

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COUNCIL MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 25 February 2026

Time: 7.00pm

Place: Council Chamber

Present: Councillors: Nazmin Chowdhury (Mayor), Lloyd Briscoe, (Deputy Mayor) Myla Arceno, Julie Ashley-Wren, Philip Bibby, Stephen Booth, Robert Boyle, , Rob Broom, Jim Brown, Kamal Choudhury, Forhad Chowdhury, Peter Clark, Coleen De Freitas, Akin Elekolusi, Alistair Gordon, Lynda Guy, Richard Henry, Rob Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Mason Humberstone, Dermot Kehoe, Lin Martin-Haugh, Andy McGuinness, Sarah Mead, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater, Tom Plater, Ceara Roopchand, Loraine Rossati, Simon Speller, Jeannette Thomas, Carolina Veres, Peter Wilkins, Jade Woods and Tom Wren

Start / End Start Time: 7.00pm
Time: End Time: 9.20pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Sandra Barr, Leanne Brady and Nigel Williams.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES 21 JANUARY 2026

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Council Meeting held on 21 January 2025 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Mayor.

The Mayor then referred to a list of community events she had attended since the last meeting including:

- 104th Birthday celebration for a Woodlands View Care Home resident;
- The AGM of the Betty Gains Community Trust;
- Holocaust Memorial Event;
- Hitchin Priory Rotary Club and North Herts Music School Music Bursary;
- Stevenage and North Herts Schools Writing Project Awards Ceremony;
- National Apprenticeship Week Event; and
- Mayor of Welwyn Hatfield Curry Night.

3 GENERAL FUND AND COUNCIL TAX SETTING 2026/27 AND CAPITAL STRATEGY

Councillor Richard Henry, Leader of the Council, introduced the proposed 2026/2027 General Fund Budget and Capital Strategy 2025/26 – 2029/30, together with final proposals for the 2026/27 Council Tax. In his introduction, Councillor Henry was pleased to announce that for 2026/27, the Council would be setting another balanced budget and was able to put additional money aside for the future thanks, in part, to the Government's changes to how Local Authorities were funded through the Fair Funding Review.

The Leader then shared several highlights, achievements and initiatives which had been delivered including:

- The launch of Claxton House, in partnership with Mace, formerly known as Swingate House which would deliver 261 new homes and a ground floor commercial unit;
- Joint working with North Hertfordshire college to provide a construction training facility in the old indoor market building;
- The Station Gateway major regeneration project which would provide a new front door to Stevenage through the provision of new amenities including high-quality housing and workspaces, improved transport, green infrastructure, and local amenities;
- A new £45 million, state-of-the-art Sport and Leisure Hub featuring a 25-metre pool, studios, gym, watersplash facility and café;
- the biggest change for the Council and other councils in Hertfordshire was Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), a major plan to replace Hertfordshire's current two-tier system of 11 councils with single tier unitary authorities.

Councillor Jeannette Thomas, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Resources and Performance then moved the motion, including the recommendations regarding the General Fund Budget 2026/27 and Capital Strategy 2025/26 – 2029/30 and the formal Council Tax Resolution, which had been circulated to Members. She advised that she was proud to be presenting a balanced budget for next year with no cuts to services.

Councillor Thomas then highlighted the following points:

- The latest Residents Survey showed a marked improvement in satisfaction with how the council was run, rising from 62% in 2021 to 68%—which was 12 percentage points above the most recent Local Government Association (LGA) benchmark;
- The Council had strengthened its green credentials by planting 4,500 new trees, with the newly created woodland areas supporting the Climate Change initiative. Further improvements were planned across the town, including increased investment in hedgerow pruning to enhance the visual quality of neighbourhood environments;
- A new, separate, weekly food waste collection service would shortly be launched across Stevenage. Flats that currently had shared communal bins for refuse and recycling would receive a shared wheely bin for food waste and

