

TONBRIDGE AND MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

PARISH PARTNERSHIP PANEL

Wednesday, 18th May, 2016

Present: Cllr N J Heslop (Chairman), Cllr M A Coffin (Vice-Chairman), Cllr Mrs J A Anderson, Cllr R P Betts, Cllr T I B Cannon, Cllr R V Roud, Cllr R W Dalton, Cllr S M Hammond, Cllr D Lettington, Cllr B J Luker, Cllr T B Shaw,

Together with Aylesford, Birling, Borough Green, Burham, East Malling and Larkfield, East Peckham, Hadlow, Ightham, Kings Hill, Leybourne, Mereworth, Offham, Platt, Plaxtol, Ryarsh, Snodland, Stansted, Trottiscliffe, Wateringbury, West Malling, Wouldham, Wrotham Parish and Town Councils and County Councillors Mrs T Dean, Mr M Balfour and Mrs S Hohler

Councillors O C Baldock, P F Bolt, P J Montague, H S Rogers, Miss S O Shrubsole and S C Perry were also present pursuant to Council Procedure Rule No 15.21.

Apologies for absence were received from Borough Councillor Mrs S M Barker and Hildenborough Parish Council.

Whilst not members of the Parish Partnership Panel apologies were also received from Councillors Mrs Hall and O'Toole.

PART 1 - PUBLIC

PPP 16/13 MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the Minutes of the meeting held 18 February 2016 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

PPP 16/14 FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS WITH PARISH COUNCILS - OPTIONS AND CONSULTATION

The Director of Finance and Transformation advised that a six week public consultation on 'fairer charging in Tonbridge and Malling' had started and residents, parish councils and other key stakeholders were invited to participate.

Members were shown a short video to explain the concept of fairer charging. This was followed by a presentation focusing on issues relevant to parish councils.

The Borough Council was considering changing the way it charged for the Tonbridge and Malling element of the council tax bill from 2017/18 onwards. The introduction of a local charge (technically called 'special

expenses') to pay for local facilities and services provided by the Borough Council, such as local parks, playgrounds, allotments, flower displays, events, cemeteries and churchyards, was being considered. This would promote fairness for all residents in different parts of the Borough when paying towards the cost of these services, generate savings to offset ongoing reduction in Government funding and protect services.

It was explained that residents living anywhere within the Borough, other than the town of Tonbridge, paid an extra parish precept for local services such as playgrounds and open spaces provided by the parish/town council. As Tonbridge was not parished services to these residents were provided and funded by the Borough Council. However, to provide some equity, the Borough Council paid grants, totalling just over £225,000 to parish councils to help them with the costs of the local services they provided.

Tonbridge and Malling continued to face significant financial challenges due to cuts in Government funding and needed to make savings of £1.8 million over the next four years, whilst protecting the services that the authority provided. The Council had adopted a Savings and Transformation Strategy to assist with the focusing and delivering of savings from a range of areas. It was noted that one of the areas being reviewed as part of this process were the grants made to the parish councils. The Director of Finance and Transformation explained that it would be unfair to simply remove the grants to the parish councils without considering the cost of the local services that the Borough Council provided in Tonbridge. Members were advised that the local services provided by the Borough Council in Tonbridge totalled some £800,000 and this could be converted into a local charge which, just like a parish precept, could be charged directly to Tonbridge households.

As part of this proposal, the Borough Council was seeking comments via a Public Consultation. Information could be found on the Borough Council's website, including the questionnaire, the short video shown at the meeting and other supporting information. All Members and parish councils were asked to spread the word and encourage residents to participate as all opinions were welcome. Copies of documents could be provided in a pdf format for placing on parish notice boards or websites.

It was emphasised that all figures used in the presentation were indicative and these would be clarified if the proposal went forward. The deadline for responses was **noon on Monday 20 June 2016**. Further information and a questionnaire to complete was available via: www.tmbc.gov.uk/localcharge

In addition, the Borough Council was undertaking a further consultation with parish councils only seeking views on the potential removal of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS). Revenue Support Grant (RSG)

for Tonbridge and Malling continued to reduce and from next year (2017) the authority would no longer receive any of this grant funding. Members were advised that there was no obligation for borough/district councils to pass CTRS grant on to parish councils and many neighbouring authorities had already stopped doing so. The Borough Council recognised that parish councils were likely to increase precepts to compensate for the loss of CTRS grant.

