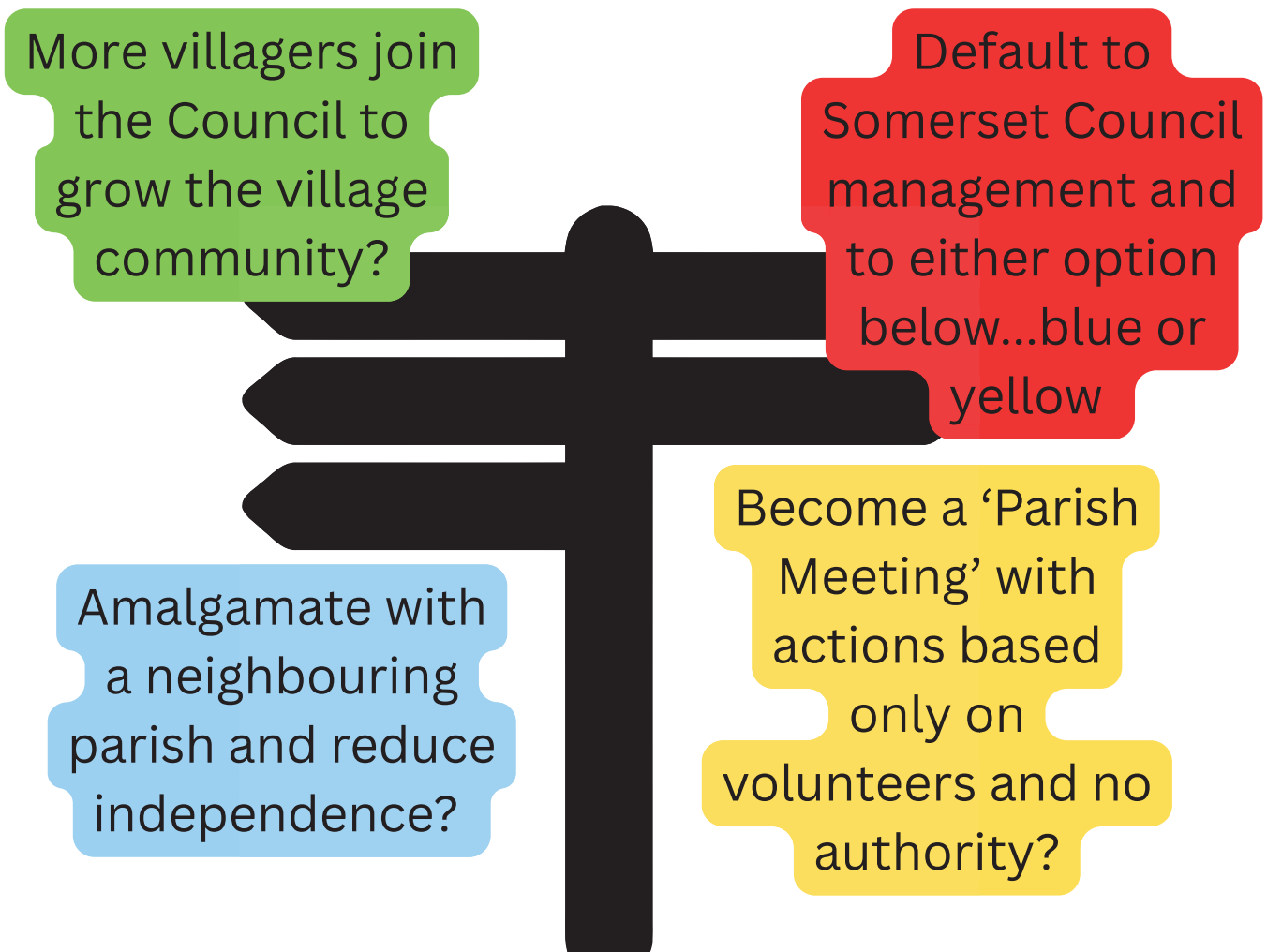


# Lopen Parish Council at a crossroads



The simple fact is that our Parish Council can only exist if people from the Parish come forward to serve as councillors

And remember this...

**Anybody could have done it, but Nobody did.**

**Somebody got angry about that because it was Everybody's job.**

**Everybody thought that Anybody could do it, but Nobody realised that Everybody wouldn't do it.**

**It ended up that Everybody blamed Somebody when Nobody did what Anybody could have done.**

Now read on...

## **What's this about?**

Well, with the Parish Council potentially going to be more important to the village due to the devolved nature of Somerset Council (SC), then it needs to be understood that although the Parish Council is the most local form of government, the people that make it up, the councillors, are volunteers who live or work in the parish or within 3 miles of it. These are ordinary, community-minded people from the village who have stepped forward for the role. And anyone hoping to make a difference can join!

## **So what's going to change?**

The effects of the financial squeeze is that SC wish to "devolve" assets and responsibilities to the smaller councils as a way of transferring the associated costs to them. This affects Lopen less than some as we have no SC run assets in the village, but we are warned that as budgets are cut within SC, it will be ever harder to get actions like County Highways to do basic maintenance like drain clearance and the Rights of Way team to do footpaths, gates, etc meaning that the village in general and parish council in particular are going to have to be more self sufficient. Therefore, the role of the parish council in the maintenance of the basic village infrastructure is going to become more important. The reality is that Lopen Parish Council raised a precept (planned expenditure) of £ 10,450 this year against a total council tax "take" from the village of just under £300K. So while we might be able to pay smaller contractors to tidy up the side-roads and clear drain gullies, the costs of full drain cleaning, road re-surfacing or embankment maintenance etc are well beyond us. As a PC we have a role to lobby, collaborate, gain access to grants and facilitate positive outcomes for Lopen.

