
Meeting COUNCIL
Portfolio Area RESOURCES AND PERFORMANCE
Date 25 February 2026



DRAFT GENERAL FUND AND COUNCIL TAX SETTING 2026/27

KEY DECISION

Author Clare Fletcher
Contributors Senior Leadership Team
Lead Officer Clare Fletcher
Contact Officer Clare Fletcher

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To consider the Council's draft 2026/27 General Fund Budget, Council Tax Support Scheme and draft proposals for the 2025/26 Council Tax.
- 1.2 To set out the Council's approach to financial resilience and the measures taken to date to ensure that the General Fund can withstand financial pressures such as higher inflation and historic lower government funding through its Balancing the Budget priority and associated activities as set out in Sections 4.5 and 4.10.
- 1.3 This report will also set out that the improved funding position enables the Council to set aside monies to cover Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) Loan repayment costs, investment into capital projects otherwise not funded, new food waste service offer to residents, funding to support LGR transition as required by Government, and one-off initiatives set out in Section 4.6.
- 1.4 To consider changes to the projected 2025/26 General Fund Budget.

- 1.5 To consider the comments from Overview and Scrutiny as part of the Budget and Policy Framework.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

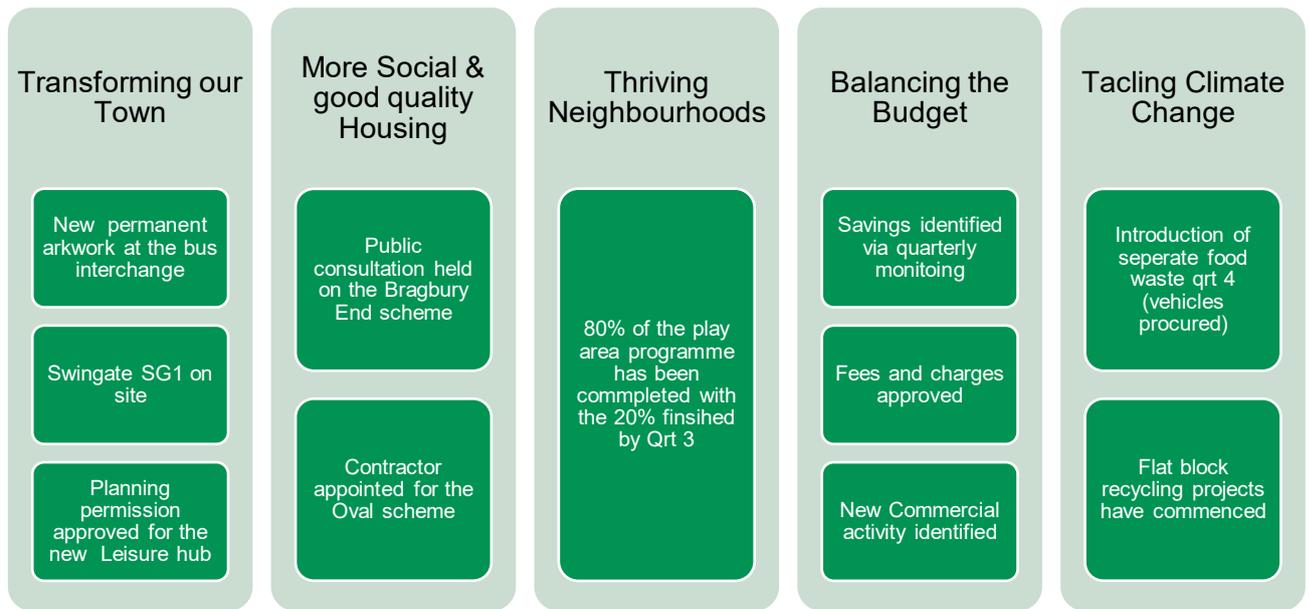
That Council approve:

- 2.1 The 2025/26 revised net expenditure on the General Fund of **£10,585,490** is approved as set out in paragraph 4.8.1.
- 2.2 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.
- 2.3 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).
- 2.4 The updated position on the General Fund Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) as summarised in section 4.10 be noted.
- 2.5 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, is approved.
- 2.6 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.
- 2.7 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.
- 2.8 That Members approve the one-off growth bids of **£589,000** as set out in paragraph 4.6.5-4.6.6 and detailed in Appendix G.
- 2.9 That the pressures identified in sections 4.2 and 4.7 to this report are noted.
- 2.10 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.
- 2.11 That the sum set aside of Local Enterprise Board (LEP) loans of **£500,000** is approved for 2026/27 and for future years the amounts set out in paragraph 4.2.2.
- 2.12 That for 2026/27 the sum of **£1,200,000** is approved to support the Draft Capital Strategy as set out in paragraphs 4.2.5-4.2.7.
- 2.13 That for 2026/27 Members approve 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 also approve the use of EPR grant funded recycling initiatives of **£751,160** as set out in Appendix F and paragraph 4.1.15.

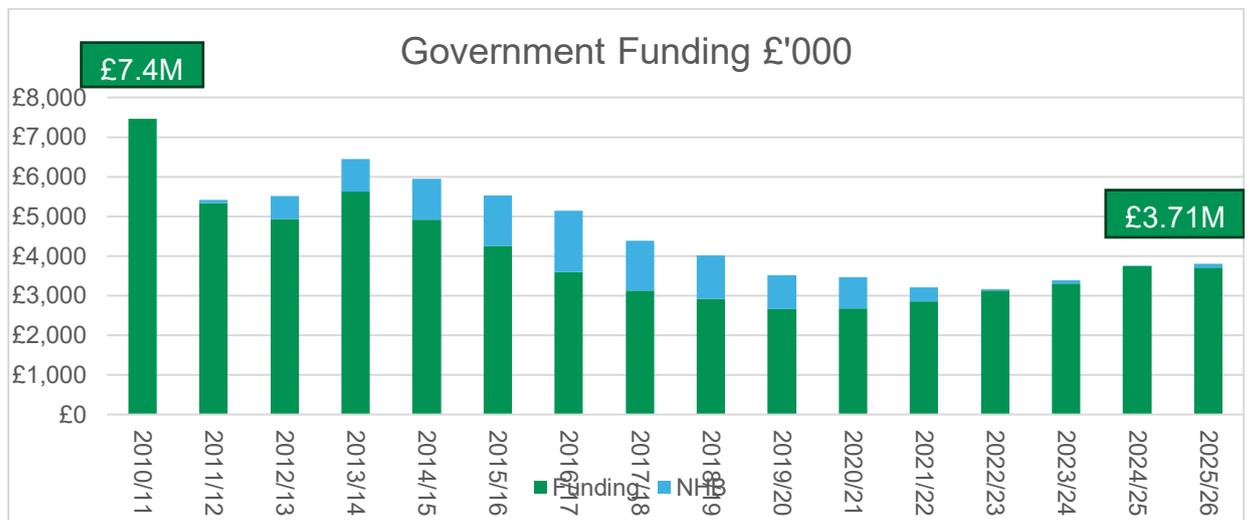
- 2.14 That the sums included in the 2026/27 Budget for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) transition budgets of **£560,000** are approved and for future years as set out in paragraph 4.2.4.
- 2.15 That Members approve the ringfencing of **£2,000,000** of Business Rates gain reserves for the repayment of LEP loans as set out in paragraph 4.10.6.
- 2.16 That Members approve the Council Tax Support scheme for 2026/27 as set out in paragraphs 4.3.6-4.3.10.
- 2.17 That the Section 25 Statement on Robustness of Estimates and Adequacy of Reserve as set out in Appendix D is approved.
- 2.18 That the Equalities Impact Assessment (EQIA) for the 2026/27 General Fund budget is noted, (Appendix E)
- 2.19 That Members note the feedback on the budget from Overview and Scrutiny as set out in Para.4.13.1 and public consultation in section 4.14.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 This report sets out the 2026/27 draft General Fund Budget including Balancing the Budget (BTB) options, growth bids and pressures. The General Fund Budget forms part of the Council's Budget and Policy Framework. Under Article 4 of the Constitution, the Budget includes: the allocation of financial resources to different services and projects; proposed contingency funds; setting the council tax; the council tax support scheme; decisions relating to the control of the Council's borrowing requirement; the control of its capital expenditure; and the setting of virement limits.
- 3.2 The Council approved an ambitious new Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan in February 2024. It is essential that the Council employs a robust budget review and setting process in order to ensure that both front line services and Making Stevenage Even Better Corporate Plan priorities can be achieved, even during the Local government Reform agenda. As such the budgets both revenue and capital provide the means through which delivery of core service and Corporate Plan objectives can be achieved.
- 3.3 A summary of some of the service and MSEB priority activities which have been delivered as a result of the budget setting activity for 2025/26 is set out below:

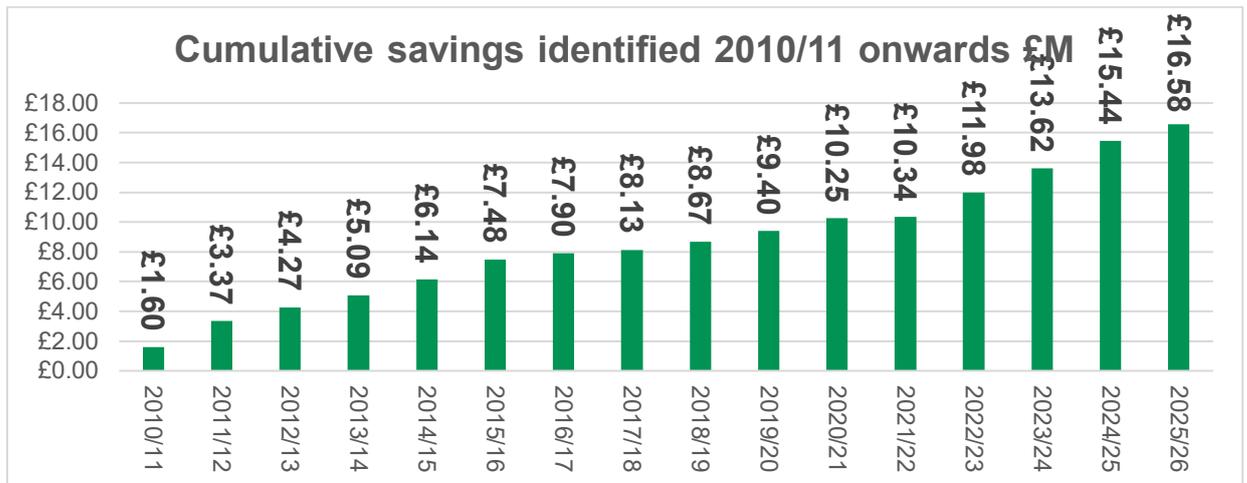


3.4 Funding for Council services reduced significantly between 2010/11-2019/20 during the period of austerity and lower government spending on the public sector and for Stevenage Brough Council this has meant a reduction in government support of £3.75Million up to and including 2025/26, excluding any annually achieved business rate gains which cannot be guaranteed.



