

PROPOSALS FOR EVERDON OUTDOOR LEARNING CENTRE

THIS COULD AFFECT YOUR POCKET!

Fellow Everdonian,

You may or may not be aware, that the Parish Council is currently proposing to purchase Everdon Outdoor Learning Centre. The Parish Council has been investigating this proposal for over a year in secret and on Tuesday, they announced that they are seeking to borrow £300,000 to purchase the centre (£250,000 to purchase the building and £50,000 for costs relating to the purchase). You may have received a leaflet to attend a meeting at the Outdoor Learning Centre – it appears that this was the consultation exercise on the Parish Council's intentions and the vote on a questionnaire given out at the end of the meeting is being taken as a Parish mandate (95% in favour) to carry out all due diligence and a structural survey of the property etc and to ask for permission from the Government to obtain a loan. Attendance of the meeting did not appear to be high, probably due to the vague details outlined on the distributed leaflet.

Whilst this is a noble cause, and I don't think any of us have any objections to the activities of the Outdoor Learning Centre, this does present a significant risk to us as Council Tax Payers (although at the meeting it was presented as a no risk enterprise that would not impact on the village precept). The Parish Council have stated that they intend to obtain a loan and this will be serviced by receipts from renting out the building to the Trust that will run the Centre. I do not see a problem with this in itself. However, I believe this loan would be secured on the revenues of the Parish Council and not on the building itself and there are circumstances where this could place a significant obligation on us as Council Tax Payers. These include, but are not restricted to:

- Maintenance costs – a building of this age and size would have significant maintenance costs, likely to be at least £15,000 per year. It is not clear that the Parish Council have included such a sum in the calculations and if this figure is not covered by the rent then the cost would fall on the Parish precept;
- If the operators of the centre were no longer able to continue and it was not possible to find a replacement tenant immediately, the Parish Council and thus Everdon Council tax payers would be liable to cover the loan payments in the meantime. The Parish Council have stated that if the current operators fail, it would be no problem and they would just get a replacement tenant, however, operating an outdoor learning centre is a pretty niche market and this may not be quite so straightforward and any period that there is no rent coming in means the Parish Council will be responsible for servicing the loan;

Continued overleaf/

- Other unexpected expenses could arise for works to the fabric of the building which could result in very significant costs to the Parish Council.

There is no cap on what the Parish Council can precept from us so, should any of the events come to pass, we could see significant rises in our Council Tax bills

One thing is for sure, if the Outdoor Learning Centre was a profitable enterprise, Northamptonshire County Council would not be seeking to dispose of it.

Whilst the Outdoor Learning Centre is a good institution offering a valuable service to children nationwide it does not provide significant benefit to us as villagers. Our children may stay there for a night or two in their younger days; the Parish Council have said the building could be used for meetings, etc (the village hall seems adequate) and villagers would be able to use the mini-bus (is there any demand for this?). If the County Council is unable to operate the centre and a Charitable Trust cannot do it on its own, should it be down to Everdon Council Tax payers to carry the financial risk?

This purchase is an Everdon Parish Council initiative but it is you, the Everdon Council Tax payers, who will bear the monetary risk for a building that is not a community asset and brings no real benefit to the parish tax payers themselves. Surely every council tax payer should be allowed a full, transparent consultation and a vote before any further funds are spent. The cost of a village poll would be a very small price to pay in the light of the expenses that could be incurred.

If you are concerned about the Parish Council's proposals, I would urge you to contact the Parish Council and ask for, at the very least, a full and fair consultation exercise to be carried out on the proposals. The next meeting of the Parish Council is Monday 11th February at 6.30pm where they will take a decision on the way forward.

Thank you for reading this.