

**AT A MEETING OF THE BOROUGH COUNCIL held in the Council Chamber -  
Town Hall, Maidenhead on Tuesday, 22nd February, 2022**

PRESENT: The Mayor (Councillor John Story), The Deputy Mayor (Councillor Gary Muir)

Councillors John Baldwin, Clive Baskerville, Christine Bateson, Gurpreet Bhangra, Simon Bond, John Bowden, Mandy Brar, Catherine Del Campo, David Cannon, Stuart Carroll, Gerry Clark, David Coppinger, Jon Davey, Karen Davies, Phil Haseler, Geoff Hill, David Hilton, Maureen Hunt, Andrew Johnson, Greg Jones, Lynne Jones, Neil Knowles, Ewan Larcombe, Ross McWilliams, Samantha Rayner, Joshua Reynolds, Julian Sharpe, Shamsul Shelim, Gurch Singh, Donna Stimson, Chris Targowski, Helen Taylor, Amy Tisi, Leo Walters and Simon Werner

Officers: Andrew Durrant, Adele Taylor, Andrew Vallance, Louisa Dean, Duncan Sharkey, Louise Freeth, Kevin McDaniel, Hilary Hall, Dean Graham, David White, Ollie Cassells, David Cook, Karen Shepherd and Elaine Browne

63. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors Luxton and Price.

64. COUNCIL MINUTES

**RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 25 January 2022 be approved.**

65. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared.

66. MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS

The Mayor had submitted in writing details of engagements that the Mayor and Deputy Mayor had undertaken since the last ordinary meeting. These were noted by Council.

67. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

**a) Ed Wilson of Clewer and Dedworth West ward asked the following question of Councillor Hilton, Cabinet Member for Finance and Ascot:**

Will the Lead Member advise when RBWM will repay its' short-term debt and how this will impact the Council's revenue budget?

Written response: *Based on the current forecast of future capital cashflows the Council is projecting to have repaid all of its short-term debt by the end of 2035/36. Based on current assumptions of future interest rates the cost of this debt is projected to peak at £2.540m per year in 2024/25 before gradually decreasing to zero by 2036/37. The average cost of short-term debt is projected to be £1.470m per year from 2022/23 to 2035/36.*

By way of a supplementary question, Ed Wilson commented that the fact the borough had a plan to repay its short term debt would be news to many residents. He asked how Councillor Hilton was proposing to share the news with residents?

Councillor Hilton responded that, as always, the council was very open and transparent in its financial dealings. The report included the capital cashflow document which showed that over the medium term (to 2035/36) the projected receipts would be £163m more than the projected spend. This was the reason why it was believed that in the medium term debt could be zero. He would consider whether more should be done to promote this, including in *Around the Royal Borough*.

**b) Ed Wilson of Clewer and Dedworth West ward asked the following question of Councillor Johnson, Leader of the Council:**

What steps has RBWM taken to ensure that it does not follow the example of Slough Borough Council and become bankrupt?

Written response: *One of the core messages from the Slough Governance review for the Secretary of State was the importance of good financial governance. This is a message already understood by RBWM from the CIPFA review presented to Cabinet in June 2020. As such, many actions have been taken to strengthen financial governance. These include:*

- *Establishment of a robust medium-term financial strategy that underpins our budget setting. This allows us to budget in the context of challenges in future years, rather than narrowly focusing on the year in question.*
- *Development of a transformation plan which will link to this medium-term financial strategy, as it will be a key enabler of achieving the significant savings required in future years.*
- *Establishment of a Capital Board and the strengthening of links between capital and revenue budgets, so the impact of capital schemes on the revenue budget is understood.*
- *On debt, reporting of debt has been strengthened and bad debt provisions reviewed to ensure they are appropriate.*
- *Partnership arrangements have been reviewed and actions implemented, including Optalis, AfC and the Property Company.*
- *New internal auditors have been appointed, allowing a fresh pair of eyes on our processes.*
- *Audit and Governance Committee has been established to facilitate greater Member scrutiny of financial matters.*

*As well as these specific actions from the CIPFA action plan, the finance team has been reviewed and strengthened, with the recent appointments of a new Chief Accountant and Senior Finance Business Partner. The finance team recognises that further change and improvements will be required to achieve the excellent financial management standards to which we aspire.*

By way of a supplementary question, Ed Wilson commented that Slough Borough Council had gone bust despite having one of the highest council tax levels in the Thames Valley. The written response had not referred to council tax. He asked if

RBWM would not raise council tax in the way seen in Slough and avoid the fate of that once proud council.

Councillor Johnson responded that the Royal Borough was in no way in a similar position to Slough. The council had a sound and credible financial plan. On the core issue of council tax, he was proud that during a cost of living crisis, the borough charged residents less than a failed socialist council. This meant hundreds of pounds in residents' pockets.

**c) John Affleck (not a resident of the borough) asked the following question of Councillor Carroll, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Children's Services, Health and Mental Health:**

**What is the proposed total expenditure per head for each child in care in 2022/23 and how many children are currently in care?**

Written response: *The total budget 2022/23 for Children in Care direct costs is £9.8m which, based on the current total number of Children in Care of 134, equates to £73,000 per child. In addition to these direct costs are the cost of staffing and other associated operational costs.*

By way of a supplementary question, John Affleck asked if the council would, to further protect the 134 children in care, break the non-disclosure agreement made in 2006, as the council had now compensated 15 children for the abuse they suffered, with the last settlement just two months previously. He asked if the council would continue to spend a miniscule amount of the 2022 budget to prove or disprove his claim of corruption outlined in a document he had offered to councillors and on his website 'www.rbwm.exposed'

Councillor Carroll responded that any allegation of child abuse should be taken extremely seriously. Safeguarding would always be a number one priority for the borough. In terms of the specific allegations, he urged Mr Affleck to take any evidence he had to the police. Councillor Carroll explained that he had explored the legal position with officers and there were legal specifications and stipulations which he could not breach in his response as he would be breaching the law.

**d) John Affleck (not a resident of the borough) will ask the following question of Councillor Carroll, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Children's Services, Health and Mental Health:**

**There have been 24 successful claims of sexual abuse at the Green Field House children's home, RBWM agreed the latest settlement two months ago in December 2021, does the council have a budget to pay any future compensation claims?**

Written response: *The Council inherited the responsibility for dealing with claims arising from the Berkshire County Council children's home and has suitable insurance arrangements in place to ensure claims are appropriately settled.*

*We hold an earmarked reserve for legal claims. The value of this is estimated at £1.1m at the end of this financial year. It is externally valued every 2 years (the last one in 2020) and the current level of reserves is sufficient on the light of this valuation.*

By way of a supplementary question, John Affleck commented that he wished the record to show that his previous supplementary question had not been answered. He commented that if the council did the honourable thing to break the non-disclosure agreement and refund the money in full, unfortunately the refund would exceed the council's reserve of £1.1m. In July 2014 the Home Secretary and Maidenhead MP, Theresa May, made three promises to the nation: a full investigation into child abuse, maximum transparency, and exposure of individuals and institutions that had failed to protect children. He asked if the 2022 Conservative Council would do the right thing and break the corrupt non-disclosure agreement.

Councillor Carroll reiterated that any allegation or evidence of corruption needed to be taken to the police for full investigation. He took any allegation of child abuse very seriously but he had already explained the context of the legal situation. The council had invested significantly in safeguarding and children's services. The budget before Members that evening included further increased investment in this area.

**e) Mark Loader of Oldfield ward asked the following question of Councillor Hilton, Cabinet Member for Finance and Ascot:**

On page 242 of the package we have 'Major Capital Cashflows - Proposed and agreed'. Under Capital receipts it shows 6. Development partnership receipts it shows total receipts of £329 million being received cumulatively up to 2035/36. Please can you provide the breakdown by source of those capital receipts and are you confident they are realisable?