3.5 The reduction in funding has historically meant the need to find annual savings while population size and unfunded pressures have grown. The Council has had a major focus on addressing the resulting financial funding gap through its 'Balancing the Budget' priority and this report summarises the options for approved or recommended for approval for 2026/27. The Cabinet and Senior Leadership Team have recognised the need to plan on the basis of a three-year savings horizon to both balance the budget and ensure that there are options identified which can be delivered within the timescales required. Taking such an approach should minimise the need for reactive service cuts. The cumulative

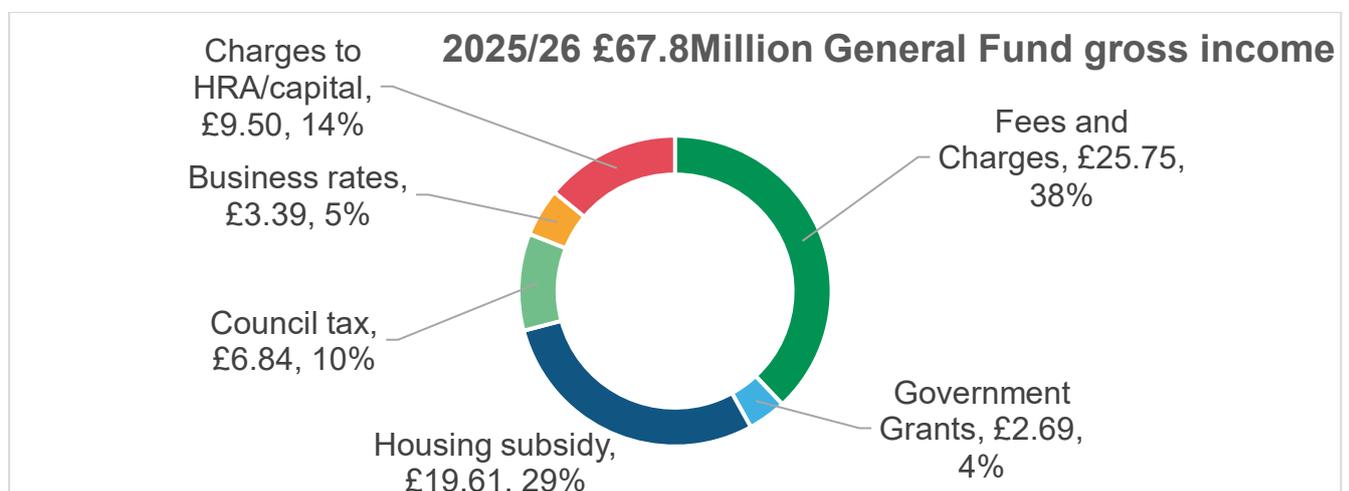
savings identified to date since 2010/11 are circa £16Million as shown in the chart below.



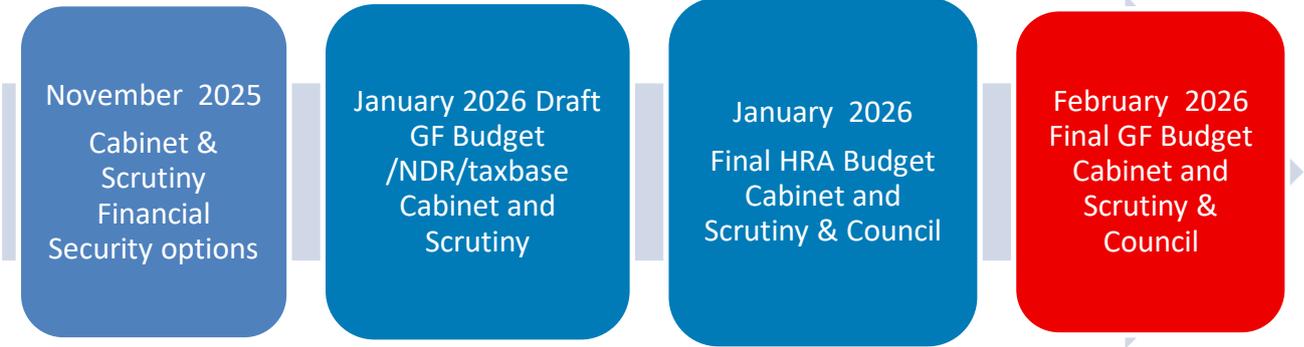
3.6 The 'Balancing the Budget' (BTB) funding gap identified in the September Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) was £2.4Million prior to any known positive impact of Fair Funding for the period 2026/27-2028/29. This was updated in the November 2025 BTB report when the Fair Funding position for Stevenage was becoming clearer (see also section 4.1) with the outstanding savings gap of £1.15Million for the period 2027/28-2029/30 being met from annual fees and charges increases with no further savings required.

3.7 Since the November 2025 BTB report was approved the government published the individual Council provisional Finance Settlements for the period 2026/27-2028/29 and the Final settlement is due to be released on the 9 February 2026 after the publication date of this report. A summary of what the Provisional Finance Settlement means for the Council was set in the January report and also set out in section 4.1 of this report. The Cabinet will be updated verbally at the meeting of the 11 February of any changes as a result of the Final Settlement.

3.8 The level of expenditure and income incurred/received by the General Fund is summarised below using the original 2025/26 SBC General Fund budget of £67.8Million and after taking into account fees and charges, government grants, services to the HRA/Capital and housing subsidy this was a net budget of £10.7Million and is funded as set out below.



3.9 The Budget and Policy Framework Procedure Rules in the Constitution, prescribe the Budget setting process, which includes a consultation period. The timescale required to implement this process is outlined below.



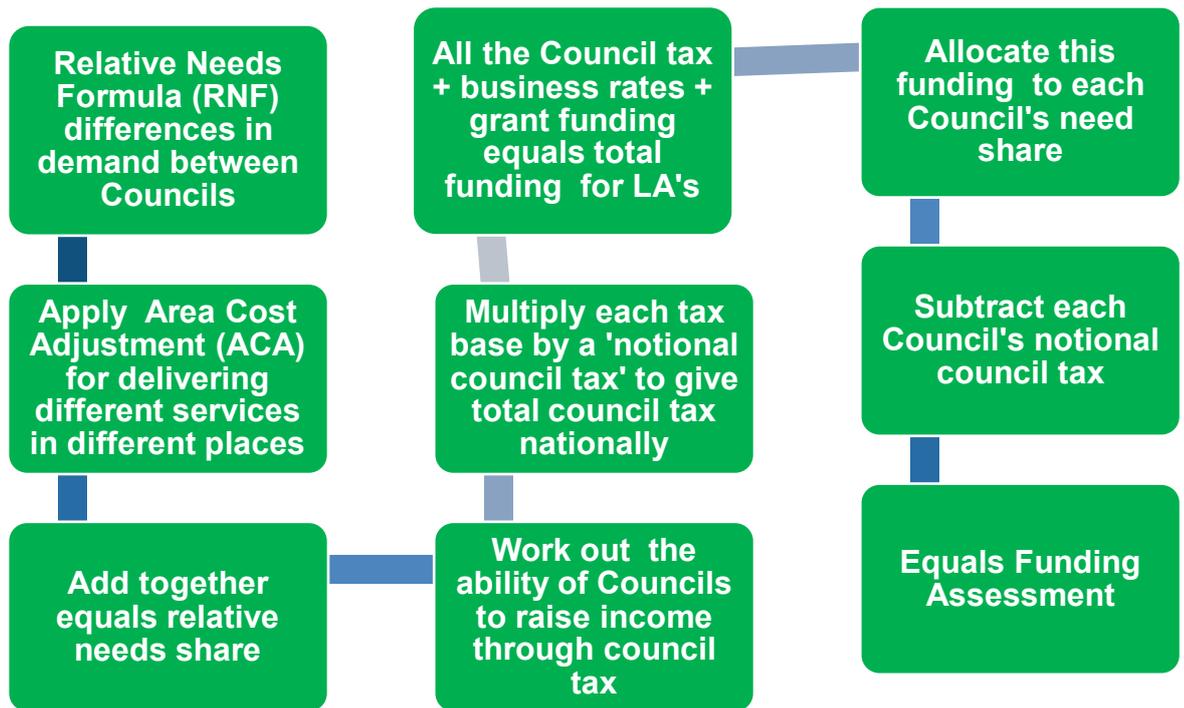
4. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

4.1 Stevenage Borough Finance Settlement 2026/27-2028/29

4.1.1 The Government set out its plans to reform local government funding on the 20 June 2025 via a consultation document ‘The Fair Funding review 2.0’. The system of Local Government funding had remained unchanged since localisation of business rates in 2013 and the plan was to revise how money is allocated to Councils in England. The reforms aim was to account for the different needs and costs faced by communities across the country, including adjusting for the costs of remoteness faced by rural communities, and the ability of individual local authorities to raise Council Tax, while also resetting business rates income. This means an update to the formulae used to calculate funding allocations, which are a decade out of date. The aim was to make the system fairer and more current, so Councils get funding that better reflects their local needs based on a number of factors. So, from 2026/27, this revised system for allocating funding between Councils, will take account of those revisited factors of Councils’ spending needs and their relative abilities to raise revenues themselves via council tax. The elements of the formula are listed below.

Fair Funding Factors	What It Means
Relative Needs	How much support a local area requires (e.g. for social care, housing, deprivation etc.)
Area Costs	How expensive it is to run services in that area (e.g. wages, property costs)
Resource Adjustment	How much money the council can raise itself (mainly through council tax)
	Core Spending Power 2026/27-2028/29

4.1.2 The formulas are then applied based on the graphic below summarised below.



4.1.3 The criteria includes a 'Foundation Formula' for general services and then specific formulas for services like adult social care and temporary accommodation with adjustments for labour, property, and travel costs.

4.1.4 The UK government consulted on the proposed reforms between 20 June 2025 and 15 August 2025. To dampen any large swings in funding, the proposed changes will be phased in over three years to ease the transition for Authorities, with funding floors in place to limit losses for those receiving less funding under the new system than currently. However, unlike the previous system there is no ceiling on the amount of increase gaining Councils will receive. The three year provisional settlement still contains £568Million of protection in place in 2028/29.

4.1.5 The argument for reform is that no reassessment has been made for current demographic and deprivation factors and is based on no change to a government funding system since the introduction of 50% business rates retention in 2013/14, not to mention additional pressures faced by Councils today. However, the difficulty with a long overdue reset means any new scheme could and appears to lead to a significant redistribution of funding around the country.

4.1.6 Included in the funding consultation was the proposals for a full reset of the Business Rates Retention System for 2026/27. The aim is to ensure funding is targeted where it is needed most and restore the balance between aligning funding with need and rewarding business rates growth. The local share (the percentage share of locally collected business rates that will be retained by local government) will continue to be subject to redistribution across local government via 'top-ups' and 'tariffs'. Stevenage is a tariff authority and retains more business rate than the historic needs assessment and for 2025/26 the estimated gains are £1.2Million. The re-set would see those gains reduce through a higher 'tariff' paid to the government with the reset now clarified to

be based on the 2025/26 NNDR 1 submission and not 2024/25 actuals realised.

- 4.1.7 Alongside changes to government funding allocations the consultation document also proposes simplifying grant funding pots. In recent years, central Government has increasingly relied on ringfenced micro-grants in an attempt to ensure the continued delivery of specific departmental priorities. In 2025/26, over 300 grants were awarded to local government from across Whitehall. Research published by the LGA in 2020 found that there were nearly 250 different grants provided to local government, around a third of which were awarded on a competitive basis. The LGA research estimated that the average cost to Councils in pursuing each competitive grant was in the region of £30,000 costing each local authority roughly £2.25Million a year chasing down various pots of money across Whitehall (see also paragraph 4.1.12).
- 4.1.8 The Consultation response was published on 21 November 2025 and the following changes were made. The Final Settlement was published on the 9 February 2026 and an update is included in this report.

Change	Impact on SBC
Baseline for Funding (2025/26)	
Pooling gains included in the calculation for business rates means Authorities which have been assigned levy savings will benefit from a more generous funding floor or, at a minimum, a three-year transition on this saving unwinding.	None not in a pool 2025/26
The recovery grant has been excluded £600Million (not all Councils received this in 2025/26).	SBC received £238K in 2025/26 and excluded from funding envelope
A portion of the £414 million children and families grant has been included.	
The temporary accommodation funding pot within FFR has been increased	SBC projected to receive more than previous estimate
Change to Relative Needs Assessment	
Changed a number of the formula and relative weighting specifically around adult and children social care indices.	Has had an impact on Districts overall (see chart below)
Change to Relative Resources Adjustment	
The main change is the confirmation of the notional council tax levels starting at £2,060 and growing to £2,160 and £2,265 over the three year period	improves funding position for SBC
For London Boroughs specifically, it may be that MHCLG might exclude 2.3% of the London taxbase from FFR altogether in recognition of non-fire GLA functions which sit outside of FFR	reduce overall funding
The Government confirmed the treatment of around 50% of the £3.4 billion extra grant funding. This figure is cumulative and of £3.4 billion, around £1.75 billion	reduce overall funding

Change	Impact on SBC
will be allocated to adult and children's social care using the new formulae	
As previously, the Business rates income is assumed to go up by inflation (this can be changed), and RSG has its own indexation assumption but also is top sliced to create the local authority better care grant for relevant authorities	increases/reduces funding

4.1.9 On 17 December 2025, the Secretary of State for the Ministry for Housing and Communities Local Government (MHCLG) released a written statement to Parliament on the provisional local government finance settlement 2026/27-2028/29. Over the three-year settlement period, Core Spending Power for all English councils (in aggregate) is expected to rise by 15.09% in cash terms. This compares to an estimated 3.3% cash increase for district councils, but for Stevenage there is bigger increase. The increase does include assumptions about increases in council tax, which accounts for an actual increase of 21% nationally*. The Final settlement was published on the 9 February and the funding that changed is highlighted in grey.

