

# **COUNCIL**

## **MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON**

### **THURSDAY, 3 MARCH 2022**

**Councillors present in the Second Floor Meeting Area:** Rick Jones (Vice-Chairman in the Chair), Adrian Abbs, Steve Ardagh-Walter, Phil Barnett, Jeff Beck, Dennis Benneyworth, Dominic Boeck, Graham Bridgman, Jeff Brooks, Jeff Cant, Hilary Cole, James Cole, Jeremy Cottam, Carolyne Culver, Lee Dillon, Lynne Doherty, Billy Drummond, Nassar Hunt, Gareth Hurley, Owen Jeffery, Alan Law, Tony Linden, Royce Longton, Ross Mackinnon, Thomas Marino, David Marsh, Steve Masters, Geoff Mayes, Andy Moore, Biyi Oloko, Graham Pask, Claire Rowles, Richard Somner, Joanne Stewart, Martha Vickers, Tony Vickers, Andrew Williamson and Howard Woollaston.

**Councillors present remotely:** Garth Simpson

**Also Present:** Honorary Aldermen Paul Bryant and Graham Jones, Nigel Lynn (Chief Executive), Sue Halliwell (Executive Director (Place)), Joseph Holmes (Executive Director (Resources)), Andy Sharp (Executive Director (People)), Shiraz Sheikh (Service Lead, Legal & Democratic Services and Deputy Monitoring Officer), Stephen Chard (Democratic Services Manager) and Vicki Yull (Principal Democratic Services Officer).

**Apologies for inability to attend the meeting were received from:** Councillors Clive Hooker, Alan Macro, Erik Pattenden and Keith Woodhams, and Honorary Aldermen Keith Chopping, Adrian Edwards, Andrew Rowles and Anthony Stansfield.

## **PART I**

### **80. Declarations of Interest**

The Deputy Monitoring Officer announced that in respect of Item 6 Capital Strategy, Financial Years 2022/23 to 2026/27 and Item 7 Revenue Budget 2022/23 all Members had previously completed an application for a grant of a dispensation in relation to 'any beneficial interest' in land within the Authority's area. The Monitoring Officer had granted the dispensation to allow all Members to speak and vote on these items.

Councillor Lee Dillon declared an interest in Agenda Item 6 Capital Strategy, Financial Years 2022/23 to 2026/27 but reported that, as his interest was a personal or an other registrable interest but not a disclosable pecuniary interest, he determined to remain to take part in the debate and vote on the matter.

There were also a number of personal interests declared prior to the meeting in relation to agenda items, set out below and published on the Council's website.

<b>Councillor</b>	<b>Description</b>
Abbs, Adrian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Greenham Parish Councillor</li><li>• Trustee of Stroke Care Newbury &amp; West Berkshire (Stroke Care get a grant from the Council and Councillor Abbs is appointed in a personal capacity)</li></ul>
Beck, Jeff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• WBC's Representative on the Board of Volunteer Centre West Berkshire</li><li>• Trustee Of the Corn Exchange Newbury Ltd</li><li>• WBC appointed Member of the Henwick Worthy Joint Management Committee Board</li></ul>

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Councillor	Description
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• WBC appointee to the Kennet Leisure Centre Committee</li> </ul>
Benneyworth, Dennis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member of Royal Berkshire Fire Authority</li> </ul>
Boeck, Dominic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• WBC appointee to the Kennet Leisure Centre Joint Advisory Committee</li> </ul>
Bridgman, Graham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stratfield Mortimer Parish Councillor</li> <li>• Investment in Abundance (Community Municipal Investment)</li> </ul>
Culver, Carolyne	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investments in Abundance and has bought some of the WBC Community Municipal Investment bonds</li> </ul>
Doherty, Lynne	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Investment in Abundance (Community Municipal Investment)</li> <li>• Trustee at St Bartholomew's Foundation</li> <li>• Board Member of the LEP</li> </ul>
Drummond, Billy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greenham Parish Councillor</li> <li>• Newbury Town Councillor</li> <li>• St Bart's Foundation Governor</li> <li>• Director of Greenham Business Park</li> </ul>
Jeffery, Owen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thatcham Town Councillor</li> <li>• Substitute on Henwick Worthy Joint Management Committee (appointed by Thatcham Town Council)</li> <li>• Member of Kennet Leisure Centre Joint Advisory Committee (Thatcham Town Council appointment)</li> <li>• In receipt of a pension from the Royal Berks Pension fund</li> </ul>
Jones, Rick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purley on Thames Parish Council</li> </ul>
Linden, Tony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member of Royal Berkshire Fire Authority</li> </ul>
Longton, Royce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Burghfield Parish Councillor</li> <li>• Member of AWE Local Liaison Committee</li> </ul>
Mackinnon, Ross	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member of Willink Joint Advisory Committee (Council appointee)</li> </ul>
Marsh, David	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Newbury Town Councillor</li> </ul>
Masters, Steve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trustee of Eight Bells</li> <li>• Trustee Mobile Phone Museum</li> <li>• Newbury Town Councillor</li> </ul>
Mayes, Geoff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beech Hill Parish Councillor</li> <li>• English Heritage</li> <li>• CPRE</li> <li>• BBOWT</li> <li>• Stratfield Mortimer Fairground Trust</li> <li>• Wokefield Common Committee</li> </ul>
Moore, Andy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Newbury Town Councillor</li> <li>• Newbury Town Council's Observer on the Board of the Volunteer Centre</li> </ul>
Somner, Richard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holybrook Parish Councillor</li> <li>• Employed by The Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust</li> </ul>
Oloko, Biyi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holybrook Parish Councillor</li> <li>• School Governor – Kennet Valley Primary School</li> </ul>
Vickers, Tony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greenham Parish Councillor</li> <li>• Newbury Town Councillor</li> <li>• Investment in WBC Abundance bonds</li> <li>• Mid &amp; West Berks Local Access Forum</li> </ul>

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Councillor	Description
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>National Ramblers</li></ul>
Woollaston, Howard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Chairman of the Lambourn Valley Flood Forum (voluntary position)</li></ul>

### 81. Public Questions

There were no public questions received.

### 82. Investment and Borrowing Strategy 2022/23 (C4124)

Council considered a report (Agenda Item 4) which sought to consolidate the investments and borrowing strategy for the year ahead, and detailed how and where the Council would invest and borrow in the forthcoming year within a particular framework. Council noted that the strategy was monitored throughout the year, with a mid-year report considered at the Government and Ethics Committee and an annual report presented to Members.

**MOTION:** Proposed by Councillor Ross Mackinnon and seconded by Councillor Howard Woollaston:

That Council agree and adopt the proposed Investment and Borrowing Strategy for 2022/23.

Councillor Mackinnon in introducing the report explained how the Strategy set out the approved institutions for treasury assets, the prudential limits for those investments, the accrued sources of borrowing, the recommended borrowing limits for the next three years, and also provided a long term forecast for the Council's borrowing requirements. The Strategy authorised the Council to place deposits in UK Government bonds, UK Building Societies and banks with sound credit ratings, other local authorities, and triple rated money markets. The Council was also authorised to lend to registered charities, public sector bodies and Council-owned companies and joint ventures. He highlighted a change this year to the amount of funds the Council could invest with any one institution which had increased from £5m to £8m, noting that the £5m limit had been held over the past 25 years.

Councillor Mackinnon noted that it was not appropriate to change the Strategy to reflect inflationary changes without a significant change in risk. The Council had, in fact, been constrained in the past by putting funds in UK government bonds at very low rates of return. The Strategy proposed an increase in borrowing over the medium term to support the Council's Capital Strategy, with the borrowing primarily undertaken through the Public Works Loans Board, and he explained how other options will be explored as well. The Strategy also included a subtle shift to hold more borrowing in the short term to take advantage of lower rates. This had already generated significant financial savings in the revenue budget and was forecast to continue to do so. It was a change of emphasis, but not one that would undermine the financial position of the Council.