Written response: *This information is commercially sensitive and therefore not available to release.*

By way of a supplementary question, Mark Loader commented that he had taken part in the budget consultation. It had been difficult to know if the appropriate level of services were being delivered without the detail of KPIs or comparisons with other councils. The report showed the development partnerships receipts as £329m up to 2035/36. He thought that sources of that figure should be transparent as a matter of public interest but the written answer had stated the information was commercially sensitive. Mr Loader commented that the housing quota would require investment in infrastructure. He asked how people could therefore be confident that the projected net capital receipts would be realised.

Councillor Hilton responded that he had a level of confidence that they would be realised. This was based on forecasts made by professional officers who understood land values, values which had historically continued to rise. It was unlikely that the figure would be exactly £329m but it would be close. The margin allowed between income from those receipts and the planned spending was £162m which gave some headroom.

**f) Adam Bermange of Boyn Hill ward will ask the following question of Councillor Johnson, Leader of the Council:**

I am concerned to see that there does not appear to be any funding in the Capital Budget for the community facilities relocation project described in the withdrawn Cabinet report from September 2021. Please could the Leader give an update on this project?

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

Written response: *The report was referred to the Communities Overview & Scrutiny Panel; the Panel is currently developing a scoping document to ensure appropriate scrutiny takes place.*

By way of a supplementary question, Adam Bermange commented that he was pleased that the Overview and Scrutiny Panel were looking at the issue but he remained concerned for the future of the community groups on the council land at Holmanleaze, including the mosque that was in desperate need of more space and had been treated poorly. There were 120 more homes to be squeezed onto BLP allocation site AL9 and he could only assume that the £1.75m capital receipt from the JV partner was included in the Treasury Management strategy even whilst the new facility investment was not. Mr Bermange therefore asked Councillor Johnson if he agreed that the 'do nothing' option was simply not an option and would he share which of the proposals already presented he preferred.

Councillor Johnson responded that the council remained committed to deliver the objectives in the report including providing better facilities for community groups currently on the site and facilitating the expansion of the educational offering in relation to Maidenhead Mosque and the fantastic work it did for the community. He provided assurance that the council was committed to all of the objectives in the paper. However he highlighted that the council could not begin to allocate funding envelopes until discussions with leaseholders had progressed further. The report would be brought forward as soon as was practically possible.

### 68. PETITIONS

No petitions were submitted.

### 69. REFERRALS FROM OTHER BODIES

#### i) Appointment of Local External Auditors

Members considered the recommendation from the Audit and Governance Committee.

Councillor Hilton Council explained that Council was asked to approve that RBWM remained part of the Public Sector Auditor Appointments (PSAA) collective procurement arrangement to appoint an External Auditor from the 2023/24 financial year, on the grounds that the approach was most likely to achieve best value in a restricted market and avoided the need and cost of the council itself undertaking a complex and time-consuming procurement process.

The council had the option of appointing an auditor independently or remaining part of the Public Sector Auditor appointments.

Councillor Hilton explained that over the years audit fees had gradually reduced but during 2019 a number of financial crises and failures in the private sector led to a focus on the quality of their work. A national drive to improve audit quality had created a major pressure for audit firms to ensure full compliance with regulatory requirements and expectations in every audit they undertook. Firms had asked their audit teams to undertake additional work to gain deeper levels of assurance. This had led to

lengthened audits, increased costs, and just as importantly an effective reduction in audit capacity.

Against this backdrop it would be very challenging for the council to independently appoint an auditor. Indications were that the S151 officers of the Berkshire unitary authorities were minded to sign up to the Public Sector Auditor Appointments, and as they shared the Royal County of Berkshire Pension Fund they saw merit, if it could be achieved, of using the same auditor. The Audit and Governance Committee had supported the recommendation.

It was proposed by Councillor Hilton, seconded by Councillor Johnson, and:

**RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That Council notes the report and:**

**Approves that RBWM remains part of the public sector auditor appointments (PSAA) collective procurement arrangement to appoint an external auditor from the 2023/24 financial year, on the grounds that this approach is most likely to achieve best value in a restricted market and avoids the need and cost of the council itself undertaking a complex and time-consuming procurement process.**

ii) 2022/23 Budget

Members considered the recommendation from Cabinet. It was noted that updated versions of Appendix 1 Annex I2 and I3 had been published.

Councillor Hilton thanked Directors and officers across the council for their professionalism and the way they had worked with their respective Cabinet Members and particularly the finance team. The budget continued to build upon the strong financial foundation laid down in 2020 which, despite the challenge of COVID, would deliver three years of underspends.

Councillor Hilton stated that he was presenting an investment budget. A budget that consolidated hard-won gains and delivered the new 2021-26 Corporate Plan. A plan and budget that continued the transformation and modernisation programme that ensured the sustainability of crucial frontline services; harnessed the power of new technology and latest expert thinking; and put the needs of residents at the heart of everything the council did to create a community-centric and data-driven organisation.

Innovation in adult social care continued with investment in new technologies to support residents' independence. Brain in Hand and MySense had been launched in January. In the first two years of the transformation programme adult social care would deliver £5m of savings, achieved against the backdrop of Covid-19, increasing costs and the frailty of residents. New staff would strengthen the housing service to ensure that residents sleeping rough or facing homelessness received the best possible support. £1.2million would be invested in John West house to expand the intensive support services provided there. To encourage recycling rates to rise, the municipal waste collection had been moved to a bi-weekly service and was on track to achieve 50% recycling by 2025 with current rates of 48.3%.

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

Councillor Hilton was proud of the support the top performing Adult and Children's Social Care teams provided to the most vulnerable residents. The council had led the campaign to retain the Frimley Integrated Care System (ICS), England's most successful. As part of the Frimley ICS the Royal Borough had a productive partnership with the Clinical Commissioning Group and other health partners including GPs. Working with them all, the excellent Adult Social Care team was creating a seamless service between health and social care. To ensure support continued, £50 million was committed to Adults, Health and Commissioning.

To maintain support for young people, Children's Services had required additional staff to managed increased demand for domestic abuse and statutory services, this investment and the increased cost of placements continued. The Children's Services budget would be increased by £3m, rising to £27m, with another £8m of investment committed over the following four years.

The budget would drive investment in the future of the borough and supported local economic recovery through the capital programme; the Vicus Way Car Park, equipped with vehicle charging points, would be completed in 2022. The £30 Million Broadway car park supported the redevelopment of the Nicholson's Centre that would transform an outdated shopping centre into a vibrant, mixed-use quarter. Work had started on the Landing and the vital regeneration of Maidenhead was truly underway. New housing, new retail, new offices, evening leisure venues and the arrival of the Elizabeth Line would make Maidenhead a 'go to' place for people and attract significant investment.

Councillor Hilton highlighted that it was not just about Maidenhead. The council was in active discussions with the Princes Foundation to crystallise the ambitious plans for Windsor. The £2.3 million project to enhance the public realm would improve the visitor experience and support the retail and hospitality economy, which did so much to support vital public services. Inspired by the Ascot, Sunninghill and Sunningdale Neighbourhood Plan, adoption of the Borough Local Plan would enable the rejuvenation of Ascot to proceed.

In support of the Corporate Plan an investment of £300,000 was made to align with the national bus strategy. To deliver real change the council would need a fair share of the government's £3bn 'Bus Back Better' funding. The council would invest £1.5 million to improve cycling infrastructure and increase cycling across the borough. It was also developing a Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan which would enhance the chances of success in future Government funding rounds.

With the Joint Venture partners, the council was creating a ladder of housing opportunity. The first phase of the Watermark development neared completion and planning had been approved for St Clouds Way; together these schemes would deliver 668 new homes. Adoption of the Borough Local Plan confirmed the provision of 2,600 homes, primary and secondary schools, new and enhanced open spaces, community and health facilities on the South West Maidenhead Strategic Placemaking Area, which those seeking a decent place to live would welcome. There was a growing focus on affordable housing with the council taking the lead on affordable rents. In the past year 57 homes were completed and planning had been approved for a further 193 affordable homes.

The council was taking bold action to tackle climate change and improve the natural environment. In recognition that the council could not deliver zero carbon on its own it was establishing a Climate Partnership which many businesses and organisations had

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

already agreed to join. To illustrate the power of partnership working, the council's pension manager had signed up to the Net Zero Asset Manager initiative, joining 220 global investment businesses who managed \$60 trillion of assets, half the global assets under management. Their commitment to net zero emissions by 2050 was a massive boost to the cause.

