

**AT A MEETING OF THE BOROUGH COUNCIL held in the Council Chamber -
Town Hall - Maidenhead on Thursday 29 February 2024**

PRESENT: The Mayor (Councillor Neil Knowles), The Deputy Mayor (Councillor Simon Bond)

Councillors Clive Baskerville, Adam Bermange, George Blundell, David Buckley, Mandy Brar, Catherine Del Campo, Alison Carpenter, Richard Coe, Suzanne Cross, Carole Da Costa, Wisdom Da Costa, Devon Davies, Karen Davies, Jack Douglas, Genevieve Gosling, Jodie Grove, Geoff Hill, Mark Howard, Maureen Hunt, Lynne Jones, Ewan Larcombe, Sayonara Luxton, Asghar Majeed, Siân Martin, Chris Moriarty, Helen Price, Gary Reeves, Joshua Reynolds, Julian Sharpe, George Shaw, Gurch Singh, John Story, Helen Taylor, Amy Tisi, Julian Tisi, Leo Walters and Simon Werner

Officers: Stephen Evans, Elaine Browne, Kirsty Hunt, Elizabeth Griffiths, Kevin McDaniel, Andrew Durrant, Lin Ferguson, Andrew Vallance and Julian McGowan

42. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors K Singh and Wilson.

43. Council Minutes

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY:

That the minutes of the meetings held on 10 October and 21 November 2023 be approved.

44. Declarations of Interest

There were none declared.

45. Mayor's Communications

As part of the agenda the Mayor had circulated a list of engagements that he or the Deputy Mayor had carried out since the last Council meeting. He advised that images of events were available via social media channels.

46. Public Questions

a) John Baldwin of Boyn Hill ward asked the following question of Councillor Del Campo, Cabinet member for Adults, Health and Housing Services

What is the 2024/25 assumption for the number of residential placements required by Adult Services, broken down by type, i.e. general needs, sheltered, extra care or whatever terminology is in use?

Written response: The budget process requires the best estimates of numbers to be made in late autumn 2023. At that time, based on the people receiving care and the historical patterns of length of time people need such support we have built the budget based on 560 Full Year Effect (FYE) places. Those are split 206 for nursing, 199 for residential, 109 supported living and the rest (46) in a range of community options including Shared Lives. The FYE places is typically lower than the actual number of people on a given day.

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

John Baldwin asked what percentage of each category was covered by price control contracts and must the remainder of accommodation and, or care be purchased on the open market.

Councillor Del Campo replied that she was unable to provide the percentage but confirmed that the remainder was purchased on the open market and were called spot placements. She confirmed that she would provide a response as soon as she could.

b) John Baldwin of Boyn Hill ward asked the following question of Councillor Jones, Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Finance

The Spending Control Panel reviews all spending bids greater than £500. How many spending requests has it reviewed to date, to what aggregate value and how many of those requests were denied and to what value?

Written response: There have been 228 requests totalling £7.9m. There have been 16 requests declined with a value of £56k. 21 requests totalling £3.5m have either been deemed not applicable due to being part of a contractual agreement or requiring further information to inform a decision. A key reason for introducing the SCP was to drive a change in culture across the organisation in relation to budget management and we have seen a culture change within services following its introduction. Within a matter of weeks, the panel saw a reduction in requests coming forward as a result of officers taking a more vigilant approach to spending. This led to a reduction in denied requests, as those that now tend to come forward are for necessary spending which is backed up by evidence or a business case.

John Baldwin thanked Councillor Jones for the written answer but stated the low refusal rate had shocked him and he did not accept this revealed a change in culture. Since the Panel was announced in September 2023 the financial position had deteriorated and he queried whether it was time to lower the limit from £500.

Councillor Jones replied that she would not want to see officer time taken up for smaller amounts as these were budgeted items and not new items. She considered the limit low enough to ensure there was no unnecessary spending, that requests were discussed by senior officers, she had sight of every request and could see no evidence that this needed to be changed.

c) Jon Davey of Clewer & Dedworth West ward asked the following question of Councillor Reynolds, Cabinet member for Communities and Leisure

Comparing the budget and the Windsor Wheel application 23/02104 financial projection, would indicate RBWM has opted for a 10% profit share where RBWM pay for the re-turfing of Alexander Gardens and electricity costs, netting circa £40k while the contractor enjoys £700k profit. How can that be considered a good business deal by RBWM's economic team?

Written response: The Windsor Wheel is being brought to the town by a private company, the same as any other operator who leases a space in one of our parks, so isn't the same as an RBWM Contractor relationship. We believe we'll receive greater income from a profit share arrangement on the wheel, although the final contract is yet to be signed.

The £40k that is included in the budget is an initial figure, however obviously if the wheel is successful and generates more income then the council will receive more income. We anticipate the net figure received to RBWM will be significantly higher than this, As an Administration when setting the budget we've tried to be cautious on the figures from income generation activities as we'd rather have more income than planned for than less. This example is no different and is a prudent way of us being somewhat cautious on figures.

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

Overall I believe the wheel is going to be a great way to increase visitor dwell time and money spent locally with our fantastic businesses, as well as a great way for local residents to see their town from a different angle, and therefore income generated for the Borough for this is a fantastic bonus to have.

Jon Davey stated that turning Alexandra Gardens into a theme park all year round instead of a place of tranquillity for residents and the biodiversity was only acceptable if the business case made sense. He considered it to be a very one-sided business deal. He requested that a better deal was sought as the Triathlon fees were based on Alexandra Gardens being worth £5k a day so he suggested that the rent should be nearer £750k. He asked whether the Triathlon had been cancelled for 2024, had all other parties who would have been using Alexandra Gardens during the summer been consulted and compensated for their loss and had that loss of income been factored into the budget?

Councillor Reynolds replied that it was about striking a balance between the historical setting of Windsor and the Park, and having a new attraction for Windsor that both tourists and residents alike could enjoy. He stated that the key driver was seeing the town from a different angle. He reiterated that no contracts had been signed and they were open to working with the applicant to see what they could do. He concluded that he was keen that this was done in a way that was the right for the council to help residents to be able to invest in our towns.

d) Jon Davey of Clewer & Dedworth West ward asked the following question of Councillor Jones, Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Finance

It was confirmed at Cabinet by the CFO that failure to put up the council tax by the maximum each year has been the major cause of RBWM's current financial position. In the interests of transparency and clarity, could a list of the actual years, the Gov recommended and RBWM actual percentage increases be published?

Written response: Actual increases compared to maximum allowed increases are set out in the table below. RBWM cut Council Tax for six years in a row from 2010. We are not aware of any other Council in the country that has cut Council Tax for such a sustained period. As a consequence, the Council's base budget is £19m lower than it would have been had Council Tax been increased by 1% a year over that period.

The Government does not specify or recommend what councils should do regarding Council Tax – it is a local decision for each council. However, when the Government refers to 'increases in spending power' to local authorities, this calculation is made on the assumption that councils are taking the maximum increase available.

	Actual change		Maximum allowable		Difference
	Base Tax	ASC	Base Tax	ASC	
2010/11	-		4.49%		8.49%
2011/12	0.50%		3.49%		3.99%
2012/13	1.50%		3.49%		4.99%
2013/14	3.00%		1.99%		4.99%
2014/15	2.00%		1.99%		3.99%
2015/16	-		1.99%		4.09%

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

	2.10%				
2016/17	0.00%	2.00%	1.99%	2.00%	1.99%
2017/18	0.93%	3.00%	1.99%	3.00%	1.06%
2018/19	1.86%	3.00%	2.99%	3.00%	1.13%
2019/20	2.77%	0.00%	2.99%	0.00%	0.22%
2020/21	1.99%	2.00%	1.99%	2.00%	0.00%
2021/22	1.99%	3.00%	1.99%	3.00%	0.00%
2022/23	1.99%	1.00%	1.99%	1.00%	0.00%
2023/24	2.99%	2.00%	2.99%	2.00%	0.00%

Jon Davey reflected that it must be a challenge for Councillor Jones to work out the actual financial reality from the inherited situation. He had calculated that, accepting councils work in a different way to normal businesses, if the Council had started with £100m budget in 2010/11 then they would now have a budget of £141m for next year. He stated that if the council was run like a business, then they would potentially have £200m balance instead of a £200m deficit.

Councillor Jones replied that she did not have the figures in front of her and could not confirm his calculations. She could state that if the maximum council tax increases had been applied since 2011 then council tax would now sit at £1,732.58 and on the council tax base that would provide an extra £35.5m. She concluded that the figures he had quoted seemed to be correct.

e) Sarah Walker of Clewer East ward asked the following question of Councillor Reynolds, Cabinet member for Communities and Leisure

Over 1100 have now signed the petition to save the Windsor and Royal Borough Museum and Tourist information Centre.