The report also set out the Council's commercial property portfolio and the investment returns made to the Council. Councillor Mackinnon highlighted how the portfolio had performed well with a consistent return on investment, and he expected this to continue in the future.

Councillor Jeff Brooks noted the upwards trajectory of servicing debts, a figure that was due to increase and would end up at around £275 per household per annum. He agreed

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that borrowing had to be done in order to deliver the capital programme but argued that the Council's borrowing could be too high in light of the current international situation (which was causing a fluid system for interest rates and increased risks).

Councillor Steve Masters queried the £8m drop in the property portfolio value and asked what advice had been received from fund managers on overall trends in the capital value of properties, and whether there were concerns moving forward.

Councillor Howard Woollaston suggested that Councillor Brooks' assessment of borrowing, while correct in some aspects, overlooked the fact that a large proportion was invested in property and other investments that were generating income.

Councillor Mackinnon agreed with the principle that Members had a role to play in monitoring the Council's borrowing. He highlighted that the Council was not able to borrow money to fund day-to-day spending but was using borrowed funds to invest in assets which benefited West Berkshire residents in the longer term. He argued that it was misleading to talk about the fluctuating capital values over the short term as the commercial property portfolio was a long term investment over many decades.

The Motion was put to the meeting and duly **RESOLVED**.

### 83. **Medium Term Financial Strategy (C4125)**

Council considered a report (Agenda Item 5) which set out the purpose of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) to determine financial planning assumptions for future years, aligned with the delivery of the Council Strategy. The MTFS highlighted the overarching key issues faced by the Council, and the different scenarios and uncertainty concerning future revenue streams. The Council was able to commence the next four years of the MTFS from a strong financial base, and this position and future projections were highlighted in the report.

**MOTION:** Proposed by Councillor Ross Mackinnon and seconded by Councillor Lynne Doherty:

That Council approve the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon in introducing the report stated that the Strategy was a rolling four year programme built to ensure that the Council had the financial resources to deliver the Council's Strategy, and it included a number of assumptions and uncertainties around both income and expenditure. The Local Government Financial Settlement for 2023 was broadly similar to the previous year, but the outcome of the Local Government Fair Funding Review was still awaited for more long term certainty around business rates.

Councillor Mackinnon highlighted that the Council had to bridge a funding gap of around £14m over the next three years and these savings would be met by transformation, digitization, and income generation. He believed that the Council had an excellent track record in delivering required savings in recent years without any cuts to frontline services. He stated that it was crucial for the Council to have adequate reserves in place to smooth what was anticipated to be an irregular pattern of savings, and to protect the provision of services. Councillor Mackinnon highlighted how carrying out a medium term forecasting exercise helped to see the demands and challenges ahead, and ensured that the Council continued to meet the needs of its residents. He stated that the recently released

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Financial Resilience Index showed that the Council was well placed to face the future with sufficient reserves and healthy financial indicators, which demonstrated its overall robust financial health.

Councillor Jeff Brooks highlighted that he had previously asked for the Strategy to be published alongside the outturn. He called for there to be a comparison published between the initial forecast and the actual outcomes at future meetings so that an accurate review can be undertaken in public.

Councillor Adrian Abbs highlighted the principal of 'Save Money And The Environment' (SMATE), raised concerns about the approach to investing into environmental protection, and referred to projects that could save the Council both money and protect the environment.

Councillor David Marsh queried why the decision had been taken to raise Council Tax by 1% rather than 2%, which had resulted in more than £1m being drawn from the Council's reserves when previous proposals from other political groups to withdraw from the reserves had been rejected.

Councillor Graham Bridgman stated that funding was set aside into specified reserves to counter fluctuations in specific areas of the budgets such as adult social care.

Councillor Lynne Doherty stated that sound financial stewardship of the Council's budget was something that the current administration had demonstrated since 2005. The previous two years had been a challenging time for local government finances with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. She suggested that sound financial planning must sit at the heart of good public finance in West Berkshire and stated that this was a Council that looked ahead and managed its finances well. She welcomed the Strategy as she felt it was a careful balance of prudent and efficient spending, it was carefully managed, it provided investment into the Council's strategies and priorities, and it demonstrated the understanding that Council Tax needed to be kept as low as possible whilst recognising the need to continue to care for the most vulnerable. Councillor Doherty referred to the uncertainties affecting the Council's finances such as the impact of COVID-19 on the economy, adult social care reforms, the Fair Funding Review and a potential business rate reset. Those uncertainties meant that the Council must remain prudent to ensure it had the financial resources available to make West Berkshire an even greater place in which to live, work and learn.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon highlighted that revenue and capital performance was considered every quarter by the Executive but that he continued to look at the issue of reviewing delivery against forecasts as raised by Councillor Brooks. He also highlighted how the majority of spending on the environment strategy came from the capital budget, and the withdrawal from the reserves as raised by Councillor Marsh was the use of specific reserves for previously identified risks that had been earmarked and set aside.

The Motion was put to the meeting and duly **RESOLVED**.

### 84. **Capital Strategy, Financial Years 2022/23 to 2026/27 (C4126)**

*(All Members had been granted a dispensation by the Monitoring Officer to speak and vote on this item).*

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*(Councillor Lee Dillon declared a personal or an other registrable interest in Agenda Item 6 by virtue of his employment at Sovereign Housing. As he determined his interest was not a disclosable pecuniary interest he remained to take part in the debate and voted on the matter).*

Council considered a report (Agenda Item 6) that outlined the Capital Strategy which covered financial years 2022/23 to 2026/27 and the supporting funding framework. The report provided a high-level overview of how capital expenditure, capital financing and treasury management activity contributed to the provision of local public services, and also an overview of how associated risk was managed and implications for future financial sustainability. As decisions made on capital and treasury management had financial consequences for the Council for many years into the future they were subject to both a national regulatory framework and to local policy framework.

**MOTION:** Proposed by Councillor Ross Mackinnon and seconded by Councillor Dominic Boeck:

That Council approve:

- (a) the Capital Strategy and supporting Capital Programme for the period 2022/23 – 2026/27;
- (b) the supporting Minimum Revenue Provision Policy for the period 2022/23 – 2026/27;
- (c) the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts Policy for the period 2022/23 – 2026/27, and;
- (d) the proposed Community Infrastructure Levy Bids for inclusion in the Capital programme 2022/23 – 2026/27.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon in introducing the report illustrated how the capital programme was split across the six priorities of the Council's Strategy. He highlighted a number of budget allocations across the service areas and went in to detail regarding some of the specific projects which would receive this funding.

Councillor Mackinnon explained that the capital programme did not just maintain essential services, it also invested in new schemes across all of the Council's Strategy priorities and was sustainable and affordable. He referred to the increase in Council borrowing but reminded Members that some of these enhancements would reduce service costs or provide funds back to the Council through income or greater efficiencies.

Councillor Mackinnon wished to provide reassurance that the capital repayment costs would be between 10 - 12% of the revenue budget, which compared favourably with other local authorities and was forecast to remain so in the future. He highlighted that the Council's Section 151 Officer had confirmed that the programme was prudent, affordable and sustainable.

Councillor Mackinnon referred to how the Council could choose not to invest and this remained an option. However, the administration had opted for a positive approach, paying close attention to the need for affordability but also to enable the capital schemes proposed to be funded properly and have a positive impact for residents. He felt that overall the capital programme struck the right balance between new investment to support the Council's priorities, continuing to fund core infrastructure, and affordability.

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Councillor Graham Bridgman highlighted a project being delivered in conjunction with Stratfield Mortimer Parish Council and emphasised the working relationship between the two. He encouraged other Parish Councils to consider projects that this Council could help develop with the use of Community Infrastructure Levy funds.