The Oaks Leisure Centre remained a key administration priority. It was also committed to working with the Environment Agency to identify and progress affordable and deliverable flood alleviation schemes that would protect residents' homes from flooding in Datchet and Wraybury.

The robust budget was agreed after considering all the options however, the budget consultation highlighted residents wished the council to promote the arts. The council understood the importance of the arts but had waited until a consultant's report on Norden Farm was published. Guided by the report it would add £140,000 to support Norden Farm and Old Court.

For 2022/23, the council was proposing a lower than inflation Council Tax increase of 1.99% together with a 1% Adult Social Care Precept. Councillor Hilton was confident that residents would not begrudge the additional average 65 pence a week they would pay to support the most vulnerable residents. The council tax, the lowest outside of London, would be between £280 and £500 less than its neighbours and demonstrated the council was on the side of residents in challenging times.

Councillor Hilton explained that officers had considered changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme prior to setting the draft budget but had agreed this was not a year to make change. The remaining government hardship grant would be considered at year end to see if any further one-off mitigations could put in place. During 2022/23 the scheme would be kept under review

Councillor Hilton summarised that in the past three years the council had taken difficult decisions, consistently delivered underspends on the revenue budget, and put the council's finances on a more sustainable footing. It had transformed services and kept taxes low, whilst investing in roads, health, education and leisure infrastructure, improved support for the vulnerable and expanded financial support for businesses. In delivering the Corporate Plan, in the medium term, if it chose, debt could be reduced to zero. Guided by the Corporate Plan, the council's strengthened corporate capacity to deliver improvement and transformation, and monitored by the emerging new performance management system, the council was well placed to continue transformation with innovation and opportunity, with financial responsibility at its heart.

Councillor Johnson seconded the motion. He endorsed all the comments made by Councillor Hilton. He thanked officers for their due diligence and hard work pulling the budget together in the most difficult circumstances and for accurate predictions in relation to the local government financial settlement. He highlighted that this would be the third year in a row that an underspend had been achieved as a result of clear financial management and stability. The proposed budget was fully costed, had been fully consulted on, and would be delivered. The draft budget had been brought to Cabinet one month earlier than previously to give additional time for the public consultation. Councillor Johnson stated that it was an investment budget, not one likely to facilitate savage cuts year on year or a spiral of decline. No alternative proposals for a budget had been put forward. The council would continue to invest in core services, focussing on people, infrastructure and the priorities of residents, delivered with the lowest possible increase in council tax and retaining the status of



## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

lowest council tax in Berkshire and the lowest in England outside of London. There had been no clarity from the Opposition as to how they would balance the budget.

Councillor Jones, as Opposition Spokesperson, thanked the finance team for their work in ensuring a balanced budget and officers across the council for their efforts in providing the best services possible despite the volatile financial situation. Councillor Jones had seen, time and time again, the administration berate the Opposition for not being able to produce an alternative budget. She therefore wished to highlight the role of the Opposition in the budget process. Opposition Members could only propose amendments to the administration's final proposed budget that had been approved on 10 February 2022. The Independent group and the Liberal Democrats had submitted their views on the draft budget for consideration during the consultation, including the negative impact the cessation of arts funding would have on those organisations.

The Opposition could suggest, challenge, and hold to account, but the responsibility of setting the budget always lay with the Cabinet. The borough deserved transparency, truth and to trust their local politicians. The borough deserved better. The basics of the budget was that there was no option but to raise council tax by the maximum allowed, in 2022/23 and for the next four years. Despite these increases it would still be necessary to find another £13m of savings by February 2026.

During the last two administrations there had been a reduction in the services offered by the council. The Children's Centre offer had been reduced. Libraries had been closed or hours reduced, despite being subsidised by parish councils. There was now no council headquarters in Windsor despite the promises by the Conservative administration. York House had been rented out to shore up the budget. Community Wardens had been reduced from a promised 25 to 6. Councillor Jones asked where the social housing was that had been promised year on year by the administration. The Assisted Transport scheme had been reduced by stealth; the system changed in a way that was not compatible with how residents used it. The promised Oaks leisure centre had been mothballed. The promised funding for the River Thames Scheme evaporated, without a plan B.

In relation to waste collection, Councillor Jones commented that a change of contract ended up costing in excess of £850,000 for a reduction in collections, and the financial details were still not transparent. She also highlighted the amount of officer and Member time spent on resolving waste collection issues. The officer core had been hollowed out with the unseen impact on skillsets, planning, strategy, democracy and evidenced policies and decision making. This had become obvious within the originally deficient Borough Local Plan and the lack of strategic policies in place to drive the direction of the council. The council leadership team was trying to recruit to fill those gaps in the skillset but it was being held back by the lack of funding to pay for the best people for those positions.

In February 2013 Councillor Jones had highlighted that the selling of council assets for development was the only way the administration could ultimately pay for their cuts to council tax. This was exactly what was happening. Land assets were being sold to pay off the Conservative debts built up by the borrowing to fund high profile, headline grabbing projects. The 2022/23 budget was set in place by decisions made up to five years previously, including outsourcing, pushing for cheaper and cheaper contracts without assessing the impact on the quality of service, the loss of knowledge and

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

control through redundancies and spending on projects running up the council's debt, without having guaranteed income that could be realised.

The Opposition had suggested options, challenged decisions and held the administration to account, and had been consistently ignored. There was a paper coming to Cabinet regarding the return of the highway engineers to an in-house service which Councillor Jones supported wholeheartedly. She highlighted that in January 2017 she had challenged the decision to outsource the specialised and knowledgeable team. She had called in the decision to scrutiny, challenging response times, lack of control, and communication with partners and Members. The Conservative Members had ignored her concerns and voted in favour of outsourcing, despite there being no evidence to support the move.

The Opposition had spoken out against the original BLP submission document. It had challenged that it was deficient and there was insufficient evidence to support the assertions made. The Opposition had been ignored but the inspector had agreed with them and it had taken an inordinate amount of officer time to get it to its current state. There was still much more to do regarding the supplementary planning documents to complete it. This had made the whole process unnecessarily costly. The borough deserved better.

The stranglehold that the administration continued to place on the Overview and Scrutiny process, despite two consecutive Peer Group reviews calling for change, restricted the only mechanism that enabled true challenge to take place. Councillor Jones requested that the administration either welcome challenge and collegiate decision making going forward, or stop pretending to care what the Opposition thought.

Councillor Jones welcomed the Finance Director's insistence that to increase spend in one area would mean a reduction from another. The accounts for month 8 (November) indicated that there would be a predicted underspend of £101,000 for the 2021/22 financial year. The administration obviously had information that she was not aware of as they had allocated £140,000 as a grant to arts provision. She was fully in support of this in principle, but it was not guaranteed and would depend on costs incurred to the end of the financial year. However should there be an increase to the current year's underspend, above £140,000, she proposed that it be added to the grants total and used to support voluntary community groups that were so essential for providing help and activities to residents especially coming out of Covid and the isolation that accompanied the pandemic.

Councillor Jones also asked that the Opposition, through scrutiny, be involved in the promised review of the residents parking scheme. She personally believed it was imperative for Windsor Town Centre that it be expanded to cover Victoria Car Park should finances allow. Looking further into the future, all contracts should be reviewed to assess whether a better service could be provided if they were returned 'in-house'. Ensuring the quality of service across the outsourced and transformed departments needed to be the council's highest priority. Continually chasing issues and returning to the same job was timewasting and costly.

The Medium Term Financial Strategy was to be refreshed and needed to be closely aligned with the Corporate Plan and the Medium Term budget. The aim, as a council, was to deliver the Corporate Plan objectives. There would be a cost to this and the

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

budget needed to reflect those costs. If it did not then the council would not be able to afford to deliver those objectives.

