

Meeting of West Berkshire District Council

Thursday 26 March 2026

Summons and Agenda



To: All Members of the Council

You are requested to attend a meeting of
WEST BERKSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
to be held in the
**COUNCIL OFFICES, MARKET STREET,
NEWBURY**

on
Thursday 26 March 2026
at 7.00 pm



Sarah Clarke
Executive Director – Resources
West Berkshire District Council

Date of despatch of Agenda: Wednesday 18 March 2026

AGENDA

Part I

1. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

To receive apologies for inability to attend the meeting (if any). **(Pages 5 - 6)**

2. **CHAIRMAN'S REMARKS**

The Chairman to report on functions attended since the last meeting and other matters of interest to Members. **(Pages 7 - 8)**

3. **MINUTES**

The Chairman to sign as correct records the Minutes of the Council meetings held on 4 November 2025, 27 November 2025, 29 January 2026, and 26 February 2026.
(Pages 9 - 42)



Agenda - Council to be held on Thursday 26 March 2026 (continued)

4. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

To remind Members of the need to record the existence and nature of any personal, disclosable pecuniary or other registrable interests in items on the agenda, in accordance with the Members' [Code of Conduct](#). **(Pages 43 - 44)**

5. **PETITIONS**

Petitions may be presented to Council. These will normally be referred to the appropriate body without discussion. **(Pages 45 - 46)**

6. **PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

Members of the Executive to answer questions submitted by members of the public in accordance with the Council Procedure Rules contained in the [Council's Constitution](#). **(Pages 47 - 48)**

7. **MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEES**

The Council to agree any changes to the membership of Committees. **(Pages 49 - 50)**

8. **MOTIONS FROM PREVIOUS MEETINGS**

That Council is informed about the following response to a Motion which had been presented to a previous Council meeting **(Pages 51 - 52)**:

- That the response to the Motion from Councillor Ross Mackinnon on explaining reasons for decisions following public consultations was heard at the Executive Meeting on 19 March 2026 (Agenda Item 7).

A copy of the minutes of this meeting can be obtained from Democratic Services or via the [Council's website](#) once published.

9. **UPDATES FROM COMMITTEES**

That Council is informed about the meetings held since the last ordinary meeting of Council. The minutes of these meetings will be available on the [Council's website](#). **(Pages 53 - 54)**

- A) The Licensing Committee met on 15 December 2025 and 24 March 2026.
- B) The Personnel Committee met on 13 January 2026.
- C) The Governance Committee met on 27 January 2026.
- D) The District Planning Committee has not met.
- E) The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee met on 4 December 2025.
- F) The Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee met on 16 December

Agenda - Council to be held on Thursday 26 March 2026 (continued)

2025 and 10 March 2026.

- G) The Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee met on 3 February 2026, 10 February 2026, and 17 March 2026.
- H) The Health and Wellbeing Board met on 29 January 2026.
- I) The Joint Public Protection Committee met on 8 December 2025 and 9 March 2026.

10. SWIFT BRICKS

Purpose: To provide members with information relating to Swifts and swift bricks and their use in West Berkshire following the Motion to Council Proposed by Councillor David Marsh and Seconded by Councillor Carolyne Culver. **(Pages 55 - 64)**

11. NOTICES OF MOTION

To receive any Motions submitted in accordance with the Council Procedure Rules contained in the [Council's Constitution](#). **(Pages 65 - 66)**

12. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

Members of the Executive to answer questions submitted by Members of the Council in accordance with the Council Procedure Rules contained in the [Council's Constitution](#). **(Pages 67 - 68)**

If you require this information in a different format or translation, please contact Stephen Chard on telephone 01635 519778.

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Item 1 – Apologies for Absence

Verbal Item

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Item 2 – Chairman’s Remarks

Verbal Item

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Item 3 – Minutes

To approve as correct records the minutes of the meetings of Council held on:

- 4 November 2025 (Extraordinary Meeting)
- 27 November 2025 (Ordinary Meeting)
- 29 January 2026 (Extraordinary Meeting)
- 26 February 2026 (Budget Meeting)

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

**EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL
MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON
TUESDAY 4 NOVEMBER 2025**

Councillors Tony Vickers (Chairman), Stephanie Steevenson (Vice-Chairman), Adrian Abbs, Antony Amirtharaj, Phil Barnett, Dominic Boeck, Jeff Brooks, Patrick Clark, Heather Codling, Martin Colston, Jeremy Cottam, Iain Cottingham, Paul Dick, Billy Drummond, Nigel Foot, Denise Gaines, Stuart Gourley, Clive Hooker, Owen Jeffery, Paul Kander, Jane Langford, Janine Lewis, Ross Mackinnon, Alan Macro, David Marsh, Tom McCann, Biyi Oloko, Erik Pattenden, Justin Pemberton, Christopher Read, Louise Sturgess, Clive Taylor, Martha Vickers, and Howard Woollaston

Also Present: Joseph Holmes (Chief Executive), Clare Lawrence (Executive Director - Place), Sarah Clarke (Executive Director - Resources), Nicola Thomas (Service Director – Legal and Democratic Services), Stephen Chard (Democratic Services Manager), Sam Chiverton (Zoom Host), Honorary Alderman Paul Bryant, Honorary Alderman Tony Linden, and Honorary Alderman Gordon Lundie

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Nick Carter, Councillor Laura Coyle, Councillor Carolyne Culver, Councillor Matt Shakespeare, Councillor Richard Somner, Councillor Joanne Stewart, Councillor Geoff Mayes (Attending Online), Councillor Vicky Poole (Attending Online), Honorary Alderman Graham Bridgman, Honorary Alderwoman Hilary Cole, Honorary Alderman Adrian Edwards, and Honorary Alderman Rick Jones

PART I

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

2. Local Government Reorganisation - Full Proposal for Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

The Council considered a report (Agenda Item 3) concerning the proposal for local government reorganisation covering the entirety of Oxfordshire and West Berkshire – termed Ridgeway Council (for West Berkshire, South Oxfordshire, and Vale of White Horse Councils) and the Oxford and Shires Council (for Oxford City, Cherwell, and West Oxfordshire Council).

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Justin Pemberton and seconded by Councillor Ross Mackinnon:

That the Council:

- A) “Is informed that, since the statutory invitation to all councils in two tier areas, significant work has been undertaken by all Oxfordshire Councils and West Berkshire Council.
- B) Is informed that there has been significant engagement and collaboration on the development of these proposals by Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, West Berkshire Council, West Oxfordshire District Council, and the Vale of White Horse District Council.

