

# Amendment by John Baker to Aspley Guise Parish Council budget proposal for 2017/18

## Highlights

- Your proposed increase in precept of 18.8% can be reduced to 0%.
- An additional £1,200 set aside for grants to local groups should they wish to apply.

## Background

The budget proposal document was delivered to Parish Councillors at 10pm on the 30th December, for approval at a meeting on the 9th January. At 13 pages, it is detailed, but not transparent – for example:

1. The "Highlights" do not include the headline increase in precept of 18.8%, which is buried in the fourth paragraph of the introduction.
2. Proposed spending includes items that have not been discussed in detail - such as "Professional Fund raising", for which no request has been made (or considered), yet attracts £5,000 of expenditure each year going forward.
3. The justification for increasing precept includes a comparison with other Parish Councils, which is irrelevant. Precept should be set at the needs of the Parish, not at a level comparable with the needs of other Parishes.

By leaving Councillors with 11 days to seek opinions from residents before agreeing to an 18.8% increase in precept, and for amendments to be required on day 5, the Council has failed to show a level of courtesy and respect that should be afforded to residents (& Councillors) during the important process of setting taxation.

I have spoken to numerous residents and they have delivered a consistent message to the Parish Council: If you want to dramatically expand spending, consult first, tax later. With this in mind, I have put forward amendments to remove the 18.8% increase but retain most principles of the Working Group's proposal.

## Proposal

I propose the following amendments (to be combined and voted on as a single amendment) to the budget proposal document:

1. Reference the 'Proposed detailed expenditure budget' (page 10).
  - a. The proposed new annual grant for "Fund raising" (under grants) is removed, resulting in a £5,000 reduction in annual expenditure (see note 1).
  - b. The money allocated for annual "Streetlight maintenance & testing" is not increased by £2,004 (see note 2).
2. Reference the "Streetlight reserve provision" (page 9):
  - a. The proposed new annual amount allocated to reserves is set at £3,062 instead of £5,062 (see note 3), reducing the amount of precept required by £2,000. The streetlight work budget should also be set at £3,000 instead of £5,000. For the

second and third years (on page 11) the Streetlight Reserve Provision and the Streetlight Work budget should both be set at £3,000.

The effect of these changes:

1. The total required precept for 2017/18 is reduced by £9,004.
2. And hence the total required precept for 2017/18 is therefore £38,960.
  - a. Calculated by taking the budgeted precept (page 9) of £47,964, and subtracting £9,004.
3. The £2,207 expenditure envisaged (figure as per Chair's advice) for the twice every decade survey of our streetlights should be paid from the existing £4,938 Streetlight reserve, which will leave £2,731 unallocated streetlight reserve prior to the proposed £3,062 transfer.
  - a. Which means there will be £5,793 of funds available for streetlight replacements in 2017/18 after paying for the survey.
4. The total precept required is approx £1,194 **less than** the £40,154 precept raised for 2016/17. In other words, there is no need for any increase in our Parish Precept.

Having demonstrated a reduction in required expenditure based on the 2016/17 precept, I further propose:

1. That £1,200 of precept is made available for local good causes in the event they wish to apply, but the recipients should demonstrate a well-defined need for the money, ie to pay the annual insurance cost for the Helping Hands group, or to fund new play equipment for Aspley Guise pre-school.
2. That the precept not be increased at all for the coming year.

Notes:

1. Spending money on "professional fund raising" is inappropriate for a number of reasons:
  - a. The proposal favours two groups (the village hall & sports trust) whilst excluding many other groups performing useful community services, such as Helping Hands, Aspley Guise pre-school, the Church, etc.
  - b. It is for the groups to spend their money on professional fund raising if they choose to do so.
  - c. Aspley Guise has many residents with the skills to raise money.
  - d. I do not believe taxpayers will agree with this expenditure, and its inclusion will have a negative impact on the Council's reputation.
2. This figure is for the testing of streetlights, which is not annual but twice a decade, hence periodic.
  - a. The figure has been included in "current expenditure" in the three year plan (page 10), implying it will be spent each year, when it will not.
  - b. The new "streetlight reserve" fund (page 9 & 11) should be used to pay for periodic maintenance, because presumably the proposal to create a "streetlight reserve" is to create a pot of money from which to pay for periodic/exceptional expenditure.
3. There is no reasonable justification for allocating £5,000 of additional precept to streetlight reserves in 2017/18 that cannot be equally applied to a £3,000 contribution.
  - a. The Council will pay for a periodic report of streetlights during 2017/18 and can act on its findings once it is in receipt of them.

- i. On the subject of Planning, the proposal states that Councillors are not “professional planners”, and equally, none of us are “professional streetlight engineers” either.
  - ii. So to suggest there is a problem with streetlights without a report is wrong.
  - iii. Equally, to suggest that we should commence a programme of replacing adequate/non-failed streetlamps is not a prudent way in which to spend taxpayers’ money.
- b. The Council can then consider action for the 2018/19 budget upon receipt of the inspection report.
- c. The Council should also keep in mind that the “general reserves” exist for events such as replacing failed lights, should the report state immediate action is required.

### Three Year Plan – impact of my amendments above

My amendment above has a corresponding positive impact on Years 2 & 3 of the proposed Three Year Plan produced by my colleagues: in general terms, my amendment will have a positive impact (reduced expenditure) of around £9k in each of these years, compared to the expenditure suggested by my colleagues. And therefore, over this 3-year perspective as well as over the single-year perspective, there is absolutely no justification for any increase in the Parish Precept this year.

### Other considerations not included in the above amendment

The inclusion of money for “Planning Advice” in order to help the Council object to applications does not demonstrate a positive outlook. The Council’s job is to assess the merit of any given planning application, not engage in taxpayer funded planning battles (they are for CBC, the Planning Authority). However, this money is also allocated for democratic services, so I have not objected to the budgeting.

Councillors should be aware that budgeting for ‘traffic calming’ may not be helpful. Whilst it may seem sensible, it does not send the correct signal to MK Council whilst Central Bedfordshire Council is negotiating a significant (£150k) payment towards the scheme.

By merely publishing this intention in the budget proposal, the Council is undermining CBC’s negotiating position – because the rational reaction from MKC, should they examine the Parish finances, will be to reduce its generosity by £15,000.

I therefore propose that the description for the £10,850 budget transfer be revised to avoid any explicit mention of traffic calming.