

County Council

Thursday 6 February 2025

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Chris Mills (Chair), Councillor Andy Jenns (Vice-Chair), Councillor Jo Barker, Councillor Margaret Bell, Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi, Councillor Sarah Boad, Councillor Barbara Brown, Councillor Peter Butlin, Councillor Jonathan Chilvers, Councillor Jeff Clarke, Councillor John Cooke, Councillor Andy Crump, Councillor Yousef Dahmash, Councillor Piers Daniell, Councillor Jackie D'Arcy, Councillor Tracey Drew, Councillor Judy Falp, Councillor Jenny Fradgley, Councillor Sarah Feeney, Councillor Bill Gifford, Councillor Clare Golby, Councillor Brian Hammersley, Councillor John Holland, Councillor Dave Humphreys, Councillor Marian Humphreys, Councillor Kam Kaur, Councillor Dale Keeling, Councillor Justin Kerridge, Councillor Christopher Kettle, Councillor Sue Markham, Councillor Jan Matecki, Councillor Jeff Morgan, Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell, Councillor Bhagwant Singh Pandher, Councillor Caroline Phillips, Councillor Wallace Redford, Councillor Will Roberts, Councillor Kate Rolfe, Councillor Jerry Roodhouse, Councillor Isobel Seccombe OBE, Councillor Ian Shenton, Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince, Councillor Tim Sinclair, Councillor Mejar Singh, Councillor Richard Spencer, Councillor Heather Timms, Councillor Mandy Tromans, Councillor Robert Tromans, Councillor Adrian Warwick, Councillor Martin Watson and Councillor Andrew Wright

1. General

Councillor Peter Butlin apologised for an error he made in disclosing exempt financial information at the Cabinet meeting which took place on 28 January 2025. Councillors Sarah Feeney, Jerry Roodhouse, Jonathan Chilvers and Judy Falp spoke in response to accept the apology and urged for improvements in the management of highways projects.

(1) Apologies for Absence

Councillors Richard Baxter-Payne, Brett Beetham, Pete Gilbert, and Sarah Millar.

(2) Members' Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-pecuniary Interests

Councillor Sarah Feeney declared an interest in item 2 on the agenda, '2025/26 Budget and 2025/30 Medium Term Financial Strategy', as the parent of a child in receipt of SEND services from the Council.

(3) Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting of Council held on 17 December 2024 were agreed as an accurate record for signing by the Chair.

(4) Chair's announcements

Former County Councillor Ron Cockings.

The Chairman announced his sad duty to inform Council of the recent passing of former County Councillor Ron Cockings. Ron, who had been elected to the Council in 2001 as a Liberal Democrat but joined the Conservative Group in 2010, served as a Warwickshire County Councillor for Stratford upon Avon West and latterly Stratford South between 2001 and 2013. The Chairman extended the Council's condolences to his family and friends.

Councillor Kate Rolfe spoke in tribute to a good and loyal friend and her extended condolences. Councillor Sarah Feeney recognised the loss of a valued colleague who had served his community and Councillor Peter Butlin noted the good work he had undertaken in his division.

Engagements

The Chair informed Council that he had been invited to the Holocaust Memorial Day event in Warwick which had been very moving and he applauded the children who had given speeches.

(5) Public Speaking

None.

2. 2025/26 Budget and 2025/30 Medium Term Financial Strategy

Councillor Peter Butlin (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Property) introduced the item by thanking the finance team for their assistance and hard work in developing the budget. He drew attention to the challenges of local government finance and media reports of Councils in financial difficulty who had been granted permission to increase their Council Tax above 4.99%, with the highest request being an increase of 25%, and offered assurance that Warwickshire County Council was not in this number. He noted the Council was in a relatively good financial position, performing well on CIPFA's Independent Financial Resilience Index, and the external auditors' annual Value for Money report had highlighted continued strong performance. However, this was another year when the Council had had to balance driving its strategic priorities with a response to events outside its control. A financial recovery strategy and spending controls had been implemented earlier in the financial year in order to address emerging concerns in the financial forecast due to the rising cost and demand for services. This early intervention had resulted in successfully bringing the in-year financial position back under control with the overspend now within the 2% tolerance allowed. He thanked all departments across the Council for their efforts in this regard. He then proceeded to set out the Conservative Group's budget proposals as contained in the appendix to the published report. In doing so he emphasised the following points:

- Continued uncertain political and economic environment, including increased national living wage and employers' national insurance contributions, the continuation of higher interest

rates, the impact of ongoing internal conflict, a new government and new policy environment that was still emerging and taking shape.

- The uncertain timing and impacts of key national policy choices around special education needs and disabilities (SEND) and the government's solution to the dedicated schools grant (DSG) deficit, adult social care reform, the broken children's social care market, home to school transport, climate change legislation and local government funding reforms, including the reset of business rates.
- Continuing demand for services as a result of a growing population of older people, increasing numbers of children and families needing support, and communities under pressure from the rising cost of living.
- This budget was recommended in the wake of a significant headwind from both pressures and demand which the Council had been able to navigate successfully because of financial resilience and long-term decision-making. However, considerable uncertainty, risk and opportunity remained in terms of the changes likely to flow from devolution, funding reform and policy changes in areas such as adult social care and SEND. The Government had chosen to delay adult social care reform until the Commission on Adult Social Care Reform reported in 2028, and with no guarantee they would act on the recommendations of that report. With regard to SEND, the Government were promising to put in place new legislation and address the financial override, however, he was not optimistic for the way in which this would be resolved.
- In such an uncertain environment, the budget proposals sought to maintain long-term resilience and sustainability, and left some headroom to deal with the uncertainties outlined.
- The Budget sought to continue to look after people and protect valued services for those most in need and universal services for all. It did not recommend the taking of short-term decisions that would place the Council's financial sustainability at risk or leave financial gaps to be closed in future years.
- The growth in demand was being felt across all services and the Council had to provide for the residents of Warwickshire, but the following areas were highlighted to underline a commitment to the most vulnerable in the community:
 - Investment of almost £47 million to meet the growing numbers and costs for supporting elderly citizens and those vulnerable adults who needed help.
 - Over £8 million in children's social care services to meet the increased costs and demand for children's placements
 - Over £7 million in home to school transport to ensure services were provided in line with policy whilst being able to respond to the increased demand and cost of the service for both mainstream and SEND transport.
- Investment was now taking place at unprecedented levels to meet the needs of the most vulnerable in communities, over the medium and long term, it was the strength of Warwickshire's economy, raising living standards for all, and shared countywide approach to creating opportunities that would bring the greatest benefits.
- The budget proposal made provision in the capital programme for nearly £132 million to support the delivery of the 2025 business plans of the Warwickshire Property Development Group (WPDG) and the Warwickshire Investment Fund (WIF).
- In addition to the capital programme, the proposals set out investment of over £122 million over the next five years to support a thriving economy with the right jobs, training, skills and infrastructure, over £40 million each year to maintain Warwickshire's infrastructure and to support services through the provision of tools to do the job, with over half of this funding going towards road maintenance.

