Cllr John Blackie’s reasons for resigning as chairman of Richmondshire District Council’s Upper Dales Area Partnership and the ensuing debate.

Cllr Blackie’s resignation email on Tuesday, January 16:

I feel distinctly uncomfortable in acting in any sort of official position - other than by election as the Member representing Hawes & High Abbotside – in a Richmondshire District Council whose policies are having, or likely to have, a hugely detrimental impact on the social and / or economic well-being of the communities in the Upper Dales that I have been proud and privileged to represent as their County Councillor these last 20 years.

**These policies include:**

-          The emerging RDC / Craven DC proposal to charge 2nd Home Owners in the Upper Dales at least 5 times the current Council Tax they pay, a proposal that will actually seriously harm the very cause its promoters claim to have put it forward to support, and result in the young families that remain or are attracted to our Dales communities as the ultimate losers, through the damage it will cause to the local economy.

**I am passionate supporter of young families in the Upper Dales with a 20+ year track record I am very proud of in promoting their best interests** – for example they need access to local services like The Little White Bus, the Post Office and the filling station in Hawes and I have been a key player in providing them – so I cannot stand idly by and watch such a misguided and ill-researched back of an envelope policy emerge without taking personal action to try to prevent the adverse and unintended consequences it will undoubtedly cause.

-          The undermining of the values of houses in the Upper Dales likely to leave all those who own a house here, lifelong local residents as well as young families who have recently bought their own property, significantly worse off due to the glut of houses this emerging proposal will undoubtedly dump on the housing market.  This will be a direct and inevitable consequence of this unwelcome and unproductive exercise in social engineering.

-          In an area heavily dependent on tourism for a living, the severe cutback in the cleaning of the 7 public toilets in the Upper Dales, some of which are each used by 150,000 or more visitors annually, to a totally inadequate 4 times a week, to be responsible for the closing of the Askrigg public convenience facility for the want of a £1,500 grant per year, to charge people to use our toilets when the investment of nearly £80,000 to introduce this charging regime has no hope of revenue payback in its 5 years, or probably at all.

-          The cause of the breakdown in relationships between Hawes & High Abbotside Parish Council and RDC by the continual cutback without any consultation in street scene services to the town, the latest of which is the loss of our locally based street caretaker, a job that has provided gainful full time employment for a local resident since 1974, who tells me he was forced to leave RDC after undue pressure was put upon him by a very senior RDC Director after he rightly spoke out to the Parish Council about the reductions in services in the town he was being instructed to deliver, a job lost as it has been made clear officially to me he will **not** be replaced by an Upper Dales resident in the future.

-          The putting forward as the official RDC submission to the Boundary Commission, fortunately rejected out of hand by the LGBCE, which was clearly designed to break down the unique cohesion between the communities I represent in the Upper Dales when redrawing the District ward boundaries here, rather than reflecting the huge number of community  interests and links that were known by the politicians that lead the RDC administration to exist between them.

**The Upper Dales Area Partnership is closely identified with Richmondshire District Council, and because of my robust objections to the RDC policies above, and others far too numerous to mention here, I wish to put some clear water between it and myself in the future.**

 Instead I will take part in the UDAP from the floor of the meeting, challenging as appropriate items that come forward on the Agenda if they are against the best socio-economic interests of the Upper Dales, and supporting those that promote them.  This I consider will be my most effective way of representing the communities in the Upper Dales at the UDAP in the future.

 I have been the Chairman of the UDAP since its first days in May 2011, and of its predecessors including the Upper Dales Parish Forum right back to the late 1990’s, so I find it a matter of dismay that I feel I have no alternative to resign.

……

He said he would be in attendance during the first item on the agenda of the area partnership meeting at Thornton Rust Institute at 7pm on Wednesday January 17 when the council tax on second homes will be discussed. David Butterworth, CEO of the YDNPA has been invited as guest speaker particularly for that agenda item.

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Betsy Everett response to Cllr Blackie’s email:

- I'm writing in a personal capacity, not as a journalist, and, moreover, as one of those homeowners whose property may be devalued by proposals to increase council tax for second-home owners. However, is this really an "unintended consequence" of the policy? Isn't it precisely the opposite? Have I missed something, or isn't this at least part of the plan? To reduce house prices overall and therefore make them more affordable for young people wanting to stay in the dales? House prices have increased dramatically in the forty-plus years since I bought my first home, but not through any effort on the part of myself or other owners. Isn't it time we shared the spoils?

Houses standing empty for most of the year at a time of great need are a national scandal.

………

Cllr Blackie’s reply:

**Well Betsy,** if it is indeed **an intended consequence** that every single owner of a house in the Upper Dales would take a hit on the value of their most precious asset, then I think it is about time the 3 promoters of the 5x Council Tax penalty regime – Cllrs Yvonne Peacock / Richard Foster / Carl Lis - should be honest enough to tell everybody about it.

They were conspicuous by their absence on the BBC One Live Programme “The Big Questions” on Sunday morning , not prepared to defend their corner, so instead I found myself debating a purely political issue on a National TV channel with an officer, David Butterworth.  And the producer did tell me each of the three Councillors had been contacted and cried off when asked to appear on TV !!

**So being held to account is an important part of the democratic process and at least you are in left in no doubt as to where I stand on the issue.**  If the result of this ill-informed and ill-researched initiative is a glut of houses on the market, and a local resident (particularly a young family) who needs to move quickly and cannot sell their house, or has to take a dramatic reduction in value to sell it, then at least I will be able to say I warned them of the consequences.  Have Yvonne, Richard and Carl done the same ??

I am not denying there are a very small handful of 2nd Home Owners who use their house very infrequently but the remainder in my experience spend freely in the local economy, providing local employment, and particularly on the small army of local builders, joiners and electricians, and very often these enterprises involve the same young families we wish to keep in the Upper Dales.  A self-employed tradesman, aged 35, very much a local person from Upper Swaledale, rang me today to say that 90% of his work was done in 2nd Homes, and without this trade, he would have to leave the Dales.

I would add that Allen Kirkbride said at the YDNPA meeting that in his opinion 2nd home owners made a significant contribution to the local community in Askrigg, where you live, and there was only a couple of properties in the village which were left unvisited for most of the year.

I am very happy to have every word I write or say recorded in the media so please do not apologise to me for being a journalist.  As it is you have sent your e-mail, as I sent mine this morning and this one now, to all the main press and media contacts in the region, so your personal views are hardly being kept to yourself.  However I welcome the debate we are having on this hugely important matter for us all in the Upper Dales.