

Chairman's Report including Financial Summary 2013–2014

Government Support Grant for Town and Parish Councils

In 2013–2014 Sevenoaks District Council, (SDC), passed on to us £11,000 as a ring fenced amount from Government that was contained in SDC's support grant.

This amount was to offset a reduction of similar amount in our core precept.

In November 2013 the Local Government Minister set out the Government's expectations for 2014–2015 as follows.

"In 2014-2015, the funding provided to local authorities in respect of local council tax support will be £3.3 billion, which includes funding for town and parish councils. This funding will not be separately identified but will form part of the overall funding available to billing authorities. The Government expects billing authorities and parish and town councils to work together to agree levels of funding to be passed down".

On the spurious grounds that neither the amount was identified nor was it ring fenced, SDC have refused to pass on to Town and Parish Councils any money from the support grant.

This removes the equivalent of £274,000 of funding, (which was the amount received in 2013–2014 by Town and Parish Councils in the Sevenoaks District), from their 2014–2015 precepts.

SDC are one of only a tiny number of billing authorities to adopt this "no ring fence, no money" stance.

The Town Council is in the early stages of seeking a Judicial Review to quash SDC's decision. We are supported in this by a sizeable number of other local Councils.

2013–2014 Wins, Losses and Draws

1. Persistent antisocial behaviour LOSS

Councillors have spent countless hours engaged with multiple agencies in order to draw up a cohesive plan that will at worst diminish the repeat problems primarily surrounding the Westerham Hall and Russell House.

The plan exists but weak implementation from SDC and the Police negates real progress.

Yet another Police reorganization is to be announced on the 7th April, driven by more funding cuts. It would be hard to imagine less police presence even though Westerham and Crockham Hill contribute £300,000 in Police rates.

We will provide details to you at the meeting and via the Gazette as soon as we have the details.

We battle on.

2. Trees LOSS

The risk of injury from falling timber is minimal; however we are persuaded of the need to embark upon a costly programme of mapping and examining all our tree stock, if for no other reason than to maintain our liability insurance protection. Any substantial felling programme that might result would exhaust all reserves earmarked for the purpose.

3. Fullers Hill Toilets LOSS

Every repair bill is large, roof £6,000, water leak £2,000 plus the monthly unblocking problems from mindless vandalism. Currently we do not pay Business Rates as they are being appealed but losing our argument will increase costs by £2,000. Keeping them open is becoming a difficult decision.

4. Westerham Sandpit DRAW

Restoration work in accordance with the original permissions to excavate has not started despite a finishing deadline of 30th April 2014.

Full details of what is happening are contained in the Planning and Development Committee Report.

We are closely in touch with KCC regarding progress.

5. Westerham Children's' Centre WIN

Following a KCC consultation on the future of all Kent centres, the closure of the Spring House run centre in Westerham was announced to the absolute dismay of the Community.

We can claim a big win here in getting the decision as announced reversed.

6. High Speed Broadband in Westerham and Crockham Hill WIN

Optic fibre to the BT cabinets in Westerham is being installed ahead of the previously announced disappointing timetable. This is a real win for Westerham and much credit to the pressure from the Town Partnership and this Council.

This is good for the community and very good for business.

The story at Crockham Hill is only good in parts as the £50,000 grant to enable the local Community Interest Company, (CIC), to get started is but a fraction of what is needed to attach all residents and businesses to high speed broadband.

More grant aid is needed even though substantial local funding has attached 150 subscribers to the CIC fibre and wireless network.

7. £55,000 Grant for extra football pitches at King George's Field WIN

See the APFOS Committee Report. Well done the Westerham Junior Football Club in the grant raising and the Town Council for seeing it through to a conclusion. A much better footballing facility is the outcome.

8. Westerham Library DRAW

Another inept cost saving consultation by KCC with a real threat over the future existence of this local **service**. The Town Council is closely involved.

9. Parking in Westerham WIN

A good job by the Town Partnership in researching and persuading SDC that shopper and business needs were critical to the financial future of Westerham.

What is needed now is to find more parking capacity for weekends and events and this is work in progress for both the Council and the Town Partnership.

10. Jubilee Notice Board WIN

A splendid addition to the Green, in an excellent position and providing good information. Expensive at £4,000 but worth the money. Councillor Ogden's commitment to see it to a conclusion are to be applauded.

