

# West Northants Council - Liberal Democrat Group

## Alternative Budget priorities for 2026-27

In the run up to the May 2025 elections for West Northants Council, the Liberal Democrats published ***A People First Council*** and asked residents to support our vision and plan for West Northamptonshire.

Our alternative budget proposals for 2026-27 **builds directly on that plan** and shows how they can be delivered in a fair and responsible way.

Our proposals contrast sharply with those put forward by the Reform UK administration who have taken a route of hitting residents with parking charges and cutting community support, focusing on the short-term. We propose investing in prevention, local decision-making and long-term solutions that actually save money in the future.

Our proposals protect market towns, support vulnerable residents and, with the current economic pressures, ensure councillors lead by example.

This summary explains **what we would do, what it would cost, and how it would be funded.**

Our proposals have been formally submitted to the council and reviewed by the relevant 'Responsible Financial Officer' (Section 151 Officer) as is required to ensure that they can be delivered. We will be presenting them as a Budget Amendment to the Full Council meeting on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2026.

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### Council Tax

The Reform UK administration have now reduced their planned council tax increase by 0.04% to 4.95% - this is a purely party-political move. The 0.04% reduction provides an average annual saving per household of just 74p per household (for a Band D equivalent property).

We would restore the council tax charge to the draft budget proposed level of 4.99% to generate an additional £110k of revenue for FY 2026/2027. There is in effect a cumulative cost of not raising council tax to the maximum level and over the medium term (4 years) this amounts to lost revenue to the council of £490K and over the longer term (10 years) lost revenue of £1.49 million.

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## Improving our roads, pavements, transport and facilities

We completely disagree with the proposal from the Reform UK administration to introduce car parking charges in Daventry and Towcester in the new financial year 2026 –2027 and in Brackley in 2027- 2028.

Our rural market towns operate entirely differently to Northampton as the County town, both in terms of scale, size and the communities that they serve. In Northampton, as well as the town Centre, which offers a wider range of stores, facilities, banking, theatres and dining, there are a range community/urban service centres across the town that have no parking fees. Rural communities, in the majority of cases, do not have these facilities.

Transport options are limited so villagers rely on being able to drive to their local towns as they provide their core essential options. There is not an equality argument.

Furthermore, Northampton has been benefitting from (and continues to benefit from) millions of pounds of regeneration funding.

There has been no impact assessment completed for such a large, significant and rushed decision.

### What we would do

- Stop new parking charges in **Daventry and Towcester**, protecting access to town centres for residents and local businesses.

### Cost

- £426,000

### How it would be funded

- From additional funds in the council's **base budget contingency** following the final government settlement.

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## Protecting and enhancing nature and our environment

West Northants Council is responsible for several open' car parks. These car parks potentially provide an ideal opportunity for the implementation of canopy solar/photovoltaics. This applies both within Northampton and our market towns of Daventry and Towcester. Whilst we understand that this idea is being explored, we believe that this approach could be accelerated with some additional focused funds. These would be an ideal source of potential energy for the council s own facilities. Canopy cover can also be useful to provide shelter during inclement weather during all seasons, including extremely hot days.

Estimates suggest that a typical 80 space car park would generate revenue of around £22k a year - investment cost would be in the region of £140K. Technology now exists to store energy (through batteries) without the need for a grid connection (although this would be preferable in most instances). DESNZ says that solar canopies may provide a new revenue stream for owners who could sell the power to a nearby business through a private wire agreement. This bypasses the grid and avoids the associated cost and time-consuming process of connection.

We also believe that there are opportunities to go further and develop a partnership group across the West Northants Council area for businesses that also have mass or large car parking spaces, examples would be Silverstone and some of our distribution facilities. Let's be pioneers in this area and look to explore photovoltaics/battery storage facilities which will contribute hugely to national 2050 net zero target as well as revenue generation. The feasibility cost would be designed to explore if there any Joint Venture opportunities. We are aware that some of these proposals are in the mix already, but this funding is designed to accelerate these opportunities.

In addition, we would reverse the proposed cuts to the bedding planting activity at a long list of locations, with the vast majority of these locations being within the town centre areas.

The 'State of Nature' report from 2023 establishes that across the UK:

- UK species have declined by 19% since 1970
- nearly 1 in 6 species is threatened with extinction

- 151 of 10,008 species assessed have already become extinct since 1500

Our proposal sets out to use these places for planting which provides an environment for pollinators and biodiversity in our urban areas

### **What we would do**

- Install **solar panel canopies over council-owned car parks**, cutting energy bills and helping meet the UK's **2050 net zero target**.
- Reverse proposed cuts to parks and bedding plants, replacing them with **pollinator-friendly planting**.
- Keep parking for the **Park Run and open water swimming** at Brixworth Country Park free of charge.

### **Cost**

- Solar feasibility and acceleration: £100,000
- Biodiversity planting: £150,000
- No charge for car parking for the Brixworth Park Run/open water swimming: £10,000

### **How it would be funded**

- One-off use of **earmarked reserves** and savings identified elsewhere in the budget.

