Preston Brook Parish Council

Financial Plan

2026-2027

Approved: 24/02/26

www.prestonbrookparishcouncil.gov.uk

PARISH + TOWN COUNCIL SECTOR SNAPSHOT 2025-2026

There are 8,896 precepting parish councils in England

Total cumulative tax levied by parish and town councils is £856M - a year-on-year increase of £75M (9.68%)

The largest majority of precepting local councils (2,450) raise a precept of between £25,000-£124,999.

Band D year-on-year precept increases in England of up to £271.20

10,236 parish and town councils in England

Largest Band D precept raised by a local council: £557.10

County with largest average Band D year-on-year precept increase in England was Bedfordshire with an increase of +26.53%. Second largest county increase was Yorkshire with +14.16%

Year-on-Year precept increases in England of up to 2,728%

The council with largest precept increase (Weston Super Mare) raised its precept from £3,135,840 to £4,450,668 (+£1,314,828)

Largest precept raised by a local council: £6,571,886

Some parishes have a negative (-£) precept, which is distributed back to residents in the form of a reduction in their council tax bill. Examples of this include Beesby with Sleazy Parish Council (East Lindsay) where the district council collects rental income from parish land on behalf of the parish.

Executive Summary

Preston Brook Parish Council is required each year to agree a balanced budget that is sufficient to discharge its statutory duties, maintain essential local services, and respond to emerging priorities identified by residents. For 2026–2027 the Council proposes a precept that reflects rising costs, heightened planning pressures and the need to invest in protecting the Parish's character and quality of life as large-scale development comes forward.

The proposed budget for 2026–2027 is 108,250.00, funded primarily through the parish precept and a projected VAT reclaim of 2,500.00. This represents a necessary step-change from historic under-funding and will enable the Council to sustain core services, progress key projects such as the Neighbourhood Plan and conservation work, and ensure Preston Brook's voice is properly resourced in discussions with Halton Borough Council and developers.

National Parish Sector Context 2025–2026

Parish and town councils remain the first tier of local government and their share of council tax continues to grow as they take on more responsibilities.

- There are 10,236 parish and town councils in England, of which 8,896 issue a precept.
- The total parish and town council precept in England is approximately £856 million, an increase of £75 million year-on-year.
- Band D parish precepts range widely, with some councils setting charges in excess of £400 per annum; the largest Band D precept is £557.10.

These figures underline that parish councils nationwide are having to increase income in order to maintain standards and invest in their communities. Preston Brook has historically adopted a very restrained approach to precept setting, which has limited its capacity at precisely the time when demands on the Council are intensifying.

Local Context and Challenges

Halton Borough Council's Local Plan to 2037 allocates significant new development within Preston Brook and safeguards further land for housing beyond 2037. Current allocations and safeguarded sites together would see the number of homes in the Parish increase from approximately 392 to around 2,814 over the coming decades - an almost seven-fold expansion.

- 0.88 hectares of brownfield land within Preston Brook are allocated for 24 dwellings, with a further 1.65 hectares of greenspace for 20 properties off Coronation Road.
- Around 10.8 hectares either side of Chester Road are allocated for 264 homes by 2037.

- An additional 69 hectares of former Green Belt land around the Parish is safeguarded to deliver approximately 2,114 dwellings beyond 2037, on top of the 308 allocations to 2037.

This scale of change has profound implications for traffic, infrastructure capacity, environmental quality, local identity and the day-to-day experience of residents. The Parish Council is already engaged in responding to planning applications, working to influence design and layout, and preparing tools such as a Neighbourhood Plan, Environmental Plan, Green Belt Re-Introduction Strategy and potential Conservation Area proposals so that growth is more aligned with local aspirations.

At the parish meeting held on 26 November 2024 residents articulated clear concerns about the cumulative impact of development on:

- Views from homes and the rural setting of the Parish.
- Access, highways safety and traffic flows on local roads.
- Pressures on schools, healthcare, and other already limited local services.
- Loss of green spaces, local wildlife habitats and biodiversity.
- Flood risk due to reductions in natural drainage areas.

Residents also expressed a strong desire for the Parish Council to take an active role in shaping future proposals, to defend local distinctiveness and to secure tangible community benefits from development. This requires a level of professional support, technical evidence and ongoing engagement that cannot be delivered without a realistic revenue base.

