

DRAFT

Note: These Minutes will remain DRAFT until approved at the next meeting of the Committee

BUDGET COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON

THURSDAY 26 FEBRUARY 2026

Councillors Present: Tony Vickers (Chairman), Stephanie Steevenson (Vice-Chairman), Adrian Abbs, Antony Amirtharaj, Phil Barnett, Dennis Benneyworth, Dominic Boeck, Jeff Brooks, Billy Drummond, Nick Carter, Patrick Clark, Heather Codling, Martin Colston, Jeremy Cottam, Iain Cottingham, Laura Coyle, Carolyne Culver, Paul Dick, Nigel Foot, Denise Gaines, Stuart Gourley, Clive Hooker, Owen Jeffery, Paul Kander, Jane Langford, Ross Mackinnon, Alan Macro, David Marsh, Geoff Mayes, Tom McCann, Biyi Oloko, Erik Pattenden, Justin Pemberton, Vicky Poole, Christopher Read, Matt Shakespeare, Richard Somner, Joanne Stewart, Louise Sturgess, Clive Taylor, Martha Vickers, and Howard Woollaston

Also Present: Joseph Holmes (Chief Executive), Sarah Clarke (Monitoring Officer and Executive Director – Resources), Paul Coe (Executive Director – Adult Social Care), AnnMarie Dodds (Executive Director – Children and Family Services), Shannon Coleman-Slaughter (Section 151 Officer and Service Director for Finance, Property & Procurement), Martyn Sargeant (Service Director for Strategy and Governance), Jon Winstanley (Service Director for Environment), Melanie Booth (Group Executive – Liberal Democrats), Jake Carpenter (Group Executive – Conservatives), Stephen Chard (Clerk), Honorary Alderman Tony Linden, and Honorary Alderman Graham Pask

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Janine Lewis, Honorary Alderman Hilary Cole, Honorary Alderman Graham Bridgman, Honorary Alderman Andrew Rowles, Honorary Alderman Paul Bryant, Honorary Alderman Keith Chopping, Honorary Alderman Adrian Edwards, and Honorary Alderman Gordon Lundie

PART I

1. Declarations of Interest

The Monitoring Officer and Executive Director for Resources advised that all Members had completed an application for a Grant of a Dispensation in relation to any beneficial interest in land within the Authority's area. The dispensation was granted to allow all Members to speak and vote on the budget items.

A number of personal interests had been declared in advance of the meeting in relation to the agenda items, they had been published on the website and were on display on the door of the Council Chamber. These interests, as well as those declared during the meeting, were as follows:

Councillor	Description
Amirtharaj, Anthony	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Foundation Governor at St Joseph's Primary School• Speen Parish Councillor• Children attend Trinity Secondary School, and St Joseph's Primary School.
Barnett, Phil	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A Member of Newbury Town Council• A Member of Greenham Parish Council

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the Executive of Berkshire Association of Local Councils (BALC)
Benneyworth, Dennis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Member of the Royal Berkshire Fire Authority
Codling, Heather	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cold Ash Parish Councillor • Hermitage Parish Councillor
Colston, Martin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committee member of Newbury Velo • On organising steering team for the Newbury Festival of Cycling, June 2025
Cottam, Jeremy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thatcham Town Councillor
Cottingham, Iain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thatcham Town Councillor • Chair of Thatcham Town Cricket Club • Ex Senior Captain Donnington Grove Golf Club and member
Coyle, Laura	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributes to Farepayer scheme for Home to School Transport
Culver, Carolyne	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member, Summit Education Trust
Dick, Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trustee of the Volunteer Centre West Berkshire
Drummond, Billy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grenham Parish Councillor • Newbury Town Councillor • A Member of the Royal Berks Fire Authority, • A Foundation Governor and Trustee of St Bartholomew's School • A Director of Greenham Business Park • Member of the Board of the Greenham Commoners Commission
Gaines, Denise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A member of South East Employers • A representative on the Hungerford leisure centre committee.
Gourley, Stuart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speen Parish Councillor • Children attend school in the District
Jeffery, Owen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thatcham Town Councillor • A Member of the Royal Berkshire Fire Authority. • In receipt of Royal County of Berkshire pension.
Langford, Jane	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purley Parish Councillor • District Council Ward Member for Tilehurst and Purley
Macro, Alan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Member of BBOWT • As a householder in Theale, I will have to pay the Theale Special Expense.
Marsh, David	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newbury Town Councillor and Chair of the Grants Sub-Committee • Trustee of Friends of Wash Common Library • Trustee of Wash Common Community Association

