

BRIGHTON & HOVE CITY COUNCIL

PLACE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

5.00pm 19 JANUARY 2026

HOVE TOWN HALL COUNCIL CHAMBER

MINUTES

Present: Councillor Evans (Chair) Cattell, Fowler, Goddard, Mackey, Meadows, Pickett, Sykes and Earthey

Other Members present: Mark Strong (CVS), Mary Davies (OPC)

PART ONE

47 PROCEDURAL BUSINESS

47. Procedural Business

47a Declarations of substitutions

47.1 Apologies from Cllr Winder

47.2 Cllr Mark Earthey attended as substitute for Cllr Bridget Fishleigh.

47b Declarations of interest

47.3 There were none.

47c Exclusion of the press and public

47.4 The press and public were not excluded

48 CHAIR'S COMMUNICATIONS

48.1 The Chair gave the following communication:

Today we are holding a special Place Overview & Scrutiny meeting as part of the budget scrutiny process. The minutes of this meeting and any specific comments made by committee members will be shared with the Cabinet to inform their planning.

We will be looking at the details of the budget plans ahead of the Cabinet meeting on 12th February and budget Council on 26th February. We are joined by Cllr Jacob Taylor, Deputy Leader of the Council and cabinet member for Finance & City Regeneration, and John Hooton, Interim Director of Property and Finance, who will be talking to us about the budget and then taking questions from members. We are also joined by Cabinet members and officers who are on hand to help with any questions, and I'd like to welcome them to the meeting.

We will start the meeting with a brief overview of the budget plans from Cllr Taylor. I will then ask each Cabinet Member in turn, supported by Cllr Taylor and by the relevant officers, to take questions on plans within their portfolio.

Although we only have one item on the agenda, this is an important subject for scrutiny, so I imagine there will be a lot of questions to get through. Can I therefore please request that both those asking and answering questions are as brief and to the point as possible. There will be ample opportunity for members to state their position on plans and propose alternative savings to Budget Council; the purpose of this meeting is to get more information on the budget plans, so I do want encourage members to ask questions rather than make statements.

Please note that any questions relating to a specific ward will be referred to officers outside of the meeting to ensure the committee is focussed on implications for all wards. In the interests of time and to ensure that everyone gets to contribute, I'm going to ask members to refrain from asking multiple questions and to ask one question only to each Cabinet Member. If you have more questions for the Cabinet Member, and if we have time, I will come back to you once everyone has had the opportunity to ask something. I do want to give all members the opportunity to ask everything they want to, but I need to be mindful that we have many service areas to cover and only limited time. I will move on to the next topic if I feel we need to, even if there are questions still to be asked.

We are in the process of setting up another special budget scrutiny committee in February where we will have the opportunity to scrutinise the budget at a later stage in the process which will include the HRA and any changes that has been made to the budget before it goes to Council on the 26th February for approval.

49 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

49.1 There were no public questions.

50 MEMBER INVOLVEMENT

50.1 There were no member questions.

51 GENERAL FUND DRAFT BUDGET AND RESOURCES UPDATE – 2026-27 TO 2029-30

51.1 The item was presented by Cllr Jacob Taylor, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Finance & City Regeneration, and by John Hooton, Interim Director of Property and Finance. Cabinet Members and senior officers were also in attendance to present and answer questions on plans relating to their portfolios and services.

Overview

51.2 Cllr Taylor told the committee that a draft budget for 2026-27 had been approved by Cabinet on 11 December 2025. A revised budget would be presented to Cabinet on 12 February 2026, and subsequently to Council on 26 February 2026.

51.3 The draft budget identified a £24.9 million budget gap. This is due to service pressures of around £35 million rather than to any decrease in funding. In fact, real terms funding has increased significantly in each of the past 2 years. This is a very different situation to the early 2010s when there were substantial year-on-year reductions in cash terms to the funding the council received. Service pressures are largely concentrated in homelessness and temporary accommodation and in adult social care. This is a common picture in councils across the country, although Brighton & Hove City Council (BHCC) is not currently experiencing a high degree of service pressures in children' care, unlike many other councils. To give an example of the scale of the challenge, the homeless & temporary accommodation budget in 2025-26 was £8M. In 2026-27 demand pressures mean this has risen to £20M. The council cannot simply fund these additional pressures and urgent steps are being taken to mitigate them: for example, by building or purchasing social housing to reduce pressures on temporary accommodation.

51.4 The draft budget identifies around £12M in savings for 2026-27. These are mainly efficiencies rather than cuts to services. A budget gap of around £13M remains, and this will be addressed in the revised budget plans due to be presented to Cabinet on 12 February. Following the Cabinet meeting, there will be a further opportunity for scrutiny of these plans.