	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
Funding Settlement	£Million	£Million	£Million	£Million
Baseline Funding Level (NNDR)		£16,240	£16,613	£16,948
Legacy Business rates Retention funding	£18,770			
Revenue Support Grant		£15,049	£17,788	£17,948
Legacy grant funding	£11,033			
Grants rolled in	£543			
Improved Better Care Fund (included in RSG from 2027/28)	£2,640	£2,640		
Families First Partnership (within Children, Families and Youth Grant)	£523	£853	£853	£729
Homelessness, Rough Sleeping and Domestic Abuse	£725	£885	£906	£927
Recovery grant	£600	£600	£600	£600
Recovery grant guarantee		£149	£114	£100
Recovery Grant Uplift at the Final Settlement		£115	£150	£175
Mayoral Capacity Funding	£34	£45	£45	£48
Fire and Rescue real-terms floor		£9	£10	£14
100% income protection floor		£86	£172	£294
95% income protection floor		£40	£89	£140
Adjustment support grant		£116		

	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
Funding Settlement	£Million	£Million	£Million	£Million
Council Tax Requirement exc. parish precepts	£38,656	£41,211	£44,019	£47,010
Core Spending Power	£73,522	£78,038	£81,360	£84,933

**A number of Councils have permission for higher increases where they are deemed to have lower than average council tax including Westminster, Wandsworth, Windsor & Maidenhead*

4.1.10 The main changes between the provisional and final settlement were:

- The Government has amended its approach to assigning 2025/26 pooling retained business rates among members of pools. The original approach was to allocate the entire pooling gain to tariff authorities or Shire Districts in county area pools. This was revised to 50% of the pooling gain to top-up authorities or Counties within each pool, based on their relative size of the baseline funding level, while the remaining 50% is shared between tariff authorities in pools using the previous approach. Why this is important is that affects authorities' assessed 2025/26 starting points (with knock-on impacts on the transitional mechanism). For a 2026/27 an **adjustment support grant** has been given to neutralise the impact on tariff pool authorities. Stevenage was not in the Hertfordshire pool for 2025/26 and was not impacted.
- **Funding floor** – changes to pooling arrangements and the treatment of the City of London have reduced the cost of the funding floor by £18.4 million in 2026/27, £85.2 million in 2027/28 and £124.2 million in 2028/29. Fire authorities will receive extra funding floor payments to uplift their core spending power by at least 3.8% in 2026/27, with this baked into future funding floors to sustain real terms growth in CSP – overall worth approx. £6 million. This reduction in funding floor cost has freed up funding for extra Recovery Grant.
- **Recovery Grant uplift** – there is a further £440 million of Recovery Grant total over three years. This acts as an additional layer for the Recovery Guarantee, aiming to achieve 17% growth in core spending power for upper tier authorities in receipt of the Recovery Grant in 2025/26. For authorities whose growth in CSP was already estimated between 14% and 17%, this extra grant will be capped at £10 million. Stevenage did not receive any further funding.
- **Homelessness, Rough Sleeping and Domestic Abuse** – the consolidated grant has been topped up by £92 million by 2028/29 compared to 2025/26, largely frontloaded to 2026/27 (£90.7 million). This includes an uplift for Renters' Rights new burdens and the rest will be targeted at supported housing which Stevenage benefited from.
- **SEND deficits** – the Government has committed to resolving 90% of local authorities' DSG High Needs deficits accrued to the end of 2025/26, estimated to be worth approx. £5 billion. All local authorities with a SEND deficit will be eligible to receive grant funding subject to submitting and securing the Department for Education's approval of a local SEND reform plan. From

2028/29, SEND spending will be covered by the overall government DEL budget, meaning local authorities are not expected to fund future SEND costs from general funds, once the Statutory Override ends at the end of 2027/28.

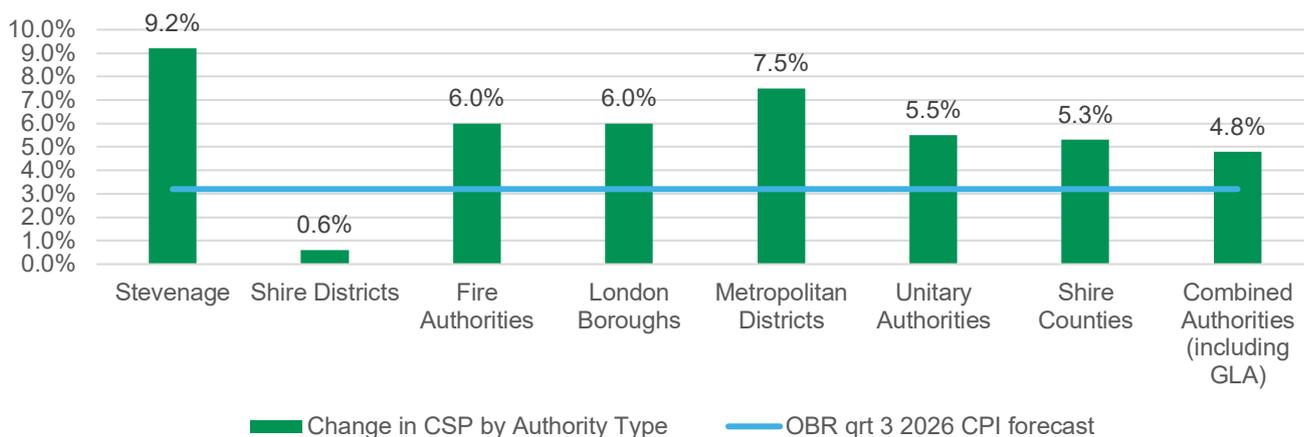
- **Council tax** – while referendum limits have stayed at the same default levels, the following authorities have been granted additional flexibility: Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (6.74%), Warrington (7.49%), Trafford (7.49%), Worcestershire (8.99%), Shropshire (8.99%), North Somerset (8.99%), and Windsor and Maidenhead (7.49%) next year. These figures are inclusive of the adult social care precept. In addition, six Police and Crime Commissioners will have a further £3.50 flexibility on the police precept and Northamptonshire Commissioner Fire and Rescue Authority will have a further £5 flexibility on the fire precept.

4.1.11 The Stevenage provisional and final settlement remain unchanged and are compared to the Balancing the Budget projections and summarised below.

Funding:	2025/26	2026/27		2027/28		2028/29	
	£'000	BTB £'000	settlement (£'000)	BTB £'000	settlement (£'000)	BTB £'000	settlement (£'000)
RSG	£149.0	£5,390.4	£2,849.5	£5,713.1	£3,493.6	£6,100.9	£4,130.0
NNDR	£3,379.6		£3,609.3		£3,692.1		£3,766.6
Recovery grant	£283.8	£283.8	£283.8	£283.8	£283.8	£283.8	£283.8
NIC/NHB	£297.8						
NNDR Gains	£1,239.0	£0.0		£0.0		£0.0	
Food waste new burdens		£554.8	in RSG	£554.8	in RSG	£554.8	in RSG
Temporary accommodation grant	£556.8		in RSG		in RSG		in RSG
Total	£5,906.1	£6,229.0	£6,742.6	£838.6	£283.8	£6,939.6	£8,180.4
Reduction for FF2 consultation changes		(£500)	£0	(£500)		(£500)	
Reduction for NNDR losses		(£160)	£0	(£160)	(£106)	£0	(£160)
Total excluding grants	£5,906.1	£5,569.0	£6,742.6	£178.6	£177.8	£6,439.6	£8,020.4
Increase from BTB report			£1,173.7		-£0.8		£1,580.9

4.1.12 Clarification from MHCLG confirmed that the finance settlement also includes the funding relating to the legislated introduction of new separate food waste collection which SBC estimates will cost £554,790 (as set out in paragraph 4.2.1). However, any Government funding amount for this has not been identified separately. Notwithstanding, 2026/27 funding for Stevenage has increased in excess of the cost of food waste compared to 2025/26 amounts. However, overall, the provisional finance settlement for Stevenage was significantly better than for Districts as a whole which is illustrated in the chart below (source LG Futures).

Change in CSP by Authority Type for 2026/27



4.1.13 The settlement also includes bigger, combined grants that replace several smaller ones, helping them focus more on delivering services than on managing payments. These grants will have their own rules for how money is shared, and some will use old methods while others will use new, single formulas, the grants now included are summarised below. The reduction in homeless grant between 2025/26 and 2026/27 relates to the transfer of the temporary accommodation element into Revenue Support Grant (RSG) as shown in paragraph 4.1.11 and is from 2026/27, part of the Council's general government funding. In the final settlement the homeless grant (including monies for Renters Rights Act) increased by £83,120, £63,700 and £33,080 for 2026/27, 2027/28 and 2028/29 respectively and has been included in the budget.

Settlement Funding:	2025/26	Grants		
	£'000	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
DHP/Crisis resilience fund	£ 141,830	£163,433	£163,433	0
Homeless grant	£1,623,414	£1,072,703	£1,118,614	£1,156,199
Renters Rights Act		£66,758	£31,433	£0
Domestic abuse grant	£38,628	£38,628	£39,492	£40,306
Total announced with settlement	£1,803,872	£1,341,522	£1,352,972	£1,196,505
EPR funding announced:	£'000	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
Extended Producer Responsibility	£1,078,000	£1,226,580	TBC	TBC
Total	£2,881,872	£2,568,102	£1,352,972	£1,196,505

Shaded denotes update

4.1.14 Included above is the 2026/27 allocation for Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) which increased from 2025/26 and is ringfenced for improving recycling and waste collection.

4.1.15 The January draft General Fund report identified that £500,000 of the 2026/27 EPR allocation was recommended to purchase two new freighters out of the three required in 2026/27 to help fund the capital growth need for next year (in

addition to that set out in paragraph 4.2.5) and was included in the Draft Capital Strategy.

- 4.1.16 The remaining recommended proposals for the 2026/27 EPR grant funding of £726,580 and £24,580 of the EPR reserve are set out in Appendix F and are funding further recycling initiatives.
- 4.1.17 The new grant funding in the Fair Funding Settlement, sits alongside an assumption of a 3% core council tax referendum principle and a 2% adult social care precept, which will result in an average overall real terms increase in local authority core spending power of 2.6% per year between 2025/26 and 2028/29.
- 4.1.18 The business rates safety net for 2026/27 is 100% rather than Council's funding the first 7.5% of losses as in previous years, this is detailed further in paragraph 4.4.3.

4.2 Pressures Projected in the General Fund 2026/27-2028/29

- 4.2.1 The General Fund budget assumptions for 2026/27 now include net growth pressures of £3.66Million as set out below which are included in section 4.7 of this report, (draft report £3.648Million).

Pressures	2025/26 MTFS	2026/27	+/-	Comments
AMENDED Inflation	£1,045,492	£1,535,037	£489,545	Inflation has increased and includes (1) Pay costs have been increased by £209K as the pay award assumptions have been increased from 2.75% to 3.25% based on current higher inflation. (2) Utility costs have increased by £60K as a result of higher standing charges. (3) higher costs from third parties and shared services (£55K amended from £149K). An additional £26.3K has been included since the draft budget including for £27K for utility and £10.7K for salary costs and lower shared service costs.