## **The simple fact is we do not have enough councillors...**

At this point in time Lopen PC has just four councillor places filled from a possible seven. This is not enough. To function at all, the council requires a minimum of three to be "quorate". Low numbers increases the workload on councillors and increases the pressure on them to attend all meetings, just so the council can function at a basic level. All of the current councillors have at least part time jobs, with other responsibilities and with the low level of reserve, the situation can easily arise where a meeting might have to be cancelled at short notice because not enough are able to attend. Should the situation arise where the number of people prepared to act as councillors fall below 3, the Parish Council can no longer function and the situation can only be recovered by Somerset Council stepping in. This would be a difficult situation, best avoided, and any voice Lopen has is lost for good.

# What does the Parish Council do?

The Parish Council is a formal, legally-constituted body with legal powers and duties. We are able to raise funds via a local tax for parish purposes, which this year will equate to £ 90/year for a band D household, for a total precept of £10,450. LPC at present has a fairly limited role as there is no community land or building in the village that it is responsible for, though as you all know we are working to change this with the Orchard Land leasing discussions. It also funds and enables the following:

- Representation of the parish's interests in wider discussions with Somerset Council. Actually in many cases it is perfectly possible for the general public to make the same contact but PC arguably has a little more clout.
- Hires and supervises contractors for village maintenance tasks (eg the Ranger)
- Provides and maintains the village defibrillator
- Is formally notified of issues and consultations that the public would have to find out for themselves, and shares the information with the village
- Provides and maintains a village lawnmower & strimmer
- Has insurance which can be extended to cover public liability for village events.
- Secured legal permissions, part funded and maintains the village Speed Indicator Device (SID), volunteer operated, and provides the legal setting for its operation.
- Takes the lead on the footpaths and village access with Highways and SC
- Consultee for local democracy and regional planning matters
- Consultee for Parish planning matters
- Consultee for flooding matters
- Helps spearhead village initiatives
- Funds and operates the village website
- Will take a role in ensuring the legal basis and insurance for the Orchard leasing

There is an argument, with some validity, that small councils such as ours are not cost-effective. The simple reason for this is the increasing bureaucratic workload imposed by central government, which remains similar for a tiny village with a population of 260 such as Lopen, right up to populations of 2 - 3,000. In addition to Councillors, a small council will have a parish clerk who looks after the administrative, financial and legal side as well as keeping the councillors in order. This is an employed and paid role legally required to safeguard the public money. While this is clearly a good thing, it is recognised for very small councils like Lopen this is a disproportionate cost reflecting a disproportionate administrative burden. However it will still need to exist in some shape whatever format the Parish Council may take. **So what next?**

## So...

This is why we are at a crossroads - When thinking about the alternatives, it should be appreciated that the minimum population (electors) a village must have to be allowed a parish council is 200. Below this (and indeed many above this) a village will be a "Parish Meeting" with much less effective authority than a PC, but still the overheads. Dinnington is a local example of this. So with just 250 electors, Lopen is in fact quite privileged to have its own council.

On the cost saving front, the most obvious alternative would be for Lopen to amalgamate with a neighbouring parish, thus sharing administrative costs. The downsides are due to size, we would inevitably be the "junior partner" to any of the surrounding parishes, and a significant dilution of local voice, rising to total absence if no one can be bothered to sit on the wider council! There is also the possibility, depending on the partnering council, of a precept increase.

It is not the view of the current councillors that we should be pushing to move away from Lopen having its own parish council. We are here because we believe it is a good thing for the village. However, it's fair to say that we are all long serving, some of us very long serving and we won't be carrying the load forever!

## All said, the alternatives in summary are:

- 1. More people come forward to serve as councillors, guaranteeing we can retain the independent Parish Council that we have currently, with the active participation and direct involvement of parishioners as councillors.**
- 2. 'Limp along' hoping not to fall below the 3 Councillor threshold and default to Somerset Council management , with the likely end result either 3 or 4 below...**
- 3. Amalgamate with a neighboring parish council (eg Seavington, South Petherton, Hinton St George or Merriott), losing our independence without necessarily any reduction in cost.**
- 4. Move away from a parish council to a 'Parish Meeting' with the almost total loss of powers, benefits and access that a parish council brings.**

The talent is out there - Lopen is blessed with a good number of civic minded and energetic people. We are also well aware that many of them regard the idea of becoming a councillor with some horror, due (we presume) to the formal procedures and bureaucracy associated with it. We have some sympathy with that view! However, the simple fact is that the Parish Council can only exist if people from the parish come forward as councillors. **Thank You.**

## Next step:

This will be a major agenda item for the **Annual Village Meeting to be held on Friday May 16th at 6.30 in the Sunday School Room.** Details and Meeting Agenda will be circulated and posted nearer the time. In the meantime those that want to apply or know more details please contact the Parish Clerk - [lopenpc.clerk@gmail.com](mailto:lopenpc.clerk@gmail.com) or one of the Councillors.