The Medium Term Financial Plan was mapped out against a period of uncertainty. The Fair Funding Review, Levelling Up and Adult Social Care funding reform would impact the council. There was not enough information to include any pressures in the 2022/23 budget papers, but paragraph 5.2.4 highlighted that although the 22/23 settlement from central government included nearly £3m in additional grant, this could be 'one-off' and may not be available in the following year. It was stated that general reserves were forecast to be £7.1m, marginally above minimum level. The optimum was nearly twice that level and the council was currently not in a position to increase them. This was identified as a key risk. Appendix 1 paragraphs 1.3 and 1.6 it highlighted the current situation:

*'With low levels of reserves and one of the lowest levels of Council Tax... coupled with increasing levels of borrowing' .....it.. 'has made the position more challenging'*

*'The position... is more acute than other councils due to... low levels of reserves.... Insufficient to cover future projected funding shortfalls.'*

Councillor Jones commented that when this was added to substantial levels of borrowing (£238m in 2024/25) and the cost of borrowing (up to £8.6m annually) it was clear why this was a key risk to the future financial sustainability of the council. The council's history of delivering savings had not been impressive over the years, but she was really pleased that officers were now closely monitoring the figures over the year.

There was no option, the council must deliver the savings the officers had identified to ensure a balanced budget. The budget was very constrained by the financial situation. Councillor Jones was sure every Member could identify an area that needed further resource and that needed to happen if it could.

Councillor Jones had asked herself if she could vote for a budget that balanced but where the decision making processes had been flawed. She made a number of suggestions:

- Any further unallocated underspends be added to the grants budget
- A cross-party review of the resident discount parking scheme
- Arts funding be put into the base budget
- A commitment to ensuring Overview and Scrutiny had the resources and the voice to allow it to play an active part in collegiate decision making.

Councillor Jones concluded that there was now an opportunity for the administration to listen to the Opposition and collectively work towards making the best decisions for the council and its residents, because the borough deserved nothing less.

Councillor Wisdom Da Costa commented that he wished to open eyes as to the fallacy of the budget and the budget setting process, and set out a proposal to help the council meet the financial and other crises it faced. Councillor Da Costa used the analogy of Rose and Jack from the film *Titanic*, two partners so in love with each other, close enough to be intoxicated with each other's scent on the prow of the Titanic. He commented that the budget was rather like that image of Rose and Jack, a snapshot in time, blissful in its presentation of revenue and costs.

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

Councillor Da Costa commented that all knew how Jack and Rose's story ended, sunk by the mismanagement of the ship Titanic. Moving too fast, with little scrutiny, to avoid the rocky iceberg in front of them. Charting a perilous navigation through hazard ridden waters, on an ego trip to show they had the lowest journey time, only they never got there. The good ship Titanic lay submerged beneath the icy and rising waters of the North Atlantic with the loss of thousands of lives.

Councillor Da Costa commented that the RBWM Budget was rather like that, a beautiful snapshot as it planned a 'gung ho' ride into the dangerous flux of climate change. The council was planning to spend virtually nothing in the budget when other councils were committing £7m (Cambridgeshire) £50m (Wokingham), £192m (Manchester) and £400m (Brent) to be ready for the fight. There were no plans and measures to see carbon emissions radically reduce in the borough quickly enough to avoid climate change. The Corporate Plan did not place climate change, climate resilience, plastic pollution and biodiversity salvation as some of its key criteria to be used when producing all future Local plans, future planning documents, any future spending, and the outsourced contracts of a £100m operation. Councillor Da Costa invited people to imagine the success if the council focused that annual £100m with a climate and environmental bent.

Instead, the council continued its ego trip to trumpet one of the lowest possible council taxes. However the cost saving did not get individuals very far, especially for those on a lower income or in higher need brackets, a young person or a family. Councillor Da Costa wished to end the fallacious approach and assess the budget together with the council's five year plan to see where it would end up, and against the Corporate Plan to see whether anything was achieved.

Councillor Da Costa did not want the future of the borough's children to be sunk under the rising waters of climate change and polluted food chains as the council failed to invest appropriately. He did not want the next generation disabled by dangerous outcomes fuelled by unhealthy objectives contained in the Corporate Plan and, worrying implications in the navigation charts of the council's 5 year plan as the council struck hazard after hazard unprepared. The council needed to keep a look out for hazards through improved scrutiny using capable leaders, usually Opposition Members, as chairs on Scrutiny Panels. Councillor Da Costa urged Members to vote against the budget and to change the constitution so that the 5-year plan was reviewed at the same time as future budgets, collaboratively and with the implications of the Corporate Plan in mind.

Councillor Werner commented that he had sat through many council budgets over the years; this would be his 29<sup>th</sup>. Over and over, the Conservatives seemed to make the same mistakes, the same attempts to predict the savings before they had worked out how to do them, the same impossible-to-meet income targets, and the utter inability to listen to anyone else be that residents, experts, or opposition councillors.

The comments about alternative budgets just showed a basic ignorance of how council budgets were created. Work on a budget did not start in November but as soon as the previous one was passed, if not before. Every decision that was made over the year had an effect on the budget for the next year, for instance saving money by insourcing a service would allow the saving to be allocated in the following budget. He understood that £0.5m pounds more would be spent on the waste contract so that it offered less of a service, which was bizarre if not incompetent. Councillor Werner

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

highlighted what else could have been done with £0.5m. It could have been used to put the council at the centre of the community again. It was now too late now to put a budget amendment as the money had been committed; £0.5m for less of a service. There were many other examples of financial initiatives that should have been taken; initiatives he had mentioned over and over again.

In relation to insourcing, Councillor Werner commented that research over the last few years had demonstrated that insourcing actually both saved money and improved services. In relation to invest to save, if the council was going to escape the spiral of decline it needed to be turning its assets into revenue raising assets rather than just selling them off cheaply. The council was charging CIL in all of the borough but not in Maidenhead Town Centre where a huge amount of development was going on. One report he had seen said that with the Nicholson's Development the council had sacrificed something like £16 million. In relation to commercialisation, Councillor Werner was interested in what the council was doing to sell services to other councils and other organisations. A few years ago the council sold off a fantastic team who were experts in putting in bids. Now, with the failure to get some grants that were available, including the Active Travel Grant, this had been shown as short sighted. Councillor Werner commented that these were all practical initiatives that would reverse the spiral of decline but by and large had been ignored up to now.

Councillor Werner referred to a quote from Einstein that the definition of stupidity was repeating the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. He therefore named the 2022/23 budget as the 'stupidity theory budget'.

Councillor Del Campo reported that a resident had recently written to her to say the administration knew the cost of everything but the value of nothing. The idea that everything must pay for itself had been the theme for the last 15 years. Councillor Del Campo gave the example of creches at the sports centres. The one in Maidenhead had been closed in 2010 and the one in Windsor in 2014 because they were losing money. However this was a social investment with wider benefits including the opportunity for people to exercise and take care of their physical and mental health. Instead, parents were advised to go to more costly day care centres. Youth clubs had been closed to all but the most needy and breastfeeding support services had been lost. Valuable signposting opportunities had also been lost. The administration claimed to value the arts but the approach to date had been shoddy. Councillor Del Campo had tried to get the issue on the agenda for an Overview and Scrutiny Panel but it had been blocked because she was told it was not the right time when sensitive discussions were being held. The December expert report had warned Norden Farm would become a hall for hire if funding was stopped; this had been known since March 2021 when she had asked the Chief Executive at Norden Farm what the impacts of grant funding cuts would be. Councillor Del Campo had suggested to officers a three year rolling commitment should be given to enable the organisations to plan ahead.

Councillor Del Campo commented that the administration had tried to distance itself from the previous Conservative administration's failed financial policy. In June 2020 the current leader had described it as a cultural failure of epic proportions and apologised for not listening to Opposition Members, however they continued to be ignored. The current administration was not as different to the previous one as it claimed to be.

Councillor Baldwin explained he had undertaken a word search of the final report to pick out key themes: inflation received 42 mentions; Covid received 41 mentions and

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

transformation received 40 mentions. The Transformation of Government report of 2005 defined transformation as 'the design of citizen-centric services to ensure effectiveness of delivery to the customer, achieve policy goals and to release savings by reducing duplication and streamlining processes'. He hoped that no one would argue against reducing duplication and streamlining processes however there were only so many times the well could be visited to cut costs. Yes the medium term financial plan predicted more cuts through to 2026/27 of a further £12.4m. This suggested to Councillor Baldwin that the major contribution transformation could make would fall exclusively on non-delivery to the customer.

