

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

19TH FEBRUARY 2025, AT 6.00 P.M.

PRESENT: Councillors S. Ammar (Chairman), B. Kumar (Vice-Chairman), A. Bailes, R. Bailes, S. J. Baxter, J. Clarke, S. R. Colella, J. Elledge, S. M. Evans, D. J. A. Forsythe, E. M. S. Gray, D. Hopkins, R. J. Hunter, H. J. Jones, M. Marshall, K.J. May, P. M. McDonald, B. McEldowney, S. T. Nock, D. J. Nicholl, S. R. Peters, J. Robinson, S. A. Robinson, H. D. N. Rone-Clarke, J. D. Stanley, K. Taylor, S. A. Webb and P. J. Whittaker

Observers: Mr J. Coleman

Officers: Mrs. S. Hanley, Mr P. Carpenter, Mr. G. Revans, Mrs. C. Felton, Ms. N Cummings and Mrs. J. Bayley-Hill

89\24

TO RECEIVE APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors A. Dale, C. Hotham and R. Lambert.

(During consideration of this item, there was a brief adjournment from 18.06 – 18.11.)

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were reminded that all Councillors had been granted general dispensations by the Audit, Standards and Governance Committee earlier in the municipal year to take part in the debate and vote on the Council's budget and Council Tax.

There were no declarations of interest.

91\24

TO CONFIRM THE ACCURACY OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COUNCIL HELD ON 22ND JANUARY 2025 (TO FOLLOW)

The minutes of the meeting of Council held on 22nd January 2025 were submitted.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of Council held on 22nd January 2025 be approved as a true and correct record.

92\24

TO RECEIVE ANY ANNOUNCEMENTS FROM THE CHAIRMAN AND/OR HEAD OF PAID SERVICE

The Chairman advised that the High Sheriff of Worcester, Mr Charles Moyle, was due to visit local charities in Bromsgrove with the Chairman. As part of this process, they would be visiting Catshill Foodbank, Age UK, Bosom Friends, the Harry Bennett Foundation and the Alvechurch Larder on Wednesday 26th February 2025. The High Sheriff was also due to make a second visit to the District on the 19th March 2025 in order to visit two charities in Wythall. Members were advised that they would be welcome to participate in these visits and were urged to notify the Chairman of the Council if they wished to take part.

The Head of Paid Service confirmed that she had no announcements to make on this occasion.

93\24

TO RECEIVE ANY ANNOUNCEMENTS FROM THE LEADER

The Leader confirmed that she had no announcements to make on this occasion.

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TO RECEIVE COMMENTS, QUESTIONS OR PETITIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

The Chairman invited Mr J. Coleman to present the following comment, submitted in advance of the meeting, for Council's consideration:

Dear Ladies and gentlemen of the Council.

My name is Jonathan Coleman and as many of you will be aware, I am one of the team of volunteers at Revise BREP who have been attempting to hold WCC to account over the BREP project.

As of our last meeting I am happy to say the new leadership behind BREP has been more responsive and open to discussion and accordingly we have made some progress.

These include:

More frequent updates on what is going on with BREP.

Looking into artwork being produced to show how the areas will be restored.

Areas of concern or worry of residents looked into.

Guarantees that all trees removed and replaced will be replaced *in Bromsgrove along the A38*

Reducing the impact of the works as much as possible (such as getting numerous lane closures removed over the Christmas period.

Moving on from BREP however, it is time that we look and listen to the people of Bromsgrove who all know the only real solution to the transport issues in and around our town is a Western Bypass.

Worcestershire County Council has no money to perform a new study, but fortunately, Bromsgrove Council being fiscally responsible does have the reserves and the ability to commission a new study. And it needs to do so sooner rather than later.

The previous flawed study, as discovered when Bromsgrove Council commissioned a review, should have been re-done years ago. But instead has been used as a scapegoat to avoid investment in and around Bromsgrove in a way that would be meaningful. As an example, the A536 at Congleton is a project that shows how well planned infrastructure helps the area immensely. Resolving gridlocks and enabling traffic to flow freely through the area.

The current central government housing plans place potentially even larger demands on the Bromsgrove infrastructure, an infrastructure that is already bursting at the seams, no new supporting roads, and the existing plans designed to encourage more people through the town rather than around it.

Bromsgrove needs an infrastructure first plan. If developers want to build houses here, then we need the infrastructure to be developed first, not as an after thought or in many cases not at all. We need new roads to be built. We need new doctors. We need new schools. We need new dentists.

A simple survey of the residents of Bromsgrove will show the overwhelming majority agree. We set up a simple 4 question survey 2 weeks ago and have already had over 3000 replies.

As such, I hope that the council makes the right choice to support and order a study into a new Western Bypass Project so the proper investment our towns needs can be secured.

Thank you for your time.”

On behalf of the Council, the Chairman thanked Mr Coleman for attending the meeting to deliver his comments.

95\24

URGENT DECISIONS

Council was advised that two urgent decisions had been taken since the previous meeting of Council. These urgent decisions had been taken in relation to the following subjects:

- The former Market Hall site
- The Promoting Independent Living (PIL) Service

The urgent decision forms had been provided for Members' information and were not subject to debate.

96\24

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CABINET MEETING HELD ON 12TH FEBRUARY 2025 (TO FOLLOW)

Council considered recommendations arising from the meeting of the Cabinet held on 12th February 2025.

Pay Policy Statement 2025/26

The Leader advised that the Localism Act 2011 required English and Welsh local authorities to produce an annual Pay Policy Statement. The Act required the statement to be approved by Full Council and to be adopted by 31st March each year for the subsequent financial year.

The purpose of the statement was to provide transparency with regard to the Council's approach to setting the pay of its employees by identifying;

- the methods by which salaries of all employees were determined;
- the detail and level of remuneration of the most senior staff i.e. 'chief officers', as defined by the relevant legislation; and
- the Committee(s) responsible for ensuring the provisions set out in this statement were applied consistently throughout the Council and for recommending any amendments to the full Council.