- all flats would receive an individual kitchen caddy;
- The Council launched its apprenticeship opportunities through the Stevenage Even Better Futures programme, designed for school leavers, those seeking a career change, and residents of all ages. Over 200 residents had applied for a career development opportunity.
- Residents would be supported through additional discretionary housing payments and support for those struggling to pay their council tax short term;
- This year's budget had given the opportunity to make improvements to the Gordon Craig Theatre – Lighting and carpeting;
- An increase to the financial support councillors could give through Local Community Budgets. Ward councillors could award a small amount of money to groups and charities to help local celebrations for the town's 80th Anniversary. Alongside this, £50,000 had been allocated to mark this special occasion of the 80th Anniversary with residents;
- Council tax would be increased by 2.99% which for Band D properties the increase would be just 14p extra a week or £7.37 a year and for those on maximum council tax support just 1p extra per week for all our 120 council services. However, for those living on their own it would be £3.66 per week and for residents that needed support to pay their council tax bill, the Council Tax Support Scheme would mean residents on full benefit would just pay 8.5% of their council tax bill. An Exceptional Hardship Scheme was also in place for those facing financial difficulty in paying their council tax and for pensioners on maximum benefit, the cost would be zero.

The Deputy Leader concluded thanked her fellow Cabinet Members, all of the Committees and Chairs and the cross party Council's Financial Services Group for their hard work in helping to develop the capital and revenue budget for next year.

Councillor Henry then formally seconded the recommendations from the Cabinet on the General Fund and Capital Budgets, together with the formal Council Tax resolution, as set out at Appendix H to the report.

Councillor Mason Humberstone moved and Councillor Rob Henry seconded the following amendment:

'This Council notes that:

1. The Labour Administration's proposed 2026/27 budget includes an increase in Council Tax at a time when many Stevenage residents continue to face significant financial pressures;
2. The Council has discretion within its General Fund to reprioritise expenditure and make operational savings.

This Council therefore resolves to amend the 2026/27 Budget as follows:

1. Council Tax

That the proposed Council Tax increase for 2026/27 be removed and replaced with a Council Tax Freeze, at a cost of: £212,815 in 2026/27.

2. Funding of the Freeze

That this cost be fully funded through the following savings:

1. Deletion of Climate Change Team post(s) - saving £101,240.
2. Reversion from HVO fuel to diesel for Council fleet operations – saving £132,000

Total Savings: £233,240
Cost of Freeze: £212,815

3. Future Years

That in future financial years the cost of the Council Tax Freeze be met through:

1. Ongoing savings achieved through the redistribution and reprioritisation of funding set out; and
2. Where necessary, support from General Fund balances, which are projected to remain above the Council's minimum recommended reserve levels.'

In moving the amendment, Councillor Humberstone advised that the amendment proposed a freeze to Council Tax reflecting the views of residents who were already facing financial pressures. He commented that household bills continued to rise while incomes did not, and therefore the Council should also seek to make efficiencies. He added that a Council Tax freeze for the year would send a clear message to residents, and confirmed that the amendment was fully costed and affordable.

In seconding the amendment, Councillor Rob Henry acknowledged the significant work undertaken by both Officers and Members in preparing the Budget. However, he advised that he had not seen any evidence setting out the impact that a Council Tax freeze would have on the delivery of Council services.

Members made the following comments:

- It was argued that a Council Tax freeze would place the Council in a difficult financial position in future years, and that increasing Council Tax was the more financially prudent option.
- It was stated that climate change remained a significant issue, and that it would not be responsible or reasonable to reduce the Climate Change Team or scale back climate-related commitments in order to enable a Council Tax freeze.
- Members noted that although the Council collected a substantial amount of Council Tax, only a small proportion of the total was retained by Stevenage Borough Council.
- It was acknowledged that, although tough choices were being made by all, the expectations of residents regarding the Council's role were reflected in the Council Tax collected and the services provided.
- Concern was expressed that returning to diesel vehicles would be a retrograde step, given the significant public health risks associated with emissions.

