens to come forward and stand as councillors. We should positively promote the councillor role based on the real life experiences of our councillors, and demonstrate how being a councillor can enrich a person's life.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should promote the role of councillors to staff members in a structured and ongoing way, as part of wider cultural changes both with the council and in our communities. Our staff should understand the importance of the councillor role and how it is an invaluable asset as part of changing and redesigning services.
- ▶ The Local Government Association (LGA) should develop a core national framework for councillors' allowances, which councils can use now as a basis for determining the rates of allowances locally.
- ▶ The Kirklees Members Allowances Independent Review Panel (MAIRP) should consider linking annual changes in the rate of councillors' allowances to the pay rate for local government officers.
- ▶ National government should revisit the legislation relating to councillors allowances, in light of the increased expectations now placed on the role and the tensions associated with the current approach to determining allowances.
- ▶ National government, in the context of corporate social responsibility, should address the real challenges faced by councillors who are employed.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should redesign support for councillors in a way that has a greater focus on their wards. This should enable councillors to provide better support for communities in developing effective facilities, programmes and social networks to improve people's quality of life.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should provide timely information and intelligence at a ward and neighbourhood level to support councillors and communities in working effectively.

- ▶ Kirklees Council should ensure that councillors have the correct tools to carry out the changing councillor role. This involves:
 - Building new councillor induction around the core expectations set out in the revised role profile. This should be compulsory for all new councillors but should also be open to all councillors.
 - Ensuring that any councillors who hold a position of special responsibility are fully briefed about the role, the expectations and the core knowledge required to effectively carry it out.
 - Implementing the findings of the councillor group who are currently looking at IT provision for councillors.

- ▶ Political groups (and in particular Group Leaders and Group Business Managers) should be responsible for the personal development of their members beyond what Kirklees Council can support or provide.

Decision-making

- ▶ Kirklees Council should carry out a full review of our governance and decision-making arrangements. The review should be based on the issues and core design principles that are set out in this report.

- ▶ Kirklees Council should revisit our approach to consultation. We should place a greater emphasis on timely, selective citizen engagement as part of the policy development and decision-making process. We should test this on a pilot basis to begin with, and consider models of good practice from elsewhere.

- ▶ Kirklees Council, in partnership with key providers, should develop a set of democratic content standards which should be used as a basis for all content that we produce and publish as part of decision-making. These should include using clear language, helping people to understand what point we're at on the decision-making journey and making sure that our content is based on citizens' needs.

- ▶ Kirklees Council, working with political group leaders, should develop video narratives in advance of a significant issue being discussed and decided, followed by similar narratives once a decision has been taken. This should include independent reporting from citizen journalists.

- ▶ 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.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should develop online and off-line interpretive information for the public relating to all of our 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.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should now take the opportunity to fully explore and implement the full capability of our webcasting technology, beyond purely broadcasting meetings. Taking advantage of the interactive technology that currently exists should be a priority.

Elections

- ▶ Kirklees Council should continue to support the innovative approaches we have developed to electoral outreach work as a means of ensuring that registration levels are maintained and continue to rise beyond the period of central government funding for Individual Electoral Registration (IER).
- ▶ National government should amend legislation to introduce the compulsory registration of young people at the age of 16.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should work collaboratively with schools to develop an optional local approach to registering young people at the age of 16.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should work with the University of Huddersfield and local colleges to integrate electoral registration as part of the existing student registration process.
- ▶ National government should lower the voting age to 16 and agree that such arrangements be piloted in Kirklees in order to fully evaluate the benefits and implications.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should work in partnership with Democracy Club to pilot the ways in which data can be used to increase voter awareness and

engagement. The learning should be used to develop a national standard that all councils should aspire to achieving.

- ▶ Kirklees Council should improve access to voter information by making polling districts and polling station data available to Democracy Club, in a format that meets their GoldPlus technical standard, in addition to sharing other essential elections data in recommended formats (candidates and election results).
- ▶ All schools in Kirklees should make their premises available to be used as a polling station on the day of an election.
- ▶ National government should continue to explore all options (for example, online voting, early or weekend voting and registration on polling day) to increase voter registration, accessibility and turnout.
- ▶ National government should consider the importance of local democracy when it is planning and legislating in respect of the timing and sequencing of elections. Local elections are important events and should be recognised as such. We do not wish to see a further dilution of local democracy.
- ▶ National government and the West Yorkshire Combined Authority should plan and sequence Mayoral elections for the region in a way that does not have a negative impact on local democracy.

