

Westerham Town Council – Annual Report – 2020-21

When we published our last, abbreviated, Annual Report in April 2020, none of us could have imagined that twelve months later we would still be living with the changes to our daily lives which Covid -19 has brought. So, while we cannot invite you to a face to face meeting to report on your Council's activities, this report summarises what has been done over the past year.

Please remember that your Council welcomes questions and comments from you, the people it represents. Email or phone us or contact us via social media.

Thank you

This year must start with thanks to so many people: to all those who came forward to help in so many ways; to our businesses who adapted, closed, reopened and closed again. We hope for happier times ahead for them: to those who kept going throughout; to our organisations who never ceased to plan for resuming their activities.

Thanks go to our Council Officers who have kept services going throughout, adapted to remote working and virtual meetings, and while dealing with immediate crises, of which there have been a few, have pressed forward with the positive agenda set by you for this Council. Thankyou too to the 13 volunteer Councillors who while adapting to this new world, have maintained their determination to make progress on your key priorities.

Key Priorities

You, our residents, set this Council's key priorities as:

- **Keep Westerham a thriving, clean and tidy small town**
- **Improve Parking**
- **Keep Westerham a safe town – from traffic and anti-social behaviour**
- **Support the community and the businesses which operate in Westerham**

Although some work on key priorities has been in the slow lane this last year much progress has nonetheless been made.

Keep Westerham a thriving, clean and tidy small town

Major planning issues

Local Plans: both Sevenoaks and Tandridge District Councils draft Local Plans, on which several years and much money has been spent, have both failed to gain approval from the Planning Inspectorate.

At the time of producing this report it is uncertain how these Plans will progress. The Tandridge Plan proposed that the Moorhouse site be developed as a major logistics hub. While this no longer appears to be likely, the Inspector has recommended that the site be removed from the Green Belt, enabling it to be developed in some form. Your Council will keep a watching brief on both these plans, will input when needed and will keep you informed.

Covers Farm: the application to restore the disused sandpit, involving the import of some 800,000m³ of infill by HGV, the majority coming along the A25 from the east and lasting over a period of at least 6 years still awaits consideration by KCC. With the support of our County Councillor Nick Chard, your Council has

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pressed for a site visit by KCC's Planning Committee before the application is determined. Currently delayed both by Covid 19 and this year's elections, this continues to occupy your Council's time and attention.

Planning legislation: the Government continues to emphasise the national need for more housing and in pursuit of that has issued two White Papers relating to changes, to both existing and future planning legislation. The impact of these could have wide ranging repercussions for Westerham and as well as formally responding to these proposals your Council has voiced its concerns to your MP, Laura Trott.

Open Spaces: your Council is pleased to have been able to maintain access to the King George and Crockham Hill playing fields as well as The Green - an open space that is in every sense at the heart of our community. This year has brought home to us the importance of our open spaces and the use of them has increased greatly. While we welcome and need visitors to Westerham to support our shopping and hospitality businesses and to keep our town thriving, we have struggled hard to keep on top of anti-social behaviour, littering and conduct one would not expect of visitors to our town.

Darent Valley Path: this year has seen the end of the 5 year financial commitment to this project which should run from the Darent's source in Westerham to the Thames. Progress this year has again been depressingly slow and a facility which would provide an alternative to the A25 for walkers and cyclists to Sevenoaks and beyond is yet to reach Westerham.

Improve Parking

The plans, reported on last year for an extension to Costells Meadow Car Park, an on-field car park at Crockham Hill Playing Field and additional spaces in Hartley and Madan Roads in Westerham have been a major victim of the pandemic. The funding, the plans and the contractors are in place, however a combination of Covid-19 and the contractor's backlog of work have resulted in no progress on the ground this year. Your Council expects a revised timing for this important work to be produced soon and the works to begin as soon as possible.

Keep Westerham a safe town – from traffic and anti-social behaviour

Westerham is one of the first in Kent to introduce a 20 mph speed limit on an A road, the A25 which passes through our town, and the roads which feed into it. At the same time, a one-way system around The Green will be introduced. These changes should calm and control the traffic at a speed which is acceptable and practical for the town and which will improve the quality of life for residents. Preparatory work with KCC is underway and it is hoped that works will start in the coming summer.

Croydon Road has a long history of flooding and of ice with the consequent risk of accidents. Your Council has been working with Highways England, the Environment Agency and KCC to combat the flooding risk, as a result of which gullies, manholes and culverts have been examined and cleared. Work will continue with these agencies to ensure that these actions are maintained.