- Although Warwickshire had not been chosen as one of the first group of councils to progress towards unitary status under the government's English Devolution White Paper proposals, it was critical that the capital and revenue investment funds and reserves were used wisely to support the substantial change that was coming.
- The reserves strategy provided a clear framework to ensure these funds were effectively managed to meet the financial risks and uncertainties that were faced whilst enabling room for investment in the delivery of the Council Plan.
- The Council had a strong track record delivering planned budget reductions over many years. The budget proposals included the delivery of a further £8 million of budget reductions over the following five years through better procurement, improvements in efficiency, increased income and delivering reductions in demand.
- Managing the demand and the cost increases facing Council services meant increasing the council tax was unavoidable. In the absence of other funding options, the proposals utilised the opportunity provided by the Government to levy Council Tax of 4.99%. This was made up of 2.9% core Council Tax, plus a 2% adult social care levy and was equivalent to an increase of £1.67 per week for a Band D dwelling.

Councillor Butlin summarised that the proposed budget strategy would deliver for those who lived, worked in and visited Warwickshire. It made difficult decisions and choices and addressed short-term challenges whilst retaining a commitment to delivering medium-term financial sustainability. It also retained flexibility as far as was possible in a complex and volatile context.

Councillor Adrian Warwick seconded the motion and reserved his right to speak.

Amendments

Labour Group Amendment

Councillor Sarah Feeney highlighted the following points in the amendment:

- The Council faced significant challenges and residents were concerned about care provision, the cost of care, provision for school places, and the SEND system. It was possible to make some changes in these areas whilst national policy change was awaited to address residents' concerns and frustrations.
- The amendment proposed the introduction of two time-limited posts within adult social care to look at supporting the flow within local hospitals, and to undertake personalised assessment of residents, supporting them to go home as early as possible after a stay in hospital and to support more people to go home after a stay in a short-term discharge to assess residential care beds.
- Parents were concerned about children struggling with mental health issues in school and the Labour Group believed that a project to enable those children to have a holistic pathway in place was required. This would help to address the current use of expensive and registered provision. Whilst the budget amendment did not set a specific saving for this, it would be positive to have some specialist expertise to support this work.
- The use of green bonds was supported.
- The adoption of estates was another issue that was raised as a concern by residents and whilst the amendment had not indicated a financial value for this, it was a key issue since estate residents were continuing to pay estate management fees as well as Council Tax

and it was incumbent upon the council, in her view, to resolve these matters quickly with developers.

- Close working with planning authorities in the county was also required to ensure that estates were built to meet minimum standards and robust discussions about infrastructure were also required.
- Areas where resident parking schemes were in operation were also in some of the poorest communities and it was argued that increases in charges were not beneficial, particularly as the process of moving to online permits was still being worked through. Residents did not understand the benefits of the scheme and did not feel it was delivering on its aims.
- Concern was expressed that public health reductions targeted the areas of prevention and support that were vital to the health of communities (eg treatment services for adult weight loss and community tuberculosis).
- Cuts to domestic abuse and sexual assault services were not supported by the Labour Group who were similarly unconvinced by cuts proposed in the library service. The key role that was played by volunteers in libraries was recognised, and whilst there were difficulties with solely community-led libraries when those who had previously committed their time and energies were no longer able to do so, it was felt that staff also had a key role to play and staffed libraries were the right model going forward. If there was sufficient money in the budget, the Labour Group would also have sought the removal of savings on Sunday opening hours, as this was the day that many residents had leisure time.
- She thanked officers for their hard work throughout the year and for their support in helping to prepare the budget resolutions.

Councillor John Holland seconded the amendment and reserved the right to speak.

Liberal Democrat Group Amendment

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse made the following points:

- Local government funding settlements had not been sufficient for many years and the new Labour government had so far continued to squeeze funding, and had exacerbated the situation due to the changes made to national insurance contributions and delaying reform to adult social care. This latter point was somewhat frustrating as it was clear from the numerous reports that had already been published what was required. Demand for SEND continued, despite some extra investment as a result of lobbying, necessitating the use of the override. Councillor Roodhouse did not consider the override was a suitable mechanism to deal with rising pressure in this service area. He also raised questions around delays to the public health grant and how much it would be.
- The Liberal Democrat amendment sought to provide funding on an ongoing basis to develop a new traded service pathway around emotionally integrated school avoidance, ie for children and young people who required an education setting other than school. It was provided for in the SEN strategy document and the Liberal Democrat amendment sought to provide the funding for it on an ongoing, not time limited basis.
- The Liberal Democrat amendment provided £161,000 for further development with the National Centre for Creative Health, working with the Library Service and Outdoor Education, particularly providing new services in libraries, and developing outreach work.
- The savings proposals had also been amended and funding provision for adult weight management, domestic abuse and the independent sexual violence advice was retained.

- The Liberal Democrat amendment sought the development of eco schools and to establish a growing grants programme.
- The work that Corporate Board had done with spending controls was recognised but the Liberal Democrat group was of the view that there could be a 10% reduction in the use of consultancies.
- Additional infrastructure was needed as local plans were developed and the Liberal Democrat amendment suggested a review of how Section 278 and Section 106 monies were spent, tightening that budget to ensure the funding was received from developers and projects were delivered on time.

Councillor Sarah Boad seconded the amendment and reserved the right to speak.

