

SDDC Draft Budget Proposal – Key Points

The controlling group at SDDC have presented their draft budget proposal and five-year plan for consultation.

There are a number of points to note as follows:

- Proposal to consider removal of S136 Concurrent Functions currently paid to parished areas of SDDC. The amount received is dependant upon the size of the parish. S136 will still be paid in 2024/25, but from 2025/26, it is proposed to remove, though there will be no alternative provision for the services (paid for by parish councils and claimed back via S136) and there will be an expectation that the services remain as they are now with no reduction in service.
- Unparished areas of South Derbyshire (such as Swadlincote) where SDDC complete the core functions will be unaffected. They will lose no funding and will continue to receive the same service as always.
- The presented draft budget indicates a 600k budget gap in 2026/27. Removal of S136 will save the council circa £400k so this is an obvious easy saving. However, this budget shows on year 4 of the financial plan there is a circa £5m deficit, within 3 years, this council will be bankrupt.

The draft budget plan shows a number of areas where expenditure is planned as follows:

- £100k planned expenditure for master plan for Swadlincote Town Centre – there is no justification for this and £100k will not produce any benefit for this ward area. Considering play area equipment (3 pieces generic equipment) comes in at around £45k, £100k consultancy for a town centre regeneration will not provide great results and is the equivalent to one quarter of the S136 expenditure across the district.
- There are several planned “roles/areas” for consideration including a potential plan to employ a further Head of Legal and Democratic Services at a cost of circa £500k over a five year period. We already have a Head of Service in this area, why do we need another?
- Proposed HR changes at circa £105K per year
- £50K expenditure for MS Teams telephony – why are employees not returning to the office space provided? If officers returned to the office, there would be no requirement for MS Teams licences and telephony for all and we would all experience a better service from staffed offices.
- £63k per year for a Procurement Manager – arguably, this could be beneficial in negotiating better contracts in all areas.
- £55k per year for customer service feedback consultancy – customer service is poor at best currently, if staff were returned to the office, the customer service would improve hugely with more timely responses than we get currently.
- £350k per year for management restructure. We have a newly appointed CEO and this should fall under their remit to manage effectively, as it did with the previous CEO. This is a planned recurring cost – why? There is no justification for this at all.
- £22k feasibility study for cemeteries – this was completed within the last 3 years and there is no requirement for it to be completed again. On top of this, there is an additional planned expenditure of £85K recurring for staff to complete the feasibility study.
- £85k for additional Tree Officers – arguably, this could be beneficial, however, £85k recurring appears to be an inflated cost depending upon the number of officers appointed.

In total there are 10 planned new roles which will cost circa £1m per year – hence the budget deficit of circa £7m by year five of the plan.

- Plans to refurb both Greenbank Leisure Centre and the Council offices at Swadlincote are also included – there are so few staff in the offices currently it is hard to see how this can be justified. There are no Leisure centre facilities in the North East of the District and much greater benefit would be apparent if new facilities were planned in this area to even up the level of service available across the district.
- Plans to earmark £1m for the refurbishment of Swadlincote Indoor Market
- Plans to earmark £1m for the refurbishment of play areas such as Eureka Park in Swadlincote – this is despite offloading play area stock to parish councils in 2023, many of which had been poorly maintained and are now costing parish councils excessive amounts to maintain/refurb.
- There is a requirement for a new crematorium to be considered – current facilities are poor across the County. Bretby Crematorium and Markeaton Crematorium are both tired and in need of extensive upgrading, however there is an argument that the Trent Valley Crematorium meets the needs of this ward area perfectly.

The CEO is ultimately responsible for the sign off of the budget plan and is responsible for “looking after” SDDC as a whole.

There are a number of areas not considered in terms of generating income and areas of expenditure which cannot be justified.

Sharpe’s Pottery Museum in Swadlincote is a facility currently unable to self-fund and is largely funded by public money including an additional £300k annually which has been requested on top of the usual funding they receive from SDDC.

There are a large number of council houses currently sat empty and untenanted, awaiting refurb – many of these properties are ready for tenants but it is currently taking circa 175 days to re-let a property when it becomes empty – massive loss of revenue.

There are two foodbanks across the district and both are receiving between £5k and £10k funding – which is not budgeted – arguably, these are much-needed, however the expenditure needs to be included in a budget plan.

Rosliston Forestry Centre could generate so much more income for the council, it is currently very under-managed with a lot of options for generating income which could be explored.

In short, it appears this draft budget plan will severely penalise residents in areas which are subject to a parish council, but not in areas where there is not.

The expectation is that all services will improve or at least remain the same, and there will be no funding to do this, which means the only way of raising the required funds is to increase the precept paid by electors – but again, not affecting those that don’t live in an area where precept is levied.

What happens next?

There is an online consultation expected to go live very soon. It is imperative that as many people as possible have their say on this and make their comments publicly.

Area Forum on 30th January (Melbourne) – Director of Finance will be present and potentially CEO of SDDC too – attendance at this meeting and asking questions to highlight the flaws in the budget plan is crucial.

The budget will be voted on at Full Council on 28th February – this will be a meeting held in public and there will be an opportunity for representation – questions will need to be submitted prior to the meeting, and you will need to register to speak at the meeting to pose your question whereby you will then have the opportunity to ask a supplementary question.

This is not a done deal and the questions must be asked in terms of justification for expenditure when there are so many other options available.