

Minutes of the Meeting of Forward Planning held in Rickards Hall on 29 September 2025 at 7:30 pm

Present: Cllrs. Jon Aldridge (*Chairman*), Angela Baker, Sarah Compton, Michael Gemmell Smith, Alan Layland, Stuart McGregor, Vince Parker, Angela Read, Michael Stockdale, Jeff Streets, Bob Todd

In attendance: Town Clerk; no members of the public. There were no representatives from the press.
19:30 The meeting opened.

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received, noted, and accepted, from Cllrs Cummings, Jacques, McArthur, and Sumner.

2 Declarations of interests or predetermination

An interest, but non-pecuniary interest, for Church House by Cllrs Baker and Layland as trustee of Eden Valley Museum, and Cllr McGregor as the Council's representative for the museum.

3 To receive, approve and sign the minutes of the Forward Planning Meeting held on 14 October 2024 (pages 2023-068/1-3).

Resolved: to adopt the minutes of Forward Planning Steering Group meeting held 14 October, and that they be signed by the Chairman as a true and accurate record, 068/1-3.

4 The Strategic Plan and Objectives 2024-27

The Strategic Plan and Objectives sets out the vision for the Council including future projects, aspirations, and infrastructure for the town. The programme and forward planning sets a time frame and is updated annually. A copy of the projects and updates was presented with the meeting agenda papers.

4.1 To receive the updated Programme of Projects and Aspirations

Members noted the progress with the 'programme of projects and aspirations' for Council 2023-27. To note:

- Tourism information - 10 new walks leaflets had been rewritten and printed, as well as uploaded on to the visitedenbridge website. Three town trails were currently being updated. Final phase was to upload the GPS routes to a walks App.
- Streetlights - the upgrade from old concrete columns continued with 41 of 247 outstanding (nine booked for 2025-26 replacement programme). Streetlights LED upgrades continue with replacements and surplus budget allowing batch upgrades.
- Council website - new website was completed and new site went live 29 September.
- Bandstand for Stangrove Park - had progressed with successful CIL bid to Sevenoaks District Council (SDC). Working detail were with the Open Spaces Committee to oversee.
- Market and High Street improvements - new market archway funded via a Prosperity Fund grant had been granted planning permission, a contractor to design and create the archway been issued. Planned to have install autumn 2025.
- Pond clearance at Stangrove Park - storm damage in winter 2025 had naturally cleared the overhanging branches and resulted in some additional tree clearance. For now, the pond had benefited from the additional light. Project put on hold whilst being monitored for pond algae and general condition.

In addition, longer term projects are included in the aspiration, suggested for the new council 2027. Notably:

- Cemeteries - new site/solutions when cemetery four is full - members noted that the current cemeteries estimated sufficient plots for 10-years. It was agreed that site for new cemetery should be included in the Infrastructure Development Plan (IPD), and that any new site should be sizable to last 100-years. Members noted that other cemetery authorities have considered reuse of plots outside the Grant of Right period, mausoleum

(above-ground structures designed to house human remains), developers to provide land, repurposing other council land.

- Vehicles upgrade and eco compliant - whilst all the Council vehicles were currently in good condition, they are not electric vehicles. The government has relaxed the rules on moving to electric vehicles but from 2035 petrol vehicles will no longer be produced with the drive still to transfer over to electric vehicles.

Members discussed the upcoming local government Reorganisation and potential impact that this may have on the Council projects in that this may result in the Town Council taking over some SDC and Kent County Council's (KCC) assets in Edenbridge. This has been raised with the full Council who has looked at the assets held by SDC in Edenbridge. For now, the view was to wait. Fortunately, the Town Council already owns and manages a lot of the community's main facilities such as parks, sports pitches and other open spaces. However, Council was monitoring the position and full Council would continue to keep Reorganisation as a regular agenda item.

Members also noted that the emerging Local Plan was a project in itself, creating work for officers and councillors including ensuring residents were made aware of the upcoming Regulation 18 consultation and the Regulation 19 consultation expected in 2026. Council would be working with a Planning Consultation ensuring the best representations were made on site allocations and policies, and also that Council had a voice at the eventual Hearing for the Plan.