Green Group Amendment

Councillor Jonathan Chilvers thanked the finance team for their support to the groups in developing their budgets and drew attention to the following points:

- In common with most county councils, the Council was facing a difficult financial position. He considered it was difficult to see how issues like the use of the statutory override would be resolved. The situation would have an ongoing impact in terms of the ability to internally borrow. However, this Council was in a better position than most and the Council had a history of good decision-making but, in presenting a balanced budget, consideration had to be given to making savings in areas where they would not have previously been considered – eg public health, winter gritting, and homelessness.
- There was more the Council could do to provide the services that residents needed as well as make efficiency savings. He highlighted the House Project which provided support for care leavers as an area where the administration had achieved this.
- The amendment removed proposed cuts to children's centres. Whilst it was identified as a saving in later years of the medium term financial strategy (MTFS), due to the length of the procurement process, it would be affecting planning already. The Green Group wanted to retain children's centres as the best vehicle to provide positive intervention in the first 1,001 days of a child's life. This provided a preventative link to other budgets, for example speech therapy which now required parents to obtain an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) to access the service.
- Prevention played a key role in the Green Group's amendment.
- He welcomed the removal of Corporate Board's proposed cuts to youth club grants from the Conservative Group's proposals as he considered that this retention of youth provision supported some of the hardest to reach young people in the county.
- In terms of capital, the Green Group amendment did not change the numbers, but sought a full review of where capital spending was proposed to ensure that the basics were being prioritised, particularly in relation to highways and safe routes to school rather than large road projects with 'dubious benefits'. The Green Group amendment would also see a streamlining of the capital programme around the climate change agenda, ensuring income generation that not only improved the bottom line on reducing bills but also reduced emissions.
- Proposed budget reductions on libraries were removed by the Green Group amendment, due to the value for money of the service in terms of cost:benefit. Keeping libraries open in areas such as Rugby, Nuneaton and Leamington, on Sundays was important and it was

also important to ensure that appropriately paid staff were running them rather than relying on volunteers which made services less secure.

- He welcomed ideas in the proposals put forward such as the Liberal Democrat's eco schools and proposals from the Labour Group relating to Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs.

Councillor Will Roberts seconded the amendment and reserved the right to speak.

Debate

Members of Council made the following points:

Councillor Yousef Dahmash, Portfolio Holder for Customer and Transformation, drew attention to the following:

- The successful implementation of the new customer platform and the evolution and improvement of other customer-facing platforms thanks to the work of the ICT Team.
- Internal Change Programmes were also making an impact ensuring that resources were focused on the areas of change that delivered maximum impact and a refresh of the Council's delivery plan from 2025 onwards would be presented to Cabinet in the near future.
- The Council's Legal Services Team continued to go from strength to strength, making a significant contribution to the Council's MTFS through external trading.
- Similarly, the Communications Team were ensuring that the good work that the Council was doing, despite the challenging circumstances, was communicated to residents. This was particularly important to ensure that residents were aware of the support on offer, for example pensioners struggling following the removal of the winter fuel payment.
- He commended the work of the library and registration service and noted the role of the library service in supporting children to be school ready; on registering a birth, the offer to join the library and receive a membership card was made, which provided opportunities to talk about the services libraries offered to families. He noted comments regarding Sunday opening times and suggested an open dialogue on making the proposals work, not forgetting the role of the digital library service which could be further enhanced and promoted.
- Overall, he applauded the strong position of the services within his portfolio which had been supported by the budget proposals.

Councillor Margaret Bell, Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and Health, commented as follows:

- Adult social care was one of the highest spending service areas, with resource focused on safeguarding vulnerable adults and supporting those with care needs. At the time of the meeting, the Council supported around 8,000 Warwickshire residents with care and support needs, with around 5,700 of them supported to remain independently in their own homes. Keeping people safe at home for as long as possible was a key aim for the administration.
- The Council supported a range of residents with learning disabilities, mental health conditions, physical disabilities, or sensory impairments. However, there were significant pressures on the service and over the financial year, there had been a 5% rise in the number of people that adult social care was supporting. At the same time, the cost of care was rising due to the complexity of care being more significant than in the past and the cost pressures faced by service providers. In response to these pressures, the proposed budget provided for additional funding to protect those vulnerable residents. After considerable

discussion, the group had considered that it was necessary to take the full 2% adult social care levy.

- The focus for the service going forward remained on improving service pathways to enhance the information and advice provided to support people to remain independent for as long as possible. Alongside the Warwickshire Community Recovery Service, the Council worked with the NHS to help people leave hospital in a timely fashion. It had been a successful programme that would be continued. Discharge from hospital was a complex area which required systemic change and partnership working.
- The new Adult Social Care Strategy set out the offer to residents over the next five years.
- A visit from the Care Quality Commission was anticipated.
- No care providers had exited the local market due to business failure in recent years. This was a huge accolade to staff and the way that they worked in partnership with local providers despite the pressures they were under.
- A comprehensive review of domiciliary care was taking place and the service was due to be retendering in the coming months. The older people's dementia day opportunities offer had been reviewed and redesigned and was also out to tender.
- She applauded the role of Public Health in prevention activity

Councillor Kam Kaur, Portfolio Holder for Education commented on the following aspects of service delivery:

- Almost half of local authorities would not be able to balance the budget if the statutory override was removed and, whilst it was a source of some derision, no plans had been brought forward in its place.
- She commented on the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Assessment & Review Service (SENDAR), and the rising number of new EHCPs (1,115 in 2024, a 48% increase on 2023) and what this meant for the caseload and timeliness of issuing them. The budget proposals included an additional allocation of £685,000 to the SENDAR Team to support this increase in demand.
- Every new EHCP required an assessment by an education psychologist and because of the increase in assessments, the Council had had to recruit locums and associate educational psychologists to meet the demand. The budget proposal included time-limited funding to support the service to meet this demand.
- The budget proposal also provided for a time-limited funding allocation to support tribunals and mediations in the SEND system.
- Councillor Kaur also highlighted the successes she had seen in her portfolio area over the previous 12 months including new SEND resource provisions, the delivery of new educational capital projects, the opening of new schools and permanent expansions resulting in the delivery of over 11,000 new permanent school places in the last 10 years.
- The work of the Warwickshire Music Service was applauded and she urged councillors to take up any opportunities afforded to them to attend a performance.

