

The last year has seen some personnel changes at Ash Parish Council, and to start off with, I would like to thank Cllr Lesley Andrew and our former Clerk Julie Ferguson for their much appreciated work on the Parish Council. I would also like to welcome Zannette Bougourd as our new Clerk.

Parish Councils are in a unique and somewhat incongruous position in local government. All of our Councillors are unpaid volunteers, but whereas local authorities such as Somerset Council are not legally allowed to increase your council tax by more than 4.99% without government permission, we have no such limit. Due to the increasing budget deficit in Somerset Council's budget, permission was given by government to increase Council Tax by 7.5% for this financial year 2025/6.

We could, if we so choose, increase our share of your Council Tax by whatever we want. Despite this eye-watering power, you might have noticed that the Ash Parish Council Precept has increased this year by a minimal 1.79% this year. There are a number of reasons for this – in part we found ourselves between clerks for some four months and during that time, myself and Caz Halfhide the Deputy Chair muddled our way through as (unpaid) volunteer Clerks.

The bottom line though is that we found ourselves better off than we budgeted for last year, and we didn't need to charge you more, so we didn't!

We regularly get advised that we should charge as much as we think we can get away with. This is a notion that your Parish Council has taken the communal decision to reject on principle.

We are also careful with the money that we do raise from the Parish, and always endeavour to spend it wisely. It isn't always popular: there are always opinions about things that we should be spending your money on, and we do regularly get pressure to throw money at problems that are outside of our remit.

Not least of all, from Somerset Council are trying to ameliorate their financial woes by suggesting that Parish Councils should take on tasks that you have already paid them to do, as we can tap you up for cash without restriction.

Ash Parish Council are helped to manage your finances responsibly by the selfless assistance of a small group of volunteers: the Millennium Woods Group, Ash in Bloom and the Ash Parish Fete Planning Group all give up their time in order to make the Parish a better place. Although outside of the Parish Council remit, the volunteers who run Ash Village Hall also do an incredible job for the Parish.

It is sad to realise though that these volunteers are a tiny proportion of our Parish residents. Whether it is planting a hedge or running a fete, it always seems to be the same faces who step forwards to help.

When you look at your Council Tax bill, it is them who you should really be thanking, but more than that, why don't you make this the year that you step forward to volunteer as well. Not only do we currently have a vacancy on Ash Parish Council, we are always looking for people to help in the Millennium Woods, at the Parish Fete or just next time we put out a call for volunteers. You really would be more than welcome, and as well as making the Parish a better place you will be helping to keep our share of the Council Tax lower for everyone!