Mindful of the changes to local government structure with new unitary authorities, and the potential lack of a Local Plan, members discussed again if they should proceed with a Neighbourhood Plan. This had been raised several times over the past few years, noting that the most recent adopted Plan's polices would hold more planning weight, in other words, a current Neighbourhood Plan (NHP) polices could be weakened by a new Local Plan, and the consensus had previously been to wait for the Local Plan and to then consider a Neighbourhood Plan to help strengthen polices to ensure best design, infrastructure contributions and better guide and control development in the town. However, with the government landscape changing and uncertainty with the Local Plan, members considered if this should now move up the agenda priorities. It was noted that to produce a Neighbourhood Plan was a significant project and work needed, which would require a working group made up of officers, councillors and residents, and that the costs can be exorbitant, for example, Sevenoaks Town Council was in the region of £100k, and Swanley Town Council £50k. The government had also withdrawn its funding support so councils would need to fund 100% of the costs. However, CIL funds could be used towards developing a NHP.

Full Council had already considered commissioning a Settlement Spatial Plans (SSP) but had resolved to defer proceeding with a SSP, and review after the Local Plan Reg 18 (3) consultation. It was noted that in 2018 a lot work had already gone in to preparing a NHP and whilst some of this may be transferable, the landscape had changed and new evidence based reports needed, polices written and public consultation. Members,

Resolved: to recommend to full Council to bring the Neighbourhood Plan further up the agenda of projects, to explore the viability of a NHP and review the 2018 Plan. However, it was agreed to wait until after the Local Plan Regulation 18 consultation before nominating councillors to a new Working Group (initially just Council members at this first phase).

5 Devolution and Reorganisation and to consider impact on council budgets

In March, after the government had announced that Kent was not included in its Devolution plan, the leaders of Maidstone, Sevenoaks, Tonbridge and Malling, and Tunbridge Wells councils wrote to the Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution to express a collective wish to develop a proposal for local government and move to unitary authorities. A full proposal submission was due by 28 November. If approved, this would start the transition from district and county councils to unitary authorities.

Moving towards unitary authorities raised questions for parish and town councils about the future of community assets such as parks, building, open spaces, leisure facilities. Some councils were already seeking to acquire and manage assets locally which are held by the district council. SDC has been quite forthcoming engaging with councils and suggesting if a parish or town council does want to consider taking over any assets they can submit an application, with guidance set out in its

updated Disposal Policy setting out how surplus assets can be transferred. However, the applicant would need to present a business case, fund any market valuations, legal costs, additional reports and evidence, and the purchase price agreed on the current market value. There were no guarantees that an application would be successful as SDC has duty to pass on to the new unitary a well managed and profitable portfolio of assets. At the May Council meeting, it received a report following a meeting with SDC. To summarise:

- Asset Categories: SDC classifies assets as operational, surplus, or strategic; all may be considered for transfer.
- Future Authority Risk: There are concerns that future unitary authorities could revalue assets, potentially for development (“asset dumping”).
- Financial Impact: Any transfer will affect T&PC budgets and likely require a precept increase.

Members of the FPSG were asked to consider the following actions to protect community interests and prepare financially:

1. Nominate a Working Group to prepare a strategy assessing the potential impact of local government reorganisation and to propose risk-mitigation measures.
2. Recommend to the Finance Committee the creation of a new Earmarked Reserve (EMR) to meet legal and professional costs associated with any future Community Asset Transfer business plans. (Item 7.3(3)).

The following decisions were:

Resolved: to appoint a Working Group to assess the impact local government reorganisation on the Town Council and to propose risk-mitigation measures. Members appointed were: Cllrs Aldridge, Baker, Gemmell Smith, Read.

Discussing the level of an EMR was difficult and mindful of budget constraints, but members agreed that it would be irresponsible not to consider planning for the future knowing that Reorganisation could have an impact on the council and agreed to,

Resolved: to create of a new Earmarked Reserve (EMR) to meet legal and professional costs associated with any future Community Asset Transfer business plans and to budget £5,000 towards this fund. (If eventually, it was not needed, it would be released back to the General Fund .)

6 Emerging Local Plan and consider budgets for advertising the Plan, and professional reports, and professional fees.

The emerging Local Plan Regulation 18(3) consultation dates were 23 October to 11 December 2025. Following this consultation, SDC hoped to proceed to the Regulation 19 consultation summer 2026, with submission for examination by the end of 2026 to meet the December 2026 deadline. If this deadline was not met, Sevenoaks District would enter the new unitary authority without an adopted Local Plan.