**AMENDMENTS:** Proposed by Councillor Jeff Brooks and seconded by Councillor Lee Dillon:

- Funds to develop a West Berks Culture Education Partnership (LCEP) and create a Delivery Plan for Phase 1. Cost of £50,000.
- West Berkshire Council developing its own Power company (invest to save). By becoming a supplier, we can take advantage of the higher revenue and so more environmental projects become affordable whilst also contributing to the council's revenue stream and also gives us options to encourage businesses with West Berkshire. This funding would provide for consultancy expertise to assist in the development of a plan including the feasibility of the scheme. Cost of £100,000.
- Set up a fund to commission innovative energy projects from organisations with charitable aims through a West Berkshire Community Energy Fund (WBCEF) Cost of £500,000.
- Set aside £1M over four years to support the implementation of Town plans that are in development in Thatcham and Hungerford. Cost of £250,000 in next financial year.
- Provide additional Defibrillators across the District. Cost of £40,000.

Councillor Jeff Brooks in introducing the amendments noted that all five would cost an estimated £1.7m and could be achieved through borrowing or drawing on reserves. He highlighted that his members would be more cautious in increasing the borrowing requirement in future years since around 12% of the budget would end up being used to service debts and this would only get worse with the upwards trajectory of interest rates. Councillor Brooks queried if a balance sheet could be produced which set out the value of the Council's assets, particularly those procured through borrowing.

Councillor Dennis Benneyworth referred to the significant investment scheduled that he and his fellow Ward members welcomed in Hungerford and Kintbury. This included a £400k infrastructure upgrade at a residential care home, an expansion to a local leisure centre through £140k of investment, and an expansion of the kitchen at a local primary school to enable the continued delivery of free school meals.

Councillor Adrian Abbs referred to energy use causing harm to the climate and impacting disposable incomes with its rapidly accelerating cost. The amendment put forward was proposing that the Council investigate the creation of an entity that can handle the complex solutions needed to tackle the large, non-council proportion of CO<sub>2</sub>. He suggested that the remit of the non-profit could cover several complex areas which was why the initial investigation was required. It could help encourage and manage other schemes run by communities or individuals to work with the National Grid or larger energy suppliers to install power storage technology. He noted that it was ambitious but would have a considerable impact on the net-zero aims. Councillor Abbs also mentioned the amendment that looks to kick-start a West Berkshire-wide project to fill the remaining gaps in the defibrillator network. It had a modest initial cost, enough for 34 units which could possibly double if match funded.

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Councillor Owen Jeffery highlighted the proposal to set aside £1m over four years to implement effective town plans for Thatcham and Hungerford. He argued that this Council needed to strategically plan for its principal communities to help them in the future, which the proposed amendment would do.

Councillor Graham Bridgman advised that he fully supported the concept of additional defibrillators across the district where they were necessary, but felt that the amendment was unnecessary as the issue was already in progression via the Health and Wellbeing Board. He noted that the work in this area had been delayed due to the pandemic but initial work to map where existing defibrillators were located had indicated there was already a good spread.

Councillor Howard Woollaston confirmed that he felt the amendment regarding the West Berks Culture Education Partnership was unnecessary as plans were already underway in partnership with the Arts Council.

Councillor Lee Dillon was pleased to note the support for the West Berks Culture Education Partnership but wanted more investment than currently proposed as it linked cultural education, higher education, youth health, criminal justice, and the voluntary and commercial sectors together to create a place-based partnership and help support recovery in town centres. Councillor Dillon suggested that the amendments demonstrated a change of focus and put forward ideas to address the carbon challenge, generate income for the Council and reduce energy costs for residents. He also referred to the proposal to invest funds in the town centres to help deliver regeneration and demonstrate the Council's commitment to that ambition.

Councillor Jeff Brooks believed that these were not inappropriate measures to bring forward and expressed his disappointment that they had not been better received.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon highlighted the contradiction in arguing that borrowing was too high whilst simultaneously proposing amendments resulting in £17m of additional borrowing. He also explained the internal process that suggestions such as creating a power company should go through to ensure that the spending of public monies is justified and appropriate.

The Amendments were put to the meeting and duly **REFUSED**.

### **FOR the Amendments:**

Councillors Adrian Abbs, Phil Barnett, Jeff Brooks, Jeremy Cottam, Carlyne Culver, Lee Dillon, Billy Drummond, Nassar Hunt, Royce Longton, Owen Jeffrey, David Marsh, Steve Masters, Geoff Mayes, Andy Moore, Martha Vickers, Tony Vickers. (16)

### **AGAINST the Amendments:**

Councillors Steve Ardagh-Walter, Jeff Beck, Dennis Benneyworth, Dominic Boeck, Graham Bridgeman, Jeff Cant, Hilary Cole, James Cole, Lynne Doherty, Gareth Hurley, Rick Jones, Alan Law, Tony Linden, Ross Mackinnon, Thomas Marino, Biyi Oloko, Graham Pask, Claire Rowles, Richard Somner, Joanne Stewart, Andrew Williamson, Howard Woollaston. (22)



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**AMENDMENT:** Proposed by Councillor David Marsh and seconded by Councillor Carolyne Culver:

Original text: "Planning and consultancy to help deliver LRIE projects (£850,000 in 2022-23)"

*Amendment: Add at end of the line after "Planning and consultancy to help deliver LRIE projects" ... "including the restoration of Faraday Road as a football ground and community sports facility."*

Councillor David Marsh in introducing the amendment referred to the Executive decision in December 2020 to approve a one year budget of £45k for feasibility studies for the LRIE, and over the next three years a revenue budget of £100k to provide consultancy support during the project development. There was now an allocation of £850k for further consultancy and he queried what value taxpayers had been getting for these consultancy fees and other expenditure on a project that was still not proved as feasible. Councillor Marsh referred to a development brief he had received which was already more than likely out of date, and the receipt of one or two environmental reports that fell short of the full environmental impact assessment and full flood risk assessment that were required on the site. The reason for the amendment was to ask that while the consultancy and feasibility work continued the restoration of the football ground as an asset of community value for sporting and social use should not be ruled out.

Councillor Tony Vickers noted that although his groups' policy concerning the LRIE projects was different, they were in support of this amendment.

Councillor Carolyne Culver explained her position that this amendment was uncontroversial and asked for the consultancy work to include the consideration of what happens to Faraday Road. It was not asking for expenditure, just a sensible and reasonable addition of words.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon confirmed that he was expecting an update paper on Faraday Road to come through the executive cycle in the next couple of months.

The Amendment was put to the meeting and duly **REFUSED**.

### **FOR the Amendment:**

Councillors Adrian Abbs, Phil Barnett, Jeff Brooks, Jeremy Cottam, Carolyne Culver, Lee Dillon, Billy Drummond, Nassar Hunt, Royce Longton, Owen Jeffrey, David Marsh, Steve Masters, Geoff Mayes, Andy Moore, Martha Vickers, Tony Vickers. (16)

### **AGAINST the Amendment:**

Councillors Steve Ardagh-Walter, Jeff Beck, Dennis Benneyworth, Dominic Boeck, Graham Bridgeman, Jeff Cant, Hilary Cole, James Cole, Lynne Doherty, Rick Jones, Alan Law, Tony Linden, Ross Mackinnon, Thomas Marino, Biyi Oloko, Graham Pask, Claire Rowles, Richard Somner, Joanne Stewart, Andrew Williamson, Howard Woollaston. (21)

### **ABSTAINED from voting on the Amendment:**

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Councillor Gareth Hurley (1)

**SUBSTANTIVE MOTION:** Proposed by Councillor Ross Mackinnon and seconded by Councillor Dominic Boeck.

Councillor Richard Somner was pleased to note the continued level of support outlined in the Strategy for highways, transport and the countryside as it represented a solid enabling position, helped to develop local infrastructure and the local economy, maintained a green district, and ensured sustainable services through innovation and partnerships. He noted that it was underpinned by collaborative funding streams from the government and the use of S106 and CIL monies which helped to deliver on a number of projects. The Strategy enabled a programme of work over a number of years and allowed for continued prioritisation and planning for delivery across the district. Councillor Somner highlighted a number of projects which would receive capital funding and that would provide various opportunities to fulfil the Council's aims.

