

## COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Council held on Wednesday, 18 February 2026 in the Council Chamber - Council Offices at 6.00 pm

<b>Members Present:</b>	Cllr T Adams	Cllr M Batey
	Cllr K Bayes	Cllr D Birch
	Cllr H Blathwayt	Cllr J Boyle
	Cllr A Brown	Cllr S Bütikofer
	Cllr C Cushing	Cllr N Dixon
	Cllr P Fisher	Cllr A Fitch-Tillett
	Cllr T FitzPatrick	Cllr A Fletcher
	Cllr M Gray	Cllr M Hankins
	Cllr C Heinink	Cllr P Heinrich
	Cllr V Holliday	Cllr K Leith
	Cllr R Macdonald	Cllr P Neatherway
	Cllr L Paterson	Cllr P Porter
	Cllr J Punchard	Cllr C Ringer
	Cllr C Rouse	Cllr L Shires
	Cllr M Taylor	Cllr E Tooke ( <i>left meeting early</i> )
	Cllr J Toye	Cllr K Toye
	Cllr A Varley	Cllr L Withington

**Also in attendance:** The Chief Executive, the S151 Officer, the Monitoring Officer, the Assistant Director for Resources, the Democratic Services & Governance Manager, the Democratic Services & Governance Officer.

### 96 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllrs P Bailey, W Fredericks, N Housden, G Mancini-Boyle, S Penfold and L Vickers.

### 97 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2025 were approved as a correct record.

### 98 PRESENTATION OF AWARD

The Chair presented the Assistant Director of Finance & Assets with his certificate for completion of the Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM) Level 7 award for Strategic Leadership.

### 99 TO RECEIVE DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS FROM MEMBERS

None.

### 100 ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

There was one item of urgent business:

The Leader, Cllr T Adams, began by saying that he welcomed the decision to

proceed with County Council elections in May and he assured members that the Council had the capacity to carry out elections. He then referred to the statement made by the Leader of Norfolk County Council on 17<sup>th</sup> February, announcing that NCC was pulling out of the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) process and devolution. Cllr Adams said that this was symptomatic of the Government's approach so far. He clarified that NCC could not cancel LGR, however, the Government needed the County Council's consent for devolution. Without NCC's money and input, it would be extremely difficult to make progress with LGR. He went onto say that the landscape could change again with the upcoming elections.

Cllr Adams said that NNDC had always been sceptical of the benefits of LGR and had raised concerns about the costs, believing that the money would be better spent on public services. In addition, it was not felt that the envisaged savings had not been achieved in areas where LGR had already taken place. There were also considerable concerns about having a much larger authority which would be more remote from residents and businesses and the impact on the management of assets such as Cromer pier and the country parks. That said, NNDC had continued to engage with the process to ensure that benefits would be maximised for the district.

He said that he was concerned that by May 2028, the devolution package could look very different from that which was promised. He referred members to the budgetary allocation for LGR, which would need to be agreed by Full Council tonight. If it was not called upon for any reason, then it would be brought back to Council for debate and reallocated to other projects. He went onto say that discussions with counterparts would take place over the coming days, following agreement of the budget for 2026/2027. An agreed response was required to the Government's questions regarding the statutory changes order and lastly how strategic partner procurement would be dealt with. In conclusion, he said that NNDC was now largely in the hands of others and he was concerned that the Government could change the narrative quite considerably, particularly the monetary value of devolution. Investment in key areas such as public transport was needed and there was a will to increase the scale of business activities across the County.

The Chair invited members to speak:

Cllr C Cushing said that he agreed with Cllr Adams' comments and welcomed the decision to proceed with elections. He reminded members that by participating in the fast-track devolution process, millions of pounds of funding was meant to be delivered to Norfolk and this now seemed to have disappeared from the agenda. He added that only the Government now supported LGR and devolution and it seemed increasingly likely that it would therefore be imposed on local authorities against their will. He said that it was prudent to set aside £750k in the budget but said that if the County Council was not engaging with the process until after the election, then it would be wise to wait until after May before spending any of that money on LGR and devolution. He concluded by saying that he hoped NNDC would be joining Great Yarmouth BC and South Norfolk DC in slowing down the process until after the county council elections.

Cllr Adams agreed with Cllr Cushing's concerns regarding the fast-track programme and said that Norfolk now seemed to be at the back of queue rather than at the front of it. People wanted to see change with devolution and introducing another layer of local government didn't help with this. Regarding the concerns raised with spending money on LGR, Cllr Adams said that it was unlikely that it would occur before the May elections and there would be discussions with neighbouring authorities on how to proceed. He added that councils were being asked to carry out business as usual,

whilst taking on new statutory obligations such as the collection of food waste, whilst having to pay for LGR.

Cllr N Dixon commented that significant events would unfold in the coming months for the Council and it was important that it focussed on delivering services and maintaining an agility to respond to events as they unfolded.

Cllr J Toye agreed, saying that the Council needed to focus on what it could do, adding that the delay to the devolution programme caused real challenges, especially for the business sector.

## **101 CHAIRMAN'S COMMUNICATIONS**

The Chair spoke about recent civic events that he had attended:

01 January – New Year's Day Fireworks lighting ceremony

27 January – Holocaust Memorial Day service, St Peter Mancroft Church, Norwich

29 January – Puss in Boots, NNDC Panto, Sheringham Little Theatre

04 February – ceremonial opening of Kings Lynn Mart and Showmen's lunch

06 February – 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary commemoration service for Henry Blogg, Lifeboat Coxswain.

## **102 LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Leader, Cllr T Adams, said that the distribution of the second homes premium on the same basis as the current financial year. This presented a significant opportunity to support families through the provision of temporary accommodation.

He then spoke about the Council's Coastal team and said he was pleased to say that a further share of funding had been secured for the Coastwise initiative. This demonstrated the success of the team and the work they had undertaken so far and provided an opportunity for coastal teams across the country to learn from NNDC's knowledge and experience.

The Leader concluded by thanking everyone involved with the NNDC staff panto, which he had attended with his family and very much enjoyed.