The deadline for responses was also noon on 20 June 2016 and all were encouraged to respond to the letter dated 6 May 2016 with regard to this matter from the Director of Finance and Transformation.

Following the six week consultation period for both of the consultations a Special Cabinet meeting would be held on 28 July 2016 to consider outcomes and options, with a draft policy drawn up in July/August (if appropriate). This revised policy could potentially be effective from next year.

The Director of Finance and Transformation recognised that this was a complex issue, and explained that she and her staff would happily talk through figures with individual parish councils. It was emphasised that the video that had been produced in-house, and could be accessed via the Borough Council's website, should assist in explaining the concept of fairer charging.

Reference was made to comments raised by parish councils in advance of the meeting around funding for Christmas lights and the likelihood of council tax capping for parish councils. The Chief Executive responded that the options for Christmas lights would be reviewed and carefully considered following the consultation and all comments would be taken into account. It was therefore important for all parish councils, and residents, to take part in the consultation.

With regard to Government applying capping to parish councils, the Chief Executive advised that extensive investigation did not suggest that this issue was likely to be revisited by central government at the present time. However, it could not be guaranteed that this proposal was ruled out. If the situation changed the Borough Council would have serious and proper discussions with parishes and attempt to identify a way forward. The Borough Council recognised the concerns around council tax capping and the potential implications.

To promote the public consultation in respect of 'fairer charging' there would be significant media coverage in the local press, a BBC Radio Kent interview to be transmitted in the near future and leaflets/posters distributed to local libraries and other public places for displaying. The use of social media was also confirmed, although it was recognised that regular posts and updates would be beneficial to keep the consultation at the top of 'news feeds'.

Members were broadly supportive of the proposals put forward given the Borough Council's difficult financial position and welcomed the concept of fairness for all residents and areas of the Borough. Parishes recognised the potential changes to funding for Christmas lighting and many were happy to explore options with their local retail centres. However, concern remained around the potential for Government to make a late decision regarding the introduction of council tax capping for parish councils.

The Kent Association of Local Councils (Tonbridge and Malling) asked that consideration be given to expressing these concerns around capping to the Department for Communities and Local Government at the earliest opportunity. The Chairman was happy to pursue this on behalf of the parishes, subject to further discussion with local Members of Parliament and in the context of the 4-year settlement.

Detailed discussion followed around the potential transfer of land and/or property assets, how the individual parish figures were estimated, maintaining a flexible approach in achieving savings targets set out in the Savings and Transformation Strategy and the overall difficult and challenging financial position faced by local government.

The Kent Association of Local Councils (Tonbridge and Malling) thanked the Borough Council for the honest approach taken with the consultation and the thoughtful timetabling. It was noted that Tonbridge and Malling had continued to support parish councils for as long as possible and that was greatly appreciated.

The County representative for Malling North also thanked the Borough Council for an intelligent and well-presented explanation of the proposals and appreciated the opportunity for residents to be involved.

The Chairman welcomed these comments and asked that these be submitted formally as part of a consultation response.

PPP 16/15 PLANNING ENFORCEMENT

The report of the Director of Planning, Housing and Environmental Health (tabled at the end of the meeting) responded to an issue raised by the Kent Association of Local Councils (Tonbridge and Malling) regarding communications with parish councils over planning enforcement cases.

Members were advised that investigations into some enforcement cases involved complex evidential work, confidential matters in the context of potential legal actions and required thorough and lengthy investigation. However, the value of effective communication was recognised and a new update system for parish councils would be implemented by the Development Control Manager. The intention was to provide regular

(fortnightly) updates on enforcement cases where the parish was the 'complainant'.

For the moment these updates would focus on those investigations where the parish council had raised the issue. Members were advised that further questions about the detail of those investigations could be directed to Development Control. The new system would be monitored for effectiveness.

The meeting ended at 8.55 pm