

North Devon Conservatives

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Ministers push ahead with plans for councillors to vote from the pub

Labour plans could undermine trust in North Devon Council warns Philip Milton

Councillors in North Devon will soon be paid for voting from their sofa or from the pub, the small print of Government documents revealed this week. Labour Ministers are to push ahead with changing the law to let councillors skip town hall meetings but still cash in on their council tax-funded salaries and pensions. This is despite overwhelming public opposition to the plans in a formal consultation.

- **Councillors to stay put on their sofas:** In July, as part of a widely-derided 'Community Empowerment White Paper', Labour Ministers announced plans to allow "remote" voting in town halls. North Devon's councillors will not have to turn up at meetings. They will be able to vote by phone or internet, from their home, their place of work or the local pub. The White Paper also included plans to introduce free doughnuts and prize draws for voting in elections; to remove controls on town hall propaganda; and to undo anti-sleaze laws brought in to stop 'jobs for the boys' corruption.
- **Anger at Labour Government plans:** The small print of the responses to the Government's consultation, published on 26 January, reveals widespread opposition to the changes. Less than a quarter of town halls backed the plans, warning that the move "erodes public confidence in democracy" and is "lacking transparency and accountability". The responses note that "concerns were also raised about the practicality and cost of remote attendance and voting", and stresses that "citizens want to be able to attend public meetings and see their councillors at work." Alarm was also raised over the increased risk of expensive legal challenges to controversial decisions, such as planning applications. But the Government has simply ignored this opposition, and says it still plans to change the law, regardless.
- **Green light to skip meetings as town hall salaries rocket:** It thought that permission to skip meetings is being proposed by Labour Ministers to make it easier for Labour councillors to hold down multiple jobs, on top

of raking in their councillor salaries. Yet in recent years, ever since Labour's Local Government Act 2000 and the widespread abolition of the 'Committee' system, councillor salaries have soared. Labour Ministers' plans come as council tax bills from April are due to hit record levels, with the average bill in England rising by £48 to reach £1,421 a year on a Band D home (equivalent to almost £120 a month).

Philip Milton, Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for North Devon, said:

"North Devon's councillors work really hard and they have a vital role in standing up for local neighbourhoods. But local decision-making by North Devon council must remain open, transparent and public.

"At a time when council tax bills are to hit record levels and people are working harder than ever to make ends meet, it is incredible that Labour Ministers are effectively pushing for some councillors to do less work for more money.

"I fear that Labour's plans for armchair voting and voting from the pub will create real cynicism amongst hard-pressed taxpayers."

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Notes to Editors

COUNCILLORS TO VOTE FROM THE ARMCHAIR OR PUB

In July 2008, the small print of the Government's so-called Community Empowerment White Paper announced proposals to allow councillors to miss council meetings and vote from their sofa or the local pub.

"Commitment: Remote Voting. Enabling Councillors to participate in meetings and votes remotely".

DCLG, *Communities in Control*, 9 July 2008, p.137.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communitiesincontrol>

On 26 January 2009, the Government published the response to the consultation proposals on "improving local accountability". Again in the small print, it reveals widespread opposition to Labour Ministers' proposed changes on remote voting, but the Government re-affirms its intention to push ahead, ignoring the inconvenient consultation responses.

"Consultation question 13: Do you agree with the proposed approach (to legislate to allow authorities to modify their attendance and voting procedures as necessary to allow remote voting)?"

53. Of the 143 responses to this question, half of respondents opposed the proposals outright, a third gave support qualified to a greater or lesser extent for some or all aspects of the proposal and **less than a quarter supported the proposal** in the consultation document. There was no correlation between the type of respondent and the opinion they expressed.

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54. **The most common concern raised was that remote attendance and voting is contrary to the work of the council and councillors being transparent and accountable and that in lacking transparency and accountability it erodes public confidence in democracy.** There was a very clear message from those consulted that not only do councillors have to meet face to face to get the best out of their meetings with each other, but citizens want to be able to attend public meetings and see their councillors at work.

55. Concerns were also raised about the practicality and cost of remote attendance and voting, with respondents suggesting that the proposals could benefit from being trialled to determine how remote attendance and voting could be successfully achieved.

56. It was acknowledged that while there are advantages to remote attendance and voting, there are also risks involved not just in terms of **damage to confidence in local government** but also in terms of increased risk of challenge on decisions arrived at through meetings or decisions that involve remote attendance.

57. We acknowledge the concerns but believe that these can be addressed successfully. The Government believes the implementation of the proposals will require primary legislation and accordingly we intend to work with the Local Government Association, local authorities and other stakeholders to address the particular concerns raised pending introduction of primary legislation which the Government intends to seek at the next convenient opportunity.”

DCLG, *Communities in Control: Real people, real power - Government response to the improving local accountability consultation*, 26 January 2009, p.18.

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/govresponselocalaccountability>

ROCKETING TOWN HALL PAY

According to research by the Taxpayers' Alliance in 2007, the average councillor now receives £9,300 a year, with many members of fire and police authorities or with 'special responsibility' salaries receiving up to £40,000 a year. Taking into account wage inflation, the average town hall salary will be £10,000 in 2009.

http://conservativehome.blogs.com/torydiary/2007/04/average_council.html

The rocketing level stems from the abolition of the Committee system in the Local Government Act 2000, and the replacement with a new regime of salaries.

“Mrs. Spelman: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what changes his Department and its predecessors have made to the (a) allowances, (b) salaries and (c) pensions for councillors since May 1997.

Mr. Woolas: Since May 1997 the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has made a number of changes to the rules relating to allowances and pensions for councillors. There is no provision for the payment of salaries to councillors.

The principal effects of these changes are as follows:

To give responsibility for the setting of allowances to local authorities.

To allow local authorities to pay allowances for the care of children and other dependants.

To allow councillors access to the local government pension scheme.”

Hansard, 14 December 2005, col. 1965W.

http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/cm051214/text/51214w02.htm#51214w02.html_wqn3

DERIDED COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT WHITE PAPER

Proposals in the Government's White Paper also included:

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/communitiesincontrol>

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Propaganda on the rates – weakening rules on party political literature

Page 109 of the White Paper pledged to “review the Code of Recommended Practice on Local Government Publicity and other central guidance which sets out which activities are deemed party political or official.” These rules were put in place in 1986 to stop inappropriate partisan spending. An extensive survey by the Taxpayers Alliance revealed in December that publicity spending by town halls has soared to £450 million under Labour. <http://tpa.typepad.com/waste/2007/12/council-spendin.html>

Jobs for the boys

Page 106 of the White Paper plans to tear up the so-called Widdicombe rules introduced in 1989 to stop corruption in local government. The rules stop council workers above a certain salary band from also being councillors to avoid conflicts of interest and the politicisation of the ‘local’ Civil Service.

Doughnuts and prize draws to vote

Page 70 of the White Paper proposed “to provide incentives for voting in local government elections”, such as by prize draws. The previous Chairman of the Councillors Commission, Dame Jane Roberts, has suggested that this could involve free doughnuts in return for voting.

ENDS