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McCann, Tom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chairman of Thatcham Memorial Foundation
Nigel Foot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newbury Town Councillor • Member of Newbury Town Council Heritage Working Group • West Berkshire Heritage Champion • Member of the Newbury Society • Member of the West Berkshire Heritage Forum • Trustee of the St Bartholomew School Foundation
Oloko, Biyi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambassador International Trade for the Institute of Directors (Surrey & Berkshire) • Past President Thames Valley Society of Chartered Accountants • Treasurer/Trustee Commonwealth Pharmacists Association • Member, Calcot Park, Golf Club • Co-Founder Reading Tech Cluster
Pattenden, Erik	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family member is employed by West Berkshire Council (at St Johns and St Nicolas Schools)
Pemberton, Justin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thatcham Town Councillor • Cold Ash Parish Councillor • A Member of the National Union of Professional Foster Carers (NUPFC)
Poole, Vicky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children attend schools in the district • Member of the National Trust • Children attend Scouts in the district
Sturgess, Louise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child attends school in the district
Stewart, Joanne	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employed by the Royal Berks Charity, Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust • Partner of Cllr Richard Somner who is employed by the Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust • Tilehurst Parish Councillor (Vice-Chair) • Greenfield Resource Centre is within her Ward
Steevenson, Stephanie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thatcham Town Councillor • Membership and Ambassador for Royal Berkshire Guiding Association • Membership The Royal British Legion • Committee Member Thatcham Volunteer Bureau • Committee Member The Learning Disability Partnership Board • Retired Berkshire Teaching member of the Teachers' Pension Fund
Somner, Richard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holybrook Parish Councillor • Employed by The Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust • Partner employed by Royal Berks Charity (part of Royal Berkshire NHS FT) • Member of BBOWT • Commissioner/Provider relationship between WBDC and RBFT for Sexual Health services

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Read, Chris	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I have the following interest in the district:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Property owned: Tiverton House, The Slade, Bucklebury and 17 Riverdale Court, London Road, Newbury○ I am a commons rights holder on Bucklebury Common and also secretary of Bucklebury Common Interest Group○ I am a director of Lambourne Court Management Company Limited○ Employee of DS Smith○ Member of the Local Access Forum• Spouse is a manager of Beenham Preschool and co-owner of Tiverton House, The Slade, Bucklebury and 17 Riverdale Court, London Road, Newbury and is a commons rights holder on Bucklebury Common
Taylor, Clive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tilehurst Parish Councillor• Chairman of Tilehurst Parish Council• School governor of the Calcot Schools (a West Berks local authority school)• Registered volunteer with Berkshire Youth (who I believe may receive payment for services from West Berks Council)
Vickers, Tony	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Newbury Town Councillor• Vice-Chair of North Wessex Downs AONB
Woollaston, Howard	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vice-Chairman of the Lambourn Valley Flood Forum (voluntary position)• Chairman of the Newbury Conservative Association

2. Public Questions

Details of the public question and answer session is available from the following link: [Q&As](#).

It was agreed that a question standing in the name of William Beard would receive a written response, given that he was unable to attend the meeting.

3. Medium-Term Financial Strategy: Financial Years 2026-2030

Council considered a report (Agenda Item 4) concerning the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for the Financial Years 2026-2030.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Iain Cottingham and seconded by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

“That Council approves the Medium-Term Financial Strategy”.

Councillor Cottingham introduced the report and highlighted that the document set out the financial plan for the Council for the next four years and that it was aligned to the approved Council Strategy. In addition, it also detailed known issues and risks concerning income and expenditure at the point when it had been written. He also discussed The Fair Funding Review 2.0 which had resulted in a £28m funding reduction to West Berkshire over the next three financial years – reducing retained business rates from the equivalent of 30 pence in the pound to 13 pence. The result of this would be that Council Tax payers would be required to fund 84 per cent of Council services, compared

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to the historic average of 70 per cent. However, the Government had also made two announcements about Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and School Grants after the finalisation of the budget papers. Therefore, the Emergency Financial Support (EFS) that had been requested would likely be the worst-case scenario.