Councillor Barbara Brown referenced the section in the Labour Group's amendment which made provision for two additional posts in children's social care to work on developing pathways with schools and with families for those children who had Social, Emotional and Mental Health issues. Whilst she recognised the work that was happening with the education service, she also considered that early intervention played a large part in supporting children and young people and their families and she, therefore, considered the proposed provision would play a key role in shrinking demand by providing this early intervention.

Councillor Judy Falp spoke in opposition to the proposed cuts to the library service. Whilst she understood the challenges in adult social care and SEND that led to budget pressures and non-statutory services becoming a target for cuts, she argued that some savings would undermine other work taking place in communities. She noted the library service savings in the Conservative budget proposal related to closure of the three main libraries on Sundays and making smaller libraries voluntary run. There had been no consultation on this proposal in Whitnash; she objected to the proposals since the Whitnash library was the only presence the County Council had in the town. The library offered a wider service than the provision of books and it was well used by young and older people. Councillor Falp explained some of the services that were provided from the building by professional employees and she urged reconsideration of the cuts which were considered counter-productive by all the opposition groups.

Councillor Martin Watson, Portfolio Holder for Economy, highlighted the following achievements within his portfolio area:

- Coventry and Warwickshire Investment Zone was an exciting project delivered in conjunction with Warwick District Council, Coventry City Council and West Midlands Combined Authority. There was over £20 million worth of capital investment into the site with a prediction to create over 10,000 jobs.
- Warwickshire was recognised as a good place for business and thanks were extended to the business support and the employability and skills teams, whose work was regularly considered in detail at Overview and Scrutiny. There had been over 54 foreign investment projects in the previous year which created or safeguarded over 2,000 jobs.
- Coventry and Warwickshire was the leading UK destination for foreign direct investment. Despite being a small shire county, more external investment was attracted into the economy than anywhere else in the UK.
- A record number of 918 businesses were supported in the previous year (361 in 2023) which demonstrated how much the support offer was required and welcomed by those businesses.
- Since the liquidation of Local Enterprise Partnerships, the careers hub had been absorbed by the Council and had engaged with 95% of schools within Warwickshire, positively impacting just under 90,000 young people.
- Over 577 individuals with learning disabilities and/or autism had been supported by the employment service to prepare for work and 471 had moved into paid employment.
- The Council also delivered the Warwickshire Work Well program in conjunction with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Integrated Care Boards, supporting 120 people since its launch in October 2024.
- A report was due to be presented to Cabinet setting out the opportunity for the Council to become a pathfinder with the DWP Connect to Work program. This would bring £2.5 million worth of investment into the county annually to help people into employment.
- Over 1,700 businesses had been supported in the previous 12 months through the business growth program utilising UKSPF funding.
- Since the launch of the Local Communities and Enterprise Fund, one of the pillars of the WIF, over £5 million worth of loans had been made to 87 businesses, leveraging £3.7 million worth of private sector investment and safeguarding 384 jobs.
- The budget recognised that this work needed to continue, as confidence in business was down – a recent report by the British Chamber of Commerce noting 68% of businesses

saying that they had real concerns around cost-based national insurance and the decrease in their revenue.

Councillor Tracey Drew highlighted the following elements of the Green Group's amendment:

- The adult social care teams were doing some welcome and innovative work around direct payments. However, uptake remained comparatively low. The funding provided in the amendment would make it possible to explore whether there were even better ways of increasing the uptake of direct payments and as a result having a greater impact on helping service users to remain living independently in their own homes.
- Some good work was taking place to support young people aged 18 to 25 in the period of their lives after they left foster care placements, but the Green Group's amendment provided for an increase in allowances which had remained static since 2020, to ensure that their development continued in a positive direction.

Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell, Cabinet Support Assistant for Adult Social Care & Health, commented as follows to provide reassurance around the prevention agenda:

- As Chair for the Children and Young Persons Partnership, she provided some context around the prevention agenda within the age range 0-19. The Partnership had been acting as an advisory panel on decisions around the delivery and development of the Healthy Child Program and associated public health activity in Warwickshire.
- Prevention was key to the efficient utilisation of resources. Within early years, for example, the focus was on pre-conceptual care and continuity of care through supporting the transition to parenthood. By supporting maternal health and family mental health, the aim was to reduce vulnerabilities and inequalities.
- Supporting healthy weight, nutrition and health literacy, along with managing minor illnesses and reducing accidents, allowed for a focus on improving resilience and promoting health literacy.
- Another area of high impact focus within early years was supporting health, well-being and development, and focusing children on being ready to learn and narrowing the word gap (a disparity in language development). This was directly linked to whether children needed greater stimulation or actually required speech and language therapy.
- The Integrated Early Years Delivery Plan continued to be very successful with a significant number of teams collaborating from within education, health, and social care to form a positive relationship with the Department for Education and the accredited Early Years Hubs, which meant that via referral routes, settings across Warwickshire had access to the Early Years Aspiration Network.
- Work with 0-19 (or 25 for those with additional needs) was looking at mental health, and the Empowering Futures programme was looking at school-age physical health, including maternity and pregnancy, early years, and school age. Health Visitors and school nurses were leading the Healthy Child Program where focus during the school years was on health and well-being reviews, early identification of need and reducing inequalities and risk through supporting resilience and well-being, ensuring that children were school-ready at age five but ready for life by age 24 by improving healthy behaviours and reducing risk taking.

Councillor Sue Markham, Portfolio Holder for Children and Families commented on the following areas of success for the Children and Families Service:

- The Council had joined Wave 2 of the Families First for Children Pathfinder Program. This was a national test and learn initiative following the independent review of children's social

care and all local authorities were expected to implement the recommendations by 2027. By becoming a Pathfinder, the Council was at the forefront of these reforms to children's social care and the Council and its partner agencies had achieved transformation in four critical areas: family help, child protection, family networks, and multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. These initiatives had resulted in a restructured children and family service, which included local family help teams. These teams provided support and led interventions for children requiring targeted early help, children in need, child protection, and children in care services. She was confident that the Pathfinder changes would make a positive difference to service delivery.