These valuable resources are in a prime location to serve Windsor and our visitors. If alternative options are being explored, please could those options be shared tonight along with the transparent cost analysis of each option?

Written response: The official RBWM petition for the Royal Borough Museum has around 70 signatures.

In the 23/24 budget that this administration inherited there was only one-off funding for the museum, that means no funding was proposed for the museum for the 24/25 years. With a significantly challenging budget situation going into 24/25 we have to think differently about services that can be provided to residents and tourists in our Borough.

We are committed to keeping a museum service within Windsor, and options for the museum are currently being explored with stakeholders. The Windsor and Royal Borough collection is a vital part of our history, and we want to ensure that residents still have access to our local heritage.

These options are being explored and worked through with the museum team, stakeholders and wider economic growth team within RBWM and we will ensure that proposals are shared widely once we are able to. If you're not already I'd encourage you to join the Friends of Windsor and Royal Borough Museum group, who we are committed to working closely with.

Sarah Walker thanked Councillor Reynolds for his reply and Jack Rankin, Parliamentary candidate for his valued support with the petition.

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

Following an interruption from the floor the Mayor asked those present to treat everyone with respect.

She thanked councillors in the Chamber from across political groups who had supported the campaign. She was disappointed that the petition was not acknowledged in the reply given that the most significant proportion of responses have come from residence in this borough and surrounding areas. She stated she was disappointed that after several months and they were able to share detailed proposals, cost impacts and options particularly when this was a top issue with residents.

Councillor Reynolds replied that he could not talk about the petition that had been referenced because he had not seen it, been provided a copy or had it submitted to the Council. The official RBWM petition had just over 70 signatures. The Council was keen to work with the friends of the Windsor Royal Borough Museum Group and were speaking to them on a regular basis. He encouraged Sarah Walker to join that group, if she was not already a member, to work with them to help make the Windsor Museum what they all wanted it to be.

f) Sarah Walker of Clewer East ward asked the following question of Councillor Hill, Cabinet member for Highways and Transport, Customer Service Centre and Employment

Parking fees have been raised across our towns by a staggering 12-17% (as well as many other cost increases to residents.) What impact assessment was carried out on the economic consequences of these hikes and why were residents and local business views in the parking consultation not heard and results not shared before prices were raised?

Written response: The council recognises that increases in parking fees and charges are never going to be popular. But in the face of a serious budget shortfall, the council has to take tough decisions.

To mitigate the impacts of increases on residents, parking charges are frozen in the two main town centre multi-storey car parks operated by the council (Hines Meadow in Maidenhead and Victoria Street in Windsor) for the first three hours.

The existing one-hour free residents' parking offer at selected council-operated car parks will remain.

As part of the consultation, Residents showed a preference to maintain the price of the first resident permit and this was agreed in the budget.

An Equality Impact Assessment was completed and published as part of the Cabinet Paper to increase fees and charges.

Sarah Walker stated that her question related to the economic impact of such significant parking charges rather than the equality impact within the answer. She stated that parking charges were increased after 75% of respondents had disagreed with the proposal and there were no economic consideration of the impact of the increases such as people going elsewhere or shorter visits. She queried why the charges had been increased before the results of the consultation were shared and why the press release did not contain a link to the consultation results. She asked why they were not seeing more income generation ideas, greater efficiencies of operations and contracts managed more effectively. She concluded that residents had been promised parking reductions from the administration prior to election, particularly in Windsor.

In response Councillor Hill reflected on the impact of the Conservatives decision to remove the Advantage Card discount some years before. He explained that this observation was relevant

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

due to the consequential economic impact. He stated that Victoria Street parking charges went up by 300%, River Street parking charges increased by 200%. He continued that both Elma Road and Alexander Gardens parking saw an 180% increase. He stated that the current administration had put charges up by a modest amount and had considered the impact. He continued that they were taking £7m out of the cost base but the dire economic situation meant that the difference had to be made up with fees and charges. He stated that the council was working hard to keep away from bankruptcy as they could not increase council tax by the necessary amount.

g) Ian Haggart of Clewer & Dedworth East ward asked the following question of Councillor Jones, Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Finance

The average RBWM Council Tax for 2023/24 is about £733 per resident and £1,742 per dwelling. This is increasing by 5% for 2024/25. Comparing the fifteen near neighbour Local Authorities, how many of the neighbours charge less Council Tax per resident and per household than this Council?

Written response: Using data from CIPFA Statistical Information Service and the Office for National Statistics the population aged 18 and over from 2022 is 120,696 and the council tax requirement from 23/24 is £87.2m. I calculate the council tax requirement per resident to be £722.66. At this figure, of the CIPFA 'near neighbour' councils, 3 charge less per resident (Milton Keynes, Bath and North East Somerset and West Northamptonshire).

Using data from the Department of Levelling Up and Communities the council tax charge per dwelling 23/24 is £1742.26. 6 councils from our 15 'CIPFA near neighbour councils' charge less per dwelling.

Council tax can be measured in 'Band D' or in 'per dwelling' terms. Band D has historically been used as the standard for comparing council tax levels between and across local authorities, and this definition is widely regarded as a benchmark when comparing council tax levels in different areas or over time. This is the council tax payable on a Band D dwelling occupied as a main residence by two adults, before any reductions due to discounts, exemptions or council tax benefit. This measure is not affected by the varying distribution of properties in bands that can be found across authorities.

In 2023/24 average Band D council tax in RBWM was £1,604, the lowest rate compared to all of its 15 CIPFA neighbours. This is £285 less than the next lowest, Solihull and £505 lower than the average (mean of its CIPFA neighbours). We would need to increase our Council Tax by 18% to be equal to our nearest neighbour and by 31% to be equal to the mean of our CIPFA neighbours.

I believe the most valid way of comparing how much RBWM is estimated to spend on its different services is with the 'Net current expenditure per head of population', taken from the Revenue Accounts Budget which councils submit to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The net current expenditure per head of population in RBWM is £1,219 compared to £1,541 for the mean average of its CIPFA neighbours, a difference of £322 per resident. RBWM spend has decreased by 5% compared to 12 years ago where the mean average of its CIPFA neighbours has increased 20%.

Ian Haggart asked which of the 15 CIPFA neighbour councils spent the same or less as the Royal Borough spends in terms per population.

Councillor Jones confirmed that she understood that three others did but would provide a written answer with the details.

h) Ian Haggart of Clewer & Dedworth East ward asked the following question of Councillor Jones, Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Finance

The budget includes £40,000 income from the Ferris Wheel that will be operated in Alexander Gardens for six months. Why is the Council's profit share just 10% of the estimated £810,000 operator profit and why is the budget amount less than half of the expected £81,000?

Written response from Councillor Reynolds: The Windsor Wheel is being brought to the town by a private company, the same as any other operator who leases a space in one of our parks, so isn't the same as an RBWM Contractor relationship. We believe we'll receive greater income from a profit share arrangement on the wheel, although the final contract is yet to be signed.

The £40k that is included in the budget is an initial figure, however obviously if the wheel is successful and generates more income then the council will receive more income. We anticipate the net figure received to RBWM will be significantly higher than this, As an Administration when setting the budget we've tried to be cautious on the figures from income generation activities as we'd rather have more income than planned for than less. This example is no different and is a prudent way of us being somewhat cautious on figures.

Overall I believe the wheel is going to be a great way to increase visitor dwell time and money spent locally with our fantastic businesses, as well as a great way for local residents to see their town from a different angle, and therefore income generated for the Borough for this is a fantastic bonus to have.

Ian Haggart asked by way of a supplementary what the lighting intensity, the power consumption and the budgeted amount that was going to come out of the £40k within the budget.

Councillor Reynolds replied that no contract had been signed and therefore they did not have the specifics of the amount of energy it would generate because this had not yet been decided. He reiterated that this was an example of the new administration being prudent in the way it calculated figures as they did not want to overpromise and under deliver.

i) Andrew Hill of Boyn Hill ward asked the following question of Councillor Jones, Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Finance

Given that senior officers clearly hold the view that it was financially reckless to enter into £200m of "unfunded" debt, can the Council confirm whether it had a policy or practice ensuring that all auditors and professional advisors had in place professional indemnity insurance covering negligent advice/opinions over the period in which this massive unfunded debt was incurred?