Council noted that, faced with significant financial pressures, an increasing number of local authorities had been struggling to keep a balanced budget. 36 Councils had requested EFS, totalling £1.5bn for the 2026/27 financial year. These Councils were run by a range of different political administrations in both rural and urban areas.

West Berkshire Council had received confirmation that it would receive £20m of EFS for the current financial year, 2025/26, and £30m for the upcoming financial year, 2026/27. This would be used to provide financial resilience after the Council's reserves had been depleted due to the cost pressures experienced in adult social care and children services. An example of these increasing pressures was that the costs of the top 25 packages for children with SEND increased by 18 per cent per annum, up to £320k per child. For these reasons, it was noted that the Council would be requested to approve the full 2 per cent increase in Council Tax and the full 2.99 per cent increase in the adult social care precept.

Members stressed that the EFS that the Council had received was not a grant, but was borrowing and would need to be repaid, with interest. In addition, in response to a question about the discrepancy between the figure of reserves presented in the MTFS and the Investment and Borrowing Strategy, Councillor Cottingham confirmed that this was a cross-casting error, with reserves confirmed as being £13.01m.

Council agreed that the financial landscape for local councils was very tough. However, several Members indicated that this position had been made worse by some of the decisions of the Administration. The comments of the Section 151 Officer were also noted, who stated that without EFS the Council would have to declare effective bankruptcy with a Section 114 Notice.

In the previous year's MTFS, EFS was described as a one off, with the Council not being reliant on it in the medium term or long term. However, it was emphasised that the new strategy would request £160m in EFS over the next four years in order to keep a balanced budget and maintain minimum reserves. Ultimately, the Council would have to use 16 per cent of its Revenue Budget in 2030 just to repay these loans.

Council also debated a recent report by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA). Members highlighted a part of the review which stated that West Berkshire's financial position was perilous and that the Administration had no clear plan to resolve the issues. In response to another point taken from the report, that the Administration had become too involved in operational issues and resulted in Officers being reluctant to challenge the financial merits of their proposals, Members of the Administration clarified that this level of engagement had resulted in them uncovering neglected areas of the Council, and that setting the direction for officers was a positive thing. It was also mentioned that the full CIPFA report had not yet been seen and so specific extracts did not provide an accurate view of the situation.

On the Grazeley Solar Farm project, Councillor Cottingham indicated that he would be double checking the project himself in order to ensure that all the figures were accurate before it would come to Council.

Overall, as the majority of Members considered that the MTFS was realistic as to the income and expenditure pressures faced by the Council, whilst allowing them to continue to deliver their services, they agreed that it should be approved.

The motion was put to the meeting and duly **RESOLVED**.

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4. **Treasury Management: Investment and Borrowing Strategy**

Council considered a report (Agenda Item 5) concerning the Treasury Management and Investment and Borrowing Strategy for 2026/27.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Iain Cottingham and seconded by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

“That Council approves and adopts the proposed Investment and Borrowing Strategy for 2026/27.”

Councillor Cottingham introduced the report and highlighted that it was critical for the Council to manage risk in a prudent way and that the report clarified where the Council would borrow and invest its money to meet its cash flow requirements. He also provided some examples of the rigorous treasury management controls proposed, such as that the Council would keep a weighted average of £10m in liquid cash throughout the financial year and that no more than 30 per cent of its borrowing would be short term (i.e. less than one year). In addition, the report clarified that the High Needs Block and EFS projections for borrowing would remain below their boundary levels for 2026/27, but that the impact of the recently announced Government reforms to SEND and the High Needs Block had not yet been quantified due to the limited time between their announcement and this meeting.

Members noted that the capital programme would be funded through external borrowing, internal cash, and capital receipts received from the divestment of assets – disposal of the commercial property portfolio, along with Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) support, would also be used to fund the Grazeley Solar Farm Project which would, in turn, also support the Council's net zero policy. The weighted cost of borrowing for the Council was just under 3.7 per cent, with the current PWLB rate being around 5.4 per cent. Overall, the aim for 2026/27 was to keep the cost of borrowing below 4.2 per cent.

