

## David Ashford – Douglas North

### Political Questions (2016)

#### Why do you want to be a member of the House of Keys?

I am passionate about our island and being blunt, I fear for its future. I want to bring both my twenty years of extensive private sector experience and the eight and half years of political experience gained on Douglas Council to the next House of Keys for the benefit of all the people of the island.

We are at a turning point as an island. The decisions made over the next five years will have an impact on current and future generations long after that House of Keys has gone. It is important we have people that can make decisions and stick to them. I feel there has been a failure in establishing a set direction over travel over the last five years and that is something that needs to be corrected.

I also want to bring a new approach to government, one where we get back to government working on behalf of the people that put them there. I feel there is an ever growing disconnect between the public and the people that they elect and I think that needs to change. I don't just want to work for the people I want to listen to them as well.

On a constituency level I want to be a strong constituency member and engaged directly with the community. As vice chairman of the Douglas Live at Home Scheme I know first-hand how important a vibrant community is to the people who live within it and what a difference it can make to peoples day to day lives. I want to engage on a day to day basis to ensure that community spirit goes from strength to strength and ensure that government works ever closer with the third sector, which can deliver many services much better and strategically than government ever can.

This is a critical juncture and it is now time for a new generation of MHK's to take the helm. I believe that my mix of extensive private sector experience and political experience gives me the skill set to grasp the challenges that lie ahead of us with both hands.

**If you were elected, what would your priorities be on a national level?**

One of the biggest priorities is to place the public sector pension scheme on a sustainable footing going forward. By the end of the next Tynwald there will be a £63million a year deficit for taxpayers to find alongside an additional £16million a year in employer contributions. This deficit unless tackled early on will have a major impact on government's ability to

**If you were elected, what would your priorities be on a constituency level?**

deliver and invest in frontline services. It also would make any future pay outs unsustainable putting at risk the promises made to government workers over the years. It is therefore to everyone's advantage that this is resolved at an early stage.

I would also push for a more diversified economy in light of the forthcoming Brexit. Although the island is still experiencing good levels of growth much of that growth is coming from a few specific sectors. It is crucial that we don't "have all our eggs in one basket" and develop a vibrant economy with a diversified base.

There should also be more done to try and provide incentives and opportunities for our young people who go to university to return to the island after their higher education is over. It is a locally developed skills base that is largely being lost to other jurisdictions.

One key priority would be infrastructure. The roads throughout the constituency, especially within the various estates require repair, and in some cases considerable investment.

Another priority will be to continue to

**How well do you think the present administration has handled the major challenges of the past five years?**

support and push the much needed refurbishment of the Willaston estate. I have been part of the scheme as a Douglas Councillor since its inception and it is slowly providing better quality housing of the 70 year old estate and once completed will hopefully also improve the quality of life for tenants. If elected I will continue to fight with Treasury, Council and the local government housing unit to ensure the investment continues until the job is done.

I would also hold regular constituency surgeries on an open door policy so that constituents can easily raise any concerns with me.

Also, I will issue regular constituency newsletters. This will allow me to update constituents on events and give them the necessary information so they can hold me to account for any decisions I may make. I would be an MHK that stays in touch with the constituency throughout the term of office, not just at election times.

While I sympathise that the current administration has had one of the hardest jobs of any administration in living memory, I also believe they have

**What are the main political and social issues facing the Isle of Man in the next five years?**

been their own worst enemy. On coming into office five years ago the administration said that it wanted to have an honest conversation with the Manx people. In this endeavour I feel they have failed. Their way of communicating decisions to the public has been haphazard and the messages at times confused.

Equally, far from tackling the big decisions such as public sector pensions, creating a fairer society and protecting the vulnerable, most of the big decisions have been delayed time and time again and kicked into the long grass for the next House of Keys to deal with.

In order to safeguard the future of our island it is imperative that the next government is all about actions not words.

One of the main ones is ensuring that we have an economy that works for all the people of the island. Diversification of the economy is also key ensuring that we as an economic entity are not overly reliant on one or two industries for our economic survival.

Alongside this we need to continue the process of balancing the books so that

**How would you deal with the challenges referred to in the previous answer?**

the ever dwindling reserves are not completely exhausted and then look to replenishing those reserves. As already mentioned, public sector pensions need to be given a sustainable future, including Tynwald members pensions.

In relation to an economy that works for everyone, we need to provide greater encouragement for existing businesses to invest on island rather than simply shipping profits off to a faceless entity in another jurisdiction. Also provide support for new start-ups and expansion of existing small businesses which are more lightly to invest in their workforce and produce the economic multiplier effect. We also need to look at personal allowances and the support net that is provided to those who from no fault of their own are finding it impossible to survive day to day. I would also oppose the continuance of the tax cap. Although I support the fact government tried it I do not feel it has brought any real substantial and sustainable benefit to the island.

With regards to diversification I have gone into more detail in diversification question later on.

