

Councillor A G Cooper (Deputy Mayor)

Present (for all or part of the meeting):-

Councillors:

K M Aspin	P A Leason
F Beatty	A R McNaughton
E L Carter	D M McNaughton
R P Cooke	A Nixon
B M Cross	G P K Pardesi
A P Edgeller	A N Pearce
P C Edgeller	J M Pert
I D Fordham	J Powell
A T A Godfrey	J P Read
A D Hobbs	A Reid
J Hood	J T Rose
F D J James	D P Rouxel
R A James	A J Sandiford
E G R Jones	S N Spencer
P W Jones	J Thorley
R Kenney	M J Winnington

Officers in attendance:-

T Clegg	-	Chief Executive
C Forrester	-	Deputy Chief Executive (Resources) / S151 Officer
I Curran	-	Head of Law and Governance
W Conaghan	-	Communications Manager
J Allen	-	Democratic Services Officer

C39 Minutes

The Minutes of the previous meeting held on 2 December 2025 were agreed as a true and correct record.

C40 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Barron, M G Dodson, A M Loughran, B McKeown, L Nixon and M Phillips.

C41 Announcements

On behalf of the Mayor, the Deputy Mayor thanked those who attended the Charity Quiz Night which raised £681 for the Mayor's Charity Appeal.

Invitations would soon be sent out for the Charity Lunch at the Riverbank Restaurant. Tickets available from the Mayor's Office.

Councillor A T A Godfrey informed Members that Councillor A Loughran was in hospital and asked that the Mayor writes to the Councillor to send good wishes from the Councillors.

C42

General Fund Revenue Budget and Capital Programme

Considered the report of the Deputy Chief Executive - Resources.

Councillor R P Cooke introduced the report before reading the following prepared statement:-

"As members will, no doubt, already have read this lengthy and detailed report I shall cover only the salient points.

The report's purpose is to propose to the Council the General Fund Revenue Budget for 2026-27, the updated Capital Programme 2026-27 to 2028-29 and indicative budgets for 2027-28 to 2028-29.

The recommendations are as set out in paragraph 2.1.

Key issues such as:

- Local Government Reorganisation and
- The provisional local government finance settlement for 2026-27 including the implementation of the fairer funding review, the Business Rates reset as well as a three-year **provisional** settlement are covered in the body of the report.

The budget for 2026/27 is based on the estimated outturn position for 2025/26 which has been updated to reflect known changes and estimates for 2026/27.

Indicative budgets have been set out for 2027/28 and 2028/29, which include the key issues that it is anticipated will be likely to have an impact on our finances.

Section 5 covers the key issues in more detail and underlines the large amount of work **and** costs (unclear at present), but which could well be significant for existing councils to meet the challenging timetable set by the government for LGR, but these will need to be planned for.

Paragraph 5.5 covers the effects of the increase in business rates as well as the previous increase in national insurance on our partners as well as, indirectly, on users of Council services. Worst case scenarios are also covered.

The Fairer Funding Review has now been implemented based on an updated needs formula to allocate funds. The results are a large shift of resources away from District Councils (average rise of 0.6%) and towards others, as can be seen from the table in Paragraph 5.8. Metropolitan councils were the biggest beneficiary (7.5% rise) as the methodology used to calculate needs favoured them more than districts.

The reset of Business Rates meant that all previous growth over the old baseline amount was taken away from the Council, and a new baseline has been introduced. Although it is **anticipated** that the Council will be able to retain any growth over this new baseline amount, at present, the figures supplied in the settlement are built into the budget.

At the time of setting the budget we had no indication of transitional grant funding to protect the budget as a result of fairer funding or business rates reset (the settlement was announced on 17th December 2025). It turned out that the settlement was not as bad as we thought it would be from meetings with the civil servants, helped by the transitional grant.

Due to this uncertainty this council sought to plan for conservative (with a small c) but realistic assumptions in budget setting in the previous year.

This ensured that when the settlement came the Council would be able to continue to deliver services.

The settlement allows lower tier councils to raise Council Tax by the higher of 2.99% or £5 (rather than the higher of 1.99% or £5) without a referendum. Indeed, a 2.99% increase is reflected in the settlement calculation by the Government.