Written response: I am not here to speak for officers but RBWM has required all contractors to have in place a minimum of £2 million professional indemnity insurance over this period. External audit contracts have been let by Public Sector Audit Appointments. They required £10 million professional indemnity insurance for their contracts during this period.

The Council has spent £200m on "unfunded" capital. That means capital expenditure that wasn't funded by grants or by the revenue budget, therefore it was funded by borrowing.

This historic expenditure was entirely the Council's decision, proposed to the Council and approved by the Council. The CIPFA review in 2019 highlighted costs, that were not capital, were being inappropriately charged to capital; at which point the practice was curtailed but it was a council decision. Auditors would flag if they had concerns about us being a going concern and being financially sustainable in the future. They would also pick up technical mis-

categorisations. It's worth noting though that auditors sample check transactions to provide a view, they do not review every transaction.

The decisions were made by council at that time, and we now live with consequences.

Andrew Hill suggested that as an alternative to relentless service cuts they should look at all the treasury advisors, surveyors, lawyers and auditors who were supposed to protect residents but did not. He cited as examples the Leisure Centre contract without a proper business case and the one-sided Golf Club contract. He reflected that Councillor Jones' written answer had implied that the advice of professional lawyers, surveyors and advisers was impeccable throughout and that she had chosen to blame only voting councillors. He asked why services such as the Environmental Health Team were being cut rather than advisers being challenged for not warning against accumulating up £200m of unfunded debt.

Councillor Jones replied that it was officers' decision making along with councillors that set the policies of the Council, the Auditors come in and sample checked transactions. It was a decision for Council and council officers as to when they borrow and whether they believe there is a plan of paying it back. She stated that the fact that there no plan to pay it back or that the plan did not happen was down to the people that made that decision to borrow the money and really no one else.

j) Andrew Hill of Boyn Hill ward asked the following question of Councillor Bermange, Cabinet member for Planning, Legal and Asset Management

Given the report says "the only meaningful way of reducing the existing debt levels" is the disposal of the golf club, and the site is now subject to a holding objection from Sport England impacting this assumption, why did the Council choose not to publish any version of the golf needs assessment it produced during the plan making period?

Written response: The large amounts of unfunded capital spend by the previous administration, over the last decade, have left the Authority with close to £200m of external debt that we now need to service out of our revenue account. It is simply a statement of fact that Maidenhead Golf Course is the one Council-owned asset with a financial value high enough to have a meaningful impact on the level of this debt should we be forced, by agreements we inherited, into disposing it but that should not be interpreted to mean that this administration is now committed to nor reliant upon its sale. It is also very clear that any disposal would fall well short of clearing the accrued debt and, in any case, meaningful capital receipts would not be received until after the current Medium Term Financial Plan period.

The Borough Local Plan was examined and adopted under the previous administration so it is difficult for me to speculate on the circumstances and possible motivations of the members of that administration that led to the golf needs assessment (GNA) not be published at that time. However, I understand that there were several draft versions of the GNA and a version that was considered finalised was not produced within the window of the examination period. Officers were open about the fact that a GNA was being produced and referred to this in the MIQ response (Matter 11, Issue 4, Question 17) which was submitted to the BLP Inspector in September 2020 so the Inspector was fully aware that this was being produced yet, whilst the Council considered the GNA to be in draft form so didn't release it, neither did the Inspector request to see a draft version.

Regarding the current planning application 24/00091/OUT, Sport England are not considered a statutory consultee in this particular instance, since the proposals do not technically involve the loss of any playing fields, which they acknowledge in their letter. It is correct to note that they maintain a 'holding objection' on the grounds that the proposal is contrary to para 103 of the NPPF, which states that, "...existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land should not be built on unless an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

shown the buildings or land to be surplus to requirements.” I understand that Sport England have asked for additional evidence from the applicant in that regard so expect that this will be provided but I am mindful that this is a live application so it would be inappropriate to comment further.

Andrew Hill stated that the hidden golf club needs assessment remained in draft for almost seven years but he had shown them the unpublished document and it clearly says final issue, September 2019. When the statutory consultee of Sport England was shown a copy of the document in 2019, they rejected the needs assessment on the basis that it was unsound and therefore it did not justify the loss of the golf club. He continued that RBWM's response was to bury their objection, it was never published nor was it shown by RBWM to the Borough Local Plan inspector or even to the High Court. He asked whether Councillor Bermange agreed that hiding the objection was utterly wrong and whether he would discuss the opportunity to return the costs claimed from residents who had every right to see Sports England's material objection.

Councillor Bermange thanked him for his question and for sharing other documents which had given him helpful additional context. He reiterated that all the activities had happened under the previous administration and the focus of the meeting was on the budget and about financial governance. The new administration had found numerous accounts of questionable financial governance and he stated that he was appalled by the way these things were managed. He was unable to answer the very specific question about a court order, but he did commit to speak again with Council Werner on this very serious issue.

k) Shay Bottomley of Oldfield ward asked the following question of Councillor Werner, Leader of the Council and Cabinet member for Community Partnerships, Public Protection and Maidenhead

There are multiple references throughout the Budget papers on how the sale of Maidenhead Golf Course is 'vital' to reducing the council's debt. By passing this paper tonight, is this council now fully committed to the sale of the golf course for development?

Written response: No not at all – there are usually alternatives in most situations and we are still searching for them. If we cannot stop it – we will do what we can to ameliorate the effect of it – we have already used our influence with CALA to increase the amount of open space, reduced the number of dwellings, increased the protection of Rushington Copse, replace some flats with town houses, and lowered the height of other flats. There is much more to do even if we can't get out of it – even less flats, even more open space and more trees saved.

Shay Bottomley thanked Councillor Werner for his direct response. He stated that there were strong views on all sides in relation to the golf course and there was still a lot of uncertainty with a live planning application. He asked whether the phrase in the response “if we cannot stop it” suggested that the hope from the Council was that the golf course development could be halted. He considered it was contradictory when the budget paper effectively suggested that the sale must happen in order for the Council to reduce its debt. He asked as a supplementary, aside from efforts to limit the environmental impact, what was the logic behind the council trying to prevent something which, if the budget was approved, was deemed to be vital.

Councillor Werner replied that he had been opposed to the sale of the site since it was first put forward within the Borough Local Plan. He stated that the Conservatives continued to promote the scheme and were suggesting further development. He concluded that due to the debts it would be many years before the sale of the land would actually benefit the Council as the value was a made-up figure.

I) Shay Bottomley of Oldfield ward asked the following question of Councillor Reynolds, Cabinet member for Communities and Leisure

It was said at Cabinet last week that the consultation on fees and charges for football, rugby, cricket and lawn tennis was not completed to the administration's satisfaction. Can you please elaborate on the issues with the original consultation, and explain how the new consultation will be different?

Written response: For 2024 the process for Fees and Charges was altered to allow us an early increase to many fees to help our 23/24 in year budget position. The increase for the above fees was not included in this early increase as, depending on the sport, the change wouldn't take place until either April or September 2024. We were informed by groups that a number of groups didn't receive full communication about the changes, and the information that was received didn't have the appropriate level of detail as a lot the explanation around why we're increasing fees and our methodology for doing so was published for the November Cabinet meeting and not as part of the main budget consultation.

I've been involved fully in the new consultation, where we have written directly to all groups who hire pitches this year, and given them more details on what the proposed fees are, and why we're looking at the increase. As well as asked for feedback around what level of fee they feel is appropriate and what impact the changes would have on 'subs' paid by members.

The Executive Director and I will go through all consultation responses at the end of March before agreeing a fee having taking into account the feedback we receive.

Shay Bottomley asked if the affected groups strongly opposed the proposed increases, what alternative solutions or compromises were being considered to address their concerns, whilst still achieving the financial goals outlined within the budget.

Councillor Reynolds replied that was very difficult to answer as he could not predict what affected groups would say. He explained that as they were not happy with how the consultation had been done they were fixing the problem, were going to do it better this time and he would be happy to share the consultation letter. Once all the responses had been received, he would make the decision with the Executive Director which was in the best interest of everybody. They would strike the balance between making sure the council was financially sustainable and promoting sport and leisure within the borough.

The Mayor concluded the item by thanking all of the members of the public for their well-considered questions.

47. Petitions

There were none notified.

48. Council Tax 2024/25

The Council considered the proposed RBWM council tax charges for 2024/25. It also set out proposed charges by other precepting bodies, including the police and fire authorities, and individual parishes.