In order to balance the books and

replacing reserves the only way this can be achieved is by a mixture of economic growth and smarter spending. I believe that we need to start prioritising better and actually develop a twenty year plan for the island. Not a five year plan that only runs one Tynwald to the next but a substantial plan as to where we want our island to be in 2030's. From that we can then develop a strategy in terms of infrastructure and investment which should be prioritised to meet that strategy. This would give greater control over public spending and ensure that departments worked closer together as one government rather than the individual silo mentality we currently see. It would also mean that any big projects outside of that strategy would require greater justification by the department concerned.

We should also be looking to use our on island experience more and also trust those who are qualified professionals within government to make decisions and lead projects. While government has been very good at telling us as individuals to shop local they have themselves resorted too many times, in my view, to employing off island consultants. We should be utilising and trusting our own local expertise.

**How would you deal with the issue of public sector pension reform and the public sector pension deficit?**

While I welcome the cost envelope proposals passed at June's sitting of Tynwald, I do not believe it fully resolves the structural issues. In fact the report itself emphasises the risks involved in the actuarial basis that has been used. Long term I would close the current scheme for civil servants, with existing accrued contributions and terms ring-fenced and safeguarded for current members. Then going forward, all members would pay into a newly created money purchase scheme. This would also apply to Tynwald members as well.

Existing schemes for frontline services would have to be examined separately to make sure that not only are they sustainable but that they are also competitive compared to what is offered in other jurisdictions.

One of the biggest reasons that the public sector pensions is in the current mess is that government has failed over the years to maintain an appropriate investment fund to cover the costs. The taxpayers of today are funding the payments of today, rather than producing an accruing fund to meet future liabilities.



**What has changed in the past five years for Isle of Man residents for the better?  
(Please give examples)**

In a turbulent world, unemployment has remained low compared to other western economies. There has also continued to be steady economic growth, although how much of that has filtered through to people's pockets is questionable. Crime continues to remain low and I believe that overall our island continues to be a safe place to live and work. The revenue side of the budget has also been balanced even if the overall budget has not. This at least puts us on a slightly more sustainable footing than we were five years ago.

**What has changed in the past five years for Isle of Man residents for the worse?  
(Please give examples)**

Although the island continues to benefit from economic growth the general person in the street is not feeling it in their pocket. People feel under financial pressure in all walks of life and that is in turn impacting on local spend and the long term individual savings of those individuals and families.

At the start of the last five year Tynwald there was an acknowledgement that the books could not be simply balanced by passing on charges to the individual in the street and needed to be a mixture of economic growth and limited charges. Instead the burden that has been placed onto households from increased energy costs and the introduction of

**Is the Isle of Man too reliant on any one sector of its economy?**

charges, such as the toilet tax, have placed ever more pressure on individuals. In terms of personal allowances the UK is now catching up with the island, something that would not have been conceivable five years ago.

Although there has been much talk of protecting the vulnerable I believe there are people of all ages who are falling outside of the safety net, just outside of the income support bracket, that are finding harder and harder to just exist day to day.

I believe there is an over reliance on both finance and e-gaming. Both over time due to their success have expanded to become ever more important to the economic success of our island. While the expansion of both sectors and their success is a good news story, it is worrying that other sectors have not seen such success and that in turn has left our economy more and more reliant on two sectors that can be affected not just by our actions but also the legislative actions of others around the world.

In order to protect the long term economic future of the island our government needs to ensure that they

**If you feel it is, how would you further diversify the Manx economy?**

encourage more diversification to create a more rounded and well balanced economy.

Brexit provides a huge opportunity for our island if we seize it correctly. The UK is an import economy and is still going to have to trade with the EU and now the world. We should be shouting from the roof tops about our automatic access rights to the UK market and the fact that we are a low tax jurisdiction. We should be marketing ourselves to research and development companies and the fact that we have agricultural areas, retail, finance all in a very confined geographical area makes us a huge selling point in that regard.

For too long the government has been focused purely on the biggest sectors of finance and e-gaming which although both are crucial and successful sectors it has left the overall economy unbalanced. The tourism sector of government should be marketing the island for events such as golfing holidays and helping to establish a one stop shop where people can purchase an all-in trip rather than having to individually book, boats, flights, hotels etc.

We also need to do more to promote

**Are you in favour of increased independence from the United Kingdom?**

small businesses across all sectors and encourage them to expand as they are the big businesses of tomorrow. Not just local small businesses, but also encouraging small businesses from elsewhere that may be looking to expand to view the island as a place they would like to do business.

As an island we also have natural resources that others don't have easily to hand. We should be using the tax system to encourage experimental businesses in relation to tidal energy production and helping encourage businesses willing to invest and test new green technologies.

At this moment in time I am happy with the constitutional relationship with the UK. As explained in another answer I believe that Brexit provides us a unique opportunity to market ourselves to the world as a low tax jurisdiction with automatic access rights to the UK marketplace. Let's make the customs agreement work in our favour!

I do find it strange that some of those who have criticised the Brexit decision are now calling for complete independence. They lament us leaving the European market but now seem to want us to exit our biggest marketplace

**If you are, in which areas?**

that is right on our doorstep, the UK.

**Are you in favour of parliamentary reform in the Isle of Man?**

Please see the above answer.

