

Gateshead

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Comment text:

Please see attached:

Attached Documents:

- attachment 1.pdf

I was very concerned to learn that there has been a suggestion that the number of locally elected councillors in Gateshead should be reduced.

At a time when the government and main opposition parties are talking about devolving more powers and responsibility to local communities it seems inappropriate to say the least to put even more pressure on already stressed local representatives.

Some may argue that the cuts in local services that have occurred over the last 12 years should mean there is a case for fewer councillors. On the contrary, the pressure to find ways of continuing to support local communities and the services they rely on brings on more not less work. My wife now acts as secretary to a local community centre, serves on active local groups such as Staiths Gateshead, Big Local and local community youth projects as well as serving as a school governor. The idea that they should be faced with even more pressure because of having fewer colleagues to share the work is very worrying for future councillors and the local community whose services are likely to be less well supported as a result.

Being a councillor is not a full time occupation. Councillors are not like MPs they do not have the expenses MPs have to employ staff and offices. The support they get from council officers is advisory. They have to type their own letters and emails, respond to social media and attend advice surgeries and local groups. Being a councillor is voluntary. It is intended that people in full time work can also serve as local representatives thus ensuring councils are made up of people who are truly representative of the local communities they serve. A reduction in the numbers of councillors will make it increasingly difficult for people in employment to serve their local communities.

Also the increasing need to rely on voluntary groups to provide former Council services means that councillors are serving on even more outside bodies on top of their council committees and working groups.

As someone whose wife is a local councillor in Gateshead I am only too well aware of how hard councillors work and how much their personal lives are affected. Even while away on holiday she is answering emails responding to social media comments and queries from residents and making and taking telephone calls. We do not complain, this is something we both support but the idea that even more work and responsibility should be put on fewer councillors is totally unreasonable.

Add to this the creation of a regional structure with a directly elected mayor which will inevitably lead to more committees and working groups which local councillors will be expected to serve on and it can be seen that this is not the time to reducing democratic representation and accountability.

The number of councillors in Gateshead was reduced from 72 to 66 some time ago. There is no reasonable case for a further reduction and indeed, as I have tried to point out the case for retaining the numbers of councillors in Gateshead is a strong one.

