

The De Montfort University and Municipal Journal Councillor Commission:

The Voice of the Councillor

Association of
Democratic Services
Officers Conference,
Hilton Hotel, 23rd
November 2017



@DMULGRU
#CllrCommissi
on



Today's speakers

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LGRU
Local Governance Research Unit

The Councillor Commission



The report



Local Governance Research Unit
The Municipal Journal

The Voice of the Councillor

Final report of the De Montfort University and
Municipal Journal Councillor Commission



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Local Governance Research Unit
De Montfort University
Leicester

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Introduction

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- Speaking about perceptions
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- The voice of parishes and towns
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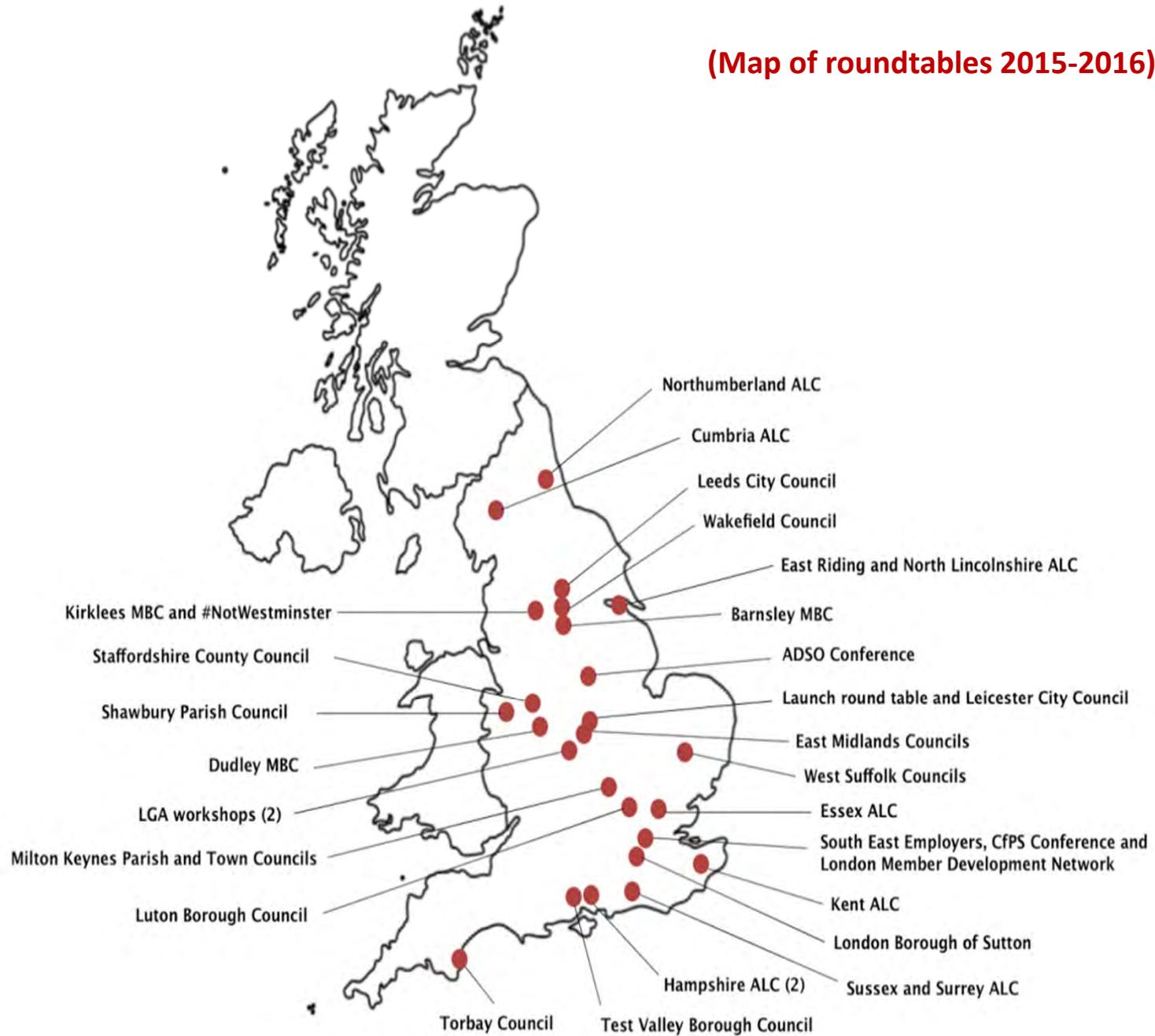
The Commission