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- C) Recommends that the Executive approve the submission to Government of a full proposal as detailed at Appendix A, for a two unitary model based on one new unitary council covering the entire existing boundaries of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils and West Berkshire Council, with the working title of 'Ridgeway', and a second new unitary covering the entire existing boundaries of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire District Councils and Oxford City Council, with the working title of 'Oxford & Shires'.
- D) Is informed that two other proposals will be submitted, one proposed by Oxfordshire County Council covering the Oxfordshire area (excluding West Berkshire) and one from Oxford City Council covering the Oxfordshire and West Berkshire area.
- E) Is informed that should Executive agree to the submission of the full proposal for a two unitary model, Cherwell District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council will submit the full proposal directly to Government in line with the Oxfordshire invitation letter."

Council received a point of order about the report and noted that, at point 5.3, it was the Executive and not full Council that had agreed to submit the interim proposal on 19 March 2025.

Councillor Justin Pemberton introduced the report and highlighted that the proposal was a defining moment for the future of West Berkshire and the region as a whole. Local residents expected councils to deliver strong leadership and value for money, but the situation had become increasingly difficult for a Council of West Berkshire's size over recent years.

It was also stressed that this was not reorganisation for its own sake, rather, the proposal was about designing a Council of a shape and size that could meet regional challenges, be financially stable, whilst also remaining connected to the places that the Members served. The Ridgeway proposal could take a broader and strategic view of the area, ensuring that residents were sustainably connected and properly linked up to key services.

Financial sustainability was also emphasised. The creation of two larger unitary authorities – Ridgeway and Oxford and Shires – would unlock economies of scale and the ability to rationalise services, resulting in fewer duplications and more resources being directed to frontline services. In addition, Councillor Pemberton indicated that the more ambition the Council had for vesting day, the sooner the costs associated with reorganisation would be recouped.

The geography of the proposed Ridgeway Council would make sense locally, regionally, and nationally due to the complementary character of the areas involved and its crucial connecting placement in a potential new Mayoral Strategic Authority. As Councillor Pemberton believed that Ridgeway Council would provide local residents with a more financially resilient local council which was able to provide more responsive local services tailored to local needs, he encouraged Council to approve the recommendations.

Some Members expressed concerns about the proposal. As the Ridgeway and Oxford and Shires Councils could see a reduction in Members from a total of 331 to 160, a question about local accountability being eroded and the creation of a greater democratic deficit was raised. As some Members stressed that decisions should be taken as close to local residents as possible, this move to a much larger authority was not seen as being

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nearly local enough. In addition, the increased workload for those remaining Members was also highlighted as potentially causing issues. If the increased number of residents in each ward resulted in Members having to spend significantly more of their free time on casework, it was worried that only people from a certain socio-economic background would put themselves forward to become a Councillor. In addition, the lack of any mention of parish and town Councils in the Governments proposals about reorganisation and devolution was also noted as being a real oversight.

It was clarified that 96 Members were proposed to serve the Ridgeway Council, which would include 38 Members for the West Berkshire area (a reduction from the current number of 43). This reduction would be achieved by three Member wards becoming two Member wards.

Furthermore, questions were also raised about the time that it would take in order to realise the indicative savings. As similar reorganisations look much longer than expected, it was possible that the financial benefits would not be realised before 2033, and that therefore other arrangements would be much quicker at delivering cost savings, such as the sharing of services between existing councils.

Overall, however, Members believed that the Ridgeway proposal was the best option currently available to the Council. Specifically, it was noted that the predominately rural and market town character of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils was complementary to that of West Berkshire, and so, as the areas shared a similar geography, they also shared similar opportunities and challenges. They were also very willing partners who reached out to West Berkshire to begin the process of putting together the Ridgeway proposal.

It was generally conceded that West Berkshire, and the other unitary authorities that emerged from the dissolution of Berkshire County Council, were simply too small to be able to cope with the increasing financial demands of areas such as adult social care and children's services. Therefore, reorganisation of West Berkshire into a larger unitary authority would be very beneficial as it would create a financially viable authority able to deliver the services that its residents needed. In terms of the other potential options, the only viable one the Members could envision would be merging with Reading and Wokingham Councils to the east. However, due to the difference in character and geography between these Councils and West Berkshire, and the similarities between West Berkshire and South and Vale, Council agreed that Ridgeway would be the best option for the residents of West Berkshire.

Members noted that Reading Borough Council had recently indicated that it wanted to submit a request to Government to take several of West Berkshire's eastern wards should Ridgeway Council be approved. In response, through conversations with residents and informal local polls, Ward Members for areas such as Theale, Tilehurst, Holybrook, and Purley indicated that there was strong local feeling for these areas to remain part of West Berkshire and not be taken over by Reading. As such, they stressed that these wards should also be included in the move towards a Ridgeway Council.

In response to a point about the lack of information around climate change and biodiversity in the proposal, Council noted that these were in the Council's Local Plans and would not be removed. Also, several Members spoke about their experience of the Berkshire County Council reorganisation and that the workload from larger wards was manageable and should not be a reason to reject the proposal.

Although questions were raised about if the Government would see through its local government reorganisation agenda, Council agreed that the Ridgeway proposal would

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provide the best value and resilience in a homogenous area, and if reorganisation was going to happen, that this option was the most preferable.

It was noted that many residents were not aware of the proposed changes, and that it was the Members duty to inform them about these proposals. Specifically, the reduction in duplication of services and Members could be a way of selling these changes. In addition, the timeline for the elections to the new authority should also be made clear.

Overall, as Council agreed that the Ridgeway proposal would be the best potential option for reorganisation for West Berkshire Council, they agreed to approve the recommendations and submit the proposal to Central Government.

