

REPORT TO AYLESFORD PARISH COUNCIL from Cllr Michael Base

Dear Fellow Councillors,

My apologies that I cannot be with you this evening.

However, should you have any questions, I will be more than happy to reply in the coming days via The Clerk.

My two main focusses at TMBC continue to be the financial position of the Council, which is not good, and the Area 3 Planning Applications.

In terms of finance, the deterioration of the position at TMBC is partly due to wider economic events, but also opportunities for savings that were not taken up by the Membership over the preceding years: With many long-time members, still believing hope to be a strategy. However, we now have a Conservative Group on-line meeting tomorrow, where I understand that a number of clear structural/service changes will be proposed in order to improve things. If agreed however, I understand that some non-mandatory services, currently provided, would be stopped.

The biggest shift has been in the cost of the Waste/Recycling Contract which is partially linked to the rate of inflation. With the pound falling from around \$1.40 over the year to below \$1.10, it is expected that inflation will now get to around 11-13 percent, and that will further impact the cost of this contract. The situation is a moving one, but at the last estimate I believe an additional £500,000 was required to offset increasing costs overall. Offsetting this we do still have a large and well-managed investment portfolio, albeit with some exposure to commercial property. Whist returns are improving, due to the rising interest rates, these will not offset price/cost increases to any real degree. The last figure I was given for the savings target factoring in inflation was £2.6m, to be saved over the short/medium term.

In terms of what we didn't do as a Council; the biggest cost still remains our adherence to the KCC Final Salary Pension Scheme. I estimated some time ago that this costs around 30 percent of salary per current employee to fund and contribute to the existing fund shortfall. It is thus no surprise then that TMBC now employs around 150 fewer staff than when I started eight years ago. A transition to a money purchase scheme would be the correct policy in my view, but this finds no backing at TMBC.

Likewise charging in the 'Northern Car-Parks' was again mooted but not taken forward; CCTV in Tonbridge was 'saved' at a cost of £100,000 pa and it would now take two years to make any changes to this contract. Fees and charges are largely legally linked to the actual cost of the department, so cannot be used to fund other areas. Sadly we also continue to adopt a position of not using our substantial capital to redevelop our own land, even as solar-farms, which is a mistake in my view. I suggested it to the Climate Change Forum, but they are generally too busy reading expensive consultant-generated reports.

A peer-review was undertaken, but it's thinking and recommendations do not seem to be taking hold within the organisation, and a number of us are pushing for a fundamental restructuring of the Management Team to provide more modern and inspirational leadership.

Finally, we still have a number of large Area 3 applications working their way through the system. Bushey Wood and now Aylesford Quarry Later Living being the most noted. As always please send your comments during official consultation to TMBC Planning via any reasonable route. Comments on Facebook are useless from an Area 3 point of view. Remember too, that unless you participate in the official consultation, you are unable to address the Committee should that application get to that stage.

I am always asked if I know when an application is coming forward for decision, and on either of the above I honestly have no information. It may well be after next May 4th, when I step down.

On the upside I am told that our area is unsuitable for fracking - small mercies.

Given the current polling I expect the Brough Council to look politically different after that election.

I wish you all my very best,

Michael