

Christmas Lighting

Report of Conclusions and Recommendations



***Scrutiny Committee
31 October 2006***

1. Background to the Review

1.1 The Scrutiny Committee of Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council has undertaken a review of Christmas Lighting. The review was scoped at the Committee meeting held on 1st November 2005 and the key issues were discussed at a further meeting held on 13th June 2006.

1.2 The review sought to focus on the following key issues:

- To assess whether the provision of public funding to support local Christmas lighting schemes continues to be justified
- To assess the level of support for local Christmas lighting schemes from traders and shoppers
- To establish whether there is any economic gain for businesses in areas displaying Christmas lights/festive displays in terms of increased custom.
- To compare the level of support provided by the Council with other Kent authorities
- To assess the degree to which traders are willing/able themselves to contribute to the costs of local schemes
- To determine if all areas currently receiving grant support should continue to do so and what scope exists to accommodate bids from new areas
- To investigate how the costs of ongoing repair and maintenance of lights should be financed.

1.3 At the second review meeting, evidence was presented from the following:

Mrs J Towler, Mr N Cornford and Mr B Frampton - West Malling
Mr R Beswarwick – Snodland
Mr B Watson, Mr G Morel – Wrotham
Mr N Garnett, Mr M Taylor - Borough Green
Mr M Richardson, Ms L Frost – Queen Street Traders, Liberty Square
Mr P Caller, Lyons Electrical (Tonbridge Centre lights contractor)

The results of a consultation undertaken on other authorities Christmas Lighting arrangements were also presented to this meeting. Following the second review meeting, views were sought from Christmas Lights Committees and relevant parish councils on the proposed changes to the scheme.

- 1.4 The purpose of this report is to set out the key issues, conclusions and recommendations resulting from the review process.

2. Review Conclusions

- 2.1 The review dealt with the following issues

(a) Tonbridge Christmas Lighting

- 2.2 The review was presented with an overview of the arrangements for the annual Tonbridge town centre Christmas lighting arrangements. The Borough Council owns and arranges the annual display. The budget was halved in the 2004/05 financial year to £10,000 per annum which is sufficient only to cover the erection and dismantling of the lights, along with additional electricity charges. The lights switch-on forms part of the Christmas Festival which has significant economic impact for local businesses.
- 2.3 The consultation with other Kent authorities revealed that there are no towns which receive any significant contributions from local traders; the cost of arranging and providing lights falling to district councils.
- 2.4 The current budget is insufficient for the purchase of new or major repairs to lighting equipment and this is likely to become more of a problem as the current equipment ages and technology improves. Some form of capital provision will be required to ensure the existing lighting equipment can be refreshed and repaired in order that future displays continue to meet expectations within the town.
- 2.5 Responses from local centres and parish councils have raised concerns about treatment of Tonbridge town centre where funding is guaranteed without any contribution from local traders. However, consultations with other centres in Kent suggest that this position is not unusual. In smaller local centres, traders appear more ready to support and fund lighting schemes whereas in larger centres, direct provision of lighting schemes by the district authority appears to be the norm. Introducing an absolute requirement for traders in Tonbridge to contribute, therefore, may well threaten the continued viability of the scheme. The lack of any local input was the key reason why the Borough Council took over the running and funding of the lights in Tonbridge some years ago.

2.6 It is desirable, however, to continue to encourage local businesses to become engaged in the Christmas celebrations in the Town Centre, particularly in light of the economic benefits generated by Christmas lighting and associated events. Rather than require an annual contribution from traders, it is proposed that any capital funding for new lighting equipment should be supported by funding contributions from local business or through other opportunities for commercial sponsorship.

(b) Local Centres

2.7 The review received background information on the history of Christmas Lighting funding for local centres. There are long-standing schemes at Martin Square, Larkfield, Snodland, Borough Green and Wrotham and a more recent scheme in Hadlow. In addition, a request for grant funding was submitted from Liberty Square, Kings Hill in 2005 and a request has recently been received for the 2006 Christmas period from East Peckham. The request from Kings Hill in 2005 could not be met due to budgetary constraints.

2.8 Grants have been awarded on the basis of meeting two thirds of eligible expenditure up to a specified maximum grant for each centre. The maximum has been calculated in accordance with the number of commercial units and floor space in the various centres in order to achieve an equitable distribution of grant monies. The current total budget for Christmas lighting schemes in local centres is £12,300.

2.9 The review found that volunteers make a significant contribution to the arrangement of lighting schemes in local centres. There is also significant fundraising undertaken to contribute to lighting arrangements and festive events.

2.10 It is logical to retain the link between the size of the commercial centre and grant award, however, the calculation needs to be regularly reviewed to ensure it remains up to date.