Councillor Jones explained that approximately 85% of funding for the Council was collected from council tax paid by residents and the Council was projecting a collection rate of 98.5%. The overall Council Tax Requirement had been calculated at £89.559m for the 2024/25 financial year. The Government had retained the referendum limit for unitary councils at 2.99% plus 2% Adult Social Care Precept, a total of 4.99%. This equated to a Band D charge for 2024/25 at £1,284.14, which in turn equated to an increase of £61.03 or 4.99%. A legislation change now permitted billing authorities in England to impose an empty dwellings premium

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

after one year instead of two. She advised that the Council intended to apply such a change from 1 April 2024. She explained that currently English billing authorities could only impose an empty dwellings premium on properties that were 'unoccupied and substantially unfurnished' and this did not cover unoccupied furnished homes. New legislation would permit billing authorities to apply a premium to second homes if recommendations were accepted. The maximum council tax charge would be 100% charge plus a premium of 100% making a total council tax charge of 200%. The legislation required the decision to be made 12 months before implementation therefore, should it be agreed, it would come into force in April 2025.

Councillor Jones proposed the recommendations as set out within the report which were seconded by Councillor Werner.

Councillor W Da Costa commented on the proposed increase in the precept for Windsor. He queried what the areas of increase were for and how it would be demonstrated to those residents that they were receiving value for money.

Councillor Majeed stated that he would be abstaining from the vote for a Council Tax rise as he believed that there are further savings that could have been made without affecting the services offered to residents.

Councillor Bermange stated his support for not making any amendments to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme in order to support the most vulnerable and economically deprived residents. He concluded that he was very keen to hear proposals for additional savings that could be made.

Councillor Werner responded to the debate stating that he had been surprised by some of the comments as conservative colleagues had voted for a 5% rise in the budget last year as part of the medium-term financial plan. He explained that the plan clearly stated that the Council was going to increase council tax this year by 4.99%. He recalled that Councillor Majeed's colleagues had voted in favour of it and recalled that some of them had spoken in favour of it. He stated that they were trying to run a partnership Council, working together to save the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead from bankruptcy. He was disappointed that they were denying the past, not owning up to their mistakes and forgetting how they voted at the last budget meeting.

The Mayor stated that Councillor Majeed had not been part of the last Council and commented that was an unfair observation.

Councillor Jones replied to the discussion that the parish precept for unparished areas such as Windsor was calculated as an average of all other Parishes and that special expenses were raised by about 2.99% to cover increased costs of parks and streetlights. She agreed with Councillor Werner that previous year's budget had made it very clear that the Council was not financially viable unless the council tax went up by the maximum allowed as set out in the medium-term financial plan.

A named vote was taken.

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

Council Tax 2024/25 (Resolution)	
Councillor Neil Knowles	For
Councillor Simon Bond	For
Councillor Clive Baskerville	For
Councillor Adam Bermange	For
Councillor George Blundell	For
Councillor David Buckley	For
Councillor Mandy Brar	For
Councillor Catherine del Campo	For
Councillor Alison Carpenter	For
Councillor Suzanne Cross	For
Councillor Carole Da Costa	For
Councillor Wisdom Da Costa	For
Councillor Devon Davies	For
Councillor Karen Davies	For
Councillor Jack Douglas	For
Councillor Genevieve Gosling	Abstain
Councillor Jodie Grove	For
Councillor Geoff Hill	For
Councillor Mark Howard	For
Councillor Maureen Hunt	Abstain
Councillor Lynne Jones	For
Councillor Ewan Larcombe	For
Councillor Sayonara Luxton	Abstain
Councillor Asghar Majeed	Abstain
Councillor Siân Martin	For
Councillor Chris Moriarty	For
Councillor Helen Price	For
Councillor Gary Reeves	For
Councillor Joshua Reynolds	For
Councillor Julian Sharpe	Abstain
Councillor George Shaw	For
Councillor Gurch Singh	For
Councillor John Story	Abstain
Councillor Helen Taylor	For
Councillor Amy Tisi	For
Councillor Julian Tisi	For
Councillor Leo Walters	Abstain
Councillor Simon Werner	For
Carried	

On the proposition of Councillor Jones, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet member for Finance, seconded by Councillor Werner it was RESOLVED that:

- i) the report be noted**
- ii) the calculations for determining the Council Tax Requirement for 2024/25 be approved as set out in Appendix A, consisting of:**
 - a. A Council Tax Requirement of £89.559m.**
 - b. A Band D charge of £1,284.14 for the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead in 2024/25, reflecting an overall increase of 4.99%, based on:**
 - i. A 2.99% increase in base Council Tax taking the charge to £1,097.30 for 2024/25;**

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

- ii. **An additional 2% to reflect an increase in the Adult Social Care Precept which is proposed as £186.84;**
- c. **The Special Expenses Precept increases by £1.06 (2.98%) to £36.66 for 2024/25 for the unparished areas of Windsor and Maidenhead in accordance with Section 35 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, as set out in Appendix D;**
- iii) **the following Precepts by partner organisations be noted:**
 - a. **The Police and Crime Commissioner for the Thames Valley - £269.28, as set out in Appendix B;**
 - b. **Royal Berkshire Fire Authority - £81.31, as set out in Appendix B;**
 - c. **Parish precepts as set out in Appendix C, as notified by the individual parishes.**
- iv) **reduction in time period for levying a council tax Long Term Empty Premium on properties, from 2 years to 1 year, from 1 April 2024 be agreed; and introduction of a new council tax premium of 100% on properties which are only occupied periodically but are substantially furnished, e.g. second homes, from 1 April 2025 be agreed.**

49. Budget 2024/25

As recommended by Cabinet, Council was asked to consider all the information provided and approve the council's approach to balancing the budget. The Council considered the proposed revenue and capital budgets for 2024/25 and the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) through to 2028/29. The appendices summarised in the agenda report and appended to it provided detailed information in each of the areas and all form part of the plans in the short to medium term:

- Appendix A Council Plan
- Appendix B Response to budget consultation
- Appendix C MTFS & MTFS graph
- Appendix D Growth
- Appendix E Efficiencies
- Appendix F Fees and Charges
- Appendix G Flexible Use of Capital Receipts
- Appendix H Capital Strategy
- Appendix I Capital Bids 2024/25 and Consolidated Capital Programme
- Appendix J Detail of Highways and Footways capital expenditure
- Appendix K Treasury Strategy
- Appendix L Dedicated schools grant
- Appendix M RBWM Pay Policy
- Appendix N EQIAs
- Appendix O Report of the CFO
- Appendix P Minutes of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny committee

Councillor Jones, Deputy Leader and Cabinet member for Finance was invited to propose the 14 recommendations, as listed on page 32 of the agenda.

Councillor Jones introduced the budget explaining that it would support the vision and aims in the new Corporate Plan which would kick start the transformation of services that would ensure the viability of the Council. She observed that although many councils across the country were setting budgets in a challenging environment of increases in social care demand and costs, interest rates and contract costs this Council also had to deal with the legacy of decisions such as low council tax and capital spending which both had a long-lasting effect on their spending power. She stated that the Council had £322 per resident which meant less to

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

spend on services, lower than the average of comparable councils and this was reflected in the impact on increases to fees and charges in order to support the provision of services.

She reported that the outgoing Section 151 Officer had warned the previous February that due to the levels of savings identified the council needed to “assure itself that there are robust plans and processes to deliver and report on the delivery of savings during 2023/24”. She had been concerned that continual non-achievable savings plans were being presented by the previous administration and this had now been proven to be correct and statutory costs under budgeted which reduced reserves by half in the last year.

She explained that they had taken a different approach to the budget by starting from the bottom up, calculating current demands, costs, income and looking at trends to strengthen their confidence in the numbers used and addressed issues as they were found. Plans were in place to provide growth of nearly £10m and savings of £7.5 and, unlike the budget approved last February, there was appropriate resources to achieve the targets as well as improved procedures to ensure that there was the capability to monitor the budget.

Councillor Jones continued that they were investing just under £50m into Adult Social Care and Health which included supporting vulnerable residents as they left hospital to reduce the risk of care home placements and addressing the real issues around recruitment and retention of permanent staff. They were investing nearly £30m into Childrens Services and were prioritising Family Hubs. £7.5m would be invested in highways, paths, bridges and street lighting as they acknowledged the impact those areas had on public safety. An investment in just over £1m in additional officer posts was to ensure effective services, adherence to legislation and cost savings.

She stated that they were aware of the cost-of-living crisis and had retained the Council Tax reduction scheme and now had two Financial Inclusion officers that could support the poorest and those ‘just managing’ residents. The ‘Here to Help’ service, that brought together the areas of financial support available, was an excellent resource for residents. Officers and councillors continued to work with the borough’s voluntary organisations to support residents across the borough.