Councillor Tony Linden indicated his support for the Calcot School remodelling and stated how the investment of just over £6m was welcomed in the Tilehurst Birch Copse Ward.

Councillor Andy Moore drew attention to the £134k allocated over the next two years for the Newbury Town Centre Master Plan which had been recently launched. He queried whether future funding would be made available following that two year period given the importance of the Plan to many people across the district.

Councillor Tony Vickers advised that as a Member representing the Newbury Wash Common Ward he was pleased to see just under £5.5m allocated to cover additional pupil numbers at Park House School. He noted that the school had converted to academy status and questioned if the Council was able to invest capital funding as a result. He suggested that perhaps a joint venture could be arranged to help address ongoing issues with the infrastructure at the school.

Councillor Carlyne Culver explained the reasoning behind the Green Party having brought forward only one amendment to the Capital Strategy this year.

Councillor Phil Barnett welcomed the proposals for the Kings Road link road, the Burger King roundabout, and the Kings Road roundabout. He stated that it was important for Ward Members to be involved in these proposed schemes given the interaction between them and the effect on traffic flow.

Councillor Adrian Abbs argued that the proposed investment in environmental schemes would do little to achieve net zero by 2030 given the focus only on what the Council controlled, and asked for the administration to be more imaginative in bringing forward environmental proposals.

Councillor Lynne Doherty referred to the major and local schemes proposed that she felt delivered for the whole district, and highlighted the investment planned in particular for the Newbury Speen Ward. She was pleased to see the amount of consultation that had taken place with residents to seek views on the capital investment and welcomed the proposals.

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Councillor Thomas Marino welcomed the investment for the remodelling and refurbishment work at Brookfields School.

Councillor David Marsh indicated his general support for some of the proposals in the Strategy but pointed out that electric vehicle charging points needed to be better located, that funding for the planting of wildflower meadows needed to be continued in future years, and that work to progress carbon reduction measures should be undertaken more quickly. He also called for more funding for the review of 30 mile per hour speed limits given it was such a vital issue for residents.

Councillor Lee Dillon explained that his Group would not be supporting the Strategy overall although they agreed with some of the individual measures contained within it. He also concurred with Councillor Marsh's statement on the speed limit reviews.

Councillor Jeremy Cottam indicated his support for the proposed investment in the LIDO and for flood relief in Thatcham.

Councillor Steve Ardagh-Walter noted that not many electric vehicles were currently driven in the district but that the investment in and the provision of electric vehicle charging points would be reviewed and increased when required in the future. He advised that Members would be updated shortly on specific projects where the Council was supporting and co-ordinating the activities of other nature facing organisations in the district, and referred to the forthcoming, significant investment in the separate food waste collection which would help the environment and improve services to residents. He concluded that there was a strong environmental portfolio in the capital budget and commended it to Council.

Councillor Dominic Boeck advised that the vast majority of children had been assigned a place in a secondary school of their choice this year, with 88% having obtained their first choice in September 2022. This was credited to the close working relationship with the schools, the detailed planning of the Education Team, and the support provided in the Capital Programme. Councillor Boeck then confirmed that the Council was responsible for the provision of basic need (classrooms for children) at Park House School but that the responsibility for ongoing maintenance rested with the Academy. He highlighted that over £52m of the £220m set out in the five year programme would be spent on the education of children and young people by providing school places for them, and maintaining and improving facilities to enhance accessibility for SEN children. He then indicated his pleasure at the allocation of a substantial sum of money for the improvement of footpaths in the Aldermaston Ward.

Councillor Mackinnon closed the debate by clarifying that his surprise regarding the Green Party Amendment was over the topic and not the number of amendments proposed, and he welcomed that Councillors were discussing the ways in which the Strategy would support their Wards. He confirmed that there was £150k in revenue reserves for town centre studies but that nothing had been procured for Thatcham yet to avoid confusion with the local visioning plan and that he was expecting it to be brought forward in the first quarter of the new financial year. Funds for both Thatcham and Newbury would be set aside and the Capital Strategy Group would assess any projects submitted. Councillor Mackinnon then noted that the proposed amendments to the Strategy could be funded by CIL, but if other projects were not cut then borrowing would still need to take place to fund the other projects that CIL had been moved from.

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The Motion was put to the meeting and duly **RESOLVED**.

### **FOR the Motion:**

Councillors Steve Ardagh-Walter, Jeff Beck, Dennis Benneyworth, Dominic Boeck, Graham Bridgeman, Jeff Cant, Hilary Cole, James Cole, Lynne Doherty, Gareth Hurley, Rick Jones, Alan Law, Tony Linden, Ross Mackinnon, Thomas Marino, Biyi Oloko, Graham Pask, Claire Rowles, Richard Somner, Joanne Stewart, Andrew Williamson, Howard Woollaston. (22)

### **AGAINST the Motion:**

Councillors Adrian Abbs, Phil Barnett, Jeff Brooks, Jeremy Cottam, Lee Dillon, Billy Drummond, Nassar Hunt, Royce Longton, Owen Jeffrey, Geoff Mayes, Andy Moore, Martha Vickers, Tony Vickers. (13)

### **ABSTAINED from voting on the Motion:**

Councillors Carlyne Culver, David Marsh, Steve Masters (3)

*(The meeting was adjourned at 7.45pm and reconvened at 8.00pm)*

## **85. Revenue Budget 2022/23 (C4127)**

*(All Members had been granted a dispensation by the Monitoring Officer to speak and vote on this item).*

Council considered a report (Agenda Item 7) which recommended the 2022-23 Revenue Budget and proposed a Council Tax requirement of £110.1m which required a Council Tax increase of 1% and an Adult Social Care precept of 3%. The Council Tax would raise £1.1m and the precept would raise a further £3.2m. At 4%, the budget was balanced after £4m of reserves that had been specifically set aside had been used. The overall Council Tax increase was intended to balance the financial impact of the pandemic on residents, and mitigate the financial pressures being faced as well as the cost pressures that the Council faced.

The report set out how the Council was focussed on delivering services to residents and businesses that supported the overall Health and Wellbeing of the district, and assisted in the recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, building on its recovery strategy and improving the quality of services provided. The revenue budget supported this through the allocation of funds to core investment in the Council's strategies, and through making revenue funding available to deliver the Capital Strategy. The budget was supported this year through a new funding settlement from the Government which provided new core funding to the Council. At the same time, the Council faced significant pressures arising from the pandemic as well as the macroeconomic picture. The Council had to also balance the level of Council Tax levied; in 2021-22 the Council decided not to take the 3% Adult Social Care precept that was available, but this remained available for use in 2022-23, alongside a further 1% Adult Social Care precept as well as a 1.99% Council Tax increase for core services before any referendum principles occurred. To support the most vulnerable, it was proposed to provide a one-off £150 reduction in Council Tax for claimants receiving Council Tax Reduction falling within a working age category. The revenue budget sought to manage these demands whilst achieving financial balance.

