

22nd July 2024

Dear Councillors,

Following my recent meeting with both the leader and deputy leader of the town council, I am writing to you all regarding the £2,000 grant offer extended to us. We have always appreciated the Council's willingness to support our work in the town, and we recognise the importance of the contributions made by local authorities to youth and community services like ourselves.

After careful consideration and internal discussion, we have decided to put the decision regarding our organisation accepting the grant on hold, as we believe it is essential to address the issues raised in this letter and seek clarity on several concerns.

When we initially applied for the grant, we outlined a funding need of £10,000 to help sustain our weekly programmes effectively. The offered amount, while appreciated, falls significantly short of our funding requirements. Due to this we are left to feel that there has been a palpable shift in the dynamics of our relationship with the Council, leading us to feel that there might be an underlying perception among some councillors that our work does not meet the standards or expectations needed for continued support.

Additionally, it appears that the process and culture of grant giving have been changed without prior indication or consultation. This shift raises legitimate questions about the issue of conflict of interest and how it has been managed. We believe transparency and fairness in the decision-making process is crucial, and any councillor with a potential conflict of interest should completely recuse themselves from the decision making process to maintain public trust.

Transitioning to a small grant-giving structure, despite already having a separate small grants system, in our view decreases the impact the council previously wanted to see. The process in place up until recently, which the council felt was needed, focussed on larger grants for a smaller number of organisations and in their eyes enabled a more substantial effect on the community. This change seems counterproductive to providing that positive impact and it would be useful to understand why and how the whole council went about changing this focus.

For clarity, we would like to ensure it is understood by the whole council that YMCA Northumberland does not take it for granted that the council will have had an abundance of applications for support this year, just as they have had in others. That being said, it is clear that some organisations have been granted the same support this year as they have previously. We appreciate that not a lot of organisations received the grant amount they applied for, but in our view there are clear questions around transparency and decision making from the published list of grant awards placed on the council website.

YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian Values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

Additionally, there now appears to be a negative narrative about the YMCA being seeded within the town council, which I deem unfair and unfounded. Specifically, the view that our organisation did not deliver the detached youth work project is incorrect. We completed the project except for a small number of weeks due to an innocent misunderstanding, following a meeting with the youth panel, where the suggestion of reopening the YMCA sessions on those nights, suggested by that panel, appeared to be a preferred option. As soon as we were aware that this decision was not agreed by the full council, this was remedied with immediate effect.

YMCA Northumberland stands as a champion for the town and a voice for change in the youth sector across the county. We are still awaiting an invitation to engage in a Northumberland-wide youth alliance, which has been hindered by trust issues caused by other organisations in different parts of the county. Again it appears that there is a narrative within the council that we and others in the town are not willing to engage and work in collaboration with other organisations, when this cannot be any further from the truth.

YMCA Northumberland has always strived to serve the young people in the Ashington community with dedication and passion. We believe in the value and impact of our work, and we are committed to maintaining high standards in all our programmes that focus on impact, rather than a quantitative measure. It is disheartening to sense a lack of confidence in our efforts, especially when the impact of our programmes is evident in the lives we touch daily.

We remain committed to our mission and to working collaboratively with Ashington Council and other partners who value and support our vision for a stronger, healthier community for children and young people. We are hopeful that future opportunities for partnership will be based on mutual respect and understanding.

At present YMCA Northumberland is now looking at a deficit of around -£25,000 in its annual budget. Which will mean that as of December 2024, unless we are able to find alternative funding sources for our youth programme, we will be looking to decrease from our five days a week programme for April 2025 onwards. Had we been able to achieve the grant level requested from Ashington Town Council, the other £10,000 application we put to another funder as match funding would have more than likely been successful as has been the case previously. As it stands now this funder has delayed this application to a later grant round in the hope we can achieve this match by the date of their next meeting.

Thank you once again for your consideration and for the support you have provided in the past. We look forward to discussing and resolving these issues raised above, where we can look towards future opportunities to collaborate in a manner that aligns with our mutual aspirations for community development.

Yours sincerely,

A large black rectangular redaction box covering the signature and name of the sender.