For many years Preston Brook maintained a very low precept, at times freezing it altogether. Between 2000 and 2007, for example, the Band D charge remained static at £9.58 per annum, meaning the precept did not even keep pace with inflation and effectively amounted to a real-terms reduction.

Analysis undertaken by the Council demonstrates that if the precept had been increased by just 5.00 per Band D property each year since 2000, the Council would now be benefiting from a significantly higher precept, strengthening its capacity to commission planning advice, advance a Neighbourhood Plan, and invest in environmental and heritage projects. Instead, the Parish has had to “catch up” rapidly in recent years in order to reach a more sustainable funding position.

In 2025-2026 the Council raised a precept of £73,538.48. This produced an average Band D charge of £197.15 per annum, equivalent to approximately £3.79 per week.

The Council has worked hard to contain costs and to find saving where possible, for example by comparing contracts and seeking external grants for specific projects. However, cost pressures continue to increase, including:

- Inflationary increases in supplies and grounds maintenance.
- Costs for unanticipated projects such as tree works necessary for health and safety.
- Nationally driven rises in employer National Insurance contributions and public sector pay.
- Escalating professional fees for planning, legal and environmental advice.

In this context, freezing or significantly reducing the precept would risk undermining the Council’s ability to meet its existing commitments, let alone respond effectively to new challenges and priorities.

Proposed Preston Brook Parish Council Budget
April 2026 - March 2027

The below budget considers the anticipated financial obligations of Preston Brook Parish Council in 2026-2027.

INCOME

Item	FY2526 Budget	Proposed FY2627 Budget
Precept	£73,538.48	£113,575.00
VAT Return	£2,000.00	£2,500.00
Totals		£116,075.00

EXPENDITURE

Item	FY2526 Budget	Proposed FY2627 Budget
Staffing	£13,000.00	£26,000.00
Overheads - Administration, Newsletter, Website, Village Hall Fees, Payroll, Banking Fees	£5,700.00	£6,000.00
Training and Expenses	£500.00	£500.00
Professional Fees and Compliance - Insurance, Audits, Annual Subscriptions, Legal	£1,400.00	£2,575.00
Equipment / Repairs / Renewals	£1,500.00	£750.00
Grants	£250.00	£250.00
Projects / Public Realm	£17,500.00	£20,000.00
Bridgewater Grange	£2,500.00	£2,500.00
Highways Safety	£10,000.00	£10,000.00
Planning (Legal)	£10,000.00	£15,000.00
Conservation / Heritage / Environmental / Green Belt Planning Protection	£5,000.00	£15,000.00
Neighbourhood Plan	£15,000.00	£15,000.00
Contingency	£5,000.00	£2,500.00
Total	£87350.00	£116075.00

GENERAL & EARMARKED RESERVES

Item	Budget
General Reserve	£15,000.00
Judicial Review (Earmarked Reserve)	£15,000.00
	£30,000.00

Budget Rationale

The budget for 2026–2027 has been constructed to ensure the Council can lawfully meet its obligations, deliver day-to-day services to an appropriate standard, and respond to strategic challenges such as large-scale development and rising compliance requirements. Each heading has been evaluated on the basis of demonstrable need, realistic cost assumptions, and the capacity required to protect the interests of residents over the medium term.

Staffing

The staffing budget reflects the true cost of employing and supporting a small team that can keep pace with the Council's growing workload. It allows for work to be undertaken by a permanent proper officer and responsible financial officer, with support from the employment of smaller fixed-term contracts to support smaller work parcels, in line with nationally-set salary increments, medical and occupational health assessments where required, reasonable adjustments for staff with protected characteristics, and contingencies for cover in the event of sickness, vacancies, or terminations. This ensures that service continuity is maintained even when unforeseen staffing issues arise.

Provision is also made for training, team development, so that officers can safely and effectively undertake site visits, events and public meetings. All staffing budgets include sufficient capacity to meet statutory responsibilities in relation to Freedom of Information requests, Subject Access Requests and data protection, which can have an adverse effect on service delivery when they arise. Without adequate staffing resource, there is a material risk that the Council would be unable to comply with legal deadlines, maintain proper oversight of development proposals, or provide the level of responsiveness that residents now expect.

Training and Expenses

The new Assertion 10 of the AGAR places additional requirements on member training and accountability. This training budget ensures that councillors, staff and key volunteers have the skills and knowledge to discharge their responsibilities safely and effectively. This is particularly important in relation to health and safety, events management, financial oversight and planning. Targeted investment in training supports better decision-making, reduces operational risk and enhances the value derived from every pound spent.