Sport & Recreation: Cllr Alan Robins (Cabinet member for Sports, Recreation & Libraries) and Alison McManamon (Corporate Director, City Operations)

51.5 Cllr Robins told the committee that his priorities included increasing income generation and improving public access to parks. There will be a review of parking charges at city parks, and also a review of the sports on offer across the city.

51.6 Cllr Sykes asked whether all the identified sports and leisure savings would be delivered in year 1 given the need to develop a commercial strategy. Ms McManamon replied that there are a number of areas for additional income being explored, including uses for Blackrock and pop-up beach concessions. Cllr Taylor added that the council needs to do much more to realise the commercial opportunities offered by its assets. There is considerable scope here.

51.7 Cllr Meadows asked whether income targets for car parking charges in parks were realistic given that many parks have not even introduced parking charges. Cllr Robins responded that parks will be assessed individually for the potential to introduce or increase parking charges. Ms McManamon added that there are a number of opportunities to increase income from parks, so there is scope to cover any shortfall in anticipated parking income. Cllr Taylor noted that some risk is inherent in all budget planning, hence the need to build reserves.

51.8 Mark Strong asked about the risk of increasing charges pricing some communities out of using sports and leisure services. Cllr Robins replied that this is not the intention and any impacts will be closely monitored. Mr Hooton added that the council provides a very comprehensive sports and leisure offer, for example, free swimming for young people, and that there are no plans to undermine this work. Ms McManamon noted that it is already the case that profitable elements of the leisure contract are used to subsidise access and this will continue. Ms McManamon offered to provide additional information in writing on the community benefits in the leisure contract, such as free swimming, schools using facilities and other benefits offered, and information on how we are protecting community activities in the new contract.

51.9 Cllr Goddard noted that the council has been historically poor at commercialising its assets. It is very important that we protect the vulnerable, but we must do much more to take advantage of commercial opportunities. For example, there is a growing demand for padel courts which would generate income, but which will not be addressed by existing modest expansion plans. Cllr Taylor responded that he partly agreed. However, it is important to note that the council does elements of commercial activity really well: for example, in terms of the annual events programme and in terms of the commercial property portfolio. Ms McManamon offered to provide additional written information on plans to increase revenue by offering additional leisure opportunities such as padel, and on the council's position on paid-for murals.

51.10 Cllr Pickett asked whether increasing outdoor event income would mean an increase in events in parks. Ms McManamon replied that a new Events Strategy will be presented to Cabinet in March. However, increasing revenue from events is not necessarily about running more major events – it is also about encouraging more community events, improving the offer for weddings and similar measures. Cllr Robins added that the council is very conscious that some residents feel strongly about access to their park being restricted by major events.

51.11 Mary Davies noted that the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) on parking charges in parks states that the impact of changes will be low. However, the Older People's Council (OPC) contests this – there will be a significant impact on older people and people with disabilities who need to use their cars to access open spaces and who may struggle to pay charges or will be unable to pay because they do not have smart phones. The OPC would like to see the EIA re-examined. Ms McManamon agreed that the EIA for car parking charges in parks will be reviewed.

51.12 Cllr Earthey asked about short-term borrowing costs for the King Alfred development. Cllr Taylor replied that there are inevitably short term costs for this type of project as the new King Alfred will not generate income while works are in progress.

51.13 Mr Strong asked whether plans to develop a VIP offer at the Brighton Centre could include offering opportunities for young people or excluded communities to benefit from new facilities. Ms McManamon agreed to take this idea away.

Central Services & Public Realm: Cllr Jacob Allen (Cabinet Member for Customer Services and Public Realm), Alison McManamon (Corporate Director, City Operations), Elizabeth Culbert (Director Governance & Law).

51.14 Cllr Allen outlined plans relating to his portfolio, including establishing a sovereign Brighton & Hove IT function, moving away from Orbis partnership arrangements.

51.15 Cllr Meadows asked about recovery of money owed by the owners of the Albion Hotel. Cllr Taylor responded that £1.2M has now been recovered and negotiations for the residue are ongoing.

51.16 Cllr Sykes asked about costs relating to work with Orbis. Cllr Allen explained that savings have been identified in terms of procurement spend, but there are cost pressures in relation to ICT, particularly in terms of cyber security. Ms McManamon agreed to provide additional information in writing on the council's actions on cyber security.

51.17 Cllr Goddard asked about the Innovation Fund. Ms McManamon replied that the council is looking to learn from pioneering councils across the country, particularly in terms of digital innovation. Mr Hooton added that the Innovation Fund will also focus on reducing costs in high-cost statutory services, for example by using reablement to reduce burdens on adult social care or by targeted work to help people avoid being made homeless.

51.18 Cllr Earthey asked about savings on subscriptions. Ms Culbert responded that the council will retain some key subscriptions (for example to the Local Government Association). Those being terminated are not considered key to council efficiency.

51.19 Cllr Mackey asked why the council had seen a rise in Freedom of Information and Subject Access requests. Cllr Taylor replied that this is likely to be because the council has made lots of significant policy changes recently. Ms McManamon added that it is clear from officer feedback that there is a need to streamline the process of responding to these requests. She also offered to provide more information in writing on this issue.

51.20 Cllr Pickett asked about risks to legal services income generation. Ms Culbert explained that there is a potential risk to income from East Sussex Fire & Rescue Service arising from changes to fire services that form an element of local government reorganisation. However, this is only part of legal services external income.

Finance & City Regeneration

51.21 Cllr Taylor told members that much of his portfolio related to capital rather than the General Fund budget, so was not germane to this discussion. However, members should note that the council's rationalisation of properties, including its main office buildings, was having a positive impact in terms of reduced buildings maintenance costs.

51.22 Cllr Meadows asked about risks of the council borrowing too much to fund developments including Withdean swimming pool and the King Alfred. Cllr Taylor replied that it is necessary to borrow to fund the overdue redevelopment of leisure facilities. BHCC is not a heavily indebted local authority and this borrowing is manageable.

51.23 Cllr Sykes asked for details of dialogue with Government over the council's settlement. Cllr Taylor responded that the council made a formal response to the Government's Fair Funding review. However, it should be noted that the fair funding formula adopted does not result in lower funding for the city, albeit funding will increase less than would have been the case using the previous formula. The council is actively talking to Government around homelessness. This is not about asking for more funding, rather the council is seeking greater flexibility to buy property to use as temporary or social housing. A number of private landlords are currently seeking to exit the rental market, and this represents a real opportunity for councils if they are able to purchase properties.

51.24 The Chair stated she was disappointed that the Government's new funding formula does not fully include housing costs when calculating deprivation. Cllr Taylor agreed, noting that the issue of local housing affordability has been raised with the relevant minister. The Government recognises that this is an issue. John Hooton added that the funding formula does now include some elements of housing costs, but does not fully reflect the cost of housing.

51.25 Cllr Earthey expressed concern about any moves to reduce the council's risk reserves. Cllr Taylor agreed that it is important to maintain and build reserves and more needs to be done in this space. Mr Hooton added that steps have been taken to build up the general reserve, which is now around £8M, up from £6M a couple of years ago. The measures in this year's budget plans are not to reduce reserves but to transfer some money from earmarked reserves to the general reserve which will enhance the council's ability to manage risk.

Net Zero and Environmental Services. Cllr Tim Rowkins (Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Net Zero and Environmental Services), Max Woodford (Director, Place).

51.26 Cllr Rowkins told the committee that priorities include protecting frontline services, particular those supporting net zero and the look and the feel of the city. There are opportunities to generate savings by exploring options for commercialisation, for example by offering graffiti removal services to local businesses, adopting a more commercial approach to the collection of garden waste and recovering full costs of cleaning up after events from the organisers. It should also be noted that public toilets are a priority: there are no plans to close any toilets and there is an aspiration to extend opening hours at some toilets where this is possible.

51.27 Cllr Mackey asked about the impacts on older or disabled people of charging for some public toilets. Cllr Rowkins replied that the council does not want to impact these groups. However, it is important to note that the high volume of visitors to central parts of the city imposes considerable burdens on the council and targeting toilets in high footfall areas of the city for charging will help with recovering some of the costs associated with being a popular tourist destination.

51.28 Mark Strong asked about community & voluntary sector (CVS) groups that want to recycle but are unable either to use domestic services or to buy commercial recycling which is not available. He also asked whether it might be possible to exempt small CVS groups from waste charges which they may struggle to pay. Cllr Rowkins responded that the recycling issue was being examined. He was sympathetic to the financial burden placed on small CVS groups, but it needs to be recognised that the council's financial situation makes it tricky to apply exemptions. Ms McManamon added that exploiting opportunities to trade waste services might provide more headroom to offer exemptions. Ms McManamon offered to provide further information on the council's policy regarding charging 3rd sector organisations for waste services.

51.29 Cllr Earthey asked about metering of council assets and suggested that local environmental groups may be willing to assist this project. Cllr Rowkins replied that metering is ongoing and is delivering cost savings. The idea of involving local environmental groups is a good one. Mr Woodford added that the council has many hundreds of assets to convert to meters and this is a major change project.