Some Members criticised the disposal approach taken by the Administration, highlighting a point raised by CIPFA that it could cost the Council over £1m per year in lost revenue. Others criticised the nature of the commercial property portfolio itself, stressing that residents of West Berkshire expected the Council to be investing in the district, not in other areas across the country. In response, it was mentioned that the property portfolio policy had been devised and implemented by the previous Conservative Administration, and that the current Administration's policy was of disposal. Although they would do this at speed, they did not want it to come at the expense of cementing a loss on the properties.

A point was made that the property portfolio had remained largely unchanged since 2023, despite claims that disposals were funding the transformation programme. Councillor Cottingham then clarified that these figures were not up to date, and that the properties in Guisborough had been disposed of.

Overall, as Council considered that the Investment and Borrowing Strategy was prudent and capable of supporting the Capital programme, they agreed to approve the recommendations.

The motion was put to the meeting and duly **RESOLVED**.

5. **The Capital Strategy and Supporting Programme: Financial Years 2026/27 - 2029/30**

Council considered a report (Agenda Item 6) concerning the Capital Strategy and Supporting Programme for the financial years 2026/27 - 2029/30.

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MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Iain Cottingham and seconded by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

“That Council approves the Capital Strategy appended to this report and its sub appendices:

- (a) Appendix A – Capital Strategy
- (b) Appendices B & C – Capital Programme for financial years 2026/27-2029/30
- (c) Appendix D – Flexible Use of Capital Receipts Policy”

Councillor Cottingham introduced the report and highlighted that the Capital Strategy showed how the Council would use capital expenditure towards public services in West Berkshire. The principal sources of funding for these projects would be from capital receipts, borrowing, grants, and Community Infrastructure Levies (CIL) and Section 106 funding.

The Programme sought to build and improve the district’s infrastructure, investing £171m over the next four years (£49m coming from Council and £122m from external funding). Some of the key areas of focus would be the turning of Chestnut Walk from an unused care house into emergency accommodation (worth £1.1m), the provision of Falklands school classrooms (worth £2.8m), an education capital enhancement programme (worth £3m), Brookfields classrooms expansion (worth £1.2m), active travel infrastructure (worth £1.8m), and for River Lambourn net neutrality (worth £2.1m). Other Members also highlighted several other key projects in the district that would be brought forward from the Capital Strategy, such as the provision of sporting facilities, improved bus services, road resurfacing, ICT systems, and rural and urban economic development.

Councillor Cottingham informed Council that the programme to derisk speculative property investments would continue with a structured disposal plan, reinvesting the proceeds in areas that would generate a better return. This was despite the point raised by some Members that the property portfolio had consistently generated income from the Council every year.

Some Members raised concerns about the involvement of Sovereign Network Group (formerly Sovereign Housing) in the Council’s housing projects, indicating that they had a policy of selling off vacant homes and that residents had raised issues around the maintenance of their properties. In addition, on young people and schools, a question was asked about if enough investment was being made in school capacity, ensuring that children could be taught in their local communities, rather than having to travel. In response, the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee were encouraged to examine this aspect of the Programme.

The proposed investments in schools and renewable energy were welcomed. However, some wanted the projects to be more quickly actioned. It was also requested that the Administration should clarify the position of the Grazeley Solar Farm and bring it forward to Council so that it could be properly debated.

In response to a point about the description of some of the project titles being repeated over several projects, Council noted that this was due to the detailed activities relating to statutory duties.

Questions were raised about the projects that had not made it onto the Capital Programme. Some projects, such as the Faraday Road Football Ground, were not mentioned and were criticised as being a focus of funding. Whereas it was felt that the money spent on this project could have been used for other useful community facilities. The lack of clarity about how it would be funded was also raised as a concern.

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As Councillor Tom McCann was not present for the entirety of the debate, the Monitoring Officer recommended that he should not vote on the item. Therefore, he has been recorded as an abstention.