In relation to covid 19, Councillor Baldwin thanked all those who had sacrificed so much. No politician should seek to use it to shield themselves from previous mistakes. In relation to inflation Councillor Baldwin had spoken to a few economists to test the assumptions in the budget. Their view had been that the exceptionally high inflation currently being experienced would persist through 2022 before slowly settling to a still high but more sustainable rate of approximately 3%. This was definitely not as rosy a picture as presented in the budget and therefore a more serious threat. Councillor Baldwin understood that the inflation risks in contracted services were mitigated by fixing rises to an index. However the real world impact would be felt by residents in the subtle under-delivery of services. The budget included a pay award of 2%, carried forward in the MTFP for 2026/27. This was actually a real terms pay cut that would cause real hardship for many. The risk assessment stated that any pay award would go some way to help maintain staff morale; Councillor Baldwin felt this would not go very far.

Councillor Davey explained that Councillor Helen Price could not be present and had therefore asked him to read out her speech.

*In my Ward of Clewer and Dedworth East residents are living in severe deprivation; residents who cannot afford both heating and eating. I've been putting my energies into seeking out sources of financial support and alerting residents to try and prevent these families going hungry or being cold. In addition, for some months I have been lobbying for more support for our residents who are facing the cost of living crisis, and we're all well aware that more of our families are going to be adversely affected. I therefore welcome the announcement at Cabinet earlier this month that a group has been set up to address how such residents can be reached and supported. Whilst I would have preferred that residents on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme would not be facing a doubling of their council tax next year, a decision made by this Council two years ago, I have been assured that those facing extreme hardship due to this increase and the cost of living crisis will receive financial support.*

*The written responses from community groups are now available, but were not at the Cabinet meeting when I asked questions on the budget. How are the points raised by community groups being addressed? To take just one, the newly-formed Youth Council, which has produced a well-considered response. It asked about home to school transport, libraries, the climate partnership, Youth Voice Youth Choice, therapy services, and their greatest concern, street lighting. And yet none of this was addressed by Cabinet. So are their concerns going to be ignored or considered at this meeting?*

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

Councillor Davey commented that after 14 years of hurt, the borough deserved better. A recent flyer through his door from the Conservatives described how they had been keeping council tax low for 14 years. He asked why they kept blowing this rusty old trumpet? From his point of view the budget should not be used to play games but it invariably was. In 2018, after years of Conservative mismanagement of funds, RBWM had reserves of 15%, which meant 15% of the council's annual revenue was put to one side in case of emergencies. In comparison, at the same time Bracknell had 45% and Wokingham 56% put aside for a rainy day. Currently the council had reserves of around 7% and the only thing keeping the budget out of the red was the promise of an RBWM lottery that would save the day. Even Alexander Devine Children's Hospice couldn't make that work to their advantage and they had the general public on their side.

Councillor Davey commented that this was all because the Conservatives continued to have their heads in the sand post COVID. While general reserves were down 25% over the last 2 years they still wanted to be seen, even after all the evidence to the contrary, to have the lowest council tax outside of London. He suggested that the administration should start working with officers to come up with some real money-making ideas that did not involve borrowing millions. Most of those in the room recognised you could not make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. If the borough was to have perfect pavements and roads, highways would need a budget of around £100m a year. Legally the council needed a budget in place to be able to operate. RBWM employed hundreds of people and he was not going to put their livelihoods at risk. Councillor Davey concluded that he would therefore be voting for the budget but asked those listening to recognise that after 14 years of hurt, the borough deserved better.

Councillor Coppinger congratulated Councillor Hilton and the finance officers. He commented that the world described by Councillor Jones was not one he recognised. In relation to waste, he accepted there had been issues with waste and recycling collections in the past, but the service was now excellent. The council had committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 at the latest and one of the first steps was to encourage recycling by reducing the frequency of black bin collections from weekly to fortnightly, in line with many other councils. Between October and January black bin waste had decreased by 21.49% and food waste increased by 30.6%. Total recycling year to date was 50.8% and in quarter 3 alone had increased to 54.1%. Vehicles were configured with two separate compartments therefore the returns to base to unload would have increased and too much time would have been taken up in transit. By increasing the number of vehicles and reducing the route size, the recycling capacity had been maximised.

Councillor Coppinger was grateful for the investment in his ward including a catchment study covering Holyport, Oakley Green, Fifield and Bray that would help investment to stop serious flooding, investment in the A308 corridor, and works to improve the Holyport Road junction.

Councillor Hunt was concerned that Councillor Jones had mentioned Overview and Scrutiny but not in a good way. She was not happy with this as she was the chairman of one of the Panels; she was hoping the Members of that Panel were happy. Councillor Werner had also mentioned about outsourcing and a spiral of decline.

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

Councillor Tisi welcomed the refocussing from a fixed role carrying out parental assessment to working with families already receiving support, to try to prevent things from getting worse. Recent high profile cases as well as increased stresses on families showed how vital early intervention was. Councillor Tisi also welcomed the change to bring the temporary accommodation management in house to save money.

Councillor Tisi explained that like her colleagues she had been thinking about how the £0.5m sent on 'bingate' could have been spent in her area. It could have been used to support the breastfeeding network; just £5000 a year would fund the service, help mothers and babies, and reduce long term demand on the NHS. Alternatively, money could have been spent on funding universal services for families and young children, something that had been swept away with the closure of the children's centres. Money could have been spent to upgrade lighting in areas in which young people felt frightened to walk home after dark as identified by the Youth Council. Councillor Tisi commented that her eye had been drawn to a number of savings which, although optimistic, had been tried and failed before, including a cut in the number of children's services agency staff. This was a noble aspiration but the council continued to be reliant on agency staff because permanent staff were difficult to attract, the key barriers being extortionate housing and living costs in the southeast, expensive public transport and a reduction in European workers. The shared lives scheme was an excellent idea first proposed in 2012 yet only five had taken up the offer. She asked what would be different in the next year compared to the past decade to enable the saving to be delivered.

Councillor Singh highlighted a number of issues his residents had faced in the last 12 months. Hedges and grass had not been cut, the streets were filthy and the play areas were unsafe. He had been trying to get two ponds in Kidwells Park maintained for over a year. He had been told there was no funding to repair a leak and he would need to submit a capital bid. After the issue had been highlighted in the local press and on social media one had been repaired and the water fountain restored. He would have gladly welcomed some of the money that had gone to Serco to repair the second pond.

Councillor Singh explained that he had attended a meeting of the Audit and Governance Committee and had been concerned to hear that two years of accounts had not yet been signed off and there had been a considerable number of objections by residents. He was also concerned that the council had lost out on grant funding and requested assurance that the money would not need to be returned to central government. Despite the collegiate talk there had been no engagement with him or his colleagues on the budget. Officers had not been able to answer all his questions about the budget. He therefore requested lead members to involve Opposition Members in the budget process. St Mary's ward had one of the highest levels of deprivation in the borough. With the increase in utility bills and other pressures he asked what package of support would be provided to residents. Given the council achieved a high return on council tax due, he commented that if families struggled to pay, the shortfall could put the council in a serious financial position.

Councillor Bhangra thanked Councillor Hilton and the finance officers for their hard work in preparing the budget in unprecedented times. A balanced budget was proposed despite the ongoing pandemic. He had not seen any credible alternative from Opposition Members. Some had used Norden Farm as a political football, scaremongering by saying there would be no funding and Norden Farm would be a



## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

block of flats. Councillor Bhangra explained that he and Councillor Carroll had worked with Norden Farm and lobbied the Leader to ensure the arts received the support it needed. It had been right that an independent consultant had been appointed to ensure a financially prudent strategy was put in place. It was proposed that £115,000 be allocated to Norden Farm and £25,000 to the Old Court, with ongoing match funding and other opportunities being actively pursued including local business partnerships and sponsorship.