Regional devolution

- ▶ National government should provide clearer information about the purpose of (and processes for) regional devolution. This should:
 - Be clear about the outcomes that national government is seeking to achieve through regional devolution.
 - Provide greater clarity about the role, responsibilities and expectations of an Elected Mayor.
 - Provide greater clarity in terms of the power and responsibilities that exist at the relevant tiers of governance (region, district and local). This should involve more transparency about financial issues.
- ▶ The West Yorkshire Combined Authority should improve the quality and flow of information in order to help citizens and local councillors understand (and have

better awareness of) regional issues and their relevance. This should include improving the way in which its democratic content is produced, published and communicated.

- ▶ Kirklees Council should review and improve the ways in which we support senior councillors to carry out their role in the context of the wider region. This should involve improving the information flow, in both directions, between the City Region and local areas. We should also make sure that all our councillors receive timely information about the wider regional devolution agenda.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should engage with local citizens to address the issue of local identity. Local devolution and governance are an ongoing challenge. We should be clearer about our local identity so that we can make a strong and powerful contribution to regional discussions.
- ▶ Kirklees Council should develop local approaches to strategic planning and priority setting (within different parts of Kirklees), based on the findings of our engagement work with citizens on local identity.
- ▶ Kirklees Council, together with our partners, should do some pilot work to explore innovative approaches to planning and priority setting in a particular area of Kirklees. This work should make use of some of the successful practice that the Democracy Commission have discovered as part of our work.

Delivering our recommendations

- ▶ Kirklees Council should make sure that the core principles set out in the “Concluding remarks” section of our report are used as a basis for progressing our recommendations. Specifically these are:
 - Adopting a citizen-led approach.
 - Being open and transparent and continuing to use the Democracy Commission’s website as a focal point.
 - Adopting a partnership approach where relevant.
 - Continuing a cross-party, councillor-led way of working.
 - Checking and celebrating progress via an annual Local Democracy Summit.
 - Retaining experience, knowledge and continuity by giving the Head of Governance and Democratic Services the strategic responsibility for delivering our recommendations.

Thank you to...

Our citizens

Our sincere thanks to everyone who has spent time talking to us at our Local democracy roadshows and our Preview evenings, for giving your Democracy Commission a strong, genuine and challenging local voice. Your insights and ideas have been invaluable.

We'd also like to thank our e-panel participants and those who shared questions, comments and ideas via web, email and social media.

Kirklees Youth Council

Our special thanks to the young citizens from Kirklees Youth Council who have been part of our work every step of the way, for telling us things that we cannot forget. You are a constant reminder of why it matters for us to strengthen our local democracy, and why we should feel hopeful for the future.

University of Huddersfield

We'd like to thank the University of Huddersfield for being our partners in the Democracy Commission and in particular for contributing Dr Mycock's time to our work. Our thanks also to the members of the University of Huddersfield Students Union who shared their experiences with us, and to Chelsea Cooper for her help.

LGiU

We're very grateful to the LGiU, not only for their insightful contributions to our work, but also for their openness and hospitality in hosting our evidence gathering sessions.

Our witnesses

Thank you to everyone who has given testimony to the Democracy Commission. Together you have given us a valuable and comprehensive collection of evidence about local democracy, which has been incredibly useful to us and which we are delighted to be able to share with others.

Our thanks to:

[Sarah Allan](#), Involve

[John Austin](#), Chair of ADSO (Association of Democratic Services Officers)

[Theo Bass](#), Nesta

[Nick Booth](#), Podnosh

[Tony Browne](#), FutureGov

[Dave Burn](#), Vice Chair of ADSO (Association of Democratic Services Officers)

[Roger Bushell](#), The Staff College

[Dominic Campbell](#), FutureGov

[Jonathan Carr-West](#), LGiU (Local Government Information Unit)

[Arthur Charvonja](#), Suffolk Coastal and Waveney District Councils

[Professor Colin Copus](#), De Montfort University and Chair of the Councillor Commission

[Cllr Gillian Corr](#), Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

[Rebecca Cox](#), Local Government Association

[Katie Ghose](#), Electoral Reform Society

[Nick Golding](#), editor of the Local Government Chronicle

[Justin Griggs](#), NALC (National Association of Local Councils)

[Professor Robin Hambleton](#), Author of the English Devolution Guide

[Ed Hammond](#), CfPS (Centre for Public Scrutiny)

[Cllr David Harrington](#), Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council

[Tom Hawthorn](#), Electoral Commission

[Dr Paul Hepburn](#), Heseltine Institute, University of Liverpool

[Cllr Sir Stephen Houghton](#), Leader of Barnsley Council

[Catherine Howe](#), Capita

[Kenny Imafidon](#), Bite the Ballot

[Lord Kerslake](#), House of Lords and President-Elect of the Local Government Association

[Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira](#), University of Leeds and Digital Democracy Commission

[Cllr Robert Light](#), Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chair, West Yorkshire Combined Authority