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The budget detailed the investment for the year ahead to deliver the Council Strategy, the ambitions in the Capital Strategy and support core Council Services. This included investment in approved strategies which included Adult Social Care, the Environment Strategy, the Digital and customer engagement strategies, and prevention work. The report also included savings proposals, other income sources, and the use of specific reserves which ensured the Council had a sustainable financial footing. The budget also allocated revenue funding to deliver the Capital Strategy that had a substantial amount of investment in infrastructure for the year ahead. The Council was proposing to support the budget with a £4m contribution from reserves; these were largely from specific reserves which included the residual Covid-19 non-ring-fenced grant, Council Strategy reserve, Transformation Fund, and Collection Fund reserves.

The report also proposed the Fees and Charges for 2022-23 (set out in Appendix F) and the Parish Expenses (set out in Appendix G) and recommended the level of General Reserves (set out in Appendix E).

**MOTION:** Proposed by Councillor Ross Mackinnon and seconded by Councillor Lynne Doherty:

That Council:

- (1) approve the 2022-23 Council Tax requirement of £110.1m, requiring a Council Tax increase of 1% with a 3% Council Tax Precept ring-fenced for adult social care;
- (2) approve the Fees and Charges set out in Appendix F and the appropriate statutory notices be placed where required;
- (3) approve the Parish Expenses of £11,210 as set out in Appendix G;
- (4) approve the proposal to again provide a £150 reduction to Council Tax for claimants receiving Council Tax Reduction falling within a working age category during the 2022-23 financial year. Where the balance to pay for a working age claimant is less than £150, all the remaining liability will be credited through this hardship scheme. Any remaining funding from the allocation will be utilised to support the Collection Fund and consideration of the further impact on the Council Tax Reduction Scheme as well as the overall Collection Fund;
- (5) note the following amounts for the year 2022-23 in accordance with regulations made under Section 31B of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, as amended (by the Localism Act 2011):
  - a) 66,310.15 being the amount calculated by the Council, (Item T) in accordance with regulation 31B of the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) Regulations 1992 (as amended by the Localism Act 2011), as its council tax base for the year (the number of properties paying council tax).
  - b) Part of the Council's area as per Appendix K being the amounts calculated by the Council, in accordance with regulation 6 of the Regulations, as the amounts of its council tax base for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which a Parish precept relates.
- (6) approve the calculation that the Council Tax requirement for the Council's own purposes for 2022-23 (excluding Parish precepts) is £110,092,085.
- (7) approve that the following amounts be now calculated by the Council for the year 2022-23 in accordance with Sections 32 to 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, amended by the Localism Act:
  - a) £375,740,350 being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(2), (a) to (f) of the Act taking into account all precepts issued to it by Parish councils.

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- b) £260,948,040 being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(3), (a) to (d) of the Act.
  - c) £114,792,310 being the amount by which the aggregate at 7(a) above, exceeds the aggregate at 7(b) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with the Section 31A(4) of the Act, as its Council Tax requirement for the year (Item R).
  - d) £1,731.14 being the amount at 7(c) above (Item R), all divided by 5(a) above (Item T), calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31B of the Act, as the 'basic amount of its Council Tax for the year (including Parish precepts)'.
  - e) £4,700,225 being the aggregate amount of all special items (Parish precepts) referred to in Section 34(1) of the Act (as per Appendix K).
  - f) £1,660.26 being the amount at 7(d) above less the result given by dividing the amount at 7(e) above by the amount at 5(a) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 34(2) of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which no special items relates.
- (8) note that for the year 2022-23, Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley & the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service have issued precepts to the Council in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 for each category of dwellings in the Councils area as indicated in Appendix K.
- (9) approve, in accordance with Sections 30 and 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, that the Council hereby sets the aggregate amounts shown in the tables in Appendix K as the amounts of Council Tax for 2022-23 for each part of its area and for each of the categories of dwellings.

Councillor Mackinnon invited Members to note a minor amendment to the table under Private Sector Housing in Appendix Fii whereby the proposed fees and charges for 2022/23 should read as £797 for a HMO Licence renewal and not £79.

Councillor Mackinnon in introducing the report noted that actual revenue spend against the budget set the previous March was reviewed each quarter during the financial year by Executive and the Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission. In the current year the actual spend had been much closer to budget and Councillor Mackinnon expressed his thanks to the opposition, and in particular Councillor Brooks, for taking a constructive approach during those meetings and recognising the continuing challenges faced by the Council this year. Councillor Mackinnon also paid tribute to staff in the Economic Development and Revenues and Benefits Teams who had continued to perform a crucial role distributing Covid business grants to firms across the district, particularly in the hospitality and leisure sectors.

Councillor Mackinnon referred to the year on year rise to the Council's costs to provide the same level of services to residents. 75% of the Council's income comes from Council Tax and the Adult Social Care precept, and this years' Local Government Financial Settlement permitted the Council to raise its Council Tax bills by up to 5.99%. The administration had chosen not to do this, but had opted instead for a core Council Tax rise of 1% and an Adult Social Care precept of 3%, meaning that bills would rise by exactly 4%. Councillor Mackinnon explained the reasoning behind this decision which included: the need to balance competing demands across the district when setting the budget; the response from residents to the budget simulator exercise which suggested an average Council Tax rise of 4.7%; the demand for Social Care services for both adults and children requiring an additional £5m, and; the cost of living rising significantly, driven mainly by wholesale energy prices. Councillor Mackinnon noted that the Council recommending an increase below the rate of inflation coupled with the £150 rebate on

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Band A to D bills from government should make a positive difference to household budgets.

Councillor Mackinnon also highlighted the robust financial control exercised by the administration which had resulted in the reserves position being strong enough to provide support to the budget while maintaining general reserves above the minimum recommended level. He announced a £150 reduction to Council Tax would again be provided to working age claimants receiving a Council Tax reduction, which gave welcome support to residents on low incomes. Councillor Mackinnon then highlighted examples of where the revenue budget provided extensive investment towards achieving the priorities in the Council's Strategy, and explained how the budget contained savings and income generation proposals totalling £5.3m to help fulfil the Council's responsibility to its residents to be as efficient as possible and to provide value for money by transforming its operations. He also confirmed that none of the proposed savings would result in cuts to frontline services.

Councillor Mackinnon noted that the Section 151 Officer is required to make a recommendation of the minimum level of the general reserve for non-specific items and risks, and this year that recommendation had been £7m. The actual general reserve position would fall from £10.59m to £9.26m this year which Councillor Mackinnon felt was prudent given the continuing uncertainty caused by the pandemic, inflation, and the potential devastating effects of current world events on economies. He commended the proposals as striking the right balance between investing in services and infrastructure whilst keeping Council Tax rises as low as possible, and it ensured financial resilience for the future.

**AMENDMENTS:** Proposed by Councillor Jeff Brooks and seconded by Councillor Lee Dillon:

- Supporting the expansion of canoeing and climbing opportunities for young people across West Berkshire and supporting local communities to set up and maintain youth clubs across West Berkshire. Cost of £35,000 annually.
- Increasing the Council reach and support to disadvantaged families, including around school readiness, and to extend provision to older age ranges. Cost of £50,000 annually.
- Creating a fund to support small, local arts and culture venues across West Berkshire. Cost of £20,000 annually.
- Viable Villages - implement a consultation program with West Berkshire villages (through the parish council network) to understand their priorities and to ensure they are viable long term. To work with every village within West Berkshire to establish what is needed to make their village viable in the longer term - in areas such as community mix, energy supplies, and housing. Cost of £40,000.
- Council Tax exemption for 100 care leavers. Cost of £35,000 annually.
- Re-instate the contribution to the Readibus service and pay Readibus the £5K withheld by the council for services already provided. Cost of £45,000 in 2022/23 and then £40,000 annually.
- West Berkshire Council establishing its own Power company (invest to save). By becoming a supplier, we can take advantage of the higher revenue and more environmental projects become affordable whilst also contributing to the council's revenue stream. This funding would provide for a dedicated Officer to undertake the planning and feasibility studies to establish the business plan for major investment and return on that investment in future years and help manage the resultant new company if deemed feasible. Cost of £80,000 annually.