- Four children's homes had been opened across the county which were now registered with Ofsted and a further home was awaiting registration. The main objective of the Council in opening its own homes was for children who needed to be in residential care to remain in the county, closer to their school and their families, and to remain in their community. These homes provided greater stability for the child as they were houses rather than a traditional children's home and provided better value for money for the County Council.
- A further area of performance focus was the stability experienced by children in care and there had been some positive improvement in this area with children in care remaining with the same home, with foster carers or in a children's home, supported by the same social worker and the same school.

Councillor Jan Matecki, Portfolio Holder for Transport and Planning commented as follows:

- Financial pressures remained challenging within the service, with some of the main pressures relating to home to school transport, which had seen demand increase by 20% over the previous three years, resulting in 12,000 children being transported daily. SEND pupils with EHCPs who required dedicated transport were also increasing at a pace of around 8% per year. These challenges were being met by the implementation of a home to school transport transformation delivery plan which contained a range of elements including network reviews using enhanced data to create more efficient routes and less contracts, encouraging more competition in the market, which included internal provision, improved contracting and procurement processes to drive efficiencies, and policy changes to tighten up eligibility and application of processes.
- The service was also taking a more strategic approach to some of the highway services which enabled a more dynamic and flexible approach to working to make further savings across the board. This included reviewing and reducing verge cuttings where appropriate whilst also ensuring that visibility was maintained at junctions and bends.
- The gritting of roads was better managed with strategic analysis of the gritting routes depending on weather forecasts rather than blanket spreading across the whole County.
- Street lighting operations had been reviewed and new technology explored which could reduce costs further.
- The service was making its spend go further by utilising technology, data and intelligence more effectively and not necessarily just cutting services and Officers continued to work hard to secure funding from grants to improve services.
- Highways had also delivered some important projects across the county including the A439 Warwick Road in Stratford-upon-Avon, Wolvey Roundabout, and secured planning permission for Rugby Parkway Railway Station.
- The Planning Team continued to face resourcing issues due to a national shortage of senior planners. Through the LGA Pathways to Planning Scheme, which sought to equip individuals to train as future planners, the Council had employed graduate planning apprentices. Despite these resourcing issues, 75% of planning applications were

determined within statutory timeframes and the Highways Development Management team responded to 99% of planning consultations prior to determination by the Local Planning Authority.

- Officers had held workshops with districts and borough councils to develop a streamlined process which would be trialled with Local Planning Authorities for smaller applications.

Councillor Andy Crump, Portfolio Holder for Fire & Rescue and Community Safety, made the following comments:

- The Council was one of only a few Councils that had a balanced five year MTFs and was in a good position with an unqualified set of accounts which had enabled the Council tax to be set at 4.99%, in contrast to some other authorities where significant increases had been levied. The Pension Fund was also in a good position, with assets exceeding liabilities. Some other authorities would welcome being in this position.
- Through WPDG, the Council had invested in Sucham Park an industrial scheme featuring commercial units in Southam, which had generated employment opportunities.
- There had been investment in Firefighter Training and Safety through the delivery of a new hot fire training facility. This had reduced the need for firefighters to travel outside the county for training and would also generate income.
- Resourcing to Risk had a permanent revenue allocation at the end of the 3-year period agreed by Cabinet (for years 4 and 5 of the MTFs) of £602k (with an additional £12k in the 5th year). These increases reflected pay increases over the time period.
- The Flooding Team had responded to a number of flooding events and Members were encouraged to ensure that residents were reporting any incidents.
- Similarly, the Community Safety Team were also leading on projects to support vulnerable residents and nighttime safety.

Councillor Heather Timms, Portfolio Holder for Environment, Climate and Culture, highlighted the following areas:

- Waste - an increase in recycling rates from households across Warwickshire had been identified over the previous year and there had also been a reduction in waste sent to landfill. There were contracts in place for the whole county for food waste collection. The contract for reuse shops at recycling centres had been tendered, and a renewed contract with AgeUK had been secured, ensuring more items would be reused and saved from landfill with money made by AgeUK supporting their work with Warwickshire communities.
- Country Parks attracted over one million visitors per year and their work included outdoor education and the early years agenda. All income from the parks was reinvested as they worked towards becoming self-financing and work to improve the commercial offer continued. Café facilities at Ryton and Pooley had been improved and visitor numbers and parking revenue had significantly increased. Broomey Croft Park at Kingsbury Waterpark had been refurbished and there had also been improvements at Stratford Greenway. The service offer across all parks had been improved and concession income had increased; solar panels had also been installed on café and toilet blocks at Ryton Pools and a lot of work was taking place regarding biodiversity.
- The Natural Capital Investment Strategy had been adopted and 24 community orchards had been approved.
- Warwickshire County Council emissions had reduced and work continued towards achieving targets. Bronze status as a Carbon Literate Organisation had been achieved which demonstrated how the focused approach of Carbon Literacy had helped capacity

build and embed carbon literacy thinking across services. Funding had also been provided to Warwickshire and West Midlands Association of Local Councils (WALC) to deliver the same training to town and parish councils.

- The target to sign up 50 schools to the Eco-Schools programme had been achieved; the offer had been developed in conjunction with Let's Go Zero and teams across the Council were already working with schools to ensure a joined-up approach.
- A dedicated Adaptation officer had been working closely with key services to help them develop climate risk assessments and accompanying action plans, including Fire & Rescue, Public Health, County Highways, Engineering Design Services and Transport teams.
- Cost of Living – Work continued with the voluntary sector, community-led schemes and the delivery of the Social Fabric Fund. The Citizens' Advice Telephony Service had seen an increase in calls from 3,500 to 12,500 which reflected the impact of the national budget.

Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi made the following points:

- Thanked councillors and officers for their work to support residents and thanked opposition groups for their budget ideas.
- Highlighted the risks identified by the Section 151 Officer which primarily related to national issues, eg the national insurance increase.
- He noted party promises before the general election regarding Council Tax increases but in some areas there had been significant increases.

Councillor John Holland (Seconder of the Labour Group Amendment):

- The English Devolution White Paper had announced the government's intentions to facilitate local government reorganisation for two tier areas. The process of unitarisation would see the abolishment of all six councils in the county and the emergence of a single tier of governance. This would result in substantial financial savings and improvement in the quality of service provided to residents. The amount of work associated with this process was also significant.
- The cost of living issue went back to the Truss-era and the inflation created by the budget at the time, and also the impact of Brexit.
- He believed the budget amendment provided solutions to the areas of difficulty highlighted during the debate relating to support for children, particularly children with additional needs, and home to school transport.
- He drew attention to the proposals in the amendment relating to Green Bonds.