[Danny Lockwood](#), The Press News Ltd

[Adrian Lythgo](#), former Chief Executive of Kirklees Council

[Peter Macfadyen](#) Frome Town Council and Flatpack Democracy

[Neil McInroy](#), CLES (Centre for Local Economic Strategies)

[Professor Colin Mellors](#), Local Government Boundary Commission for England

Joe Mitchell, Democracy Club
Dr Catherine Needham, 21st Century Councillor, University of Birmingham
Kajal Odedra, Change.org
Sym Roe, Democracy Club
Cormac Russell, Nurture Development
Sharon Salvanos, Electoral Services Manager for Kirklees Council
Andrew Scallan, Electoral Commission
Katherine Sladden, Change.org
Professor Andrew Taylor, University of Sheffield
John Turner, Chief Executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators
Mel Usher, Frome Town Council
Rob Vincent, Electoral Commissioner and former chief executive of two councils
Craig Wright, KPMG
Anthony Zacharzewski, Democratic Society

Our council colleagues

We would like to thank the councils who kindly welcomed us in our visits, especially the officers and councillors who shared their experiences:

Bassetlaw District Council

Julie Briggs (Democratic Services Manager), Steve Brown (Head of Corporate Services), Cllr Simon Greaves (Leader of the Council), Ros Theakstone (Director of Corporate Services), Cllr Jo White (Deputy Leader of the Council)

Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council

Yvonne Ledgerton, Cllr Andy Moorhead, Cllr Mike Murphy, Cllr Chris O'Hare, Cllr Frank Walsh

London Borough of Bexley

Rose Bedlow, Cllr Alan Deadman, Dave Easton, Nick Holier, Cllr Don Massey, Bjorn Simpole

The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames Council

Cllr Kevin Davies (Leader of the Council)

We would also like to thank all the Kirklees Council staff who took part in our survey.

Our partner organisations

Our thanks to the members of partner organisations who took part in our group discussion and who offered different and valuable perspectives about local democracy. Thank you to:

Paul Bridges, Manager, Huddersfield Mission

Alistair Conn, Site Manager, Syngenta

Liz Cook, CEO, Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing

Laura Ellis, Head of Governance & Corporate, NHS Greater Huddersfield CCG

Helen Severn, North Kirklees CCG

Tom Taylor, Chair, Third Sector Leaders

Angela Williams, Principal, Huddersfield New College

Political groups and councillors

Thank you to everyone from our local political groups who have participated in our political group discussions and in our survey. We'd especially like to thank the recently elected councillors who shared their experiences with us.

Our facilitators

Our thanks to the Social Marketing Gateway (SMG) for listening so carefully to our citizens at our roadshow events and making sure that local voices have been at the heart of our work right from the beginning.

The Kirklees Council support team

We would like to say a special thank you to the council officers who have all contributed to the smooth delivery of this work:

Diane Sims, David Bundy, Spencer Wilson, Deborah Nicholson, Helen Smith,

Agnieszka Wilstrop, Richard Farnhill, Penny Bunker, Sharon Salvanos,

Sam Atkinson, Louise Khan, Katy Deacon, Vina Randhawa, Louis Webster,

Helen Kilroy, Richard Dunne, Jenny Bryce-Chan, Yolande Myers, Alaina McGlade,

Michelle Ross, Steve Copley, Nicki Boothman, Andrea Woodside, Andy Wood,

Cheryl Reid, Sue Ginty, Julie McDowell, Jackie Ingham, Martin Haigh & Max Youell

We're certain that our Democracy team will continue to reach new heights of professional excellence and achievement due to all the hard work that each of you put in every single day.

A special message of thanks from the Commissioners

A very special thank you to **Carl Whistlecraft** for being so committed in his leadership and for putting so much time and outstanding dedication into the Kirklees Democracy Commission.

The evidence gathering, drafting and organisation have been a herculean task, which Carl and his small team of officers have excelled in tackling.

Carl has been meticulous in his preparations, and really helpful in his advice and guidance, in what has been a mammoth task. This project's success would not have been possible without his dedication and patience.

We'd like to say a massive thank you for making it happen.

We would like to thank **Diane Sims** and **David Bundy** for helping in our deliberations, for pulling all the masses of information together and for keeping a sense of humour when we have been a little tetchy and sometimes pedantic.

The whole process of working well with officers and with Commissioners from different political backgrounds has been excellent and has definitely enhanced member and officer relationships.

It is a bar that we will measure against for the future.

Kirklees Democracy Commission

www.democracycommission.org.uk

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“By 2020 Kirklees is an informed citizen-led democracy with accountable elected representatives who enable communities to influence and affect decisions governing their lives”

[#kirkdemocracy](https://twitter.com/kirkdemocracy)