She reflected that the statement by the lead member for Finance in 2019 that the Council could choose to be ‘debt free’, including the pension deficit, in the medium term future had not happened. There had been no reduction in the £200m debt in the last four years and no receipt expected in the next four years to reduce the debt. The cost of this borrowing was estimated to reach £13m which was 11% of the budget that could not be spent on services.

In both this years Revenue budget, and the Medium Term Financial Strategy, officers had made assumptions based on trend analysis and using best information available regarding forward factors. Given the estimated low reserves they had increased the contingency budget from £2.4m last year to £3.6m and the intent was to add any unused contingency into reserves in April 2025.

The capital receipts expected from large scale projects would help reduce Capital Financing requirement e.g. debt but, based on historical agreements, the income from those would not be realised within the next four years, and were impacted by the amount of interest the Council was paying until the receipts were received.

Councillor Jones explained that Appendix D, E, F & H identified Growth, Efficiencies, Fees and charges and Capital spend. The most notable Growth was £5.2m in Adult Social Care and £2.6m in Childrens Social Care to address the inadequacies in the 23/24 budget.

In the last decade Social Care had increased from being 54% of the Council’s net revenue expenditure to 77%, which greatly impacted other services, but they were are also seeing increased funding in other areas. The Council was spending:

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

- £130k for tree inspection & maintenance
- £2.5m to cut carbon emissions and save money on energy consumption
- £1m on provision improvement for Special Educational Needs
- £300k investment in our asset portfolio to attract improved rental,
- £200k investment in transforming the Health Suite at Windsor Leisure Centre
- £310k of funding for identified remedial works to Braywick Leisure Centre

None of which would incur borrowing.

She continued that Capital spend was being restricted to the necessary infrastructure, funded by external grants which therefore reduced the need for borrowing. They were ensuring that they prioritised any schemes coming forward that delivered a healthy return.

The Treasury Strategy (Appendix K) highlights the importance of the Council's cashflows, borrowing and investments. Large amounts of unfunded borrowing had left the authority with around £200m of debt. They were continuing to enhance processes to produce better quality forecasts to inform future management decisions and support was already in place to strengthen both capacity and capability.

There were some recommendations from Corporate Scrutiny that have been considered by Cabinet and feedback was given at Cabinet last week.

The Chief Financial Officer had set out the risks and mitigations within her report at Appendix O.

Councillor Jones concluded that the answer to why they had not issued a Section 114 – this was a statement that they would not be able to cover future costs was because it would not be politically prudent to, but it was a good question and the responsibility lies with the Council's Chief Financial Officer and not elected members. The professional opinion of the CFO was that there was a plan for a balanced budget, a small reserve, a good contingency built into the budget and a Medium-Term Plan with surpluses being generated. Therefore Government, following a review of our situation, could refuse the Council support on the basis that they were still financially viable.

Councillor Jones stated such a decision would damage their reputation and credibility and they were not in that situation at this time. The borough finances were challenging and had taken a serious 'knock' following the undeliverable budget set in February 2023 which had necessitated officers and members taking very difficult decisions that they would rather not have taken. Thanks to the Chief Financial Officer and her team, the senior leadership team, Lead members, scrutiny panels and officers across the council they had a challenging but balanced and deliverable budget. She commended the budget to Council.

The proposals were seconded by Councillor Werner.

Councillor Sharpe replied on behalf of the opposition. He thanked the officers for their hard work in preparing the budget. He commented that 12 months before a budget had been prepared that had over £10 million pounds in reserve and after only ten months in charge the new Administration was admitting that over £6m of reserves had been spent and the other surpluses that had been built up very carefully over previous years were destroyed. He asked how this represented good financial management of residents' money and stated this was a 'shambles'. He considered that the proposed budget lacked ambition and a situation where they were spending more and charging residents more and charge our families as much as they can for through rising fees and charges. He commented that a plan was still lacking after nearly a year.

He highlighted that the solar panel initiative developed under the previous administration and free parking allowance to all electric vehicles to enhance the green agenda but this had been abolished. He stated that prior to the budget and without consultation they had put up parking charges and was enormous for many residents especially during the cost-of-living crisis. He

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

queried how much consideration had been given to the livelihood of businesses in Maidenhead and Windsor impacted by the increased parking charges and expected to see them decline. He commented on the low number of residents supporting the proposals.

He observed that Community Infrastructure Levy was supposed to be paid out to compensate communities for the additional housing burden in their areas and to provide the necessary infrastructure required by residents in that area whether it was schools, roads for example but instead within Maidenhead it was decided not to levy CIL. Where houses were currently being built in Ascot and Sunningdale there would be a complete change in the community and most of the CIL raised in the south of the borough was being spent in Maidenhead and more non-Ascot based projects benefiting from CIL collected. His residents were furious with the distribution of funds. He stated that had been advised that there was no money for a very inexpensive scheme to alleviate some needed local traffic issues.

He concluded it was a 'shambles' with a council that had no plan, an Administration that had failed to get a grip of the situation, there were areas of huge spending across this borough and these needed to be managed very carefully to ensure the safety and security of the Council.

The Mayor reminded everyone present that each speaker had five minutes to make their points, he asked everyone to listen to the debate and to avoid repeating others.

Councillor Werner started by saying that this was not the budget that he wanted to be supporting as his first budget as Leader of the Council. He had known that the finances were in a mess but had no idea quite how fake the last conservative budget had been. He paid tribute to both the councillors and officers for their collegiate approach that with the Liberal Democrats, Independents and officers coming together to sort out the mess. He reflected that he had previously been ignored at each budget meeting so it was satisfying to be able to actually make changes happen to fix the finances.

He stated that they had started the process of taking back inhouse where it made sense to do so to provide better value for money and better services for residents, making better use of assets and not just selling them off to benefit developers but rather bringing them back into use.

He continued that commercialisation or making better use of the councils skills would bring in revenue such as from the council run a gold standard CCTV control operation. He stated that better procurement and contract management was another complete mess to be fixed with many cases where the contract was effectively left to mark their own homework. They would be expanding the procurement team so they could focus on contract management and hold contractors to account.

He commented that his worry was that every time they thought they'd uncovered all the mess they picked up another stone and uncovered something else. The amount of debt collected last year bore no resemblance to the budget and most of all the fake transformation program but this year the transformation was based on reality that the services had proposed to implement.

Councillor Werner explained that they had introduced a financial recovery plan for survival and the budget was the next vital step on the way to recovering the finances. He explained that each year he named the budget to appropriately summarise it. There had been the 'Titanic budget', the 'gamblers budget' and the last 'fantasy budget'. He concluded that this year's budget was about fixing the mess so he had determined to call it 'The Phoenix budget' with the council rising out of the ashes of 16 years of the previous Administration.

Councillor C Da Costa commented that she was very encouraged to hear that they were looking at insourcing again. She believed that bringing adult social care back inhouse would make a saving but also an opportunity generate income by selling that service to neighbouring

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

councils. She was pleased to see that they had not affected the Council Tax support work with many people in financial need having to pay any more would be devastating for them and mean the difference between having enough electric to cook the food that they had received from the food bank to feed their children. She stated that if the budget presented in any other circumstances, she did not think she would be happy to support it but she acknowledged these were exceptional times. She ended by saying that depending on the rest of the debate she may be forced to support a budget that she would normally never would.

Councillor W Da Costa thanked officers and lead members for their hard work. He stated that Windsor residents and businesses were really not happy about the parking rates in Windsor with businesses reporting that they were losing business to other places. He requested confirmation that Windsor Museum would stay open as residents did not want it to close.

He stated there was an amount of obscurity and the lack of transparency within the budget papers as presented due to the lack of detail in the budget as it was not broken down into service areas and headings were too broad to be scrutinised. He queried that there was no balance sheet to consider especially on the long-term debt there was not enough information on reserves. He observed that staffing levels kept being cut and RBWM staff were overworked and underpaid. He asked what was being done to secure external income streams, maximize grants and look at building their trading operations.

He asked what the strategy was for increasing council tax and stated that they must hold an open, honest and transparent discussion in public about the impact of low council tax on the borough and lobby the government. He considered that there were flaws in the consultation and the implementation as they were basing the budget on an unapproved Corporate Plan which showed poor ambition on climate change and many other environmental crisis.

The Mayor announced an adjournment commencing at 8.33pm. The meeting re-started at 8.44pm. During the adjournment Councillor Walters left the meeting.