The Council's pay and grading structure comprised grades 1 – 11. These were followed by grades for Managers, Assistant Director 1, Assistant Director 2, the Director of Worcestershire Regulatory Services (WRS), Executive Director, Deputy Chief Executive and then Chief Executive; all of which arose following the introduction of shared services with Bromsgrove District Council.

Within each grade, there were a number of salary scale points. Up to and including grade 11 scale, at spinal column point 43, the Council used the nationally negotiated pay spine. Salary points above this were locally determined. All Council posts were allocated to a grade within this pay structure, based on the application of a Job Evaluation process. Posts at the level of Managers and above were evaluated by an external assessor using the Hay Job Evaluation scheme. In common with the majority of authorities, the Council was committed to the Local Government Employers' national pay bargaining framework in respect of the national pay spine and annual cost of living increases negotiated with the trade unions.

All other pay related allowances were the subject of either nationally or locally negotiated rates. Redditch Borough Council was managed by a senior management team who managed shared services across both Bromsgrove District and Redditch Borough Councils. All of the senior officer posts listed had been job evaluated on this basis, with the salary costs for these posts split equally between both Councils.

The policy also set out:

- The recruitment of Chief Officers
- Additions to the salaries of Chief Officers (Members were informed that there was no performance related pay)
- Termination payments
- Advertisement/publicity of posts

The Council's definition of lowest paid employees referred to persons employed under a contract of employment with the Council on full time (37 hours) equivalent salaries in accordance with the minimum spinal column point currently in use within the Council's grading structure. As at 1st April 2024, this was £23,656 per annum.

Following the presentation of the report, Members questioned whether the grades detailed in the report applied to permanent staff only or also to agency staff. In response, confirmation was provided that these costs applied to internal staff only.

The recommendation was proposed by Councillor K. May and seconded by Councillor S. Baxter.

RESOLVED that the Pay Policy Statement 2025/26 be approved.

Strategic Parking Review

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Regeneration presented the Strategic Parking Review report for Members' consideration. Council was advised that prior to Cabinet, the report had been scrutinised in detail at a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board held on 11th February 2025. Based on points raised during the debate at the Board meeting, Cabinet had amended the recommendations detailed in the report and had added a fourth recommendation.

During the presentation of this report, the Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Regeneration addressed a number of points that had been raised during the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting:

- Concerns had been raised about the introduction of Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) systems in the Council's car parks. Members were advised that ANPR systems operated differently in Council run car parks compared to the private sector. In a Council car park with ANPR, customers could pay and leave at a later point.
- The intention was to allow for customers to pay on foot as they were leaving the car park. Legal advice was being sought to clarify that this arrangement would be possible.
- Members were assured that there was no intention to introduce cashless machines so customers would be able to continue to pay for parking using cash where they chose to do so.
- Council was advised that there was no intention to introduce out of hours charges for car parks in wards outside Bromsgrove town centre.
- The additional recommendation that had been proposed at the Cabinet meeting addressed issues raised about the need to take action in respect of on street parking out of hours and at weekends.

In concluding the presentation of the report, the Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Regeneration thanked the Overview and Scrutiny Board for their input and highlighted that compromises had been made in order to address the Board's concerns.

Following the presentation of the report, Members questioned the number of additional Civil Enforcement Officers that could be employed based on the additional £70,000 funding that had been proposed. Council was informed that this budget would fund the employment of an additional two Civil Enforcement Officers.

Reference was also made to the potential for ward Councillors to help address parking issues in their communities and questions were raised about how best to achieve this. Clarification was provided that there would be a need to work in partnership with the Police, local schools and other interested stakeholders to address problems with parking. Members could help by highlighting specific issues in their wards with relevant lead officers.

The recommendations were proposed by Councillor S. Baxter and seconded by Councillor K. May.

RESOLVED that

- 1) The Director of Resources includes in the Medium-Term Financial Plan for 2025/26 a capital budget of £100k for ANPR systems to Recreation Road South, St Johns and Windsor Street car parks.
- 2) A revenue budget of £15k per annum be included in the Medium-Term Financial Plan from April 2026 for the maintenance contracts for the ANPR installations.
- 3) A revenue budget of £335,160 for Car Parking Enforcement be included in the Medium-Term Financial Plan from April 2025, which is to include an annual inflationary uplift, determined by the Consumer Price Index (CPI).
- 4) The Council allocate an additional £70,000 for additional Civil Enforcement Officers to enable increased enforcement during out of hours and weekends.

Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/26 to 2027/28 Tranche 2 (Following Consultation)

In opening this item, the Chairman advised that recommendations had been made on the subject of the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) 2025/26 to 2027/28 Tranche 2 report at both the meeting of the Cabinet held on 12th February 2025 and the meeting of the Cabinet held on 19th February 2025. To ensure clarity in respect of decisions made on the budget at the meeting, Members were advised that the Chairman intended to consider both sets of recommendations together at this stage in the meeting.

The Chairman further advised that no alternative budgets had been submitted for consideration at the meeting and therefore the subject of alternative budgets would not be debated when considering the MTFP.

The Cabinet Member for Finance subsequently presented the MTFP 2025/26 to 2027/28 and in doing so highlighted that the Council had presented budget reports in two Tranches, in a similar manner to 2024/25. The initial Tranche was published in December 2024 and Members approved initial pressures and increases at Council in January 2025. This second Tranche incorporated the final Local Government Settlement figures.

Members were asked to note that:

- The Council only received the Final Local Government Settlement on the evening of 3rd February 2025.
- National Insurance contributions were part of that settlement and the Council, like many authorities, was short of funding, in this case in the region of £200,000 a year.
- Not all grant allocations were known by the date of the meeting.

A certain set of assumptions, and pressures and some savings were agreed in the Tranche 1 budget. This included departmental changes, due to contract pressures and demographics. These departmental changes resulted in an overall £1.387 million revenue pressure in the 2025/26 financial year and then £938,000 by 2027/28. At Tranche 1, there was a £1 million deficit to be closed which increased to an ongoing £1.5 million problem in 2027/28. £1 million of this amount from 2026/27 onwards was linked to the impact of the changes to Waste Regulations.