**If you are, which aspects of the parliamentary system would you change?**

I am a passionate believer in parliamentary reform for the island and submitted written evidence to the Lisvane review.

Legislative Council must go out to public election, but via a system that does not challenge the supremacy of the House of Keys. My evidence to the Lisvane review goes into greater detail on how I believe such a system can be created.

Legislative Council members should also not be members of government departments. They should be focused purely on their independent scrutiny role. Equally, the number of seats allocated on Legislative Council should decrease from eight to five.

Although I have no problem with the Bishop retaining his seat in Legislative Council, I firmly believe his vote should be removed. It is fundamentally not right that he should have a potential power of veto in close votes.

Over the last few decades the power of the Executive has grown massively. I would like to see some of that power returned to Tynwald. I believe all Tynwald motions should be binding on the government of the day, none should be advisory. They should then be forced to produce a timescale, for approval by Tynwald, of when any motion that is passed will be implemented.

House of Keys question time should be expanded. The length of the sitting days would easily accommodate this and hopefully prevent what is becoming a constant occurrence, with standing orders having to be used to try and extend the question period.

The number of government departments is far too many and needs to be reduced. Equally, the fact that all House of Keys members, other than by choice, are members of government departments impacts on scrutiny of the executive. I believe that other than the Minister of a department there should be a maximum of two other political members within each department.

While I believe in collective responsibility within the department structure, I do not agree with it within Council of Ministers. If a member of Council of Ministers votes

against something at the Council of Ministers meeting then they should be free to speak, and oppose, that policy on the floor of Tynwald without fear of losing their role. As an example, if the Home Affairs Minister disagrees with the Agriculture Minister, why shouldn't they be able to voice that disagreement and vote the way they believe is best for the island, without running the risk of losing what could be a very good Minister for their department. Tynwald is supposed to be a parliamentary debating chamber within a democratic structure not a rubber stamp for the executive, and that is what collective responsibility is slowly turning it into.

A perfect example of this the Department of Infrastructure currently, excluding the Minister, contains four MHK's. This makes it impossible under collective responsibility for that department to lose a vote in House of Keys. Under the rules of collective responsibility if COMIN approve the policy that would mean nine members of COMIN voting in favour along with four department members making a total of thirteen MHK's, an inbuilt majority every time. A similar situation exists with the Department of Economic Development, which also has four MHK's as departmental members.

**Who should have the responsibility of electing the Chief Minister?**

The Chief Minister should be solely elected by House of Keys.

I don't agree with the public election of Chief Minister as I believe that would create a presidential system of government. Any Chief Minister with an all island mandate would then be all powerful. If the other 23 members of Keys disagreed with them then we could end up with political and economic deadlock, delivering a vacuum of leadership. In other words the same situation as the current Labour Party is seeing in the UK. I want to move power away from the executive back to the parliament, not centralise power further, which a direct election process would do.

**Are you in favour of the nationalisation of air and/or sea services to and from the Isle of Man?**

The answer is different depending on the service. In relation to air travel I believe that while open skies has served us well over the time it has been in place it is now starting to fail. The continual problems over the London City route show this, a crucial link for our business community, that but for private intervention could well have been lost to the island.



In this regard I would support the setting up of a regulatory body to allow carriers to tender to operate individual essential routes on a five year rolling contract. Other less essential routes could continue to operate on an open skies basis.

While competition is a good thing, it can also be detrimental if you have two airlines competing over the same route for passengers with our limited population and potential passenger numbers. This can lead to airlines concluding that routes are no longer viable and run the risk of the routes going completely, as we have seen in the past. Slots are owned by the airlines themselves and if that airline leaves the island there is no guarantee that route and the slots into the corresponding airport will not go with them. An interesting study into this very area was carried out by Keith Boyfield for the Institute of Economic Affairs in 2003.

With regard to the sea services I am a firm believer that there needs to be greater regulation and control over the services. Unlike the airline sector it is not a matter of convenience, our sea route is our lifeline. I am in favour of the corporatisation of sea services with the government holding the golden share in

such a structure. The corporate entity holds the user agreement and then tenders out the services once every 10 years to interested parties. This gives greater control over the terms and conditions under which the service is operated.

I would also support the creation of a proper island regulatory body to oversee regulation and pricing structures not just in air and sea services but also energy provision.

**Are you in favour of renewable energy projects in Manx territorial waters?**

I am in favour of renewable energy projects, particularly wave technology. I believe that longer term these sort of projects are the technological power houses of the future and if we can establish our island as a cutting edge test bed for these technologies then it will benefit us going forward. We have are lucky as an island to have access to multiple renewable sources and we should be marketing ourselves more widely in this area.

**Are you in favour of an increase in means testing for financial support and/or services provided by Government?**

I am, and for the last four years I have been actively pushing for the introduction of the social housing means testing that was promised by government five years ago.

**If you are, in which areas?**

The main area is social housing. In recent years rents have been rising without a similar rise in income for what I refer to as the "squeezed middle". These are the people that fall just outside the income support brackets but still suffer from day to day financial hardship. Means testing would allow for a graduated scale of rent to be introduced with those tenants who can afford to pay more paying into the pot and those in greater need receiving the support they need.