Councillor Hill started by thanking officers for their work and diligence in producing the budget. He listed the features the new Administration had been left with: £203m of debts; land values set by developers; Council Tax at £322 per household below neighbouring authority; borrowing money to fund revenue expenditure and non-revenue generating capital projects; Adult Social Care debt of £5.8m with performance targets in customer service doubled due to reduced head count; stagnation of officer pay causing difficulties in recruitment and retention; the real capital receipts from Maidenhead Golf Course reduced from £500m to circa £100m; reduced officer capacity with 75% of staff to do 100% of the work and a budget around £30m per year below what was needed. He queried why the Auditors did not highlight these issues and where were the members of the past Administration.

He continued that despite the challenges they had a balanced budget with double the previous year's contingency at over £3m. They would still maintain the borough's streets, bus services and improve cycling and walking routes. He reported that they were increasing footfall within their towns and car park usage had markedly increased following initiatives noting that car parking charges had not increased in Victoria Street in Windsor and Hines Meadow in Maidenhead to ensure residents had an option. He stated that planned ICT upgrades had either taken place or were taking place. The adult social care debt was under control, reducing and they expected it to be below £5m by the end of the financial year. He commended the budget and urged all colleagues to support it.

Councillor Story commented that fundamental to understanding the proposed budget was understanding what had happened to the finances since May 2023 when the Liberal Democrats took over the Council. He reflected that unfortunately the Council would have its first budget deficit in five years which would wipe out the four years of budget surpluses under the Conservatives. He recalled that the Council's reserves had been more than £1m above the minimum of £7.9m and the effect of this year's deficit was that reserves were now less

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

than £4m with over half the reserves being spent in less than a year. He queried what had gone wrong. He reflected that lamenting the low council tax previously set meant that the borough's families would have a council tax bill that was hundreds of pounds a year higher than it is now. He found that an extraordinary concept in the current tough economic times. He stated that the Council was not on the list of councils with excessive debt published by Moody's Investment Services. He stated that the budget papers make it clear that it is the Chief Financial Officer who has the statutory duty to ensure a council's budget is robust then if you accept that the Chief Financial Officer this year and last fulfilled that duty rigorously then the true reason for the financial collapse lies in what happened and what did not happen in those five months between May and the October crisis council meeting. He suggested that officers would have briefed the new Administration on every aspect of the finances including the immediate corrective required to deal with any likely budget variances so why the way until October. He concluded that they must monitor this budget carefully and take corrective action quickly in order to mitigate significant unforeseen and maybe unavoidable costs. That is what they had failed to do this year.

Councillor K Davis thanked the Place directorate and the Sustainability Team for their creative, positive and proactive approach to tackling the incredibly tough financial position. She stated that the financial circumstances had not stopped them from being ambitious in their approach to reducing carbon and increasing biodiversity. She highlighted £6m of investment for decarbonisation at Windsor Leisure Centre which was fully funded by a public sector grant and topped up by Section 106 money to replace gas fired boilers with air source heat pumps, air handling units and a solar PV array; centralising energy billing to save money administrating hundreds of invoices across the entire Council and the money saved would fund an energy analyst to help identify areas of unusual usage across the Council estate; and continuing to fund the Climate Partnership would build on the valuable projects to share knowledge and skills and increase capacity across businesses organisations and community groups. She stated there were many examples of local groups but mentioned in particular The Wilds wildlife groups who were working hard with the Council to deliver the biodiversity action plan. She referred to infrastructure improvement plans across the borough to support electric vehicles by accelerating the role out of EV charge point implementation plan, plans to support healthy active travel with the Great Park Link in Windsor, and Healthy Routes to School in Old Windsor and West Windsor. She noted the financial position remained extremely challenging but was very excited for the future of the council's work on climate change and biodiversity and commended this budget.

Councillor Howard focused on the thing he received most comments from his residents about and that was a frustration about service delivery in front of them such as potholes. He had discovered that the Council had 'hollowed out' professional contract negotiators and professional staff who are able to manage their contracts properly. He supported the proposal because to bring the management of contracts back inhouse that were aligned with the objectives of residents rather than letting suppliers mark their own homework. He believed his residents would support this effective management of contracts going forward.

Councillor Del Campo recalled that in 2020 a former conservative member of the Council described his own party's financial legacy as a 'cultural failure of epic proportions' but the next three years did little to remedy that situation. She commented that they were facing the challenge of how to rescue their finances whilst remaining true to their principles, it had not been easy but she felt they had brought back some humanity and started to give officers the support and resources they need to deliver priorities.

She continued that within Adult Services they had corrected the base budget so that it was much closer to the actual cost of delivering services but as it was almost entirely statutory, and demand led it only took a few complex cases to have a profound effect on the finances. They would however not be starting the year with the challenge of needing to find £5m of in year savings. In January they had begun an invest to save project to reallocate funds for long-term unfilled social worker posts to uplift full-time salaries to favourably compare with nearby

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

boroughs and reduce their dependence on agencies. At a recent Graduate Fair there had been six expressions of interest compared to zero previously. A reduction in staff turnover was also good for residents in terms of giving them consistency of care.

They were also looking into developing their own Care Home although they were at the very early stages of this process business modelling what could be done, what was available, what was happening in other boroughs and shaping the business plan to generate income through privately funded residents and influence local care prices.

She stated that Optalis provides a very high standard of care and they were exploring bringing more of the statutory services back into RBWM so that decisions about the care people need, the commissioning of services from third party providers and the finances would be brought back together with the help of the new case management system.

She noted that their pledge on social housing would take time to realise but she was delighted that when the new development of Saw's Close opened there would be 32 additional homes for social rent available to the housing team. She concluded by welcoming the new Housing Assistant Director and extending her thanks to officers across Adults, Health and Place, the senior leadership team, Cabinet and members who had worked so hard to help them bring the budget forward.

Councillor Hunt thanked the senior officers and finance team for all the work that had gone into producing the budget. She noted that councils across the country were having difficulties and RBWM was no exception. She noted that approximately 80% of funding was for statutory social services and the cost of providing this was increasing. She welcomed some of the outsourced services being brought back into the Council, the last Administration had started this in some areas, and she was very pleased that this was continuing. She also welcomed the increased monitoring of finances and commented that there was a lack of detail as to how the new corporate transformation program would achieve the aims and deliver the savings promised. She was concerned this was one of the key risks in the medium-term financial strategy and that assumptions regarding Capital Income and CIL are affected by outside influences. She reflected that these figures seem to fluctuate greatly from one budget to another and she would like to have more assurance that the reserves had been fully examined and were robust to ensure the budget was deliverable.

She queried whether enough budget had been allocated to recruitment and retention to attract and retain staff and what focus had been placed on income generation outside of increases to charges for residents such as parking charges, pitch charges and planning fees. She wanted to see better use of the Council's assets to make the best of them to be more attractive for marketing use. She wanted to see the full list.

She stated that the budget as it stands did not appear to deliver the surpluses needed, there were too many acknowledged and incorporated risks and there was already an emerging gap between the rebased budget and the rising reality with significant risk of capacity and capability within the budget. She concluded that she could not support the budget.

Councillor Moriarty focused on consultations observing that the consultation approach that they had inherited had not been good enough and residents had reported that their voice was simply not heard. One of the new Administration's stated aims was to give that Community a voice which was central to decisions therefore consultations should be easy to engage with, easy to understand and free from technical information to extract the most insight. He suggested that consultation should ask questions providing the widest possible picture and not a narrow focus; should create opportunities to listen on platforms that residents already interact with rather than relying on surveys and make it clear how they can expect to see the results. He advised that the Administration did not think that the current approach to consultation was good enough and were determined to work with officers to raise the standard of consultations.

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

Councillor Bermange commented that the first aim of the emerging Council Plan was to put the Council on a strong financial footing in order to meet their vision for the borough. He focused on one important priority which was to drive efficiencies through strong asset management through optimising the use of buildings, land and other assets that the council owns in order to generate income and also to streamline the Capital programme to reduce further borrowing and make better use of CIL and Section 106 funding. He advised that the Council had a modest portfolio of purely commercial assets. He supported improvement works to attract a better rental yield but also bring them up to the minimum energy efficiency standards. Where assets were currently deployed for delivery of services, they were looking to make savings such as relocate the Pensions Fund staff out of Minster Court to make better use of spare capacity within the Town Hall offices. Part of their commitment was to deliver more services inhouse so considering their own properties with a view to establishing their own Care Home facilities and temporary accommodation. He stated that the social value of assets would also be considered beyond the financial receipts but if there was no viable option for maintaining and optimising an asset's use, then applying the proceeds of any sales to reduce inherited debt would help fund the program of service transformation. He concluded that the Council was in a 'financial perilous situation' but he was optimistic that the proposed budget was tough a vital step towards a sound financial future.