Following debate, a vote was taken on the amendment. The amendment was lost. At this juncture the Monitoring Officer provided advice regarding any issues and complaints raised by Members relating to the Code of Conduct confirming that such matters would be addressed in accordance with the prescribed procedure outside of the Council meeting.

A further debate then took place on the substantive motion including the following comments:

- The budget was described as a positive development for residents, enabling delivery of key projects including the new sports and leisure centre, the new running track at Ridlins, and the refurbishment of the Gordon Craig Theatre, alongside events marking the Town's 80th anniversary;
- The budget would support work to tackle homelessness, rough sleeping and domestic abuse;
- Councillor Andy McGuinness, Leader of the Opposition, stated that his Group had welcomed many of the initiatives undertaken by the Council over the past 12 months and he wished to congratulate the Strategic Director and Chief Financial Officer and her team for delivering another balanced budget. He commented that it was important for Members to focus on the issues that united them rather than those that divided them. While acknowledging that the cost of living crisis remained a reality for many residents, he noted that staffing levels had already been reduced and that any further reductions could impact the viability of Council services.
- Regeneration of the town would continue, including commencement of the landmark redevelopment of The Oval, while maintaining protection of frontline services;
- Concern was expressed regarding the requirement to commit funding for Local Government Reorganisation, despite the Government's view that these costs would be recoverable once unitary councils were established, as the associated financial projections remained uncertain;
- It was noted that the increase in Council Tax came at a time when many residents were already experiencing financial pressures due to rising household bills and the ongoing cost-of-living concerns.

A recorded vote* was then taken on the motion, and it was **RESOLVED**:

1. That the following be approved:
 - a. the revised working revenue estimates for the year 2025/26 amounting to £10,585,480 and the revenue estimates for 2026/27 amounting to £13,587,330;
 - b. the contribution to balances totalling £6,053 in 2025/26;
 - c. the contribution to balances totalling £241 in 2026/27.
2. That it be noted that at its meeting on 10 December 2025 the Cabinet calculated the amount of 28,884.5 Band D equivalent properties as its council

tax base for the year 2026/27 in accordance with Regulation 3 of the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) Regulations 1992 made under Section 31B of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 as amended by Section 74 of the Localism Act 2011.

3. That the following amounts be calculated by the Council for the year 2026/27 in accordance with Sections 31 to 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 as amended by Section 74 of the Localism Act 2011:

- | | | |
|----|------------------------|--|
| a. | £91,216,105 | Being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(2)(a) to (f) of the Act, less the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(3)(a) to (d) |
| b. | £83,885,797 | Being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(3)(a) to (d) of the Act. |
| c. | £7,330,308 | Being the amount by which the aggregate at 3a above exceeds the aggregate at 3b above, calculated by the Council in accordance with Section 31A(4) of the Act as its Council Tax requirement for the year. |
| d. | £253.78 | Being the amount at 3c divided by the amount at 2 above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31B (1) of the Act, as the basic amount of its council tax for the year |
| e. | <u>Valuation Bands</u> | |
| | A | £169.18 |
| | B | £197.38 |
| | C | £225.58 |
| | D | £253.78 |
| | E | £310.18 |
| | F | £366.57 |
| | G | £422.97 |
| | H | £507.56 |

Being the amounts given by multiplying the amount at 3d. 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 which in that proportion is applicable to dwellings listed in valuation 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.

4. a. That it be noted that for the year 2026/27 Hertfordshire County Council have stated the following amounts in precepts issued to the Council, in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, for each of the categories of the dwellings shown below:

Valuation Bands

	Basic Amount of Council Tax	Adult Social Care Charge	2026/27 Council Tax
A	£1,030.46	£208.33	£1,238.79
B	£1,202.20	£243.06	£1,445.26
C	£1,373.95	£277.78	£1,651.73
D	£1,545.69	£312.50	£1,858.19
E	£1,889.18	£381.94	£2,271.12
F	£2,232.66	£451.39	£2,684.05
G	£2,576.15	£520.83	£3,096.98
H	£3,091.38	£625.00	£3,716.38