At the same time, permanent warning signs of these risks are to be erected

prominently on Croydon Road.

Less encouraging have been the results of efforts to prevent anti-social behaviour. Motorcycles have been burned out on King George's Field, residents have been threatened and property damaged by groups of youths. Crockham Hill Playing Field has also suffered.

Activities to engage young peoples in more constructive pursuits have necessarily gone on hold although there are plans to revive these once conditions permit. At the same time, there have been frustrations with the apparent slowness with which sanctions are applied to perpetrators. While these frustrations are understandable, no-one would wish to circumvent the legal process. Your Council has been pressing both Kent Police and Sevenoaks District Council's Community Safety Unit to allocate greater effort to Westerham and to give more attention to keeping the community updated on actions taken. Some progress has been made and penalties imposed. Litter has become a national affliction and Westerham is not immune. Working with Sevenoaks District Council, which is responsible for rubbish collection, your Council aims to address the source of the litter, the leavers of the litter and sufficient provision for the collection of what is left.

Support the community and the businesses which operate in Westerham

While much of the planned community activity has been in abeyance, all is ready to emerge once conditions allow: summer activities, the Youth Bus and Free Food Fridays will restart as soon as possible. Such activities are important in promoting dialogue with the Youth of Westerham to establish their priorities for their Council.

A Mentoring Project, using the experience and counselling skills of Councillors to mentor local school children and give help with issues such as career paths, future education and job opportunities has been put forward to the secondary schools attended by Westerham's children. At the same an offer to link schools needs for IT equipment with donations the Council is aware of was made.

Equally, the Forget-me-not Cafe, supported by your Council, is ready to restart and the Council Chamber, used by the Art Group, Lip Reading class and Hearing Aid clinic will be opened up as soon as conditions allow.

This last year has brought to the fore the importance of supporting our local businesses. While the issue of financial support under government schemes rests with the District Council, the Town Council has expressed its support for local businesses and emphasised the importance of 'shopping local' throughout the pandemic. Your Council will continue to permit careful usage of The Green over the summer period, to help businesses and the community generally to move forward from what has been an extremely difficult period into much more enjoyable times.

'Normal business'

As well as working towards those key priorities, your Council continues its ongoing responsibilities for managing our allotments, playing fields and open spaces for the benefit of the community, for much of the lighting in the town, as consultee for all Planning applications - more than 130 planning applications were reviewed and

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commented on during the year - and for representing the views of our residents with both District and County Councils and our MP on issues outside our remit.

Finance and Governance

For the financial year ending 31st March 2021 all expenditure was undertaken within the authorised Council budget and spending powers. All spend was in pursuance of agreed activities and priorities. The following summary represents the unaudited position:

Year ending 31 st March 2021 *unaudited	
Balance B/F	£402,532
Precept	£237,200
Total other receipts	£126,088
Staff costs	£101,556
Loans	£ Nil
Total other payments	£129,350
Balance c/f	£534,914
Total cash and investments	£534,500
Total fixed assets	£2,054,543

During this last year Council expenditure either made or committed was £295,700; some £58,500 in excess of the precept (the Town Council's share of your Council Tax) Council's ability to raise additional funds through rents, leases, accessing grants and other external sources of funding means that it can spend more on our community than it asks the community to contribute. The precept for Westerham Town Council for the financial year 2020/2021 was £237,200 which represents an annual cost of £114.81 per year, or £2.21 per week, for Council tax band D houses in Westerham/Crockham Hill. The diagram below shows how your money is spent.

How did WTC compare with our neighbouring towns in 2020/21?

Edenbridge Town Council
Sevenoaks Town Council
Westerham Town Council

Band D charge Precept generated

150.10 554,962
125.41 1,215,299
114.81 237,200

Council reserves monies to ensure that it can maintain, improve and replace its assets for the future and to cover anticipated expenditure from identified risks. Although our General Reserve is slightly below the recommended level of 30% of precept, taken together with reserves held for specific purposes, they are more than adequate.

Looking forward

Moving into the next year, 2021/22, your Council's priorities will be:

- first of all to progress as quickly as possible and as is safe those actions which have been delayed by the effects of the pandemic, the extension of car parking, the resumption of support for the young and not so young in our community
- the longstanding plans to bring forward redevelopment of the King George's Field facilities which are finally coming to fruition. Specialist sports and grounds maintenance advice has been obtained by the King George's Field working party, which includes councillors from its key committees. Once this preparatory work is done, we plan to begin a public consultation exercise in the summer/early autumn