The settlement for 2026/27 is set out in Table 1 which also shows the details for 2025/26.

It includes £300k for transitional protection. Note also that the Revenue Support Grant increase is in part driven by several other grants which were paid separately before being rolled into it.

However, this changed towards the end of last week. Government gave an urgent alert from the District Councils Network on Thursday 5 February. The civil servants made errors in calculating revenues from DCN sheet. There was little or no formulae from the Government, but the S151 Officer calculated that a worst case scenario would be the loss of £3m from Government.

Amended figures are out today. They do not affect the bottom line - almost net neutral for this year.

The S151 Officer has appropriate delegated authority to make the necessary changes as it is just a reserves movement - having obtained a new grant to offset the reduction in business rates.

This has shown the importance of adequate reserves. But we are not out of the woods yet. Next year we lose £1.3m. Year after we lost £1.3m, so postponing the pain and then will affect the budgets.

Budget issues and Adjustments for 2026/27 are contained in paragraphs 5.21 to 5.25 and the major changes in the 2026/27 Portfolio budgets (recurring in future years) are listed in paragraph 5.25. Here, one should note that the Council purchased the Civic Centre in 2025/26 and as a result the base budget has been reduced by £776k to reflect rent no longer needing to be paid. Also included is a revised income stream of net £490k. This is a cautious estimate of the Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme (this is the money paid to us, collected by central government from private sector companies based on the amount of waste materials they produced. It is only guaranteed for one year and we do not know what could happen in future).

2025-26 Forecast Outturn

The latest portfolio position reflects the inflationary increases in costs and known changes in the forecast and the impact of savings achieved. The estimated outturn is a £1.6m portfolio surplus against the profiled budget. This can be seen in Table 2 in Paragraph 5.27. The major changes in the Environment and Resources portfolios reflect the additional receipts from the Extended Producer Responsibility Payments (already covered) and there no longer being a rental charge for the council to occupy the Civic Centre. Vacancies and recruitment difficulties are also reflected in the forecast.

At present the Council is forecasting a £0.5m deficit over the budgeted for position for investment income due to falls in the interest rate and the use of reserves to purchase the council building. Taking into account other technical adjustments the result is a favourable overall forecast outturn for 2025/26 of **£460k**. This can be seen in Table 3 para 5.33.

The end of business rates pooling and the reason is in Paragraph 5.31. (As there is no longer any growth in the system there is no longer a benefit from entering a pool, but this will be reviewed in future years).

Table 3 in paragraph 5.33 reflects the forecast outturn position for 2025/26, the proposed budget for 2026/27 and indicative budgets for 2027/28 and 2028/29. These budgets are generally based on the maintenance of the existing provision and delivery of the priorities as set out in the Corporate Plan for 2025/26 to 2027/28. The only material change is the introduction of Food Waste Collection from 2026/27 in line with Government policy.

There is no specific funding for this as it has been included in the settlement. The detailed budgets are included in APPENDIX 1.

While the multi-year settlement is welcome and helps to some extent with medium term planning, it should be borne in mind that this is a **provisional** settlement and subject to change. The Government's wish to reorganise local government combined with this still limits the council's ability to plan strategically.

Table 4 in paragraph 5.37 shows the changes in 2026/27 budget assumptions. The main changes are the introduction of fairer funding and the business rates reset, the increase in portfolio budgets and the reduction in investment income already alluded to.

Due to the Council's prudent approach to budgeting, it has been able to manage the business rates reset and change to the funding methodology well. Examples are set out in Paragraph 5.39.

Reserves and Balances

These are an essential part of good financial management and help the Section 151 officer to reassure the Council of the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of reserves. See APPENDIX 5 for that statement.

The policy for many years has been to maintain the level of the General Fund balance at a minimum of £1m and this is maintained over the planning period.

Capital Programme 25-26 to 28-29

The programme is attached as APPENDIX 2 and further information is given in paragraph 5.44 including the fact that the funding mechanism for the former Wilco site has been changed from council resources to Future High Street Grant and a new scheme is included for "natural environment vehicles" otherwise known as street cleansing vehicles.

The Council has capital resources of £1.495m in General Fund and £3.136m of Section 106 resources not allocated at present (last year **£4.341m**).