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

(The meeting commenced at 7.00 pm and closed at 7.53 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature

DRAFT

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

COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THURSDAY 27 NOVEMBER 2025

Councillors Present: Tony Vickers (Chairman), Stephanie Steevenson (Vice-Chairman), Adrian Abbs, Antony Amirtharaj, Phil Barnett, Dominic Boeck, Jeff Brooks, Nick Carter, Jeremy Cottam, Iain Cottingham, Laura Coyle, Carolyn Culver, Paul Dick, Billy Drummond, Nigel Foot, Denise Gaines, Stuart Gourley, Owen Jeffery, Paul Kander, Alan Macro, David Marsh, Tom McCann, Biyi Oloko, Justin Pemberton, Vicky Poole, Christopher Read, Richard Somner, Joanne Stewart, Louise Sturgess, Clive Taylor, Martha Vickers, and Howard Woollaston

Also Present: Paul Coe (Executive Director – Adult Social Care), Clare Lawrence (Executive Director – Place) Martyn Sargeant (Service Director – Strategy and Governance), Nicola Thomas (Deputy Monitoring Officer and Service Lead for Legal and Democratic Services), Melanie Booth (Group Executive – Liberal Democrats), Jake Carpenter (Group Executive – Conservatives), Stephen Chard (Clerk and Democratic Services Manager), Honorary Alderman Tony Linden, and Honorary Alderman Graham Pask

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Martin Colston, Councillor Heather Codling, Councillor Patrick Clark, Councillor Jane Langford, Councillor Dennis Benneyworth, Councillor Clive Hooker, Councillor Erik Pattenden, Councillor Janine Lewis (Attending Online), Councillor Matt Shakespeare, Councillor Geoff Mayes (Attending Online), Councillor Ross Mackinnon (Attending Online), Honorary Alderman Hilary Cole, Honorary Alderman Anthony Stansfield, Honorary Alderman Andrew Rowles, Honorary Alderman Mollie Lock, Honorary Alderman Graham Bridgman, Honorary Alderman Paul Bryant, and Honorary Alderman Rick Jones

PART I

1. Chairman's Remarks

The Chairman reported that he had attended 15 events since the last Council meeting on 16 October 2025. Specifically, he highlighted his attendance at the Streatley ribbon cutting for a new accessible footpath, an 80th anniversary celebration for the founding of the United Nations, the Greenham Trust Charity Award Ceremony, and the 20th annual road death memorial service put on by Thames Valley Police. In addition, he also attended a number of remembrance events, including a Poppy Appeal in Calcot and the Great Western Railway Poppies to Paddington event.

The Vice-Chairman also attended a number of events since the last ordinary Council meeting, including a Diwali celebration in Thatcham, an achievement event for children in care, Glow Rides – and event for all women cycling, the Thatcham remembrance service, and the Purley-on-Thames' annual Chairman's reception.

2. Minutes

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Tony Vickers and seconded by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

“That the Minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2025 were approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chairman.”

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

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3. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

4. **Petitions**

Councillor Carolyne Culver presented a petition containing 53 online signatures, and 15 paper signatures, relating to the Berkshire Pension Fund divesting from companies complicit in Israel's genocide and apartheid.

The Chairman of West Ilsley Parish Council, Tim Pearey, presented a petition containing 70 online signatures, and 76 paper signatures, relating to the implementation of a weight restriction on Bury Lane, West Ilsley.

The Chairman thanked the Member and resident for presenting the petitions and confirmed that officers would review them and confirm within ten working days what action would be taken.

5. **Public Questions**

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

6. **Membership of Committees**

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Dominic Boeck and seconded by Councillor Owen Jeffery:

That Council approve the following changes to the membership of Committees:

- "That Charlie Gale and Natasha Rowe be appointed as Young Person Co-opted Members of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee
- That Emily Daly be appointed as Primary School Governor Co-opted Member of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee"

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

Council noted that Councillor Janine Lewis and Councillor Billy Drummond would swap positions on the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee so that Councillor Drummond becomes a full Member of the Committee and Councillor Lewis becomes a substitute Member of the Committee.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Jeff Brooks, also highlighted several changes to the portfolios of the Executive Members. Therefore, the composition of the Executive for the remainder of the 2025/26 Municipal Year was announced as:

Councillor Jeff Brooks	–	Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Transformation, ICT, Customer Services and the Project Management Office
Councillor Heather Codling	–	Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Education and Children and Family Services
Councillor Patrick Clark	–	Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and Public Health
Councillor Iain Cottingham	–	Portfolio Holder for Finance and Resources
Councillor Nigel Foot		Portfolio Holder for Culture, Leisure,

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		Sport and Countryside
Councillor Denise Gaines	–	Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing
Councillor Stuart Gourley	–	Portfolio Holder for Highways and Environment
Councillor Tom McCann	–	Portfolio Holder for Public Safety and Capital Projects (Built Environment)
Councillor Justin Pemberton	–	Portfolio Holder for Community Engagement, Economic Development and Regeneration and Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation
Councillor Vicky Poole	–	Portfolio Holder for Strategy, Governance and Commercialisation

7. **Motions from Previous Meetings**

There were no motions from previous meetings needing updates.

8. **Updates from Committees**

Council noted the meetings that had been held since the last ordinary meeting of Council as laid out in Agenda Item 9.

9. **Devolution - Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority Expression of Interest (C4747)**

Council considered a report (Agenda Item 10) concerning the submission of an expression of interest in a Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Justin Pemberton and seconded by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

That the Council:

1. “Is informed of the benefits from the proposed devolution of powers and functions, and agrees to continue building on the collaborative approach across the region to date.
2. Notes that the informal Devolution Board will oversee discussions with Government, ensuring robust governance and stakeholder engagement by elected members throughout this process.
3. Recommends that the Executive approves the Expression of Interest (EOI) to authorise the Council to submit this to Government, noting that the EOI is designed to proactively position the Thames Valley for early consideration in the next wave of the Devolution Programme.
4. Supports that a further report will be brought to Council and Executive prior to any final decision on the creation of a Strategic Authority”.

Councillor Pemberton introduced the report and highlighted that the White Paper from Government discussed both Local Government Reorganisation – of which the Council had submitted a Ridgeway Council proposal – as well as devolution. The Government was clear that it wanted all of England to be covered by a devolved authority and that they would be ending the current deals-based approach to devolution. He also informed Council that the Government would pass legislation enabling them to create a devolved authority above any local authority which failed to come to an agreement about one. For

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this reason, doing nothing could mean the Government legislating the creation of a Strategic Authority over West Berkshire, without its input.

Members noted that the goals of these Strategic Authorities would be to enable growth and that their remit devolved from central Government would involve cross boundary infrastructure, spatial planning, developing local skills, and encouraging investment. If the Government were to pursue a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) in the Thames Valley, it would likely have a directly elected Mayor and a board comprised of the Leaders of the Councils in the area. However, specific governance arrangements would be confirmed in any final proposal. In addition, the Government would benefit from dealing with a reasonable number of Mayors across England, rather than hundreds of Council Leaders. Overall, Councillor Pemberton recommended that the Council submit an expression of interest in a Thames Valley MSA.

Some Members expressed their opposition to the establishment of a Mayoral Strategic Authority. As Police and Crime Commissioner and Local Elections had low voter turnout, questions were raised as to the democratic legitimacy of a future Mayor. In addition, the centralisation of power in the hands of a single mayor, and the undermining of the role of local authorities with decisions being taken further away from where residents lived, was also a concern. As there was no confirmation about the governance structure or funding proposed for the MSA at this time, it was questioned as to whether the Council should engage in the proposed process.

