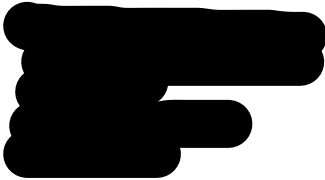




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19th July 2023



Thank you for your attendance at the Full Council meeting on 18th July 2023. In accordance with our standing orders, you used the opportunity to raise several questions addressed to the Leader and members of the Council. The Chair of the meeting, Cllr Mark Purvis, confirmed that you would receive a written response to your questions. This is in accordance with Standing Order 3 (h) which states,

“In accordance with standing order 3(e), a question shall not require a response at the meeting nor start a debate on the question. The Chair of the meeting may direct that a written or oral response be given.”

In response to your first question:

1. *Does the Council consider that its current composition provides the best possible representation of the electorate of Ashington? Particularly in terms of age, gender, health, employment status and political affiliation.*

The current composition of Ashington Town Council is that which was elected in May 2021, and in a bi-election on 7th July 2022. There are 6 wards of Ashington Town Council and only one ward has Cllrs who were elected uncontested. Therefore, of the 18 seats available, there were elections for 15 of them. This represents 83%, which compares favourably with the 38% average for England in May 2021.

Councillors are voted for by the public, rather than being selected for their age, gender, health, or employment status. Ashington TC has a higher proportion of female Cllrs (44%) than the average for England (36%). Ashington TC has a similar proportion of working Cllrs (44%) than the those

recorded for England following the May 2021 elections (46%). Health is a constant variable, and not something that is collected in regards the demographics of Cllrs, or via surveys on elections nationwide.

100% of Ashington Town Councillors are politically affiliated, and votes were cast knowing their political affiliation.

In response to your second question:

- 2. What steps is the council taking to encourage greater participation in elections to it? Thinking of how many of the current Town Cllrs were elected unopposed.*

Only three seats were elected unopposed in May 2021. 15 of our 18 Cllrs were duly elected following a poll, and contested election, of these 7 were new Cllrs from the previous term (2017).

The Council understands the role the Council must take to encourage interest in becoming a Councillor, and participation in local elections. The Council will play an active role in the run up to the 2025 local elections by raising awareness, publicising election information, including our own publicity about becoming a councillor.

In response to your third question:

- 3. Does the council consider that the attendance and active participation of members is what the electorate deserve?*

Councillor attendance is monitored, meetings are quorate, and decisions are taken in accordance with the law. In the 2022/23 council year, the average Cllr attendance at all meetings of the Council was 57%. 13/18 Cllrs had over 50% attendance. 11/18 had over 60% attendance, and half had over 65% attendance. So far in the current council year, not including those Cllrs who have a leave of absence, average attendance is 71%.

In response to your fourth question:

- 4. While it is undoubtedly reasonable to make allowance for temporary inability for elected members to attend meetings does the council believe that there maybe circumstances where having the ability to bring "new blood" into the council would be better than always granting exemption from attending meetings and being removed by virtue of non-attendance? Members who are unlikely to return to an active role on the Council would be able to resign creating a casual vacancy that could be filled by by-election or co-option. This could be used as an opportunity to widen the membership and demonstrate the council was seeking to be as open and democratic as possible.*

Ashington Town Council is a considerate council, and has adopted an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy which is based on the principles of dignity and respect. We have in accordance with the law permitted a leave of absence for three Cllrs. One has returned, as expected, and another two are going through a period of convalescence. It would be inappropriate, unresponsive, and uncaring to suggest to an elected member that they should stand down, when the Council is able to support their return to their duly elected role. Councillors are always 'able' to resign, without having to give a reason; the Council cannot and would not ask someone to resign.

We 100% support the Council's right to grant a leave of absence on health grounds and suggest that any Council that did as is suggested in your question would not encourage participation, openness and democracy but would rather put off those individuals who might consider standing for election, when uncovered how Cllrs are treated when they are unwell.

In response to your fifth question :

5. *Does the Council consider it should be more pro-active regarding the developments in the town and should take a lead in the creation of a Neighbourhood Plan for Ashington? I understand the Council is considering a Strategic Plan, surely leading on what local people want in terms of future development of the town should be a key part of this. It is a sad fact that people are more likely to get involved in campaigns against, what they consider undesirable developments, (like the Banks' housing proposal West of Wansbeck Road), than in participating in planning a new attractive and sustainable future with appropriate infrastructure. Development should not be lead by commercial property developers. A democratically elected council should be able to guide future development of their area with active participation of its population.*

Your views on a future Neighbourhood Plan for Ashington are interesting. We are sure you are aware that a Neighbourhood Plan cannot contradict National Policy or the Northumberland Local Plan but must complement these policies.

The Council has already invited a representative from the NCC Neighbourhood Planning Team to attend a future Council meeting; this will be arranged in the autumn.

Please note that this response has been written in consultation with the Chair and Leader of Ashington Town Council and will be brought to the next Full Council meeting for endorsement (26th September 2023). As is always the case your personal details will not be published.

Yours sincerely



Sarah Eden
Executive Officer/RFO

in consultation with Leader, Cllr John Tully, and Chair, Cllr Mark Purvis