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- Develop a Green Hub - as the expertise grows within the Council this amendment aims to embed the sharing of that expertise with consumers and business and all interested parties in West Berkshire. Cost of £100,000 annually.
- Remove the green bin charge for those in receipt of Council Tax benefits. Cost £100,000. Roughly 5,500 homes. We assume an uptake of around one third of these households at a cost of £50 each, meaning a total cost of £92,000 but we allow more than this within this cost allocation (on-going). Cost of £100,000 annually.
- Reduce green bin charge to provide a £2 discount (becomes £48) for the lack of collection in January 2022 (one off). This would reduce the green bin charge to £48 per year for the financial year. Cost of approximately £60,000.

Councillor Jeff Brooks in introducing the amendments referred to his previous calls on the Administration to undertake a zero based budgeting exercise which challenged spend on every item, role and expense in each department. He stated that a key benefit of building the budget from the bottom upwards was that it focused attention on the actual resources required to produce an outcome rather than a percentage increase or decrease in the budget compared to the previous year. It was an approach to budgeting that started from the premise that no cost or activity should be factored in to a budget just because it was present in a previous period, and that everything to be included must be considered and justified. He argued that this approach also avoided building the budget around the financial pressures presented by officers and allowed Members to work through officer assumptions and recommendations and challenge them robustly. Councillor Brooks also felt that the report did not contain enough detail on the proposals and gave some examples where not enough narrative had been provided to justify the savings. He also highlighted the risks posed by the assumptions over inflation, interest rates and the pay award.

Councillor Brooks then referred to the amendments being proposed by the Liberal Democrat group, some of which had been tabled in previous years, and which sought to build on the initiatives the Administration was developing. It was his belief that they were appropriate, with the extra funding required being affordable and verified by the Section 151 Officer, and that they had merit and would make a positive contribution to services that residents receive.

Councillor Martha Vickers noted that young people were one of the groups that had suffered the most during the pandemic due to no schooling and isolation from their peers. As a result, there was growing concern for their mental health and wellbeing, especially the disadvantaged whose families had fewer resources. The amendments sought to help young people develop physical and mental skills and grow in confidence. She suggested that young people needed places to gather to meet and develop friendship groups, and be safe places where they could have the support of trained youth workers if needed. She referred to the excellent facility for young people in Newbury at the Waterside Centre, and invited Council to support other communities in other areas of the district to serve their young people better. With regards to the amendment which considered disadvantaged families, she argued that it was correct to provide extra support to those in insecure jobs and young families who had suffered the most through the pandemic. Councillor Vickers noted that there had been a rise in the number of children in care and queried if this was linked to the hardship experienced during the pandemic by vulnerable families. She also highlighted the work of Citizens Advice West Berkshire which provided a vital local service that people could turn to, and invited the Council to help support it during this time of increased demand for its services. Councillor Vickers also sought



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assurance that the Public Health Grant from government which helped to fund the vulnerable families' service was secure.

Councillor Adrian Abbs stated that whilst the current plan had begun to tackle the climate emergency, he felt that the pace and scale did not allow for the net zero target to be achieved by 2030. He noted that the revenue amendment to establish a Power company built on the previous capital budget amendment by proposing the creation of a senior officer post to investigate its establishment. This matter was ambitious and complex, but an investigation would help ensure it was undertaken correctly. Councillor Abbs also referred to the proposal to set aside funding for two officers whose remit would be to ensure both the sharing of expertise built up in West Berkshire Council and to act as advisors for those looking at projects and new technologies for example. He argued that knowledge sharing was essential to meet the stated climate emergency goal. Councillor Abbs then mentioned the amendment to remove the green bin charge for those in receipt of Council Tax benefits which was a small measure to help residents.

Councillor Dominic Boeck agreed that young people had faced challenges during the pandemic but was not convinced that the solution was as presented in the amendments. He noted that the Youth Teams, community groups and partners such as Berkshire Youth and the Greenham Trust had spoken to young people and it was clear that they wanted safe spaces where they could socialise and speak to people they trust. He felt this could be achieved without recreating the youth clubs of the past and confirmed that officers were working with partners to make better use of spaces in community buildings using sustainable funding streams. Councillor Boeck also stated that there were excellent facilities at the Waterside centre and Adventure Dolphin. He then highlighted the outreach work undertaken via the Family Hubs which had been recognised as a model for other local authorities. Finally, he confirmed that the Council was in contact with 92% of the young people who had left care, and they were receiving advice and support from officers as needed. All but a handful were in adequate accommodation, and very few were Council Tax payers. If they began to struggle, help would be offered via the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

Councillor Tony Vickers confirmed that his political group strongly supported localism partnerships with and amongst parishes, and the desire of rural communities to take back control as society goes through drastic and sometimes frightening change. He referred to the various factors which contributed to these rising problems, and the 'Viable Villages' campaign from the CPRE which sought to understand and address the threat to rural communities. CPRE had partnered with Shelter to attempt to address the problem of increasingly non-viable villages. He wanted the Council to demonstrate leadership and adopt the amendment to make it proactive in assisting rural communities and making rural life more affordable, sociable and sustainable.

Councillor Steve Ardagh-Walter reminded Council that two large City Councils, Nottingham and Bristol, had jointly lost around £70m over the last three years by investing in and setting up power companies. Added to this was the rocketing of energy prices and the volatility of the last six months which had seen 25 energy companies collapse. He felt this would be a loss for the Council and did not support the amendment. He then noted that the sharing of expertise already occurred with partner organisations, consumers and businesses. This could be increased upon, but he believed allocating a further £100k to do this was not warranted. Councillor Ardagh-Walter referred to the proposal to discount the green bin charge because of a missed collection in January 2022. He confirmed that this had been a pre-announced suspension of the green bin

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collection in a month when garden waste was not really produced. He did not believe that both proposals relating to the green bin charge were a good use of the Council's resources, and had no logic or rationale or suggestions as to what would be cut elsewhere to fund them.

Councillor Claire Rowles, as the local authority representative on Citizens Advice West Berkshire, welcomed and endorsed the comments made regarding their good work. She had seen it first hand from attending their Board meetings on a regular basis, and wanted to highlight that the administration had been supportive of their work and would continue to be so in the future.

Councillor Richard Somner noted that 'viable' had no definition, and that the proposal did not reflect a standard offering or need, or the diversity across the district. For example, he explained that 'viable' for a village in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty would not be the same as 'viable' for a village within a Development Proximity Zone. Each of the Parish and Town Councils within the authority's boundary were of varying sizes, capacities and capabilities which would require individual engagement. He felt that this engagement work was already covered under the Customer First programme, and the opportunity to set a design at a local level could be provided under a Neighbourhood Development Plan. Regarding the Readibus amendment, he advised that any increase in the funding available towards service provision would be distributed with equity and fairness to all service providers. For absolute clarity, he also confirmed that any service level agreement in excess of £5k with any provider of these services would require a signed agreement between parties. Councillor Somner believed that it would be unfair and unconstitutional to fund one provider over others. A formulaic approach was in place which was established and based on previous years' activities. Additional demand for an increase in this area was also not evidenced over and above the current level of service provision.

Councillor Nassar Hunt stated that although the level of interactions with care leavers was very high and should be celebrated, in his experience as a care leaver it often did not resolve problems. Trust issues can lead to non-communication, and asking for help was more difficult than just receiving it. He also referred to the report released by government which showed that one third of care leavers were homeless within two years of leaving care. Councillor Hunt felt it was important to acknowledge this and to explore this proposal in the future even if it was not agreed at this meeting.