Council also questioned the geographical area that would be covered by a Thames Valley MSA, and if Swindon and Buckinghamshire would be included, as this was not mentioned in the report. However, as this process was still in its initial stages, Council noted that the geography had not been confirmed. Some Members also wanted greater clarity as to what benefits the MSA could bring to the area, such as promoting the wellbeing of children and young people and how it could better serve the rural communities in the district.

Overall, as Council believed that the creation of a MSA over West Berkshire was inevitable, they agreed to approve that the Executive submit the Expression of Interest and engage in the process in order to shape any MSA for the benefit of the local residents.

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

10. **Public Protection Partnership Shared Service Agreement (C4760)**

Council considered a report (Agenda Item 11) concerning the shared service agreement for the Public Protection Partnership (PPP).

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Tom McCann and seconded by Councillor Justin Pemberton:

That the Council is informed that:

1. "The decision taken by the Executive to enter into a new shared service agreement with Bracknell Forest Council and Wokingham Borough Council until the 31 March 2029 including the terms set out in this report and to extend the delegation of the Executive functions to the Joint Public Protection Committee.
2. The agreement includes an exit clause based on a minimum of twelve months' notice to give effect to leaving the agreement on the 31 March in any given year.
3. West Berkshire Council continues to be the host authority to avoid significant short-term disruption.

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4. That the Service Lead for Public Protection in conjunction with the Service Lead for Legal and Democratic Services be authorised to enter into this agreement on behalf of West Berkshire Council”.

And that the Council approves:

- A) “The extension of the delegation of its Council public protection related functions to the Joint Public Protection Committee until the 31 March 2029.
- B) That Wokingham Borough Council becomes a full Member of the Joint Public Protection Committee and all other governance arrangements and that the terms be based on those set out in the original shared service agreement of the 6 January 2017.
- C) And that the Terms of Reference and relevant sections of the Constitution (Part 3.1 Appendix JPPC and Part 6.5 Council Bodies Rules) be amended to reflect the revised Governance arrangements set out in the recommendation above”.

Councillor McCann introduced the report and highlighted that he was very satisfied that Councillor Pemberton, the previous Portfolio Holder for the area, and Officers, had managed to successfully re-incorporate Wokingham Borough Council into the PPP. As he believed that Wokingham would be a positive addition to the PPP, he encouraged Council to approve the recommendations.

In addition, Councillor McCann indicated that he would clarify the financial implications of the report as some Members raised questions about the costs associated with the change proposed. The potential impact of the PPP on the wellbeing of children was also raised as an area that Members would also like to see more detail on.

The work of the PPP was mentioned, with several Members highlighting their positive experience in engaging with the service on the wide range of activities that they undertook. However, some Members indicated that they would appreciate greater clarity about how to contact the service about the local issues that they were facing.

Overall, as Council were happy for Wokingham to rejoin the PPP, and that they were satisfied that they would be a positive addition to the joint service, they agreed to approve the recommendations.

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

11. **Constitution changes to Part 8: Contract Rules and Part 13: Appendix D (C4748)**

Council considered a report (Agenda Item 12) concerning Constitutional changes to Part 8 – Contract Rules – and Part 13 – Appendix D.

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

That Council approve the amendment of the following parts of the Constitution as outlined in the report:

- A) “Part 8 Contract Rules, to take effect on 1 April 2026.
- B) Part 13 Appendix D, Protocol for use of ICT Equipment supplied to Members, to take immediate effect”.

Councillor Brooks introduced the report and highlighted that the Constitution was a living document and under continual review. The Procurement Act of 2023 required the Council to examine its procurement rules. The proposed changes in the report complied with this demand and also streamlined them in order to ensure that they were more usable. He

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gave assurances about the effectiveness of the Council's checks and balances, even with a greater delegation value, and noted that the proposal had been recommended for approval by both the Constitution Review Task Group and the Governance Committee.

On a question about the approval process when spending anything worth £2.5m and above, Members noted that spending of this amount was required to be progressed through the Procurement Board of the Council (of which the Portfolio Holder was a Member), that it would need to be publicly declared before it could be spent, and that the full details of the decision would be made publicly available.

In response to a question about the potential risk of a large project getting split into smaller parts so it could pass under delegated powers, Members were assured that, as this was a well-known risk from a fraud perspective, it would be tightly monitored to ensure this did not occur. If it was found that this had occurred, the repercussions would be very serious.

Overall, as Council were satisfied that the proposed new thresholds would be in line with the statutory position, they agreed to approve the recommendations.

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

12. **2026/27 West Berkshire Council Timetable of Public Meetings (C4753)**

Council considered a report (Agenda Item 13) concerning the timetable of public meetings for the 2026/27 Municipal Year.

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

"That Council approve the timetable of public meetings for the 2026/27 Municipal Year".

Councillor Brooks introduced the report and highlighted that it was a regular item which outlined the proposed meeting dates for West Berkshire Council for the upcoming municipal year. Overall, as Council was satisfied with the report, they agreed to approve the meeting timetable.

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

13. **Notices of Motion**

The Council considered the under-mentioned Motion (of which Agenda Item 14 refers) submitted in the name of Councillor David Marsh relating to the use of Swift Bricks.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor David Marsh and seconded by Councillor Carolyne Culver:

"That Council notes that swifts, one of the oldest species on earth, fly thousands of miles (spending up to three years on the wing) to breed in the UK. Increasingly, they are finding their nesting sites blocked up. Their ancient forests with nest hollows now gone, they rely on cavities in buildings, but these too are disappearing, leaving this iconic creature on the RSPB "red list" of endangered species.

Swifts just need a brick with a hole in it to nest. The average two-storey new house contains 20,000 bricks and swift bricks— costing an estimated £30 each – can help save swifts, as well as other small nesting birds. The Labour government, having promised in opposition to incorporate a swift brick nest box into new buildings by law, has reneged on this pledge.

Council further notes, however, that a number of local authorities, with all-party support, have adopted policies requiring swift bricks to be included in new

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developments. These measures have proved popular with residents as well as local wildlife charities.

