

Report from ward councillors: 2011/12 budget

Despite the worsening financial circumstances of many residents and calls for restraint from the government, Icklesham Parish Council has approved a 20.6% hike in its tax demand for 2011/12. Since 2003, our parish council tax has quadrupled from £19,000 to almost £95,000. On top of this, IPC has borrowed and spent £40,000 on Icklesham village hall.

Only Winchelsea councillors voted against the tax ramp. Perhaps as a consequence, all new projects for Winchelsea were cut. Only the other three wards will see new spending.

The tax ramp comes despite the fact that IPC has never yet managed to spend its budget. The current council (since 2007) has spent an average of just 71% of budgeted expenditures and a mere 65% of annual income. Thus, parish council tax has been one-third higher than necessary.

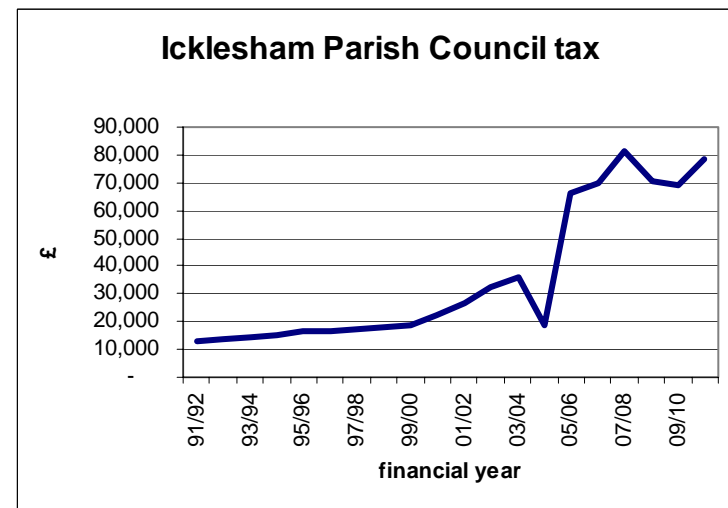
IPC carried over £42,000 of unspent funds from last year. The year before, over £55,000. And the year before that, almost £40,000. And these numbers disguise the true situation, because of the switching of sums during the year from projects included in the original budgets to new projects not envisaged when the budgets were drafted.

One argument made in favour of the tax hike was that the sums involved were small when considered per household. The average is about £65. In isolation, many people may consider such a sum to be small. But every penny of money taken from taxpayers should be taken for necessary and planned projects, not sitting idle in the council's bank account until councillors get around to deciding how to spend it. Such

sums must also be considered in the context of other tax bills facing residents, the increasing cost of living and the shrinking real value of wages and pensions.

Another argument to justify the tax ramp was the extra cost of elections this year. In fact, this adds just £6,000 to the bill. The real reason for the large increase is unjustified changes such as the increase in the contingency fund to £10,000.

We were also told that the Sussex Association of Local Councils has urged parishes to increase their budgets to make up for the cuts by the District and County Councils. Unfortunately, none of the planned spending by IPC will tackle areas where other councils have reduced spending.



item	amount	change	comments (unless otherwise stated, figures are 2007/08 to 2009/10)
Chairman's allowance	300	unch.	IPC is one of the few councils in Rother to pay this. Only introduced in 05/06. Reduced from £450 and no longer paid to the chairman upfront but claimed against expenses. This year, it has been used to buy flowers for a former councillor's widow and lunch for a guide and his wife who took some councillors on a private tour. It has previously been used to buy leaving presents for retiring councillors and clerk, money which should have come from councillors' own pockets
Clerks' allowances	1,300	unch.	Budget underspent by an average of £251 a year or 19%.
Clerks' travel expenses	1,800	+38%	Only the public sector pays employees to travel to work and IPC only has to pay because it prefers to employ clerks living outside the parish.
Clerks' salaries	23,376	+10%	Budget underspent by an average of £1,568 a year or 8%.
training	1,200	+140%	For new councillors next year, but the training budget has been underspent by an average of £925 a year or 78% (07/08-10/11). Yet IPC refused £150 for training for a Winchelsea councillor this year.
audit fee	1,000	unch.	
Clerks' office expenses	2,400	unch.	
elections	8,000	+300%	This sum should have been accumulated gradually over previous years.
hire of village halls	400	-20%	IPC continues to have to pay for hall hire in all wards other than Rye Harbour, despite making an annual grant to all the halls. The cost should be deducted from the grants (£6,000 next year) .
insurance	2,000	unch.	
legal expenses	1,500	+100%	Budget underspent by an average of £575 a year or 92% (07/08-10/11). A disguised contingency fund, as there is no regular legal work and free legal advice is given by SALC and NALC.
subscriptions	1,000	+18%	Rise due to unnecessary new subscription to National Playing Fields Association.
allotment maintenance	1,500	+33%	Budget underspent by an average of £1,107 a year or 55%. Another disguised contingency fund: planned work is separately budgeted.