Council Tax Base and Collection Fund

This is the number of properties in the Borough expressed in terms of Band D equivalents (APPENDIX 4).

The Council's Tax Base is now estimated to be 50,296.31. This is an increase of 662.16 from the previous year.

The Collection Fund has been reviewed as part of the budget process.

Council Tax 2026-27

The proposed increase of **2.99%** is within the guidelines for district councils as contained in Government policy.

The proposed level of Council Tax for 2026/27 is £184.09 for a Band D property and the overall level of Council Tax subject to final determination by Council in February 2026. The usual caveat is that the figures in this report may need minor amendment if any further information emerges before then.

For 2025/26 Council Tax was £178.75 for a Band D so rise of £5.34 How much per week extra? About 10 pence per week.

The total Council Tax for the Borough will reflect the spending decisions by all the other preceptors.

Remember that although we collect Council Tax we only keep about 10%. The vast bulk goes to the County Council.

Risks and Future Challenges

The range of significant risks are covered in paragraph 5.53. The most serious of these are the recruitment difficulties faced by the council, with the reasons shown in Paragraph 5.52. These shortages of staff could have a negative impact on service delivery. This is likely to be an issue until LGR is resolved. There is also the matter of additional work that LGR is going to generate. Provision has been made for this in the budget.

So, yes, there is a deal of uncertainty when peering into the crystal ball but thanks to the prudence and competence of our knowledgeable and experienced Section 151 officer and his equally talented and hard-working team the Council is well placed to weather any storms that are gathering.

Despite the challenging year ahead we will continue with our ambitious plans for the transformation of the High Street. We are continuing the demolition of the derelict former Co-op store and the Guildhall Shopping Centre. We shall also be refurbishing street furniture and utilising bin storage in the town centres (£19k). In addition, we have received confirmation from the Government that funding for the Station Gateway scheme is forthcoming. There is around £1.5m of extra support being rolled out for local businesses following our successful "High Street Boost" scheme. Work has been completed on enhancing the entrance and approach to Stafford Railway Station, which is often the first impression visitors get when they arrive at our County Town - and we are implementing plans for revamping Rowley Park and some other play areas.

Finally, and on behalf of all members, I should like to thank the Finance Team for the huge amount of time and effort they have put into the creation of this budget, working to such tight deadlines to produce it. We are only seeing the tip of this but there has been so much work involved in collecting, checking, analysing and presenting the very considerable amounts of data and they have done a superb job.

So, a big thank you to the Deputy Chief Executive (Resources) Chris Forrester, the Chief Accountant Financial Management Emma Fullager and all the Finance Team who created this budget.

I commend this budget to the Council and ask that all the recommendations be agreed."

The proposal was seconded by Councillor A T A Godfrey

In accordance with the Budget and Policy Procedure Rules (Part 4, Section 5 of the Council's constitution) an alternative budget (attached to these minutes as a **SCHEDULE**) was proposed by Councillors J M Pert who reserved his right to speak, seconded by M J Winnington on behalf of the Conservative Group.

Members of the Council then discussed the amendment as provided for under paragraph 15 of the Council Procedure Rules.

At the vote, the Deputy Mayor subsequently declared that the amendment was defeated.

Following continuation of the debate, Members voted on the proposals as set out in the report, which on being put to the vote were declared to be carried.

RESOLVED:- that:-

- (a) the Budget Requirement for the General Fund Revenue Budget for 2026-27 be set at £21.049 million noting the increase of £161k from the previously recommended amount to Cabinet of £20.888 million due to additional tree team posts;
- (b) the indicative General Fund Revenue Budgets be set at £20.759 million for 2027-28 and £21.039 million for 2028-29 noting the increase of £35k in 2027/28 and £52k in 2028/29 previously recommended by Cabinet due to additional tree team post and Cannock Chase District Council led shared service recharge changes;
- (c) the General Fund working balance be set at a minimum of £1.0 million;
- (d) the detailed capital programme as set out in appendix 2 of the report be approved;
- (e) the Council Tax for 2026-27 be increased by 2.99% to £184.09;
- (f) the Council's Tax Base be set at 50,296.31 (as determined by the Deputy Chief Executive - Resources S151);

- (g) it be noted that the inflation parameter for fees and charges for 2026-27 was generally set at 4%;
- (h) that delegated authority be given to the Deputy Chief Executive (Resources)/S151 Officer in consultation with the Resources portfolio holder to add items to the budget funded from reserves in line with the purpose of the reserve;
- (i) that the Deputy Chief Executive (Resources)/S151 Officer be authorised to adjust reserve contributions to reflect any grant and local taxation changes announced in the final 2026/27 Local Government Finance Settlement.