Councillor Stimson explained that in December 2020 the council had set out its environment and climate change strategy to reach net zero by 2050. It knew that with just two officers and funding the plan needed to be conservative. The strategy was criticised for its lack of ambition in that it did not tackle areas that were beyond the council's control, but it did not make sense to councillor Stimson to overpromise, and hence under-deliver, as she had said at the time. She would have loved to spend £100 million on the climate strategy, but she imagined that would not go down well when the council could not deliver its statutory commitments such as children's services and adult social care.

Since the last budget, the team had grown from two to eight members. The council had commissioned ARUP to review 31 council buildings to undertake a heat mapping analysis, installed over £200,000 worth of LED lighting in schools, rolled out automated meters to understand water consumption and quickly identify leaks in the borough, delivered environment education to 1200 children across the borough at Braywick Nature Centre despite the COVID impacting delivery, and had just been awarded a significant amount from the SALIX public decarbonisation fund to retrofit five of the boroughs schools and ensure they were powered by green energy by the start of the new school year.

The environment and climate strategy made it clear that it could not just be for the council to be responsible for the delivery of the strategy and it would require action from central government, the private sector, communities and individuals to deliver the challenging targets. This was one of the reasons for setting up the Climate Partnership. There was a single line item of £250,000 in the 2022/23 budget. This was planned to be put into the budget for the next two years as well, to fund the secretariat that would support the board. It was core funding, which meant that it would cease as soon as the organisation could fund itself, and that needed to be within the three year timeframe at the latest. Businesses that were not delivering sustainability were being increasingly wiped off the stock market. Employees now sought more from their employers than simply a job; they wanted to be proud of who they worked for and produce a product or service that was credible or sustainable. Residents were looking for more from the council in terms of climate action. The partnership sought to address that by partnering with highly sustainable businesses who wanted to invest their ESG funds, schools, charities, landowners, and resident groups. Going forward, there would continue to be officer capability as well as Our Community Enterprise to prepare for government bids, but sustainability benefits would also come from other departments, such as transport, planning and housing.

A similar process to EQIAs was being developed to help support all officers in assessing the Environment and Climate Strategy which should go at the end of reports. Carbon Literacy Training was being rolled out with a first cohort having completed the training already as well as members of the team being trained as trainers to accelerate the roll out. The current interim sustainability position statement

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

was already delivering improvements in sustainability across new developments as well as funding to support decarbonisation efforts. The capital programme included funding for development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and government would also be providing funding to local authorities to support delivery at a county level. There was a strong in-house team to lead on development and delivery of the Biodiversity Action Plan.

Councillor Stimson concluded by thanking the sustainability officers, who did so much with a small budget, and the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council who were both supportive of the development of the Climate Partnership.

Councillor Bateson thanked Councillor Hilton and the finance team for their hard work on the budget. The council was in a better place than a lot of other councils in Berkshire. The Cabinet had worked hard with officers to make savings in their departments in cost effective ways, for example shared services and new transformation models such as in the libraries.

Councillor Clark thanked Councillor Hilton and officers for their extreme diligence and hard work. He highlighted that the budget included £1.5m for walking and cycling. The work that was planned had been carried on by the council although the funding bid had not been successful. Bus services would be supported by £300,000 of funding. The council was dependent on government for grants. Officers in good faith made bids to secure the maximum amount of funding and although he was sad when the bids were not successful, he defended that work. £6m would be invested in highways and infrastructure including for road safety, active travel, bridge refurbishments, street lighting and regeneration.

Councillor Clark commented that the Opposition had urged the council to spend more, but every resident knew that if the council spent more in one area, there was less to spend elsewhere. He had not heard one revenue generating or cost reduction proposal put forward by the Opposition.

Councillor Singh requested a personal explanation. He had asked the lead member if the covid grant funding would need to be returned to central government. He understood there was £1.5m in the pot; if this was returned, he asked if it would leave a hole in the finances. In relation to cost reduction he asked why the administration would not ask Members of the Opposition for ideas rather than going to external consultants

Councillor Werner requested a personal explanation. He reiterated the suggestions he had made in his earlier speech in relation to insourcing, invest to save, CIL, commercialisation and re-investing in the experts in grant applications.

Councillor Werner requested a second personal explanation. He explained that his reference to a spiral of decline was in relation to the council's failure to invest in the community.

Councillor Carroll thanked officers for their work on the budget which was an 'investment in people' budget. The budget proposed continued investment in adult social care to further the principles of independence, enablement and compassion by taking a personal approach to care packages and a greater use of technology. The council would continue to place a high priority on domestic abuse services to protect

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

the most vulnerable. Investment in children's services would build on an already positive legacy with 97% of schools in the borough rated Good or Outstanding. Investment would support critical priorities including safeguarding, prevention and early intervention.

Councillor Carroll confirmed that the views of the Youth Council had been taken into consideration. He had met with representatives from the Youth Council along with Councillor Hilton the previous week to discuss their thoughts and concerns. He had been pleased to confirm funding for arts and therapy services and that the council would be working with the Police and Crime Commissioner in relation to street lighting.

Councillor Carroll explained that the council had invested in the family hub model because an All-Party Parliamentary Group and the Children's Commissioner had recommended the model as best practice to allow a focus on the vulnerable and disadvantaged. He highlighted that £1.7m funding was proposed for public health to support health visits including breastfeeding.

Councillor McWilliams thanked officers and Councillor Hilton. He explained that in housing, investment was proposed for additional private rented sector officers and client services officers to assist homeless households into settled accommodation and prevent homelessness by supporting issues of debt management. The budget included £1.2m investment in the expansion of John West House and the Tap 4 Lasting Change scheme. At least £1.4m in grant funding had already been secured to support homelessness with additional funding being sought. Councillor Carroll had already referenced £240,000 to support the forthcoming Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy. In addition, £4m was included to deliver additional affordable housing.

Councillor McWilliams highlighted that three times as many consultation response had been received then the previous year. Over 450 community groups had been contacted. The largest response related to arts funding which had been responded to. He highlighted that the budget consultation was an initiative introduced by the current administration.

In relation to sports and leisure, statistics from the last few months showed a strong bounce back from COVID. Fitness revenue was back to 93%; total membership back to 95%. The council remained committed to the Oaks Leisure Centre and would be exploring options to deliver it in the new post-COVID world. The council was also looking at options to expand Windsor Leisure Centre which had new facilities opened earlier that day, including a new waterslide funded by RBWM. The budget allowed for additional repair and maintenance work at all leisure centres.

Councillor McWilliams stated that over the last few years and in the context of a global pandemic, the council had taken the difficult decisions to put RBWM's finances on a more sustainable footing. The long-term plan for the borough had seen finances stabilised, services transformed, and taxes kept low, alongside investment into roads, health, education and leisure infrastructure, improved support for vulnerable residents, particularly rough sleepers and those facing homelessness, and expanded financial support for businesses during Covid. The sound financial management would reduce public debt to zero if that was chosen, which would deliver a financial boost to future generations of local people.

Councillor Cannon thanked Councillor Hilton and officers for their work on the budget. He explained that he had listened to all the speeches and as a result he had a few

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

concerns. He had spoken to all his Cabinet colleagues and none were aware of any shadow Member identifying themselves to the relevant Cabinet Member. Councillor Cannon explained the council had a zero tolerance policy on making residents' lives a misery, but it also employed education before enforcement. Earlier in the debate there had been a definition of stupidity given but he believed the reference had been incorrect. The original quote had been that the definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

Councillor Bond commented that the subject of the refuse collection had come up a number of times. In his ward he was still experiencing problems with collections. It seemed that one thing would go wrong which was then amplified by other errors in the system. This had been happening for the last 6 months.

Councillor Bond explained that when he was elected the Advantage Card parking discount scheme was in place, which was then abolished. An alternative was proposed in 2020 but had been aborted within a month. There was now 1 hour free parking in a limited number of car parks starting in April. He was sure that independent businesses and other shops would be in favour of anything that encouraged footfall but they also liked stability and predictability. It was also important that there was no discouragement of alternatives that were better for health and were more environmentally friendly such as walking, cycling or catching the bus. As an occasional bus user he welcomed investment in the services.