## **103 PUBLIC QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS**

There were two public speakers – Julia Drury and Alexander Drury. Both wanted to speak in relation to Agenda Item 17 – Notice of Motion 'Sheringham Sixth Form Provision and Post 16 Educational Inequality'.

The Chair invited Ms J Drury to speak first. She began by saying that she had been head of Sheringham Sixth form from its inception in 1995 until 2001. She explained that it was set up to provide opportunities for post 16-year-olds in Sheringham and the surrounding area. In the first year it provided vocational and A level course to 32 students. By the time she left in 2001, there were 150 students and since then it had grown to over 200 students. Many of those students had gone onto university and post A level training courses. The approach had always been to take any student with basic GCSE qualifications and help them achieve. Tailored support had been provided to every student with an aim to inspire so that they could aspire. By removing the opportunity to do A Levels at Sheringham Sixth Form, the aspirations of young people would be stifled.

Mr A Drury then spoke. He said that he attended Sheringham Sixth Form from 1998

to 2000. He said that the 6<sup>th</sup> form was a springboard for achieving ambitions. For him, it had led to academic achievements and for others it meant that they were able to stay in the local area, working in various professions and in some cases, running their own businesses. Many of his peer group were now embedded in the local community and contributing to the local economy. This demonstrated how important it was having a college in Sheringham as it helped retain local people in the area. He then went onto speak about people from low-aspiration households who did not have a tradition of educational attainment in the family and said that any barrier to accessing education had a significant impact on such young people achieving their potential.

**104 APPOINTMENTS TO COMMITTEES, SUB-COMMITTEES, WORKING PARTIES & PANELS**

It was RESOLVED

To approve the recommendation from the Overview & Scrutiny Committee to appoint Cllr C Rouse as a substitute on the Norfolk Health Overview Select Committee.

**105 PAY POLICY STATEMENT 2026 - 2027**

The Leader, Cllr Adams, introduced this item. He said that it was a statutory report that came to Full Council on an annual basis.

It was RESOLVED

To adopt the Pay Policy Statement and to publish the statement for 2026/2027 on the Council's website.

**106 CAR PARK ORDER 2026**

The Portfolio Holder for Finance, Estates & Property Services, introduced this item. She explained that the proposed increases set out in the order did not affect the standard inland car parks in the market towns, as it was acknowledged that they faced different challenges to the coastal car parks.

Cllr Shires then highlighted some of the responses to the consultation. Regarding the Hornbeam Road car park in North Walsham, she said that it had been designed to support transport from the train station and not to solve displacement parking from nearby residential streets. It was intended to support sustainable transport from the nearby train station and the very well-used Norwich Road bus stop. Last year, charges were introduced on the site to see if maintenance costs could be covered. Following discussions with users of the car parks, feedback from occasional users indicated that the daily rates were far too high. It was therefore proposed that a daily flat rate of £3.00 was trialled which was comparable to that of the train station car park. The impact would be monitored carefully. She went onto say that tourism brought pressure to the Council's coastal car parks and it was reasonable that visitors should contribute towards the maintenance and upkeep of these car parks. Prices would be kept at a competitive price to ensure that visitors were not deterred.

Finally, Cllr Shires sought to quell any concerns regarding eating and cooking within the car parks. She said that it was not intended to prevent anyone from eating fish and chips in their car. The intention was to stop parking spaces being used for cooking or picnic places. It was a standard provision in car park orders across the country and the wording had been clarified to remove any ambiguity.

It was proposed by Cllr L Shires, seconded by Cllr T Adams and

RESOLVED unanimously

1. That the Council introduces the Car Parking Order 2026 on 7 April 2026 as advertised.
2. That the Council considers it appropriate to make the order subject to minor changes to wording within the Car Parking Order 2026.

## **107 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM CABINET 2ND FEBRUARY 2026**

Cllr L Shires introduced this item. She said that the reports had all been to Cabinet and Overview & Scrutiny Committee, where the recommendations had been supported. The Treasury management Strategy had been reviewed by the Governance, Risk & Audit Committee (GRAC). She did not intend to present them in detail but said that she wanted to provide an update on the Non-Domestic Rates Policy 2026 – 2027, as the Government had recently introduced some changes.

Cllr Shires explained that if an organisation occupied a property on which it paid National Non-Domestic (Business) Rates (NDR) it may be eligible for up to 100% Discretionary Rate Relief if it was operated within some or all of the guidelines shown in the policy. She added that the guidelines for determining relief were not intended to be a rigid set of rules and neither were all the guidelines applicable to every organisation. Each case would be judged on its merits taking into account the contribution which each organisation/business made to the district's amenities and its resident's lifestyles and wellbeing.

The government had announced a new ten-year 100% relief for eligible electronic vehicle charging points and electric vehicle only forecourts to start from 1 April 2026/27. These properties would be identified by the VOA and would be fully funded by Section 13 grants.

Cllr Shires then talked through the rest of the key changes:

The Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Business Rates Relief scheme provided eligible retail, hospitality, and leisure properties with 40% relief which previously was 50% and 75%. From 1 April 2026 this would be replaced by two lower multipliers.

The new mandatory RHL multipliers were based on occupation of the business not the VOA description and would enable NNDC to provide government updates throughout the 2026/27 year to fully compensate for the loss of income as a result of these changes. In line with the government, NNDC had updated the discretionary rate relief policy to end this relief from 1 April 2026.

Supporting Small Businesses relief was government funded to local authorities so that they could provide relief for businesses that had a Rateable Value (RV) increase from 1 April 2026 caused by the 2026 NDR revaluation and as a consequence lost Small Business Rates Relief, Rural Rate Relief or RHL relief. This relief would be capped at the higher of £800 or the relevant transitional relief caps from 1 April 2026 and would apply for three years. The previous scheme was due to end on 31 March 2026 however has been extended for another year. The relief would be delivered through local authority discretionary discount powers (under section 47 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 as amended).

Cllr Shires then explained that the discretionary government scheme for Film Studios relief which started on 1 April 2025 at 40% relief would continue until 2034. There were no such studios in the district currently.