Councillor Price commented that her concern was the impact that any proposed cuts had on the borough's poorest residents as they were facing food price, rent and service charge increases with rises disproportionately impacting them more. She did not believe they had analysed the social economic profile of those who had responded to the consultation and wanted this to be addressed in future consultations. She observed that the removal of the library inclusion post, the printed copies of 'Around the Royal Borough' and of school transport to excluded pupils would disproportionately impact the poorest residents despite the Council Plan stating that the priority was to reduce inequalities.

Councillor Price continued that she welcomed the signposting to alternative services and in particular community groups. She really welcomed the creation of the Volunteering Community Sector Partnership and along with the continued work of the Household Support Fund Partnership with its 18 partners to support vulnerable communities would help create more streamlined and cohesive working. Other positive examples were the Household Support Fund and the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. She stated that it was important to work with housing providers to ensure there was not a duplication of effort, resources and to identify any gaps in provision. She concluded by highlighting the relaunch of the volunteering campaign to encourage residents to volunteer. Councillor Douglas encouraged and supported volunteering within Maidenhead and in Windsor a paper-based directory of community groups and volunteering opportunities was soon to be published. She stated that they all had a role to play in supporting the poorest residents.

Councillor Reeves stated that he had been driven to make a difference and to stand as a Councillor because he did not want to allow the continual risk that the borough was being put under by the previous Administration by the decisions being made. As a contract professional he was quite dismayed by the contract decisions that were previously made and when he'd discussed processes, he understood officers shared his concerns about procurement and contract management. He considered that it was by continuing improvements within contract terms that they could regain the spending power. He pointed out that 77% of the budget was spent on social care, 11% to service interest payments which left only 12% of the budget to spend on these non-statutory services. He concluded that officers and fellow members had made the best of what the Council had but he wanted to continue to work to build this secure foundation for residents in the future.

Councillor J Tisi commented that despite the low level of reserves and the £7m deficit, they would have been able to get very close to a balanced budget had it not been for some of the demand led statutory increases in costs within Adult Services and Children's Services. He

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

considered that borrowing was one of the most important items with £13.5m to cover interest and MRP which was 11% of the Council's budget or £1 in every £9 for which the residents would get nothing to service this cost. In relation to refinancing until recently a very junior officer undertook the refinancing at spot rates with no financial management for such a big debt but this had now changed.

He explained that accountants had to be realistic and prudent. He gave the example of the use of Capex to cover revenue overspend and quoted the CiFPA report's observations on the lack of scrutiny in place. Improved spending control and income generation ideas. He welcomed the Observation Wheel and supported the limited £40m in the budget for revenue generation unlike previous unrealistic assumptions. He stated that he welcomed the use of some of the capital funding that the Council received from CIL as he thought that was a good idea to utilise this free money. He concluded that the amount in the budget for the demolition of the Novello Theatre was not intended as they were working with the community who want to save it.

Councillor Douglas commented that there was no budget line for volunteering. He reiterated that the Council was in a difficult position and there were a lot of things that the Council would like to fund that it was unable to, and volunteers were stepping into the gap in many different ways doing amazing work. He noted that the budget called out the role of volunteers saying that volunteering was building a sense of community and strengthening residents feeling of responsibility and ownership for local areas. He continued that it was a rare win-win area where everybody benefited even the volunteers themselves who deserved so much thanks for spending their time and energy. He mentioned some examples to illustrate: Waterway volunteers, Goodgym missions across the community, the Maidenhead Town team and the Braywick Heath Nursery. He noted there were hundreds of other groups whose work should be recognised as it affected the boroughs health, wealth and well-being.

Councillor Majeed joined colleagues in thanking the officers for their hard work producing the budget. He stated that a major concern that had been raised by residents in Ascot was law and order. The previous administration had included in their budget to pay for four dedicated police constables to be deployed across RBWM to focus on local priorities. This was the first Partnership of its kind in the Thames Valley Police area and reflected concerns around lack of neighbourhood policing. The Crime Summit held in March last year with residents and stakeholders shaped the priorities for these new Police Constables. He noted that this partnership seems to have been dropped from the current budget. He stated he could not support the budget because he believed the budget was a cost cutting exercise and not for the benefit of residents.

Councillor Carpenter clarified a comment made earlier in the meeting that the Council had a partnership Cabinet but not a partnership Council. She was an independent Councillor and was not in partnership with any other party.

Councillor Carpenter expressed her thanks and appreciated to Councillor Jones and the officers for devising a balanced budget which would give the Council much needed breathing space for the upcoming year. She had concerns regarding its long-term viability and feared that they might face potential imbalances before the end of the next financial cycle. With the demand for statutory services increasing, an aging demographic and people moving here for RBWM's exceptional services she did not believe they could maintain a balanced budget even with the upcoming transformation project. She noted that the largest savings in Adult Social Care relied on people remaining in their own homes and older people being taken in by younger people. Whilst she supported the principle she was concerned that carers were rarely paid more than the minimum wage and there were significant recruitment and retention challenges in the sector. Councillor Carpenter reported that her residents were questioning the value of their council tax as they had witnessed a decline in services such as adequate grass cutting, park maintenance, potential reduction in bus services and lack of any noticeable enforcement. Increasing parking fees in Windsor was a tourist tax and that the Council should

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

provide discounted parking to residents. She reiterated the request for Cabinet to secure a more favourable deal than receiving only 10% of the profit for the proposed Ferris Wheel in Alexander Gardens. She noted the low income from the three month Windsor on Ice attraction. Councillor Carpenter stated that whilst Windsor remained unparished the monies contributed could be spent anywhere within the borough whereas if it was parished it could be ring fenced. She was pleased to hear that there were plans to relocate the museum to a more suitable location but was concerned about the potential costs associated with this relocation and refurbishment of the Guildhall. She concluded that there were too many uncertainties and hopeful outcomes to provide her full support for the proposed budget.

Councillor Luxton commented that the new Administration claimed to be near bankruptcy since 20 September 2023 but they were spending, they were not showing income generating solutions or real efficiencies in services only cuts, price hikes and tax increases for residents. She could see no plans for debt repayment, housing solutions or to increase income on new housing. She stated that residents were entitled to have answers to why taxes were increasing in difficult times during the cost-of-living crisis. She asked that the present Administration take responsibility for the budget moving forward rather than looking back and blaming the Conservative administration. She concluded that she would not be supporting the budget.

Councillor Reynolds reported that when asked what their top five priorities were whilst in Administration and he stated that their number one priority was still being there as a council in 12 months' time. He considered the budget to be stable and something that could be built on. They had fixed the mess that they had been given. He commented on the horrible legacy from the previous administration of 18 tower blocks in Maidenhead Town Centre. He listed the retailers and restaurants they were bringing to the town including Nandos, Bombay Story, Hobby Craft and Wagamamas among others being brought back onto the High Street. He referred to scaremongering about the amounts spent on taxi livery and advised that nothing had been spent so far. He referred questioning colleagues to Appendix A Council Plan reciting the key objectives: strong finances; cleaner greener safer; children and young people being given a great start in life; healthy and independent lives and a council that delivers for residents of the borough. He gave examples of how the Council would demonstrate the plan through £6.3m of decarbonisation money, £850k for additional street lighting, £1.2 m for repairs and maintenance in borough schools, £200k for a new health suite in Windsor Leisure Centre and £110k to fix the Braywick Leisure Centre that was not fit for purpose; £1.2m for pot hole repairs; £2.5m for highways and footway resurfacing; £200k in roadway safety schemes; £300k in healthy routes to school, £600,000 for EV infrastructure delivering 500 new EV chargers by May 2025 all funded by grants, S106 and CIL money.

Councillor Gosling thanked all those involved in the onerous task of producing the budget. She observed that nationally there was a total combined Council debt of £97.8 billion pound. Although she welcomed change to combine services to save costs but considered the Windsor Museum should be preserved in its current position as it was an iconic institution, that there would be moving costs and it might no longer be visited. She could not support the budget as felt that there were further revenue opportunities that could have been explored.

