

## ALL ABOUT YOUR COUNCIL TAX - NEWPORT PAGNELL TOWN COUNCIL

This year the finances of Newport Pagnell Town Council have focussed primarily on one thing – saving Middleton Pool and Leisure Centre. Owing to Covid-19, the Leisure Centre has been legally obliged to close for over seven and a half months during the year, and for the remaining months it has operated at vastly reduced levels of capacity, because of restrictions on numbers who may be in the centre at one time. Government legislation is clear: where a facility run on behalf of a public authority makes a loss, then the public authority must pay the contractor for those losses. This year the Leisure Centre will make a total loss of £907,033, and next financial year (starting in April 2021) the forecast loss will be at least £105,797.

The Town Council fortunately has held extensive reserves for just such an eventuality, but no one could predict a virus that would close down a facility that normally produces a turnover of over £1.6M per annum. Insurance companies did not cover new viruses such as Covid-19. Whilst Milton Keynes Council (MKC) has received £2 million for lost income on parking and leisure, and a host of other grants, to date it has shared only £31,000 of these with Middleton Pool and Leisure Centre, although we have heard that there may be a possibility that further sum of up to £150k could be contributed by MKC. It is also hoped that a Sport England Grant applied for through MKC will provide a small sum towards these losses, but since that grant was predicated upon being in a Tier 3 situation for December 20-March 21 which meant that Leisure Centres were able to remain open, and we are now in complete lockdown, it is likely to contribute only around 1/9 of the total losses made.

These are not the only losses the Parish Council has suffered. MKC has reduced the tax base, calculating that fewer homes will be paying their council tax this year. We have also lost over £47,000 of income support from the Government for those not paying 100% of Council tax (we get no funding for this) and there have been closures of other income producing facilities such as community centres, while expenses have still had to be paid. Government rules mean we have been unable to furlough most staff, and in any event staff have been working harder than ever during the pandemic to keep parks and play areas in good condition, to claim grants wherever possible, and to manage those facilities we were able to keep open, such as allotments.

It is therefore with a sad heart that the Town Council, despite making huge savings in many areas, is forced to raise its precept from £135.02 per annum per D Band Household to £185.13 per annum. This increase is equivalent to an increase of just 96 pence per week. It's important to note that, despite providing more services than most other parishes in Milton Keynes, our precept will still not be the highest in Milton Keynes.

### How did the Town Council perform in the last year?

- **Town development** The New and Modified Newport Pagnell Neighbourhood Plan has been submitted to Milton Keynes Council, for onward transmission to the examiner. This plan, whilst introducing no new housing in the town, will help to protect green sites from development, and will give clarity to planners on the importance of preserving the heritage assets in the town. The Steering Group for the Neighbourhood Plan now starts work on Version 3 of the plan which will focus on the Town Centre. If you are interested in joining the Steering Group, please let us know. The Town Council has demanded a role in helping to plan the new development of MK East, which will be built south and east of Newport Pagnell. We were unable to stop this development, as MKC applied for and received significant funding from the Government for the infrastructure needed, including a new bridge across the M1, but it's critically important that the impact of the development on Newport Pagnell and its High Street is not forgotten. The **town ranger** has had a big impact on the local environment, from cleaning street signs to cutting encroaching vegetation and from weed spraying to removing graffiti.
- **Leisure services** Preventing Middleton Pool and Leisure Centre from being permanently closed has been a major focus here, but we have not lost sight of the need for refurbishment of Willen Road Sports Ground, or of the additional sporting facilities that will be needed on the new Tickford Field Farm site. We've worked hard to ensure that sufficient contributions from developers are made to improve these. We're also aiming to provide the NP Archery Club with a new home.
- **Parks and Play Areas** The fact that parks stayed open right throughout the first lockdown was a huge blessing to many residents, who would otherwise have felt even more trapped in their homes. The latest shutdown has meant that play areas have also been able to remain open, which has given parents of young children some relief from home schooling. Our contractors have now undertaken all of the high-risk work on trees identified during last years' risk assessment and are moving on to trees at a lower risk level. Some 23 trees have had to be fully removed and the Town Council has made a commitment to do far more than replace these, by adding many new trees to our parks. Some progress is being made in taking on the few parks not yet owned by the Town Council, and two more are due to pass into Town Council ownership shortly. Riverside Meadow play area refurbishment is complete. We now turn our attention to the open spaces behind Milton Drive and Hornbeam.
- **Floral displays and horticultural show** The town centre hanging baskets did provide a small amount of joy during what was a very bleak year indeed, and in this coming year will burst forth in shades of sky blue and pink. It is not known as yet whether the horticultural show will be able to take place.

- **Allotments** There has been a focus on improving access across ditches and replacing taps with push button varieties to save water.
- **Public Toilets** These remain open during the current lockdown.
- **Community centres.** Refurbishment of the Portfields Centre took place during this financial year, and despite the current closure of the centres, there is still use of them for schools' Covid-19 testing.
- **Youth services** Timing is everything, and shortly after our refurbishment of the Youth Club building its heating unit gave up the ghost. A new external heating unit had to be ordered from overseas, before fitting it to feed the heating vents that run throughout the Youth Club. Although many youth activities at the centre have had to close again during this latest shutdown, the pre-school based there is still offering schooling to children of key workers, and the Friday Night Youth Club remains available for vulnerable children.
- **Events** 2020 was an impossible year for events, and unfortunately we judge that we cannot run any events until much later in 2021. The Covid Memorial will take place in October, as will the Choral Event, but the Vintage Event has again been a casualty of Covid-19, forcing us to cancel it in 2021 and to have to rearrange all our plans for the second year in a row.
- **The future role of the Town Council** Work will continue on plans for sporting provision, parks and play areas improvement and on revising the Neighbourhood Plan. Investigations into planned developments nearby will also continue. This is an election year, so any new Councillors will be welcomed and trained.

### What do these services cost ?

Note that there is also a cost to running a Council that cannot be split into the services shown within the pie chart. The pie chart contribution by each household is larger than your precept, because the Town Council has had to use its reserves. **£ per annum**