Members thanked the S151 Officer and Finance team for the work carried out to achieve a balanced budget.

C43 Fees and Charges Review

Considered the report of the Deputy Chief Executive - Resources.

Councillor R P Cooke introduced the report before reading the following prepared statement:-

“I recommend to the Council that the fees and charges for 2026/27 and specifically the new charges in paragraph 5.10 and the increases above 4.3% in APPENDIX 1 be approved.

The report sets out the proposed Fees and Charges for 2026/27 and Paragraph 2.2 sets out the items to be included in accordance with the revised financial regulations agreed by the Council on 16th September 2019. In addition, the report includes those fees and charges where NO increase is proposed from 1 April 2026, for noting by Council.

The proposed fees and charges will have a direct impact on the 2026/27 budget and beyond and decisions should take into account the Council's overall financial position together with likely issues which could have an impact on our finances. Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 detail the headwinds and risks facing the Council.

The forecast budgets should also be considered when making discretionary decisions about income and expenditure. The higher the yield from fees and charges the greater the income which is reflected in the budget. But this needs to be balanced by the recognition that the elasticity of demand around that % price rise could lead to a greater % fall in the quantity demanded and a consequent reduction in income. Other issues with relatively high charges are set out in Paragraph 5.4.

A reminder that the changes in fees and charges again come into effect from 1 April rather than 1 January to bring them into line with the budget setting cycle.

For 2026/27, inflation, as defined in financial regulations, is measured by the RPI which in October 2025 stood at 4.3%. For information, CPIH was 3.5%. However, in general, where officers have delegated authority, charges will rise by about 4%, allowing for rounding.

Some fees are set by external bodies or set by legislation/ regulations. These are included in the full list of published fees and charges but do not appear in this report.

Note that taxi license fees are subject to a separate review and require consultation.

Charges for new services are set out in paragraphs 5.09 and proposals for deletion are in Paragraph 5.10.

Proposed increases above the threshold of 4.3% are shown in the APPENDIX.

The Council also considers market conditions when setting fees and charges. Thus, some charges where the Council has the power to vary them will not rise.

The most significant of these are that car park and chargeable garden waste collection charges will be FROZEN at 2025/26 prices.

I ask Council to agree the recommendations."

The proposal to approve the recommendation was seconded by Councillor A T A Godfrey.

On being put to the vote the matter was declared to be carried.

RESOLVED:- that the proposed Fees and Charges for 2026/27 be approved, specifically the new charges as set out in paragraph 5.10 of the report and those increases above 4.3%, as set out in the associated appendix 1.

MAYOR

Alternative Budget**Proposal**

Increase council tax by 0.5% in 2026/27 not 2.99% then remaining years are as per budget proposed.

Proposal	Impact on current budget	Funding source to balance the budget
Increase council tax by 0.5%	223,861.89 in 2026/27 231,708.14 in 2027/28 239,829.39 in 2028/29 Total: £695,399.42	Reduction in contribution to budget support reserve 2026/27
Freeze car parking charges	None - already in	
Feasibility study for a new car park in Eccleshall	£30k cost	Reduction in contribution to budget support reserve 2026/27
Feasibility study for a new learner pool at Stone Leisure Centre	£30k cost	Reduction in contribution to budget support reserve 2026/27
Rural business start up grant scheme	£100k cost	Reduction in contribution to budget support reserve 2026/27
Grants for individual councillors to give with the scheme administered by the voluntary sector community foundation (£2.5k per councillor plus 10% admin charge)	40 councillors 40*2500 = £100,000 Admin fee= £10,000 Total cost = £110,000	Reduction in contribution to budget support reserve 2026/27
Total over 3 year budget	£957,899.42	£957,899.42