Pressures	2025/26 MTFS	2026/27	+/-	Comments
Employer pension contributions	£100,000	(£1,327,540)	(£1,427,540)	The Council was notified in November 2025 that the employers rate would reduce from 19.3% to 16.5% and in addition the fixed payment of £1.5Million across both the HRA and General Fund. The Fund is 112% funded hence the significant decrease in costs. This has also lead to a reduction in shared service costs provided to other LA's.
Housing Benefit net costs	£10,000	£75,954	£65,954	With the transfer to Universal Credit the level of bad debt provision has increased for housing benefit overpayments as well as the assumed reduction in housing admin subsidy.
LEP loans repayment reserve	£0	£500,000	£500,000	see paragraph 4.2.2-4.2.3.
Local Government Reform (LGR)	£150,000	£560,000	£410,000	see paragraph 4.2.4.
Revenue Contribution to Capital	£700,000	£1,200,000	£500,000	see paragraph 4.2.5-4.2.7
Queensway LLP	£250,000	£250,000	£0	The Council set up the LLP to act as a catalyst for regeneration in the town centre. In order to ensure that funding to invest in the asset and/or support the LLP over the 37 year lease, the CFO recommended increased contributions be set aside as ser out in the BTB November 2025 report.
Apprentice Scheme	£150,000	£150,000	£0	Members approved as part of the September MTFS to fund the apprentice programme previously assumed to be met from year end underspends
External support for the new Forster Country park	£20,000	£20,000	£0	Members approved as part of the September MTFS a contribution to support the implementation of the Forster Country Park

Pressures	2025/26 MTFS	2026/27	+/-	Comments
Maintenance (including lifts)	£0	£50,000	£50,000	The Council has incurred additional costs relating to in particular the Railway MSCP and Railway lift during 2024-2025. The increase in budget will ensure works are completed in a timely manner.
On-going costs related to PCI compliance (Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard (PCI DSS))	£0	£54,000	£54,000	The Council is implementing a system to support compliance for payments made to the Council, the current projections for annual fees is recommended to be included in the budget
Separate Food Waste	£0	£554,790	£554,790	The MTFS had assumed this would be funded from a allocation within the funding settlement, however it has not identified separately (see para.4.1.12
NEW :Reduction in skip income	£0	£39,000	£39,000	The income budget for Ro-Ro skips is not achieving the budgeted levels and this budget has been reduced for 2026/27 in line with 2025/26 actual income.
Total Identified	£2,425,492	£3,661,241	£ 1,235,749	

4.2.2 The 2026/27 identified pressures of £3.66Million include a £500K recommended transfer to an earmarked reserve for repayment of the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) in 2029/30 of £6.5Million. The loans were granted for acquisition of assets to facilitate the Council's SG1 regeneration programme and a scheduled set aside of monies to repay the LEP loans are summarised in the table below and are included in the revised MTFS projections in section 4.10. A significant part of the remainder of the LEP loan balance has been recommended to be ringfenced in the NNDR earmarked reserve as set out in paragraphs 4.10.4-4.10.5, leaving £400K to be identified in the period 2026/27-2029/30.

	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	2029/30	Total
LEP loan set aside	£500,000	£1,000,000	£1,300,000	£1,300,000	£4,100,000
Still to be identified					£2,400,000
Total Loans to be repaid 2029/30					£6,500,000

4.2.3 The alternative option to the LEP loan reserve would have been to ringfence more business rate gains however, with the changes to business rates as set out in section 4.4, the likelihood is these will be significantly lower than experienced in previous years and 2026/27 projections are currently showing zero gains.

- 4.2.4 Also included in the 2026/27 £6.3Million pressures is an additional cost of £560,000 for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) transition expenditure which the government anticipates Councils will meet from reserves and LGR savings. The CFO recommends setting aside the following amounts which will be reviewed following any future announcements on the LGR timetable. District Councils in Hertfordshire have suggested a minimum amount of circa £1Million.

	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	Total
LGR funding	£560,000	£500,000	£400,000	£1,460,000

- 4.2.5 The November 2025 Balancing the Budget report recommended that the identified 2026/27 in year surplus of £706K should be utilised to support the General Fund Capital Strategy as the investment in the Council's assets has been severely restricted to fix on fail due to a shortage of capital resources. The Draft Capital Strategy to this Cabinet meeting includes a larger increase due to the improvement in the General Fund financial position and the contributions to capital recommended are summarised below.

Capital Funding (Revenue)	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	2029/30	Total
Additional funding for capital	£1,200,000	£1,200,000	£1,200,000	£1,000,000	£4,600,000
Growth Bids not funded	£175,000	£621,700	£140,500	£669,400	£1,606,600

- 4.2.6 In addition to the use of revenue for capital investment in 2026/27 an amount of £250,000 is recommended to be transferred in 2025/26 to the capital earmarked reserve (based on the in-year surplus set out in section 4.8) to given additional financial resilience to the Capital Strategy in the event that projected receipts are delayed. This measure would be in addition to the deferred works reserve of £400,000.
- 4.2.7 However, Members should note that even with the additional resources set out above there are still a number of capital bids not funded and the stock condition survey included in the proposed 2026/27 programme may identify further works required to the Council's community, operational and leisure buildings once completed.

4.3 Council Tax and Council Tax Support

- 4.3.1 The December 2025 Cabinet Council Tax base report showed a 2026/27 increase in the tax base of 1.09 % compared to 2025/26, (2025/26 -0.3%). The growth in the taxbase assumed by the government was slightly lower in the Core Spending Power (CSP) with the government assuming £24,688 less council tax income than Stevenage is projecting for 2026/27. In terms of the increase in Band D property the finance settlement assumes a 2.99% increase for Districts plus a further 2% for social care for unitary and upper tier Councils with £15 increase on a Band D for the PCC.
- 4.3.2 The November 2025 Cabinet BTB report recommended a 2.99% increase in council tax and the CFO recommends increasing council tax by 2.99%, a below inflation increase with SBC element of the bill forming only 10.8% of the overall council tax bill for Stevenage residents.

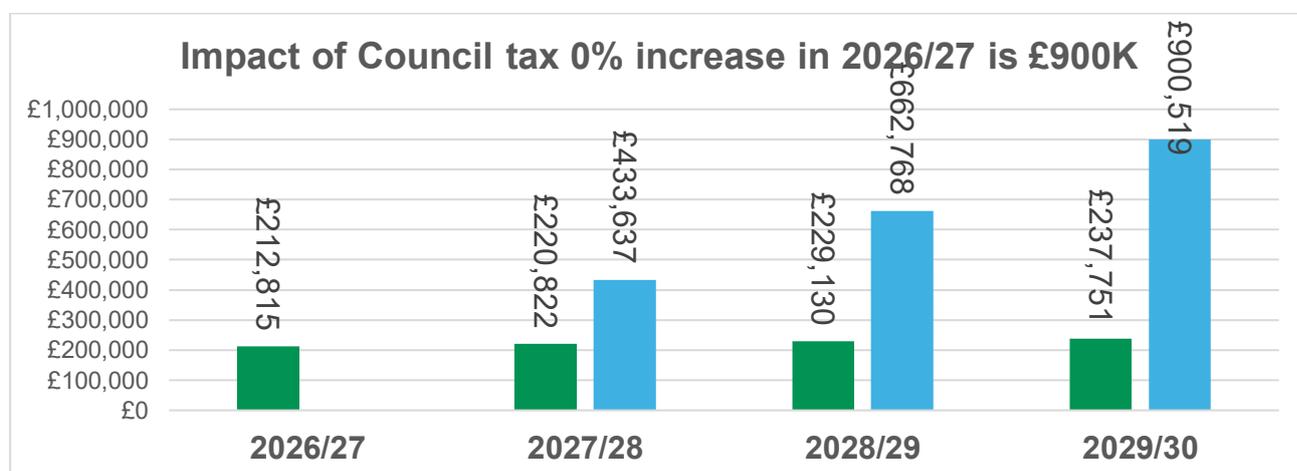
4.3.3 Members will recall that SBC retains the lowest share of the overall Council Tax raised each year. To illustrate this, taking a Band C property, (which is the biggest proportion of properties in Stevenage) the relative shares of council tax for a band C property are shown below.

Authority	2024/25	2025/26	Cost per week	Increase	Share
Hertfordshire County Council	£1,498.45	£1,573.22	£30.25	4.99%	77.58%
Stevenage Borough Council	£212.68	£219.03	£4.21	2.99%	10.80%
Police Crime Commissioner	£223.11	£235.56	£4.53	5.58%	11.62%
Total	£1,934.24	£2,027.81	£39.00	4.84%	100.00%

4.3.4 An estimate of the 2.99% increase in council tax for Stevenage Borough Council is summarised in the table below.

Council tax band	2025/26 SBC	2.99% incr.	2026/27	Incr. per week
A	£ 164.27	£4.91	£169.18	£0.09
B	£ 191.65	£5.73	£197.38	£0.11
C	£ 219.03	£6.55	£225.58	£0.13
D	£ 246.41	£7.37	£253.78	£0.14
E	£ 301.17	£9.01	£310.18	£0.17
F	£ 355.93	£10.64	£366.57	£0.20
G	£ 410.68	£12.29	£422.97	£0.24
H	£ 492.82	£14.74	£507.56	£0.28

4.3.5 The impact of a council tax increase versus no 2026/27 increase during the General Fund medium Term is set out in the chart below and shows that over the period 2026/27-2029/30 this equates to an estimated loss of resources of £900,519.



Council Tax Support

- 4.3.6 A local CTS scheme cannot be revised for at least one financial year. Billing Authorities (such as SBC) must consider whether to revise or replace their scheme with another on an annual basis.
- 4.3.7 Any revision to a scheme must be made by the Council by the 11 March, immediately preceding the financial year in which it is to take effect and will require consultation with those affected. Additionally, consideration should be given to providing transitional protection where the support is to be reduced or removed.
- 4.3.8 The Council must, in the following order, consult with major precepting authorities, (i.e. Hertfordshire County Council and Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) for Hertfordshire), publish a draft scheme in such manner as it thinks fit, and consult such other persons as it considers are likely to have an interest in the operation of the scheme. The CFO wrote to both precepting authorities regarding the proposal for 2026/27.
- 4.3.9 The current **working age** scheme requires those on maximum benefits only to pay 8.5% of their council tax bill for the year. This equated to £172.36 for a Band C council home in 2025/26 on the total bill (with an additional 25% discount for a single person) or £3.31 per week.
- 4.3.10 In November 2025 Members approved the retention of the existing scheme for next year (uprated to reflect benefit changes for 2026/27) and agreed that officers should look at a banded scheme for proposal to include engagement / consultation with residents subject to the Local government Reform timetable for Hertfordshire.

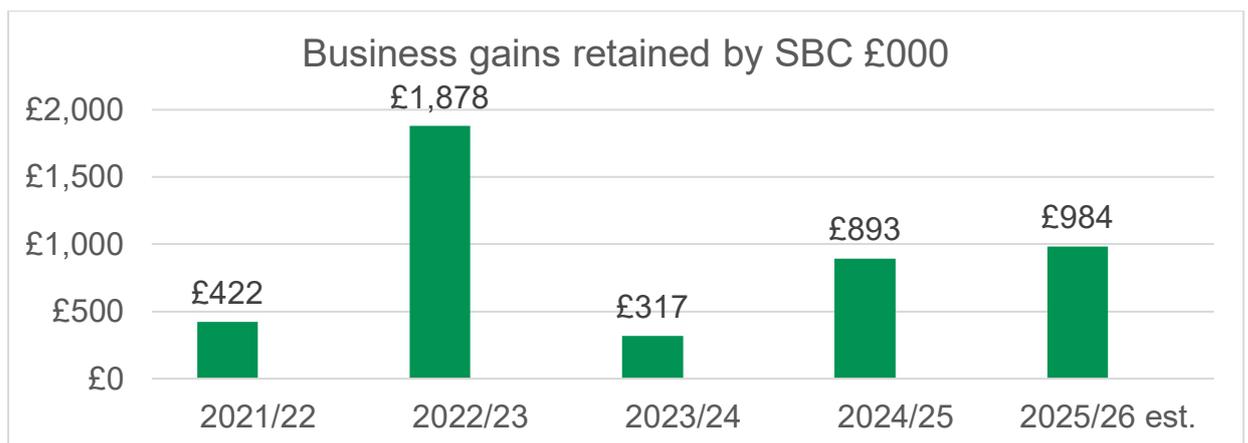
4.4 Business Rates Income

- 4.4.1 The MTFS and draft General Fund budget only includes an assumption of the 2026/27 baseline funding for business rates, or the amount the government has assessed the Council needs under its funding formula. In previous years there has been an additional £200K gains in the General Fund (with the rest transferred to the NNDR gains earmark reserve), however with the complete reset of business rates for 2026/27 and a projected reduction in gains against the 2025/26 estimate (see paragraph 4.4.7) no gains are currently included for the period 2026/27-2029/30.
- 4.4.2 Alongside the reset a number of other changes are being made to business rates, there will be the introduction of up to three new multipliers, which could cause volatility in the projected rates councils collect. This coincides with a new revaluation coming into effect on 1 April 2026, using market values determined as of 1 April 2024. As announced at Autumn Budget 2024, in April 2026, the government will replace retail, hospitality and leisure relief with two lower business rates multipliers for properties with rateable values below £500,000. In addition, a new larger property multiplier will be introduced for properties with a rateable value over £500,000, which is intended to help fund the reduction in the RHL multipliers.

