

Old Marston Parish Precept 2011/12

Old Marston Parish is unique. It has a relatively low number of houses and thus has a lower tax base than the other Parishes. It maintains more facilities however than the other parishes – these include three recreation grounds, a burial ground, sports pavilion etc. The maintenance of these facilities is included within their precept. The OM special expenses are thus high – a considerable sum of money being spread over comparatively few dwellings. The current Parish Chairman and Clerk are aware of this problem and have been working with the City Council over the last few years to try if possible to soften the burden on the OM tax payer.

Double Charging? The OM administration queried whether this was happening. According to the DTLR May 2002 publication "Guidance Note on Financial Arrangements with Parish and Town Councils" this can happen where "a service is provided by the parish rather than the principal authority, but the principal authority still charges taxpayers in the parish for the equivalent services it provides elsewhere. In a district where a town is unparished, it can happen if the costs of facilities for residents of the unparished town are spread across the whole district, rather than being charged only to the residents of the town."

I have explained to the chairman that I do not believe this to be the case in Oxford City. This is because under ss34/35 of the LGFA 1992 we calculate a figure for the special expenses for the unparished area of the city. This figure, together with the parish precepts, is deducted from the ~~total Council Tax~~ requirement, and the net "City Wide Tax" is the figure charged across the area.

Use of Old Marston facilities by non residents? OM have produced a considerable amount of evidence to show that some of their facilities are also used by non residents and argue that a credit should therefore be allowed. This is what has indeed happened over the last three years. In **2008/09** a total of £19,580 was credited against the OM special expenses – this means that whilst we actually paid a precept totalling £55,500, the special expenses charged to OM tax payers was £35,920. This credit was in respect principally of a land drainage scheme required to one of the recreation grounds. The net cost of this, after a grant, was £18,225. The remaining balance was in respect of a new computer £1,355. The decision to allow this credit was made by the Chief Technical Accountant at the time.

The same happened in **2009/10** but to a limited extent. The Precept paid to OM was £57,750 and, with a credit of £7,750 allowed, the net Special Expenses totalled £50,000. This calculated credit was I believe mainly because a considerable number of the users of the recreation grounds (in particular the one by Mortimer Hall, visible from the Marston Ferry link road) were non residents.

In **2010/11** the Precept paid to OM was £61,000 and, with a credit of £10,000 allowed, the net Special Expenses totalled £51,000 (a 2% increase on the

2009/10 net figure). This credit was in respect of the areas bullet pointed below. To justify the case the Parish Clerk had carried out a consultation exercise on users of the recreation grounds. This concluded that a high proportion were non-residents. In particular this applies to the recreation area by Mortimer Hall which is visible from the Marston Ferry link road.

I met with officials from the OM Parish on Nov 25th to have a preliminary discussion about Council Tax **2011/12**. In line with the likely freeze on Council Tax to be applied by the City (and County and Police Authorities), a zero percent increase in the Parish Special Expenses was the favoured option. The draft 2011/12 budget produced by the clerk indicated potential expenditure of £75.9k with income at £63.3k (the latter includes the £61k Precept Payments). A further consultation exercise conducted on users of the recreation grounds over the summer of 2010 came to the same conclusion as before – that a considerable proportion came from outside of the Parish.

We again discussed areas where a potential credit could be allowed. These were basically as in 2010/11:

- **Burial Ground.** Interment of ashes is not reserved for Old Marston residents. This is important with the city crematoria becoming full.
- **Recreation Grounds** – see above. Expenditure in this area is likely to include some £10k in respect of necessary tree felling.
- **Pavilion in Boults Lane.** The eventual plan is to have a new pavilion built that is likely to cost around £700k. Reserves in the bank are earmarked for that purpose. The existing pavilion is used by Marston Saints Football Club of which a considerable portion of members come from outside of the OM Parish.
- **Allotment** provision – allotments are available for non residents.
- **Library** at Mortimer Hall – available for use by non residents as well as residents.

In view of the above, a credit of £10k has again provisionally been discussed. This will mean that the City will once more actually pay OM £61k, with £51k being charged to the OM tax payers via the special expenses. This will still mean that Old Marston has the highest Council Tax bills with the Band D charge being approx £39.29.

I believe this to be a fair and equitable approach.

Adrian Wood, Finance Performance Officer, Friday, 26 November 2010