The motion was put to the vote. In accordance with the provisions outlined in the Constitution, the vote on the Capital Strategy would be recorded. The names of those Members voting for, against, and abstaining were read to the Council as follows:

Capital Strategy and Supporting Programme: Financial Years 2026/27 - 2029/30		
For	Against	Abstain
Councillors	Councillors	Councillors
Adrian Abbs		Tom McCann
Antony Amirtharaj		
Phil Barnett		
Dennis Benneyworth		
Dominic Boeck		
Jeff Brooks		
Patrick Clark		
Heather Codling		
Martin Colston		
Jeremy Cottam		
Iain Cottingham		
Laura Coyle		
Carolyn Culver		
Paul Dick		
Billy Drummond		
Nigel Foot		
Denise Gaines		
Stuart Gourley		
Clive Hooker		
Owen Jeffery		
Paul Kander		
Jane Langford		
Ross Mackinnon		
Alan Macro		
David Marsh		
Geoff Mayes		
Biyi Oloko		

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Erik Pattenden		
Justin Pemberton		
Vicky Poole		
Christopher Read		
Matt Shakespeare		
Richard Somner		
Stephanie Steevenson		
Joanne Stewart		
Louise Sturgess		
Clive Taylor		
Martha Vickers		
Tony Vickers		
Howard Woollaston		
40	0	1

The motion was put to the meeting and duly **RESOLVED**.

6. **Financial Year 2026/27: Revenue Budget**

Before the start of this item, Councillor Nick Carter joined the meeting.

Council considered a report (Agenda Item 7) concerning the Revenue Budget for the Financial Year 2026/27.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Iain Cottingham and seconded by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

“That Council approves the 2026/27 Council Tax requirement of £136.48 million, requiring a Council Tax increase of +2.99% with a +2.0% Council Tax precept ring-fenced for Adult Social Care.

And that Council:

- 1 Approves the proposed General Fund net budget requirement of £210.9 million itemised in Appendix B.
- 2 Approves the fees and charges disclosed in Appendix C, the Council notes the additional in year fees. The charges may be introduced by the Executive during the course of the financial year.
- 3 Approves the savings disclosed in Appendix F and the investments disclosed in Appendix E.
- 4 Notes that a budget consultation was undertaken between 1st December 2025 and 12th January 2026. The consultation responses are disclosed in Appendix I.

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- 5 Notes the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) allocations totalling £136.52 million and agree that the Schools Block of £74.09 million is allocated to schools using the local formula agreed by the Schools Forum on 19th January 2026. The outline DSG budget by block is detailed in Appendix H. Members are asked to note that the expenditure budget set is more than income funding available, and it is therefore anticipated that the cumulative High Needs Block (HNB) deficit will be increased by +£16.98 million in 2026/27, with the cumulative balance at March 2027 forecast to be £47.67m million. The cost of financing the HNB is factored into the revenue capital financing requirement for 2026/27 and drives part of the Council's EFS request.
- 6 Request that the Executive ratifies the EFS request to Central Government of £50 million, split between £20 million attributable to 2025/26 to provide resilience to the reserves position, and £30 million required to balance the 2026/27 revenue budget.
- 7 Approve a 100% Council Tax discount for Care Leavers aged 18-25 who reside in West Berkshire."

Councillor Cottingham introduced the report and highlighted that the budget set the Councils expenditure and Council Tax bill for West Berkshire residents for the 2026/27 financial year. Council noted that they were legally required to set a balanced budget and that the funding sources were derived from council tax, retained business rates, revenue grants, and EFS.

The total budget proposed amounted to £210m and would be used to deliver day to day services such as Adult Social Care, Children Services, Temporary Accommodation, Highways maintenance, and more. There had been numerous meetings to identify efficiency savings in order to reduce the amount of EFS needing to be requested. As the Administration did not view this as free funding – the cost of EFS borrowing totalled 10 per cent of the revenue budget per annum – they were doing everything possible to remove financial dependence on Central Government.

As Councillor Cottingham indicated that the Administration did not want to be the agents of austerity on behalf of the Government, they had looked to protect the most vulnerable in West Berkshire and actually increased funding to key areas such as Adult and Children's services and temporary accommodation by £19m. He also highlighted that the Council was expecting to keep its reserves above the minimum recommended level set by the Section 151 Officer.

From the responses to the residents' survey, the top five priority services were identified as roads, education, children's services, waste and recycling, and housing and homelessness. The Administration had also listened to the feedback and so would not cease the provision of the Adult Respite in the Community (ARC) programme, nor would they proceed immediately with the extension of peak charges for the Henwick Worthy Sports Ground.