- b. That it be noted that for the year 2026/27 Hertfordshire Police Authority have stated the following amounts in precepts issued to the Council, in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 and amended by Section 27 of the Police and Magistrates' Court Act 1994, for each of the categories of the dwellings shown below:

Valuation Bands

A	£186.67
B	£217.78
C	£248.89
D	£280.00
E	£342.22
F	£404.44
G	£466.67
H	£560.00

5. That, having calculated the aggregate in each case of the amounts at 3e. and 4a. and b. above, the Council in accordance with Section 30(2) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, hereby sets the following amounts as the amounts for council tax for the year 2026/27 for each of the categories of dwellings shown below:

Valuation Bands

A	£1,594.64
B	£1,860.42
C	£2,126.20
D	£2,391.97
E	£2,923.52
F	£3,455.06
G	£3,986.62
H	£4,783.94

6. To determine in accordance with Section 52ZB Local Government Finance Act 1992 that the Council's basic amount of Council Tax for 2026/27 is not excessive in accordance with principles approved by the Secretary of State under Section 52ZC having calculated the aggregate in each case of the amounts at 3e.
7. The 2025/26 revised net expenditure on the General Fund of **£10,585,490** is approved as set out in paragraph 4.8.1.
8. That for 2025/26 the sum of £250,000 is transferred to the Capital earmarked reserve to support the Draft Capital Strategy as set out in paragraph 4.2.6 and included in the revised net expenditure of £10,585,490.
9. The updated position on the General Fund Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) as summarised in section 4.10 be noted.
10. The minimum level of General Fund reserves of **£3,648,355**, based on the 2026/27 risk assessment of balances, as shown at Appendix C to this report, be approved.
11. The contingency sum of **£500,000** within which the Cabinet can approve supplementary estimates (in addition to the General Fund net budget), be approved for 2026/27 (reflecting the level of balances available above the minimum amount). With a further **£500,000** approved specifically for additional Local Government Reorganisation transition costs if required.
12. The 2026/27 Balancing the Budget options as set out in section 4.5 and Appendix A, totalling **£84,640** for the General Fund, be included into the Council's budget setting processes.
13. That the one-off growth bids of **£589,000** as set out in paragraph 4.6.5-4.6.6 and

detailed in Appendix G be approved.

14. That the pressures identified in sections 4.2 and 4.7 to this report be noted.
15. That the 2026/27 Balancing the Budget growth options as set out in section 4.6 and Appendix B, totalling **£145,140 (and £95,140 from 2027/28)** for the General Fund, be included in the Council's budget.
16. That the sum set aside of Local Enterprise Board (LEP) loans of **£500,000** be approved for 2026/27 and for future years the amounts set out in paragraph 4.2.2.
17. That for 2026/27 the sum of **£1,200,000** be approved to support the Draft Capital Strategy as set out in paragraphs 4.2.5-4.2.7.
18. That for 2026/27 the use of **£500,000** Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) funding for the purchase of two new freighters as set out in paragraph 4.1.14 and the use of EPR grant funded recycling initiatives of **£751,160** as set out in Appendix F and paragraph 4.1.15 be approved.
19. The draft General Fund Budget for 2026/27 of **£13,587,330** is proposed, with a contribution to balances of **£241** and a Band D Council Tax of **£253.78**, (assuming a 2.99% Council Tax increase).
20. That the sums included in the 2026/27 Budget for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) transition budgets of **£560,000** be approved and for future years as set out in paragraph 4.2.4.
21. That the ringfencing of **£2,000,000** of Business Rates gain reserves for the repayment of LEP loans as set out in paragraph 4.10.6 be approved.
22. That the Council Tax Support scheme for 2026/27 as set out in paragraphs 4.3.6-4.3.10 be approved.
23. That the Section 25 Statement on Robustness of Estimates and Adequacy of Reserve as set out in Appendix D be approved.
24. That the Equalities Impact Assessment (EQIA) for the 2026/27 General Fund budget be noted, (Appendix E)
25. That the feedback on the budget from Overview and Scrutiny as set out in Para.4.13.1 and public consultation in section 4.14 be noted.
26. Final General Fund growth bids identified for inclusion in the Capital Strategy (section 4.2, and Appendix A to the report) be approved totalling £7.9Million for 2026/27-2028/29.
27. Final General Fund Capital Budget for 2025/26 to 2029/30 of £118Million, as set out in Appendix B to the report be approved.

