South Tyneside Council – written evidence (CCE0148)

Area of Interest: The ways society can support civic engagement and the role of Government and Parliament in supporting that

1. South Tyneside Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Select Committee’s work to identify ways to promote civic engagement. In particular, we hope that by describing an engagement mechanism we recently developed and employed to considerable success, we can help to encourage and enable more local authorities to leverage existing networks or develop new networks to facilitate the engagement of broad communities in both small- and large-scale policy change.

2. South Tyneside Council began our Brexploration initiative in June 2017. This initiative has been an effective exercise in supporting civic engagement, facilitating targeted cooperation between society and local government, and establishing communicative pathways between society and wider Government and Parliament.

3. Brexploration is a proactive, collaboration engagement vehicle, aimed at gathering local stakeholder perspectives, needs and priorities which relate to Brexit. It has been a particularly effective mechanism for soliciting views and perspectives which will inform future Council responses to changes in policy and circumstance that Brexit may bring, as well as shape proactive actions taken by the Council to limit negative repercussions and maximise benefits of Brexit for our area.

4. Brexit is a change which has impacted and has the potential to impact so many aspects of public and private life that it would be impossible for the Council (or indeed any individual organisation) to claim to understand or attempt to respond to the situation without consulting widely. Effective civic engagement around this issue is therefore essential. In developing Brexploration, the council established an effective mechanism for itself (and indeed wider regional partners) to be able to listen to and learn from community leaders and stakeholders.

5. The Council already undertakes a range of general and specific community engagement and consultation activities, including land development consultations, regular community area forums for residents and partnership boards which facilitate close working with local business, health and third sector communities. The Brexploration project is a new and flexible consultation vehicle which has been set up in response to Brexit, with the understanding that findings have the potential to shape a number of current and future council activities.

6. Brexploration was originally conceived as an Overview and Scrutiny People’s Select Committee exercise which sought to gather evidence from representatives of different major local sectors. However, the initiative quickly evolved into a wider, more collaborative engagement framework relevant to stakeholders across the wider North East region.

7. The regional aspect of the exercise has been important in supporting civic engagement in other local government structures, including the North East Combined Authority.

8. The Brexploration launch event took place on June 30th. The 4-hour event consisted of a scene-setting plenary with national and international context provided by hosts Alan Donnelly (former North East MEP) and Mark Easton (BBC News Editor), a series of themed roundtable discussions inviting delegates for their thoughts and contributions, and a plenary which allowed for full-group summaries of roundtable discussions and cross-theme questions and answers.

9. Approximately 350 individuals and organisation representatives from across the private, public and third sector were identified and approximately 80 of these delegates were able
to attend the event. Invitees were selected for their knowledge and experience of and capacity to speak for different parts of local society and the economy. The invitee list included organisations the Council already has strong working relationships with, as well as a wide range of organisations new to the Council. The objectives of and reasons for the exercise were made clear, and invitees were encouraged to bring ideas and evidence that would help to shape a collective local response to Brexit. By pitching the event at a high-level, emphasising the collaborative element of the event and reaching out to and inviting major business and community leaders, the Council ensured that, at this critical stage, the consultation was relevant and appealing to invitees, and therefore was successful in bringing together a sufficiently diverse range of those important community stakeholders with pertinent and detailed insights into different parts of the community and the economy.

10. Delegates were invited to choose one of three roundtables to attend and contribute to. The Increasing Prosperity discussion was led by Alan Donnelly, and examined considerations such as the region’s needs and concerns in terms of trade and international direct investment. The Workforce and Skills roundtable, guided by Caroline Theobald CBE, of FIRST Face to Face, looked at current and anticipated shortages in skills across different sectors, considered options for immigration and training solutions and identified specific asks of the government relating to priority sectors. The Community Collaboration discussion, guided by Collaborate CIC CEO Dr Henry Kippin, gave close consideration to community strengths and needs and how successful devolved services and former-EU powers could function.

11. The event was significant in that it not only facilitated useful discussion and engagement between Councillors and Officers and the public and business community, but also supported collaborative dialogue between representations of different parts of the community. For example, the Collaborative Communities roundtable brought together trade union representatives, the Police and Crime Commissioner, and the leader of a local international community organisation, among others, allowing them to listen to each other’s perspectives, identify shared priorities and build working relationships. The event also gave an opportunity for representatives such as MEP Jude Kirton-Darling to share their insights and research. Councils have an important role to play in forging these inter-community connections which are foundational to a health civic society.

12. Following on from the launch event, Brexploration has split into two tracks: 1) a local process, which will be driven forward by the People’s Select Committee, and will inform local policy responses to Brexit-related changes, and 2) a regional/national process, wherein a report is under development, based on initial discussion content and built upon through a wider consultation process, which will be championed and delivered to national government with the aim of shaping Brexit negotiations.

13. Delegates expressed appreciation of and satisfaction about the initial event, and it was suggested and broadly agreed upon by the wider group that the initial event should be followed up by a series of further discussions which could allow more in-depth look into specific issues. The Council and those involved are looking into how these potential continued discussion opportunities could be best facilitated.

14. The collaborative aspect of the Brexploration project has been central to its success. The Council have been flexible and open to partner involvement throughout, and anticipate future elements of the project to be taken forward by interested partners as much as by the Council itself. It is also notable that individuals from a range of political parties were invited the event, and the event was not limited by existing associations or memberships of particular structures. This afforded broad-ranging, meaningful discussion which
transcended traditional political fault lines and facilitated genuine cross-engagement and collaboration.

15. South Tyneside Council recommends that this style of engagement exercise, which leverages and grows networks, could be employed by other local authorities as a means of developing policy which satisfies the needs and concerns of a wide range of constituents and stakeholders.

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