Multipliers	2025/26	2026/27	Scope
Small Business RHL* Multiplier		38.2p	RHL hereditaments with RVs under £51,000
Standard RHL* Multiplier		43p	RHL hereditaments with RVs between £51,000 and £499,999
National Small Business Multiplier	49.9p	43.2p	Non-RHL hereditaments with RVs under £51,000
National Standard Multiplier	55.5p	48p	Non-RHL hereditaments with RVs between £51,000 and £499,999
High-value Multiplier		50.8p	All hereditaments with RVs of £500,000 or above

**Retail hospitality and Leisure*

- 4.4.3 The government has recommended changes to the safety net and transitional arrangements which are intended to help councils manage the financial impact of all the impacts summarised above. In previous years the first 7.5% of losses were funded by Councils before the safety net applied. For 2026/27, 2027/28 and 2028/29 the safety net starts at 100%, 97% and 92.5% for the respective years.
- 4.4.4 Historically business rate gains above the £200K assumed in the budget have been used transferred to the NNDR reserve to fund time limited growth and regeneration objectives due to the uncertainty over the level to be achieved. The rules governing NDR accounting mean any estimated gains are taken in year and any difference between the actual and the estimate are taken from or, in the case of losses refunded to, the Collection Fund in future years.



Note: A Pilot operated in Hertfordshire in 2022/23 where 75% of gains were retained in Hertfordshire

- 4.4.5 The actual level of business rates that the Council keeps each year is determined once the NDR1 form issued by the government is completed which must be done by the 31 January 2026. This calculates business rates collectable, level of reliefs to be given in 2026/27 and S31 grants due.

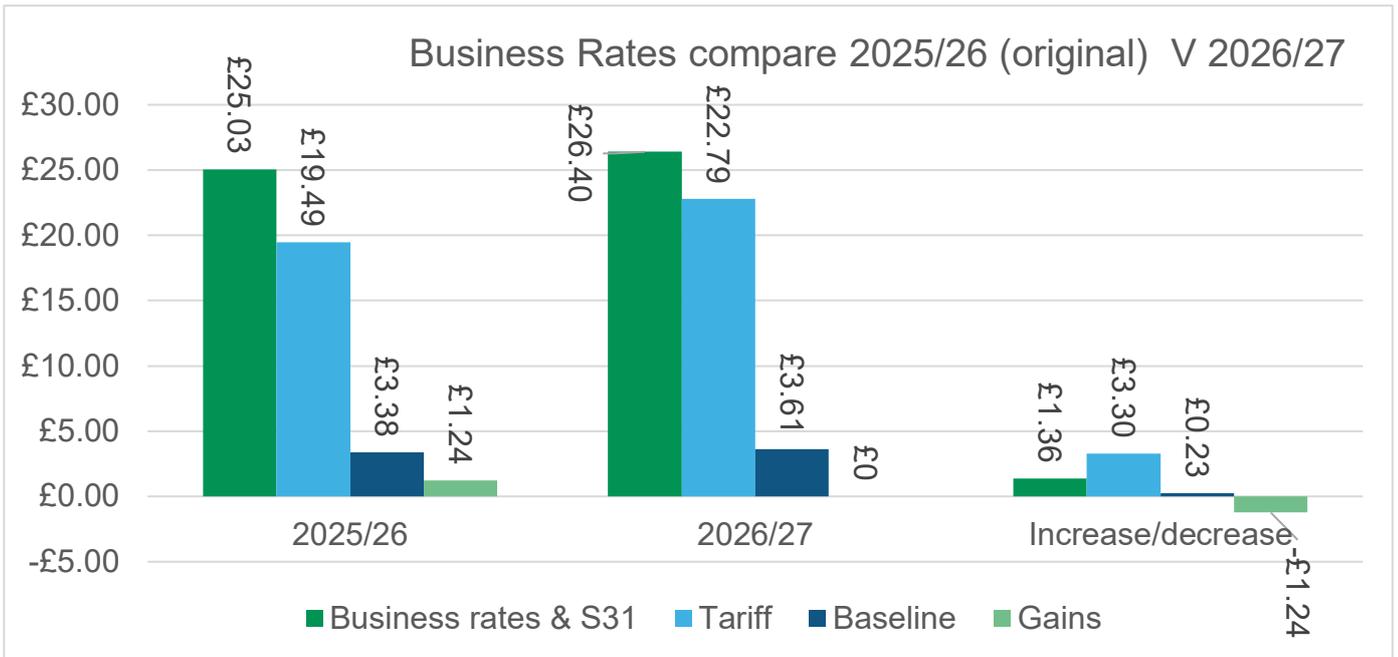
4.4.6 The 2026/27 Business Rates retained by SBC have now been estimated and are at the baseline level with no gains projected for next year.

Stevenage's Business rates retained for 2026/27 versus the Government baseline calculation	Government 2026/27 baseline calculation	SBC 2026/27 Calculation	Variance
Gross Rates	£69,107,886	£69,391,246	£283,360
Mandatory reliefs granted funded from S31 grant		(£7,816,696)	(£7,816,696)
S31 Grant		£7,816,696	£7,816,696
Higher multiplier income in excess of smaller RHL rate not funded through grant		(£154,177)	(£154,177)
Discretionary Relief		(£168,535)	(£168,535)
Appeals provision set aside	(£2,591,546)	(£2,801,898)	(£210,352)
Bad debt provision set aside	(£414,647)	(£165,000)	£249,647
Cost of Collection allowance for administration by SBC	(£110,164)	(£110,164)	£0
Energy reliefs	(£1,518)	(£1,462)	£56
Total Business rates for distribution	£65,990,011	£65,990,010	(£0)
40% of Business Rates retained by SBC	£26,396,004	£26,396,004	(£0)
Tariff	(£22,786,682)	(£22,786,682)	£0
Retained Business Rates	£3,609,322	£3,609,322	(£0)

4.4.7 The 2025/26 business rates have also been reviewed as part of the NNDR1 process and remain unchanged from the draft budget report and are summarised below and included in the 2025/26 and 2026/27 budgets.

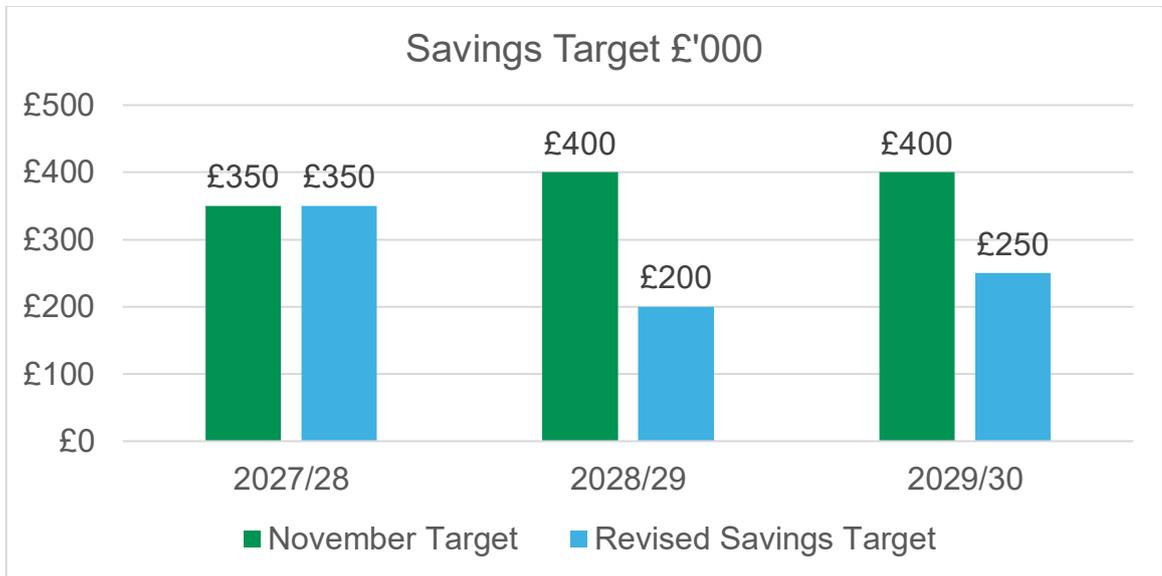
	Original NNDR	Revised NNDR	2025/26 impact	2026/27 impact
Business Rates	(£22,824,068)	(£22,287,351)		£536,717
Tariff	£19,488,317	£19,488,317		
S31 Grants	(£2,210,373)	(£2,185,159)	£25,214	
Levy	£927,339	£651,082	(£276,256)	
Retained Business Rates	(£4,618,785)	(£4,333,110)	(£251,042)	£536,717
Reduction in Business Rates				£285,675

4.4.8 No gains are currently projected as the increase in the 2026/27 NNDR tariff payment to the government has been increased from £19.49Million in 2025/26 to £22.79Million as part of the business rate reset and Fair Funding.



4.5 The Balancing the Budget Savings Target

4.5.1 As set out in paragraph 3.7 the 2027/28-2029/30 savings shortfall of £1.15Million could now be addressed through annual fees and charges increases if costs and income remain in line with the updated MTFS projections. The target has been updated based on the financial information included in this report and is now projected to be £800K as summarised below.



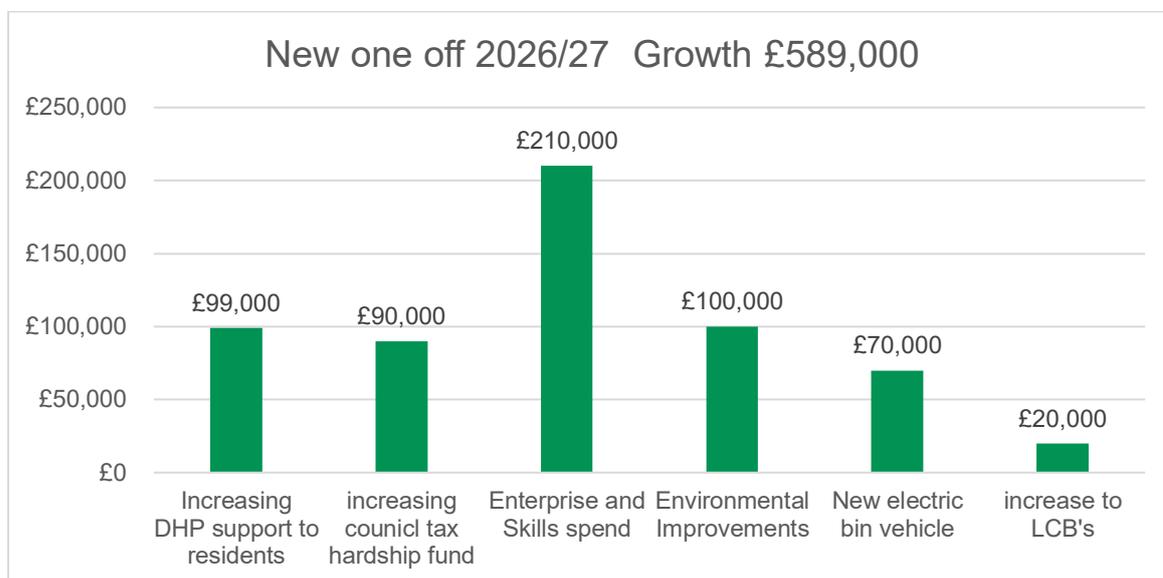
4.5.12 The BTB report to the November 2025 Cabinet report included the recommended/approved budget reductions/income increases, which are summarised and did not contain any service cuts.

