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Speech by Ann MCCOY, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, Stockton on Tees Council, (ELDW partner city), United Kingdom

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Debate on “European Local Democracy Week (ELDW)”

Strasbourg, 28 March 2017

Good afternoon, thank you for inviting me to speak to you today about our involvement in European Local Democracy Week (ELDW).

My name is Councillor Ann McCoy. I am an elected member of Stockton on Tees Borough Council, which is a local authority in the North East of England.

My title is ‘Cabinet Member for Children and Young People’. This role gives me responsibility for Education and Children’s Social Care.

I am also chair of the ‘North East Regional Employers’ Organisation’ (NEREO), and one of three regional chairs of CEEP – the ‘European Partnership of Public Employers.’

My experience and involvement in local government goes back to the 1980’s. Over the decades, I have seen local government undergo an amazing development and transformation.

Since that time, the connections between our local communities and local democracy has become even more important than it has ever been.

Involving our residents in local democracy is extremely important to us. We work hard:

- to ensure we understand residents’ priorities;
- to ensure they know their views are valued, and their voices are heard;
- to ensure we clearly communicate what we are doing on their behalf; and
- to ensure we make them aware of the realities about how decisions are made;

What did we do before ELDW?

Prior to the introduction of ELDW, our Council was already actively involved in promoting local democracy at the ‘grass-roots’ level.

Increasing democratic participation and active citizenship have been key priorities for a long time. To achieve this, we developed a democratic engagement strategy called, "Opening the doors to democracy."

Voter registration and voting are at the core of the strategy – to ensure that everyone entitled to vote is able to do so.

The strategy is supported by a number of campaigns, activities and events which run throughout the year – promoting democratic participation to all sections of the community.

One of the key long-term campaigns is to "Turn 'little' voters into 'big' voters" – by supporting school council elections. The children and young people get used to being an active citizens and voting in their school community. So it becomes natural to continue into adulthood.

For a number of years, the council participated in a UK-wide initiative called "Local Democracy Week" (LDW) – to increase awareness and understanding about the work of the council and the role of local councillors.

Young people were the main target audience. An officer in our Democratic Services Team organised activities and events with a variety of partners – both inside and outside the Council.

The campaign took place during October. This made it easier to transfer over when we got involved in 'European Local Democracy Week'.

So how did we become involved in ELDW?

Although ELDW began in 2007, we did not get involved initially because we thought participation would involve a lot of extra costs and resources. Then in 2011, we heard about the "12 Star City" award – for local authorities who go the 'extra mile' to promote democracy at the grass-roots level.

We decided to see if we could meet the '12 Star City' criteria by adapting our 'business as usual' democratic engagement programme.

So we identified a number of planned events and activities, which fitted in with the ELDW theme. Then we liaised with the Congress staff organising ELDW to discuss our proposed programme. We were very pleased with the support we received, and as a result became the first local authority in the UK to become a '12 Star City' – along with Paris, Brussels and Tbilisi!

Since then ELDW has become a core part of our year round campaign promoting local democracy to all sections of the community.

How do we plan and prepare for ELDW?

Throughout the year, staff look out for 'potential' ELDW events and activities that we, or our partners, may be planning.

Once the ELDW theme is announced, we identify which events and activities fit in with the theme. This means that we can utilise existing staff, budgets and resources.

We try to build on the 'foundations' and success created by the events and activities from previous years. So we try to find out what works and keep doing it! This means that some elements are repeated.

For example, the work we do in schools is very effective. However, getting into schools can be difficult, so try to offer activities and events, which support the school curriculum and fit in with the school's schedules.

Our 'secret weapon' is the Mayor, as nearly every school is delighted to have a visit from the Mayor.

So each year, the Mayor and I (as Cabinet Member), visit as many schools as possible. We encourage the children and young people to ask questions about how and why we became involved in local government and politics - though we do not make political speeches.

Sometimes things do not go according to plan. When I was Mayor, I visited a primary school in December. I was dressed in a bright red jacket with the Mayoral chains. The Head Teacher had all the children seated smartly in the hall.

She asked if someone could tell everyone who this very important lady was – after an awkward silence, she asked them again; and still there was silence. Then she said, “Surely someone can tell us who this very important lady is.”

A little boy put his hand up. The Head Teacher breathed a sigh of relief, and then said to him: “Please stand up John and tell us who this very important lady is.”

So he stood up and said, “She is Father Christmas’s wife!” So on that day I learned that being Mayor is not as important as being Father Christmas’s wife!

That was a number of years ago, and I think we have managed to improve awareness about the role of the Mayor!

What has been achieved through our participation in ELDW?

Our participation has helped us in a number of ways. For example:

- increasing the levels of voter registration, particularly among young people and students;
- providing a launch-pad for new campaigns and initiatives such as ‘Make a difference - Be a Councillor’;
- increasing the number of schools who have school councils, and the number of children who want to be school councillors;
- increasing the effectiveness of our engagement with young people by raising the profile of our Youth Assembly. (Nearly 5,000 young people (55%) voted to elect our new Youth MP and Chair of the Youth Assembly);
- and our ELDW programmes have helped us to develop a network of partners to support our work – from the public and private sectors – as well as the voluntary and community sector.

I want to mention one more significant change that started during ELDW.

We re-launched the Youth Assembly a few years ago to increase the effectiveness of our ‘youth engagement’ and directly link it into the Council’s decision making.

Both the Leader of the Council and I, attend the Youth Assembly meetings. This means that the young people can talk to us directly about issues concerning them.

Our Youth MP chairs the meetings of our Youth Assembly and we have seen a real degree of maturity since we began. Issues that have been on their agendas for discussion have included domestic abuse, self-harm, mental health, discrimination, welfare reforms and sexual exploitation – issues that a lot of adults would struggle to understand.

The young people also raised an issue that we as a local authority had not even thought about. They call it ‘holiday hunger’.

Our schools have a ‘free school meals’ system for children and young people from low income families. The young people from the Youth Assembly wanted to know what children entitled to free school meals did in school holidays, and if they had enough to eat.

(Since the introduction of some of the welfare reforms, a number of ‘Food Banks’ have been opened by local charities to help support people struggling on low incomes).

So some young people did some research. They found out that there is an increase in families using Food Banks during school holidays. Their findings have been given to our local MPs. I think this demonstrates that our young people are becoming socially aware.

In closing, I would like to encourage all local authorities who have not yet participated in ELDW, to take a closer look.

There are lots of useful resources and information on the ELDW webpages. You can also find out what has been done in other countries – and most importantly you can take part like we have by adapting your events and activities to fit in with existing staff and resources.

And finally, I just want to say again how proud we are as a council to have been recognised as a '12 Star City.'

I hope you have found this presentation interesting.
Thank you for listening.