
Council

MINUTES of the Meeting held in the Council Chamber, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, ME10 3HT on Wednesday, 18 February 2026 from 7.00 pm - 9.00 pm.

PRESENT: Councillors Mike Baldock, Monique Bonney, Andy Booth, Lloyd Bowen, Hayden Brawn, Derek Carnell (Deputy Mayor), Ann Cavanagh, Shelley Cheesman, Simon Clark, Charles Gibson, Tim Gibson, Kieran Golding, Angela Harrison, James Hunt, Carole Jackson, Elliott Jayes, Mark Last, Peter Marchington, Ben J Martin, Kieran Mishchuk, Charlie Miller, Kieran Mishchuk, Lee-Anne Moore, Tara Noe, Tom Nundy, Chris Palmer, Richard Palmer, Hannah Perkin, Carrie Pollard, Ashley Shiel, Julien Speed, Paul Stephen, Sarah Stephen, Terry Thompson, Karen Watson (Mayor), Mike Whiting, Tony Winckless, Ashley Wise and Dolley Wooster.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Lisa Fillery, Jo Millard, Larissa Reed, Claire Stanbury and Claudette Valmond.

APOLOGIES: Councillors Lloyd Chapman, Roger Clark, Alex Eyre, Alastair Gould, Rich Lehmann, Peter MacDonald, Claire Martin, Pete Neal and Mark Tucker.

726 **Emergency Evacuation Procedure**

The Mayor outlined the emergency evacuation procedure.

727 **Minutes**

The Mayor announced that as the minutes had not yet been published, they would be considered at a future meeting.

728 **Declarations of Interest**

The Deputy Monitoring Officer announced that there was a dispensation for all Members in discussing the Budget and Council Tax item.

Councillor Elliott Jayes declared a non-pecuniary interest as he was a Director and Trustee of the Swale Community and Voluntary Services (CVS) organisation.

729 **Mayor's Announcements**

The Mayor said she had recently enjoyed visiting SCC Coachworks and the Shepherd Neame Brewery in Faversham. She had attended the Town Crier competition at the Criterion Theatre, Sheerness. The Mayor had also visited an assisted-living accommodation facility in Sittingbourne.

The Mayor spoke about her experience at the Swale Community Leisure (SCL) Vision Awards and the first birthday of 'Her Voice' at Heather House, Sittingbourne.

In the coming weeks, the Mayor said she would be attending a church service celebrating the Romanian community and the Tree of Hope event at Heather House by Next Youth. She encouraged others to attend and support the Tree of Hope event which would be held between 12 pm and 3 pm on Saturday 21 February 2026. The Mayor said she would be part of the selection panel for the Sittingbourne Carnival Queen. She also said she would be visiting one of the Isle of Sheppey prisons.

Finally, the Mayor thanked those that supported her quiz night held earlier in the month. She said it was an enjoyable evening, was greatly attended and had raised over £600 for the Mayor's charity.

730 Questions submitted by the Public

The Mayor advised that no questions had been received from the public.

731 Questions submitted by Members

The Mayor advised that no questions had been received from Members.

732 Leader's Statement

The Leader said:

"Good evening madam mayor, one and all, as this is our Budget Council, I will keep my remarks deliberately brief.

Tonight our focus must be on the decisions before us in setting a responsible budget, protecting essential services, and supporting our residents through continued financial pressures. This budget reflects extremely difficult choices, but it also reflects our priorities for fiscal stability, value for money, and investment where it matters most.

I thank officers and pay tribute to members from all parties for their work in getting us to this point, and I look forward to a constructive and focused debate this evening."

All Group Leaders acknowledged the Leader's Statement.

The Leader sent his good wishes to the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Derek Carnell, who was celebrating his Birthday the next day.

733 Nomination of Mayor 2026/27

Councillor Carrie Pollard nominated Councillor Derek Carnell for the role of Mayor elect for the 2026/27 civic year and gave a supporting speech. The nomination was seconded by Councillor Mike Baldock who gave a supporting speech. On being put to the vote, the nomination was agreed. Councillor Carnell thanked Members for their support.

Resolved:

(1) That the Mayor elect for the Civic Year 2026/27 be Councillor Derek Carnell.