2.11 There is a need to consider new and potential grant applications from other local centres but any significant extension of the scheme would mean that the amounts awarded to existing schemes may need to be reduced. A significant expansion of the scheme cannot therefore be justified. In order to assess the potential for future applications for Christmas lighting grants, a definition of a 'local centre' has been suggested to ensure grant support is focused on the larger local centres only. It is proposed that, in order to be eligible for funding under the scheme, a local centre in urban locations 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. The Local Development Framework sets out which areas of the borough are defined as 'urban' and 'rural'.

- 2.12 In order to provide for a fair distribution of grant between eligible centres, it is proposed that a maximum grant is set for each based on the number of commercial units as a percentage of the total of all centres combined. There is also an opportunity to extend the scope of eligible costs to include celebratory activities, such as festivals, held over the Christmas period. This would increase the flexibility of the scheme and give local centres more choice over the way their grant is spent. New criteria for what can be included in funding applications will need to be prepared following the completion of this review.
- 2.13 The continued involvement of local communities in lighting schemes is to be encouraged and promoted. To recognise this, the release of the maximum grant for a location could be made dependent upon match-funding being obtained from local traders, fundraising events and voluntary work. Voluntary work (either in committee involvement, fundraising work and erecting and dismantling lighting) should be recognised as contributing to this match-funding financially. An appropriate hourly rate will be required for the costing of this activity, however, for simplicity, it is proposed that one rate is set for all Christmas lighting related activities.
- 2.14 Where a local centre does not fundraise the maximum grant allocation, it is proposed that the grant awarded by the Borough Council will match the funds actually raised. In this way, Borough Council grant will act as a further incentive for local participation and involvement.
- 2.15 Parish councils have a key role to play in supporting their local centres and the review has concluded that this should be recognised formally within revisions to the scheme. As most parishes already support their lighting committees, it is proposed that the parish councils become formal funding partners, along with the Borough Council. It is proposed that contributions from the parish council should form one element of the overall match funding for a lighting scheme and that a contribution from them will be required before Borough Council funding can be released. It is suggested that these minimum parish council contributions are aligned with the tax base of each parish as set out below:

Parish tax base	Parish council contribution (recommended minimum)
Less than £1,000	£100 (Wrotham)
£1,000-£2,000	£200 (Borough Green, East Peckham, Hadlow, West Malling)
More than £2,000	£300 (East Malling and Larkfield, Kings Hill, Snodland)

2.16 If new requests for funding are to be accommodated, it will be necessary either to reduce the maximum grant available to all local centres or increase the annual revenue budget. Increasing the budget to £16,000 per annum, would enable the current level of funding to be largely maintained, and enable a limited number of new bids to be accommodated. An indicative distribution of grant based on this formula is set out below.

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

2.17 Another difficulty faced by local Christmas lighting committees is the purchasing of new lighting equipment. In order to facilitate new schemes in eligible areas, and assist existing schemes plan better lighting schemes, a small, rolling capital fund could be set up. This separate fund could be bid for on a 4 year rolling programme, with two local centres being able to make a bid each year. Match-funding would be required. While this funding will not help with annual renewals and repairs (which would be included as eligible costs), it should make a

significant contribution to medium term planning of lighting schemes. Priority should be given to lighting schemes in new local centres.

3. Recommendations

(a) Tonbridge

- 3.1 That the Borough Council continues to provide funding for the Christmas lighting scheme in Tonbridge town centre with an annual revenue budget of £10,000.
- 3.2 That a capital provision is set up for the purchase of new equipment at 5 year intervals.
- 3.3 That the release of capital funding is dependent upon contributions to new lighting schemes being received from local businesses and/or commercial sponsorship.

(b) Local Centres

- 3.4 That the Borough Council continues to provide grants for Christmas lighting schemes in local centres.
- 3.5 The commercial space calculation is brought up to date and applied to establish a maximum grant for each local centre as a percentage of the total budget allocated to the grant scheme.
- 3.6 New guidelines are drawn up for eligible costs to include costs related to celebratory events over the Christmas period.
- 3.7 The release of grant funding for local lighting schemes is dependent upon an equivalent amount being raised in total from parish councils, local traders, fundraising activity and volunteer activity. A reporting and monitoring system for match-fundraising should be developed along with an agreed hourly rate for volunteer labour.
- 3.8 That there are recommended minimum contributions from parish councils, based on the parish tax base.
- 3.9 A separate capital fund is established for lighting equipment renewals with bids received on a 4 year rolling programme. Priority will be given to supporting new lighting schemes.
- 3.10 That the annual revenue budget be increased from £12,300 to £16,000 per annum in order to accommodate new schemes.