Balancing the Budget Savings Summary	Approved	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29
MTFS efficiency savings	September 2025 Cabinet	£766,606	£839,616	£843,364
Fees & charges	October 2025 Cabinet	£309,000	£314,000	£314,000
Taxi Licences	October 2025 Cabinet	£33,000	£60,000	£60,000
Commercial Option Primett Road	October 2025 Cabinet	(£22,500)	£100,000	£100,000
Star Chamber Options (App A)	November 2025 Cabinet	£84,640	£105,970	£132,370
Changes to Leisure Contract	December 2025 Cabinet	£110,000	£110,000	£110,000
Total		£1,280,746	£1,529,586	£1,559,734

4.6 Growth Options

- 4.6.1 The September 2025 MTFS assumed growth of £75K for 2026/27 there are a small number of proposed growth bids which include a one off bid of £50K for the Towns 80th Anniversary programme in 2026/27 and on-going growth bids of £95,140 and are summarised in Appendix B.
- 4.6.2 Included in the growth bids is monies for events. Members should note that initially event island had a proportion of Towns Fund revenue monies to fund events, if the programme as outlined in Appendix B is to continue a growth bid is required.
- 4.6.3 The growth bids are in excess of the £75K growth target, however savings identified are higher than in the September MTFS and General Fund balances are significantly above the minimum level required and they are all therefore recommended.
- 4.6.4 The November 2025 BTB report further recommended that once the Finance settlement was published there could be further scope to include growth in the 2026/27 General Fund budget and in particular reporting the significant shortfall in capital resources and as set out in paragraph 4.2.5-4.2.6.
- 4.6.5 The January Draft Budget identified that consideration of any further additional growth should take into account the medium-term financial position and the inflation and pressures identified within this report and an amount of £600,000 was identified along the following themes.
- **Supporting our residents** through additional Discretionary housing payments and S13a Council tax support exceptional circumstances to keep residents in their homes
 - **Supporting residents into work** through training interventions including for those of working age
 - **Improving our town** by complementing the proposed draft capital programme with additional spend to complete hedge 'hair cuts' -
 - **Increasing the financial support Councillors can give** through increasing the Local Community Budget that Members can award to groups and charities in their ward and in particular during the 80th Anniversary of the town.

4.6.6 Since then, additional inflationary pressures have been identified (see paragraph 4.2.1) reducing the 2026/27 in year surplus slightly. However, there are additional one-off growth bids proposed of £589,000 and summarised below (see also Appendix G) and recommended for approval.



4.6.7 Should the Final Funding settlement announced on the 9 February 2026 be slightly lower the growth can still be recommended as the growth in paragraph 4.6.6 is one off in nature and the General Fund balances are projected to be above minimum balances recommended.

4.7 Changes to the 2026/27 General Fund budget versus the 2025/26 Balancing the Budget

4.7.1 The General Fund budget is now projected to be £13,587,330 (with a contribution to balances of £241), versus the November BTB report projection of £11,589,874 (and a draw on balances of £706,396) which didn't include the any contribution to capital (recommended in the report). General Fund net expenditure is higher versus the BTB report (which now includes a contribution to capital) and as set out in paragraph 4.7.3 core resources have also increased to support the additional budgeted spend. The changes between the BTB report and the proposed General Fund budget are set out below.

BTB report to Draft General Fund Budget	£	Comments
Balancing the Budget	£11,589,870	
Impacts from 2025/26 :		
Slippage of revenue contribution to capital from 2025/26	£163,500	see para. 4.8.1
Total 2025/26 Changes	£163,500	
Inflation :		
Inflation 2026/27	£489,545	see para 4.2.1

BTB report to Draft General Fund Budget	£	Comments
Employer pension contributions	(£1,427,540)	see para 4.2.1
Pressures:		
Housing Benefit net costs	£80,580	With the transfer to Universal Credit the level of bad debt provision has increased for housing benefit overpayments as well as the assumed reduction in housing admin subsidy.
Maintenance (including lifts)	£50,000	see para 4.2.1
On-going costs related to PCI compliance (Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard (PCI DSS))	£54,000	see para 4.2.1
Reduction in skip income	£39,000	see para 4.2.1
Government Reforms:		
Local Government Reform (LGR)	£410,000	The BTB & MTFS report included £150K for LGR transition costs, however discussions within Hertfordshire LA's a figure of £1Million which has been profiles over 2026/27-2027/28 for SBC.
Separate Food Waste Costs	£554,790	The cost of new separate food waste was anticipated to be funded through new burdens see also para. 4.1.11.
Extended Producer Responsibility grant	(£1,226,580)	The second year of the funding for EPR announced in November 2025 (see also para. 4.1.14-4.16)
Recycling & waste related spend (EPR)	£726,580	see para. 4.1.14-4.16
New Revenue Contribution to Capital (EPR)	£500,000	
New use of EPR Reserve	£24,580	
Funding Capital and repaying debt:		
New Revenue Contribution to Capital	£1,200,000	The BTB report recommended the use of surpluses to fund capital which has been restricted for a number of years (see also para. 4.2.5-4.2.6)
LEP loans repayment reserve	£500,000	see paragraph 4.2.2-4.2.3.
Investment Income		
Investment income	(£184,410)	The General Fund balances are projected to be higher for 2026/27, however there is an increase in internal borrowing estimated for 2027/28 which reduces the projected investment interest due.
Savings Changes:		

BTB report to Draft General Fund Budget	£	Comments
Savings recommended	£8,060	This includes a £5K reduction of parking income in the Old Town while the Active Travel highways improvements are underway approved by Members in the November 2025 Cabinet meeting.
Growth Changes		
New one off growth	£589,000	See paras. 4.6.5-4.6.6
Changes to reserves		
Transfer from reserves NNDR	(£536,710)	The 2025/26 projected losses need to be repaid to the Collection Fund in 2026/27 and the equivalent amount has been transferred from the NNDR reserve
Transfer from EPR reserve	(£24,580)	see para.4.1.15
Minor changes:		
Minor movements	£7,644	There has been a reclassification between inflation and minor movements
Total Identified	£1,833,960	
Draft General Fund budget 2026/27	£13,587,330	

4.7.2 The Proposed 2026/27 General Fund budget still includes a sum of £155,000 for running the May 2026 district elections. The Council's Cabinet meeting on the 14 January 2026 voted to approve postponing those elections, however this is a decision for the Secretary of State and the Council has not yet received a decision by the government.

4.7.3 General Fund core resources are summarised in the table below.

Core resources	BTB Assumptions	Draft Budget	BTB V Provisional Variance
Business Rates	(£3,470,303)	(£3,609,322)	(£139,018)
Revenue Support Grant	(£1,420,051)	(£2,849,486)	(£1,429,434)
Recovery grant	(£283,819)	(£283,819)	£0
Business rate losses	£160,000	£0	(£160,000)
Total	(£5,014,174)	(£6,742,626)	(£1,728,452)
Council Tax	(£7,305,404)	(£7,330,308)	(£24,905)
Transfers to Collection Fund NNDR	£183,637	£720,354	£536,717
Transfers from Collection Fund Ctax	(£160,330)	(£234,991)	(£74,660)
Total Collection Fund changes	(£7,282,096)	(£6,844,945)	£437,152
Total Funding	(£12,296,270)	(£13,587,571)	(£1,291,300)
Use of Balances	(£706,396)	(£241)	£706,155

4.8 2025/26 Budget changes

4.8.1 The 2025/26 General Fund budget is projected to decrease by £140,980. A summary of the changes is detailed below.

Changes to the 2025/26 Budget			
General Fund quarter 2 budget		£10,726,470	
Higher costs:			
Salary costs	£15,000		Revised salary costs are projected to be slightly higher than the working budget.
Supporting the Valour Hub	£30,000	£45,000	The Community Development Armed Forces Covenant & Valour Programme Officer will coordinate, develop, and deliver SBC's Armed Forces Covenant activities, and lead the development, submission, and start-up delivery of the Valour Hub Programme. Key responsibilities include supporting the Armed Forces Covenant Officer Group and Forum, managing delivery against outcomes, milestones, preparing briefings and reports. This focused capacity is essential to develop the Valour bid to a high standard and ensure the successful implementation of the Stevenage Valour Hub model.
Lower costs:			
Business rates	(£454,690)		The Council has submitted a number of business rates appeals as a result of the 2023 rating list. This is backdated to 2023 and relates to St Georges MSCP.
Housing Benefit costs	(£69,010)	(£523,700)	
Slippage:			
Revenue Contribution to Capital	(£163,500)	(£163,500)	The Draft Capital Strategy identifies slippage including for the garages programme
Changes in Reserves:			
Transfer to NNDR Reserve	£251,220		Core resources have reduced as a result of lower business rate gains from a lower levy on business gains (£366K) off set by lower S31 grants (£188K). All gains above £200K are transferred to the NNDR reserve.
Transfer to Capital Reserve	£250,000	£501,220	Paragraph 4.26-4.27
Total Changes		(£140,980)	
Revised General Fund budget		£10,585,490	

4.9 Level of Balances required for General Fund and projected balances

- 4.9.1 The September 2025 MTFS assumed that the minimum level of balances required would be £3.57Million. A full assessment has been carried out which is detailed in Appendix C and, accordingly, the minimum level of balances now totals £3,648,355. The projected General Fund balances even with one off growth are higher than the revised amount for 2026/27.
- 4.9.2 The projected General Fund balances and council tax requirement are set out below and the level of projected General Fund balances are as set out in paragraph 4.10.1.

General Fund Budget	2025/26 Estimate	2025/26 Projected	2026/27 Estimate
Net Expenditure	£10,753,540	£10,585,490	£13,587,330
Use of/ (Contribution) to Balances	(£6,053)	(£485,370)	(£241)
Budget Requirement	£10,747,487	£10,100,120	£13,587,089
Revenue Support Grant	(£149,048)	(£149,048)	(£2,849,486)
Recovery grant	(£283,819)	(£283,819)	(£283,819)
New Homes Bonus	(£97,000)	(£97,000)	£0
Backstop grant (Audit)	£0	(£60,044)	£0
Total grant support	(£529,867)	(£589,911)	(£3,133,305)
Business Rates net of tariff and levy	(£2,408,412)	(£2,684,669)	(£3,609,322)
S31 grants NNDR	(£2,210,192)	(£2,185,159)	
Total in year business rates	(£4,618,604)	(£4,869,828)	(£3,609,322)
(Return) /Contribution to Collection Fund (NDR) re 2023/43 & 2024/25 & 2025/26	£1,232,757	£1,232,757	£720,354
Collection Fund Surplus (ctax)	£196,632	£196,632	(£234,991)
Council Tax Requirement	(£7,040,510)	(£7,040,510)	(£7,330,308)
Council Tax Base	£28,572	£28,572	£28,885
Council Tax Band D	£246.41	£246.41	£253.78
Council Tax Band C	£219.04	£219.04	£225.58

4.10 Medium Term Financial Strategy General Fund Summary

- 4.10.1 The MTFS modelling has been updated to reflect the contents of this report, there are small deficits in 2027/28 and 2029/30 which if increase may require an adjustment to the savings targets as set out in paragraph 4.5.1 may be required.