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## **Housing Matters. Let's get it right**

Social housing continues to be an area of challenge for the council, with very limited numbers being built in the first half of this financial year even with the council's emerging approach of working with developers to support the building of more affordable homes.

Demand for social housing continues to rise. Without dramatic intervention the situation is likely to continue to worsen.

Whilst there is some capital funding allocated; our perspective is that we need to go further faster.

We have ring fenced capital funds to purchase homes to support The Childrens Trust (some £20 million). We therefore urge the council to allocate an additional £8 million for the explicit purpose of purchasing appropriate private homes to contribute to meet the needs of those seeking social housing support. The

benefit of such an approach is that the council would be creating assets which are likely to appreciate rather than depreciate. Acquisition will also be a quicker process than build. Much like the situation with children's homes, we would propose that the capital sum is set aside in principle and proposals come forward with appropriate business cases.

The council is also currently consulting on its new local plan which provides for up to 47,300 new homes being built up to 2043.

The new Reform UK administration has decided that the rural areas must provide a 'share' of the new housing and so the draft plan now includes new targets. At the same time the Government has removed funding for Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs).

We are concerned that many rural areas, if the new plan policy is adopted, will be at risk of housing being forced on them without any say. Our proposal is therefore to recruit two dedicated officers to support neighbourhoods in the development of their NDPs.

This would enable communities to take back control and shape their own 'Place' rather than having this determined by the council. This approach would be designed not to stop development but rather to fully ensure that localism continues to enable communities to engage in the process and get the benefits of development and not just the pain.

The funding would be limited to the transition period over the introduction of the new Local Plan.

## **What we would do**

- Purchase additional homes to increase the supply of **social housing**, delivering homes faster than new builds.
- Provide a dedicated team of Council Officers to support our villages in producing or updating their **Neighbourhood Development Plans** (NDPs).

## **Cost**

- £8 million (capital investment)
- Council support for NDP's: £450,000

## How it would be funded

- Capital funding on an **invest-to-save** basis, including flexible use of capital receipts from council assets.
- Council support for NDP's: Additional council tax revenue or a one-off limited contribution from reserves.

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## Supporting young people to support the future

In West Northamptonshire, 18% of the population live in the 20% most deprived areas of England (55,852 people) based on the 2019 Indices of Deprivation. Northampton (24.1%) has the largest proportion of people living in the 20% most deprived areas. Extensive evidence shows a direct correlation between poor mental health and emotional well-being and levels of deprivation. This results in increases in numbers of vulnerable individuals including both children and adults.

Good mental health and wellbeing are essential for a child's development and are one of the key components of giving children the Best Start for Life. Children with poor social and emotional skills, low self-esteem or low confidence are more likely to struggle and find school more challenging.

In 2021, an estimated 821 2-4-year-olds were identified as having at least one mental health disorder. Mental health disorders were also found to be higher among 2-4-year-olds who had poorer levels of general health, lived in more deprived areas, lived in lower household incomes, had parents who received welfare benefits, where there were poorer levels of family functioning, and poorer parental health and wellbeing.

In West Northamptonshire, 1,942 young adults aged 17-19 were identified as having a possible mental health disorder in 2021, whilst 3,607 were estimated to have a probable mental health disorder (Mental Health of Children and Young People).

Expenditure under the High Needs Block of the Direct Schools Grant (DSG), as well as West Northants Council revenue budgets required for Special Educational Needs (SEND) support and intervention for children and young people has a significant impact on the overall budgets of the Council. As at mid 2025, West Northamptonshire had over 4,700 children identified as having SEND with an EHCP, with increases in the identification of higher rates of children with autism and social emotional and mental health needs (SEMH).

The total number of children identified as having SEMH needs at mid-point in 2025 was 1625.

Additional and often costly support through EHCP for children identified as having SEMH total for 2024-25 was 1094.

Lack of emotional and well-being support for children and young people, as well as for adults, in the most extreme cases affects suicide as well as self-harm rates. In West Northamptonshire in 2021/22, 55 children aged 10-14 and 225 young adults aged 15-19 were admitted to hospital due to self-harm. 100 people aged 10 and over committed suicide in 2019-21.

The external evaluation by University of Northampton of the Action for Happiness programme in West Northamptonshire has identified a significant improvement in the mental health of those who have engaged (approx. 400 participants). Measures of Well-being have shown an increase of 1.18 of the participants in the programme. Set against the Governments well established framework for "Wellby" impact on life satisfaction and emotional health, equates £13,000 to 1 point improvement. In addition, there is real potential for reduced demands for SEMH SEND funding if children and young people's mental health and well-being provision was improved in schools as a strategy for prevention and early intervention.

We remain concerned about the long-term viability and affordability of our existing model of children's care provision. The Northants Children's Trust is exposed to external market forces with so much of children's care provision being provided by Private Equity firms with no cap on their profits. Whilst being fully aware of the likely ILAC inspection in the Spring and fully committed to support the council to achieve the best rating possible, it is evident that the council needs to explore all possible options for potential future provisions. There are examples across the country where authorities have engaged organisations such as CIPFA to carry out a full financial review of provision. Clearly the financial provision should not compromise quality, but we believe that the time has come to explore any potential future options.