Councillor Lee Dillon referred to the Conservative government having proposed an increase in National Insurance against all workers, which he felt was a regressive taxation policy and would negatively impact those on the lowest income. He noted that the amendment regarding mileage was proposed to recognise and help employees with fuel costs, and suggested that the Council would need to update its travel policy shortly as the reimbursement rates would no longer coincide with fuel costs. Councillor Dillon then referred to his political Groups manifesto pledge to abolish the green waste bin charge in a financially sensible way. The proposal put forward would assist those on the lowest income first, but he felt that the Council should not be charging residents to recycle. Councillor Dillon then noted that 8% of care leavers were not in contact with the Council every year but that the administration was expecting them to use a discretionary local Council Tax scheme. He argued that it should be a fundamental right of care leavers to be guaranteed financial assistance so they could plan in advance, and that this was something the Children's Commissioner had called upon all local authorities to do. He also felt that a refund should be given to residents for the green bin charge as set out

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in the amendments because residents had paid for a service which was not received, that services would not need to be cut, nor were the amendments unconstitutional since the Section 151 Officer had approved them.

Councillor Jeff Brooks referred to the issues and losses experienced by Nottingham and Bristol City Councils, and said this supported the idea of undertaking an investigation in the first place. Most initiatives have risk and he felt this proposal should not be dismissed outright because of others bad experiences. He explained the belief and passion behind the proposals, which his party would continue to bring forward at future budgets or push through should control of the Council change in their favour. He felt that the administration had lost its passion and enthusiasm.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon noted that the combined capital and revenue funds proposed for an investigation in to a power company was £180k, which he argued was not an insignificant amount of taxpayers' money. He had no details on the proposal and was not confident that he knew exactly what it was regarding, and stated that more information and clarity would have been useful. Councillor Mackinnon also highlighted that the January 2022 missed green bin collection was not actually missed, it had been delayed. The service was provided and extra garden waste was collected. He noted that the Section 151 Officer could provide advice on the implications for the budget but would not judge the amendments as to their constitutional merit. Councillor Mackinnon thanked Councillor Hunt for his contribution and insight and agreed that care leavers should be supported. He had reservations though that the proposal, however well-intentioned, elevated one groups' struggles over others. He felt it a good principle that those who received Council services, and could afford it, should pay for them subject to the support mechanisms described.

The Amendments were put to the meeting and duly **REFUSED**.

### **FOR the Amendments:**

Councillors Adrian Abbs, Phil Barnett, Jeff Brooks, Jeremy Cottam, Lee Dillon, Billy Drummond, Nassar Hunt, Royce Longton, Owen Jeffrey, Geoff Mayes, Andy Moore, Martha Vickers, Tony Vickers. (13)

### **AGAINST the Amendments:**

Councillors Steve Ardagh-Walter, Jeff Beck, Dennis Benneyworth, Dominic Boeck, Graham Bridgeman, Jeff Cant, Hilary Cole, James Cole, Lynne Doherty, Gareth Hurley, Rick Jones, Alan Law, Tony Linden, Ross Mackinnon, Thomas Marino, Biyi Oloko, Graham Pask, Claire Rowles, Richard Somner, Joanne Stewart, Andrew Williamson, Howard Woollaston. (22)

### **ABSTAINED from voting on the Amendments:**

Councillors Carolyn Culver, David Marsh, Steve Masters. (3)

**AMENDMENT:** Proposed by Councillor Steve Masters and seconded by Councillor Carolyne Culver:

- A grant of £40,000 to West Berkshire Foodbank, to fund staffing and other additional costs, to help them cope with increased demand from those hardest hit

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by the fuel and cost-of-living crisis. This would be for one year initially, to be reviewed in 12 months' time.

Councillor Steve Masters in introducing the amendment referred to the growing financial pressures upon residents in West Berkshire. He noted that food banks operated out of five locations across the district and the project had been founded by local Churches and community groups, with support from the Greenham Trust, to work together on helping relieve hunger in the local area. The food banks were part of the national Trussell Trust network and received no direct funding from West Berkshire Council in 2021. He also noted that approximately 2.5m people used a food bank in the United Kingdom last year, up by more than 600,000 on the previous year. The number of food bank users had increased each year from just under 26,000 in 2008/09 to approximately 2.5m in 2021. Locally, the figures to March 2020 showed a similar increased demand and projected demand followed the national trends upwards. Councillor Masters suggested that hunger in the UK was not about food, it was about a lack of income. The main drivers of food bank use in the district were problems with the benefits system, the delays in adequacy, sanctions, and deductions causing challenging life experiences. He referenced the effects of the economic situation post-lockdown, and the ongoing economic challenges faced by residents such as the rising domestic fuel bills, as well as the National Insurance increases, which he felt would inevitably increase the number of residents and families facing a choice between heating and eating. The amendment allocated £40k to the food bank to assist with additional costs incurred during the last year and the recruitment and retention of an additional member of staff to meet the increased demands on the service. Councillor Masters recognised that in a more equitable society food banks would not be needed, and that the Council should be mindful of the wider impacts of increasing fuel poverty and stagnating incomes, and provide this support to what had unfortunately become a vital service.

Councillor Owen Jeffery requested that Council support the proposal as it was a minor amount and a one-off for the year.

Councillor Martha Vickers suggested that members should question MPs and the government as to the rising need for food banks, which she believed should not be happening in a civilised society. She felt that the benefits system was not working, with Universal Credit being cut, leading people in to poverty where they live in cold homes and visit food banks. Councillor Vickers highlighted that young children suffered the most when food and energy was short, and that sadly organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group were saying that infant / child mortality rates in the UK were higher than in other European countries.

Councillor Hilary Cole referred to the support already provided to the most vulnerable by the Council through its partnership work with groups such as Loose Ends and West Berkshire Homeless, and she was unsure as to why the food bank had been singled out for grant funding with no proof of this need being evidenced. She highlighted that in October the Council had received an allocation of Household Support funding of £694k and over 1400 applications had been approved to date with an average award of £220 being paid directly to applicants. She believed that this targeted approach ensured that help was received by those individuals and families most in need. Councillor Cole accepted that the food bank made a contribution but argued that working together in partnership with all organisations had been what had enabled the Council to achieve the results it had. She also referred to the number of rough sleepers in the district which had been reduced to zero.

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Councillor Carolyne Culver stated her belief that the Council was capable of supporting the one-off cost for this proposal. She noted that the number of food bank users had increased, and that residents were also facing rising fuel costs, the end of the energy price caps, and inflation rising by up to 7% in April. She queried if Members had to see people queuing up outside the Council Chamber with begging bowls before agreeing there was a need for food banks. She asked if they cared so little about the amount of poverty in the district and the fact that people could not afford to eat which was only going to get worse. She argued that the sense of solidarity displayed towards the people of Ukraine should be extended to the people in the district who could not afford to eat.

Councillor Steve Masters believed it unlikely that any Member would experience hunger over the next 12 months but that there would be many residents who would. He noted that the proposal was a one off for one year and hoped that the situation would have improved to a point by then whereby food banks were no longer needed. He agreed that there were other charities and agencies that the Council needed to support but felt that ample funds should be provided to support all priorities on basic needs.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon noted that the food bank was one of a number of routes that residents experiencing hardship could obtain relief from but was not aware that the food bank had requested any funds from the Council this year. He then highlighted ways in which the Council and government supported those in need by referencing the £695k Household Support fund, the 4200 children assisted with free school meals, and the Council Tax reduction scheme.

The Amendment was put to the meeting and duly **REFUSED**.