Councillor Cross thanked Councillor Jones and the Chief Finance Officer for their hard work to get the Council to this position from a very challenging starting point. She commented that her concern around the budget was that it was reliant on delivering and delivering at pace the transformation and efficiency targets that have been mentioned. Financial resiliency was low and she argued that the margin for error was high. She highlighted that they had two years of unaudited figures so there was a lot that could go wrong. Through the briefings she had received in advance of the meeting she had received assurances that they had a team inside the council with the experience to successfully deliver this balanced budget, that the governance was in place and early warning triggers to highlight if any of the efficiency savings were not going to plan and spotlight if any of the growth targets were stalling. She recognised this would not be easy but hoped they could move forward with conviction and confidence. She raised one area of significant spend in the budget which was home to school transport

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

that was costing the Council multiple millions of pounds and the cost was increasing. She noted that work was already underway to see if efficiencies could be made but she would like to see this on the priority list of areas to be scrutinised for additional financial efficiencies and reviewing operationally how it was delivered.

Councillor A Tisi began her comments by offering a vote of thanks to the Lin Ferguson, Executive Director for Children's Services, Clive Haynes Deputy Director for Education, Sarah Moran Deputy Director for Children's Social Care and Early Health and all staff from Achieving for Children delivering Children's Services in RBWM. The team had come together and face the challenge of finding new ways to identify savings that would not risk the fundamental service provided to families and generate income in an already high achieving but relatively low spending service.

Councillor A Tisi reflected on her final budget speech in opposition and how she had previously pledged that if she was made lead member she would defend early Health Services. Despite the extreme pressures facing the budget she was proud to say that they had done that. She noted that early intervention in the families that were struggling could prevent children having to be taken from their family home which was better for the council's budget but ultimately it was better for those children. £2.6m had been added to the base budget as a more realistic starting point. She noted that just one or two expensive placements could cause a huge impact and the service was at the mercy of markets. Achieving for Children were having a renewed drive to increase the number of In-House Foster carers including connected carers. Educational psychology services were being commercialised to other boroughs. Grant funding was being used to increase provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities at existing special and mainstream schools. She noted that by supporting the young people locally they would be able to reduce some of the home to school transport costs with an extensive review of the service being undertaken.

Councillor G Singh commented on the observations made about the lack of Community Infrastructure Levy within Maidenhead Town Centre noting that it was the previous administrations' zero charging schedule in order to support developers that had contributed to the current financial position as there were so many missed opportunities to receive these contributions.

Councillor Coe commented that at the heart of the problems faced by the Council was the Conservatives' policy of borrowing to spend. He observed that the plan was to cut Council Tax, borrow millions, invest the borrowing in income generating assets to replace the missing council tax revenue, pay off the debt by selling land to balance the books. From this plan he reflected that Vicus Way Car Park was losing thousands every week and the Magnet Leisure Centre and the Golf Course had been sold below their proper value resulting in the debt not being paid and the books not being balanced. He stated that Conservatives' hubris broke the borough's finances as they overestimated their business acumen and underestimated the risks. He stated that the new administration was delivering a responsible budget incorporating tough decisions for many of their residents to get the council back on track. He concluded by thanking officers working within his portfolio, who had delivered significant savings, the chief financial officer for her hard work and all the officers for their hard work in delivering the budget to help fix the mess.

Councillor Larcombe commented that things could have been worse as the previous administration had pulled out of the river scheme Channel One which would have meant a contribution of £53m from the Council. He stated there was currently a consultation on the scheme as it is now e.g. channels two and three. He stated there was a new channel proposed with the Council's contribution expected to be in the region of £10m for a substandard scheme in comparison with the one that was already developed. He noted that the Council already had a contract indicating that the Council was due to contribute £900k over the next two years but it did not appear to have been signed. He finished by asking for a future response why the four directors went simultaneously from the property company.

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

Councillor Jones started to sum up the debate by stating it was not the amount of debt a council had but their ability to pay it off that affects the Revenue Budget. She reflected that interest rates were almost zero when the Conservatives grew the debt to £200m, those interest rates had gone up and borrowing costs were now £13m which is 11% of the budget. The statutory unbudgeted social care was the cause of reserves being halved because the costs were not optional, the numbers of people accessing care had remained stable within 2% but they were unbudgeted at the time of the budget and should never have happened. She stated that they would not be repeating the mistakes of the previous administration where no plans were in place with a Transformation Subcommittee that never met. The Transformation Boards was already in place, project resource had been provided with proposals made by officers, backed by plans and overseen by the Executive leadership and then reported to Cabinet.

Councillor Jones reflected on the potential impact of four police officers working with one officer per shift across the whole borough each day. She did not consider that a good deal, believed the money should be spent on Community Wardens and stated it was a disgrace to see their numbers reduced.

Councillor Jones continued that she would welcome any ideas for increased revenue generation but was surprised that those mentioning these opportunities had not already spoken to officers to contribute to the viability of the Council because that was why they were all there. She was surprised due to the comments made that there were no amendments proposed in the budget.

She was surprised to hear from Councillors who had previously voted for the maximum council tax rise for four years in the medium-term budget last year were now saying that this should not happen.

Councillor Jones concluded that their first priority was financial stability. Without it they could not provide the services that the residents want and need without the money to do it. The only way to do that was to put back the financial stability into the Council which had been lost over the last decade.

A recorded vote was held.

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

Budget 2024/25 (Resolution)	
Councillor Neil Knowles	For
Councillor Simon Bond	For
Councillor Clive Baskerville	For
Councillor Adam Bermange	For
Councillor George Blundell	For
Councillor David Buckley	For
Councillor Mandy Brar	For
Councillor Catherine del Campo	For
Councillor Alison Carpenter	Against
Councillor Richard Coe	For
Councillor Suzanne Cross	For
Councillor Carole Da Costa	For
Councillor Wisdom Da Costa	Against
Councillor Devon Davies	For
Councillor Karen Davies	For
Councillor Jack Douglas	For
Councillor Genevieve Gosling	Against
Councillor Jodie Grove	For
Councillor Geoff Hill	For
Councillor Mark Howard	For
Councillor Maureen Hunt	Against
Councillor Lynne Jones	For
Councillor Ewan Larcombe	For
Councillor Sayonara Luxton	Against
Councillor Asghar Majeed	Against
Councillor Siân Martin	For
Councillor Chris Moriarty	For
Councillor Helen Price	For
Councillor Gary Reeves	For
Councillor Joshua Reynolds	For
Councillor Julian Sharpe	Against
Councillor George Shaw	For
Councillor Gurch Singh	For
Councillor John Story	Against
Councillor Helen Taylor	For
Councillor Amy Tisi	For
Councillor Julian Tisi	For
Councillor Simon Werner	For
Carried	

On the proposition of Councillor Jones, Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet member for Finance and seconded by Councillor Werner it was

RESOLVED that the council's approach to balancing the budget be approved:

- i) the net budget for 2024/25 of £118.721m as set out in the main body of the agenda report;**
- ii) Fees and Charges for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix F to the agenda report, noting that this excluded the pitch fees referenced in paragraph 11.4;**
- iii) that delegated authority be given to the Executive Director of Place, in consultation with the Cabinet member for Communities and Leisure, to**

COUNCIL - 29.02.24

approve the final amount to be charged for the Outdoor Facilities section of Fees and Charges, set out in the Appendix F to the agenda report, as referenced in paragraph 11.4;

- iv) the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts for the purposes outlined in Appendix G of the agenda report;
- v) the statement of MRP policy contained in Appendix H to the agenda report under the heading Minimum Revenue Provision;
- vi) the Capital Strategy 2024/25 as set out in Appendix H to the agenda report;
- vii) the consolidated Capital Programme for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix I of the agenda report;
- viii) that delegated authority be given to the Executive Director of Place and the S151 Officer, in consultation with the Cabinet member for Finance to approve the inclusion of the proposed PSDS project, subject to business case;
- ix) the breakdown of projects with the highway resurfacing programme as detailed in Appendix J to the agenda report;
- x) the breakdown of projects within the footway maintenance and construction programme as detailed in Appendix J to the agenda report;
- xi) the Treasury Management Strategy for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix K to the agenda report, including the Treasury Management Policies and Lending Counterparty Criteria;
- xii) the prudential indicators as set out in Appendix K to this report, including the Operational and Authorised limits for external borrowing;
- xiii) the allocation of the £165.017m Dedicated Schools Grant as set out in Appendix L to the agenda report; and
- xiv) the updated Pay Policy Statement for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix M to the agenda report.

Apology

The Mayor closed the meeting by issuing an apology to Sarah Walker for the way she was heckled during her submission earlier in the evening noting it was unacceptable and if the Council was going to encourage people to take part in local democracy then they should have behaved better.

The meeting, which started at 7.00 pm, ended at 10.08 pm.