County Council and District Council Services

Government funding cuts to both these organisations have been substantial over the last three years and a further round of reductions will happen in the 2015-2016 financial year.

These public bodies are not suited, either commercially or culturally to professional downsizing and tend to respond by trimming something off everything. The end result becomes less than satisfactory services being delivered across the board and any income generating opportunities are subject to above inflation price rises, e.g. parking.

How will the above problem impact upon Westerham Town Council?

We have taken over the toilets and a number of green open spaces. We have battled to keep Children's Services in place and will have to do the same with the Library. We are likely to be capped in terms of any above inflation precepts going forward yet we are the first in line to be asked for solutions by the community when County and District Councils devolve or abandon services.

As stated before, the grand idea of "localism" increasingly means public services being run by fund raising volunteers or not at all.

Although the cost of Government in all its forms had grown to be massively unaffordable, spending £4 for every £3 received, public demand for services has not abated and it is very difficult to see how this will play out for us as a Town Council.

Where do we spend your money?

Budget for 2014-2015

1. Street lights and lighting	£24,000
2. Youth and Children's' services	£20,000
3. Toilets	£8,000/10,000
4. King Georges Playing Field	£17,000
5. Allotments	£16,500
6. Graffiti and vandalism	£5,000
7. Property and open spaces maintenance	£13,000
8. Crockham Hill Field and garden	£10,000
9. Business rates	£7,500
10. Insurance	£8,500
11. Grants	£5,000
12. Professional fees and subscriptions	£4,500
13. Payroll costs	£70,000
14. Office costs	£12,000
15. Christmas lights and trees	£1,500
16. Reserving for repairs and replacements	£8,000
17. Contingencies	£3,500

Finance, Regulatory and Audit

1. Our precept for 2014-2015 will be £177,200 compared with £174,869 in the previous year, which included the one off support grant.
This is an increase of 9.8 pence per week for a Band D property.
2. In 2012-2013 we spent £256,000 in the community, which compares with £310,000 in 2013-2014. This large increase includes grant aid and money spent from reserves. Investing in the community £135,000 more than we receive in our precept demonstrates that Westerham Town Council is good value for money.
3. In the year ended 31st March 2014, Council operated within its agreed budget and our accounts, financial activities and risk controls have been audited without qualification.
The annual return for 2012 is published at the end of this report.
4. Council reserves are contained under thirteen separate headings reflecting the high cost, one off nature, of maintaining community

assets which exceed £2.5m. Whilst repairing, replacing or resurfacing buildings, playground equipment, tennis courts, pavilions etc. happens infrequently, when it does it is very expensive and impossible to include in a single year's precept, hence the creation of reserves.

These thirteen reserves total £120,000. In addition we are recommended to hold a non specific reserve equivalent to 30% of our precept.

Westerham and Crockham Hill Councillors and Committees

We manage the Council's responsibilities through five Committees with Council approving their actions. This involves 54 formal meetings each year. In addition we provide representation on 15 outside bodies and attend countless meetings with various Government Agencies in the hope of achieving better service delivery to the community.

Most meetings with Government Agencies and our senior Councils are fruitless, pointless and depressing but occasionally we get a win and that keeps us motivated.

My thanks to my colleagues for their dedicated commitment to the communities of Westerham and Crockham Hill.

The Town Council Staff

For the last three years extracting service delivery at even the most basic level from our County Council and to a lesser extent District Council has been an increasingly unrewarding and time consuming activity.

I predicted it would get worse and it has and there is nothing worse that listening to well paid public servants telling you there is no money to do anything.

Nevertheless our Council staff remain cheerful and focused and I thank them for their support and competence.

Councillor Graham Shutter

Graham joined Westerham Parish Council in 2000 and is resigning from the Town Council at this Annual Meeting on health grounds.

Fourteen years is a long stint and we all wish him well and thank him for his special expertise that has ensured our major projects came to successful conclusions. Hopefully we can recruit a new Councillor who knows the correct order and process of events.

We are sorry to lose his Council presence but pleased that he is still willing to be consulted when we need his know how.

Alan Wesley

Chairman

Westerham Town Council. April 2014