She then spoke about recent changes to pubs and live music venues relief, explaining that the government had announced on 27 January 2026 that in 2026-27, eligible pubs and live music venues would benefit from a 15% business rates relief on top of the support announced at the Budget in 2025. Their bills would then be frozen in real terms for a further 2 years.

Local authorities were due to complete their NNDR1 for 2026-27 shortly, so it is not expected that authorities would have forecast the value of the relief, however, NNDC has estimated that there are approximately 100 eligible properties and the total relief would be about £161k for the 2026/27 year. The figures will be confirmed in the outturn data on the actual total cost for providing the relief, as per the usual process, via the NNDR3 process.

Local authorities would be fully compensated for the loss of income associated with granting the pubs and live music venues relief and the government will fund the associated new burdens, including the administrative and software costs of implementation.

She concluded by thanking the Revenues Team for their hard work, especially in exceeding their collection rates targets for both council tax and business rates.

The Chair asked members if they were content to take the recommendations en bloc.

It was RESOLVED unanimously to approve the following recommendations from Cabinet:

**1. Capital Strategy 2026 -2027**

To approve the Capital Strategy 2026/27.

**2. Treasury Management Strategy 2026 – 2027**

To approve the Treasury Management Strategy 2026/27.

**3. Non-Domestic Rates Policy 2026 - 2027**

To approve:

- a) That the Revenues Manager continues to have delegated authority to make decisions up to the NNDC cost value of £4k as indicated in Appendix A.
- b) That the Revenues Manager continues to have delegated authority to make Hardship Relief decisions up to the NNDC cost value of £4k as indicated in Appendix C.
- c) That the Rate Relief Policy is revised as indicated in Appendix A, B and C.

#### **4. Medium Term Financial Strategy 2026/27 – 2029/30**

RESOLVED

To approve the Medium Term Financial Strategy for 2026/27 – 2029/30

#### **108 RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 11 FEBRUARY 2026**

The Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, Cllr V Holliday, confirmed that there were no further recommendations to Full Council.

#### **109 BUDGET & COUNCIL TAX 2026 - 2027**

The Chair advised members that there would be a series of recorded votes. He then invited the S151 Officer and Chief Financial Officer (CFO) to speak on the robustness of the estimates.

The CFO said that when considering the robustness of the estimates and adequacy of reserves a holistic approach was taken, which considered the general reserve, earmarked reserves and the identified risks in relation to the revenue and capital budgets presented for approval.

The CFO confirmed that he was satisfied that the estimates, as presented in the budget were sufficiently robust and that the reserve balances proposed for 2026/27 were adequate.

The Chair then invited Cllr L Shires, Portfolio Holder for Finance, Estates & Property Services to introduce the Budget for 2026/2027.

Cllr Shires began by saying that despite a deeply disappointing funding review, the Council had been able to produce a balanced budget. Funding for the Council was reduced in real terms and included a government funding floor of 95% of Core Spending Power. Additionally, new burdens had been placed on the Council with insufficient funding for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and a domestic food waste collection service. She said this approach reinforced a long-held concern that central government did not understand rural communities. The funding formula may be national but the consequences were intensely local. This was not a new phenomenon. Since 2010, shire districts had experienced some of the deepest cuts in funding whilst facing additional pressures such as the need for temporary accommodation and the implementation of food waste collection. National economic volatility, inflationary pressures, pay award uncertainty and fluctuating interest rates all continued to increase the cost of delivering services. Through prudent financial management, disciplined use of reserves, careful forecasting and a clear medium term financial strategy (MTFS), the Council had been able to maintain essential services. Whilst other councils faced instability, NNDC continued to plan responsibly.

Cllr Shires said that the shortfall in funding for temporary accommodation remained one of the most significant challenges. By the end of the financial year a temporary accommodation funding gap of £400k was anticipated, a position that was likely to continue into the next year. It was due to such pressures that the Council introduced the 100% second homes premium and she confirmed that North Norfolk's 7.3% share of this premium which resulted in £663K, would be used to mitigate government funding shortfalls and to maintain the second homes premium reserve. That reserve would continue to provide stability in managing temporary

accommodation costs. In addition, NNDC had successfully negotiated a share of the County Council's second homes premium, estimated at £1.7m. This agreement ensured that the capital investment that was committed for temporary accommodation could now be funded without borrowing.

She then spoke about the proposed mandatory introduction of food waste collections, saying that whilst the Council supported the environmental ambitions of the policy, the funding provided by central government underestimated the establishment and ongoing costs of such a scheme. The initial capital allocations have underestimated the real expense of vehicles, containers and operational set up and the ongoing revenue did not reflect the cost of collection in a large rural district.

Cllr Shires said that she had been clear about working with all members of the Council throughout the budget monitoring and budget setting process and always in the best interests of North Norfolk residents. She thanked the Overview & Scrutiny Committee for their time and diligence in helping to reach this stage. Scrutiny strengthened decision-making and she asked for the committee's support in the year ahead. She also thanked opposition members for their constructive support throughout the budget setting process.

Cllr Shires said that the budget setting process for the year began with the Council facing a projected £1.8m deficit. The scale of work required to close the gap had been significant and she thanked officers for their diligence, professionalism and creativity shown in bringing forward a balanced budget. She said it was important to note that changes in government funding and expectations had added a further £2.4m to projected future deficits. This context made the achievements outlined all the more significant. She thanked all officers for their professionalism, resilience and dedication to North Norfolk. She extended her thanks to her Cabinet colleagues for the way they had engaged constructively with this process and commended them for responding so positively to the scrutiny of their portfolio budgets and worked collaboratively to identify solutions.

The Local Government Financial Settlement (LGFS) guaranteed only 95% of core spending power on the assumption that District councils would apply the maximum increase before a referendum was required, of 3.00% or £5 in Council Tax. The recommendation was to increase Council Tax in 2026/27 by 2.96%, £5.13 for a 'Band D' property. This amounted to less than 10 pence per week. She reminded members that NNDC retained a very small proportion of the council tax it collected – just 7.3 pence of every £1.00 paid.