734 Nomination of Deputy Mayor 2026/27

Councillor Tim Gibson nominated Councillor Angela Harrison for the role of Deputy Mayor elect for the 2026/27 civic year and gave a supporting speech. The nomination was seconded by Councillor Ashley Wise who gave a supporting speech. On being put to the vote, the nomination was agreed. Councillor Harrison thanked Members for their support.

Resolved:

(1) That the Deputy mayor elect for the Civic Year 2026/27 be Councillor Angela Harrison.

735 Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) Government Consultation

The Leader proposed the recommendations which were seconded by the Deputy Leader who reserved his right to speak.

In supporting the recommendation, the Leader of the Conservative Group spoke of the seemingly never-ending process of the LGR.

The Leader of the SIA Group reminded everyone that the LGR consultation was now live but questioned whether Central Government listened to local authorities or the public. He supported the recommendation.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group expressed her surprise at the options shortlisted by Government, drawing attention that one of the options did not comply with the recommendations set out by Government.

The Leader of the Reform UK Group was critical of the Government process.

Councillor Terry Thompson of the Green Group, agreed with the points made by other Group Leaders.

A Member spoke of historical Local Government reorganisations.

Councillor Wise said the lack of enthusiasm of Members in the Chamber echoed the attitude of members of the public

Resolved:

(1) That delegation be granted to the Chief Executive to prepare and submit the response from Swale Borough Council to the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government in response to their consultation on Local Government Reorganisation proposals for Kent and Medway, following a Member workshop and consultation with Group Leaders.

736 Pay Policy Report

In introducing the report and proposing the recommendations, the Leader said the item had been discussed by the Policy and Resources Committee in January 2026.

The Deputy Leader seconded the recommendations and reserved his right to speak.

The Leader of the Conservative Group highlighted that under Appendix 1(C), on page 27 when referring to the Chief Executive and Director appraisal process, all Group Leaders had the opportunity to take part and feed into the process.

The Leader of the SIA Group spoke of the benefits of including Trade Unions in the process and asked if this could be considered for future years.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group drew attention that the gender pay gap had increased compared to 2025 and suggested this be looked at. She acknowledged this may be due to a low turnover of staff.

The Leader of the Reform UK group and the Green Group both made no comment.

A Member suggested the Council should be increasing opportunities and encouraging younger people in the Borough to be supported in applying for vacancies in the Council and this could be discussed at the relevant Committee.

The Deputy Leader acknowledged and agreed with the comments made. He spoke of the importance of apprenticeships which encouraged the development and retention of those employed by Swale Borough Council (SBC) and said there should be a renewed focus on apprenticeships in the future.

Resolved:

(1) That the proposed Pay Policy Statement be agreed for publication on the Council's website.

(2) That the information within the Pay Policy Statement be updated with actual year-end figures before final publication.

737 Budget and Council Tax for 2026/27

The Leader introduced the report which sought Council's approval of the Council Tax Requirement, Revenue Budget and Capital Programme and Council Tax for the year 2026/27, as set out in the report to the Policy and Resources Committee held on 4 February 2026 and to approve the Council Tax Resolutions set out in Appendix I.

In proposing the recommendations, the Leader said the budget was a very different budget from those presented previously as it was the first truly cross-party Council budget, built not on party lines but on shared commitment to do the best for the community. He said the budget was a result of 12 months of work shaped through monthly cross-party budget meetings where every group around the table was given the opportunity to challenge, contribute and influence the final outcome through the budget working group. The Leader said the discussions involved compromise on all sides, difficult choices and honest debate, to achieve the best possible outcomes for the residents of Swale within the financial realities faced by the Council.

The Leader said the way the budget was created was significant and that Members across the Chamber had worked constructively, put aside political differences where necessary and focused on what united rather than divided them.

The Leader recorded his personal thanks to Members involved for engaging in the united spirit, and to officers for their professionalism, patience, expertise and tolerance in supporting the process over the weeks and months. He said that this budget demonstrated that collaboration worked and when Members worked together and listened to each other and accepted that nobody got everything they wanted out of the budget, a balanced and responsible budget that reflected shared priorities and protected the services that Swale residents could rely on every day could be delivered.

Finally, the Leader said he was proud of the way that Members had worked together on this budget and said it belonged to the whole Council.

