

Edenbridge Town Council statement on Budget and Precept for 2023-24

The Council's budget and Precept for 2023-24 were confirmed at the January meeting. Following the December meeting, the draft budget was approved and published with the recommendation to increase the Precept by 5%. At the time, the Council could only assume the tax base for 2023-24 (the figure used to calculate the Band D proportion of the Precept council tax), and Members based their decision on the then current 2022-23 tax base of 3819.62.

The tax base was later issued and was estimated to be 3,891.91 (including an allowance for non-collection); higher than the expected 3819.62 which had the benefit of reducing the Band D equivalent from £180.43 to £177.08, previously outlined in the December statement with the draft budget. However, at the January meeting, Council confirmed it would stick with the increase to the Band D equivalent for 2023-24 to £180.43, an increase of £0.71p per month/or £8.59 annually.

When considering the budget and Precept, the Council needs to be careful to protect current and future income so that services can continue to be delivered for the community. Efficiency savings are continually being sought, as well as other sources of funding.

The Council maintains specific reserves that are earmarked for future planned projects and expenditure, for example the elections and maintenance to Council assets. The forecasted year-end for these earmarked reserves is £345,452.

The General Reserves are in a reasonable position but at levels lower than is comfortable. Ideally, the Council should hold a minimum of six months' value of expenditure, i.e., closer to £385,000; the forecasted level for year-end 31 March 2023 is £244,028.

Bearing this in mind it would be neither good practice or prudent to draw on the reserves to cover a budget shortfall.

For completeness, it is worth noting that CIL Funds are strictly speaking part of the Council's reserves, but there are strict rules how this money can be spent, it is set aside for community infrastructure and not Council ongoing costs. At the end of October, the Council had £158,863 general CIL; and allocated £142,467, £301,330 in total. (The November CIL Board awarded a further £153k to community projects.)

Some estimates of inflation are included, but mostly the budget assumes similar costs (with some savings). Utilities for the buildings were in contract until June 2025, but the street lighting would see increases from 1 April 2023.

The main increase from the current year's budget to next year's is staff costs. There has been a marked lag in the NJC agreeing pay increases with the pay rise for 2022-23 only recently being agreed. As a result, the staff costs (salaries, pensions, National Insurance contributions) for 2022-23 (this year) will be approximately £25,000 more than budgeted at £398,000. This has been the starting point for the 2023-24 staff costs.

Raising the Precept is always a sensitive topic, and no decision is ever taken lightly. However, Members felt that in order to be able to continue the high standards of services residents deserve, and continue to secure suitable reserves level, it was necessary to increase the Precept, and to increase the Band D equivalent by 5% as initially agreed at the December Council. With the higher tax base, this would provide some additional Precept revenue to help future proof the reserves.

Budget 2023-24

Expenditure: £771,841

Income (estimated): £92,773 plus the Precept

Council Precept: £702,217

Band D equivalent £180.43

Edenbridge Town Council activities include:

- Managing six Open Spaces – Blossoms Park, Marsh Green, Recreation Ground, Stangrove Park, Mowshurst, Millenium Wood, plus some other smaller areas in the town
- Providing four playgrounds, a multi games area and outdoor gym
- Servicing four cemeteries and two allotment sites
- Maintaining six properties – the Sports Pavilion, Doggetts Barn, Rickards Hall, Church House, Cemetery Depot, Public Toilets, plus a few other smaller buildings and stores
- Supplying 251 streetlights – there is also a replacement programme to provider newer and energy efficient columns
- Management of Market Yard car park, and services to Leathermarket car park
- Providing access to council service via the Council office, open 5-days a week
- Employing the Community Warden
- Promoting Tourism for Edenbridge
- Investing in the Thursday Market with a Market Officer and advertising/PR activities (including the launch of a market Facebook page and website), thus helping to promote visitors to the High Street and town centre
- Funding the events licence for the High Street (£1,700) which local groups can apply to use for their events, this helps to keep events and activities local, for example Edenbridge Community Christmas Association, the Bonfire Society
- Working with other authorities, agencies and groups to represent Edenbridge and promote initiatives
- Providing planters and hanging baskets display for the High Street
- Maintaining and repainting most of the street furniture in the high street; this includes the bollards, some bins, the planters, benches and visitor signage
- Providing community grants