28. Forecast of and approach to resourcing the General Fund capital programme as outlined in the report (Paragraph 4.4) be approved.
29. The revenue contribution to capital, 2026/27 to 2028/29 as set out in table 4, paragraph 4.3.4 be approved of £4.6Million to fund the capital programme.
30. That the proposed use of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) contributions of £225k as set out in section 4.6 be approved.
31. The approved revenue surplus in any year of up to £500K that can be allocated to the capital reserve to support capital expenditure be noted.
32. That the comments from Council Financial Security Group and Overview and Scrutiny as set out in section 4.11 be noted.
33. That the legal implications of Section 24 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 in relation to financial decisions (capital) made by a council that is due to be abolished or reorganised in section 5.2 be noted.

*Recorded Vote on Substantive motion:

For – Councillors Myla Arceno, Julie Ashley-Wren, Stephen Booth, Robert Boyle, Lloyd Briscoe, Rob Broom, Jim Brown, Kamal Choudhury, Forhad Chowdhury, Nazmin Chowdhury, Peter Clark, Coleen De Freitas, Akin Elekolusi, Alistair Gordon, Lyn Guy, Richard Henry, Jackie Hollywell, Dermot Kehoe, Andy McGuinness, Lin Martin-Haugh, Sarah Mead, Robin Parker, Claire Parris, Ellie Plater, Tom Plater, Ceara Roopchand, Loraine Rossati, Simon Speller, Jeannette Thomas, Carolina Veres, Peter Wilkins, Jade Woods and Tom Wren - 33

Against – Councillors Phil Bibby, Mason Humberstone and Rob Henry - 3

Abstentions – 0

Not present – Councillors Sandra Barr, Leanne Brady and Nigel Williams – 3

4 **ANNUAL TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY INCLUDING PRUDENTIAL INDICATORS 2026/27**

The Council considered a report in respect of the Annual Treasury Management Strategy 2026/27, including its Annual Investment Strategy, Prudential Indicators and Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Policy following consideration by the Audit Committee and Cabinet.

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that the Treasury Management Strategy 2026/27 be approved.

5 **MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES SCHEME 2026/27**

The Council considered a report in respect of the Members' Allowances Scheme for 2026/27.

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that the Members' Allowances Scheme for 2026/27, as set out in Appendix A to the report, be agreed.

6 **PAY POLICY STATEMENT 2026/27**

The Council considered a report in respect of the Pay Policy Statement for the financial year 2026/27.

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED**:

1. That the Pay Policy Statement set out in accordance with the Localism Act 2011 and the Local Government Transparency Code 2015, as attached at Appendix 1 to the report, be approved.
2. That the pay policy statement be placed on the Council's website once approved.

7 **DECISIONS TAKEN BY THE EXECUTIVE UNDER THE SPECIAL URGENCY PROVISIONS OF THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES (EXECUTIVE ARRANGEMENTS) (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) (ENGLAND) REGULATIONS 2012**

The Council considered a report advising of decision(s) taken by the Cabinet in accordance with the Special Urgency provisions of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012.

The Chief Executive advised Council that whilst the requirement to report on this was a procedural matter, on 16 February the Leaders of those respective Councils were notified by the Secretary of the State that he would be withdrawing his decision to postpone local government elections on 7 May. On that basis, and as Returning Officer, the Chief Executive confirmed that the Council was fully preparing to administer the scheduled Council elections on 7 May.

A Member noted that the reference in the report to the "postponement" of elections was incorrect, as the proposal would have resulted in a cancellation rather than a postponement.

It was moved, seconded and **RESOLVED** that the report be noted.

CHAIR