Council therefore resolves that:

- A) Swift boxes will be installed at suitable Council-owned properties, including providing audio lures to attract breeding pairs, before the next nesting season in May 2026.*
- B) At least 50% of homes on new developments in West Berkshire shall be required to have at least two swift bricks installed. New commercial and industrial developments shall be required to have at least three swift bricks installed per appropriate unit.*
- C) This condition will be attached to all relevant planning permissions for new buildings, in line with Local Plan policy SP11, Biodiversity and Geodiversity, the Council's Environment Strategy (refreshed May 2025), the Berkshire Biodiversity Strategy, and other initiatives to maintain, restore and increase biodiversity in West Berkshire.*
- D) This is in addition to any biodiversity mitigation or enhancements normally requested through the planning process."*

The Chairman informed the Council that the Motion would not be debated at this meeting. In accordance with [Procedure Rule 12.6.2](#), the Motion would be referred to the Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee. This would enable their input and that of expert Officers, before then coming back to Council for debate.

Councillor Marsh introduced the Motion and highlighted that swifts were one of the oldest species on Earth. The proposed Motion would seek to ensure that a proportion of new homes built in the district would contain swift bricks in order to help preserve the species. Since 1995, there had been a decline in the species by two thirds, with 40 per cent of this decline occurring in last ten years. In addition, swifts were now on the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds red list of threatened species.

Local Councils around the country had taken measures around swifts, including a Council in Nottinghamshire which passed a motion similar to the one proposed, ensuring half of new homes included swift bricks, as well as Devon County Council who installed swift bricks on County Hall. These bricks could halt the decline in swifts and provide a safe nesting place for many other types of small birds. In addition, the adoption of this Policy would also offer developers a visible way to ensure that promises to protect and enhance the natural environment were being taken seriously.

Councillor Denise Gaines, the relevant Portfolio Holder, responded that the decline in the swift population was a real concern, and that Government looked to have u-turned around the inclusion of swift protections in their Planning and Infrastructure Bill.

She also noted that Local Plan Policy SP11, on conservation and enhancement of the environment, outlined that the Council would like to create habitats for locally characteristic species within the fabric of buildings, and enhance wildlife connectivity general.

As a recent development in the district was approved with a condition for the inclusion of swift bricks, Councillor Gaines welcomed the Motion being discussed by the Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee.

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14. Members' Questions

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

(The meeting commenced at 7pm and closed at 8.50pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature

DRAFT

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

**EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL
MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON
THURSDAY 29 JANUARY 2026**

Councillors Present: Tony Vickers (Chairman), Adrian Abbs, Antony Amirtharaj, Phil Barnett, Jeff Brooks, Patrick Clark, Heather Codling, Martin Colston, Jeremy Cottam, Iain Cottingham, Laura Coyle, Carlyne Culver, Nigel Foot, Denise Gaines, Stuart Gourley, Owen Jeffery, Alan Macro, David Marsh, Geoff Mayes, Tom McCann, Biyi Oloko, Erik Pattenden, Justin Pemberton, Vicky Poole, Christopher Read, Louise Sturgess, Clive Taylor, and Martha Vickers

Also Present: Joseph Holmes (Chief Executive), Sarah Clarke (Executive Director – Resources), Paul Coe (Executive Director – Adult Social Care), AnnMarie Dodds (Executive Director - Children's Services), Clare Lawrence (Executive Director – Place), Nicola Thomas (Deputy Monitoring Officer and Service Lead for Legal and Democratic Services), Melanie Booth (Group Executive – Liberal Democrats), Sadie Owen (Principal Democratic Services Officer), Thomas Radbourne (Zoom Host), Honorary Alderman Tony Linden, and Honorary Alderman Graham Pask

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Councillor Nick Carter, Councillor Stephanie Steevenson, Councillor Owen Jeffrey, Councillor Matt Shakespeare, Councillor Dennis Benneyworth, Councillor Paul Kander, Councillor Dominic Boeck, Councillor Ross Mackinnon, Councillor Howard Woollaston, Councillor Richard Somner, Councillor Clive Hooker, Councillor Joanne Stewart, Councillor Paul Dick, Councillor Jane Langford

PART I

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest received.

2. Requisition to the Chairman of Council

The Council considered the points made concerning requisition to Council to discuss the Government's Local Government Finance Settlement (Agenda Item 3).

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

“The Government's Local Government Finance Settlement will leave West Berkshire Council among the hardest hit of all councils in the country.

The settlement sets out funding for councils for the next three years - up to 2028-29. While a three-year settlement will allow the Council to better plan its budgets, the figures show that West Berkshire will see one of the lowest increases in Core Spending Power nationally.

Core Spending Power being a measure used by government to show the total revenue funding a local authority has available to deliver local services through the local government finance settlement.

This includes:

- *Revenue Support Grant*
- *Retained Business Rates*

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- *Council Tax*
- *Applicable Government Grants*

West Berkshire's Core Spending Power - which assumes council tax will increase at the upper limit of 4.99% each year - will rise by just over a third of the national average. Without those projected council tax increases, the Council would have seen an actual reduction in spending power.

The Revenue Support Grant, a key source of Government funding, will fall sharply from £27 million to £16 million in just two years - almost halving in a short space of time. By 2029, the Council's core spending power will be £191 million. With inflation at 3%, the cost of essential services such as adult and children's social care, waste services and debt repayments alone would consume virtually all of this.

Because of this, Council resolves to request that the Leader:

- 1. Writes to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), The Rt Hon Steve Reed OBE MP, to request that the Government urgently review the proposed funding model being applied to West Berkshire Council to address the significant and unfair consequences to this Council's ability to deliver essential public services to our communities.*
- 2. Writes to our two local MPs to ask that they support our efforts and urge MHCLG to address the negative impacts of the proposed settlement on West Berkshire Council, and request that this be reviewed as a matter of urgency.*
- 3. Discusses this difficult situation with the Berkshire Unitary Authority Leaders and looks to develop a joint Berkshire wide response to this very distressing financial situation."*

Councillor Brooks introduced the grounds for the requisition, highlighting the significant financial challenges faced by the Council due to reductions in government grants and changes to the funding formula. He explained that the Council was increasingly reliant on borrowing to cover day-to-day costs, which would ultimately burden residents with repayment obligations. Councillor Brooks also emphasised that the recommendations included with the requisition were not intended to criticise the government but to make a reasoned and polite request for a review of the funding formula to ensure fairness.

Several councillors elaborated on the financial pressures, particularly in areas such as Adult Social Care and Children's Services, which were experiencing rising costs and demand. Councillor Heather Codling expressed concern about the escalating complexity of cases and the associated financial burden. She stressed that children were not to blame for the pressures and that the Council had a responsibility to ensure the system supporting them was adequately funded.

It was noted that the government's funding formula disproportionately impacted West Berkshire due to its classification as a low deprivation area, despite the Council facing significant challenges such as an ageing population, rural service delivery costs, and increasing demand for specialist care. Councillor Chris Read cited examples of residents in need, including individuals facing health challenges, housing issues, and financial difficulties, to illustrate the real-world impact of reduced funding on vulnerable populations.