Councillor Sarah Boad (Seconder of the Liberal Democrat Amendment):

- Councillor Boad highlighted the importance of library services and how well supported the activities that took place in library buildings were, eg craft groups, rhyme time, use of computer facilities, disabled badge applications, and bus pass applications. The Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) Working Group were also trialling whether bus services could be improved through the provision of paper timetables which were available at libraries. The libraries were well used resources and were particularly important for families from a deprived background. The Liberal Democrat amendment therefore sought to protect library services.
- She voiced concerns regarding the process of unitarisation as many district and borough council non-statutory services could be subsumed into the four main budget pressures highlighted by the debate.

- She expressed frustration at the new government, particularly relating to the increase in national insurance for which the Council would not be properly compensated, and the lack of understanding for the way in which two-tier councils operated, noting that the Deputy Prime Minister, Angela Rayner, had spoken about providing services for working people, when many of the Council's services were focussed around adult social care and children's social care.
- She considered that local government reorganisation was distracting for the real business of local authorities to serve residents.
- She highlighted the importance of Children's Centres to support those children who did not have the best start in life.
- She highlighted the extra funding in the amendment for casualty reduction.
- In terms of Highways, Councillor Boad emphasised her frustration regarding the difficulty of bringing delegated budget schemes to fruition.

Councillor Will Roberts (Seconder of the Green Amendment)

- Councillor Roberts noted the backlog of over 500 gully cleaning jobs and whilst there was some action taking place to bring that figure down, climate change and the resulting heavier rainfall were leading to worse surface flooding. In preventable cases, this was wasting officer resources and risking harm to residents attempting to unblock drains. The Green amendment sought to address this issue and was a prime example of where investment could prevent increasing costs.
- Overall, he noted that due to the financial pressures and service demand faced by the Council there was limited room to propose amendments.

Councillor Adrian Warwick (Seconder of Motion) thanked the chamber for the contributions that had been shared and commended the budget proposal, particularly commenting on:

- The budget had been a difficult one due to the national picture and service pressures but opposition groups seemed to agree with the majority of the proposals. He took the opportunity to address how some of the points raised were covered in the budget proposal.
- The Conservative government had similarly inherited a poor financial situation from the previous labour government. It had then had to negotiate a pandemic and a war whilst achieving strong growth.
- Concern had been expressed for elderly residents, who were in further difficulties due to the loss of the winter fuel payment.
- The administration had supported a hospital to home service provided by Fire and Rescue Service which utilised existing assets.
- He welcomed supportive comments as the Council found itself in the positive position of having a balanced five-year MTFS despite delays to adult social care reform and thanked the Finance Team for their work.
- He highlighted the work that had taken place through the WPDG and WIF to promote growth and the need to ensure that growth was not inhibited.
- He noted the risk factors set out in the budget, largely driven by the national context.
- Councillor Warwick echoed disappointment in the Government and the financial decisions which were impacting the Council, for example he noted that amendments proposed the addition of posts and reflected on how many additional posts could have been proposed if changes to national insurance contributions had not been imposed.

Councillor Sarah Feeney (Mover of Labour Group Amendment) replied that:

- She welcomed similarities with support for children with social, emotional and mental health needs, but considered that it was important to understand the pathways and options open to them.
- Comments regarding ensuring infrastructure projects were correct were also welcomed.
- She noted comments in the debate concerning homelessness and felt that this was an area that needed more work with district and borough colleagues.
- She welcomed the Portfolio Holder's comments about children being given library membership which she pointed out originated in a previous motion by the Labour Group and stated the Group was keen to explore how the library model could be promoted and protected. She welcomed comments around the services that were provided by fully staffed libraries, recognising that libraries provided a greater range of services than the traditional loaning of books.
- She shared views expressed regarding the statutory override but considered it was disappointing that the issue had not been addressed by the previous government.
- The Labour Group welcomed work to bring EHCP assessments into the statutory timeframe. She hoped that whatever changes were introduced by the Government they addressed requiring an EHCP in order to access speech and language therapy. It was important that young people could reach their full potential without delays to accessing support.
- She supported the new hot fire training facility which demonstrated the ability to invest to save.
- The Labour Group fundamentally disagreed with cutting services to abused women and those suffering severe sexual abuse.
- Noting comments regarding the government's promises on council tax, she asserted that the financial position was an inherited one and not what the government had thought it was. She stated that she was appalled at the rose-tinted view of the situation before the general election.
- Local government reform was badly needed and overdue. The English Devolution White Paper was about more than unitarisation – it offered real power and funding to local areas in the biggest decentralisation of power from central government.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse (Mover of Liberal Democrat Group Amendment) replied:

- He suggested sharing Portfolio Holder briefings ahead of future budget setting meetings so that the debate could focus on key issues rather than an annual review of performance.
- All the budget proposals were balanced because they had to be. However, each group had got to the point of balance by different routes and the Section 151 Officer had provided his risk assessments accordingly. The risk assessments highlighted partnerships and demand management of adult social care. Councillor Roodhouse expressed his dissatisfaction that reform in this area had been delayed until 2028 and urged his Labour colleagues to lobby MPs and Parliament to address this at the earliest opportunity as this was a key area of demand pressure.
- He underlined the need to understand the trajectory around service demand in order to identify the investments that needed to be made in SEND as there were issues, not only related to the Covid-19 Pandemic, which were coming forward and would have impacts into adulthood. He sought clarity on how these issues would be dealt with. He considered that elements of education such as creative arts and outdoor education had a role to play. Understanding this demand and unlocking this potential was key to the Liberal Democrat amendment.

- Acknowledging comments regarding local government reorganisation, he suggested that the reserve Council meeting date (18 February 2025) be used to debate the issue.
- Noting proposals regarding gully cleaning, he expressed the view that it would be more efficient and effective if this happened at the same time as road sweeping, but this would require the ability to deliver a service in conjunction with district and borough colleagues.