Members were asked to consider and confirm recommendations to the Finance Committee for part of its budget recommendations. After some discussion the following recommendations were agreed:

Resolved: to budget for consultation-event promotion for both the Regulation 18 (3) consultation in 2025, and the Regulation 19 consultation in 2026 of £2,700 - 2025-26 budget overspend £1,200; and 2025-26 new budget £1,500.

Resolved: to set a budget of £10,000 for 2026–27 for professional fees to support representation at the Examination Hearing.

Resolved: to create of an Earmarked Reserve (EMR) for professional reports - such as a Spatial Settlement Plan - once Local Plan sites had been identified, to guide infrastructure planning, of £5,000.

Resolved: to maintain the Neighbourhood Plan EMR at £15,000 and to explore CIL funding through SDC and Town Council CIL funds.

It was noted that some unspent funds in 2025-26 budget could potentially be moved to support the EMR.

7 **To make recommendation to the Finance Committee any additional increases to the budget and Precept to cover any proposals or projects in the Strategic Plan**

Members were asked to consider the timescales and planning for upcoming projects, and whether funding allocations should be included in the 2026–27 budget to support their delivery. This may involve both short-term and long-term funding, with implications for the forthcoming budget and longer-term financial planning. Recommendations made would be presented to the Finance Committee for inclusion in its draft budget calculations and precept recommendations. These are presented to Council at the December meeting for consideration. To help reduce budget pressures, and where appropriate, applications would also be submitted to the CIL Board for infrastructure maintenance or new infrastructure projects.

Members noted that there was a lot of projects currently, in the pipeline, and upcoming - including Local Plan and potential Neighbourhood Plan - and recognised that this all created additional work and pressures for officers on top of the day-to-day activities of council activity. Councillors should consider perhaps holding back on some of the projects to help manage work loads and costs.

7.1 **To receive a summary of the 10 and 30 year maintenance plan**

Members noted Council had detailed 1&10 and 30-year maintenance plans, which were reviewed annually by officers and adjusted accordingly to budgets and work needs. The plans had been updated to reflect feedback from the recent building surveys, although the full Church House report was still awaited. Marsh Green playground remained in the forecasts as the CIL bid was yet to be considered. It was also anticipated that the cost of the playground would exceed pre budget estimate of £54k - the CIL bid would request the full amount, following pre discussions with potential providers.

Members didn't have any questions regarding the plan but did discuss if the Marsh Green playground should be funding by part council funds and part CIL funded so as not to deplete CIL pot. Officers were asked to consider when preparing the budgets and the CIL application.

7.2 **To receive a copy of the end-of-year reserves position**

Members received a copy of the end-of-year reserves position 2024-25 as previously reported to Council (May meeting) and published on the website/finance/reserves. It was noted that during 2025-26 there would be some movement of the reserves notably from the Buildings Reserves which had funded additional costs to Rickards Hall redecoration and floor repairs; costs relating to the Pavilion heating and hot water investigations and professional reports, and some projects carried-over from 2024-25 with delivery in the current year. An update of reserves is reported to the Finance Committee. Members recommended that the building reserves should be replenished in the new budget and,

Resolved: to recommend that the Buildings EMR be brought up £100k, in view of recent experience of the heavy maintenance cost for unexpected works, the number of buildings that the council owns, and some of the planned works in the 10 and 30 year plans.

7.3 **To make recommendations to the Finance Committee for 2026-27 budget**

Members summarised its decisions:

Resolved: the following recommendations to Finance Committee for budgets 2026-27:

- **Buildings EMR - to replenish some of the spend in 2025-26 to ensure a building reserves brought up to £100,000 (as per agenda item 7.2).**
- **Equipment, tools, & vehicles reserves - to increase IT equipment replacements budget adding £8,100 (as reported to Council September 2025); and £4,000 and future replacement vehicles.**
- **New EMR for reorganisation and community assets £5,000 (as per agenda item 5).**
- **Strategic Plan Projects EMR (created 2025) - to add £10,000 to the EMR to help enable delivery of future projects.**
- **New Local Plan budget - £1,500 to fund consultation events and Examination Hearing representation (as per agenda item 6) .**

- **Neighbourhood Plan/Local Plan EMR for professional reports - £5,000 to support a Spatial Settlement Plan - once Local Plan sites are identified, to guide infrastructure planning.**
- **Neighbourhood Plan EMR - to maintain the current level of £15,000.**

8 Date of next meeting - tbc 2026

Noted that the annual calendar of meetings would be presented to October Council.

20:45 The meeting closed.

Pending Approval