Councillor Bond referred to a rule of thumb he found useful that stated 80% of the work to identify savings should be done by this stage. From the wording of some of the savings and the level of unachievable savings from the current year detailed in the financial update, the council did not seem to be there yet. He appreciated a pandemic had occurred but in the year ahead he felt it would be good to get ahead of the curve and put some flesh on the bones of the medium term financial plan. In the revenue, investment and growth bids there was a line described as 'ongoing issues relating to parcels of land, boundary fences and tree maintenance for which there was no current budget'. He assumed that this included a hedge in Belmont ward that was badly overgrown. The area was widely used by families from three wards walking to local schools. In the autumn a team of volunteers had cut it back to make the pavement safe. The leader of the opposition had presented the volunteers with a certificate to thank them for their work. If the allocation in the budget covered that hedge Councillor Bond was sure that the volunteers and everyone in the area would be pleased to see it being dealt with properly by the council in future.

In relation to inflation, Councillor Bond referred to the range of uncertainty. The interest rate assumption was 0.6%. Inflation was now at 5% and heading to 7% therefore the real after inflation interest rate was -5% and rising. This was a peculiar price signal in a market economy; he worried about how it would end and the developing cost of living crisis for residents.

Councillor Haseler acknowledged that the cost of living crisis was an issue but he had also heard criticism of the low council tax level in the borough, which was a confusing message. After the 2019 elections the council had called in CIPFA to review its financial management. Officers had worked hard to bring the finance back on track. The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel had reviewed the CIPFA report in November 2021 and noted that all actions had been implemented or were on track. Therefore the earlier statement about a 'spiral of decline' was not appropriate.

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

Councillor Haseler explained that the draft budget had been scrutinised at an expanded Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel in December 2020. All Members had been invited to submit questions to be answered and to guide the Panel in terms of lines of enquiry. Only four Members had submitted questions. Councillor Haseler thanked Cabinet for the arts funding; he felt Norden Farm was a fantastic community asset.

Councillor Rayner stated that she was proud to be part of an administration and council that two years previously was facing so many severe financial challenges and today was providing success, transformation and making lives better through a sustainable borough of opportunity and innovation, though still mindful of the acute issues such as low reserves.

One service that had faced the challenge was the libraries. Last year the budget showed a £300,000 saving and libraries possibly facing closure. The challenge was enormous but following a 12 week consultation, 35 meetings with residents and community groups and over 1,000 responses to the consultation, funding was secured through partnership working to create a sustainable service which was more closely linked to the community and all 11 libraries were kept open. In the 2022/23 budget the council was looking to increase the access with three pop up libraries and more opportunities with £48,000 in the capital budget. The success of the transformation had been noticed in central government and libraries across the country as a potential blueprint for others. This helped promote RBWM's reputation amongst its peers. The council had responded to the Youth Council letter and engaged with them and had been delighted to hear their ideas.

The recently adopted Corporate Plan was threaded through the budget, giving focus to the future and evidence of the most important challenges to deliver on the priorities, serving residents and the vulnerable and making services simpler, easier to access, faster and better. It would create a council run more efficiently and effectively and spending residents' money more wisely.

Councillor Rayner highlighted the Guildhall in Windsor, which was a key heritage asset and much loved by locals, used for events and housing the museum and tourist information centre. In the budget there was £615,000 for the building repairs. For the amazing local groups and charities the council was able to offer a pot of grant funding in the capital budget of £261,000. The voluntary work they did and lives they changed was enormous; it was a great privilege to be able to help them do their fantastic work.

In relation to the arts, Councillor Rayner stated this was not a U-turn but considered an effective decision making of a well-run council. The council had identified £140,000 from underspends in the current year thanks to the fantastic officers who were working to find better and more efficient ways of delivering services. This had been confirmed by the Section 151 officer. Through discussions and partnership working and a consultant's report it was proposed to give £115,000 to Norden Farm and £25,000 to Old Court. Councillor Rayner thanked those residents who had taken part in the public consultation. The arts were so important to create culture and quality of life; this had been especially true during the pandemic.

The council had an invest to save programme including appointing a commercial officer who would look at new opportunities for the council to earn revenue and

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

support the services. The new direction would expand the council as a revenue earning business and explore commercial opportunities making the most of the assets the council had to provide more money to spend on what residents wanted. Our Community Enterprise was retained by the council to look for grants and bids for the council and residents.

Councillor Rayner was delighted to offer a 2% pay award to RBWM staff, including those at Optalis and Achieving for Children. The staff had faced enormous, unprecedented pressures with Covid and recently with the storms. These challenges, as well as working from home, meant that it was important to recognise this. She was really pleased that the staff satisfaction surveys showed an improvement over the last few years. Staff had shown dedication beyond their work to look after residents. Councillor Rayner highlighted that there was also a recommendation that the Independent Remuneration Panel reviewed the indexation element of the Members' Allowances Scheme and brought a report back to full Council. As residents were having an incredibly tough time and struggling with inflation and other things it was appropriate that councillors did not benefit from the staff pay award.

Councillor Rayner thanked the finance team and Cllr Hilton for the budget which balanced and gave a clear strategy for the next year ahead.

Councillor Reynolds stated that he wanted to clear up some confusions that had arisen. The biggest U-turn in the budget was funding for Norden Farm and the Old Court. Councillor Johnson had said on social media that it had always been the plan to fund the arts. Ward councillors had accused people of scaremongering. Yet Councillor Rayner did say on her social media page in January that a conversation had been held with the arts centres and it was made clear that there would be no funding in the following year's budget.

Councillor Reynolds highlighted that many Members had commented on the bold action being taken on climate change, yet the plan was also to build on the green belt in Maidenhead. It had been said that the waste contract would support the climate change objectives, yet this would mean more lorries on the road. Members had been told that the administration did not want to overpromise and under-deliver, yet this is what had happened in relation to the pocket park in Dearswood. Councillor Reynolds had heard that discussions had taken place with the Youth Council but that did not mean actions were taken. He had been told that the Oaks leisure centre remained a priority but a four year delay and no idea when it would be built did not seem much of a priority to him. Members had heard that the waste service was excellent, but this was not the experience of residents who contacted him on a weekly basis.

Councillor Reynolds highlighted the various suggestions Councillor Werner had made in his earlier speech, some of which had been referenced by Councillor Rayner. The budget had been described as positive but it would not feel like that to those who were disadvantaged.

Councillor Hill congratulated Councillor Jones on her excellent speech; she had called it right since 2011. Council tax was being put up by the maximum amount allowed plus the adult social care precept and that was the plan for the next five years. The capital flows, debt levels and repayments spreadsheets on pages 190 and 191 of the report told the whole story. The story was one of financial mismanagement on an epic scale. The Conservatives had become addicted to debt leaving RBWM around £0.25bn in debt by 2025/26, with interest payments of almost £9m per annum.

## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

RBWM's financial future was based on the sale of Maidenhead Golf Club and a mass extinction event in the town. The wholesale destruction of the green belt site and its wildlife was environmental devastation on a scale that had never been seen before in the borough. The Conservatives had made RBWM's financial health dependant on one development site, Maidenhead Golf Club. It was not known what CALA Homes would build, when the build would take place, what the sale prices would be, or what the capital receipts would be. Yet the Conservatives were betting the future of the borough on the receipts and reductions in interest payments. Councillor Hill commented that there were so many assumptions it was frightening. If CALA Homes sneezed, RBWM would catch a cold. Councillor Hill felt it was a highly speculative, highly irresponsible budget that he would not vote for.

Councillor Knowles commented that the medium term financial plan included a commitment to lobby the government to allow council tax increases above the maximum allowed. He agreed with others that there was a historic set of circumstances including the inheritance of five year old problems that were being worked through. Cash flow forecasts were a very good arbiter of an organisations' financial position. It was not until 2025/26 that the council would be in a position where income was greater than expenditure. Until then any major project would need to be funded by borrowing. 2024/25 was the pivot point. The current debt including the pension deficit required a £11m repayment that came out of the revenue budget. This was a concern as it would increase going forward and the market was volatile. The service fee for the debt in 2024/25 was £8.6m. There was still a lot of risk and there was no plan beyond 2024/25. The 2022/23 budget was what it was. He knew that both officers and Councillor Hilton had put a lot of effort in to balance it all out. He would therefore be supporting the budget because it was the only budget on the table, but it was balanced and had been put together with due diligence.