General Fund Balances	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	2029/30
In year surplus	£485,370	£241	(£64,004)	£94,311	(£36,434)
Year end balances	£6,990,974	£6,991,215	£6,927,211	£7,021,522	£6,985,088

**Members should note that the opening balance for 2025/26 was incorrectly stated in the draft report and increased the General Fund balance by £555K*

4.10.2 Adding the additional one-off £589K growth bids (Appendix G) means the General Fund now has a small projected 2026/27 surplus of £241. Although the funding position is much better for SBC than in recent years, there are still risks to setting a balanced budget going forward which are:

- Business rates do not recover to the base level assumed by the Government and there is an on-going loss of business rates before the safety levy is payable increase net costs to the General Fund a 7.5% loss of retained business rates (before the safety net) would equate to a cost of £282.5K (£160K in the MTFS for 2028/29) and there are no losses assumed in the MTFS after 2028/29.
- LGR transition costs are higher than estimated and there is an expectation that Councils will fund this themselves and all of the proposed Unitary models required savings to be realised. Furthermore, the relatively short timescale could lead to costs for say new ICT needing to be purchased ahead of 2028/29.
- The General Fund Capital Strategy has a future funding shortfalls despite the £1.2Million funding recommended in the Capital Strategy and further capital requirements may be identified as a result of the stock condition survey commissioned for 2026/27 (growth bid).
- Inflation increases which results in the need for higher BTB savings targets to be set.
- The overall government funding envelope reduces beyond 2026/27 requiring a revision to the three year settlement.

4.10.3 The draft 2026/27 budget has includes one off growth (see also paragraph 4.6.6 and Appendix F) and revenue contributions to capital expenditure (RCCO), as a strategy to utilise the additional core funding set out in paragraph 4.1.10. However, if that one off growth was recommended for future years then the General Fund budget would have significant deficits in future years requiring higher savings if not addressed.

General Fund Balances	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28	2028/29	2029/30
In year surplus	£485,370	£241	(£653,004)	(£494,689)	(£625,434)
Year end balances	£6,990,974	£6,991,215	£6,338,211	£5,843,522	£5,218,088

4.10.4 In addition to the risk assessment of balances to support the General Fund's financial resilience, there are currently two further allocated reserves available which are summarised below. The CFO recommends they are retained at the projected levels in case they are needed to support the General Fund in year, subject to the recommendation in paragraph 4.6.6.

Reserves £'000	Closing 2024/25	(Use)/to	Closing 2025/26	(Use)/to	Closing 2026/27	(Use)/to	Closing 2027/28
Gains (NNDR)	£4,580	(£1,022)	£3,558	(£1,077)	£2,481	£1,442	£3,923
Income equalisation Reserve	£758	(£200)	£558	£0	£558	£0	£558
Total Available to support the GF	£5,338	(£1,222)	£4,116	(£1,077)	£3,039	£1,442	£4,481

4.10.5 The closing balance for the NNDR reserve as at 31 March 2028 is £3.9Million and that includes assumptions about realised and unrealised NNDR and net interest rate earned on the Council's joint venture with Mace at Claxton House. This is summarised below.

NNDR Reserve	£	£
Opening Balance 2025/26		(£4,580,127)
Gains not realised	£1,667,434	£0
Graduate scheme spend	£757,940	£2,425,374
Net Gains still to be achieved	£	
Remaining gains to be realised 2025/26	(£753,903)	£0
Claxton House	(£1,014,434)	(£1,768,338)
Closing Balance 2027/28		(£3,923,092)

4.10.6 The CFO recommends that the £2Million of the reserve's balances are used to contribute to the remaining outstanding LEP loans as set out in paragraph 4.2.2. This would leave a balance of £1.9Million by 31 March 2028 to be utilised if the 2025/26 NNDR gains are achieved and the returns from Caxton House. If this doesn't happen there would be a shortfall on the reserve of £573K to be funded from the General Fund.

NNDR Reserve £'000	Closing 2024/25	2025/26	2026/27	2027/28
Gains Realised	(£4,580,127)	(£2,580,127)	(£1,557,990)	(£481,399)
Caxton House		£626,201	£101,729	(£1,742,365)
Graduate scheme spend	£0	£202,760	£254,507	£300,673
NNDR Gains projected not realised		£947,080	£720,354	
2025/26 Gains still to be realised		(£753,903)		
LEP loans	£2,000,000			
Total Available to support the GF	(£2,580,127)	(£1,557,990)	(£481,399)	(£1,923,092)

4.10.7 The General Fund reserves allocated for specific purposes are summarised below.

Reserves £'000	Closing 2024/25	Use	Closing 2025/26	Use	Closing 2026/27	Closing 2027/28
NHB reserve <i>note 1</i>	£10	£0	£10	£0	£10	£10
Business Change & Digital Reserve <i>note 2</i>	£773	£314	£1,087	£0	£1,087	£1,087
Homeless reserve <i>note 3</i>	£420	£109	£529	(£96)	£434	£434
Planning Delivery <i>note 4</i>	£198	(£95)	£103	£0	£103	£103
Queensway monies <i>note 5</i>	£215	£193	£408	£293	£701	£1,094
Regeneration Reserve <i>note 7</i>	£245	(£107)	£139	£0	£139	£139
Town Centre Reserve	£0	£56	£56	£0	£56	£56
Town square reserve <i>note 6</i>	£1,711	£55	£1,766	(£35)	£1,731	£1,546

Reserves £'000	Closing 2024/25	Use	Closing 2025/26	Use	Closing 2026/27	Closing 2027/28
Insurance reserve <i>note 8</i>	£62	£0	£62	£0	£62	£62
ICT reserve <i>note 9</i>	£142	£0	£142	£0	£142	£142
New Leisure <i>note 15</i>	£219	(£219)	£0	£0	£0	£0
Stevenage works <i>note 11</i>	£20	(£20)	£0	£0	£0	£0
Asylum seekers reserve <i>note 12</i>	£1,018	(£227)	£790	(£518)	£272	£272
Future Councils reserve <i>note 10</i>	£198	(£198)	£0	£0	£0	£0
Commercial Property repair reserve <i>note 13</i>	£41	£0	£41	£0	£41	£41
Domestic abuse reserve	£196	£0	£196	£0	£196	£196
Extended Producer Pays grant	£0	£218	£218	(£25)	£193	£193
Elections Reserve	£0	£50	£50	(£50)	£0	£0
LEP Loan Reserve	£0	£0	£0	£500	£500	£1,500
Apprentice Reserve	£150	£150	£300	£150	£450	£600
Total Allocated for use	£5,617	£280	£5,896	£219	£6,115	£7,473

4.10.8 There is a planned transfer to balances of £280K and £219K in 2025/26 and 2026/27 respectively. The established reserves are as follows:

1. NHB reserve was created to hold NHB allocations so that the General Fund did not become reliant on the funding. This reserve has reduced from its peak of £1.6Million to £10K in 2025/26.
2. Business Change & Digital Reserve is used to hold the monies set out for the Council's Business Change programme including improving the Council's digital offer and streamlining processes to give better outcomes and improved service delivery for residents. When business cases are established monies will be drawn down from the reserve.
3. These are ringfenced government Homeless grants which are used to support the Council's homeless function including additional staff resources. The 2026/27 allocation has been assumed to be spent in year.
4. Planning Delivery is required to support the surveys for the Local Plan and is used over and above any General Fund allocation.
5. Queensway Car Park Monies - this is the income from the Queensway Limited Liability Partnership (LLP) for parking income and the allowance for future costs for the LLP as agreed in the September 2024 and 2025 MTFS. This money has been ringfenced to support the fit out of future commercial tenancies on Queensway North.
6. Town Square Reserve - the monies are held to support the running costs of assets acquired for regeneration purposes.
7. The Regeneration reserve is used to fund one off additional costs incurred by the Regeneration Team to support the teams projects including professional and legal advice.
8. The Insurance reserve is used to support adhoc preventative works to reduce potential future claims where no core budget is in place.
9. The ICT reserve is ICT Reserve - this was used to absorb pressures in year.

10. The Future Councils Reserve is used to ringfence the £750K grant funding received by the government, which is predicted to be spent by 31 March 2026.
11. Stevenage Works is the flagship job and training hub / partnership which comprises SBC, North Herts College and Job Centre Plus. The funding in the reserve has yet to be forecast and an update will be included in the February report.
12. These are ringfenced Asylum grants which are used to support the Council's homeless function including the provision of additional staff resources.
13. The Commercial Property Reserve is a reactive pot which can be used to support works to the commercial estate if expenditure is above the in-year budget allocation.
14. The Extended Producer Pays reserve see para. 4.1.14-4.1.16.

4.11 Chief Finance Officer's Commentary

- 4.11.1 The Chief Finance Officer is the Council's principal financial advisor and has statutory responsibilities in relation to the administration of the Council's financial affairs (Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 and Section 114 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988). This commentary is given in light of these statutory responsibilities, (see also Appendix D).
- 4.11.2 The Council has evolved its budget strategy to meet multiple challenges as set out in this report and the financial strategy to deal with this is the 'Balancing the Budget' priority of 'Stevenage Even Better' Corporate Plan.
- 4.11.3 Officers regularly update the MTFs to ensure that a clear financial position for the Council can be demonstrated over the next five years. This medium-term view of the budget gives a mechanism by which future 'budget gaps' can be identified allowing for a measured rather than reactive approach to reducing net expenditure. Work is ongoing throughout the year to seek to bridge the BTB funding gap.
- 4.11.4 The Council has taken significant steps over recent years to balance its budget and the 2026/27-2028/29 Fair Funding Settlement has improved the financial position of the Council and given certainty about the next three years funding from Government. The 2027/28-2029/30 BTB savings target has significantly reduced from historic levels and totals £800K and should be funded through annual fees and charges increases. This is of course dependent on the realisation of projected inflationary pressures as set out in the MTFs.
- 4.11.5 Events such as COVID and the Cost of Living crises have increased financial risks to Councils which has seen spikes in inflation which have become baselined within the budget. The Council has however taken a number of financial resilience measures which seek to increase the resilience of the Council's position including:
 - A risk assessment of balances to ensure general reserves held take the increased risk from recessionary pressures into account.

- Establishment of the income equalisation reserve (£558K by 31 March 2026) which can be returned to the General Fund if fees and charges are lower than projected.
- Identification of a sufficient level of on-going BTB options to ensure the General Fund is above or at the minimum level of balances.
- Introduction of a Business Change and Digital programme to deliver savings for both the General Fund and HRA and get the Council ready for LGR.
- Implementation of a Commercial and Insourcing Strategy which looks for opportunities to increase the Council's net income from new commercial options, ensuring fees and charges are set based on the cost of services and any insourcing opportunities.
- Setting aside monies in the Queensway reserve to ensure there is sufficient monies available to Queensway LLP for future investment and support.
- Setting aside monies to repay the LEP loans due to be repaid in 2029/30
- Increasing funding for Discretionary Housing Payments and Hardship funding in 2026/27.

4.11.6 The current projections of balances, the new Fair Funding and the measures the Council has taken to date as set in this report mean that the level of balances projected are above the minimum level and sufficient to set the 2026/27 budget. However, a structural deficit could soon open up (as demonstrated in paragraph 4.10.4) if growth is on-going rather than one off in nature.

4.11.7 Further commentary can be found in Appendix D to this report (Section 25 Statement including Robustness of Estimates and Adequacy of Reserves) which Members are asked to approve.

4.12 Contingency Sums

4.12.1 Cabinet Members will recall that a Contingency Sum needs to be determined by the Council as part of the Budget and Policy Framework in order to avoid the need for Council to consider all supplementary estimates during the course of the year. This contingency sum constitutes an upper cumulative limit during the financial year within which the Cabinet can approve supplementary estimates, rather than forming part of the Council's Budget Requirement for the year. A sum of £500,000 is proposed for 2026/27 for general spend and remains unchanged from 2025/26.

4.12.2 In addition a further allowance of £500,000 is recommended specifically for Local Government reorganisation if funding required is needed in advance of the 2027/28 allowance or costs are higher than expected. This means the General Fund would still project cash balances above the minimum levels set out in the report.

