

Cannock Chase Conservative Group General Fund Alternative Budget 2026/2027

1. This 'Alternative Budget,' covering both the General Fund and the General Fund Capital Programme, sets out proposals similar to those put forward by the Conservative Group last year, as outlined below.
2. We recommend that Full Council refers this matter back to Cabinet for further consideration.

Statement on the potential closure of Cannock Chase Museum

3. In the Conservative Group's 'Alternative Budget' proposals for 2024/25 and 2025/26, we were explicit about the need to protect, enhance and properly display our remarkable local heritage following the proposed closure and then actual closure of the Museum of Cannock Chase. The museum's collections—generously donated over many years and curated by the Council—tell the story of our communities, industries and people, and they rightly belong to local residents, not locked away in storage.
4. At every stage, the Conservative Group has been clear and responsible in recognising the Council's financial challenges. We have consistently argued that any decision on the future of the museum must balance affordability with ambition. Financial pressure should never be used as an excuse for cultural neglect or inaction.
5. As far back as our 2023/24 budget proposals, we set out a clear vision: safeguarding our local history while modernising how the collections are housed and displayed, making them more accessible, engaging, and relevant. Central to this vision is ensuring the collection plays an active role in local education—supporting schools through mobile, touring and pop-up exhibitions in community and public spaces across the district.
6. Alongside preserving the nationally significant mining collection, we have also argued for a broader and more inclusive focus—highlighting Cannock Chase's contribution during the two World Wars and celebrating the historic importance of Castle Ring and our wider heritage.
7. We acknowledge that the former museum building was outdated, energy-inefficient and no longer fit for purpose, a fact clearly evidenced by the 2022 stock condition survey and reinforced by subsequent assessments. That is precisely why, in 2022, the Conservative Group brought forward constructive and cost-conscious proposals to relocate the collection to a more energy-efficient, lower-carbon space with a sustainable long-term maintenance plan. We also proposed a "touring museum" model, designed to widen access and strengthen links with local schools.
8. However, despite repeated assurances from the Labour Group in 2023 that they would "save the museum" and had a plan to keep it open at the former Valley Colliery site, those promises were not delivered. It was the Labour administration that ultimately closed the Museum of Cannock Chase on 26 April 2025, ending 36 years of public access. Almost a year on, they have still failed to bring forward a credible alternative. As a result, the collection has remained hidden from public view, inaccessible to residents, schools, and visitors alike.
9. We note the establishment of Chase Heritage CIC, created to work with the Council to secure a sustainable future for the collection. The Conservative Group strongly supports the aims of this organisation, but it is deeply concerning that progress under the current Labour administration appears slow, uncertain, and lacking urgency.

10. We therefore reiterate our call to urgently explore all available options to save, modernise, and appropriately locate the museum collection in an energy-efficient, accessible setting where it can once again be enjoyed by the public. This must include actively pursuing external funding opportunities, such as support from Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Over the past three years, we have repeatedly called for meaningful public consultation and the development of a clear, long-term strategy.
11. The Conservative Group believes this is now imperative. Without decisive action, Cannock Chase risks losing its museum—and its heritage—altogether.

Statement on the potential closure of The Prince of Wales Theatre

12. In last year's Alternative Budget, the Conservative Group made clear its deep frustration and anger at the Labour Cabinet's reckless and poorly thought-through decision to close the Prince of Wales Theatre in December 2024. This closure was not inevitable; it was the direct consequence of political choices made by the Labour administration, taken in spite of repeated warnings from Conservative councillors about the Council's worsening financial position and the urgent need for rigorous financial control over the many years Labour have controlled Cannock Chase District Council from the mid 2000's through to 2021.
13. More recently, the Conservative Group have pressed the Labour administration to complete a full, forensic spending review—work which was already underway under the previous Conservative administration ahead of the 2023/24 budget, during the two years of Conservative control. That work was abruptly abandoned following the change in political control in 2023 by the then Labour Coalition. We believe this failure of leadership, oversight and financial discipline has materially contributed to the Council's current instability and to the series of rushed, short-sighted decisions now being imposed on residents by the current Labour Cabinet.
14. The Prince of Wales Theatre was not an afterthought. It was a flagship element of the former Conservative administration's 2021 Levelling Up Fund bid, designed to act as a cultural, economic and regeneration anchor for Cannock town centre. The proposal was backed by professional feasibility studies, extensive public consultation, and strong stakeholder support. Labour inherited a fully developed, evidence-based plan—and chose to dismantle it.
15. Between 2024 and 2025, the Labour administration systematically unravelled this vision. Step by step, they walked away from the original regeneration scheme, first by closing the Theatre as part of last year's budget and then by rejecting the Community Asset Transfer proposal submitted by Cannock Chase Theatre Trust. That rejection extinguished a community-led route to keep the Theatre alive.
16. Public opposition has been overwhelming and unequivocal. More than 20,000 residents have signed a petition opposing the closure and demolition of the Theatre. Conservative councillors—who live in and represent Cannock Chase—stand firmly with residents in their anger and disbelief. While Labour Cabinet members offered reassurances in September that there were no plans to demolish the Theatre and that meaningful engagement would continue, those assurances were hollow. In less than two months, the Labour Cabinet executed a complete U-turn, voting to demolish the Theatre and deliberately closing the door on any further dialogue.