This proposal is to set aside some funding for a feasibility study of options with a view to reporting back by the end of this calendar year so that decisions can be made with regard to the 2027-2028 budget and beyond.

The feasibility study will require:

- Cross party involvement drawing in experience and expertise required to take forward the study

- Engagement with and learning from local authorities where Children's Care provision options have been explored and decisions reached on future models
- Detailed options appraisal based on ensuring quality provision along with cost efficiencies
- Detailed options appraisal of staffing and provision structures

### What we would do

- Expand the **Action for Happiness programme** in schools to improve mental health and wellbeing.
- Accelerate the purchase of **community-based children's homes**.
- Support and retain foster carers by exploring **council tax relief**.
- Carry out a feasibility study on the future of children's care provision.

### Cost

- Action for Happiness: £300,000 (over two years)
- Children's homes acquisition: £10.24 million (capital)
- Children's care feasibility study: £250,000
- Foster carer support: approx. £240,000

### How it would be funded

- Earmarked reserves and **capital funding** (£10.24m), with long-term savings from reduced reliance on private provision.

## Creating more local jobs and better local jobs

This council should actively pursue high value industries and sectors, in line with existing Economic Growth Strategy. We have seen rapid growth in the logistics sector which don't always create the highest paid jobs, with plenty of examples where workforces have been 'shipped' in from other areas to fulfil needs.

We continue to believe that there is an opportunity to develop a feasibility study into how West Northamptonshire might capitalise on the booming film and TV production and other digital and creative sectors. This is not a tourism agenda but rather a business and growth opportunity to explore the creation of production facilities within our area. With the construction of the Universal Theme Park now agreed for Bedfordshire in 2031, this is the ideal time for our area to establish our unique propositions for the next 50 years.

In addition, the Economic Growth Strategy further identifies opportunities in the Life Sciences and Green Energy sectors. This funding should be seen as seed funding to develop detailed actions to attract these sectors in line with the existing strategy.

### **What we would do**

- Invest in attracting **digital, creative, life sciences and green energy industries**, supporting higher-paid local jobs.

### **Cost**

- £80,000

### **How it would be funded**

- Re-purposed reserves and savings from councillor allowances.

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## **Providing the local services, you need**

We would reverse the £46K cut to community grants. We believe this to be extremely short sighted given the reliance that the council has on the voluntary sector. It is a counter-productive measure and unaligned to the concept of 'One West Northants'. We consider these grants to be essential to the voluntary sector and will return more than the cost of investment. Our proposals would reinstate this fund using funding from the £3.5 million contingency.

### **What we would do**

- Reverse cuts to **community grants**, protecting vital voluntary groups.
- Protect funding for **Age Concern** and preventative services.
- Pilot **digital and assisted care**, helping people live independently for longer.

### **Cost**

- Community grants reinstated: £62,000
- Age Concern funding: £50,000
- Digital/assisted care pilot: £250,000

## How it would be funded

- Base budget contingency, additional education-service income, and earmarked reserves.

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## Building a council that works for you

### What we would do

- Cut councillor Special Responsibility allowances (SRA's), freeze the general allowance and other expenses (except childcare cost).
- Require councillors to pay a contribution for parking where charges apply.
- Redirect savings to frontline services and community support.
- Campaign for fairer funding, including powers for a **visitor levy**.

### Savings generated

- Nearly **£118,000 per year**

### How savings would be used

- Councillor training
- Community grants
- Economic growth initiatives
- Keeping health and wellbeing activities free

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## Visitor Levies – an area for consideration

The Government, in its most recent budget, gave Mayors the powers to introduce 'visitor levies' within their Mayoralty areas but stopped short of bestowing these same powers upon Unitary Councils. We believe that this is an oversight and short sighted for councils of the size and stature of West Northants Council.

We advocate that West Northants Council should lobby/campaign for similar powers as Mayors under such a scheme.

Funding and revenue sources grow ever tighter. We believe that such an approach would be proportionate and fair and allow unitary councils to invest

further in 'Place' without solely relying on its resident base. This levy should apply to business visitors as well as tourists.

According to the Northamptonshire Tourism Strategy 2023–2030, the wider county attracts around 18 million visitors a year, who spend around £1 billion. Of the two million overnight stays, around 74% take place in West Northamptonshire. That's about 1.48 million people staying overnight. A £2 levy would raise almost £3 million. A £5 levy would raise around £7.4 million.

Such a scheme would **entirely negate** the need to introduce car parking fees in our market towns and could also raise additional funds for improvement and enhancement schemes.

Therefore, we call for cross-party support to make this council's position clear via our local Members of Parliament and other channels.

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## A People First Council

These proposals show that West Northamptonshire Council can:

- **Protect communities and town centres**
- **Invest in prevention and early support**
- **Lead on climate action**
- **Deliver value without unfair cuts**

They are rooted in the promises Liberal Democrats made to residents in the 2025 local elections and focused on delivering a better future for everyone.