4.13 Member Consultation

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- 4.13.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee discussed the Draft Budget report at their meeting of the 20 January 2026 and the Strategic Director (S151) advised them that the fair funding settlement had been relatively beneficial to Stevenage compared to the average increase in Core Spending power (CSP) for District Councils.
- 4.13.2 A question was asked about the settlement to which the Strategic Director replied that the final settlement had not yet been received and there could be some changes as a result of this and it was likely to be published end of January beginning of February. The Strategic Director also advised the committee the settlement was for three years but each year's funding would need to be laid before parliament.
- 4.13.3 A Member also asked about the level of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) funding the Council will receive/received and the Strategic Director told the Committee that SBC was granted £1.078Million in 2025/26 and a further £1.22Million in 2026/27 that was required to fund recycling initiatives. The Committee were further informed that a breakdown of the recommended spend for 2026/27 was included in the report to the February Cabinet in addition to the funding of the two freighters (£500K) already recommended for approval in the January Draft Cabinet report.

4.14 Public Consultation

Resident Survey (2025)

- 4.14.1 The 2025/26 Residents survey (on this Cabinet agenda) shows that resident's preferences with regards to achieving budget savings are firstly to reduce costs through the provision of more online services. This was ranked the highest (out of five options in 2025, 2021 and 2017) with 46%. This first-rate ranking has increased from 2021 and supports the Digital Strategy (approved at the December Cabinet) as a method to reduce costs and improve efficiency / productivity.

Please tell us your order of preference for each of the following options by ordering them 1 to 5	2025 rank	2021 rank	1st
Reduce time and money spent on paperwork by interacting with more residents and customers online/modernising services	1	1	46%
Make money by selling more of our services to residents and customers	2	4	9%
Increase income from fees and chargeable services, to keep the council's element of Council Tax as low as possible	3	2	24%
Spend less by reducing or cutting the services that you tell us are not a priority	4	3	10%

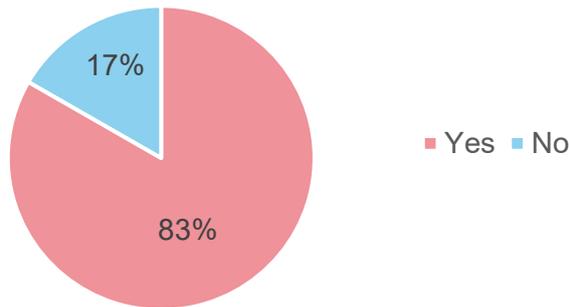
Please tell us your order of preference for each of the following options by ordering them 1 to 5	2025 rank	2021 rank	1st
Increase our element of Council Tax (for example from 51p per day to 55p per day)	5	5	7%

4.14.2 The 2025 residents' survey asked residents whether the council tax represented value for money. While strongly disagree has decreased (from 15% to 12%), overall 44% (was 52% in 2021) of residents agree it represents value for money, with an increase in the number neither agreeing or disagreeing. It should be noted that Stevenage's performance remains above the LGA benchmark (2024) of 36%. Stevenage Borough Council is also the billing authority but only accounts for 10.8% of the overall council tax. The 2025 data and prior year comparators are shown in the chart below.

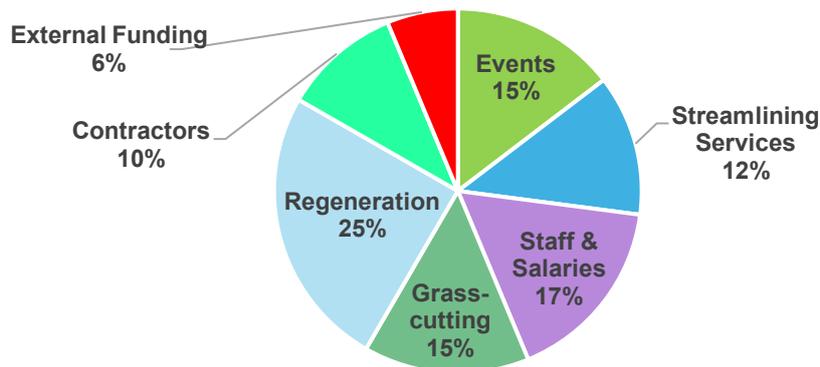
	Responses	2025	2021	2017	2015	2011
To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Council Tax paid to Stevenage Borough Council provides good value for money?	Strongly agree	5%	16%	10%	7%	6%
	Tend to agree	39%	36%	36%	39%	40%
	Neither	28%	18%	30%	30%	33%
	Tend to disagree	13%	10%	17%	18%	16%
	Strongly disagree	12%	15%	7%	6%	5%
	Don't know (DNRO)	4%	4%			
	Summary: Agree	44%	52%	46%	46%	46%
	Summary: Disagree	12%	26%	24%	24%	21%

4.14.3 Development of the Councils 2024/25 Corporate Plan included a period of public and stakeholder engagement and consultation to include ascertaining if respondents:

- Agree that Balancing the Budget should be a priority so that the Council can remain financially resilient and continue to deliver key services as set out in the Corporate Plan?
- If no, is the alternative is to reduce services and provide less?
- If yes, what should the Council stop doing to generate £1.23Million savings?
- 83% of respondents to the consultation agreed that Balancing the Budget should be a priority:



4.14.4 All survey respondents were asked for financial savings suggestions. The responses can be categorised into seven themes:



- The Transforming Our Town programme will attract new businesses to the area which would increase business rate revenue and car parking income (25%). – *The Council has opened a new Multi Storey car park and is working with partners to bring new business into the town, also improving the business rates collected and retained by the Council.*
- Reduce Staff and Councillor salaries (17%). – *The Council’s Member allowances are reviewed and agreed by an Independent Remuneration Panel and staff pay is governed by the collective pay agreements as agreed with the unions.*
- The Council should consider selective grass-cutting allowing green spaces to grow wilder (within safe reasons) and reduce maintenance costs for grass cutting etc. (15%) – *The Council has already implemented this as a measure with an associated cost reduction.*
- Streamlining services (12%) – *The Council has a transformation programme which is targeted at streamlining processes and reducing costs.*
- Reduce use of Contractors (10%) – *The Council has a Commercial and Insourcing Strategy which includes reviewing contracts to see if they can be brought back in-house where deemed viable to do so at the point of re-tendering.*
- Reducing or cancelling events such as the November Fireworks Display, or those held on the Event Island and the Stevenage Museum. (15%) – *the Council has been looking at how it manages and delivers future event activity with a view to driving out efficiencies where possible.*

- Seeking external funding to plug the financial gap (6%). *The Council has actively sought external funding and has received circa £80Million of revenue and capital funding over the last few years.*

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial Implications

- 5.1.1 The report deals with Council finances and as such all implications are contained in the main body of the report.
- 5.1.2 Savings options are required to follow the Budget and Policy Framework as set out in this report. Fees and charges require a report to the Cabinet and were considered by the Cabinet in October 2025.

5.2 Legal Implications

- 5.2.1 The Council is required to set a balanced budget each year. The Local Government Finance Act 1992 requires the Council to estimate revenue expenditure and income for the forthcoming year from all sources, together with contributions from reserves, in order to determine a net budget requirement to be met by government grant and council tax.

5.3 Policy Implications

- 5.3.1 The report deals with Council policy and as such all implications are contained in the main body of the report.

5.4 Staffing and Accommodation Implications

- 5.4.1 There is one savings option relating to the Customer Service Centre which reduces staff costs but the saving relates to posts that do not have permanent staff in.

5.5 Equal Opportunities Implications

- 5.5.1 In carrying out or changing its functions (including those relating to the provision of services and the employment of staff) the Council must comply with the Equality Act 2010 and in particular section 149 which is the Public Sector Equality Duty. The Council has a statutory obligation to comply with the requirements of The Act, demonstrating that as part of the decision-making process, due regard has been given to the need to:
- Remove discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that its unlawful under this Act
 - Promote equal opportunities between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not

- Encourage good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

5.5.2 These duties are non-delegable and must be considered by Council when setting the Budget in February 2026.

5.5.3 To inform the decisions about the Budget 2026/27 officers have produced an overarching EQIA for the budget to inform the decision taken by Council in February 2026 (Appendix E). The measures contained within the budget are shown to have a positive impact as many of the savings are efficiency and do not involve service cuts together with the proposed additional growth recommended.

5.6 Risk Implications

5.6.1 Risk implications have reduced since the last budget report in terms of funding as a result of the Fair Funding settlement and the reduction in employer pension contributions. But risks to setting a prudent General Fund budget still remain in the short and medium term particularly which includes the delivery of all the Balancing the Budget options identified in Appendix A and within the report.

5.6.2 There are a number of risks that have been identified and these are set out in the report. The risks to the General Fund are summarised below.

Expenditure and Income	Impacted by	Risk (to increase cost)
Inflation	Although price increases around utilities and fuel have fallen, there is still huge volatility in the market with the continual war in Ukraine.	medium
	The MTFs assumes a 3.25% pay award for 2026/27, however previous years deals have been higher and the need for the pay grades to have due regard to inflation and the minimum wage may drive much higher pay negotiation outcomes. The 2027/28 pay award has been increased to 2.75% reflecting current higher levels of inflation from 2.5%.	medium
	The MTFs assumes a reduction in CPI inflation during the MTFs which has to be delivered to keep costs in line with projections.	high
Demand for services	There may be an increase for support services such as homeless and advice and this puts further pressure on the Council's budgets	medium
Local Government Reorganisation	There is a risk that the Council will incur costs associated with LGR following the submission for Hertfordshire in November 2025. Hertfordshire Councils	high

Expenditure and Income	Impacted by	Risk (to increase cost)
	have included an amount in their budget's but this may not be sufficient.	
Fees and Charges	The impact of the current economic climate may impact the Council's fees and charges income which is required to support the funding of services.	medium
Core funding	Future years funding set out in the Fair Funding settlement may not be realised if the pressure to reduce public sector costs increases.	high

5.7 Climate Change Implications

5.7.1 The Council declared a climate change emergency at the June 2019 Council meeting with a resolution to work towards a target of achieving net zero emissions by 2030. The Digital Strategy will contribute to reducing the Council's carbon footprint. In 2023/24 the Council approved an additional officer post to support its efforts meet its climate change goals. Included in the 2024/25 options was a growth bid to convert the Council's fleet from diesel to use hydrogenated vegetable oil (HVO) in order to reduce the Council's carbon emissions, the full year impact was included in the 2025/26 General Fund budget.

5.8 Local Government reform Implications

5.8.1 As part of the timetable for LGR, the Secretary of State's will issue a Direction under section 24 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 (the Section 24 Direction) and this will place restrictions on different types of expenditure by the Hertfordshire Councils without consent in the period up to vesting day.

5.8.2 Section 24 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 allows the Secretary of State to direct that from a certain date the authorities to be dissolved under a Structural Change Order may not, without the written consent of those specified in the direction:

- Dispose of land for more than £100,000 (note: disposals include granting or disposing of any interest in land; entering into a contract to dispose of land or grant or dispose of any such interest; and granting an option to acquire any land or any such interest)
- Enter into contracts that exceed the following limits Capital £1,000,000+
- Non-capital £100,000+

Note: all of the financial limits set out above would be cumulative from the date enacted.

- 5.8.3 This means all disposals of land and, for contracts, repeat contracts with the same third party or for a similar description of matter as a previous contract are caught.
- 5.8.4 The purpose of a section 24 direction is to ensure that a new authority has oversight of and a degree of control over the decisions of its predecessor councils which could have implications for the finances and plans of that new authority.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

BD1 General Fund Medium Term Financial Strategy (2025/26-2029/30) September 2025 Cabinet

BD2 Balancing the Budget November 2025 Cabinet

BD3 Fees and Charges October 2025 Cabinet

APPENDICES

Appendix A General Fund Budget Options

Appendix B General Fund Growth Options

Appendix C Risk Assessment of Balances

Appendix D Section 25 Statement including Robustness of Estimates and Adequacy of Reserves

Appendix E EQIA Overarching General Fund budget and Council Tax increase

Appendix F EPR grant use 2026/27

Appendix G Additional one off Growth Proposals

Appendix H Council tax resolution

Appendix I General Fund Budget