Councillor Hilton concluded the debate. He commented that had Covid not occurred, the council would be a lot further down the line into transforming the medium term financial strategy. Greater granularity was already planned along with transformation and the Corporate Plan. This meant the strategy would become a plan for the future and explore all risks that could be identified including the fair funding review, the levelling up risk and the impact of changes in self-funders. Being transparent had simply provided opportunities for the Opposition to talk back to the administration on issues that had already been identified. The finance team and Directors were already working on mitigation measures. The Members of the Opposition seemed keen to spend more money on areas such as reducing parking charges. Councillor Hilton commented that he paid less in Winsor for parking than he did in Bracknell. In terms of arts the Lottery would help. He did not understand why the council was always seen as the first place to go for arts funding when there was a wealth of organisations that had money available for such projects.

Councillor Hilton highlighted a number of capital projects that had been invested in, including the Braywick Leisure Centre, Maidenhead Waterways and the Stafferton Way Road. All these projects were in support of Maidenhead regeneration. There was a price to pay and that was through capital receipts. The capital cashflow demonstrated the council could be debt free by 2035 and have significant cash reserves.

Councillor Hilton concluded by commenting that he had been told the administration was doing the same thing over and over again. As in the last two years, the administration would deliver underspends on the revenue budget.

It was proposed by Councillor Hilton, seconded by Councillor Johnson, and:

**RESOLVED:**

**Appendix 1 – Revenue Budget**

**That Council considers and:**

- i)** Approves the 2022/23 Net Budget of £103.346m, consisting of:
  - a. The proposed new growth in service budgets of £5.449m as set out in **Annex D to Appendix 1**, plus an additional £0.140m growth in the Arts budget recommended by Cabinet on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2022;
  - b. The proposed new opportunities and savings of £3.396m as set out in **Annex E to Appendix 1**;
  - c. The associated contribution from Earmarked Reserves of £2.144m, and the level of contingency as £2.38m as set out in paragraph 5.8.3;
- ii)** Approves the calculations for determining the Council Tax Requirement for 2022/23 as set out in **Annex I1 to Appendix 1**, consisting of:
  - a. A Council Tax Requirement of £82.493m.
  - b. A Band D charge of £1,164.99 for the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead in 2022/23, reflecting an overall increase of 2.99%, based on:
    - i. A 1.99% increase in base Council Tax taking the charge to £1,025.90 for 2022/23;
    - ii. An additional 1% to reflect an increase in the Adult Social Care Precept which is proposed as £139.09;
  - c. The Special Expenses Precept increases by £0.67(1.99%) to £34.57 for 2022/23 for the unparished areas of Windsor and Maidenhead in accordance with Section 35 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, as set out in **Annex F to Appendix 1**;
- iii)** Notes the following Precepts by partner organisations:
  - i. The Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley - £241.28 (para 5.6.3), as set out in the updated **Annex I3 to Appendix 1**;
  - ii. The Royal Berkshire Fire Authority - £73.95 (para 5.6.3), as set out in the updated **Annex I3 to Appendix 1**;
  - iii. Parish Precepts as set out in the updated **Annex I3 to Appendix 1**, as notified by the individual Parish Precepts;
- iv)** Approves the allocation of the £140.607m Dedicated Schools Grant as set out in **Annex G to Appendix 1**, and delegated authority be given to the Executive Director of Children’s Services and S151 officer in consultation with the Cabinet Members for Finance and Adult Social Care, Children’s and Health Services to amend the total schools’ budget to reflect the actual Dedicated Schools Grant levels once received;



## COUNCIL - 22.02.22

- iv) Approves delegated authority to the Grants Panel to award community grants (capital and Kidwells Trust) for the 2022/23 annual round and publish the decisions following the Grants Panel.

### **Appendix 2 – Fees and Charges**

#### **That Council considers and approves:**

- v) The Fees and Charges for 2022/23 as set out in **Annex A to Appendix 2**.
- vi) Delegated authority is extended to the Executive Director for Adults, Health and Commissioning, in liaison with the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, Health, Mental Health and Children's Services, to set the Direct Payments Standard Rate (p20 of Annex A to Appendix 2).

### **Appendix 3 – Capital**

#### **That Council considers and approves:**

- vii) The Capital Strategy 2022/23 – 2024/25 as set out in **Annex A to Appendix 3** of this report. A draft was considered by Audit and Governance Committee on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2021.
- viii) The consolidated Capital Programme for 2021/22 – 2024/25 in **Annex B1-3 to Appendix 3** of this report, including previously approved schemes and proposed new schemes as set out in **Annexes B4 & B5 to Appendix 3** of this report.
- ix) Capital programme slippage to date from 2021/22 to 2022/23 as detailed in **Annex B6 to Appendix 3**.
- x) Funding of £0.497m of School Condition Allocation is used to support the increased costs of replacing oil-fired boilers at five schools with gas boilers (para 7.8)

### **Appendix 4 – Treasury Management**

#### **That Council considers and approves:**

- xi) The Council's Treasury Management Strategy for 2022/23 as set out in **Appendix 4** of this report, including
  - a. The proposed Lending Counterparty Criteria;
  - b. the continuation of the current Minimum Revenue Provision Policy for 2022/23.

A draft was considered by Audit and Governance Committee on 21<sup>st</sup> October 2021.

- xii) The Council's Treasury Management Policies as set out in **Annex A to Appendix 4** of this report;
- xiii) The Council's Prudential Indicators as set out in **Annex B to Appendix 4** of this report

**Appendix 5 – Pay Policy Statement**

**That Council considers and approves:**

- xiv) The Council’s updated Pay Policy Statement Strategy for 2022/23 as set out in **Appendix 5** of this report, noting that Sections 2.9, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4 and 4.5 of that appendix will be updated following Council’s decision regarding the 2022 staff pay award.

**Appendix 6 – Proposed Pay Award**

**That Council considers and approves:**

- xv) A pay award of 2% from 1 April 2022 for all staff paid on RBWM local pay scales.
- xvi) An increase in Members’ Allowances of 2% in line with the employee pay award, as required by Section 17 of the Members’ Allowances Scheme.
- xvii) a request to the Independent Remuneration Panel to review the indexation element of the Members’ Allowances Scheme and to report back to full Council.

**Appendix 7 – Feedback from the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel / Public Consultation**

**That Council considers and has due regard to the contents of Appendix 7.**

<b>2022/23 Budget (Motion)</b>	
Councillor John Story	For
Councillor Gary Muir	For
Councillor John Baldwin	Against
Councillor Clive Baskerville	Against
Councillor Christine Bateson	For
Councillor Gurpreet Bhangra	For
Councillor Simon Bond	Against
Councillor John Bowden	For
Councillor Mandy Brar	Against
Councillor Catherine del Campo	Against
Councillor David Cannon	For
Councillor Stuart Carroll	For
Councillor Gerry Clark	For
Councillor David Coppinger	For
Councillor Jon Davey	For
Councillor Karen Davies	Against
Councillor Phil Haseler	For
Councillor Geoffrey Hill	Against
Councillor David Hilton	For
Councillor Maureen Hunt	For
Councillor Andrew Johnson	For

COUNCIL - 22.02.22

Councillor Greg Jones	For
Councillor Lynne Jones	Against
Councillor Neil Knowles	For
Councillor Ewan Larcombe	Against
Councillor Ross McWilliams	For
Councillor Samantha Rayner	For
Councillor Joshua Reynolds	Against
Councillor Julian Sharpe	For
Councillor Shamsul Shelim	For
Councillor Gurch Singh	Against
Councillor Donna Stimson	For
Councillor Chris Targowski	For
Councillor Helen Taylor	Against
Councillor Amy Tisi	Against
Councillor Leo Walters	For
Councillor Simon Werner	Against
<b>Carried</b>	

The meeting, which began at 7.00pm, finished at 9.33pm.

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....