Civic expenses, although modest, are essential to ensuring that civic participation is open to a broad range of residents, not only those who can absorb incidental costs. Allowing reasonable expenses such as parking (when undertaking council business) or childcare helps to remove barriers to service as a councillor and supports a more diverse, representative decision-making body. This budget line also includes an allowance for the Chairperson of £250.00 per annum.

Overheads

The administration budgets cover the basic infrastructure that enables the Council to function as a corporate body. This includes equipment, printing, and meeting room fees, as well as hire for larger public meetings for the Neighbourhood Plan. Rising costs of printed materials for consultations, newsletters and statutory notices has been factored in.

This budget line also includes costs for the website, general communications and community engagement which underpin the Council's commitment to openness and two-way dialogue with residents. Website funding covers hosting, maintenance and development so that information is accurate, accessible and compliant with transparency requirements. Communications budgets support design software and outreach work to explain decisions, promote services and encourage participation.

Community engagement funding allows for structured consultations, surveys and the production of annual reports for every household. In the context of major planning and growth pressures, this engagement is vital to capturing local priorities and ensuring that residents' views are properly evidenced and reflected in Council policy.

Professional Services and Compliance

This budget line include necessary outgoings to support the Council to meet its legal due diligence processes including adequate insurance covers - public liability and employer liability.

Audits require greater scrutiny year on year. External accountability has become more detailed, and audit periods have placed additional pressure on officers' time. This budget line therefore accommodates appropriate audit fees, and ensures adequate staffing capacity is available to respond to queries without compromising the delivery of day-to-day services. Investing in good audit and governance reduces the risk of qualified opinions, reputational damage and corrective costs in future years.

The Council does not employ in-house specialists for legal, HR, IT or advanced planning work, so it must hold sufficient budget to commission professional advice when needed. This includes legal support for complex planning matters, HR advice for sensitive personnel issues, and IT consultancy to ensure systems remain secure and fit for purpose. The same envelope also supports work related to data protection, information governance and other regulatory frameworks.

Recent experience across the sector shows that under-resourcing these areas can expose councils to significant financial and reputational risk. The proposed level of provision therefore reflects not only anticipated planned work but also a prudent allowance for unforeseen matters, such as contentious planning applications, legal challenges, or technical issues that require rapid external support.

Community Grants

The grants budget provides a mechanism for supporting local organisations, festivals and events that contribute to community cohesion, wellbeing and the local economy. Structured grant programmes with clear terms of reference ensure that funds are allocated fairly and transparently.

Public Realm Projects

Investment in public realm staffing, equipment, and enhancements directly affects the look and feel of the Parish. These budgets support routine tasks such as grass cutting, planting and minor repairs, as well as more proactive improvements like additional noticeboards, and new planter schemes. By maintaining an attractive, well-kept environment, the Council supports residents' pride in their area, encourages active travel and outdoor activity, and may help to mitigate some of the negative visual and environmental impacts associated with surrounding development.

Strategic Planning and Neighbourhood Plan

Finally, the Neighbourhood Plan and related strategic planning budgets are central to the Council's long-term response to development pressures. They provide the means to commission specialist planning support, prepare the evidence base and carry out the engagement required to produce a robust, community-led plan with statutory weight in the planning system.

This work is not a discretionary add-on; it is one of the most powerful tools available to shape where and how growth happens, what infrastructure is prioritised, and how local character is respected. A properly resourced Neighbourhood Plan process will put residents' aspirations at the heart of future decision-making and will help the Parish to secure better outcomes from developments that will affect the community for generations

PRECEPT

LEGISLATION + REFERENDUM PRINCIPLES + PRECEPT CALCULATION

S.78 Localism Act 2011 states:

(2) The local precepting authority must calculate the aggregate of –

- *a) The expenditure the authority estimates it will incur in the year in performing its functions and will charge to a revenue account for the year in accordance with proper practices,*
- *b) Such allowance as the authority estimates will be appropriate for contingencies in relation to amounts to be charged or credited to a revenue account for the year in accordance with proper practices,*
- *c) The financial reserves which the authority estimates it will be appropriate to raise in the year for meeting its future expenditure, and*
- *d) Such financial reserves as are sufficient to meet so much of the amount estimated by the authority to be a revenue account deficit for any earlier financial year as has not already been provided for.*

(3) The local precepting authority must calculate the aggregate of –

- *a) The income which it estimates will accrue to it in the year and which it will credit to a revenue account for the year in accordance with proper practices, other than income which it estimates will accrue to it in respect of any precept issued by it, and*
- *b) The amount of financial reserves which the authority estimates that it will use in order to provide for the items mentioned in paragraphs (a) and (b) of subsection (2) above.*

(4) If the aggregate calculated under subsection (2) above exceeds that calculated under subsection (3) above, the authority must calculate the amount equal to the difference; and the amount so calculated it to be its council tax requirement for the year.