17. This decision was pushed through by Labour councillors alone, without cross-party engagement, without public consultation and without transparency. Even more damning is the fact that the Labour Leader has confirmed that no social or economic impact assessments were carried out prior to this decision. In other words, Labour is prepared to demolish a major cultural asset without understanding—or choosing to understand—the consequences for Cannock town centre, the local economy or community cohesion.
18. The Conservative Group is clear: Labour’s decision to close the Prince of Wales Theatre and proceed towards demolition is unnecessary, disproportionate, and deeply irresponsible. It represents a failure of imagination, a failure of leadership and a failure to properly explore alternative operating models that could have protected this vital community asset.
19. This alternative budget therefore proposes to halt the current course of action and urgently revisit decisions relating to the Prince of Wales Theatre. This must include commissioning a full and independent structural survey; revisiting Cannock Town Centre Regeneration plans with a view to redirecting available Government capital funding towards restoring local theatre provision; and actively exploring all viable governance and management options. The Labour Cabinet should also immediately accept the national Theatre Trust’s offer of pro-bono support, rather than continuing to ignore expert advice and the clearly expressed will of local residents. We are also aware that the Government have recently ring-fenced funding to support local authorities with cultural assets, such as theatres, and we propose that opportunities such as this be fully utilised.
20. If Labour proceeds down its current path, it will do so in full knowledge that it is acting against public opinion, expert guidance, and the long-term interests of Cannock Chase.

Statement of Civic Centre Relocation

21. In September, the Labour Cabinet voted to push ahead, in principle, with the relocation of the Civic Centre, subject to a future business case. This was not a bold new vision, but a rushed and ill-considered revival of an idea previously examined—and deliberately paused—by the former Conservative administration in 2023.
22. Under Conservative leadership, proposals for a Civic Centre relocation were explored responsibly and transparently. We were clear that any move should improve accessibility for residents, strengthen engagement in the town centre, and, where possible, enable partnership working with other public bodies such as Staffordshire County Council and the Police to create a genuine “one-stop shop” for public services. However, detailed officer advice at the time exposed significant financial, operational and workforce complexities, including uncertainty around hybrid working models and long-term affordability.
23. Faced with this evidence, the Conservative administration made the correct decision: to put residents first and decouple any Civic Centre relocation from the Town Centre Regeneration programme so that regeneration could progress without being jeopardised by an expensive and unresolved office move. Our priority was delivery, not headlines.
24. Today, that regeneration programme no longer resembles the original plan to boost the town centre and local economy. None of the necessary groundwork previously referred to for a Civic Centre relocation has been completed— yet despite this vacuum of evidence, the Labour Cabinet has chosen to press ahead regardless.

25. This decision epitomises the current administration's approach: ideology over evidence and haste over competence. It is being taken at a time of severe economic pressure and against the backdrop of national local government reorganisation, under which this Council is expected to be abolished within two years.
26. The Conservative Group fundamentally opposes Labour's decision to pursue the relocation and potential construction of new council offices for a council that will shortly cease to exist. This is not strategic planning; it is fiscal recklessness. It risks wasting millions of pounds of public money while residents face service cuts, rising costs and continued uncertainty.
27. Through this Alternative Budget, we therefore call for an immediate halt to Labour's Civic Centre relocation plans. Public money should not be committed to a project that lacks evidence, lacks necessity, and lacks any credible long-term justification.

General Fund Alternative Budget

28. We note that the Labour administration's budget includes a 'Budget Support Fund' totalling £1,020,000 and a general budget support reserve. We also note the existence of a £190,000 'Contingency Fund', held to address unspecified future events, insurance liabilities and business rates reset risks. While the Conservative Group accepts that reserves of this nature are necessary, we feel a full review at this stage would be beneficial.
29. We therefore propose a comprehensive review of all reserves held within the General Fund, on the basis that elements may relate to outdated programmes, dormant projects or provisions that are no longer required. In a period of acute financial pressure, allowing public money to sit idle without justification is indefensible.
30. We also note the sum of £3,596,000 listed within the Labour budget under the budget line titled 'Other'. This figure appears to represent a collection of general reserves. The Conservative Group again call for a full breakdown and detailed review of this allocation to determine whether it could be better deployed to support growth, services, and long-term sustainability.
31. Following these reviews, and in the interests of delivering real value for money, we propose that any released funds be subject to targeted, evidence-led assessments aligned with clear growth and efficiency priorities. Each proposal would be supported by a fully costed business case, ensuring decisions are driven by outcomes rather than ideology.