Cllr Shires reminded members that in 2024/2025, it had been agreed that the Sustainable Communities Fund would be paused and she made a commitment that it was not a withdrawal. She was delighted to announce that it would be reinstated in a new form, a dedicated members' fund investing £160k back into local communities. Each councillor would have an allocation of £4k to support projects within their ward, empowering them to respond directly to local need. The fund would operate within a clear and robust governance framework, and she welcomed cross-party engagement in shaping how it was administered.

Cllr Shires said that since 2019, the Administration had committed over £147m towards capital investments across North Norfolk. She then outlined the projects that had been completed in the last year and said that the capital proposals for 2026/2027 built on that strong track record, ensuring continued investment in the environment, amenities and infrastructure that mattered most to North Norfolk. The budget committed over £10.6m in further capital investment across the district, with

over £820k allocated towards 'our greener future', including further decarbonisation of the Council offices. £3.9m was allocated towards 'Developing our Communities' including £120k for play area improvements, £40k to improve the public conveniences on Newgate Lane in Wells and £3.6m in the long-term investment in the substructure of Cromer Pier. £4m was allocated towards 'Meeting our Housing Needs' through the purchase of additional temporary accommodation and £1.8m towards 'Investing in our local economy and infrastructure', including £740k to renovate the Cornish Way industrial units and Cedar House in North Walsham. She said that the budget showed the unwavering commitment to North Norfolk and its residents.

Cllr Shires said that members would be aware that the Government's programme for local government reorganisation proposed the creation of new unitary authorities by April 2028. At present, no additional grant funding had been provided to support this transition process. Until legislation was passed and any new authorities were established, the Council was legally required to set a balanced budget and maintain a robust MTFs on the basis that NNDC continued to operate whilst simultaneously planning for imminent structural changes. Consequently, £750k was set aside in an earmarked reserve for LGR. The Government expected councils to meet the cost of reorganisation from existing resources. Whether or not members supported the direction of travel, it would be financially irresponsible not to prepare. She added that the pathway to devolution and reorganisation did not begin in the Chamber. The Conservative Administration at County Hall had 'opened that door' and had now withdrawn, leaving NNDC to navigate the consequences. The Council had a responsibility to ensure that North Norfolk remained financially secure whatever the outcome and on that basis, she assured members that if the Government's expected announcement regarding the future structure of Norfolk's councils did not result in LGR for which NNDC was required to meet the costs, then the earmarked reserve for LGR would be brought back to Full Council for members to determine an alternative use for those funds.

In conclusion, Cllr Shires said that last year the Council had proposed a shrinking deficit. Recent Government decision had increased the financial burdens that the Council faced but despite the challenges, she assured members that work continued to address the forecast deficit and ensure the sustainability of the Council and its assets for the future. Whilst there was certainty that there would be 95% of core funding for the next few years, she said that she no longer had confidence that fairness extended to rural communities such as North Norfolk. Through this budget and future budgets, the Council would be there to support residents where the Government was failing to do so. Finally, she said that she would like to update members on the latest Budget Monitoring position at period 10. For period 6, a £300k surplus had been forecast and the period 10 report would be presented to cabinet on 9<sup>th</sup> March. She thanked the S151 officer, the Deputy S151 officer and the Finance Team for their hard work and support in bringing forward a balanced budget.

Cllr Shires proposed the Budget for 2026/2027. Cllr T Adams seconded the proposal and reserved his right to speak.

The Chair thanked Cllr Shires and invited the Leader of the main Opposition Group, Cllr C Cushing to respond.

Cllr Cushing began by thanking the Finance team for their support during the last three months and Cllr Shires for the ongoing dialogue in the lead up to the Budget presentation, particularly for her input and support in shaping the amendment which

would be coming forward later in the meeting.

Starting with the Revenue Budget, Cllr Cushing said that he welcomed a balanced budget and he agreed with Cllr Shires about the Government's disregard for rural areas and that District Councils were being penalised via the LGFS, by receiving funding at only 95% of core spending power. This approach was in line with the imposition of the family farm tax and the increasing of business rates by approximately 30%. In addition, consultations were planned on the closure of more rural post offices and they had also removed VAT relief on places of worship which meant repairs to churches would now cost 20% more.

He then spoke about the ending of the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) and the Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF). This funding had provided huge support to local businesses and was meant to be replaced by new Mayoral funding. This had now been delayed by two years and no alternative had been proposed. He queried the Government's approach of 'baking in' council tax increases into the LGFS as he felt it could disincentivise councils from making savings.

Looking forward, he said that he had concerns about the significant deficit forecast from 2027. He added that there was an assumption that NNDC would not exist from 2028 due to unitarization, however, as the Leader had outlined earlier in the meeting, the County Council had announced that they were ceasing to cooperate with the Government regarding implementation of LGR. This could potentially mean that LGR and Devolution would not happen and serious consideration should therefore be given as to how the Council would balance the budget in future years. In light of this, he added that overall, the MTFs was very good but that section 8 which focused on mitigating budget gaps should be strengthened.

Cllr Cushing said that the Conservative Group supported the introduction of local community grants. They had opposed the removal of the Sustainable Communities Fund two years and had proposed that it was reinstated last year.

Moving on to the capital strategy, he said it was disingenuous to claim that the Administration had spent £147m since 2019 as a substantial amount of this had come from central government. He was concerned about the Council's ability to deliver it all. There were 59 projects in the current programme and a further 19 proposed as part of the budget, resulting in 79 projects in total. Some sort of prioritisation of projects would be good. An initial assessment indicated that little or no work had begun on 20 of them and with officer capacity potentially stretched due to LGR, a review would be a good idea. As in previous years, he highlighted the large number of projects in Cromer. Out of the 78 on the programme, 23 were Cromer initiatives. He accepted the argument that NNDC owned several assets in the town, including the pier, which the Council had a duty to maintain but he felt that the remaining allocation of resources should be reviewed to ensure fairness across the district. He queried why Cromer Town Council was not being asked to take on responsibility for some of the projects in the town.