- **Professor Colin Copus (Chair)** - *Professor of Local Politics, Local Governance Research Unit, De Montfort University*
- **Heather Jameson** - *Editor, The Municipal Journal*
- **Lord Gary Porter** - *Chairman of the Local Government Association, Leader of South Holland Council*
- **Councillor Mike Evans** - *Chairman of Whiteley Town Council, Chairman of Hampshire Association Local Councils*
- **Sir Merrick Cockell** - *Chairman, UK Municipal Bonds Agency and London Pensions Fund Authority*
- **Anthony Zacharzewski** - *Director, Democratic Society*
- **Jessica Crowe** - *Head of Customers, Commissioning and Governance, London Borough of Sutton*
- **Jacqui McKinlay** - *Chief Executive, Centre for Public Scrutiny*
- **Rachel Wall (Researcher to the commission)** - *PhD*

How we listened

- Started taken evidence in December 2015 – finished evidence collection December 2016
- 31 round table discussions with councillors
- 10 round table with just parishes
- Number of councillors attending round tables (total) – 336
- Number of written submissions – 128
- NALC Survey: 81 responses
- Twitter chat via **@DMULGRU** using **#CllrCommission**

(Map of roundtables 2015-2016)



How we listened

- Round tables were ran similarly to unstructured focus group interviews
- Open and flexible questions
- No pre-set agenda – discussion led and shaped by councillors
- Huge involvement from councillors
- Listened to councillors, didn't just speak about them.
- Transformative – we learned from councillors, they learned from one another!



(Round table held at Morpeth Town Hall)

Speaking about the Council

Relationships within the council

- Leading members
 - Leaders and executive members/ committee chairs receive the greatest support for the duties they perform.
- Scrutiny chairs or vice-chairs
 - Do not enjoy the same level of access to officers and resources as leading members
- Majority group councillors
 - Sometimes struggle to access officers and resources they need at a strategic level
- Minority(s) group(s) councillors
 - Group provides minority councillors a sense of strength, but still often struggle to access the officer and resource support they need

The Main Themes

- Globalisation
- Europeanisation (now de-Europeanisation)
- Urbanisation
- Austerity
- Government control
- The need for innovation
 - public services
 - local leadership
 - governing
- Ensuring community cohesion
- Devolution
- The challenge of responsibility without power



Speaking about the Council

We want information!

- One of the most prominent frustrations we heard from councillors was a lack of access to **information** they need, or information not presented in a clear and helpful way.
- A number of councillors told us they had submitted Freedom of Information requests to their own councils in order to obtain the information they require.



Training

- Discontent in some places with the nature and quality of training provided
- Different opinions over whether training should be compulsory

Speaking about the Council

Council Constitutions

- Continuum of interest among councillors in constitutions....

Full engagement  Abdication

- Often reported that the ruling group had a '*cavalier*' attitude towards the constitution, sometimes also using it as a way to restrict the opposition groups in the council.
- Lack of resources and protection for minority groups.

Must be seen as more than a set of rules and conventions

Speaking beyond the Council

Public Accountability

- Local government exists in a fragmented and often chaotic network of competing and interacting agencies and bodies with different:
 - Purposes
 - Resources
 - Policies
 - Structures
 - Ambitions
 - Powers



... many of which also operate beyond the boundaries of any one council and have little or no accountability to the public or concern for place.

Speaking beyond the

Council

Speaking with other councils

- Councillors are not always treated as councillors by officers from other councils.

The Community

- We heard from councillors that the work they do with their local community is a favoured aspect of their role, but does not always experience the level of support compared to other aspects of the role.

Proximity to the public

- Unique feature of the office of councillors
- Provides councillors with intelligence about local issues – a vital resource for the councillor

Speaking in response to central policy change

Central regulation and control

- Councillors expressed frustration at the level of oversight and control exercised by central government
- Different currents of opinion from councillors
 - A desire for greater freedom, but
 - A desire for more guidance and regulations about what central gov expects

Localism

- Councillors are sceptical of government's approaches and commitment to localism..... *'Localism is what we do, every day'*

Reorganisation

- Councillors concerned by how rapidly conversations of devolution have moved to conversations of reorganisation
- One of the most contentious and divisive

Speaking in response to central policy change

Devolution

- At the time of our research, devolution and combined authorities were fresh in the minds of councillors
- There is a genuine and enthusiastic among councillors demand for greater devolution to local government, **but...**
- Councillors are not convinced of government's commitment and the model for devolution they are currently offering.
- Some frustrations we heard:
 - Recognised as a top-down process
 - Councillors, unless executive members, receive little info on devo
 - *'Voting with a blindfold'*
 - One size does not fit all!
 - 'Cut and paste devolution'
 - To mayor or not to mayor?