The Parish Council must note that the Government could impose a cap on precept increases in future years, and the Council must seek to arrive at a realistic and sustainable budget in the short-to-medium term, to ensure it is adequately resourced for the future.

2026-2027 Proposed Precept

The proposed budget for FY2627 is £116,075.00. Income of £2,500.00 is anticipated from VAT reclaims. The Council's auditor has also recommended consideration be given to an Investment Strategy which may also produce an income in FY2627.

The Council's reserves of £30,000.00 represent prudent financial management and provide:

- Protection against unforeseen expenditure
- Capacity for asset maintenance or capital works
- Resilience against income volatility
- Stability in precept setting

Best practice guidance suggests general reserves should typically between 3-12 months of net revenue expenditure depending on risk profile. The Council's current level sits within a range that can be justified by reference to operational risk, inflationary pressures, and future asset liabilities. However, the auditor has noted the reserves should be increased.

Whilst it is anticipated that there may be an underspend carried forward from FY2025/26, the Council should determine whether:

- Such funds are to be treated as one-off underspends, or
- Formally allocated to a time-limited precept subsidy strategy

Reducing the precept by, for example, £10,000 for a single financial year would create a short-term saving to taxpayers. However, unless matched by recurring savings or recurring income, this over time would:

- Deplete reserves
- Reduce financial resilience
- Risk a compensatory precept increase in subsequent years
- Increase volatility in annual council tax bills

Volatility in the precept can undermine public confidence and create longer-term financial inefficiency.

A structured, multi-year approach (for example, modelling any reserve-funded subsidy over a defined 3-year period) would allow:

- Predictable precept levels
- Managed reduction of reserves if desired
- Clear justification under audit
- Alignment with the Investment Strategy maturity cycle

Following the first full year of investment maturity, the Council will be in a stronger position to determine the optimal allocation between short-, medium- and long-term deposits to maximise yield whilst maintaining liquidity.

With a 2026-2027 tax base* of 368, a precept of £113,575.00 would equate to the approximate sums in the table below for each property band in the Preston Brook Parish Council area.

Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Band E	Band F	Band G	Band H
£206.78	£240.73	£274.68	£308.63	£376.53	£444.43	£515.41	£617.26

This precept level would equate to an annual year-on-year increase for each property band in the Preston Brook Parish Council area, as outlined in the table below.

Band A	Band B	Band C	Band D	Band E	Band F	Band G	Band H
£74.69	£86.95	£99.22	£111.48	£136.01	£160.53	£186.17	£222.96

Households that fall within a Band D rating would pay an increase of approximately £2.14 per week.

The proposed precept would fully fund the services and protections residents have asked for – including adequate planning and legal support, neighbourhood plan progression, environmental improvements and protections and day-to-day operations and grounds maintenance - all for around £5.94 per week for a typical Band D household.

By comparison, a Band D household already contributes around £37 per week in Council Tax to Halton Borough Council, the Police and Fire authorities combined, most of which funds borough-wide services rather than Preston Brook specifically. The £5.94 parish precept is the part of the bill that stays in Preston Brook and is spent directly on the village - its green spaces, roads, environment, and the work needed to influence major planning applications and protect the Parish's character. This precept ensures that a meaningful share of Council Tax is retained and reinvested directly in Preston Brook.

**The tax base is calculated by taking the number of Band D equivalent properties in the parish from information supplied by the Valuation Officer, making allowances for discounts and exemptions, successful valuation appeals, the cost of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, non-collection, and housing growth estimates. The number of Band D equivalent properties is calculated by scaling properties in other bands either up or down to convert them to a Band D level.*

The determination of a parish council's tax base includes the impact of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 which abolished Council Tax Benefit from 31.3.13 and introduced localised Council Tax Support (CTS) schemes. Billing authorities are required to express localised council tax support schemes in terms of a reduction in the Council Tax tax base.