

I thought that parishioners might like to see your council's response to the [government's consultation paper](#) and, just to be pedantic, I prefer "referenda" as the plural form of referendum.

Please find below the response to the above consultation from Polstead Parish Council in Suffolk.

1. Introduction

A. The basis or rationale for this discussion is to be found on page 7 of the government paper at paragraph 8 under the heading "Parish Precepts". This reads 'There has been a growing awareness in recent years of the council tax increases set by local precepting authorities, and of the very high precept increases set by some town and parish councils in particular. Increases in council tax revenue from town and parish councils have outstripped those for England in each of the last five years. The average town and parish precept set in some billing authorities (around £100) is larger than that of the smallest shire district of Breckland (£68). It is right that local precepting authorities should have the resources they need to support neighbourhoods and local communities. However it is also right that council taxpayers are protected from excessive increases".'

Comments

a. No evidence is cited in support of the proposition set out in the first sentence. More importantly, we are not told whether "the very high precept increases" mean percentage increases or actual cash increases. In fairness:

i. This latter point is taken up in the first sentence of Paragraph 12 on page 9

ii. For 2009 / 2010 Polstead Parish Council's precept was increased by 29% and for 2010 / 2011 by a further 6%. However, research has demonstrated that these increases have done no more than bring its precept roughly into line with 4 other adjacent rural councils with which it may be sensibly comparable.

b. The second sentence is incomprehensible

c. The third sentence is not much better. What do these figures "(around £100)" and "(£68)" mean? Without knowing the composition of Breckland, its population, needs and resources the comparison is just a vapid statistic.

d. The last 2 sentences are mere platitudes.

B. As indicated the author of the paper does at paragraph 12 on page 9 recognise a fundamental factor. The sentence reads "There are occasions when authorities may set council tax increases that are very large when expressed in percentage terms, even though the absolute cash amount is very small". This factor needs to be and will be properly understood, illustrated and driven home.

C. The cost of the council tax to a Property Band "G" council taxpayer of Polstead is:

Suffolk County Council	£1,877.55	(77%)
Suffolk Police	£ 267.90	(11%)
Babergh District Council	£ 231.68	(10%)
Polstead Parish Council	£ 50.69	(2%)

The last supports spending of £11,770 (£12,000 for the sake of arithmetical simplicity). The tax is paid by nearly 400 households in Polstead.

D. It is worth pointing out that the Polstead council tax payer probably gets more visible return for his money from the Polstead precept than the rest put together. Few of them have children in state funded education, police officers are seen in the village on rare occasions and never on foot, the lighting in the towns is of only sporadic interest, hardly any make calls on social services and what benefit is to be derived from paying a salary in excess of £200,000 to SCC's Chief Executive is a matter for debate. It is not suggested that the villagers of Polstead should not contribute to these things, somebody has to. However, from the parish precept in broad terms you get what you see and you see what you get viz:

- a.** Well kept village greens and other open spaces
- b.** The bank surrounding the village pond regularly strimmed and the railings repainted from time to time
- c.** The play ground for the young well equipped and maintained and likewise the large playing field for the older children
- d.** 27 miles of rural footpaths regularly strimmed and kept under control and so on.

Some of these matters are not strictly the concern of the parish council but if it does not look after them, nobody does and the parishioners complain. The parishioners of Polstead like to see their village properly cared for and are willing to pay for it. Even the apparently eye watering 29% rise was greeted by precisely 2 mild protests at the Annual Parish Meeting following the rise.

2. Excessive Increases

From the above it can be easily demonstrated that an increase of 5% to cater for a slight rise in the cost of employing local labour and purchasing materials e.g. fence posts, will produce additional revenue of £600 i.e. an average of £1.50 per household per annum or 3p per week. Even 10%, which may appear startling will only cost each household 6p per week. A referendum held in Polstead would cost the parish £1,600 if not held in conjunction with any other election. In the case of a 10% increase of precept the parish would stand to be £1,600 poorer if the referendum was lost and £400 poorer if it won.

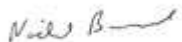
It is only if the parish council were to contemplate a piece of serious capital expenditure that any question of a referendum might rear its head. Suppose the parish council were to undertake a project costing £100,000 to be paid for over 10 years. The precept would have to be doubled. Even this in cash terms would not be a monumental disaster. Additional expenditure of £12,000 split between 400 households means an average increase of £30 per annum per household or 60p per week which equates to ½ litre of petrol.

Much more important however, is that the activities of the parish council could hardly be more transparent. The agenda for its meetings are published on the 3 village notice boards and on the parish council website. The minutes of each meeting are published in the parish magazine and on the website. The meetings are open to the public, with opportunity for public participation at the public forum.

Whatever the theoretical extent of its legal powers, whatever its own standing orders and internal procedures, in practice no such scheme for capital expenditure or any more modest scheme could possibly be embarked upon without the enthusiastic support of a substantial majority of the parishioners. The parishioners after all elect the members of the parish council every 4 years or not as the case may be. This is what is called democracy as practised at the lowest level of organised government in England.

3. Response to Consultation

In the light of the above no detailed response is merited. This notion is absurd. These proposed referendums at the level of Polstead Parish Council are wholly unnecessary and an affront to local democracy to which this government aspires and should be rejected out of hand.



Nicholas Brandt, Chairman Polstead Parish Council