Councillor Iain Cottingham provided detailed figures, explaining that the Council's funding from central government was projected to decrease by £28 million over the next three

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years. This included a reduction in the retention of business rates from 30% to 13%, which would significantly impact the Council's income. Councillors expressed concerns that the shift undermined the Council's ability to deliver essential services and created a disincentive for economic growth in the district.

Councillor Justin Pemberton expressed a sense of urgency and sorrow, stating that the funding settlement threatened the district's ability to invest in its future and maintain its identity as a thriving community. Councillor Nigel Foot highlighted the potential widening of health disparities due to reduced funding, particularly in addressing pockets of deprivation and supporting vulnerable residents. Councillor Patrick Clark emphasised the challenges faced in Adult Social Care, noting the high costs of providing care in rural areas and the increasing demand for services as the population ages.

The recommendations within the requisition called for a united effort to engage with the government and local MPs to advocate for a fairer funding settlement. Councillors stressed the importance of presenting a strong, collective voice to ensure the needs of West Berkshire residents were adequately represented.

The absence of the Conservative opposition group was a significant point of discussion during the meeting. Councillor Brooks and other councillors criticised the decision of the Conservative group to boycott the meeting, describing it as a dereliction of duty and a failure to represent their constituents. It was suggested that the absence of the opposition meant that residents in their wards were not being represented in the critical discussion.

Councillor David Marsh and other Opposition Group Members questioned the timing and purpose of the meeting, suggesting that earlier action might have been more effective. However, they also criticised the Conservative group for failing to engage in the discussion.

Overall, as Council was satisfied with the report, they agreed to approve the recommendations.

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

(The meeting commenced at 7pm and closed at 7.59pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature

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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**.

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		
Carolyne 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.

COUNCIL - 26 FEBRUARY 2026 - MINUTES

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

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Council – 26 March 2026

Item 4 – Declarations of Interest

Verbal Item

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Council – 26 March 2026

Item 5 – Petitions

Verbal Item

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Council – 26 March 2026

Item 6 – Public Questions

To Follow

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Council – 26 March 2026

Item 7 – Membership of Committees

Verbal Item

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Council – 26 March 2026

Item 8 – Motions from previous meetings

Verbal Item

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Council – 26 March 2026

Item 9 – Updates from Committees

Verbal Item

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Swift Bricks

Meeting considering report:	Council
Date of Committee:	26 March 2026
Portfolio Member:	Councillor Denise Gaines
Date Head of Service agreed report:	11 February 2026
Date Portfolio Member agreed report:	5 March 2026
Report Author:	Rachael Lancaster (Team Leader – Place)

1 Purpose of the Report

1.1 This report is to provide members with information relating to Swifts and swift bricks and their use in West Berkshire following the Motion to Council by Cllr David Marsh and Cllr Carolyne Culver.

1.2 The motion states;

“That Council notes that swifts, one of the oldest species on earth, fly thousands of miles (spending up to three years on the wing) to breed in the UK. Increasingly, they are finding their nesting sites blocked up. Their ancient forests with nest hollows now gone, they rely on cavities in buildings, but these too are disappearing, leaving this iconic creature on the RSPB “red list” of endangered species.

Swifts just need a brick with a hole in it to nest. The average two-storey new house contains 20,000 bricks and swift bricks– costing an estimated £30 each – can help save swifts, as well as other small nesting birds. The Labour government, having promised in opposition to incorporate a swift brick nest box into new buildings by law, has reneged on this pledge.

Council further notes, however, that a number of local authorities, with all-party support, have adopted policies requiring swift bricks to be included in new developments. These measures have proved popular with residents as well as local wildlife charities.

Council therefore resolves that:

- A) Swift boxes will be installed at suitable Council-owned properties, including providing audio lures to attract breeding pairs, before the next nesting season in May 2026.*
- B) At least 50% of homes on new developments in West Berkshire shall be required to have at least two swift bricks installed. New commercial and*

Swift Bricks

industrial developments shall be required to have at least three swift bricks installed per appropriate unit.

- C) *This condition will be attached to all relevant planning permissions for new buildings, in line with Local Plan policy SP11, Biodiversity and Geodiversity, the Council's Environment Strategy (refreshed May 2025), the Berkshire Biodiversity Strategy, and other initiatives to maintain, restore and increase biodiversity in West Berkshire.*
- D) *This is in addition to any biodiversity mitigation or enhancements normally requested through the planning process."*

- 1.3 The Motion was referred to the Resources and Place Scrutiny Committee, for their input before the motion would return to the Executive for debate.
- 1.4 This paper sets out some information about swift boxes and how they can be used to support swift, and other bird, populations.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 The recommendation is that the motion as drafted cannot be supported for the reasons set out in the body of this report.

3 Implications and Impact Assessment

Implication	Commentary
Financial:	There would be a financial implication from the installation of swift boxes on Council owned properties. The feasibility of exploring the installation of Swift nest boxes would have a resource and cost implication as well as the installation of the boxes. The boxes generally cost between £20 and £150 depending on the material, size and mounting design. The technology to add audio lures generally costs between £64 to £120 for the hardware, in addition they require a mains electricity supply. To install these on all existing suitable Council owned buildings would require budget to be allocated for this purpose. There is no available budget for this purpose in the forthcoming financial year 26/27.
Human Resource:	The development of a project to establish suitable council owned buildings and to source a supplier/contractor to install these would require resource allocation. At present there is no capacity for such a project in the forthcoming financial year 26/27.
Legal:	No legal implications

Swift Bricks

Risk Management:	No risk implications
Property:	Installing swift boxes upon Council properties would likely have wider impacts related to maintenance and longer term costs.
Policy:	<p>The draft December 2025 National Planning Policy Framework includes a requirement for swift boxes to be included in new developments.</p> <p>Policy SP11 Biodiversity and Geodiversity of the Local Plan Review, while not making specific reference to Swift boxes does require new developments to consider mitigation for wildlife which could include the inclusion of swift boxes.</p> <p>Policy SP7 Quality Design sets out that design proposals could create habitats for locally characteristic species, with opportunities to design wildlife habitats into the fabric of buildings.</p>

	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Commentary
Equalities Impact:				
A Are there any aspects of the proposed decision, including how it is delivered or accessed, that could impact on inequality?		X		No impact on inequality
B Will the proposed decision have an impact upon the lives of people with protected characteristics, including employees and service users?		X		No impact on people with protected characteristics