As the total council tax funding requirement was £136.5m, a 2.99 per cent increase in the basic rate and 2 per cent increase in the adult social care precept was proposed. This would equate to a total council tax increase of 4.99 per cent for 2026/27.

AMENDMENT: In the name of the Minority Group, proposed by Councillor Adrian Abbs and seconded by Councillor David Marsh:

Original Text:

The Revenue Budget for 2026/27.

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Proposed Amendment:

“Council resolves to adopt the following approach for the 2026/27 financial year and beyond:

1. Partnership with Parish and Town Councils on Non-Statutory Services

In order to provide a credible and immediate mechanism to reduce pressure on West Berkshire Council’s general fund and to limit the reliance in year on EFS, Council will cease to provide non-statutory local services by September 2026 subject to a rapid consultation with all relevant bodies.”

Councillor Abbs introduced the proposed amendment and highlighted that it had been submitted before the Council had secured EFS worth £30m. He informed Council that the funding hole had been produced by a rising demand in social care and the funding reductions of the Fair Funding Review 2.0 settlement. Between 2024/25 to 2028/29, the Council would potentially have to borrow £140m in EFS. The interest payments on this would amount to £91m, resulting in an annual repayment charge in excess of £12m – every £1m taken in EFS would cost the Council £604k over the lifetime of the loan.

Councillor Abbs also highlighted that the entirety of the funding received by the Council through residents’ council tax was used by only two statutory services, Adult Social Care and Children’s Services. The amendment therefore proposed to cease provision of non-statutory services and have them devolved down to the Town and Parish Councils. This level of Local Government was not under the same financial constraints as the District Council as there was no limit to the amount that they could increase their precept by before needing to confirm it via a referendum.

Due to its serious financial position, these savings could be extremely valuable to the Council. If approved, the amendment would protect key services through their devolution, which could even be contracted back through WBC, whilst removing the possibility of the Council issuing a section 114 notice (declaring effective bankruptcy).

However, the majority of Members opposed this amendment.

Members highlighted that this proposal would put a significant and unfair pressure on the Parish and Town Councils in the District. The average reserves for Parish Councils ranged between £50k-£100k and these had been built up in order to provide for one off or emergency costs, not day to day operations. If they were forced to use them for devolved services, it was indicated that they would have no funds available for emergencies. This was also not accounting for all those reserves that had been specifically earmarked for certain projects.

In addition, it was emphasised that the Parish and Town Council level of Local Government ran mainly on volunteers, with many clerks being part time. The burdens of taking over the non-statutory services from WBC was agreed to be pushing them too far.

A point was also raised about Council Tax as some Members believed that this proposal was a way to circumvent the Council Tax rules. If the services were devolved, Parish Councils would need to increase their precepts to cover it. However, as they were not bound by the same limits as the District Council, they could raise their rates by well over 4.99 per cent. Ultimately then, residents could see a significant increase in their council tax bill whilst seeing a potential reduction in services.

Council was also informed that there was already a catalogue of services that West Berkshire had been offering to Parish and Town Councils. However, the current form of devolution was done voluntarily, through consensus, and Members believed that the proposed amendment would essentially be forcing these services on the Parishes.

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In addition, a point was raised about the practicality of the amendment, that if it was approved, it would require a complete overhaul of the budget papers. Therefore, the final budget would only likely be ready well into the financial year. Additionally, it was highlighted that the parishes had already approved their precepts for this financial year, potentially leaving a very large service hole.

Some Members welcomed the principal of the amendment, that local people should have a say and be more involved in the provision of local services. However, the majority of Members did not support its adoption.

The proposed amendment was put to the vote. In accordance with the provisions outlined in the Constitution, the vote on the proposed amendment to the Revenue Budget would be recorded. The names of those Members voting for, against, and abstaining were read to the Council as follows:

Minority Group Amendment		
Revenue Budget: 2026/27		
For	Against	Abstain
Councillors	Councillors	Councillors
Adrian Abbs	Antony Amirtharaj	David Marsh
	Phil Barnett	Tony Vickers
	Dennis Benneyworth	
	Dominic Boeck	
	Jeff Brooks	
	Nick Carter	
	Patrick Clark	
	Heather Codling	
	Martin Colston	
	Jeremy Cottam	
	Iain Cottingham	
	Laura Coyle	
	Carolyn Culver	
	Paul Dick	
	Billy Drummond	
	Nigel Foot	
	Denise Gaines	
	Stuart Gourley	
	Clive Hooker	
	Owen Jeffery	
	Paul Kander	
	Jane Langford	