The Provisional Local Government Settlement was made on the 18th December 2024. In that settlement, the Council's core spending power was unchanged at £13.42 million. However, this zero per cent increase in spending power masked a significant change in funding, with Councils expected to have a 2.99 per cent increase in Council Tax to achieve a break even position, with "Other Grants" reducing by a corresponding amount. The Council, like many other authorities, had already assumed they would be maximising Council Tax increases in their existing plans and this settlement had no inflation built in. The £200,000 shortfall in National Insurance contributions exacerbated this situation.

The Government had allocated specific targeted grant funding for a number of initiatives. This funding was for a single year, as Local Government Funding was due to change significantly in the 2026/27 settlement, which would be for three years. However, the impacts on the Council for this targeted funding were:

- Bromsgrove had not received any additional grant funding.
- Council Tax in Tranche 2 would be increased from 1.99 to 2.99 per cent.

- £233 million additional Homelessness Prevention Grant had been allocated to local government, of which Bromsgrove had received £349,000, which was £88,000 more than previously anticipated.
- Nationally, £1.1 billion new funding had been introduced through implementation of the Extended Producer Responsibility scheme for recycling. Bromsgrove had received £1.004 million, which was included in the Tranche 2 budget proposals.
- Business Rates support to the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors was expected to be neutral and Government funded through a Section 31 Grant.
- UK Shared Prosperity Funding (UKSPF) had been extended for 2025-26 at a reduced level of £900 million nationally. Bromsgrove had received £918,000 of this funding, divided between Revenue funding of £748,000 and Capital funding of £170,000.

Significant grant levels for Bromsgrove District Council included:

- Housing Benefit Administration Subsidy - £146,878
- Discretionary Housing Payments - £62,332
- Discretionary Housing Payments Administration - £11,114
- New Burdens Funding (Universal Credit) £2,770
- Revenue Support Grant £118,000
- New Homes Bonus £24,000
- Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Grant £36,000
- Funding Floor (formally Funding Guarantee) £1,111,000
- Section 31 Grant Funding for Business Rates Subsidy (RHL) would be based on the NNRA1 forms
- National Insurance Contribution – The Final Local Government Settlement on the 3rd February 2025 allocated a sum of £0.1 million. This was circa £200,000 less than the Council's requirements and this difference was reflected as an additional pressure
- Housing Benefit Subsidy £11,192,229 (Members were asked to note that this was the 2024/25 level, as the 2025/26 level was not known by the date of the meeting)
- Disabled Facilities Grant - £1,285,847 (up from £1,130,316), which would be added to the Capital Programme
- Capital Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) allocation for Food Waste Bins/Vehicles £902,511, which would also be added to the Capital Programme.

The Council had assessed a number of other options to move to what was believed to be a sustainable position over the three-year planning period. This process had resulted in the following changes since Tranche 1:

- Council Tax – The Government expected, as part of the Local Government Settlement, that all Councils would increase Council Tax levels by the maximum 2.99 per cent possible. The Council

assumed a 1.99 per cent increase in Tranche 1 and so this increased that level by £96,000 to come in line with Government expectations.

- Actuarial Changes from 2026. Following a conversation with the new Actuary and the Worcestershire Treasurers at the end of November 2024, expectations were now that in the 2026 Triennial Revaluation there would be minimal increases. This saved £150,000.
- ERP Funding Allocations – the Council had received £1.004 million in ERP Funding. This would be allocated over the three-year funding period with £250,000 allocated for specific marketing projects to move the initiative forward across all sectors.
- 2024/25 Salary Adjustment – Following allocation of actual salary increases for 2024/25 as part of the December payroll, this saving could be realised.
- Capitalisation of Salaries – The Council should be allocating staff costs to capital projects. The authority had not done this in the past. By the date of the meeting, an assumption of a 5 per cent recharge had been made. This needed to be sustainable over time.
- One Off Funding from the Finance Reserve. There were finance specific items in the departmental pressures that were one off in nature. These could be funded from the earmarked Finance Reserve.
- Departmental Efficiencies – to balance the overall budget, there was the requirement for departmental efficiencies to be made.
- Savings on the VM Ware Contract – it was expected in Tranche 1 that this contract would have a 10-fold increase as a result of a change of supplier, but in December the Council was able to limit the increase to a far smaller level.

The following additional costs were also highlighted:

- Replacement Bins – Bromsgrove District Council was the only authority in England with the diamond bin. This was limiting the options in the purchasing of the replacement refuse fleet.
- Worcestershire Regulatory Services (WRS) Uplift for Inflation – These were the agreed increases approved at the WRS Board in November 2024.
- Local Government Settlement Costs – These costs now reflected the changes to funding in the 2025/26 Local Government Financial Settlement. The most significant was the £352,000 reduction in Government grants.
- The Sunrise Project - The project focussed on supporting the most vulnerable and complex customers often known to organisations for repeat and reactive demands and identified as having a high level of contact with multiple partner agencies. The expenditure was designed to improve the financial sustainability and health and

wellbeing of residents, and in particular those more vulnerable residents. The project was tenure blind and included the provision of access to courses to improve employment opportunities and quality of life.

- The Final Local Government Settlement on the 3rd February 2025 allocated the Council £0.1 million for the National Insurance changes. This was £200,000 less than the Council's requirements and this difference was shown as a pressure.
- Following input from the Overview and Scrutiny Board at a meeting held on the 11th February 2025, Cabinet agreed to an £85,000 additional pressure in parking services.

The effects of these changes overall were a net £252,000 deficit in 2025/26, increasing to £1.115 million in 2026/27, before reducing to £484,000 in 2027/28. This was an overall call on general fund reserves of £1.851 million and £600,000 of this was required for National Insurance contributions.

Fees and charges had been considered and agreed at Tranche 1 of the budget process. However, this had not included commercial charges for the authority's commercial Environmental Services customers. These had therefore been provided for consideration at Tranche 2 of the process. In addition, updated WRS charges had been included in the Tranche 2 report, which proposed changes to those fees in line with increases in the service across the County.

By the date of the Council meeting, the authority had closed accounts up to the 2022/23 financial year and had received "Disclaimer Opinions" for those three years. Because those years were now closed, there was certainty over the Earmarked Reserve balances which at the 31st March 2028 were due to be valued at £12.526 million. The 2025/26 Earmarked Reserves level of £9.484 million assumed that all ward budgets would be spent over the three year "pilot period" and that pressures would be funded from specific reserves.

The Capital Programme for the Council had been provided for the period up to 2029/30. A number of amendments had been made since Tranche 1. This included:

- The items carried forward from 2023/24 to 2024/25 had been fully reviewed and updated as part of the Closure of Accounts 2023/24 process.
- The requirement of a firewall for Parkside at £9,750 had been integrated into the programme.
- The requirement for an additional £25,000 a year for laptops for new starters had also been integrated into the programme.
- The Market Hall redevelopment had been reprofiled and overall showed a £1.4 million deficit, which was being funded by the Council.

- The requirement to replace the wheely bin fleet had been added at a cost of £2.2 million.
- Updated funding for 2025/26 had been added for both UKSPF and Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) Budgets.
- Government funding for the new Food Waste Service (Vehicles and Containers) had been added at £902,000. This was still over £500,000 short of the authority's overall requirement.
- The updated play audit implementation profile from the December 2024 report had been added. No change was required for the revenue funding assumptions.
- Inclusion of the capitalisation of salaries.
- As per the discussions at recent meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Board and Cabinet concerning the Strategic Parking Review, £100,000 had been allocated for the implementation of ANPR systems to Recreation Road South, St Johns and Windsor Street Car Parks.

The Treasury Management Strategy, Minimum Revenue Provision Policy and Asset Investment Strategy set out how the Council would invest and borrow funds and to whom. These strategies had been reviewed by the Audit, Standards and Governance Committee and had been included in the report for Members' consideration.

The impending Devolution of powers in Local Government and the setting up of Unitary Councils in existing two-tier areas before the close of this Parliament had been highlighted as a significant risk in the report. In light of this, the Council was reviewing schemes that could be delivered and completed within the following three years to ensure that a legacy of a sustainable, attractive Bromsgrove was transferred on vesting day with infrastructure and amenities reflecting stakeholder requirements to make a difference to the residents of Bromsgrove. As part of this initiative, it was expected that General Fund Reserves would fall no lower than £5 million, which was two times the Government recommended level. Initiatives under review for prioritisation, inclusion and approval following updated business cases were:

- Full funding of the 10-year play strategy agreed by Council in 2024 (only five years of funding had been previously included in the Capital Programme) including non-Council assets set out in that report.
- Bromsgrove Town Centre public realm – continuation of improvements on the high street, Church Street, Mill Lane and Worcester Road. This included resurfacing, street furniture and lighting upgrades, and possible acquisitions to deliver further regeneration. These works were valued at costing approximately £2 million.
- Rubery – a high street design feasibility study to create a central plaza/meeting space and to reconfigure the parking. These works had an estimated cost of £120,000.

- Work in other centres, although this would need to link with Parish Councils and un-Parished areas which also had responsibilities.
- Full programmes of litter bin replacement.
- Investment to upgrade the authority's parks facilities.
- Investment in a new depot to reflect differing needs for services and vehicles in the future.

In terms of risks, Members were asked to note that the budget was being set in a time of extreme uncertainty. The causes of this uncertainty included:

- Changes to the Government and this being the first year of a new administration.
- The 2025/26 Local Government Financial Settlement was only for one year and had resulted overall in a £352,000 reduction in central grants.
- There would be a new financial settlement formula in 2026/27, which would be for three years, but the make-up of this settlement formula would only start to be consulted on in the spring of 2025.
- The Government had also announced significant reorganisation of the Local Government Sector within Worcestershire, which on the date of the meeting had a two-tier authority structure but would be moving to a Unitary Authority setup by the end of the Parliament. On the date of the Council meeting, the future format of Unitary Councils in Worcestershire remained unclear, as were the rules in relation to use of reserves and balances in the intermediate period and the obvious impact on the Council's staff, Members and present stakeholders.
- The status of Councils with "Disclaimer Opinions" on their accounts remained uncertain. Members were informed that it was understood that there would be over 500 of these opinions that had been issued across English Councils.
- The ongoing issue of funding, with the care element of Local Government taking more of the "overall" resource pot on a yearly basis leaving less for other services provided by local government to the public.
- Access to existing former Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership (GBSLEP) funds from Birmingham City Council during 2025/26.

Risk Reports had been regularly presented to the Audit, Standards and Governance Committee. These reports had highlighted the following specific risks linked to finance:

- Resolution of the approved budget position.
- Financial process rectification (in relation to the 2020/21 Accounts and subsequent years not being approved, which was close to some sort of resolution with the "Disclaimer Opinions").
- Decisions made to address financial pressures and implementing new projects that were not informed by robust data and evidence.

- Adequate workforce planning.

In addition, in this time of uncertainty, the Council would also need to embed a new Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive/Director of Resources, both of whom had been appointed in January 2025 and would commence employment with Bromsgrove and Redditch Councils after serving their respective notice periods.

There were also the core risks of implementation of any Council financial plan in that:

- Any savings proposal must pass the Section 151 Officer's tests for robustness and delivery. If items were not deliverable or amounts not obtainable, they could not be included.
- Implementation of savings to time and budget – there must be full implementation processes documented to ensure implementation within timescales.
- Non delivery was a high risk. Savings were tracked and reviewed on a quarterly basis by the Audit, Standards and Governance Committee to ensure implementation happened based on the plans and the assumptions would become part of the Council's core processes.
- Loss of key personnel would be critical, especially given the impending Local Government Reorganisation and mitigation plans would need to be drawn up which in themselves would require resources to administer and deliver.
- Changes of corporate direction and priorities, given the upcoming changes in the sector.

For Tranche 2, the opinion of the Section 151 Officer was that the risks contained in the 2025/26 budget estimates had been minimised as far as was possible. In the previous two years, the Council had moved to the delivery of sustainable budgets. However, these had been impacted by three years of staff pay awards far in excess of those ever previously seen in Local Government. This, given the fact that staffing costs were approaching 50% of overall costs, had had a significant impact on Council budgets over this period leading to in year overspend positions and had required subsequent mitigation in the following years' budgets.

Although inflation was reducing in the UK, given wider economic events and governmental changes in other countries, it was not clear if inflation in particular would move back to being consistently within the Government's 2 per cent target. This impacted both Council costs as well as the costs of other services used by customers.

Employee budgets were almost 50 per cent of the Council's costs. Over the previous 18 months, there had been a significant move to fill establishment positions. However, the Council was still running at levels of vacancy of around 100 against an overall joint establishment of 850 and using considerable agency resources to ensure services were maintained. This resulted in additional short-term costs and the

Workforce Strategy, implemented in 2023, was starting to mitigate this. This was demonstrated in the Council's staff turnover figure being 50 per cent of the national average at just over 7 per cent. However, this remained the most significant financial risk to the Council.

The next most significant financial risk was the fact that the Council had not been able to present its 2020/21, 2021/22 and 2022/23 Accounts for audit, and the possible inaccuracy of opening balances used in budgetary data. These three years had now been completed under the new "backstop" regulations, but because of the national audit issues, the Council had received "Disclaimer Opinions" for all three years. This was not unusual and there were circa 500 of these opinions that had been issued for English Councils, however, the implications of this for Councils and the wider sector remained unclear. What the closure process had highlighted, now it had been completed for these years, was that the Council was in a stronger position in terms of reserves than was previously anticipated. The 2023/24 Accounts had also now been completed and presented for audit within the new "Backstop" requirements. The revenue budget and capital programme had been formulated having regard to several factors including:

- Funding available.
- Inflation.
- Risks and uncertainties.
- Priorities.
- Service pressures.
- Commercial opportunities.
- Operating in a post Covid-19 environment.

The MTFP highlighted that the current financial position had moved, following the Local Government Settlement, to a position of requiring £1.851 million (up from £0.996 million due to the National Insurance decision) of funding from General Fund Reserves over the three-year period. This was a departure from the previous two years where the Council had tried to move to a more ongoing sustainable position. The reason for this movement in the short term was that

- In year three, 2027/28, the ongoing deficit to close going forward would be £484,000, half of which were National Insurance costs.
- That the Local Government Financial Settlement methodology would significantly change in 2026/27, and it would not be sensible to make savings where those services might need to be reinstated.
- That the general fund would still be at a strong level, at £12.526 million after allowing for this support which was well above 25 per cent of gross turnover.

The Council had reviewed the authority's position in line with the CIPFA Resilience Index. The data for the resilience index was obtained from the Revenue Expenditure and Financing England Outturn Report 2023-24 ('RO Forms') and reflected figures submitted by Local Authorities to

the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), published on 12th December 2024. The Council, in comparison to its nearest neighbours and levels of risk:

- Had lower risks in terms of levels of reserves, interest payable, levels of debt, and growth being above the baseline.
- Had a slightly higher than average fees and charges to services expenditure ratio.

This reflected the fact that the Council had no long-term debts and reasonable levels of General Fund and Earmarked Reserves. With fees and charges, these were the only real avenue to revenue increases given the limits on Council Tax rises.

In line with Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003, the report of the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) set out the robustness of estimates included in the budget and the adequacy of the Council's reserves. The Chief Financial Officer's opinion was that the estimates were robust.

Relevant budget holders were responsible for individual budgets and their preparation. All estimates were then scrutinised by Financial Services staff and the Corporate Leadership Team prior to submission to Members. The two tranche 2025/26 budget process had ensured that all budget assumptions had been reviewed and reconsidered by Officers, and then Members, through the Finance and Budget Scrutiny Working Group, Cabinet and Council.

The budget had a £1.526 million call on General Fund Reserves over the three-year period but by year three did start to move to a more sustainable position. More work would need to be done to incorporate changes to ensure financial sustainability was embedded across the organisation, especially with the change coming forward for Local Government in terms of funding and structure.

In terms of the adequacy of reserves, Budget and MTFP proposals forecast the level of General Fund balances at £12.526 million as at 31st March 2028, which was over five times the recommended 5 per cent of net level. The present positive MTFP position, took into account the updated position in terms of accounts being closed to the 2023/24 financial year. However, the "Disclaimer Opinions" still highlighted the potential of possible issues with opening balances. It was therefore prudent for the Council to build reserves, as they were the Council's single source of funding for business change initiatives.

Further work would be undertaken to ensure that expenditure levels were sustainable and matched by income over the medium to long term. Plans were therefore in place to continue to review budgets and identify and accelerate further savings opportunities.

The Cabinet Member for Finance concluded his presentation by reading out and proposing the recommendations on the MTFP arising from the meetings of the Cabinet held on 12th February and 19th February 2025.

Once the report had been presented, the following points were discussed by Members:

- The importance of setting aside funding to support legacy projects that would have a beneficial impact in Bromsgrove District long after the authority ceased to exist.
- The extent to which there might be risks to legacy funding of projects, such as the work associated with the Play Audit, if those works were to partly take place once a unitary authority had been established.
- The potential for sports clubs and Parish Councils to receive some of the legacy funding.
- The decision by Cabinet to withdraw from providing additional funding to the Poverty Truth Commission, following scrutiny at meetings of the Finance and Budget Working Group and Overview and Scrutiny Board. Due to concerns about the extent to which this project would have secured value for money, Members welcomed this decision.
- The hard work of Members of the Audit, Standards and Governance Committee in reviewing the Council's financial risks over time and in considering the accounts that had been submitted.
- The hard work of the Financial Services team in preparing both four sets of accounts in tight timescales as well as in the preparation of the MTFP. Members thanked Officers for their hard work.
- The targeted funding that had been proposed for initiatives in wards located outside Bromsgrove town centre. Members welcomed this funding.
- The fact that no alternative budgets had been submitted on this occasion for debate at the Council.
- The extent to which some of the Council's funds from the former GBSLEP could be used on legacy projects. Members were reminded that GBSLEP funding had to be spent on regeneration projects and would be subject to the submission of robust business cases.
- The need for all proposed legacy projects to be assessed in accordance with a robust set of criteria.
- The uncertainty, in terms of local government funding, in the medium and long-term, and the need for Council representatives to participate in Government consultation processes concerning future funding models.
- The decision not to propose any cuts to services at this stage, given the significant levels of forthcoming changes to local government.

