



Griston Parish Council

Narrative to the 2024-25 Precept Calculation

SUMMARY

The Parish Council precept has risen this year by 59% (to £27,790, equal to an average £1.80 per week per household). As this is a significant increase, we have prepared these notes to explain why this has been needed.

The need for the increase falls into three main headings:

1. Suppression of increases to protect parishioners in previous years
2. Additional major costs now required
3. 'Cost of living' increases across the entire budget.

The Parish Council has sought to limit increases in recent years, mindful of the impact of other general household cost increases on our parishioners, such as Covid-19, food, inflation, fuel and energy utilities. This has led to some erosion of budget reserves to meet rising bills which we now have to pass on. For example, in 2021-22, we spent £23,175.92 against an income of £13,697.48, reducing our reserves by around half to £9,478.

Council tax is calculated at the Band D rate, and this increase makes Griston's 2024-25 precept of £93.57 the 18th highest of the 112 in the Breckland district.

At this stage, we do not anticipate any further increases – notwithstanding exceptional liabilities and charges – for at least three years.

TERM CONTRACTS & INFLATION

We have managed to keep costs down in the recent past on items such as insurance and grounds maintenance by signing fixed cost three-year contracts. These provide cost certainty for the duration of the contract, but the increase upon renewal reflects the cumulative three year inflation plus an element of projected inflation for the next period. In the last three years, the inflation rate has exceeded all expectations and our contractors will seek recovery in their renewal costs.

This means at renewal in 2024/5, increases in insurance will take into account three years of inflation, confirmed by our broker as likely to November RPI. In 2023 this was 5.3%, so we expect the 2025 increase – after a three-year fix - to be around 15%.

Our grounds maintenance and street lighting contractors' fuel costs reflect what parishioners will have noticed in their own expenditure, and should come as no surprise. The Parish Council has always offered very much a 'no frills, value for money' service, but this has recently been at the expense of reserves, and so there is little residual 'fat' we can reduce.

Our grounds maintenance contract is also multi-year, which has limited labour cost increases until renewal in 2025, but we must again expect that fixed cost benefit will cease on renewal and budget accordingly for a significant step change in cost.

STREETLIGHTING & ENERGY

Counterintuitively, there is currently no financial benefit to upgrading streetlights to energy efficient LEDs as the energy is supplied on an 'unmetered connection' and charged at a standard rate per lamp, rather than by actual consumption. We therefore replace light fittings only when they fail and not as part of a planned programme.

There are also eight street lighting columns in the Manor Road estate which weren't included in the MoJ's sale of the housing stock - and whose actual operational ownership is undefined. The parish council repair these when they fail as a public safety issue, but this is an additional 'grey area' expense as they're not on our asset register. We can't actually insure them as they don't belong to us.

THE QUEEN ELIZABEH II PLAYING FIELD

The parish council's major asset - and potential liability - is the Queen Elizabeth 2 playing field and playground. Opened in 2012, the equipment cost £56,000, which was met by grant funding. The upkeep, inspection and maintenance is, however, an additional and ongoing cost to the Parish Council.

We are mindful that the grassed area and hedges need attention beyond just cutting to keep the park area up to standard and are therefore making additional provision for periodic weed suppression and two yearly hedge trimming.

The largely timber-framed equipment is now twelve years old and the timber elements came with a fifteen year warranty; thus we can expect some deterioration in coming years. The replacement equipment cost (new for old) is now around £85,000 and we have decided an annual maintenance budget of 7% is appropriate. That 7% of the replacement cost is £5,250 – just under 20% of the precept.

We intend to prolong the life of the timber elements with suitable treatments, while replacing worn out or damaged parts with new. The two infant swing seat cradles this summer are the latest renewals, and the bottom step to the slide has been replaced in May 24 to keep the park safe and desirable. The picnic seats

and tables will be inspected and treated this year, then assessed annually and re-treated to maximise their life. We believe it is sensible to budget for some new equipment in the next five years so the park doesn't become tired and our parishioners can enjoy it to the full.

Rather than the OEM carrying out the periodic inspections, we have trained our own Councillors to do this and carry out minor running repairs.

PARK SECURITY & ACCESS

The third entrance to the field - via the additional parish council-owned land leading to Carbrooke Road - is insecure and a pedestrian kissing gate is needed to prevent cars, motorbikes and horses entering. At the same time, the vehicle gate will be repaired and realigned to provide access to the same standard as Manor Road. The projected cost for this necessary upgrade is £1500.

This has been needed for several years, but recently became more obvious when the hedge was trimmed. While the additional area was a gift to the council, it has created additional costs - fencing, security, grounds maintenance - which have not previously been recognised and budgeted for. We are formalising these for future years.

VOLUNTEERING

Key to keeping our costs manageable is the involvement of parishioners in activities we would otherwise pay external suppliers for. We therefore propose to run several 'work parties' for volunteers to assist in this. We are always mindful of insurance liabilities and the competence and safety of everyone involved, so this can become a little complicated.

Councillors themselves undertook the gate, swing and slide step replacements to keep costs down, as well as grant-funded hedge planting. Wherever possible we explore grant funding to supplement costs, but competition can be fierce for limited funds.

There is also the matter of 'picking up the slack', where some duties we expect others to carry out aren't done and we step up to maintain things. Among these is verge grass cutting (where 'No Mow May' has been seen to stretch into September) and parishioners started to cut near their properties, and cleaning of road signs, which highlighted several required replacements. We intend to recognise these activities and seek some recompense from Norfolk County Council Highways.

THOMPSON ROAD TROD

The largest new element of cost contributing to the increase is the provision of the 'trod' footpath extension along Thompson Road.

The total budget for this is £26,000, but we have secured 50% grant funding from Norfolk County Council's Parish Partnerships which reduces our contribution to £13,000. To reduce the impact on precept further, we have agreed with NCC that construction will start in March 2025 and end in April, so can be split across two financial years, with a contribution of £6,500 in 2024-25 and the same in 2025-26. This facility will be a valuable addition to pedestrian safety and improve the daily lives of many in the village, especially as we now have improved and increased frequency bus services using the road.

Given the state of public finances generally and the likely change of Government in 2024/5, we were unsure if the 50% funding would still be available in 2025 if we waited any longer, so we took the decision to action it now while NCC were still offering to pay half the cost.

Hopefully this goes some way to explaining why the 2024-25 precept has had to be increased and our parishioners approve of the steps we are taking to ensure Griston remains a friendly, desirable village to live, work and play in.