Cllr Cushing agreed with Cllr Shires' comments about food waste collection. He had never supported the proposals and said they simply did not make sense in a rural area. It wouldn't be carbon neutral or have any impact on climate change. He felt that the Council should not proceed any further with the proposals until the position regarding LGR was clear.

In conclusion, Cllr Cushing said that although he believed LGR was not beneficial for Norfolk, he supported setting aside £750k for this work. He felt the capital

programme should be reviewed and prioritised and allocated across the district. The Conservative Group would work with the Administration where possible to try and navigate the challenging times ahead.

The Chair then invited Cllr J Punchard, Leader of the Independent Group to respond to the budget proposals.

Cllr Punchard began by thanking Cllr Shires for her willingness to engage fully with him on a 'blank book' budgeting exercise and for responding so willingly to his many challenges. He welcomed the local community grants fund. He was frustrated by the cuts that were being imposed by central government, whilst the burdens on the Council increased. He said that it always pained him to vote for an increase in council tax but on this occasion, there was no other option if key services were to be maintained.

The Chair invited Cllr Shires, as proposer of the budget, to respond.

Cllr Shires said that she welcomed the strong dialogue between herself and Cllr Cushing in the run up to the budget and she understood his concerns. She thanked Cllr Punchard for his engagement and challenges in recent months. She said that careful and honest engagement across the political spectrum was key to reaching a balanced budget.

Cllr Cushing and Cllr Punchard confirmed that they did not wish to respond further.

The Chair then advised members that the following amendment had been submitted in advance of the meeting:

### **Stalham Public Toilet Feasibility Study**

Proposed by Cllr K Bayes, seconded by Cllr L Shires:

A feasibility study will be commissioned to explore the construction of a new public toilet and Changing Places facility in Stalham, with the aim of securing long-term provision for the town.

The study will assess indicative project costs, identify potential barriers and risks, and outline realistic timescales for delivery should funding become available.

Funding for the study will be drawn from unspent allocations from other public toilet regeneration projects across the district, to the amount of £25,000.00. Breakdown as follows:

- *£5k Design of facility*
- *£2k Legal Counsel for special conditions*
- *£2k Planning application and advice*
- *£6k Surveys (general £1k, £1.5k trees, £1.5k bats etc, £2k drainage)*
- *£2k quantity surveyor to cost development*
- *£1k Consultations*
- *£7k Contingency including*

This project will support both local and district-wide priorities to maintain accessible public toilet provision in Stalham. The current facility is in a poor state of repair and is arguably not well located when considering the town's future growth and development proposals.

The Chair invited Cllr K Bayes as proposer of the amendment to introduce it. He confirmed that the S151 Officer had seen it and accepted it as valid.

Cllr Bayes said that it had cross-party support and he thanked the other Stalham member, Cllr M Taylor for the huge amount of work that he had done. Cllr Bayes explained that over a year ago there were plans to close the public toilets in Stalham and over half the town signed a petition to keep them open. This ensured that they remained open on a temporary basis. Since then, local members had regularly engaged with Cllr Shires on the future of public toilet provision in Stalham. It was hoped that the toilets could be relocated to another site and that a modern facility would cater for the needs of residents and visitors to the town. The amendment was the first step in this process. It was hoped that undertaking a feasibility study would help the Council understand the potential barriers and opportunities. In particular, he wanted to thank Cllrs Adams, Shires, Cushing and Dixon and the S151 Officer for their help and support in bringing it forward.

Cllr L Shires said that she welcomed the way in which opposition members had worked with her on this proposal. She was pleased to second the amendment to the budget. Whilst not a commitment to do the work, it was a commitment to do the groundwork properly. Whilst Stalham's current public toilet provision did not meet the standard the public expected from the Council's public conveniences, it was also arguably not ideally located. It was important to understand why the current facilities were not well used and to explore whether a better located, accessible facility would be better used. The feasibility study would provide a clear, evidence-based foundation. Without this work, it was just a case of speculating, with it, it was a case of planning effectively. The amendment aligned with the Council's local priorities for Stalham and the Council's wider district commitment to maintain accessible public conveniences where they were needed most. It was modest in cost and strategic in intent. She wanted to make a slight alteration and confirmed that she had already spoken to Conservative colleagues about this. Instead of funding being drawn from '*unspent allocations from other public toilet regeneration projects across the district*' she proposed that funding would be drawn from *the Asset Management Reserve*,

The Monitoring Officer (MO) asked the proposer of the amendment if they agreed to the proposed alteration. Cllr Bayes confirmed that he did.

Cllr T FitzPatrick commented that if the proposer of the Budget accepted the amendment then there was no need for a debate, it would just form part of the substantive motion. The MO advised that a recorded vote was required as there had been an alteration to the amendment.

The Chair advised members that a recorded vote would be taken.

It was RESOLVED unanimously to accept the amendment.

The Chair then advised members that he would open the debate on the substantive budget proposals:

Cllr C Rouse thanked the Finance team for their hard work on the Budget. He welcomed the announcement for Ward member grants.

Cllr N Dixon began by congratulating the S151 Officer for delivering a balanced budget. He then said that he welcomed capital spending east of North Walsham but reiterated the need to be mindful of the impact of LGR on the MTFs and forward planning.

Cllr S Butikofer said that she welcomed cross-party engagement on the budget and the amendment that had come forward. She referred to the Police & Crime Commissioner's (PCC) budget and said that as the Council's representative on the Police & Crime Panel, the PCC was given a lot less money from central Government. Questions had been asked regarding the spending of second homes money by the PCC and it was confirmed that it would be spent on policing in Norfolk rather than the services that it had previously been spent on. She concluded by saying that she was delighted to see the consensus on looking into public toilet provision in Stalham.

The Chair then asked the Cllr V Holliday, Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee to speak about recommendations on the Budget made by the Committee. Cllr Holliday confirmed that the budget had been reviewed in depth and the recommendations were all supported.

The Chair then invited Cllr T Adams to speak as seconder of the Budget 2026/2027. Cllr Adams began by saying that rural councils were being punished in favour of Northern Metropolitan councils which were mainly Labour controlled. Yet again, the rural economy was being neglected.

