

Tiptree Parish Council

Annual Parish Meeting 2026

Report of the Chair of the Policy & Finance Committee

As Chair of the Policy & Finance Committee, I am pleased to provide an overview of the committee's work, the areas it has considered, and the role it has played in supporting the wider work of Tiptree Parish Council. Firstly I would like to thank Cllr Andrew Dickey for his leadership before me, and the other members of the committee.

The Policy & Finance Committee has an important role within the Council. Its remit includes supporting financial planning and monitoring, reviewing and developing Council policies, supporting good governance, and helping ensure that the Council has the resources, controls and frameworks in place to deliver services and projects effectively.

In practice, this means balancing sound financial management with the need to support the ambitions of the Council and the needs of the community.

Over the past year, the committee has focused on several broad areas:

- financial oversight and stewardship;
- budget and precept planning;
- review of financial processes and controls, including procurement;
- policy and governance review;
- reserves, banking and investment arrangements;
- Ensuring that the council is set up for success in an increasingly complex regulatory environment.

The committee met during the year to consider both routine financial oversight and a substantial programme of policy and governance work, including financial processes, reserves, Standing Orders, procurement, emergency planning, banking arrangements.

Financial oversight and stewardship

A core responsibility of the committee is to oversee the Council's financial position and help ensure that public money is managed responsibly and transparently.

Throughout the year, the committee has received and reviewed financial information from the Responsible Financial Officer. This has enabled the committee to monitor income and expenditure, review the use of reserves, consider budget performance, and identify areas where further planning or control may be needed.

During the year, the committee noted that the Council had general reserves which stood at just under £300,000. This gave the committee the opportunity to consider how reserves should be managed in a balanced and responsible way.

On the one hand, it is important that the Council maintains financial resilience and protects itself against unexpected costs, future pressures and operational risks. On the other hand, it is also important that funds held by the Council are used appropriately to support services, improvements and community priorities where this is justified.

The committee has therefore sought to encourage a more deliberate and strategic approach to financial planning, rather than relying on reactive decisions or the ad hoc use of reserves. This remains an important area of focus for the year ahead, with the council providing an endorsement to come back with an updated financial regulations which includes a detailed section on reserves.

Budget and precept planning

The budget-setting process is one of the most significant responsibilities of the Policy & Finance Committee.

The 2025/26 budget and precept were approved by Full Council following recommendation from the Policy & Finance Committee, with the precept for that year set at £428,294.

During the year, the committee also turned its attention to planning for the 2026/27 financial year. In doing so, it considered the needs and requests of the Council's committees, the wider financial position of the Council, and the need to strike an appropriate balance between delivering for residents and managing the burden placed on local taxpayers.

The committee reviewed budget submissions and encouraged committees to think ahead more clearly about their priorities and expected expenditure. One of the aims of this work has been to improve longer-term planning, so that significant items can be identified earlier, evaluated properly, and built into the budget process where appropriate.

In considering the 2026/27 budget, the committee recommended the use of up to £30,000 from general reserves to offset the proposed precept requirement, with the aim of helping to limit the overall increase. This reflected the committee's view that reserves can have a legitimate role in smoothing budget pressures where that is prudent and sustainable, while still maintaining an appropriate level of financial protection.

Review of financial processes and controls

A significant focus of the committee during the year has been the Council's financial processes and internal controls.

The Council's Financial Regulations make clear that the Council is responsible for ensuring that its financial management is adequate and effective, that there is a sound system of

internal control, and that public money is properly safeguarded. The committee has taken this responsibility seriously.

At the March meeting, the committee considered the ongoing review of the Council's financial processes. Following discussion, it was resolved that the policy required supplementary annexes and formatting, but would still be recommended to Full Council.

This work is important because the Council's financial processes need to be clear, practical and robust. They should support good financial control, proper authorisation, transparency and accountability.

The committee has also considered issues including financial reporting, staff payment processes, system access, the role and support needs of the Responsible Financial Officer, and the wider framework of internal controls.

The aim of this work has been to improve clarity, strengthen resilience, and reduce operational risk. This is particularly important in smaller authorities, where practical processes, officer capacity and role clarity can have a significant impact on effectiveness.

Good internal control is not just about compliance. It is also about creating confidence that the Council is operating effectively, responsibly and in the best interests of residents.

Reserves policy

The committee also reviewed the draft Reserves Policy during the year.

At the March meeting, the committee considered the policy and resolved that further work would be undertaken before it returns to the committee. This remains an important area of work because a clear reserves policy helps the Council distinguish between general reserves, earmarked reserves and funds held for specific projects, risks or future commitments.