Swift Bricks

Environmental Impact:	X			Incorporating swift boxes into new developments or Council buildings will benefit the natural environment.
Health Impact:		X		No health impact
ICT Impact:		X		No ICT impact
Digital Services Impact:		X		No digital services impact
Council Strategy Priorities:	X			The inclusion of swift boxes in new development or council buildings will support Priority Area 3. Tackling the climate and ecological emergency.
Core Business:		X		No impact on core business
Data Impact:		X		No impact on data

Consultation and Engagement:	<p>Planning Service – conditions on planning applications must be justified on a case-by-case basis and pass the national policy tests for conditions. A general requirement for 50% of dwellings would not meet these tests. However, there is a strong existing policy framework and the draft NPPF indicates national policy will strengthen it further. Swift bricks and boxes are a commonly specified biodiversity enhancement and they are routinely sought on development already.</p> <p>Environment Delivery – there is no available budget to support funding of any potential Swift Boxes on Council owned buildings.</p> <p>Resources and Place Scrutiny – The recommendation was not supported at their meeting on 17 March 2026.</p>
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4 Executive Summary

- 4.1 This paper responds to a Council motion regarding the increased use of swift bricks in West Berkshire both within Council owned properties and new developments. The paper outlines the ecological need, current policy framework and practical considerations for implementation.

Swift Bricks

- 4.2 Swifts, a migratory species have experienced a 60% population decline since 1995, mainly due to the loss of traditional nesting sites in older buildings. Swift bricks which provide integral nesting cavities within new or renovate structures offer a cost-effective means of creating long term habitat. They also benefit other declining bird species such as house sparrows, martins and starlings.
- 4.3 National policy support for swift bricks is strengthening. The draft NPPF (2025) explicitly encourages integrated nest boxes for priority species, including swifts. Locally, the West Berkshire Local Plan Review (2023–2041) already requires biodiversity enhancements, though it does not specifically mandate swift bricks. Swift bricks cannot be counted toward Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) calculations, as they are considered artificial features. In practice, swift bricks and boxes are already specified in planning consents.
- 4.4 The Motion proposes four actions and a response to each of these is provided below;
- 4.5 Installation of swift boxes on suitable Council-owned buildings by May 2026, potentially including audio lures. It is not feasible to do this within the timeframe specified. This requires careful site selection, budget allocation, and consideration of potential noise impacts, particularly in residential areas. As such, this aspect of the motion cannot be supported.
- 4.6 Requiring swift bricks on new development – aiming for 50% of new homes to include two swift bricks each and commercial/industrial development three swift bricks per unit. To be applied as a condition on new development. It is not possible to apply this as a planning condition on every planning application as it would not meet the national tests for conditions. Each condition must be justified on a case by case basis, however there is a strong existing policy framework and the draft NPPF indicates national policy will strengthen it further. Moreover, Swift bricks and boxes are commonly specified and already routinely sought as a required enhancement on new developments. Whilst, this aspect of the motion cannot be supported, the Local Planning Authority will continue to secure swift bricks and boxes where appropriate and justified and consideration can be given to more specific policy wording through the next Local Plan.

5 Supporting Information

Introduction

- 5.1 A motion was brought to Council in December regarding swift bricks and supporting the use of them in Council-owned properties and in new developments.
- 5.2 This paper sets out the background to swift bricks, and deals with each part of the motion in turn setting out what the Council already does, and what could be done to support the use of Swift bricks in new development and at Council owned buildings.

Background

- 5.3 Swifts are a migratory bird which travels to the UK from Africa in April, returning in August. The species is classified as Red under the Birds of Conservation Concern 5 (2021). Traditionally swifts would have nested in trees and on cliffs, however, they have adapted to live in the roofs of old buildings. Swifts are site-loyal and typically return to the same nest site each year.

Swift Bricks

- 5.4 Between 1995 and 2020 swift numbers have decreased by 60% in the UK, with further decline likely due to the loss of nesting sites from the renovation of older buildings, removing cavities and gaps and the build quality and design of modern homes.
- 5.5 Swift bricks are a construction brick which contains a cavity to allow swifts to nest within it. They operate much like a nest box but can be built into the fabric of a building. They are usually installed high on the exterior of building facades, with their design and installation guided by British Standard BS42021:2022. They cost upwards of £25 depending on the specification of the brick.
- 5.6 Swifts like to nest in loose colonies, with several families nesting close together, and therefore swift boxes, where installed, should be in groups of 2 or 3, at a height of at least 5m above the ground, and between 50cm and 100cm apart, with no obstruction from trees, ladders, creepers or window cleaning gear. Swift Conservation¹ have published a guide on the installation of swift bricks which suggests that typically a house would have two to four boxes, a small block of flats four to ten boxes, with larger infrastructure such as a school, office or warehouse should have between ten and forty depending on the size.
- 5.7 Swift Bricks have also been known to attract a range of wildlife, including house sparrows, house martins, blue tits and starlings. Therefore, the inclusion of them in new development can support a number of different species.

Planning Policy

- 5.8 The recently published draft NPPF (published for consultation December 2025)² includes specific reference to swifts in policy N2 Improving the natural environment:
- para f: *Minimise impacts on biodiversity and include features for species which support priority or threatened species such as swifts, bats and hedgehogs. Development proposals should incorporate integrated nest boxes (commonly known as swift bricks) into their construction unless there are compelling technical reasons which prevent their use or would make them ineffective.*
- 5.9 This shows that there is a government commitment and expectation that swift boxes are included within new development.
- 5.10 The West Berkshire Local Plan Review (2023 – 2041) includes two policies which support the use of swift boxes, Policy SP7 Quality Design and SP11 Biodiversity and Geodiversity. While there is no specific reference to the use of Swift Bricks, there is the requirement to provide habitat mitigation and enhancements as part of development proposals.
- 5.11 The Council currently use the following condition to secure biodiversity measures, which has been used to secure swift bricks:

¹ Swift Conservation, Leaflet 4 – Swift Nest Bricks – installation and suppliers <https://www.swift-conservation.org/Leaflet%20-%20-%20Swift%20Nest%20Bricks%20-%20installation%20&%20suppliers-small.pdf>

² National Planning Policy Framework: proposed reforms and other changes to the planning system https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6941965758a21370f58f304e/Draft_NPPF_December_2025.pdf

Swift Bricks

The development hereby permitted shall not be occupied until [stipulate the essential matter, e.g. bat boxes, bird boxes, artificial otter holt or badger sett] has been installed/constructed in accordance with details that have first been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

Reason: To ensure biodiversity enhancements are incorporated into the development. This condition is applied in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework, and Policy SP11 of the West Berkshire Local Plan Review 2023-2041.