- The different financial challenges that were experienced by District and County Councils. Members noted that a significant pressure for County and Unitary Councils arose from the costs associated with social care.
- The potential opportunities arising from Local Government Devolution.
- The speed with which Local Government Devolution was likely to occur in Worcestershire, given that the area had not been included in the Government's first tranche of reorganisation.
- The need for transparency in setting the Council's budget and planning for the future.
- Work that Officers had recently been asked to undertake to review play areas that were not managed by the Council.
- The opportunities that Members had had to feed into the budget setting process at meetings of the Finance and Budget Working Group, Overview and Scrutiny Board and Cabinet.

The recommendations were proposed by Councillor S. Colella and seconded by Councillor K. May.

In accordance with the Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2014, the decision in respect of this matter was taken by holding a formal recorded vote and the results were as follows:

Members Voting FOR the Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/26 to 2027/28:

Councillors A. Bailes, R. Bailes, S. Baxter, S. Colella, J. Elledge, D. Forsythe, E. Gray, D. Hopkins, H. Jones, B. Kumar, M. Marshall, K. May, P. McDonald, B. McEldowney, S. Nock, S. Peters, H. Rone-Clarke, J. Stanley, K. Taylor, S. Webb and P. Whittaker (21).

Members Voting AGAINST the Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/26 to 2027/28:

No Councillors (0).

Members voting to ABSTAIN on the Medium Term Financial Plan 2025/26 to 2027/28:

Councillors S. Ammar, J. Clarke, S. Evans, R. Hunter, D. Nicholl, J. Robinson and S. Robinson (7).

Therefore, on being put to the vote, the recommendations were carried.

RESOLVED that

- 1) The Tranche 2 growth proposals be approved.
- 2) The additional funding to the Council, as per the final Local Government Settlement, including the estimated levels for 2026/7 and 2027/8, be approved.
- 3) The Tranche 2 savings proposals, including an increase of Council Tax of 2.99 per cent, be approved.
- 4) the Commercial and Worcestershire Regulatory Services fee increases for 2025/26 be approved.
- 5) The updated five-year Capital Programme 2025/6 to 2029/30 along with its ongoing revenue costs be approved.
- 6) The levels of Earmarked Reserve being carried forward into future years and the setting up of the Property and ERP Reserves be approved.
- 7) The level of General Fund balances following additions from the 2025/6 MTFP be approved.
- 8) Members take account of any feedback from the Tranche 2 consultation process undertaken.
- 9) The updated MTFP following discussions at Overview and Scrutiny Board on 11th February and amendments agreed at Cabinet on 12th February, as detailed in the Cabinet minute 69/24, be approved.
- 10) Subject to incorporating the changes detailed in recommendation 9 above, the MTFP Recommendations made in the report to Cabinet on 12th February be approved.
- 11) The funding of £40,000 from Reserves allocated to the Poverty Truth Commission project be removed from the Medium-Term Financial Plan.

(At the end of the debate in respect of this item, there was a brief adjournment from 19.42 to 19.54.)

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RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CABINET MEETING HELD ON 19TH FEBRUARY 2025 (TO FOLLOW)

The Chairman advised that a meeting of the Cabinet had taken place earlier that day at which recommendations had been agreed for the consideration of Council. Whilst there had not been sufficient time to prepare the minutes of that meeting in time for Council, recommendations had been tabled for Members' consideration.

Local Development Scheme

The Cabinet Member for Planning, Licensing and Regulatory Services opened the item by thanking Mr J. Coleman for the comments that he had submitted earlier in the evening to the Council. It was highlighted that the Council would be undertaking consultation in respect of the content of the Local Plan and the Cabinet Member for Planning, Licensing and Regulatory Services urged residents to take part in this process.

The Local Development Scheme provided a basic timetable for the Local Plan process at the Council. The report had been reviewed at meetings

of both the Overview and Scrutiny Board and Strategic Planning Steering Group (SPSG). In both cases, Members had been advised that the Council had limited choice in terms of the timetable. However, Councils needed to set their own timetables as otherwise, under the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), there was a risk of central Government intervention.

Further work would continue moving forward in respect of preparation of the Local Plan. Members would have an opportunity to contribute to this work by attending meetings of the SPSG and all Councillors were urged to participate in this process.

During consideration of this item, the Cabinet Member for Planning, Licensing and Regulatory Services highlighted that the Cabinet had amended the second recommendation in the report to request a delegation to the Assistant Director of Planning and Leisure Services to be used following consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning, Licensing and Regulatory Services, rather than to grant a delegation directly to the Cabinet Member. This amendment had been required, in line with constitutional requirements at the authority, because Cabinet Members did not have individual decision-making powers.

The recommendations were proposed by Councillor K. Taylor and seconded by Councillor K. May.

RESOLVED that

- 1) Bromsgrove District Council Local Development Scheme 2025 be approved as the Council's programme for plan-making, effective as of 19th February 2025; and
- 2) Delegated authority be granted to the Assistant Director for Planning and Leisure Services, following consultation with the Cabinet Member for Planning, Licensing and Worcestershire Regulatory Services, to approve updates to the Local Development Scheme as required.

Council Tax Resolutions 2025/26

The Cabinet Member for Finance presented the Council Tax Resolutions 2025/26 for Council's consideration.