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	Ross Mackinnon	
	Alan Macro	
	Geoff Mayes	
	Tom McCann	
	Biyi Oloko	
	Erik Pattenden	
	Justin Pemberton	
	Vicky Poole	
	Christopher Read	
	Matt Shakespeare	
	Richard Somner	
	Stephanie Steevenson	
	Joanne Stewart	
	Louise Sturgess	
	Clive Taylor	
	Martha Vickers	
	Howard Woollaston	
1	39	2

The Minority Group amendment was declared **LOST**.

Debate returned to the substantive motion.

For some residents, it was felt that council tax had been increasing whilst services had been reduced. However, it was stressed that the increased costs of Adult Social Care and Children's Services had grown to dominate the Council's budget and, as these were statutory services, other services had suffered.

Despite these financial pressures, the Council's Children's Services had been rated 'Good' by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and 95 per cent of schools had received a 'good' or 'outstanding' rating. However, some Members asked if the proposals in the budget, rather than simply maintaining the current position, would really provide measurable improvements for children and young people.

In addition, Council welcomed the news that the Government had agreed to write off 90 per cent of the High Needs Block deficit and overhaul SEND provision. As this was a substantial reason behind the requirement to ask for EFS, this reduction would be a needed financial ease.

On Adult Social Care, the last Care Quality Commission (CQC) review gave the Council a 'good' rating, and 90 per cent of respondents to a survey indicated that the services provided had improved their lives. Due to increased life expectancy and more people entering adulthood with complex care needs, the requirement for funding had been

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increasing. However, the Administration had been taking steps to provide this statutory function as effectively as possible whilst reducing costs.

In response to a point about the small number of residents that had responded to the budget consultation, it was suggested that the Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee could be more involved in the process from an earlier stage, potentially going into the community to gain qualitative feedback on the budget proposals and areas of potential improvement.

In response to the proposed budget, the Opposition Group proposed a collaborative approach to dealing with future budgets. As the Council found itself in a very difficult financial position, with a number of the reasons for this being out of the Administrations control, the Leader of the Opposition Group, Councillor Ross Mackinnon, suggested that they could bring their Groups skills into the budget decision making and implementation process. This would help to ensure that targets were met and strategies were fully implemented. In return they were willing to take a share of the responsibility for those decisions.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Jeff Brooks, emphasised that the Opposition Group had lost the last election, and that the Liberal Democrat Administration had been elected to implement their Manifesto. Therefore, they would not accept a coalition. A point was also raised that the Conservatives had previously been in control of the Council and had not solved the problems currently facing the Council.

The substantive motion was put to the vote. In accordance with the provisions outlined in the Constitution, the vote on the Revenue Budget would be recorded. The names of those Members voting for, against, and abstaining were read to the Council as follows:

Revenue Budget: 2026/27		
For	Against	Abstain
Councillors	Councillors	Councillors
Adrian Abbs	Dennis Benneyworth	Carolyn Culver
Antony Amirtharaj	Dominic Boeck	David Marsh
Phil Barnett	Paul Dick	Clive Taylor
Jeff Brooks	Clive Hooker	
Nick Carter	Paul Kander	
Patrick Clark	Jane Langford	
Heather Codling	Ross Mackinnon	
Martin Colston	Biyi Oloko	
Jeremy Cottam	Richard Somner	
Iain Cottingham	Joanne Stewart	
Laura Coyle	Howard Woollaston	
Billy Drummond		
Nigel Foot		
Denise Gaines		
Stuart Gourley		

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Owen Jeffery		
Alan Macro		
Geoff Mayes		
Tom McCann		
Erik Pattenden		
Justin Pemberton		
Vicky Poole		
Christopher Read		
Matt Shakespeare		
Stephanie Steevenson		
Louise Sturgess		
Martha Vickers		
Tony Vickers		
28	11	3

The motion was put to the meeting and duly **RESOLVED**.

(The meeting commenced at 5.30pm and closed at 9.10pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature