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Paper submitted by the Clerk to the Council at the meeting of 08.01.25

A briefing paper for Councillors on the Budget Preparation for 2025 - 2026

Introduction

The budget is a key part of the council's plans and must tie in with its policies. The council needs to be budget for a number of reasons:

- To plan its future activities
- To provide an opportunity to monitor progress during the year, by comparing what it actually spends against what it plans to spend.
- To assist the council in setting its precept
- To provide the framework authority for expenditure under various headings.

Precept – what is the precept and it's legal basis.

The precept is the parish council's share of the council tax. The precept demand goes to the billing authority, the district council or equivalent, which collects the tax for the parish council.

Section 50 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 specifies the calculation of the budget requirement for local precepting authorities. In accordance with the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2015, the Parish Council must also ensure that its financial management is adequate and effective and that it has a sound system of internal control.

During the process of calculating the precept, Council should be mindful that sums it sets must be sufficient to cover the following:

- Next year's expenditure, including an allowance for contingencies
- Outstanding expenditure in previous years
- Expenditure that is anticipated to be incurred before the precepted sum become available
- Payments to a sinking fund, capital fund or a renewal and repairs fund.
- Comparisons between expenditure and income

Risks associated with the setting of the budget

1. Risk 1 – Capping of Parish Council Precepts

Whilst capping is possible in the future, the government has issued its local government finance policy statement which set out the government proposals for 2025-2026, alongside longer-term plans for funding reform. It has been confirmed within that statement that "There are no council tax referendum principles for mayoral combined authorities or town and parish councils" for the upcoming financial year. The means that, once again, no centrally imposed cap has been placed on the amount by which local council precepts may rise.

Risk Assessment – low likelihood and low impact.

2. Risk 2 – Sustainability of village amenities

The continuing operation of amenities in the parish relies upon efforts of the parish council to raise income whilst controlling costs. There are times and circumstances when the parish council will need to rely on external funding or where the parish council itself will be asked for financial assistance. With the continued growth of the village of Thurston there will be a greater call on the current facilities as well as the need for improved or a wider range available to the population. There is an expectation that, as in the previous year, the parish council will be expected to undertake a number of services that are no longer offered by either the District or the County e.g. hedge clearance; skirting of pavements; leaf clearing; gully and gutter clearance. Clarity has also been given on some areas of land within the village which fall under the remit of the parish council.

Risk Assessment – medium likelihood and medium impact

3. Risk 3 – Personnel Costs

Council must be aware that it needs to comply with employment law and pension legislation. Annual pay awards and performance reviews should be built into budgets for future years. In addition, if any new employees “opt-in” to the local government pension scheme, there will be higher staff costs through employer contributions to the pension scheme. The Clerk and Deputy Clerk are currently the only members of staff enrolled into the Local Government Pension Scheme (as operated by Suffolk County Council) with employers contributions at 20% for 2025-2026. The detailed breakdown of the budget to be set (*Paper 6*) shows the hours covered by the budget and any associated employment costs (*including unknown annual pay increase for 2025/2026 and increases in Employers NI*). *The costings for the annual pay award for 24/25 have been fully implemented in the current year*).

Risk Assessment – medium likelihood and medium impact

4. Risk 4 – Asset Replacement Reserve

Council should consider allocating on an annual basis a sum to be made as a contribution to an Asset Replacement Reserve to allow a reasonable sum to be maintained for the replacement of the assets held by the council on a rolling basis. Whilst the Annual Play Inspection Risk Assessment Reports for the Council owned and maintained play areas highlighted (in 2019) that all play equipment had a life expectancy of between 5 – 10 years, Council should ensure that it has sufficient reserves to allow for a partial replacement on a rolling basis. Council should consider updating this assessment during 2025-2026. Currently Council has an earmarked reserve of £5,000 for asset replacement although new equipment over the past couple of years has been funded from s106 monies held at Mid Suffolk District Council and from Neighbourhood CIL monies held by the Parish Council.

Risk Assessment – medium likelihood and medium impact

5. Risk 5 – Failure to Contribute to General Reserves

The Parish Council currently has a significantly low level of general reserves and should ensure that such reserves are held in accordance with Proper Practices which states that one of the key stages

in determining the budget is to “provide for contingences and consider the need for reserves”. As with any financial entity, the parish council must ensure that it has sufficient reserves (both general and earmarked) to finance both its day-to-day operations and future plans. However, it should be remembered that given that the majority of its funds are generated from taxation / public reserves, it needs to ensure that such reserves are not excessive.

Risk Assessment – low likelihood and medium impact

6. Failure to Manage Restricted Reserves (CIL Funds)

A portion of CIL income is paid to the Parish Council to be spent by the parish council on offsetting the impacts of development in the area. These sums must be held in a designated reserve (restricted reserve) to support the expenditure on facilities and services to ensure that there is the capacity to sustain such growth. Over time this will lead to a reduction in the total reserve available and all associated revenue costs will need to be brought into the revenue budgets funded by the Precept. Such Reserves have a time limit in which expenditure must be incurred and council regularly receives updates on funding received, monies expended, current balances and future balances once committed funds are fully expended.

Risk Assessment – Medium likelihood and Medium impact

Precept Demand

The starting point for the preparation of the Draft Budget involves an examination of recent trends in respect of receipts and payments along with known associated costs for new assets and new expenditure incurred. Council has previously run with the presumption that any increase in Precept shall be less than 5% with an explanation for departure from such a trend.

MSDC issued a statement dated 14th November 2024 which detailed an indicative tax base and whilst they did not anticipate any significant changes, the Final Tax Base will not be confirmed until January 2025. The District Council has set a deadline of 31st January 2025 for the submission of the Parish Precept by the Parish Council.

Council was therefore advised to be “minded to set” a budget of £247,372 on 4th December 2024 with formal approval of the budget and the precept to be agreed at the meeting of 8th January 2025 (for the year commencing 1st April 2025 to 31st March 2026).

The Draft Budget includes the sum of £50,000 for the first year of a new PCSO Contract. It does not however include the allocation of monies for donations and the increased hours for the Community Library, but for comparison purposes both have been shown below along with the funding source – CIL.

CATEGORY	Budget 2023-24	Actual 2023-24	Budget 2024-25	Revised 31.12.24	Projected 2024-25	Budget 2025-26
STAFF	85234	67581	97160			103770
STREET LIGHTING	4500	5383	6250	0		6000
GROUND'S MAINTENANCE	8500	2975	13000			9240
TREE MAINTENANCE	0	0	10000			10000
VILLAGE MAINTENANCE	18335	17560	25430			22677
PLAY AREA NEW EQUIPMENT	0	38972	0	0	0	0

PCSO CONTRACT	48300	39895	48300		48300	48,300
OFFICE ADMINISTRATION	20626	16994	23340			24,420
AUDIT/ACCOUNTANCY	2000	1421	2125			2,210
LEGAL /PROFESSIONAL FEES	15000	18990	5000			5,000
HEATH ROAD PLAY AREA	3055	1205	3055			3,055
LIBRARY	2700	2700	2700	2700	2700	2,700
SMALL GRANT DONATIONS	10000	3500	10000			10,000
TOTALS	218,250	217,176	246,360			247,372

FUNDED BY						
PRECEPT	152920	152920	177360	177360	177360	201,497
CIL RESERVES	61000	23172	61000			37,700
GRANTS	0	30884	0	0	0	0
CLEANSING GRANT	4330	3474	5000			4,175
MISC INCOME	0	6726	3000			4,000
TOTALS	218,250	217,176	246,360	238249	244149	247,372

Tax Base

MSDC have advised that although the Taxbase calculator and Indicative Tax Base information as issued via email on 14th November 2024 is not anticipated to change (email of 7th January 2025) this will not be confirmed until Thursday 9th January 2025. and can be used in the calculation of the Precept to be set as per the detailed workings in Paper XXX.

Tax Base for 2025/2026	Tax Base for 2024/2025	% Change	Status
£1861.37	£1766.96	5.3%	INDICATIVE – to be confirmed 9 th January 2025

Proposal 1:

The expenditure budget in the sum of £247,372, as submitted, is approved at the meeting of 8th January 2025.

Proposal 2:

Details of the funding sources for the overall budget to be as follows: Precept £201,497; CIL £37,700; Grants £4,175 and Miscellaneous Income £4,000.

As the indicative tax base is not anticipated to be amended, the precept required to cover the non-funded aspects of the budget set for 2025/2026 will remain at the proposed charge of £108.26 on a BAND D property. This represents an increase of £7.89 per annum or 7.85% on a BAND D property.

Proposal 3:

Should the indicative tax base be confirmed at a differing figure than that which has been communicated, the funding sources will be reviewed at the council's committee meeting of 22nd January 2025.

Analysis of Tax Base for Thurston since 2014-2015

Year	Tax base	Band D	Movement in £	Movement in %	Precept in £	LCTS Grant
2014-15	1174.31	49.74	1.21	2.5	58,413	1,961
2015-16	1184.29	50.98	1.24	2.5	60,379	1,307
2016-17	1197.97	67.27	16.28	31.93	80,582	654
2017-18	1203.56	75.57	8.30	12.35	90,959	Phased out
2018-19	1206.53	77.96	2.39	3.17	94,067	0
2019-20	1219.82	79.43	1.46	1.88	96,889	0
2020-21	1228.87	85.58	6.15	7.74	105,162	0
2021-22	1220.96	86.71	1.15	1.32	105,864	908
2022-23	1380.20	90.91	4.20	4.84	125,480	0
2023-24	1645.31	92.94	2.04	2.23	152,920	0
2024-25	1766.96	100.37	7.43	8.00	177,360	0
2025-26	1861.37	108.26	7.89	7.85	201,497	0

Reserves – Earmarked, Restricted and General

Council should be mindful of guidance given within the Practitioners’ Guide to Proper Practices to be applied in the preparation of Statutory Annual Accounts and Governance Statements (March 2024) which states that “The authority (parish council) needs to have regard to the need to put in place a General Reserve Policy and have reviewed the level and purpose of all Earmarked Reserves.”

As with any financial entity, it is essential that an authority has sufficient Reserves (General and Earmarked) to finance both its day-to-day operations and future plans. It is important, however, given that its funds are generated from taxation/public levies, that such reserves are not excessive. Smaller authorities have no specific right to accumulate funds via the precept and all reserves should be reviewed and justified regularly (i.e. at least annually).

Earmarked Reserves

Earmarked and Other Reserves — none of the above in any way affects the level of Earmarked and/or Capital Receipts Reserves (EMR/CRRs) that a authority may or should hold. There is, in practice, no upper or lower limit to EMR/CRRs save only that they must be held for genuine and intended purposes, and their level should be subject to regular review and justification (at least annually) and should be separately identified and enumerated. Significant levels of EMRs in particular may give rise to enquiries from Internal and/or External Auditors.

Restricted Reserves

Neighbourhood CIL is passed to parish or town councils by MSDC where development is taking place. The amount will be 15% or 25% depending on whether the community has an adopted Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP). Thurston has an adopted NDP as of October 2019.

The CIL Regulations 2010 as amended state that the parish council must spend the CIL income they received from the District on either:

- The provision, improvement, replacement, operation or maintenance of infrastructure;

or

- Anything else that is concerned with addressing the demands that development places on an area.

Providing CIL is spent in accordance with the above, CIL monies may be used to provide seed or match funding with other income streams and / or may be spent collaboratively with other parish councils, community interest companies or other providers to make the most efficient use of funding to benefit the community.

General Reserves

The generally accepted recommendation with regard to the appropriate minimum level of a general reserve is that this should be maintained at between (3) and twelve (12) months of net revenue expenditure.

The reason for the variation is to cater for the large variation in sizes of individual authorities. In practice any authority with a net revenue expenditure in excess of £200,000 should plan on three (3) months equivalent General Reserve.

Council is therefore encouraged to adopt as a General Reserve, the level that is appropriate to its size and situation and plan its Budget so as to ensure that the adopted level is maintained.

Current General Reserve as per Policy (1 month's contractual duties)	Level as per 3-month equivalent of net revenue expenditure
£19,557	£61,842

The General Reserve Fund will be determined at 31st March 2025 (the end of the financial year) and Council is encouraged to ensure that it meets the one-month rule as outlined above and as referenced in Council's Reserves Policy 2024.

Current Earmarked Reserves stand at:

Earmarked Reserves (Designated Reserves)				
	Opening Balance 01.04.24	Movement	Reasoning	Closing Balance 31.12.24
Asset Replacement Fund	5,000			5,000
Staff Reserve	4,290			4,290
Parish Poll / Election	3,645			3,645
CIL Restricted Funds	171,970			172,845
Thurston Community Players	4,008	-4008	Paid in full to TCP	0
Contingency / General Reserve	0	+19557	Reserve Policy 2024	19,557
TOTALS	188,913			205,337