

North Devon Conservatives

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Date: 26 May 2009

Time to shine the light on town hall, government and MPs' spending

Calls to increase openness and accountability in spending of taxpayers' cash

PHILIP J MILTON, Prospective Member of Parliament for North Devon, this week gave his backing to new plans to increase openness across local government, Whitehall and Parliament – to help rebuild the public's trust and confidence in politics, and to ensure proper accountability for the way their money is spent.

- Under a national Conservative blueprint for local government, councils – including North Devon and Devon County Councils – will be required to publish online details of all expenditure over a set limit, detailing all payments for goods and services. This has already been done by Boris Johnson in London's City Hall (publishing information on items over £1,000) and by Conservative-run Windsor & Maidenhead (publishing figures over £500). This would bring one of the biggest shake-ups to town hall accountability since Margaret Thatcher championed a Private Member's Bill in 1960 which forced councils to open their meetings to the press and public.
- This greater transparency and accountability would help reduce wasteful expenditure, saving taxpayers' money. Both local residents and local newspapers could scrutinise this new information, creating a new citizen-led financial discipline on local government.
- At the same time, there should be greater openness in central government. Under new Conservative plans for a 'People's Right to Know', every single item of central government spending over £25,000 and all public sector salaries over £150,000 would be published online. Furthermore, as part of a package of measures to clean up MPs' expenses, all claims made to the Parliamentary Fees Office would be published immediately online as they are made.

Published and promoted by Sir Richard Peek on behalf of the NDCA, The Strand, Barnstaple, N. Devon
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Philip Milton said:

“Almost fifty years ago, Conservatives made councils hold their meetings in public. This transformed local government for the better. In the 21st century, we should go further and use the power of the internet to shine the light on public spending and help improve value for money. Greater openness, in both local and central government, is vital to help restore the public’s trust and confidence in our political system.

“At a time when the public finances are so tight, every penny counts and openness will impose a citizen-led financial discipline to North Devon and Devon County Councils, Whitehall departments and Parliament. The public should have a right to know how exactly their money is being spent.”

Notes to Editors

OPENNESS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Margaret Thatcher, as a backbench MP, championed the Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Bill which became law in 1960, requiring council meetings to be held in public. The Act was spurred by an industrial dispute in the printing industry, which led to Labour-run councils barring journalists involved in the dispute from council meetings.

[http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Public_Bodies_\(Admission_to_Meetings\)_Act_1960](http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=Public_Bodies_(Admission_to_Meetings)_Act_1960)

Under a Conservative Government, town halls would allow people to see exactly how they are using public money. Councils would be required to regularly make information about their spending available to the public online. Councils would list all items of expenditure above a certain level (e.g. perhaps in the region of £1,000) and we will consult on what this level should be and how often it should be published.

Boris Johnson has opened up the Greater London Authority’s books, published all items of expenditure over £1,000.
<http://www.london.gov.uk/gla/expenditure/index.jsp>

Conservative-run Windsor and Maidenhead have gone further, publishing all information over £500.
http://www.rbwm.gov.uk/web/finance_payments_to_suppliers.htm

In the United States, the Missouri Accountability Portal shows how such financial openness can be extended across state government, listing not just expenditure, but also details on contracts, taxes and employee salaries.
<http://mapyourtaxes.mo.gov/MAP/Portal/Default.aspx>

A partial right for local residents to inspect local authorities’ detailed financial records and receipts exists under Section 15 of the Audit Commission Act 1998. However, people’s access to information is restricted to a small window of four weeks a year, and it can only be viewed in person.
http://thejournal.parker-joseph.co.uk/blog/_archives/2008/7/6/3779232.html

OPENNESS IN WHITEHALL & PARLIAMENT

Under Conservative plans for a ‘People’s Right to Know’, every item of central government spending over £25,000, and all public sector salaries over £150,000, will be published online.

As one part of a series of measures to clean up MPs expenses, all claims made to the Parliamentary Fees Office should be published immediately online as they are made. David Cameron’s full action plan is available at:
<http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Downloadable%20Files/ActiononExpenses.ashx?dl=true> (PDF)

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