

## **This Year's Great Shelford Parish Council Budget**

As always, this is the time of year when we determine the Parish Council Budget, and set the parish precept (the Parish Council's share of your Council Tax bill). Budget-setting involves setting out our usual items of expenditure (from mowing the recreation ground, grass verges and cemetery, to paying our staff), trying to predict what new issues will come up over the course of the year, looking at our "wish list" for improvements to the village, and lastly considering whether we have sufficient in reserve to form a safe margin. Sometimes it feels as if a parish crystal ball would be useful.

In the light of all these considerations, we have set a budget of £155,978. Less anticipated money carried forward from the current year, this requires a precept of £125,000. This will mean a 25% increase in the amount the Parish Council requests on your council tax bill. This sounds like a whacking rise. To put it in context, for a band E property (in this example, an Edwardian terraced house), the Parish Council is asking for an additional £15.94 for the year, or 31p a week.

We're sure you'd like to know why we've asked for this increase, so here is an explanation of what is in the budget.

In general terms the range and scope of parish business is increasing. Currently ours is a high growth area, and issues such as growing volumes of traffic and new development (ranging from residential developments to a proposed Science Park) constantly require a response. While the Parish Council has few powers, it provides the interface with district and county councils, and other bodies, and, where possible, brokers solutions to local problems. The county council, in particular, has acute budgetary constraints. This causes expenditure to trickle downwards – for example, financial contributions to painting white or yellow lines, or reducing the speed limit. Parish input is required to remedy problems with the new streetlighting, or problems with pavements, potholes and drainage. All of this increases the Parish Council workload, and since the parish clerk is the first point of contact, this means the clerk's workload. It seems increasingly clear that more paid clerk hours will be required.

There are other items requiring additional expenditure. For example, a recent survey of the condition of the parish cemetery confirmed that many of the old monuments are disintegrating. This is not surprising as many are 70 to 90 years old. Estimates are currently being sought for repair work to ensure the safety of the site. A tree survey will also be done.

The Parish Council is reaching the end of a big capital project: the sports pavilion. Inevitably, such a large project has had a significant impact on the parish budget. Reserves built up in anticipation over many years have now been spent, and it is time to start building them up again for the next project.

If you are not a sportsman or –woman, you may feel you don't get much benefit from the pavilion. Well, the Parish Council has a duty to provide for a whole range of constituencies – children, teenagers, the elderly, those who play sport, those who like to walk and so on. Clearly we don't all benefit from all the facilities. But the pavilion is much more than just a set of showers and changing-rooms. There is a shortage of rooms to rent in the village, and the pavilion has been designed to provide another meeting-room. It will shortly be provided with wifi access, and it has kitchen facilities, and a large, pleasant, central room which looks out onto the recreation ground. The doors can be opened in summer, and it makes a great space for village

groups to meet in, for social functions and for village events. Over the next year we hope to exploit to the full the letting potential of the pavilion.

So now we are beginning to consider our next project. The Parish Council's current "wish-list" for future improvements to village amenities includes the following:

- New and better play equipment on the Recreation Ground;
- The purchase of Grange Field as additional recreation space;
- Repairs and improvements to the river bank;
- Replacement of the skateboard ramp.

We anticipate funding much of this work by obtaining grants, but there is no doubt that some contribution from the parish will be required, and this is one of the reasons we are seeking to build up our reserves.

In the past, the Parish Council has received useful sums of money from so-called Section 106 agreements. These are contributions from developers towards infrastructure, and can be used by the parish to provide precisely those amenities such as recreation land, and the other facilities for the benefit of the village. Recent changes in legislation mean that developments of less than 11 units are now exempted from the requirement. Here in Great Shelford, this is the most common type of development, and thus a source of contributions to village projects has largely dried up.

General reserves are an important part of the parish budget. They provide a fund for unforeseen expenditure that arises during the year, and, as mentioned, to help in funding new projects. But above all they provide a margin of safety for the parish finances. Guidance suggests that reserves should constitute at least one third of the gross annual spend. Currently we have little left in our reserves. A significant top-up is therefore needed. We do not lightly increase the amount of council tax you pay, but we would be failing in our duty if we did not set a budget with adequate reserves.

So these are the issues which have informed our budget-setting. Great Shelford's precept compares favourably with other parishes: it is currently\* less than that of Little Shelford or Stapleford. In a league table of parish council spending we sit towards the lower end, at number 36 out of 101 Cambridgeshire parish councils (and most of those low-spending councils represent smaller communities, not large villages like ours)\*.

So far it has all been about spending. It is worth mentioning that a vast amount of work is done by the parish councillors themselves. They are totally unpaid and voluntary. Their work is done for free, for love of the very special village we live in.

\* Based on 2014-2015 figures.