5.12 On 13th October 2025 the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs confirmed that Swift bricks cannot be counted towards Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)³. BNG only considers natural features (eg. trees, ponds, lowland meadows), and swift bricks (along with features such as bat boxes) are considered artificial, and therefore cannot be counted in the BNG metric.

Proposals

5.13 The Motion to Council included four proposals:

A) Swift boxes will be installed at suitable Council-owned properties, including providing audio lures to attract breeding pairs, before the next nesting season in May 2026.

5.14 The installation of swift boxes at suitable Council-owned properties is considered to be appropriate. However, it would not be possible to install these before the next nesting season as suitable sites would need to be identified. Further swift nest boxes generally cost between £20 and £150 depending on the material, size and mounting design. The technology to add audio lures generally costs between £64 and £120 for the hardware, in addition they require a mains electricity supply. The Council does not have a budget or resources available to establish the feasibility of a project to achieve this, nor for the purchase and installation of the boxes or the audio lures.

5.15 Audio lures are used to increase the rate of adoption of swift bricks (although it can still take 12 – 24 months for swifts to occupy the bricks) and the noise can result in noise complaints from members of the public. The audio lures require a loudspeaker, ideally mounted inside the nest box, with a mains electricity power supply and a device that holds the MP3 audio file for the swift call. The volume level should be set as loud as a real swift's call; however, it is acceptable if the call is muffled due to coming from inside the nest box. As the calls would introduce a new sound into a neighbourhood, consideration of neighbours would need to be taken into account. While it may be acceptable to play audio calls in office, school or commercial areas, this is less acceptable in residential areas.

5.16 On the basis of the challenges to find appropriate sites, finance and resources, and the risk of disturbance to residents, it is not recommended that swift boxes are installed at suitable Council-owned properties including providing audio lures to attract breeding pairs at this time. However, it is recommended that this is considered for new development.

³ Swift Bricks, Question for Department for DEFRA <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2025-10-13/81318/>

Swift Bricks

5.17 Estimated cost of installation:

Estimated cost		Notes / Assumptions
Installation of swift box plus audio lure	£660 per box	Includes hardware, power supply and installation. Hardware estimate: £260 (based on market estimates) Installation estimate: £400 (reasoned market estimation)
Ongoing maintenance	£50 per box per year	Swift boxes should last the lifetime of the building. Inc. visual check, ensuing cable/speaker intact. Does not include street cleaning.
No. Boxes per Council owned property	3	Based on motion request for new commercial buildings. Buildings should have more than one box installed as Swifts like to live in groups.
No. Council owned buildings	235	Estimated half Council owned buildings might be suitable for a swift box. <i>Source: Council-Owned Properties - West Berkshire Council</i>
Officer time to support the project	£50,000	<i>General working assumption</i>
TOTAL	£550,550	Includes 1 year maintenance Maintenance will have an ongoing annual cost of £35,250 (excluding officer time to coordinate and any additional street cleaning required)

B) At least 50% of homes on new developments in West Berkshire shall be required to have at least two swift bricks installed. New commercial and industrial developments shall be required to have at least three swift bricks installed per appropriate unit.

Swift Bricks

5.18 It is assumed that this element of the motion means that on average across the district at least 50% of new homes should incorporate at least two swift bricks. With all new commercial and industrial development installing at least three swift bricks per unit.

5.19 For larger housing developments and commercial schemes, introducing a swift brick requirement would work well, as a definitive number of swift bricks could be required and secured via condition. Where there are small or single dwelling proposals, a specific requirement for swift bricks could add an unreasonable additional burden for applicants, especially when considered alongside other biodiversity/enhancement requirements (eg, BNG, bat boxes). However, the proposed draft NPPF does include requirement for swift bricks to be installed with new development, so the Council may be able to implement this without the need for specific local policy to be included within the new local plan. Further consideration of how this could be implemented, and what types of development would be included in any Council policy would be required.

5.20 Swift bricks generally cost between £25 and £40 per brick.

- C) *This condition will be attached to all relevant planning permissions for new buildings, in line with Local Plan policy SP11, Biodiversity and Geodiversity, the Council's Environment Strategy (refreshed May 2025), the Berkshire Biodiversity Strategy, and other initiatives to maintain, restore and increase biodiversity in West Berkshire.*
- D) *This is in addition to any biodiversity mitigation or enhancements normally requested through the planning process."*

5.21 A general biodiversity enhancement condition is already used when granting planning permission, which allows for specific enhancements to be listed within the condition. The precise biodiversity enhancement will be determined on a case-by-case basis depending on the nature of the development and its location.

5.22 It is not possible to commit through a Council motion to apply any planning conditions on every planning application, to do so would be *ultra vires*. Each condition must be justified on a case-by-case basis and pass the national policy tests for conditions. However, Council can be reassured that there is a strong existing policy framework, and the draft NPPF indicates national policy will strengthen it further. Moreover, Swift bricks and boxes are a commonly specified biodiversity enhancement, and they are routinely sought by the Planning Service.

5.23 The installation of swift bricks would form one part of the biodiversity mitigation enhancements proposed for new developments. It would be for the ecology team to determine the most suitable biodiversity mitigation for each development when considering the merits of the scheme, including the location and specific proposals.

6 Other options considered

6.1 No other options have been considered, as this report is responding to the Motion presented at Council.

7 Conclusion

7.1 The motion sets out how the Council wishes to support the migratory swift population, through the installation of swift bricks at appropriate council buildings and through

Swift Bricks

requirements placed upon developers in the planning process. For the reasons set out, the Motion cannot be supported as the measures set out are unable to be implemented.

- 7.2 Whilst the Motion cannot be supported, existing Local Plan Policy provides the policy hook to secure swift bricks and boxes and the new draft NPPF (currently subject to consultation) includes a requirement for swift bricks to be introduced in new developments where appropriate, therefore, giving the Council a strengthened planning policy basis to secure swift bricks, where appropriate, along with other biodiversity measures, when considering planning applications.

Background Papers:

Swift Conservation, Leaflet 4: Swift Nest Bricks – installation and suppliers leaflet
<https://www.swift-conservation.org/Leaflet%20-%20Swift%20Nest%20Bricks%20-%20installation%20&%20suppliers-small.pdf>

Subject to Call-In:

Yes: No:

The item is due to be referred to Council for final approval



Wards affected: All

Officer details:

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Job Title: Team Leader - Place
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E-mail: Rachael.lancaster@westberks.gov.uk

Council – 26 March 2026

Item 11 – Notice of Motions

Verbal Item

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Council – 26 March 2026

Item 12 – Member Questions

To Follow

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