

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

06 October 2016

Report of the Chief Executive

1 SCRUTINY REVIEW - CHRISTMAS LIGHTING AND HIGH STREET FLOWER DISPLAYS

To set out the key issues to be addressed by the review.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 As reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 13th September 2016, the review of Christmas Lighting and High Street flower displays will involve the following:

- A review of current support provided by the Borough Council for Christmas lighting displays in some of the parished areas of the Borough, including consultation with the groups who manage these arrangements;
- A review of how Christmas lighting displays and High Street Flower displays are currently provided in Tonbridge and an assessment of the annual costs of such provision;
- Initial discussions with the Tonbridge Town Team on how best to engage with Tonbridge High Street traders regarding options for local approaches for both Christmas lighting and floral displays.

1.2 'Fairer Charging' Consultation

1.2.1 Members are aware that the impetus for this scrutiny review arose through the consideration of the 'Fairer Charging' consultation (see Cabinet agendas for 20 April and 28 July 2016).

1.2.2 At the outset of the consultation, Christmas lighting and high street floral displays were included in the draft package of 'special expenses' services eligible to be charged to Tonbridge residents. This was because, in the parished areas of the borough, the Borough Council is not directly responsible for providing these services.

1.2.3 In response to the consultation, members of the public questioned why the Borough Council, and therefore the local taxpayer, were meeting the full costs of these services in Tonbridge. Comments included:

- *“Christmas lights should at least be part funded by traders in the town”.*
- *“Christmas lights and flower display attract visitors to the town and should be funded by the businesses that benefit.....”*
- *“Re the Christmas lighting surely this is paid through business rates? As it encourages people to use our high street.....”*
- *“A bid levy should be implemented along high streets for businesses to pay an additional fee each year. This should then be used to fund the lighting, flowers and upkeep of the surrounding parks etc.....”*
- *“The Xmas lights, carnivals etc are a total waste of charge payers’ money and should be funded by those organising them.....”*
- *“Why not allow local businesses to sponsor Christmas markets/lights and carnivals?”*

1.2.4 With these comments in mind, Cabinet agreed that, rather than just including the full costs of the Tonbridge Christmas lights and hanging baskets in a special expenses scheme chargeable directly to Tonbridge residents, further work should be undertaken via a scrutiny review. Cabinet were hopeful that, alongside the Tonbridge Town Team, opportunities could be explored to secure funding from traders and providing more comparability across the borough.

1.3 Support for Christmas Lighting Displays in the Parished Area

1.3.1 A grant scheme to assist with the costs of Christmas Lighting displays in some local centres in the parished area of the Borough has been in place for a number of years and was last formally reviewed by this Committee in 2006. The annual budget available to provide financial support to these centres is £16,000. The key elements of this scheme is as follows:

- (a) retail centres in urban areas to be eligible for grant support must have a minimum of 4,000 sqm of commercial floor space (ie retail and retail services) and at least 12 or more individual units. In rural locations, eligible centres must have a floor space of 300 sqm or more and at least 7 or more individual units which together form a definable village centre;
- (b) the Council reimburses 50% of total expenditure up to the maximum grant. The maximum grants for each centre are set based on the number of units within those centres as follows:

Centre	% of total units located in centre	Maximum grant £	Parish council contribution £	Remaining match-funding required £
West Malling	37.1	5936	200	5736
Martin Square	9.2	1472	300	1172
Snodland	17.5	2800	300	2500
Borough Green	13.1	2096	200	1896
Wrotham	4.4	704	100	604
Hadlow	6.8	1088	200	888
Kings Hill	8.4	1344	300	1044
East Peckham	3.5	560	200	360

[Note Kings Hill has never submitted an application. This has allowed Aylesford to be added to the scheme from 2013 with a maximum grant of £1,000 on the basis that it fulfilled the minimum retail size.]

- (c) actual grants paid are based on the contributions made by each centre up to the maximum. These local contributions can include direct financial support, local fund raising, and volunteer time (currently based on an hourly rate of £9.60).
- (d) Parish Councils must also make at least a minimum financial contribution to the costs based on the parish tax base and this ranges from £100 to £300 as set out above.
- (e) Claims for grant are made by each centre following the Christmas period.
- (f) One off capital grants of £3k each have been made available to all centres over the past 4 years to help upgrade lighting schemes. Each centre has now received a grant and the capital budget is now fully utilised.

1.4 Consultation with Parished Groups

- 1.4.1 The above scheme has worked well over the last 10 years. However, as part of this review, we have consulted with all local groups to explore whether any changes to the scheme are now required. Responses received will be reported to the Panel meeting.