One of the biggest challenges was the undertaking of food waste collection across the district. Again, this came from a lack of understanding of the cost of providing services in rural areas. A lot more travel time was needed to accommodate collection across a wide area. He said that the proportion of council tax collected by NNDC had reduced further year on year, despite the fact that service provision was maintained and, in some cases, even increased. There was no doubt that district councils provided good value for money.

Responding to Cllr Cushing's comments regarding external funding received from Government reflected NNDC's ambition, capability and needs and the Council had often bid for that funding. He referred to the Leisure scheme at Fakenham which made up a large part of this external funding.

He then spoke about the number of Cromer based projects in the capital programme. He said that it reflected which assets needed the most work and he said that previous administrations had also provided a huge amount of support for Cromer projects and schemes and these had been handed down to NNDC over time. Many of the assets in the town provided revenue and to ensure this continued they needed to be maintained.

In conclusion, Cllr Adams said that he welcomed the amendment and he hoped that further investment in Stalham would be coming forward. He reiterated Cllr Shires comments about the positive engagement and dialogue across the political spectrum during the budget setting process.

The Chair then invited Cllr Shires to speak as the proposer of the Budget.

Cllr Shires said that the Budget represented responsibility but also belief. Belief in North Norfolk, belief in local communities and belief in the ability to navigate difficult times with confidence and purpose. She said that it had been a very difficult financial year. The pressures were real and the funding constraints were undeniable and the landscape of local government continued to shift. However, despite this, the Budget presented to members was not about cuts but about stability, investment and resilience and members should be proud of that. It was a budget for a rural district that refused to be overlooked and that understood that behind every line of

expenditure there was a resident, a family, a business or a community. The commitments were not abstract but were tangible improvements to the places people called home. In a time when public discourse could feel divided and uncertain, the Council Chamber had shown something different – seriousness, collaboration and a shared commitment to residents. She thanked the Finance team, Cabinet colleagues and all members for engaging in the process. North Norfolk was strong, the Council was stable and the direction was clear.

The Chair informed members that there would be a recorded vote.

It was proposed by Cllr I Shires, seconded by Cllr T Adams and

RESOLVED unanimously to

That having considered the Chief Finance Officer's report on the robustness of the estimates and the adequacy of the proposed financial reserves, the following be approved:

1. The 2026/27 revenue budget as outlined at Appendix A;
2. The service budgets detailed in Appendix B;
3. The statement of the movement in reserves as detailed at Appendix C, including;
  - 3.1. To approve the use of the Communities reserve to fund a revenue budget of £4,000 per Member to allow the award of small local grants.
  - 3.2. To approve the creation of an £0.75m Ear Marked Reserve to mitigate the Revenue costs of Local Government Reorganisation.
4. The updated Capital Programme and financing for 2026/27 to 2028/29 as shown in Appendix D;
5. The new capital bids recommended for approval as detailed at Appendix E;
6. That Members note the current financial projections for the period 2026/27 to 2029/30 that form the Medium Term Financial Strategy as presented as a Cabinet recommendation from its meeting on 2 February 2026;
7. That the minimum Level of the General Fund Reserve of £2.1m for 2026/27 to 2027/28;
8. The Local Council Tax Support Scheme (LCTS) for 2026/27 as set out in paragraphs 3.18 to 3.19;
9. A feasibility study will be commissioned to explore the construction of a new public toilet and Changing Places facility in Stalham, with the aim of securing long-term provision for the town. The study will assess indicative project costs, identify potential barriers and risks, and outline realistic timescales for delivery should funding become available. Funding for the study will be drawn from unspent allocations from the Asset Management Reserve to the amount of £25,000.00

The Chair advised members that they were now required to undertake the setting of Council Tax for 2026/2027. He invited the Section 151 Officer (Chief

Financial Officer) to outline the different elements of the Council tax recommendations. He explained that Appendix F to the report set out the statutory calculations for the council tax bases.

It was proposed by Cllr L Shires, seconded by Cllr T Adams and

Following a recorded vote, RESOLVED unanimously to

10. Undertake the Council Tax and statutory calculations set out at Appendix F, and set the Council Tax for 2026/27;
11. The demand on the Collection Fund for 2026/27 is as follows:
  - £8,285,376 for District purposes which reflects the recommended Council Tax increase of 2.96% (£5.13) for the district element for a Band D equivalent property
  - £4,318,242 for Parish/Town Precepts,

## **110 PORTFOLIO REPORTS**

The Chair said that Cllr C Ringer would like to make a statement regarding the collection of food waste. Cllr Ringer reminded members that Full Council had already approved funding to purchase vehicles for food waste collections. The Council had engaged constructively with DEFRA about the challenges anticipated but always with a clear commitment to deliver. One of the concerns raised had been about the rush to market for such vehicles. The original timeframe would have seen NNDC take delivery of vehicles in the late summer with rollout of the service aimed for the Autumn. Unfortunately, the Council had now been informed of delays to the production of vehicles and implementation would now move to early 2027. He would keep members updated as matters progressed.

Cllr J Toye then showed a short film about the 'High Street Matters' initiative and the North Norfolk High Streets Matter scheme. He thanked officers for their support and work on this project and County colleagues for use of the video and said it showed the benefits of good collaboration and hoped the same approach would be taken to LGR.

The Chair invited members to ask questions:

Cllr A Fitch-Tillett asked Cllr C Ringer about the reference in his report to 59 cases of bio-crime in January. She wondered why there had been an increase. Cllr Ringer replied that he didn't believe that it was a long-term increase. It covered the Christmas period.