In seconding the recommendation, the Leader of the Conservative Group reserved his right to speak.

The Leader of the SIA Group said it was interesting when a budget was proposed by the largest group and seconded by the main opposition group, that between them had more than half the Members of the Council, as the outcome was obvious. He said there was strong alignment between the Labour and Conservative groups and it was difficult to come up with anything new, particularly when long-term programmes could not be carried out in a Council whose future would cease to exist. He said that because of the LGR, a five-year strategy could not be planned, and Councils just had to get through the next two years. The Leader of the SIA Group referred to the decision to charge in some car parks on the Isle of Sheppey and said it was unfortunate this could not be discussed via the amendment submitted and he could not support the budget for that reason.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group said creating the budget was not about ticking every box for every group on every wish list, but was about having difficult conversations, making compromises and figuring out what worked for the community. She said everyone involved had to listen and give a little, and the budget presented was balanced, sensible and focused on the residents, despite the difficult financial circumstances that local government faced. The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group said it had been a transparent process involving trust, honesty and an open door policy, which some chose not to be part of, and which subsequently left their arguments against the budget less convincing. She said that whilst Members in the chamber disagreed on national politics and sometimes core values and priorities, it was important that those views were put aside and Members could work together for the benefit of their residents and show that even when there were disagreements, they could still agree on what mattered most.

The Leader of the Reform UK Group said he appreciated the hard work officers and Members had put into the budget and commented that the Director of Resources and her team were always available to respond to questions and attend meetings on the budget. He acknowledged a balanced budget had been achieved but said the budget had the biggest impact on residents and the budget should reflect their views, and by not accepting Members' amendments, it was a sad reflection on democracy and he could not support it.

The Councillor Terry Thompson (Green Group), referred to the erosion of funding from central government over many years and said this had led to the Council creating its current budget, and he thanked officers for their work on creating a balanced budget.

The Mayor invited Members to speak and comments made included:

- The topic of charging for car parks on the Isle of Sheppey had gained much attention from the public before and during the budget consultation;
- one in eight voters on the Isle of Sheppey had voted against the charge for car parks on the Isle of Sheppey but had been ignored;
- was critical that the cost of installing car parking machines matched the income generated to fund them;
- it would be wrong to support a budget that the residents he represented did not

support;

- did not support introducing car parking charges in areas with so few facilities;
- the negative impact that car parking charges had on the residents, businesses and road network on the Isle of Sheppey;
- should be reducing parking charges to encourage people to visit high streets and town centres;
- acknowledged that historical austerity in local government remained a major influence on the budget setting;
- welcomed collaborative working through the budget setting process, particularly with LGR looming;
- due to uncertainty in the LGR process, SBC had to plan for longer;
- the Council had very little non-statutory spend and had to be responsible as financial instability would cost residents;
- the wider impacts on town centre footfall, noting factors beyond car park charges, such as online shopping and related trends, and welcomed the opportunity for Members to discuss the issue and submit ideas to the Economy and Property Committee;
- reminded Members that there had been six years of warnings about potential cessation of entire non-statutory services, mitigated by the recent uplift in Government funding;
- projects which had received Government funding paying particular attention to £21million being put aside for social housing in Swale;
- nobody wanted to increase Council Tax and parking charges or have to spend more money on homelessness, but there had to be compromises to protect services;
- the long term vision to deliver social housing in the borough;
- expressed concern that many areas of the Isle of Sheppey including Minster, Queenborough and Halfway had not received investment from the Pride and Place funding, and questioned what benefit the Isle of Sheppey would receive from the proposed budget?
- was critical that Chairs and Vice-Chairs had not been involved or involved in the budget setting work;
- amendments had not been allowed at the Environmental Services and Climate Change Committee, and the amendments proposed for the Council budget had been rejected;
- questioned why revenue from parking charges was included in the budget to be used for projects yet to be decided;
- critical of including a budget for postal costs in a digital age;
- critical of including budget for security for meetings where public attendance was low;
- critical of retaining free parking for those attending the Hop Festival in Faversham;
- charging for parking in the Isle of Sheppey car parks put off tourists and others using the outdoor facilities;
- suggested Members should not support the budget and parking charges on the Isle of Sheppey be removed;
- with an increase in the amount of new development in the area and resultant increase in income from Council Tax and Section 106 Agreement, residents wanted to know what it was being spent on;
- only 9% of the Council Tax income was allocated to SBC;