bus shelter repair	2,000		Budget underspent by an average of £1,057 a year or 60%. Yet, some bus shelters have been in a poor state for a while.
grass cutting	8,000	+14%	Largely Icklesham, Winchelsea Beach.
playground maintenance	1,500	+33%	Budget underspent by an average of £2,608 a year or 92%. It is unclear why the maintenance budget should be so large given that most playground equipment is new (IPC has spent over £52,000 on new playground equipment since 03/04 and has budgeted to spend another £9,500). Another disguised contingency fund.
playground inspection	400	unch.	
rubbish clearance	2,500	unch.	Largely Winchelsea Beach.
seat cleaning	500	new	We support this, having tried to get benches cleaned for several years.
small works	3,000	unch.	General contingency fund for repairs.
streetlighting electricity	1,900	+6%	Budget underspent by an average of £365 a year or 18%.
streetlighting maintenance	1,442	unch.	Carried over unspent from last year.
tree maintenance	1,500	+200%	Seems a lot given that IPC has this year spent/budgeted £4,300 on a comprehensive programme of inspection and maintenance (proposed by Winchelsea councillors to stop the waste of money on sporadic ad hoc inspections, the reports of which kept getting lost).
emptying dog bins	1,200	-60%	Winchelsea Beach. An exceptional and welcome cut-back.
Contingency Fund	10,000	+33%	This rise was justified on the basis of unsubstantiated advice. However, financial analysis suggests a figure of £4,000 would be more than adequate, as IPC has underspent its budgets by an average of £24,600 a year. IPC also has a separate £3,000 contingency fund for small works and several other items in the budget are disguised contingency funds. IPC also has an insurance policy to cover extreme events.
Pear Tree Marsh allotment	1,800	+80%	Clearing a blocked ditch. IPC has refused to roll over the unspent money in this year's budget to clear the derelict areas in this allotment.
direction sign, Icklesham	500	new	Unnecessary.
cost of grant to Icklesham Memorial Trust	3,118	unch.	This is the annual cost of paying back a £40,000 grant given to Icklesham village hall and funded by borrowing for 20 years.
community noticeboard, Icklesham	800	new	Hardly a priority. There is no need given that there is a parish noticeboard and one on a bus shelter. In contrast, IPC refused to release £169 budgeted this year for a noticeboard on the Strand bus shelter for residents of Tanyard Lane.
repair of Smeatons Lane, Winchelsea Beach	1,000		Smeatons Lane is apparently owned by IPC and money has to be spent every year, £3,200 this year alone.
fencing of Smeatons Lane, Winchelsea Beach	4,000		£2,700 has already been spent replacing a collapsed fence along Smeatons Lane with posts to stop cars parking on council property. The new money is to install a new gate, fix the gate posts and replace the remaining fence. The gate, one gate post and remaining fence are not in need of replacement. This is unnecessary, particularly in current circumstances.
fingerpost sign, Rye Harbour	750	new	To the lifeboat hut. No demonstrated need. Hardly a priority.
gateway sign, Rye Harbour	1,400	new	An isolated and relatively cost/ineffective speed calming measure.
flagpole, Rye Harbour	2,000	unch.	Budget underspent by an average of £1,150 a year or 92% (03/04-10/11). Why is IPC spending any money on this flagpole?
community noticeboard, Rye Harbour	800	new	Hardly a priority. There is no need given that there is a parish noticeboard and one at the shop. In contrast, IPC refused to release £169 budgeted for a noticeboard on the Strand bus shelter for residents of Tanyard Lane.
youth projects	1,000	unch.	Budget underspent by an average of £1,000 a year or 67%. No projects planned. Another disguised contingency fund. Yet a request for money for a youth project in Winchelsea this year was refused.
donation fund	1,000	unch.	Budget underspent by £333 a year or 40%.
grant to Rye Community Transport	1,500	unch.	

grants to churches	1,200	+20%	Money towards maintenance of churchyards, but IPC does not know how much the churches spend. Each gets 25% whereas the cost differs widely between churches. When the grant was divided pro rata with costs, other wards objected to St Thomas's receiving a larger share.
grants to village halls	6,000	+50%	When IPC had a fund to which village halls could apply, they rarely bothered. Now money is given out each year whether or not the village halls need money, and IPC does not ask how the money is spent. There is no justification for increasing this sum by so much, if at all.
grant to Rye Harbour Nature Reserve	300	unch.	This has become an annual grant. Rather generous in current circumstances.
new bins	500		For other wards. Yet IPC refused to reinstate money for a larger waste bin to replace the overflowing one by the public toilets & recycling bins.
Local Action Plan	1,500	new	No specific projects. Another disguised contingency fund.
new playground equipment	2,500		IPC has spent over £52,000 on new playground equipment since 03/04 and budgeted to spend another £9,500. It has never assessed need, does not know how many children there are in each ward and what age. It is poor financial planning to concentrate expenditure in this way.
Total expenditure	111,386		