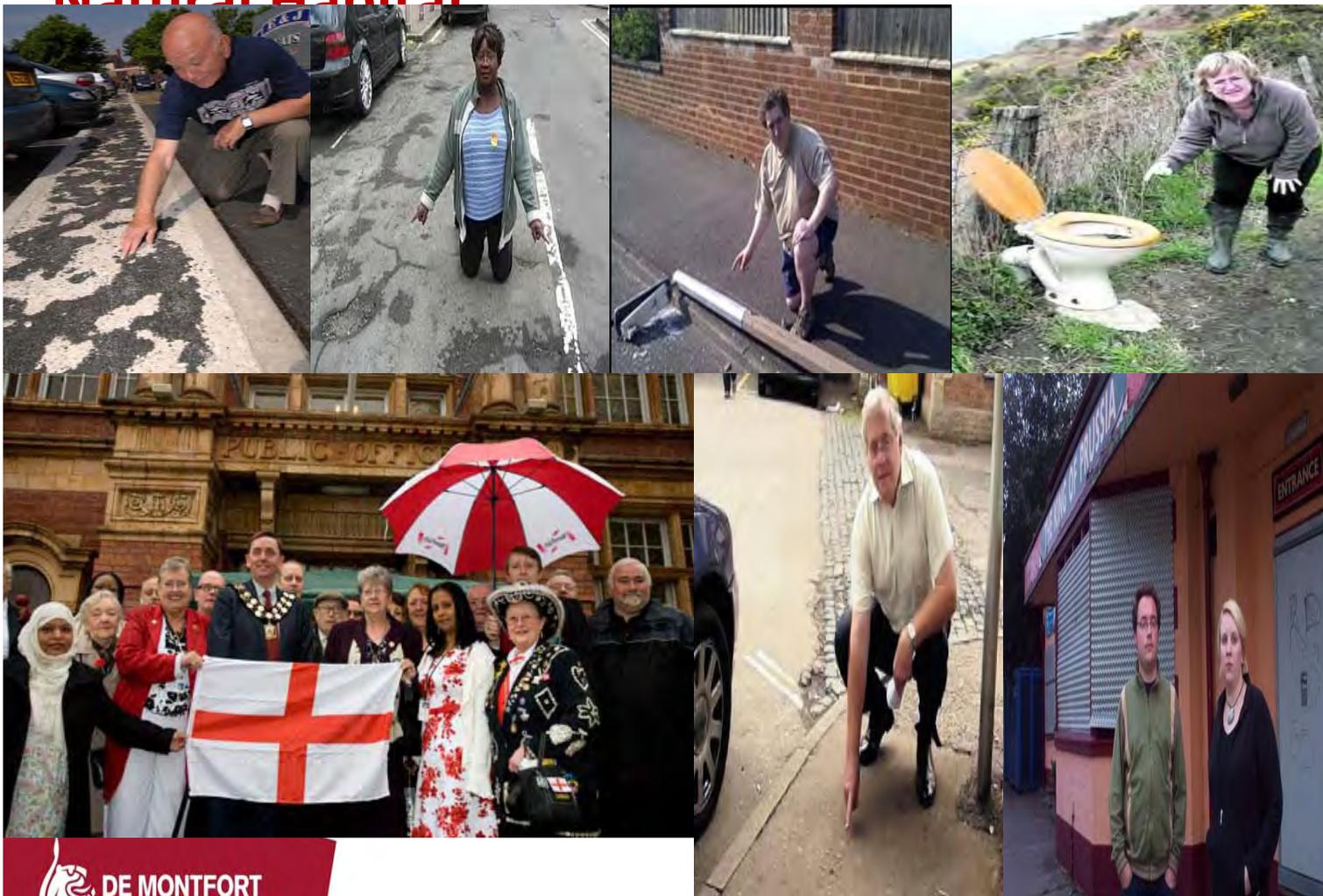


Speaking about perceptions

'Councillors are not craving praise for what they do, rather they expect their office, its roles, functions, powers, responsibilities and, more importantly, its limitations to be recognised...' (The Voice of the Councillor, 2017 p.69)

- Councillors highlighted three important sets of perceptions:
 - Public Perceptions
 - Media Perceptions
 - Westminster Perceptions

Speaking about perceptions: Councillors' Natural Habitat



Speaking about the job

Who do they do it?

Public Service

- motivated by a deep sense of public service, of pursuing public well-being, of giving up their time, energy and resources to provide a service to fellow citizens.

The democratic spirit

- linked to public service, councillors' often have a deep-centred belief in the democratic system and in deliberation and the democratic way of resolving political differences

Ambition:

- desire to achieve for personal growth and success and to stand out in some way as having secured victory in open competition

Status:

- Even though the office of councillor is much maligned, it offers a status and public recognition which can be used as leverage to take action or employ influence

Speaking as a parish or town

- Many similarities to principal authorities, but some important differences
- Twin and triple hatters
- Third tier or first tier?
- Parish and town politics
- Relationships – within and beyond the parish/ town
- Why do they do it?
- Co-option – **not** a ‘virtue’
- More research is needed to understand the relationship between parishes and principal authorities



Where next?

- Official launch event in Parliament
- Westminster Hall Debate
- Regional workshops
- Work with other organisations such as the LGA
- Policy papers
- Celebrating and sharing best practice
- Continuing to listen to councillors and promote debate for change