Members were informed that the Council Tax Resolutions ensured that the Residents of Bromsgrove were charged the correct Council Tax. That Council Tax included elements for a number of partner organisations including:

- Worcestershire County Council
- Bromsgrove District Council
- The Police and Crime Commissioner for West Mercia
- The Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service

- The 19 Parish Councils in the District

The report detailed how much each precepting authority was charging across the full range of property bands, A to H. Overall, the average band D charge had increased in the following ways:

- For the County Council, an increase of 4.99 per cent to £1,615.71
- For the District Council an increase of 2.99 per cent to £257.48
- For the Police and Crime Commissioner an increase of 5.05 per cent to £291.50
- For the Fire and Rescue Authority an increase of 5.14 per cent to £102.22

The Council was due to collect £88.3 million of Council Tax income in 2025/26 on behalf of all these precepting organisations. The funds would be distributed to recipient organisations.

The recommendations were proposed by Councillor S. Colella and seconded by Councillor K. May.

In accordance with the Local Authorities (Standing Orders) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2014, the decision on the Council Tax Resolutions was taken by a formal recorded vote process.

Members voting FOR the Council Tax Resolutions 2025/26

Councillors S. Ammar, A. Bailes, R. Bailes, S. Baxter, J. Clarke, S. Colella, J. Elledge, S. Evans, D. Forsythe, E. Gray, D. Hopkins, R. Hunter, H. Jones, B. Kumar, M. Marshall, K. May, P. McDonald, B. McEldowney, D. Nicholl, S. Nock, S. Peters, J. Robinson, S. Robinson, H. Rone-Clarke, J. Stanley, K. Taylor, S. Webb and P. Whittaker (28).

Members voting AGAINST the Council Tax Resolutions 2025/26

No Councillors (0).

Members voting to ABSTAIN on the Council Tax resolutions 2025/26

No councillors (0).

Therefore, on being put to the vote, the recommendations were carried.

RESOLVED

- 1) The calculation for the Council Tax requirement for the Council's own purposes for 2025/26 (excluding parish precepts) as £9,876,907.05.
- 2) That the following amounts be calculated for the year 2025/26 in accordance with sections 31 to 36 of the Act:

- a) £48,010,187.83 being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in section 31A(2) of the Act (taking into account all precepts issued to it by Parish Councils) (i.e., gross expenditure).
 - b) £36,759,479.34 being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in section 31A(3) of the Act. (i.e gross income).
 - c) £11,250,708.49 being the amount by which the aggregate of 1.2.2(a) above exceeds the aggregate of 1.2.2(b) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with section 31A(4) of the Act, as its Council Tax requirement for the year. (Item R in the formula in section 31B of the Act).
 - d) £293.29 being the amount at 1.2.2(c) above (Item R), all divided by Item T (1.1(a) above), calculated by the Council, in accordance with section 31B of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year (including parish precepts).
 - e) £1,373,801.44 being the aggregate amount of all special items (parish precepts) referred to in section 34(1) of the Act (as per the attached schedule 3)
 - f) £257.48 being the amount at 1.2.2(d) above less the result given by dividing the amount at 1.2.2(e) above by Item T (1.1 (a) above), calculated by the Council, in accordance with section 34(2) of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which no parish precept relates.
 - g) The amounts shown in column 4 of schedule 1. These are the basic amount of Council Tax for the year for dwellings in those parts of the Council's area shown in column 1 of the schedule respectively to which special items relate, calculated by the Council in accordance with section 34(3) of the Act. (District and parish combined at band D).
 - h) The amounts shown in columns 7 to 14 of schedule 1 being the amount given by multiplying the amount at 1.2.2(g) above by the number which, in the proportion set out in section 5(1) of the Act, is applicable to dwellings listed in a particular valuation band divided by the number of dwellings listed in valuation band D, calculated by the council, in accordance with section 36(1) of the Act, as the amounts to be taken into account for the year in respect of categories of dwellings listed in different valuation bands.
- 3) That it is to be noted that for the year 2025/26, Worcestershire County Council, Police and Crime Commissioner for West Mercia, and Hereford and Worcester Fire Authority have issued precepts to the Council in accordance with section 40 of the Act for each category of dwelling in the Council's area as indicated below:

	Valuation Bands							
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£
Worcestershire County Council	1,077.14	1,256.66	1,436.19	1,615.71	1,974.76	2,333.80	2,692.85	3,231.42
Police and Crime Commissioner for West Mercia	194.33	226.72	259.11	291.50	356.28	421.06	485.83	583.00
Hereford and Worcester Fire Authority	68.15	79.50	90.86	102.22	124.94	147.65	170.37	204.44

- 4) That having calculated the aggregate in each case of the amounts at 1.2.2(h) and 1.2.3 above, that Bromsgrove District Council in accordance with sections 30 and 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 hereby sets the amounts shown in schedule 2 as the amounts of Council Tax for 2025/26 for each part of its area and for each of the categories of dwellings.

- 5) The Director of Resources be authorised to make payments under section 90(2) of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 from the collection fund by ten equal instalments between April 2025 to March 2026 as detailed below

	Precept (£)	Surplus/Deficit on Collection Fund (£)	Total to Pay (£)
Worcestershire County Council	61,978,747.00	417,276.00	62,395,750.00
Police and Crime Commissioner for West Mercia	11,181,910.85	75,243.70	11,257,154.55
Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Authority	3,921,149.04	26,361.05	3,947,510.09

- 6) The Director of Resources is authorised to make transfers under section 97 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 from the collection fund to the general fund the sum of £11,250,708.49 being the Council's own demand on the collection fund (£9,876,907.05) and parish precepts (£1,373,801.44) and the distribution of the surplus/deficit on the collection fund (£76,521.40).

- 7) That the Director of Resources is authorised to make payments from the general fund to parish councils the sums listed on Schedule 3 by two equal instalments on 1st April 2025 and 1st October 2025 in respect of the precept levied on the Council.

- 8) That the above resolutions to be signed by the Chief Executive for use in legal proceedings in the Magistrates' Court for the recovery of unpaid Council Taxes.

- 9) Notices of the making of the said Council Taxes signed by the Chief Executive are given by advertisement in the local press under section 38(2) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992.

98\24

TO NOTE THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE CABINET HELD ON 12TH FEBRUARY 2025 (TO FOLLOW)

The minutes from the Cabinet meeting held on 12th February 2025 were noted without comment.

99\24

QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

the Chairman advised that there had been five Questions on Notice submitted for consideration at this meeting.