A clear reserves framework should help both councillors and residents understand why funds are being held, what they may be used for, and when it may be appropriate to use them.

This is particularly relevant where the Council is considering how best to balance financial resilience with delivery of local priorities. The Council should hold sufficient reserves to manage risk, but should also ensure that reserves are not held without a clear purpose or rationale.

Policy and governance work

Alongside financial matters, the committee has undertaken a substantial amount of work during the year in relation to policy and governance.

This has included reviewing the committee's own terms of reference, as well as considering a number of wider governance documents and processes. These have included the Financial

Risk Assessment, Standing Orders, the Employee Handbook, the Communications and Engagement Policy, the Flag Flying Policy, and aspects of the Council's financial procedures.

Some of these items have already progressed through to Full Council for approval, while others remain part of an ongoing programme of review and improvement.

This work may not always be highly visible externally, but it is essential to the effective running of the Council. Strong governance helps ensure that decisions are taken properly, that roles and responsibilities are clear, and that the Council operates in a way that is transparent, accountable and consistent.

The committee has also had regard to the importance of keeping policies up to date and ensuring that they remain fit for purpose. In local government, good governance is not static. It requires regular review, reflection and updating in light of changing expectations, legal requirements, operational experience and good practice.

Standing Orders and policy review schedule

Standing Orders are a core governance document for the Council. They set out how meetings are run, how decisions are made, and how councillors and officers should operate within the Council's formal decision-making framework.

The committee reviewed the document and recommended some changes around the selection of committee chairs, enabling standing committees to select their own chairs.

The committee also considered the need for a structured policy review schedule. Currently the council has circa 40 policies, which need to be kept up to date. In order to best do this, it was resolved that the Clerk would prioritise policies into yearly, two-yearly and three-yearly review cycles and bring this back to the committee.

Banking, investment and financial sustainability

The committee also considered the Council's banking and investment arrangements. The council is now at a size where it is no longer protected under the Financial Services Compensation Scheme, therefore it needs to consider alternative arrangements to ensure reasonable financial resilience and protections. It was determined that the best way to do this was to ensure investments were distributed amongst multiple institutions and held at banks with high credit ratings (with consideration of past experience of customer service as well)

it was resolved that the Clerk would open accounts with HSBC, Lloyds and Nationwide so that Full Council could decide which accounts to use.

This work supports the Council in considering how its funds are held and managed, and how financial arrangements can best support security, accessibility, resilience and value for money.

Emergency planning and resilience

The committee considered a new Emergency and Resilience Policy during the year.

Following discussion at the March meeting, it was resolved that the new policy would be recommended to Full Council.

This policy is intended to support the Council's role in preparing for, responding to and supporting recovery from local emergencies, while recognising the respective responsibilities of principal authorities, emergency services and other agencies.

The Council is not the primary emergency responder, but it can still play an important role in community coordination, local communication, signposting, use of local facilities where appropriate, and supporting community resilience.

Having a clear policy helps ensure that the Council understands its role and can act in a proportionate, practical and coordinated way if an emergency affects the parish.

Transparency and accountability

The Council continues to publish key financial and governance information, including audit-related documents and details of payments over specified thresholds.

This is an important part of public accountability.

The work of the Policy & Finance Committee supports this transparency by helping to ensure that budgets, policies, controls and reporting arrangements are properly considered and reviewed.

Public confidence depends not only on what decisions are made, but also on how those decisions are reached and how clearly the Council explains them.

The committee's role is therefore not simply administrative. It helps underpin the Council's accountability to residents and supports confidence in the way the Council manages public money.

Looking ahead

Looking forward, there are several key priorities for the Policy & Finance Committee in the year ahead.

The committee will continue its review of the financial regulations with the endorsement of the council.

This will be focused on looking forward as well as backwards, and helping to set the council up for success, including more detail around procurement and reserves, and containing a focus on practical easily accessible exhibits.

We also need to consider the sustainability of the breadth of policies that the council has, and ensure that we can focus our resources appropriately.

Finally, we will be working on next years budget.

Thanks and conclusion

In closing, I would like to thank the members of the Policy & Finance Committee for their contributions during the year.

I would also like to thank the Clerk and Responsible Financial Officer, other councillors, and staff who have supported the committee's work.

The Policy & Finance Committee plays an important role in underpinning the work of the Council as a whole. Much of what it does is behind the scenes, but it is fundamental to ensuring that the Council is financially sound, properly governed, and well placed to support the needs of the parish.

Over the past year, the committee has sought to support responsible financial stewardship, strengthen governance, improve financial processes, and encourage better forward planning.

There is still more to do, but I believe important progress has been made.

Thank you.