Cllr V Holliday asked Cllr J Boyle for more detail on the 48 homes proposed for disposal by Flagship Housing Association. Cllr Boyle replied that a meeting had been arranged with Flagship to discuss the homes that had been disposing of. The intention was to sell one property and make two new ones available. Due to difficulties with nutrient neutrality in Norfolk, some of the properties had been built outside of North Norfolk. However, this year, a significant number of new homes would be provided. She added that NNDC always looked into the possibility of purchasing such properties for temporary accommodation, but this was not always financially viable. She said that she would provide more information when she had been updated by Flagship. Cllr V Holliday said that there used to be monthly meetings between the Council's Strategic Housing Team and the Housing providers. She asked whether these had lapsed. She added that she was concerned that

villages were losing properties due to the Housing Association's disposal programmes but that any replacements were often out of the District. Cllr Boyle agreed but said that the Council could only influence the situation as they had no financial stake. She reiterated that there were more new properties in the pipeline.

Cllr K Bayes asked Cllr A Brown about there being no mention of neighbourhood plans in his portfolio report. He said that Stalham had submitted one a while ago and he asked for the current situation. Cllr Brown replied that neighbourhood plans that had been submitted were proceeding but there was no funding made available in the recent Government spending review. Any submitted before the spending review would not be affected. He added that he believed there were 4 or 5 plans that had been validated.

Cllr N Dixon asked Cllr J Toye about recent national employment indicators which showed little or no growth and with the additional burdens of national insurance increases, minimum wage and business rate increases on employers as well as the cessation of the Rural Prosperity Fund. He asked how North Norfolk's economy had been affected and what the Council was doing to provide additional support to support the rural economy and businesses. He went on to say that if the local economy had not been impacted, could proof be provided, especially for the hospitality and youth sectors. Cllr Toye replied that it was a mixed view out there. It was not just about business rates, it was about the unequal playing field for VAT and the cost of employing staff. Assistance was being provided where possible on a case-by-case basis. In general terms, high streets were looking positive. The biggest challenge at the moment was persuading employers to take on apprentices and focus on growing their business. The Council remained committed in supporting local business and helping them find solutions to the challenges they were facing.

Cllr P Neatherway asked Cllr C Ringer about contingency plans were in place to ensure that Council services could continue to operate in the event of a serious cyber attack. Cllr C Ringer said that there were back-up servers based at Fakenham but he would IT to provide a more detailed response.

Cllr J Punchard asked the Leader, Cllr Adams for an update on 9 Norwich Street in Fakenham. Cllr Adams replied that he could not share a response at the current time as negotiations were ongoing and remained confidential.

#### **111 QUESTIONS RECEIVED FROM MEMBERS**

None received.

#### **112 OPPOSITION BUSINESS**

None received.

#### **113 NOTICE(S) OF MOTION**

The Chair advised members that there were two Notices of Motion. As thirty minutes was allocated for this item in total, he suggested that 15 minutes was allowed for each motion.

The Chair then invited Cllr A Brown to introduce the first motion:

## **Proposed closure of Corpusty School**

Cllr Brown began by thanking residents of Corpusty for attending the meeting and showing their support. He said that Corpusty Primary School had been operating since 1881 and had survived economic depressions and two wars and had weathered declining pupil numbers before. It had taken Synergy Trust just 7 years to preside over a period of managed decline. The consultation in January 2026 was circulated to some local residents but not the local member.

He went on to say that Corpusty had the first neighbourhood plan in North Norfolk and the school was central to the community and additional housing had been planned around it. Without any detail from Synergy Trust regarding what they wanted to replace it with, it was hard to gauge future viability. The principal reason provided was falling pupil numbers but Cllr Brown felt that this was disingenuous. Governance appeared to be obscure. If it was accepted that the school was due to close, then the alternative options were Reepham or Gresham rather than Astley school which was much closer and had capacity.

Cllr Brown concluded by saying that although he acknowledged that education was not a responsibility of the District Council, members had a duty to try and understand what was going on at Corpusty school and what was being withheld. The vibrancy of the village depended on having an active school. He therefore proposed the motion.

The Chair invited members to speak:

Cllr L Shires said that as a parent of a child who had attended a small rural school, she was supportive of village primary schools. They were special to the young people who attended them and the communities around them.

Cllr J Boyle said she was concerned that when schools were closed in villages that had been earmarked for expansion, there were significant ramifications. The Council had worked hard to prepare a Local Plan and had allocated new housing in villages such as Corpusty due to the presence of a school. The wider impact of not taking a holistic approach was worrying.

Cllr C Ringer then spoke as seconder of the motion. He said that the primary school had stood at the centre of village life in Corpusty since 1881. The rhythm of daily life changed when schools closed and it should always be a last resort.

If falling numbers were the rationale for closure then more investigation was needed to explore all reasonable alternatives. Modest viability in one setting could relieve pressure in another. Holt Primary School was under significant strain at the moment and a more strategic approach to intake across local schools would be beneficial.

He asked if there had been meaningful engagement with NNDC at any point regarding projected housing growth in the village. As far as he could see there had not. Thirty eight new homes were planned in Corpusty, with the assumption that there was a school in the village.

To make a short-term decision now before those homes were built would undermine the very framework that had been put in place to protect the future of the village. The Academy Trust had played no part in shaping the Neighbourhood Plan or NNDC's Local Plan, which they could have been expected to have done if they really wanted to ensure the future viability of the school.

Cllr C Ringer said that now it had been confirmed that the County Council elections would take place in May 2026, any decision regarding closure of the school should be delayed until after the election. Norfolk County Council was responsible for strategic planning for education and it was only right that a newly elected authority with a democratic mandate had the opportunity to scrutinise, challenge and help shape decisions of this magnitude.

For a school that had existed for 145 years, allowing sufficient time for new housing to come forward, proper engagement and a newly elected County Council to consider the matter was not unreasonable. He seconded the motion.

The Chair asked Cllr Brown, as proposer of the motion, to close the debate.

Cllr Brown said that he agreed with Cllr Ringer's comments. The school had over 100 pupils in recent years and there had to be an explanation for the significant drop in numbers. More time was needed to fully explore this. he did not believe that the whole story was being told.

It was proposed by Cllr A Brown, seconded by Cllr C Ringer and

**RESOLVED** unanimously

**1. To write to the DfE Regional Director for the East of England requesting:**

- Intervention and review the decision to close Corpusty School
- A pause in implementation pending completion of:
  - A full Equality Impact Assessment under the Public Sector Equality Duty;
  - A rural and coastal access impact review;
- Clarification as to how the decision aligns with forthcoming legislative reforms to MAT accountability.