51.30 Cllr Sykes asked about community composting, noting that it would be a shame to end this just because food collections are being rolled out. He also declared an interest as he is on the board of the Food Partnership. Cllr Rowkins responded that he recognises the value of community composting, but there has to be consideration of whether this is something the council can support financially. He would be happy to explore non-financial support measures.

51.31 Cllr Pickett asked about the council's fleet and whether there would be disadvantages in measures to rationalise the storage of parts. Ms McManamon replied that elements of the current supply chain are ineffective and the plans are to develop a new stock control system which will address this and make the fleet more reliable.

51.32 Cllr Meadows asked whether the plan to charge for replacements for broken bins would be worth the administration costs. Cllr Rowkins replied that most of the required admin is already in place. It needs to be recognised that residents are responsible for the upkeep of their bins. However, bins damaged by the council will be replaced for free, and there will be no charge for replacement bins when residents have requested to up or downsize.

51.33 Mary Davies stated that the Older People's Council is opposed to the proposal to charge for some toilets, challenging the low impact score in the Equality Impact Assessment, and would prefer that funds were raised via a tourist tax. Cllr Taylor responded that local areas do not currently have the ability to impose tourist tax. This is a power that may, in time, be granted to the Mayoral Authority. Ms McManamon added that the EIA on toilet charging plans would be reviewed.

51.34 Cllr Fowler asked about plans to charge for Christmas tree disposal and the impact on residents who already pay for garden refuse disposal. Cllr Rowkins replied that residents with brown bins will still be able to use these for disposal of Christmas trees at no extra charge; the plan is to introduce charged disposal as an offer for those without brown bins. Mark Strong noted that Rotary already offer collection and disposal for a small charge.

51.35 Mark Strong asked whether the council would continue to remove offensive graffiti. Cllr Rowkins confirmed this is the case. The plans to offer a charged service to business with graffiti do not mean that the council will start charging to clean offensive graffiti.

Culture. Cllr Birgit Miller (Cabinet Member for Culture, Heritage and Tourism)

51.36 Cllr Miller told the committee that her priorities include a focus on greater efficiencies and on commercialisation, for example in terms of introducing a VIP offer for Brighton Centre events and on making the city a more attractive venue for filming.

51.37 Mark Strong asked about the potential negative impact on local residents from increasing the number of city events. Cllr Miller replied that she recognised the issue. The new events strategy will include a reduction in the hours of some events and there will be limits placed on some event locations, for example, the north of Valley Gardens will only be offered for daytime events, minimising disruption to local people. It should also be recognised that the main focus for increasing revenue is on weddings and filming rather than on outdoor events. Ms McManamon added that feedback from Place Committee informed, and is embedded in, the events strategy. Cllr Taylor noted that many residents enjoy city events and are happy to accept a degree of inconvenience.

51.38 Cllr Earthey asked about opportunities to increase revenue on the Volks railway, potentially including extending it either to the east or the west. Cllr Miller replied that she would love to look at extending the Volks, but this is not a realistic opportunity in the short term. More pertinent measures include developing Blackrock so that the Volks terminates at a destination that people will want to travel to, and increasing use of the Volks by holding themed events.

Cllr Taylor added that developing Brighton's Eastern seafront is the biggest commercial opportunity in the city and something that the council is focused on.

Transport. Cllr Trevor Muten (Cabinet Member for Transport)

51.39 Cllr Muten told the committee that his priorities are to deliver a well-run service that meets the needs of residents whilst generating income. Measures planned include the charging of 'lane rental' to utilities companies and a rationalisation of resident parking.

51.40 Mark Strong noted his concern that additional roadside advertising would risk the safety of cyclists. Cllr Muten replied that public safety will be of paramount concern when considering any additional use of advertising.

51.41 Cllr Earthey asked about plans to address potholes. Cllr Muten replied that this would be detailed in a Cabinet paper expected in March. The council is anticipating a 4 year settlement from Government to help fund this work.

51.42 Committee members discussed whether they wished to make any specific recommendations in addition to sharing a draft minute of the meeting with Cabinet for information ahead of its consideration of budget plans. Members agreed to make 2 recommendations, around the equality impact assessment of plans to introduce parking charges in some parks, and around the council's reserves where committee members did not wish to see the Council adopting any policies that would increase risk.

51.43 RESOLVED – (i) that Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee recommends that the Equalities Assessments relating to parking at parks, and charging for toilets, are urgently revised to accurately reflect the Impact of proposals to groups with protected characteristics, particularly older people and the many which intersect e.g. those with disabilities and socio-economic deprivation.

(ii) that Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee recommends that Cabinet looks closely at the plans to move sums from earmarked to general reserves.

The meeting concluded at 7.31pm