Question submitted by Councillor J. Elledge:

“Can we please get a list of all bus shelters in the district along with -
A/ who owns them
B/ which team maintains each one
C/ the current state of repair of each one and example of what each repair status means
D/ the planned maintenance schedule for them?”

The Leader provided responses to each part of the question in turn.

In respect of part (a) Members were advised that a list of all Council owned bus shelters had already been circulated. Currently there was no list available of bus shelters under the responsibility of third parties. In terms of part (b), the Council’s Minor Works Team maintained Council owned bus shelters. In respect of parts (c) and (d), Council was informed that bus shelters were inspected every two years to identify any issues which were then prioritised to be addressed. The last inspection was in 2023 and they were due to be inspected again in 2025. The Council was also looking at utilising software within Environmental Services that would allow the authority to track the condition of bus shelters electronically.

Councillor Elledge subsequently asked a supplementary question which sought clarification as to whether bus shelters that were not owned by the Council were instead owned by Parish Councils.

The Leader responded by explaining that there was a mixture of arrangements in place. Bus shelters were owned and maintained by Bromsgrove District Council, Worcestershire County Council, Parish Councils and some Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations.

Question Submitted by Councillor J. Clarke

“I regularly receive comments asking what the Council is doing to reverse the decline of our High street. So, I went on a short walk through the town centre. This revealed 20 businesses are boarded up and with

forthcoming closures, including the Halifax and Lloyds, this will soon rise to 23.

Has this Council explored using the High Street Rental Auctions powers launched in December as a way of tackling this problem?"

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Regeneration responded by explaining that the Council was in the process of reviewing the High Street Rental Auctions (HSRA) powers alongside the recent Town Centre Healthcheck to explore potential properties that would be suitable for the powers. The authority had the power to hold rental auctions to let qualifying high-street premises that had been unoccupied for the whole of the preceding year, or for at least 366 days in the preceding two years. Should there be qualifying premises, the success of the initiative required willing potential tenants to bid on the vacant properties.

Councillor Clarke subsequently asked a supplementary question which made reference to the availability of funding to support the HSRA process and he questioned whether the Council would be submitting a bid for this funding.

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Regeneration explained that this was in the process of being investigated further.

Question Submitted by Councillor S. Robinson

"With Worcestershire County Council encouraging residents to cut back hedges in February, do you not agree it is time for residents in the district to have the opportunity to have their brown bins collected from the start of February?"

The Cabinet Member for Environmental Services and Community Safety responded by commenting that the Council's current service operated for nine months of the year from the last week in February until the end of November (40 weeks) to reflect the main growing season when residents were maintaining their gardens and producing the majority of their garden waste. The Council had extended the garden waste service through the winter on a number of occasions previously to support residents with their winter maintenance, most recently during the Covid Pandemic in 2020/21, but saw very low take up by residents both in terms of number of households placing their bins out for collection, and the volume of material inside them. When considered against the cost of operating these vehicles on a weekly basis, and the environmental impact of providing the service, the volume of material collected did not offset the carbon footprint of operating the service in this period. Therefore, in the Council's current service model, this had not been proposed as a permanent alteration; and the same concerns would apply to the smaller extension suggested.

Given the scale of changes in the process of being implemented around how waste was managed nationally and the additional burdens this was placing on the Council, officers had been tasked with reviewing the future arrangements for these services. As part of that the garden waste service would also be reviewed to determine whether there was a way to further extend the service for residents whilst balancing the financial and environmental costs.

In the interim though, residents were still able to dispose of their garden waste at the County Council's Household Recycling sites free of charge throughout the year. When the service recommenced at the end of February, the grass had typically not yet started to grow sufficiently for cuttings to impact on residents' capacity, so any hedge cuttings that residents produced during January and February and stored in their brown bins could then be collected.

Councillor S. Robinson subsequently asked in a supplementary question for all Councillors to be provided with the figures relating to the previous occasion when the garden waste collection service operating times had been extended. The Cabinet Member for Environmental Services and Community Safety undertook to provide this information after the meeting.

Question Submitted by Councillor J. Robinson

"Can the portfolio holder update the council what the plans are for Stourbridge Road Car Park?"

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Regeneration informed Members that the land was sold subject to contract and conditional upon planning permission being granted. The planning applications were pending on the date of the meeting.

Councillor J. Robinson subsequently asked in a supplementary question how long the planning status was likely to remain pending.

The Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Regeneration responded by advising that she was unable to comment on this matter for legal reasons.

Question Submitted by Councillor S. Evans

"In the last full council meeting the portfolio holder confirmed the council were looking into setting up a Bromsgrove BID. Can you confirm if any businesses have suggested they would be in support of this and what level of tax they would be expected to pay?"

In responding, the Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Regeneration referred Members to the portfolio holder annual report that she had presented at the Full Council meeting held in January 2025.

This report was quoted, where a statement had been made that “A feasibility study for a proposed business improvement district for Bromsgrove Town Centre will be undertaken and work will take place with existing networks to establish a BID steering group. The feasibility stage will take approximately 3 months. If it is feasible to move forward, the process to set up the BID will take up to 18 months.” The detail referred to in the question would form part of this process.

100\24

MOTIONS ON NOTICE

The Chairman highlighted that one Motion on Notice had been submitted for consideration at the Council meeting. However, in advance of the meeting, group leaders had agreed that the Motion should be referred for consideration at the following meeting of the Constitution Review Working Group scheduled to take place on 10th April 2025. On this basis, it had been agreed that the Motion would not be debated at the meeting.

101\24

TO CONSIDER ANY URGENT BUSINESS, DETAILS OF WHICH HAVE BEEN NOTIFIED TO THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF LEGAL, DEMOCRATIC AND PROCUREMENT SERVICES PRIOR TO THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE MEETING AND WHICH THE CHAIRMAN, BY REASON OF SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES, CONSIDERS TO BE OF SO URGENT A NATURE THAT IT CANNOT WAIT UNTIL THE NEXT MEETING

There was no urgent business for consideration on this occasion.

The meeting closed at 8.24 p.m.

Chairman