Councillor Jonathan Chilvers (Mover of the Green Group Amendment) replied that:

- He supported the work of Trading Standards which played a vital role in community protection and that was why the Green Group amendment removed the saving proposed in the Conservative budget.
- The Green Group amendment also removed the proposed reduction for counselling and support for survivors of sexual abuse.
- He noted Councillor Matecki's comments that part of the reduction for street lighting was due to genuine efficiency but he considered that half of it was effectively a service reduction which would see the amount of hours street lighting was on reduced. Nighttime street lighting was important to those residents who were commuting to and from work in the early morning or late at night.
- He welcomed the announcement of funding for Resourcing to Risk beyond three years and sought further detail from the Portfolio Holder.
- He echoed comments regarding the poor performance of the previous Conservative government.
- He concluded that the Green Group amendment, therefore, focussed on: highways basics - enabling children to walk and cycle safely to school and ensuring that drains were clear to protect residents and businesses from flooding; preventative services – he noted proposed savings in the Conservative proposal which would effectively cut preventative services centred in public health, libraries and childrens centres. He considered the Green Group amendment took a financially sensible long-term economic view with a commitment to relentlessly pursuing services that were not only more efficient but also better for residents.

Councillor Peter Butlin (Mover of the Conservative Group Motion) thanked Members for an interesting debate and replied that:

- In a tight fiscal position, options were limited and considering the variation proposed by the opposition groups was less than 1%, he concluded that there was general agreement with the budget proposed.
- Some of the opposition's proposals were answered by the Portfolio Holders in terms of the service delivery work that was already taking place despite the financial constraints.
- He explained the savings methodology, which was driven by better procurement, right sizing, artificial intelligence, technology, and data driven decision making. He considered that about 5% of the savings proposed were 'cuts' but these had been the subject of careful consideration.
- He noted that the statutory override was a piece of legislation that few agreed with, as it was directly in opposition to the first principle of local government finance to balance the budget. The government were not sufficiently funding statutory SEND services and were now essentially leaning on local government finances to plug the gap. He looked forward to this being addressed in the Spring Budget Statement with new legislation brought forward and trusted that the debt would be written off.
- He expressed his pride in the investment into mainstream provision which had been achieved and would also reduce home to school transport costs.

- He was also proud that the county's population growth suggested people liked to move to and live in Warwickshire.
- Turning to the risk assessment in the budget proposals, he asserted that these were largely due to central government and the impact that national decisions were having locally, eg winter fuel payments, the increase to national insurance contributions and the rise in the minim wage. Energy was also the most expensive in the western world and it had also risen despite election promises to reduce it. He noted claims of how government decisions would affect the farming community and hospitality sector.
- Councillor Butlin stated he would have welcomed the opportunity to be more flexible in the budget proposals and allocate more funding to services but it was necessary to focus on statutory services and look after the most vulnerable. He considered the budget achieved this aim. However, he recognised that different political groups would have different priorities.
- He recognised that although the Council was not in the priority stream for unitarisation, reorganisation would be happening and he viewed this budget proposal as placing the Council in a good place to move forward on reorganisation. Whilst he considered it would be an expensive process, he believed the savings would be considerable and the outcome would be the ability to deliver better services.
- He concluded by reiterating thanks to the Finance Team and thanked those Members who were supportive of the proposals.

Votes:

Vote on Labour Group Amendment

A vote was held on the Labour Group amendment. The results were 9 votes in favour and 41 votes against.

The amendment was defeated. 9 votes in favour and 41 votes against.

Vote on Liberal Democrat Group Amendment

A vote was held on the Liberal Democrat Group amendment. The results were

The amendment was defeated.

Vote on Green Group Amendment

A vote was held on the Green Group amendment. The results were 9 votes in favour and 41 votes against.

The amendment was defeated.

Vote on the Conservative Budget

The Conservative budget became the substantive motion. A recorded vote was held. The results were:

Votes for (36)

Councillor Jo Barker, Councillor Margaret Bell, Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi, Councillor Peter Butlin, Councillor Jeff Clarke, Councillor John Cooke, Councillor Andy Crump, Councillor Yousef Dahmash, Councillor Piers Daniell, Councillor Clare Golby, Councillor Brian Hammersley, Councillor Dave Humphreys, Councillor Marian Humphreys, Councillor Andy Jenns, Councillor Kam Kaur, Councillor Dale Keeling, Councillor Justin Kerridge, Councillor Christopher Kettle, Councillor Sue Markham, Councillor Jan Matecki, Councillor Chris Mills, Councillor Jeff Morgan, Councillor Penny-Anne O'Donnell, Councillor Bhagwant Singh Pandher, Councillor Isobel Seccombe OBE, Councillor Ian Shenton, Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince, Councillor Tim Sinclair, Councillor Mejar Singh, Councillor Richard Spencer, Councillor Heather Timms, Councillor Mandy Tromans, Councillor Robert Tromans, Councillor Adrian Warwick, Councillor Martin Watson and Councillor Andrew Wright

Votes against (14)

Councillor Sarah Boad, Councillor Barbara Brown, Councillor Jonathan Chilvers, Councillor Jackie D'Arcy, Councillor Tracey Drew, Councillor Judy Falp, Councillor Sarah Feeney, Councillor Jenny Fradgley, Councillor Bill Gifford, Councillor John Holland, Councillor Caroline Phillips, Councillor Will Roberts, Councillor Kate Rolfe, and Councillor Jerry Roodhouse

Resolved:

That Council agrees the 2025/26 Budget and authorises work to continue on ensuring the 2025-30 Medium Term Financial Strategy is aligned with and supports the delivery of the Council's ambitions as set out in the Council Plan.

3. Treasury Management Strategy and Investment Strategy

Councillor Peter Butlin, Portfolio Holder for Finance and Property introduced and moved this report, noting that both strategies were statutory documents that full Council was required to approve on an annual basis before the start of the financial year. Councillor Butlin reported that the strategies in their current form had worked well and, therefore, only minor adjustments were proposed as detailed in the report.

Councillor Isobel Seccombe seconded the proposals and reserved her right to speak.

Councillor Adrian Warwick thanked the Portfolio Holder and officers for their work. He reflected on the importance of the Treasury Management strategy with regard to the Council's appetite for risk and the way investments had been made which had helped to secure the financial footing that underpinned the budget.