1.5 Tonbridge Christmas Lighting and High Street Floral Displays – Current Arrangements

- (a) High Street Floral Displays

- 1.5.1 Currently the Borough Council provides flowers displays in a number of locations in Tonbridge including the Cannon Lawn, Tonbridge Castle, Tonbridge Cemetery and in the High Street. These displays are undertaken to improve the visual quality of the High Street through the Summer months for the benefits of traders, shoppers and visitors to the town, supporting economic regeneration and tourism. For the purpose of this review consideration is only being given to provision within the High Street. The High Street display consists of hanging baskets from the Quarry Hill Parade Shops to the High Street/Bordyke Road Junction including a section either side of the River below Tonbridge Castle, existing flower troughs at St Stephens Church and outside the NatWest Bank, and 2 new flower troughs at the Botany.
- 1.5.2 The display is annual and is generally installed between May and September. The purchase, installation and maintenance (mainly watering) of all the hanging baskets and two existing flower troughs is undertaken by an external contractor and with quotations being sought each year the potential does exist for both the price and the contractor to vary year-on-year. The 2 Botany planters were installed this year as part on the High Street refurbishment and the maintenance of these lie with the Borough Council. These are planted with permanent displays, as opposed to seasonal bedding, and maintained under the Council's main Grounds Maintenance Contract. It is worth noting that the installation of the hanging baskets is subject to annual approval from Kent Country Council as they are installed on KCC lighting columns.
- 1.5.3 As quotations are sought on an annual basis for the Hanging Baskets, costs have the potential to vary year-on-year (the three quotations received for the Summer 2016 display varied by £3,000) though the annual cost of the display for Summer 2016 was £6,765 and consists of the purchase, installation and maintenance. Replacement baskets are not covered with in this budget and would need to be accounted for separately, if required. In addition to the above the annual cost of maintaining the Botany Planters within the contract is estimated at no more than £100; this is only estimated as the costs for watering will be unknown and will be dependant weather conditions and plant species used if the display is changed. This cost will also be subject to an annual CPI increase in line with the overall contract. In addition costs will also be incurred by the Borough Council in regard to staff costs and Central, Departmental & Technical Support Services though these are not readily available as the costs for the flower displays are shown within a larger budget code (Tonbridge Castle Grounds). If Members are minded to include these costs in the review further work to extract them can be undertaken.

(b) Tonbridge Christmas Lighting Displays

- 1.5.4 Currently the Borough Council provides full financial support and management for the supply and installation of Christmas Lights in Tonbridge from the end of November to the end of December each year. The current display includes the provision of lamp-column mounted and cross street lights from Quarry Hill Parade Shops to the Bordyke Road/High Street Junction. The display also includes

lighting either side of the River below the Castle, the provision, installation and lighting of a Christmas Tree at the Watergate and lighting through a number of Birch trees, also in the Watergate area. As with the hanging baskets, the displays are undertaken to improve the visual quality of the High Street for the benefits of traders, shoppers and visitors to the town, supporting economic regeneration and tourism. The current display also plays a key role in the annual Tonbridge Christmas Festival event.

- 1.5.5 The current lighting display is owned by the Borough Council though is tested, repaired and installed by an external contractor. This contract is subject to competitive quotations and offered for a 3 year period. The current contract expired at the end of 2015 and is therefore due for renewal. Arrangements are being put in place to secure a contractor for the 2016 Christmas display though will not commit the Council beyond this date. As with the hanging baskets the installation of the Christmas Lights is subject to annual approval from Kent Country Council as most are installed on KCC lighting columns.
- 1.5.6 The total estimated cost associated with the provision of this display is £16,000 (as currently shown in the 2016/17 budget book) and includes the testing, repair and installation (mentioned above) though also includes the annual testing of fittings (supporting brackets) in the High Street and the purchase and installation of the Christmas Tree. It should be noted that the costs are subject to external quotations and, therefore, all have the potential to increase/decrease annually. Indeed, the outturn costs for the 2015 display was £21,319 and reflected increased repair costs.
- 1.5.7 As highlighted above the current lighting display is owned by the Borough Council and, therefore, is shown within the Council's Capital Renewals programme. The current full replacement cost attributed to the lights is £30,590 (purchased in 2010/11 for £26,607) with an estimated life expectancy of 7 years before they will need replacement; the lights are next due for replacement in 2017/18. Taking this into consideration it is estimated that there is an annual Capital Renewals cost associated with the lights of £4,370.

(c) Overall Costs

- 1.5.8 As set out above, annual costs for both Christmas lighting and floral displays can vary from one year to the next. However, to assist the review and provide a base on which traders in Tonbridge can be consulted on possible future contributions, the following annual costs are suggested based on an average of the outturn figures from the last three years. These do not include associated staff and on-costs or capital renewal costs.

Tonbridge Christmas Lighting - £18850

Tonbridge High Street Floral Displays - £8500

1.5.9 As a means of comparison, we have consulted Tunbridge Wells BC and Sevenoaks DC on the arrangements they have in place for Christmas lighting. Sevenoaks DC plays no part in the scheme for Sevenoaks High Street as this is a function undertaken by the Town Council. Tunbridge Wells BC currently operate a similar scheme to our own and currently meets all of the costs involved. However, like us, they are also currently exploring possible joint funding with their recently formed Town Centre Partnership.

1.6 Consultation with Tonbridge Traders

1.6.1 Howard Porter, Chairman of the Tonbridge Town Team, will be attending the Panel meeting to discuss how best local traders in Tonbridge can be engaged.

1.6.2 If financial contributions are to be sought from traders, there are a number of options to address:

(a) Should the Borough Council continue to administer the lighting scheme and all floral displays in Tonbridge but seek contributions from the traders to assist with future funding or, alternatively, should the Borough Council devolve responsibility for both schemes to a constituted local group (if formed) and offer grant support to assist with the costs?

(b) If the Borough Council retains overall responsibility, should there be different recommended contribution rates for different types and sizes of retail establishments or a single recommended annual fee for all?

(c) If responsibility is devolved, would it also be appropriate for the ownership of the Tonbridge Christmas lights to be transferred to local ownership?

(d) Are there other options to achieve support funding, for example, sponsorship from larger retailers/businesses or the generation of additional funding from concessions etc?

1.7 Next Steps

1.7.1 Subject to initial discussions of the Panel on the above issues, it is suggested that a second meeting of the Panel be held in November to review progress and to hear further from the Town Team and traders in Tonbridge High Street regarding the potential to attract financial contributions.

Nil

contact: Mark Raymond
Chief Corporate Policy Officer

Julie Beilby
Chief Executive