

## **Cannock Chase Conservative Group General Fund Alternative Budget for 12 February 2025 Council Meeting**

This 'Alternative Budget' in respect of both the General Fund and the General Fund Capital Programme, represents suggestions, similar to those proposed by the Conservative Group last year, as detailed below.

It is our recommendation that Full Council refer this back to Cabinet for further consideration.

### **Statement on the potential closure of Cannock Chase Museum**

As the Conservative Group outlined within last year's 'Alternative Budget' we believe it is imperative that we continue to have a Museum in Cannock Chase that can house our fantastic local collection and tell the wonderful story of the local area and people.

At this juncture and with the current financial backdrop, we agree it is vital that careful consideration is given to what the future of the museum may look like.

As we initially outlined during our budget proposals in 23/24 in respect of the museum, we are keen to preserve our local history and improve how the collections are housed and displayed in order to make our story even more accessible and attractive to local people. We would like to ensure that the local museum collection plays a key role for local schools in educating local children, such as by creating mobile exhibitions and pop-up exhibitions with public spaces across the district.

In addition to preserving the amazing mining collection, we would also like to expand the focus of the museum to highlight the role our local area played during other periods in our history, such as the two World Wars and to highlight the importance and history of Castle Ring.

The current location of Cannock Chase Museum in the aging, the former Valley Colliery buildings are energy inefficient and require hundreds of thousands of pounds of refurbishments to bring the building up to standard, as was demonstrated through the findings of the initial stock condition survey back in 2022. We would like to therefore explore moving the museum collection into a more energy efficient space, with a lower carbon footprint, and a long-term affordable maintenance plan.

We therefore again propose to save, modernise and relocate the museum into a more energy efficient and accessible space where full collections can be safely displayed and enjoyed. To do this, we propose maximising opportunities to attract additional support from organisations such as the Arts Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund. We have, within our budget suggestions over the last two years, suggested consultation and asked that a longer-term plan be explored and considered as a matter of urgency, as we feel this is imperative to prevent the Museum of Cannock Chase being lost in its entirety.

### **Statement on the potential closure of The Prince of Wales Theatre**

As a Group, we were shocked and saddened over the sudden announcement by the current Labour administration in respect of the potential closure of the Prince of Wales Theatre in December 2024.

Again, we have in recent years, been urging the current Labour administration to take note of the Council's financial position and to reestablish and continue the spending review previously commenced ahead of the 23/24 budget.

We felt this imperative to ensure the safeguarding of taxpayer funds and establish long term stability.

It is disappointing that this work promptly ceased following the change of administration and we feel it may be a contributory factor towards the position the Council finds itself in today and are disappointed by proposals to close the Prince of Wales Theatre within the Labour administration's budget.

## **General Fund Alternative Budget**

Last year, the Conservative Group proposed, via an alternative budget, that a full review of all 'Earmarked Reserves' retained within the General Fund Budget be undertaken. To date, such a review has not yet been completed, nor has any additional information been published.

Given that such a task has not been undertaken for some time, we now suggest this be actioned imminently. We believe it should be similar to the Capital Review undertaken in respect of the 'Earmarked Reserves' within the Capital Programme Budget undertaken by the previous Conservative administration in 2022/2023. This enabled funds that were either unused or related to outdated projects to be released and allocated in accordance with the changing needs of the Council.

The current total of 'Earmarked Reserves' within the General Fund equate to £15,795,000 as forecast at 31/03/2025, as shown in Appendix 6.

Following a full review of 'Earmarked Reserves' and for the benefit of both the residents of Cannock Chase and businesses within Cannock Chase, we wish for individual, specific reviews to be undertaken in line with the following priorities and growth proposals, informed decisions can then be made ahead of the reallocation of monies released through the overall earmarked reserves review. Each review would be prepared as a fully costed business case.

- **Allocate funds to look at the feasibility of creating a space for small, affordable incubator units for local start-up businesses**
  - Our understanding is that the land upon which the former museum sits contains a covenant ensuring that it, rightly, cannot be repurposed for residential development. We therefore believe that the Council could consider allocating capital investment towards bringing the site up to an appropriate standard for incubator units which, once complete, would generate an income and achieve self-sufficiency. Such a space would therefore not result in any further revenue expense (as the museum currently does) to maintain. The site is only a suggestion provided for consideration and our proposal would entail a wider feasibility study looking at all local sites that may be suitable.
- **A fundamental review of current arrangements in order to enable the development of a new car parking strategy.**
  - This would look at, amongst other options, discounted season tickets.

- **A review of the Council’s current processes and any technological improvements that may be required to assist with Human Resource matters,**
  - This would include the implementation of more effective systems to track absenteeism, track productivity and, in light of the forecast deficit in forthcoming years, reduce the Council’s current spend on agency staff; and
- **An assessment of how and where Artificial Intelligence could safely and appropriately be used by Cannock Chase District Council.**
  - This may assist in identifying patterns that can help the Council to better understand the needs of our local communities and provide more targeted support, in the long-term increasing efficiency, ensuring best use of taxpayer money and reducing the burden on staff – so that we can deliver more with less.

It is felt that reviews, as outlined above, on a case-by-case basis could lead to Cannock Chase District Council working in a more streamlined, resilient manner, and could identify opportunities where investment to support longer-term savings could be implemented to ensure we are operating in a fiscal, prudent and sustainable manner.

### **General Fund Capital Programme Alternative Budget**

These proposals will be funded from unallocated resources, available capital receipts and underspends on projects which are no longer required for project delivery within the current capital programme.

Within the administration’s proposed 2025/2026 budget, we note that the sum of £1,090,000 remains unallocated, of which £250,000 is yet to be received by the Council.

	<b>2025/2026</b>
<b>Increase to existing Allocation</b>	
Increase to Play Areas Developments	(£300,000)
<b>Additional Schemes</b>	
Investment pot for Street Furniture Improvements (Bins, Benches, Bus Stops)	(£200,000)
Investment Fund for Cannock Chase Heritage Trail (for capital works)	(£100,000)
Investment Fund for Mill Green and Hawks Green Valleys Nature Reserve (Deavalls Farm) (for capital works)	(£35,000)
Investment Fund for Hednesford Hills Nature Reserve (for capital works)	(£35,000)
Investment Fund for Hazelslade Nature Reserve (for capital works)	(£35,000)

*£350,000 will remain unallocated as a contingency budget.*