



15 February 2008 – EDITORIAL

Catching council tax evaders is on our wish list

More than £2.5m is an awful lot of dough. It's probably a yacht, some very fast cars, superb holidays for ever and ever or an envious address in Tunbridge Wells – perhaps all of the above if you also buy some serious financial advice.

This is the amount which people in the borough of Tunbridge Wells have dodged in council tax during the past five years – by people eligible to pay, it should be stressed.

These aren't people who are impoverished and simply cannot afford to cough up for their monthly bill. They are people who are side-stepping their bills and on the face of it, have no good reason.

News of the startling figures will no doubt prompt those law abiding taxpayers among you to exclaim "It's not fair! I pay mine! Why should I stump up and others get away with it?"

There will also undoubtedly follow, heated discussion about **what Tunbridge Wells Borough Council could or should have spent the money on** – everyone will have their own diverse ideas.

Judging by the recent pages of this newspaper, the wish list might include an ice rink, public toilets, a park and ride, the Pantiles and the Common, a cinema, **grot spot improvement**, recycling – the list is not endless but it would be long.

But judging by comment from the Local Government Association, this borough is not harbouring any more council tax evaders than any other district.

It should be noted that while these figures sound high they are by no means unusual – council tax debt is a notoriously difficult tax to collect we are told by the association.

And the borough council will continue to try to collect the debts well after the financial year has passed.

The shame seems to be that this council has been number crunching for many months as its new budget looms. A little cut there, a big cut here – and who is likely to lose out?

Well that's easy, those of you who pay your council tax like good boys and girls for 10 months of the year, that's who. And that's because many of those who didn't pay up have long left the borough – no doubt to continue to duck their bills elsewhere.

But for those thinking they might try to save a fair few quid next year by ducking a bill or two – the figures show council officers and debt collectors, like elephants, have a very long memory.

The cumulative collection rate between 2003/04 and 2006/07 was an admirable 99.39 per cent – which proves that they might not get you in the first instance but they won't forget you. And they're getting better. In 2006/07 the council wrote off just £2,862.

This financial year just about to end shows a collection rate of 97.06 per cent – but the Local Government Association predicted that would in all likelihood end up at near on 100 per cent.

So, for those who have a pile of council tax bills gathering dust on the doorstep – you may be having a mini (council) tax break for now but the holiday could soon be over.