

Open letter to all households in Weston and Gayton regarding the Weston with Gayton Parish Council Precept and Decision Making

Dear Resident of Weston or Gayton,

Following a recent discussion on the Weston and Gayton News and Views Facebook page, the Parish Council would like to take this opportunity to address the level of misinformation and fully explain the rise in the 2020/21 precept request.

The Weston with Gayton Parish Council annual precept for 2020/21 has been set at £37,773. A full breakdown of expenditure is available on the Weston with Gayton Parish Council website at www.westonstaffs.org.uk

This amount represents a 14% increase in Weston and a 15% increase in Gayton. In real terms this equates to an annual increase per band D property of approx. £8.32 for Weston and £6.61 for Gayton or an extra 16 pence per week for Weston and 13 pence per week for Gayton.

The annual budget enables the Parish Council to provide a range of services. The largest proportion of the budget is spent on Grounds Maintenance. Since 2017 the Grounds Maintenance budget has increased from £16,082 to £17,792, which is minimal considering the extent to which the contract has increased in scope over the timeframe. This budget covers all grass cutting, verge maintenance, hedge maintenance, maintenance of the Village Hall grounds in both Weston and Gayton as well as grass cutting and hedge maintenance at both St. Andrew's and St. Peters Church. This also includes routine tree maintenance, maintenance of the war memorial, tarmacked footpath maintenance including moss removal, maintenance of all flowerbeds, borders and planters, routine maintenance upkeep and repair of all play equipment including the Multi Use Games Area and the Skate Park, maintenance and repair of all street furniture and monthly moving of the Speed Indicator Device from the A518 to the A51 and back.

Since 2017 central government funding to Staffordshire County Council has been dramatically reduced and as a result the County Council have stopped providing any village maintenance. Whereas previously all verge maintenance, hedge cutting, and removal of path and pavement vegetation was undertaken by the County Council it now falls to the Parish or will not be undertaken at all. As a result, the Grounds Maintenance contract has had to expand to encompass this extra work. In addition, recent extreme weather has led to increase in tree maintenance and removal, all of which add to the cost.

A substantial increase has been added to the 2020/21 budget for repairs and maintenance of the play equipment. The Parish Council own and maintain all the play equipment on the village green as well as the skate park and the Multi Use Games Area. They are responsible for conducting weekly safety inspections as well as three full independent safety inspections per year. The cost of these independent inspections has increased over the past year and the age of much of the equipment provides additional challenges in terms of repairs and maintenance. The budget has therefore been increased to reflect the additional costs required to repair, maintain and where necessary replace equipment. The safety of children in the village remains the highest priority.

An additional £1000 has also been added to the budget to enable the Parish Council, in conjunction with other neighbouring Parish Councils to undertake some drain and gully clearance. Again, as a result of the reduction in funding for the County Council, gully and drain maintenance will now only be carried out by the County Council on a three-year basis for most gullies and drains in the village. The Parish Council felt that this will lead to increased standing water and possible flooding to properties, and therefore made the decision to increase the precept to enable some additional gully cleaning of key priority/problem drains to be undertaken.

Another service that has lost funding from the County Council is Rights of Way. Footpath maintenance will now be targeted at category A and B footpaths. Almost all of those in Weston and Gayton are Category C, which means no routine maintenance or upkeep will be undertaken. Therefore, an additional £200 has been included in the Gayton budget for the past two years to enable some basic maintenance to be undertaken.

All decisions regarding the budget and any planned increases are discussed in detail at the Parish Council meetings in October, November and December. These are all advertised in advance and open to the public. All decision making is made in an open and transparent manner and members of the public are actively encouraged to come along and have their say.

In addition to the service above the Parish Council respond to planning applications, empty the dog bins, pay for the Christmas Lights on the tree at the Village Hall and with the Village Hall organise the Christmas Lights switch on event, play a significant role in Remembrance Sunday and liaise almost daily with the County and Borough Councils to ensure issues of concern are addressed in the village. They have provided the equipment and fixed signage for the Community Speedwatch programme, they have purchased and installed the speed indicator device on the A51 and A518 and they paint and maintain the bus shelter and all street furniture including park benches, flower planters and a number of notice boards.

They are required by law to understand and comply with all relevant government legislation including the accessibility requirements for the website, financial regulations including the annual internal and external audit, compliance with the pensions regulator, compliance with the General Data Protection regulations and a wealth of other administrative duties.

The Parish Council has one paid employee, working 11 hours a week. The salary of the Parish Clerk has increased over the past few years largely as a result of the number of contracted hours increasing from 7 to 11. Councillors are unpaid and other than training costs do not claim for the general costs they incur in their role as Parish Councillors.

All Parish Council meetings are open to the public and the public are actively encouraged to come along and give their views. There is an open public participation section at every meeting. Details of all meetings are available on the website at www.westonstaffs.org.uk

There is currently one vacancy on the Parish Council in the Parish of Gayton. If anyone would be interested in joining the Parish Council please contact the Parish Clerk at ParishClerk@westonstaffs.org.uk or call 0759 400 2590.

When the restrictions regarding the Coronavirus are lifted and public meetings re-open, the Parish Council will set a date for an open public meeting. They would like anyone who is interested or has concerns regarding the level of the precept to come along and discuss this with them. The Annual Budget setting process for 2021/22 will begin in October 2020. This meeting will help inform the priorities in the budget and the level of precept request for the following year.

In the meantime, if anyone has any questions or concerns regarding the Parish Council please do not hesitate to contact the Parish Clerk at ParishClerk@westonstaffs.org.uk or call 0759 400 2590.

We are all fortunate enough to live in a beautiful part of the country and to live in the beautiful villages of Weston and Gayton. Let us all work together, supporting the community and each other by raising and listening to concerns in a positive and proactive manner.

Yours Faithfully

Jan Griffiths
Chairman Weston with Gayton Parish Council