**2. To write to Norfolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Education seeking:**

- An explanation of how this decision aligns with Norfolk's strategic vision for 4-11 years education in North Norfolk;
- Details of alternative delivery models explored with Synergy MAT;
- Assurance that a coherent plan remains in place for continued Ofsted rated good schooling provision for displaced pupils at alternative schools.

**3. To write to Synergy Multi-Academy Trust requesting:**

- **Publication of the Trust's impact assessment:** including projected effects on participation, travel burdens and Free School Meal pupils over five years;
- **Explore Alternatives:** To instruct the Chief Executive to pursue the Trust for further information about viable alternatives to closure including engaging with Astley Primary School in Briston by potentially merging Briston and Corpusty school catchment areas. Further to explore possible combination with SEND children sharing the school premises;
- **Enhanced Consultation:** To conduct an independent Community Impact Assessment to fully understand the long-term social and economic consequences for the Corpusty and Saxthorpe area;
- **Management Audit:** To pursue a review of the Trust's performance in other schools within their federation and the auditing of financial accounts since inception.

The Chair thanked members and then invited Cllr L Withington to introduce the next motion:

## **Sheringham Sixth Form Provision and Post-16 Educational Inequality**

Cllr Withington showed several slides setting out the reasons why removing A levels from Sheringham Sixth Form's curriculum from September 2026 would be detrimental to young people, the community and the local economy. She highlighted the likely impact on young people's ambitions and future earnings and how having to travel long distances to reach alternative sixth forms would lead to disengagement from their community. In addition, she spoke about Sheringham's growing creative & cultural economy which was embedded in tourism and how the reduction in creative arts subjects would reduce progression routes for young people. She urged the Government to give stronger local authority oversight of provision and responsibility for strategic development of educational opportunities and ensure alignment with national curriculum expectations.

Cllr C Ringer seconded the motion and reserved his right to speak.

The Chair opened the debate:

Cllr C Heinink said that as a teacher based in Sheringham, the loss of A level provision at the Sixth form was a disaster for families in the town and beyond.

Cllr P Neatherway said that he echoed the previous comments and said that in simple terms economy of scale should not justify policy.

Cllr V Holliday said that as the member for a neighbouring ward where many families were affected by the proposals, she was very supportive of the motion. Without the possibility of attainment at sixth form level, options for progression were reduced. Barriers should be lifted – not put in place.

Cllr A Fitch-Tillett said that as the grandparent of a child who was currently in year 9 at Sheringham school, she was appalled by the proposals to close the sixth form. Under the current plans, children at the high school would no longer be able to stay at their place of education and it caused anxiety and disruption.

Cllr J Toye said that it was important to access the data behind the proposals from the Academy Trust. It was vital that the right courses were provided in the right place and that decisions were not driven by some other mechanism. He supported the motion.

The Chair then invited Cllr C Ringer, seconder of the motion to speak.

Cllr Ringer said that in a rural, coastal district such as North Norfolk, access to post-16 education was not an optional extra it was essential infrastructure. Where a young person lived in the district already shaped what was available to them and by removing A level provision from Sheringham, that geographic disadvantage becomes even more entrenched. The impact rippled out beyond the entire high school catchment and beyond. In many communities, public transport was sparse and infrequent. By removing A levels for many young people, you were not just adjusting the curriculum balance, you were removing their practical route to academic progression all together. Ultimately this meant that access to A levels became dependent not on ability or aspiration but on family circumstances. Finance or just the postcode. Narrowing the academic offer, apparently in anticipation of a Government White Paper, the contents of which were not known, raised many questions.

Academic and vocational studies can and should co-exist and the motion did not seek to dictate curriculum design, it asked for transparency. It asked for a full assessment and accountability, a full equality impact assessment and a coastal access review. It requested an analysis of implications relating to participation, NEET levels and inequality and how this aligned with forthcoming legislative reform of multi-academy trust accountability because at the moment an academy trust could remove this provision without any consultation at all. These weren't unreasonable requests, they were the minimum the community should expect when decisions of this magnitude were made. North Norfolk already faced inequality, coastal and rural deprivation, lower than average wages, seasonal employment patterns, and transport limitations. If participation in post-16 education declines as a result of this decision, it would not be an abstract statistic, it would be young people's horizons narrowing. The proposals to remove A level provision from Sheringham could undo three decades of good work. He seconded the motion.

Cllr Withington said that she had nothing further to add as proposer of the motion.

The Chair then moved to the vote.

It was proposed by Cllr Withington, seconded by Cllr Ringer and

**RESOLVED** unanimously to

**1. To write to the DfE Regional Director for the East of England requesting:**

- Intervention and review of the decision to cease A-Level provision in Sheringham.
- A pause in implementation pending completion of:
  - A full Equality Impact Assessment under the Public Sector Equality Duty;
  - A rural and coastal access impact review;
  - An assessment of implications for participation, NEET levels and inequality.
- Clarification as to how the decision aligns with forthcoming legislative reforms to MAT accountability.

**2. To write to Norfolk County Council's Cabinet Member for Education seeking:**

- An explanation of how this decision aligns with Norfolk's strategic vision for 16+ education in North Norfolk.
- Assessment of the projected impact on participation, progression and NEET levels.
- Details of alternative delivery models explored with Synergy MAT.
- Assurance that a coherent 16+ sufficiency plan remains in place for Sheringham and surrounding communities.

**3. To write to Synergy Multi-Academy Trust requesting:**

- Publication of the Trust's impact assessment, including projected effects on participation, travel burdens, NEET levels and Free School Meal pupils over five years.
- A detailed explanation of the financial rationale for closure, including comparative data with other rural Norfolk sixth form, trends in numbers on roll since 2018, strategies undertaken to increase recruitment, and the evidence base supporting the proposed vocational curriculum as viable and

sustainable.

**114 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC**

**115 PRIVATE BUSINESS**

The meeting ended at 9.04 pm.

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Chairman