### **FOR the Amendment:**

Councillors Adrian Abbs, Phil Barnett, Jeff Brooks, Jeremy Cottam, Carolyn Culver, Lee Dillon, Billy Drummond, Nassar Hunt, Royce Longton, Owen Jeffrey, David Marsh, Steve Masters, Geoff Mayes, Andy Moore, Martha Vickers, Tony Vickers. (16)

### **AGAINST the Amendment:**

Councillors Steve Ardagh-Walter, Jeff Beck, Dennis Benneyworth, Dominic Boeck, Graham Bridgeman, Jeff Cant, Hilary Cole, James Cole, Lynne Doherty, Gareth Hurley, Rick Jones, Alan Law, Tony Linden, Ross Mackinnon, Thomas Marino, Biyi Oloko, Graham Pask, Claire Rowles, Richard Somner, Joanne Stewart, Howard Woollaston. (21)

### **ABSTAINED from voting on the Amendment:**

Councillor Andrew Williamson. (1)

**SUBSTANTIVE MOTION:** Proposed by Councillor Ross Mackinnon and seconded by Councillor Lynne Doherty.

Councillor Adrian Abbs argued that the schedule associated with the Budget Meeting of Council left little time for detail to be presented and for a thorough discussion of the amendments to be had. He expressed frustration at not being able to offer further explanation when Members had raised questions or points required clarification. He

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addressed what he felt had been incorrect comments from Councillor Ardagh-Walter regarding the power company proposal and explained how it was an 'invest to save' idea. He noted that funding would be available from the UK Infrastructure Bank which had £22b to spend on these kind of projects, and had better rates of borrowing than the Public Works Loan Board. He felt that the proposals contained within the revenue budget were too small to really have any major effect, would not help tackle the climate emergency, and would result in a failure to meet the 2030 zero carbon target.

Councillor Joanne Stewart wanted to clarify that the revenue budget proposal for 2022/23 did not take into account any reforms to Adult Social Care which would be coming in 2023 and beyond. This was because the Council, like every other local authority and social care service provider, were working through the detail and information with government departments and other key experts such as the Local Government Association. She then highlighted the achievements and challenges being faced in Adult Social Care which she felt the budget proposals would help to address. These included the proportion of adults aged 65 and over growing in comparison with younger age groups and the increased demand and complexity of need, and the increased needs of older adults and people with disabilities impacting the demand on placements in care homes. Councillor Stewart advised that care home occupancy levels were starting to return to pre-pandemic levels but this had meant a loss of income whilst overheads increased with rising inflation and energy costs. She noted that recruitment had been a key issue for everyone in the social care market but the Council had been focusing on how it could use government funding to improve training and develop roles within its own service teams and with external providers. This was showing positive improvements and would allow the Council to reduce its reliance on agency staff in the future. Councillor Stewart confirmed that an external review of the Adult Social Care budget forecast model was being undertaken by the Local Government Association in conjunction with the Finance and Adults Social Care teams to assess and either validate the model or identify where improvements could be made to enhance forecasting and improve data. She expressed her confidence that the budget proposal with a 3% Adult Social Care precept would ensure the Council continued to deliver the services residents needed and wanted despite the significant pressures being faced across the care sector.

Councillor Tony Vickers expressed his disappointment at the presentation of the budget report, in particular its small number of pages. He argued that a reduction in its length was not a relevant cost saving exercise in the digital age and that officers had more work to do in reducing it. He believed that every Council Tax payer was entitled to view spend and compare figures each year to see trends. He felt that there were inconsistencies in the way the documents were presented, and called for additional text to be inserted to explain phrases and proposals. He asked that a better way of presenting essential budgetary information to taxpayers was found.

Councillor Richard Somner invited Members to note that there had not been an increase in car parking fees proposed for the coming year. He regarded this as a positive contribution to residents by the Council despite the reduction in car parking income, and noted that the Council's fees and charges were good when benchmarked against other authorities in the region.

Councillor Owen Jeffery expressed his disappointment at the Conservative administration who he felt had not accepted the Liberal Democrat amendment because of perceived glory they might obtain, and had resisted an opportunity of direct benefit to the hard pressed in society as a result.

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Councillor Lee Dillon believed that not enough detail on the budget proposals had been put forward by the administration either given they had officers at their disposal and opposition members did not. He also referred to 18 separate budget lines in the proposals with £917k of income generation, savings or disinvestment where it was stated there was no impact and queried why these had not been put forward last year.

Councillor Graham Bridgman invited Members to note that the paper on licensing fees had been considered by the Licensing Committee prior to its consideration by Council and had therefore afforded all Members the opportunity to review the background and ask questions of officers directly about the proposals. He advised that he had been involved in discussions between West Berkshire Council, Wokingham Borough Council and Reading Borough Council regarding the forthcoming Adult Social Care reforms, what that might mean in terms of costs, and where that funding would come from. The increase in National Insurance would go initially to meet National Health Service issues and he argued that a better formula was required for the distribution of that funding if costs were not to substantially exceed income. Councillor Bridgman also advised that the government had increased the Public Health grant by 2.7% nationally across the board. He felt the government needed to better acknowledge public health pressures and take a different view of the role of local authorities in the public health arena, but was hopeful that NHS funding would be given to the Council in the future in order to improve the lives of residents.

Councillor Lynne Doherty explained how her passion, as Leader of the Council, lay in delivering the Council's Strategy adopted in May 2019 and that this revenue budget had been carefully put together to do just that. Some examples she provided to demonstrate this included: the £300k investment in special educational needs which helped to provide the same opportunities to those with a disability or additional need; the investment in to the LEP to continue to deliver on key economic growth in the district, making it an attractive place for businesses to come, start, thrive and grow with high employment and a strong local economy; £310k to support the Local Plan which would deliver housing and employment land across the district and help make homes available for all residents at all stages of their life, and; the £55k being spent on the new enhanced bus partnership to support public transport in the area making it easier for residents to use alternative methods of transport. Councillor Doherty explained that the administration sought to be efficient when spending whilst recognising the requirement to balance the need of many when delivering public services. Residents continued to feel the impact of Covid and the current cost of living was rising which had contributed to the decision to keep the core Council Tax as low as possible at only 1%. She stated that ideally it would have been 0% in the current financial situation but that was not possible, and the 3% was put in purely to support the most vulnerable in society through Adult Social Care. Councillor Doherty recommended the budget as she believed it delivered for all residents in West Berkshire and carefully balanced economic, social and environmental needs.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon echoed the words of the Leader, and offered to discuss the principle of zero based budgeting with Councillor Brooks in the near future. He also confirmed he would reflect on the points regarding the detail on the budget and perhaps host another meeting to discuss potential improvements. Councillor Mackinnon reiterated that no request for funding had been received from the West Berkshire Food Bank, and no indication that it needed a member of staff. He also thought it unlikely that a budget amendment would be the route taken by the food bank to submit this request. Councillor Mackinnon ended by thanking Members for their contributions to the debate.

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The Motion was put to the meeting and duly **RESOLVED**.

**FOR the Motion:**

Councillors Steve Ardagh-Walter, Jeff Beck, Dennis Benneyworth, Dominic Boeck, Graham Bridgeman, Jeff Cant, Hilary Cole, James Cole, Lynne Doherty, Gareth Hurley, Rick Jones, Alan Law, Tony Linden, Ross Mackinnon, Thomas Marino, Biyi Oloko, Graham Pask, Claire Rowles, Richard Somner, Joanne Stewart, Andrew Williamson, Howard Woollaston. (22)

**AGAINST the Motion:**

Councillors Phil Barnett, Jeff Brooks, Jeremy Cottam, Carolyn Culver, Lee Dillon, Billy Drummond, Nassar Hunt, Owen Jeffrey, David Marsh, Steve Masters, Geoff Mayes, Andy Moore, Martha Vickers, Tony Vickers. (14)

**ABSTAINED from voting on the Motion:**

Councillors Adrian Abbs, Royce Longton. (2)

*(The meeting commenced at 5.45 pm and closed at 9.30 pm)*

**CHAIRMAN** .....

**Date of Signature** .....