

Bidford Parish Council – Budget Statement for 2010-2011

At its meeting on 25th January the Parish Council decided to increase its precept for the year starting in April from the present figure of £154,000 to £199,500: an increase of 29.5% over the present year. This may raise a few eyebrows at any time, but must be more controversial at a time when all the political parties are proposing enormous reductions in public spending as a result of the credit crunch of 2008-9 and the worldwide recession it triggered.

We are all feeling the effects of this, and it would be surprising if at the present time people did not question the Parish Council's decision. So I want to explain why we have chosen to increase our expenditure by almost 30%, and why we have done it in the present financial circumstances. I can assure you that this is not irresponsible spending. What we have done this year is to make an investment in Bidford, from which the village and its community will benefit positively over the coming ten years.

The 2010-11 budgetary process began with an open meeting in early December last year to which the whole village was invited. It was advertised in the local press and on the council website, and people were asked to give their views on what expenditure was considered necessary or desirable. The council's spending record for 2008-9 was available for scrutiny, as were the proposals already on the table for continued expenditure in the coming year. Next to no-one came to the meeting, and those who did were young people with an interest in provision for the under-20s.

They were very keen on the replacement of the skate park, and argued that the costs could be justified in several ways, including a reduction in the number of teenagers hanging around the village looking for something to do.

Eighteen months ago, the council began considering replacing the play equipment on the Big Meadow, and bringing it up to date in terms of appearance, performance and safety. Similar work has been done in Broom, Jubilee Close and Marleigh Park since 2006, and many young parents have raised the Meadow as an issue meanwhile. A consultation was held during 2009 and people of all ages were asked what kind and which range of equipment they wanted to see installed. The council accepted the majority view of respondents.

At the same time, a report was made on the avenue of trees on the Meadow, showing that a number of trees need to be replaced, and that others require expert maintenance. The tree specialists from the County Council advised planting 27 new trees and surgical work on all the mature trees in good condition, if the avenue is to remain in good shape for future years. Sadly, this does not come cheaply. Yet the Big Meadow is the most powerful attraction in the parish for residents and visitors alike and we cannot neglect its maintenance.

Looking at the parish from a broader perspective, the council is keen that it should be seen by residents and visitors alike as an attractive place with some civic pride. This means that the approaches should be eye catching, and the information signs relevant and informative. We already spend some money on keeping footpaths and verges in good shape and propose continuing to do so. But we also want to attract visitors into the heart of Bidford particularly, and hopefully to bring sightseers to the church and other monuments, and customers to the local businesses.

The council has its day to day business to carry out, and whatever the financial condition of the country, this tends to cost more from year to year. This year we are following our normal practice, making use of grant money where we can obtain it to help towards the cost, and dipping into our reserves to minimise the impact on our revenue budgets. But unlike County, Borough and District councils, as a parish we have no capital budgets, and all our spending, whether of a revenue or a capital nature, has to come from the revenue we are able to raise.

Bidford Parish Council is keen to add value to the parish by undertaking a range of amenity improvements which will serve the villages and their residents for several years to come. Obviously, much of this expenditure is capital. Some of it has to be spent immediately in order to benefit from financial subsidies we should otherwise lose, and all of it will bring long-term benefits to our communities. The increase agreed raises the cost of the council from £169,600 in the present year to £199,500 in the coming year.

This is a growing parish and it is impossible to keep pace with local aspirations unless we increase our spending from year to year. The effect of this year's increase is to raise the cost of parish council services by £23.00 pa. for the average (Band D) taxpayer, and more or less proportionately for those on different bandings. The council believes it is acting in the best interests of the parish, and is offering residents good value for money.

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