Our priority areas for review include:

- **Feasibility of small, affordable incubator units for local start-up businesses across the district.**

As set out in last year's Alternative Budget, we understand that the site of the former Valley Colliery buildings is subject to a covenant preventing residential development. Rather than leaving this site closed and underutilised as Labour are at present, we propose to seek external capital investment opportunities to bring it up to a standard suitable for business incubator units. Such a scheme could generate income, become self-sustaining, and avoid the ongoing revenue drain that characterised the previous museum model. While this site is suggested for consideration, we are clear that a wider feasibility study should examine all potential locations across the district.

- **A fundamental review of car parking arrangements leading to a new, coherent car parking strategy.**

This would include ensuring any existing parking charges are proportionate and applied equitably across the District and exploring options such as discounted season tickets to better support residents, commuters, and town-centre businesses.

- **A root-and-branch review of the Council's workforce processes and supporting technology.**

This could address the Council's eye-watering reliance on agency staff by improving systems to track absenteeism, productivity, and performance, ensuring taxpayers are no longer footing the bill for inefficiency.

- **An assessment of how Artificial Intelligence could be used safely, responsibly, and effectively by Cannock Chase District Council—or its successor authority.**

Used properly, AI could help identify service demand trends, target support more effectively and improve efficiency, allowing the Council to deliver better outcomes with fewer resources while reducing pressure on staff.

The Conservative Group believes that undertaking these reviews on a case-by-case, evidence-led basis would enable Cannock Chase District Council to operate in a more streamlined, resilient, and financially responsible manner. Crucially, it would help identify where targeted investment could unlock long-term savings, support economic growth, and ensure the Council is managed in a fiscally prudent, transparent, and sustainable way—something that is currently lacking under the Labour administration.

- **A zero-based budgeting review of Council services.**

Rather than rolling forward historic budgets by default, we propose a zero-based approach for services, requiring each area to justify its expenditure from first principles. This would challenge entrenched spending patterns and expose areas where budgets have continued as a result of roll-over rather than need. This could help inform any further decisions by a successor authority.

- **A full review of external consultancy, professional services, and commissioned advice.**

The Council has, over previous years, increasingly relied on external consultants. We propose a review of all consultancy spend over the past five years to assess value for money, duplication and whether work could be delivered more efficiently via alternative models. We appreciate that caution should be taken in respect of this review ahead of the local Government Reorganisation plans.

- **Procurement reform and contract management review.**

In light of recent issues experienced with the Council's previous leisure contract, we propose a review of procurement practices to ensure contracts are competitively tendered, actively managed, deliver best value and utilise local service providers. This should include scrutiny of contract extensions, index-linked uplifts, and supplier performance, particularly where long-term arrangements have quietly drifted without challenge. We are aware that the Cannock Chase Council utilises the County Council's framework, but are not obligated to do so for all contracts.

General Fund Capital Programme Alternative Budget

32. These proposals will be financed through a combination of unallocated resources, available capital receipts, and underspends from projects that are no longer required for delivery within the current capital programme. This approach ensures that public funds are redirected to projects with clear benefit, rather than being left dormant or spent inefficiently.
33. In last year's Alternative Budget, the Conservative Group proposed allocating £100,000 to invest in and improve the Cannock Chase Heritage Trail. While it is welcome that the Labour Cabinet has since adopted this idea and used Shared Prosperity Grant funding to support it, this highlights a pattern of the current administration trailing behind Conservative-led initiatives rather than demonstrating proactive leadership.
34. Taking into account the new leisure schemes, totalling £1,533,000, and the vehicle replacement programme, totalling £1,095,000, there remain £1,210,000 in unallocated general capital funds and £1,664,000 in unallocated S106 contributions. The Conservative Group believes an element of these sums should be strategically deployed to deliver tangible benefits for residents, drive local growth, and ensure maximum value from every pound of public money, whilst also retaining a baseline contingency fund.

Capital	2025/2026
Increase to existing Allocation	
Increase to Play Areas Developments	(£500,000)
Additional Schemes to be funded from RCCO	
Investment pot for Street Furniture Improvements (Bins, Benches, Bus Stops)	(£210,000)
Green Space Improvement Fund	(£200,000)