- questioned what services residents got from KCC in return for the high proportion of Council Tax income allocated to them;
- compromises needed to be made to balance the budget, and said that when parking charges were introduced in Faversham, the town had to adapt and continued to thrive;
- referring to the decrease in footfall, there were measures Members could take to encourage and support shopping in the High Streets;
- reminded Members that the budget was for the whole of Swale and said that the fight against parking charges on the Isle of Sheppey had been fought and lost, and it was time to move on; and
- the budget was testament to what could be achieved when working together and focused on what mattered most to residents, and as a collective, priority had been given to sensible local investment and key frontline services had been ringfenced.

The seconder of the motion, Councillor Bowen, referred to the question, and associated criticism about why funding had been allocated for potential appeals on planning applications that had not yet been determined, and reminded Members that previously there had been criticism that no provision had been made for unexpected appeal costs. He acknowledged that nobody wanted to increase the Council Tax, but it was necessary in order to keep services running and he reminded Members that they were debating the budget for all SBC residents and the interests of the borough, not solely for those in their wards.

Councillor Bowen spoke about the cross-party discussions that had taken place over many months and the compromises that had been made to reach a balanced budget, for the benefit of the whole borough. He paid tribute to the officers and to the budget working group. Finally, Councillor Bowen said it was a good workable budget and there was no need to use the reserve date to return to discuss alternatives.

In summing up, the Leader reminded those Members who had been critical that the Isle of Sheppey did not receive any funding, that millions of pounds had been spent, highlighting improvements in Sheerness and £20 million earmarked to be spent at the eastern end of the Isle of Sheppey.

In accordance with Council Procedure Rules 3.1.19(5) a recorded vote was taken and voting was as follows:

For: Councillors Harrison, Tim Gibson, Noe, Cavanagh, Bowen, Goulding, Last, Booth, Speed, Wooster, Wise, Cheesman, Watson, Thompson, Jackson, Charles Gibson, Ben J Martin, Perkin, Simone Clark, Brawn, Hunt, Winckless and Miller. Total equals 23.

Against: Councillors Chris Palmer, Mishchuk, Pollard, Jayes, Bonney, Paul Stephen, Nundy, Whiting, S Stephen, Carnell, Baldock, Richard Palmer. Total equals 12.

Abstain: Councillors Moore and Marchington. Total equals 2.

Resolved:

(1) That Members note the Director of Resources opinion on the robustness of the budget estimates and the adequacy of reserves.

(2) That the report to the Policy and Resources Committee of 4 February 2026 on the Medium Term Financial Plan and the 2026/27 revenue budgets be approved.

(3) That the resolutions contained in Appendix I be approved.

(4) That in accordance with the proposals contained within AI 2014 No. 165 that a recorded vote be taken on the 2026/27 Budget and Council Tax and the Budget be approved including the agreed amendments.

738 Treasury Management Strategy 2026/27

The Leader introduced the report which set out and sought approval of the Treasury Management Strategy 2026/27 and the Prudential and Treasury Management Indicators. He proposed the recommendation which was seconded by the Chair of the Audit Committee, Councillor Charles Gibson, who thanked officers and Members, and said the strategy offered value for money for residents.

Resolved:

(1) That the Treasury Management Strategy 2026/27 and the Prudential and Treasury Management Indicators be approved.

739 Urgent Item - Council Tax Reduction Scheme - Appendix VII

The Mayor confirmed with all Members in attendance that they had read the urgent report and Appendix.

In introducing the report, the Leader said its purpose was to recommend changes to the Council's Council Tax Reduction Scheme with effect from 1 April 2026. He advised that Council had to approve the annual scheme and he said that in July 2025 the Policy & Resources Committee agreed to carry out a consultation in respect of the proposed changes, and those changes were agreed by the Policy & Resources Committee in January 2026.

