



Somerset
Council



Have your say

Budget consultation

Open from 11 December until
22 January



Have your say on council budget setting

You may already be aware that the new unitary Somerset Council (SC) has declared a financial emergency. They have a budget shortfall for 2024/25 of approximately 20% shortfall (£100m). By law they have either set a balanced budget or issue a section 114 notice, which is akin to declaring bankruptcy in the Council world and means that services would likely be restricted to core statutory ones only. At this point it is not quite clear which way it will go in Somerset, though the current administration is doing all in its power to set a balanced budget and remain in control. Inevitably this means many tough decisions to be made over spending cuts.

It should be noted that this situation is neither unique to Somerset Council nor the fault of the current administration who only started in April this year, but has been building for some years, largely as the result of a dramatic fall in central government funding over the last decade coupled with recent rampant inflation, though the decision of the old Somerset County Council not to raise their precept at all for the last 6 years has not helped. They are further handicapped (as are all English county/unitary councils) by central government maintaining their precept cap at 2.99% (+2% ring-fenced for social care), even in these times of high inflation.

The link below gives some more information and also gives the opportunity to complete a survey to let Somerset Council have your views on the relative importance of the services they provide. **Please help them in their decision making process by participating!**

<https://somersetcouncil.citizenspace.com/comms/budget-consultation-2024-2025/>



What does Somerset Council's financial emergency mean for Lopen?

One of the cost-cutting measures that Somerset Council (SC) is investigating is further "devolution", where they give the opportunity for town and parish councils to take on and fund the running of assets and services currently operated by Somerset Council in their parish. The thinking behind this is that although all English councils from "District" level upwards have their precepts capped at 2.99% (+2% where they have responsibility for adult social care), smaller town and parish councils do not and can raise their precepts as much as they deem necessary, so this is seen as a way of getting more money via another route, thus potentially saving services that might otherwise be cut/closed.

Lopen Parish has no dedicated SC assets. An SC Service that Lopen has until recently been buying into is the Ranger, but after a few changes of SC Ranger staff and some variable service over the last year since a long-term Ranger retired, Lopen's service has been withdrawn, as have some other parishes.

If Somerset Council do have to issue a S114 notice, which is quite likely, the inevitable result is that only statutory services will continue. The impact will be felt across services that effect cities, towns and parishes. The statutory services that Somerset Council have a duty to provide include the following: children's safeguarding and social care; adult social care; education services; waste collection; planning and housing services; road maintenance; and library services. The extent and level of service provision will be defined by Somerset council. For example, waste collection will almost certainly be restricted to household collection services, whilst the public waste bin and dog bin emptying will be subjected to a charge, and recycling centres may operate on reduced hours, or some smaller centres be closed entirely. Street cleaning, fly tipping removal, drain clearance, verge maintenance, for example, are likely to be cut. For this reason Lopen are in discussion with other local towns and parishes investigating pooling of service providers, which should prove more cost effective than individual contracts. Towns and parishes need to be proactive in the circumstances and Lopen Parish Council have been attending the Local Council Network meetings and other workshops and seminars to best equip us with the knowledge and fully engage with other councils to forge a way forward and discover opportunities within our communities.

Extending from this, SC have asked the towns and parishes whether we would be prepared to contribute towards the costs of non-statutory services used by our parishioners outside the parish. Examples of this could include supporting local rubbish recycling centres, leisure centres / pools, libraries, public transport and some services currently carried out by county highways within the parish. This would inevitably mean the need to increase the parish precept by a substantial percentage, though it should be noted that this neither raises the cost to you the parishioner very much or (unfortunately), raises very much money. For example, doubling the precept (100% increase) would cost a band D household an extra £65 per year and raise just over £7,000.

Please note that there is NO intention to raise the precept by this level, it's just an illustration of scale.

[Lopen Specific Survey by the Parish Council \(Please participate - Very short - 2 mins max!\)](#)

The purpose of this survey is to ask you whether:

- You think the parish council should use Parish Council funds to help support Somerset Council services that we may all benefit from both inside and OUTSIDE the parish,
- What level of precept increase you would consider acceptable and
- What services you would prefer to support.

As the next Parish Council Meeting convenes on the 29 January, the date on which we will be setting the precept as part of the budget, we would be grateful if you could respond to the survey well in advance of that date to enable us to consider residents' views when making decisions. We really appreciate your input and look forward to your responses.