Councillor Jackie D'Arcy asked the potential future use of Green Bonds which had proved very successful at Islington Council.

Councillor Seccombe responded that Local Climate Bonds was a new opportunity which the Council may avail itself of in the future. He explained the context for investment and the Council's overriding principles for borrowing to minimise cost pressure and maximise opportunities for residents and business. It was clear that the future would be more challenging but the robust work that was undertaken would support the Council to meet those challenges responsibly.

Councillor Butlin reiterated the principles on which the strategies were built and stated that the Council's track record spoke for itself.

Vote

A vote was held. The motion was agreed unanimously.

Decision

Resolved that:

1. The Treasury Management Strategy for 2025/26 (Appendix 2 to the report) be approved with effect from 1 April 2025;
2. The Investment Strategy for Non Treasury Investments for 2025/26 (Appendix 3 to the report) be approved with effect from 1 April 2025;
3. The County Council requires the Executive Director for Resources to ensure that gross borrowing does not exceed the prudential level specified (Appendix 2 to the report, Section 3.16, Table 12 "Authorised Borrowing Limit");
4. The revised lending limits for the Warwickshire Property Development Group (WPDG) (Appendix 3 to the report, Annex 7) come into immediate effect;
5. The revised lending limits for the Warwickshire Investment Fund (WIF) (Appendix 3 to the report, Annex 7) come into immediate effect;
6. The County Council requires the Executive Director for Resources to ensure that gross investment in non-Treasury investments does not exceed the prudential levels specified (Appendix 3 to the report, Annex 7);
7. The County Council authorises the Executive Director for Resources to undertake such delegated responsibilities as are set out in Appendix 2 to the report, Annex 7, and Appendix 3, Section 2.5; and
8. The County Council requires the Executive Director for Resources to implement the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Policy (Appendix 2 to the report, Section 2.13-2.29).

4. Addition to Capital Programme - Electric Vehicle Infrastructure

Councillor Jan Matecki, Portfolio Holder for Transport and Planning introduced and moved this report, which was seconded by Councillor Tim Sinclair. In moving the motion, Councillor Matecki reminded Council that just under £3m pounds had been secured from the Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Capital Fund from the DFT. The purpose of the fund was to support delivery of additional publicly available charging infrastructure to encourage the uptake of electric vehicles. This would also help the drive towards more sustainable transport, better air quality and carbon net zero. The Council had worked closely with neighbouring local authorities as part of a consortium, led by the sub-national transport body

Midlands Connect, and the consortium would use its collective buying power to leverage as many new charge points as possible and promote the roll-out of charging infrastructure in parts of Warwickshire where delivery had been slow to date. Current projections were for the delivery of around 700-800 charge points, which would deliver around about 1,500 sockets in total, installed in on-street locations where residents had no off-street parking or where home charging would be deemed difficult. There was no expectation on the Council to provide any financial shortfall to allow the scheme to progress.

Councillor Bill Gifford praised officers for their work on understanding need and the potential locations for electric vehicle (EV) charging points. He highlighted his belief that Warwickshire had potential to be the center of electric battery power in the country, with the research taking place at Warwick University, the siting of the Gigafactory in Warwick District and , Jaguar Landrover introducing a new model that would be entirely electrically powered. He understood that one of the biggest concerns people had around EVs was around charging and he therefore welcomed the funding and proposals.

Councillor Sarah Boad also welcomed the investment and the work to identify the where charging locations were needed. She noted that current charging points were generally located in town centres or streets close to them and welcomed the potential to have charging points in neighbourhood shopping areas or other car parks. She recognised that for people without access to a driveway, charging was more complicated and had seen wires across pavements with rugs over the top, to enable people to charge their cars on-street, and welcomed more widely available charging points.

Councillor Sarah Feeney explained that EV charging was an issue that was raised frequently in the division she represented, Benn, where there was very little off street parking. A pilot had taken place in the previous year which had seen options to charge on-street explored and residents were keen to understand whether or not this would formally continue. She questioned the options that would be available in terms of mobility for the charging points since many residents with EVs were not always able to park in the space nearest the charging point.

Councillor Warwick welcomed the report and the investment and applauded the work of officers. He was an EV driver himself and, in the division he represented, Fosse, he had been dealing with situations where residents did not have direct access to charge. He noted that officers had introduced the gully charging that had been described in the debate, and that government guidance on the continuation of this had been awaited. However, he understood that range anxiety was an issue for EV drivers and that the proposals would go some way to addressing this concern.

Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince shared her experience as a new EV driver, noting that there was a delay in having a home charging point installed and the careful journey planning that had to take place in order to understand where charging points were available. This experience had helped understanding of how sporadic provision was in some areas and how some EV parking spaces were taken up with a non-EV. She therefore welcomed work to understand where there were gaps in provision and was interested in the wattage and speed of the proposed charging points as this affected how long the car was parked in a space.

Councillor Sinclair explained that he had taken part in the Electric Vehicle Charging Scrutiny Task and Finish Group (TFG) in 2022 which had looked into this issue. As part of this work he had spoken to EV drivers to understand their needs and anxieties around charging, and noted that EV users needed a place to charge, fair prices, reliability and on-street parking. He welcomed the funding and praised the work of officers to transform and accelerate provision across the county.

Councillor Matecki commented on the range of modern EVs and his experience as an EV driver. In response to comments made during the debate he explained that the proposals would seek a geographical mix of locations for charging points and there were many different models and innovations that could be explored. He explained the timeline for procurement and installation and commended officers for their work to date.

Vote

A vote was held. The motion was agreed unanimously.

Decision

Resolved

That Council approves the addition to the Capital Programme of £3.295 million for the installation and ongoing management of electric vehicle chargepoints (“the Project”) to be funded from a grant awarded under the Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) Fund and the addition to the Capital Programme of such other private sector investment sum as the Council may secure in support of the Project.

5. Any Other items of Urgent Business

None.

6. Exclusion of Press and Public

Resolved

That members of the public be excluded from the meeting for the items mentioned below on the grounds that their presence would involve the disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1972.

7. Exempt Minutes of the 17 December 2024 Meeting of Council

The exempt minutes of the Council meeting held on 17 December 2024 were agreed as an accurate record.

The meeting ended at 1.40 pm

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