The Leader of the SIA group sought and was given clarity, on the proposed removal of the minimum income floor for self-employed working-age claimants. He also referred to paragraph 5.6 of the report, noting that while the Council aimed to support residents, KCC had argued that higher discounts could discourage claimants from improving their employment. He further reminded Members that KCC had previously assured that their share of Council Tax collection would not increase, yet it had risen.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group said Council Tax was a regressive, unfair tax that put pressure on those that could least afford it and Government should be looking at it as it was not fit for purpose. She said it was good that the Council had taken steps to alleviate the pressure of people in the borough that most needed it. She drew attention to the report's reference to "work incentive issues," noting that this formed part of what had been described as 'Alarm Clock Britain'. She expressed concern that this rhetoric implied that people on low incomes did not already work hard or set an alarm to go to work, and suggested it further implied that they should simply obtain better-paid employment, despite such opportunities not being readily available. She urged that the Council take a strong stance against this narrative.

The Leader of the Reform UK Group drew Members' attention to paragraphs 5.7 and 5.8 of the report, noting that both the Fire Brigade and the Police and Crime Commissioner opposed the changes. He also referred to the period of austerity from 2010 to 2015 and the continuing impact it had on the public and public services, which he said was forced on the public by the coalition government at the time. He questioned whether the longer term negative impacts had fully been considered, and advised that, for these reasons, he could not support the recommendation.

Councillor Thompson (Green Group) stated that it was unacceptable that residents in employment required subsidies because they were not being paid a fair wage and were then unfairly taxed. He also highlighted the disparities between those living in high-value properties and the rest of the community and he supported the updated Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

Members were invited to speak and comments included:

- Valuation office delays in setting Council Tax bands for new properties meant residents were unable to plan household bills without confirmed banding;
- asked the Leader and Mayor to write to Government to increase staff at the valuation office, in order to cope with increased new development;
- it cost more money to collect the Council Tax from the small group of residents that could not afford it and were entitled to 10% discount, than it did to implement the policy;
- the Council should be supporting its most vulnerable residents and this scheme would help; and
- queried the financial costs of the scheme broken down by the recommendations.

The Chief Executive advised that the valuation office had already been written to. The Section 151 Officer explained that the costs of implementing the scheme were already included in the budget agreed earlier in the meeting.

The Deputy Leader stated that decisions made by KCC had implications for all precepting authorities and he drew attention again that SBC received only 9% of the Council Tax which was significantly less than KCC received. He reminded Members that questions about the scheme and the report could have been put to the Policy & Resources Committee when the item was discussed at their meeting in January 2026.

In summing up, the Leader spoke in full support of the scheme.

In accordance with Procedure Rule 3.1.19 (2), a recorded vote was taken and voting was as follows:

For: Councillors Last, Bowen, Brawn, Harrison, Wooster, Perkin, Bonney, Cheesman, Hunt, Noe, Jayes, Golding, Pollard, Miller, Booth, Wise, Paul Stephen, Ben J Martin, Marchington, Simon Clark, Sarah Stephen, Nundy, Winckless, Tim Gibson, Baldock, Jackson, Charles Gibson, Whiting, Carnell, Cavanagh, Speed, Moore, Watson and Thompson. Total equals 34.

Against: Councillors Richard Palmer, Chris Palmer and Mishchuk. Total equals 3.

Abstain: None. Total equals 0.

Resolved:

- (1) That a scheme offering a maximum 100% Council Tax Support be agreed.***
- (2) That the percentage support in income bands 2 to 4 be increased by 10%.***
- (3) That the income thresholds for each band by the welfare benefit uplift applied by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for 2026/27 be increased.***
- (4) That the minimum income for self-employed working age claimants be removed.***
- (5) That the Council Tax Reduction Scheme with DWP benefits be aligned by disregarding the additional compensation payments listed in paragraph 2.20.***
- (6) That delegated authority be given to the Director of Resources and the Head of Revenues and Benefits to update and publish the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) policy in line with the agreed recommendations.***

740 Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned from 7.35 pm until 7.50 pm.

Mayor

Copies of this document are available on the Council website <http://www.swale.gov.uk/dso/>. If you would like hard copies or alternative versions (i.e. large print, audio, different language) we will do our best to accommodate your request please contact Swale Borough Council at Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne, Kent, ME10 3HT or telephone the Customer Service Centre 01795 417850.

All minutes are draft until agreed at the next meeting of the Committee/Panel