

Chair's Report 2024

You might be surprised to hear it, but being on Ash Parish Council is far from glamorous. Most of the job involves organising, or in many cases just doing, the minutiae of Parish life. This might be arranging for the consecration of the new cemetery; sorting new disabled access paths for the village car park and the recreation ground along with proper access gates; providing, installing and maintaining defibrillators; planting trees and hedgerows and making sure that Parish land is well maintained.

To do all of this, we set and administer the Parish Precept - the share of your Council Tax that pays for the running of the Parish. For the past three years we have managed to keep this precept at the same level and not increased it at all. When the cost of living crisis was at its peak, we wanted to do as much as possible to help parishioners to make ends meet. Now that things are easing, we have had to face reality and increase the precept for the first time in three years.

During this three year period, estimates for the accumulative rate of inflation using ONS data is around 27%. Quite simply, everything that we do on your behalf is costing more than it did three years ago. Having the rate of inflation drop to something reasonable doesn't mean that prices have gone down. It means that prices are going up more slowly, and unfortunately we have had to reflect that by raising our Parish Precept by 14% - a little over half of what inflation has been doing during the same period.

The situation is not helped by the fact that the combination of government cuts and previous financial incompetence has led to the newly and expensively dreamt up Somerset Council trying to shirk off many of their responsibilities on to Parish Councils. They have presented us with a number of these 'opportunities' under the justification that we can charge you whatever we like and get away with it, whereas they are limited by statute. What they don't acknowledge is that through your council tax, you have already paid them to do the things that they are suggesting that we charge you again for.

Whilst government funding decisions have undoubtedly contributed to the financial position, there is a negative financial legacy from previous iterations of the various non-unified Somerset councils have also played a part - such as apparently spending £289 million on a property portfolio that is now worth only £220 million. We are also yet to see any of the promised financial benefits from the expensive creation of the unified Somerset authority.

Luckily, Somerset don't do a great deal directly for this Parish, and we are actively resisting all attempts to take on extra things at your expense, although we do have to make some form of contingency. For example, if Somerset stop paying for dog poo bins to be emptied then we will either have to step in, or we will literally and metaphorically be in excrement.

What we can promise you though is that Ash Parish Council will always do our best to spend your money as wisely as possible, whilst trying to make continued improvements to facilities in the Parish.