

Please find below Sedgefield Town Council's respond to the letter from former Town Councillor Elizabeth Flanagan published in the May 2025 Sedgefield News:

The statement that Sedgefield's Town Councillors are not elected but are co-opted is untrue. Local council elections take place every 4 years and these are run in accordance with legislation and administered by Durham County Council's Electoral Services. Depending upon the number of people who put themselves forward to stand for election determines whether or not an election is contested or uncontested. Sedgefield Town Council has 15 Councillor positions and in the most recent local council election, an election which has been promoted extensively both locally and around the County, we had 14 people who put themselves forward for nomination with all being elected. We now have 1 Councillor vacancy which we will seek to fill by co-option using our open and transparent recruitment process that we advertise in our Sedgefield Extra, on our website, our X account, via our residents database, the weekly Round-up and via the Town noticeboard and the Parish Hall.

To put this into some context, in the recent elections there have been 668 Councillors from the 1120 positions across County Durham who have been elected uncontested with a further 168 seats subject to contested elections. 28 seats remain unfilled as zero nominations were received so new elections are required. This means across the County there are 256 of Councillor seats available for co-option¹. In this context democracy is strong in Sedgefield and we are bucking the county and national trends where many Town and Parish Councils simply struggle to attract Councillors or are operating with a significant number of Councillor vacancies. Indeed, in Sedgefield we are lucky to have a very diverse mix of Councillors in terms of age, gender, skills, backgrounds and interests. In the years which intervene local Council elections, in accordance with legislation unless ten electors of the Parish request for an election to take place in response to a notice published by Durham County Council, then the Town Council will seek to fill any such vacancy via co-option using the same robust, open and transparent recruitment process outlined earlier.

In response to Ms Flanagan's concerns regarding finances, in accordance with the Town Council's financial governance arrangements, which are subject to legislation and robust internal audit scrutiny as well as reported to an external auditor as part of its year end accounting processes, the Town Council closely scrutinises its budget and continuously strives to make the best use of its finances and seek efficiencies where possible. The Town Council has not been immune to the impacts of rising costs over recent years and has committed to minimising these increases by entering an Energy Management SLA with Durham County Council to help further analyse and alter the Parish Hall's energy usage.

Sedgefield Town Council has always endeavoured to keep the inevitable increase of all Council service fees and charges in line with inflation which, for example, has historically resulted in an annual increase of either 50p or £1 on our most frequently booked Hall rate (general use booking in the Main Hall for up to 5 hours). When Sedgefield Parish Hall re-opened after the COVID-19 pandemic, the Town Council froze Hall hire fees to pre-pandemic rates to aid our Parish Hall community in re-establishing themselves at a time of economic uncertainty.

¹ Figures supplied by the County Durham Association of Local Councils (CDALC).

However, as rising costs continued in recent years, the level of Parish Hall subsidy needed to be addressed so as not to impact upon other Town Council services.

The Town Council commences its budget setting process for the next financial year in the autumn so that a recommendation for its precept and all fees and charges for the following financial year are agreed by full Council in January. In accordance with the Town Council's financial governance arrangements, all of which can be viewed on our website at www.sedgefieldtowncouncil.gov.uk/annual-report-and-accounts/, we give our service users notice in January of the new charges coming into effect on 1st April. Following close scrutiny of the Parish Hall's income and expenditure during 2024/25, a series of changes were agreed by full Council in January 2025.

In order for this much-loved community asset to remain viable and sustainable for community use, the pricing structure has been updated to reflect more accurately the use of the different rooms and facilities within the Hall and additional fees have been introduced. One of these new fees levied relates to space utilised for regular user storage, and in some instances, this space is considerable. In addition, the charges now ensure those who use the Hall for commercial purposes pay higher fees and those events which sell tickets, whether community or commercial, also pay higher fees to reflect that they are generating income for their group rather than simply delivering a session. The Town Council has been working with the Hall's regular users over recent months to ensure that community groups can utilise the hall's booking procedure in a way that keeps their price increases to a minimum, ensuring the building continues to support and prioritise the local community above commercial, profit-making or bookings made from outside the area.

With regards to the refurbishment of the bar area, the Town Council is indeed thankful to Sedgefield Players for its assistance in seeking grant funding for the recent purchase of new curtains and the anticipated bar refurbishment, however, it is the Town Council which has provided the financial match funding for this project and not Sedgefield Players.

The majority of Sedgefield Town Councillors are regularly visiting and attending events in Sedgefield Parish Hall such as coffee mornings, local fundraisers and membership groups they are a part of, and therefore not only enjoy that facility themselves as individual residents but also fully understand and appreciate the Hall's importance as a community asset. The Parish Hall is used for such a diverse array of events ranging from live music to amateur dramatics to exercise classes to Youth Club to hobby groups and so much more.

It is in everyone's interests that Sedgefield thrives and we would be delighted if readers wanted to apply for the Town Council's current vacancy and look forward to hearing from you.