

Leader Budget Speech 2026/27

I am delighted to present the Council's balanced budget for 2026/27. Once again it is a budget that continues to invest in our services, invest in our assets, invest in our people and invest in our place.

At the highest level, it is a general fund revenue budget set at twenty six point six million pounds, and a general fund capital programme totalling fourteen point seven million pounds.

At a time when local government finances are tighter than ever, especially following on from what has turned out to be a rather unfair funding review by the current government, I am proud to be able to confirm that no frontline or back-office services will be reduced for the year ahead. We have produced a fully funded balanced budget that gives us an excellent platform to tackle the difficult medium term position current being forecast.

In our budget, Councillors will note the additional two million pounds put into our new waste collection service. We have demonstrated the Council's values perfectly in this roll out, demonstrating Learning as we entered into phase 2 and now phase 3, Empathy, as we have listened to our residents and offered additional support where required, Ambition is clear with this being the single largest service change that I can ever recall for this Council, and Fairness, especially for our hard working crews who no longer have to worry every time they grab a bin bag that something sharp or heavy might cause them an injury.

We have listened to what our residents have told us, and through our transformation and ICT work programme have improved self-service functionality so our customers can carry out transactions at a time that suits them.

We have increased the coastal maintenance budget for 2026/27 by seventy seven thousand pounds to a total of four hundred thousand pounds so we can continue to be a responsible local authority and seek to do all we can to protect our stunning coastline from the continued threats of coastal erosion and climate change. We must fully recognise however that we simply can't do this alone. We will keep up engagement with the Environment Agency who will need to play a significant role in funding the multi-million pounds required over the more medium-long term.

An additional sixty one thousand pounds has gone into toilet cleaning. Yes, it's not glamorous or headline grabbing, but couple this with the two million over the next two years in our capital programme for toilet renovations, it's another great example of prioritising our resources in projects and services that will be of real benefit to the largest proportion of our residents and visitors alike.

We are investing nearly three million pounds next year in replacement vehicles critical to frontend service delivery, and have half a million pounds set aside next year for necessary improvement and maintenance works to the historically important

Eling Tide Mill. A report will also be coming forward to the Council in the early summer to set out our intentions around the delivery of strategic CIL projects. When combined with our annual infrastructure programme, habitat mitigation schemes and budget set aside for Arts and Culture projects, we have over twenty million pounds of projects funded through CIL within our three year capital programme. We care about the place that is the new forest, and want to see money that has been collected here, spent here.

We have also invested in our biggest asset, our staff who do such a brilliant job at providing the front end of customer interaction and satisfaction, and just as importantly, we can't forget the range of staff who provide the often unseen functions that simply keep us going. In line with the People Strategy, this budget is supporting the Digital Skills for All Programme launching this year, and we have increased the training budget for our staff to ensure they remain as well prepared as they can be to take the essence and culture of the New Forest into the new Council, post April 2028.

A clear priority of ours is also to try and keep council tax increases as low as possible. We have done our bit and have imposed by far the lowest Council Tax percentage increase of all the precepting authorities on the Council Tax bill. It's easy to forget that this council's council tax share only equates to around nine per cent of the overall bill. We play an important role in collecting the council tax for the County Council, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Police and Crime Commissioner, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Fire and Rescue service, and the Town and Parish Councils. Our share for the year at two hundred and eleven pounds and ninety two pence for a band D property continues to represent excellent value for money at just four pounds per week.

Outside of the General Fund, our Housing Revenue Account, funded in the main through Housing Rents, is also balanced, and will spend in excess of nineteen million pounds next year on improving and maintaining the five thousand two hundred and fifty homes that we own.

The opposition will claim that we should be doing more, that we must take the opportunity to spend more whilst we can. Let me tell you, we are doing absolutely everything we can to prioritise our resources and our spend to where it is needed the most on the services that this Council has responsibility for. The budget is in accordance with priorities that have been collectively set by all members of this chamber.

And, even with Local Government Reorganisation around the corner, the residents of the New Forest will still need a responsible and financially sustainable local authority beyond March twenty twenty-eight. That is what you get with a budget set by a Conservative administration.

I'm extremely thankful to my Cabinet, to the members who have supported them, and to our officers for getting us to this position.

Chairman, I fully endorse the recommendations as laid out in the report of the Cabinet.