

Ninety days for council tax dodger



Ninety days for council tax dodger

Monday 21 February 2011

A Minehead man who failed to appear at a committal hearing on February 3 for non-payment of council tax was arrested and spent a night behind bars before appearing before Taunton and West Somerset Magistrates on February 11.

Magistrates found Martin Barnfield, aged 38, of The Avenue, Minehead, guilty of withholding council tax payments and sentenced him to 90 days in prison.

Mr Steve Perkins, representing West Somerset Council, told the court that Barnfield owed a total of £6,393.98 in unpaid council tax and costs to West Somerset Council. The charges stretched over six years and related to his two former addresses at The Cedars and King George Road, both in Minehead.

Mr Perkins, the Council's Principle Recovery Officer, said: "The council tries its utmost to come to a mutual arrangement with any customer experiencing financial hardship. However, in extreme cases committal hearings like this are necessary.

"Magistrates carry out means enquiries in respect of each year owed and they are left with three options, which are to impose debtor repayment, remittance or commitment to prison.

"Mr Barnfield told the court that he was self-employed and had been in and out of work over the period in question. However, as only nominal payments had been made, magistrates decided to grant the council's request and send the debtor to prison for the maximum possible sentence of 90 days."

Cllr Kate Kravis, Lead Member for Finance, commented: "This is a last resort, but one we are prepared to go to when people refuse to pay. People found guilty of withholding council tax payments are getting all their services at the expense of other members of the community and that simply is not fair. This shows that by wilfully not paying, you are risking a criminal record and prison.

"We can help people who are struggling through genuine hardship to come to an arrangement. The best advice if you are struggling is to talk to us to see what can be done."