

Annual Assembly 7 May 2019 - Finance Report by the Town Clerk and Town Council's Responsible Financial Officer

Services to the Community

Costessey TC provides many local services and owns around 90 acres of open spaces including woodlands, playing fields and parks with play equipment. We provide grit bins, litter bins, dog bins and benches and maintain bus shelters. We are the local Burial Authority and maintain the cemetery in Longwater Lane and the closed churchyard at St Edmund's. We own, maintain and hire out rooms at Breckland Hall, the Owen Barnes Room, the Costessey Centre and West Costessey Hall. We provide substantially more public services and facilities than many surrounding parishes and have nine members of staff, some part-time. Our councillors are unpaid volunteers and do not receive allowances.

2018-19

Looking back at last year's report it appears that not much has changed! We are still awaiting the transfer of the play areas and linear parks at Queen's Hills; at Greenhills Woods the Corsican Pine trees have more or less been removed, the next step is replanting with native species; the cemetery extension at Longwater Lane to include natural burials is almost at the planning application stage; and Council are considering replacement equipment at Breckland for both the trim trail and skatepark areas. Projects tend to proceed at a steady pace, but that does not mean that the Town Council is inactive!

The biggest issue facing the Town Council this year has been the proposed transfer of streetlights. Also known as parish lights or footway lights this proposal has taken up a huge amount of councillor and staff time, and we are still working our way through all the details. The original proposal to transfer 226 parish lights which South Norfolk Council managed was complicated by the fact that many stood on land or were attached to buildings which, in the past, had been owned by South Norfolk, but had been transferred to Housing Associations and, by implication, could have been bought under the Right to Buy scheme.

Our solicitor's advice was to take on ONLY those lights which were definitely on publicly owned land and to avoid anything on sites which had been transferred to other organisations. This reduced the number of lights to be transferred to about 189 and several calculations and recalculations were made with regard to the running costs and transfer sum from SNC. South Norfolk had hoped to complete the transfer during the 18-19 financial year, but this proved to be impossible. The target date then became 1 April 2019, but even this has slipped, though the contract is ready.

The Town Council supports opportunities to keep residents healthy by providing play areas, sports pitches and an outdoor gym. This year we spent £12,131 on the sports pitches and over £2332 on play equipment at Longwater Lane play areas, plus replaced the cross trainer at outdoor gym.

Another large area of expenditure was on the maintenance of the halls, often to do with heating systems and automatic doors – all of which seemed to go wrong at the same time - and frequently at that. Passing the responsibility for overseeing buildings maintenance and upkeep to a Clerk's Assistant who will be in charge of all the buildings has freed up time for the Deputy Clerk to seek more grant funding for our projects and for the Clerk to keep up with the ever-increasing demands of paperwork from revised government directives – eg updated Treasury Management and Investment guidelines.

The Town Council also gives grants to support local community groups and organisations; sadly this year one of the Dementia cafés has had to close due to external funding for staff ceasing; we have supported the Royal British Legion, especially in the commemoration of the end of WWI with the installation of a permanent flagpole at the Costessey Centre and the donation of a "Shadow Tommy

at Queen's Hill's School. Donations this year to support our community total **£1,775.28**, including to the CAB and for Toadwatch signs in addition to engaging qualified youth workers to run the Cossey Posse and QUBE youth projects.

Once again I would like to thank all my staff, who work hard to ensure that the accounts are up to the correct standard for the accountant and auditors; without their accurate work we would not receive such a glowing Audit Report. Also, our grounds staff are extremely versatile and save the Council thousands of pounds in call-out fees through their skills. Their contribution is much appreciated.

2019-20

With the Ordinary Elections on 2 May we now have 19 Town Councillors rather than 16, arranged by three wards, rather than two. Councillors are unpaid volunteers who should be commended for giving a great deal of their time freely for their community. In the coming weeks they will need to consider previous unfinished projects and other future projects in a new 4-year plan to the next Ordinary Elections in 2023, and this will have an impact on the finances over the next few years.

New councillors will need supporting with training and IT, so I expect to spend a larger proportion of the budget on training and tablet devices for electronic communications in the first year of the new Council's four-year term. Hopefully the flip side of this will be that the stationery budget reduces, but the "paperless office concept" was always a figment of the imagination for local councils, because the signed minutes of meetings are the legal record of proceedings. Having said that, e-mails have reduced our postage costs considerably as well as speeding up communications and this trend will obviously continue.

Because our income is limited and mainly comes from hall & pitch hire, and burial fees, we have to "husband" our resources carefully, while continuing to support our community. We keep 25% of the Parochial Charity's allotment rents in return for help in administering their allotments, and include in our budget a sum for grants to support local community groups and organisations.

Community halls in general do not cover their costs and our halls are no exception. We expect to spend even more money on maintenance of the halls as equipment is out of warranty and costs of maintenance contracts rise.

The shortfall between our income and expenditure is made up by the Precept, the amount collected through Council Tax. This is divided by the tax base (not the number of properties) and is often averaged out and quoted at Band D as a benchmark. We no longer receive a Precept Support Grant, which was designed as compensation for a reduction in the tax base following the change in the way benefits were calculated, so we are dependent on the Council Tax we receive to be able to provide our services.

Following the re-organisation of the parish boundaries we have taken on some properties on Lodge Farm, which would previously have fallen within Bawburgh parish and the residents now benefit from the facilities which a larger Council can provide.

Because Council decided to take on only a proportion of the 226 Streetlights from SNC, the Special Levy of £5.01 which South Norfolk charged all Costessey residents for those lights will be transferred proportionately to CTC's Council Tax at £4.21. It will appear as a notional 3.8% increase on the Council Tax Bill, BUT IN FACT IS A DIRECT TRANSFER OF THE LEVY PREVIOUSLY PAID TO SNC.

CTC HAS NOT MADE ANY INCREASE TO COUNCIL TAX TO COVER THE COSTS OF INFLATION OR SERVICES. THE NOTIONAL INCREASE IS A TRANSFER OF THE STREETLIGHTS TAX PREVIOUSLY PAID TO SNC