

COUNCIL

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON

THURSDAY, 29 FEBRUARY 2024

Councillors Present: Adrian Abbs, Antony Amirtharaj, Phil Barnett, Dennis Benneyworth, Dominic Boeck, Jeff Brooks, Patrick Clark, Heather Codling, Martin Colston, Jeremy Cottam (Chairman), Iain Cottingham, Laura Coyle, Carolyne Culver, Paul Dick, Billy Drummond (Vice-Chairman), Nigel Foot, Denise Gaines, Stuart Gourley, Clive Hooker, Owen Jeffery, Paul Kander, Jane Langford, Janine Lewis, Ross Mackinnon, Alan Macro, Erik Pattenden, Justin Pemberton, Vicky Poole, Christopher Read, Matt Shakespeare, Richard Somner, Stephanie Steevenson, Joanne Stewart, Louise Sturgess, Clive Taylor, Martha Vickers, Tony Vickers and Howard Woollaston

Also Present: Nigel Lynn (Chief Executive), Paul Coe (Interim Executive Director – People), AnnMarie Dodds (Executive Director - Children and Family Services), Joseph Holmes (Executive Director - Resources), Clare Lawrence (Executive Director - Place) and Sarah Clarke (Service Director (Strategy and Governance)), Honorary Alderman Adrian Edwards (Honorary Alderman), Honorary Alderman Andrew Rowles (Honorary Alderman), Honorary Alderman Anthony Stansfeld (Honorary Alderman), Stephen Chard (Democratic Services Manager), Melanie Booth (Group Executive (Lib Dems)), Councillor David Marsh, Councillor Geoff Mayes, Benjamin Ryan (Democratic Services Officer) and Honorary Alderman Tony Linden (Honorary Alderman)

Apologies for inability to attend the meeting: Honorary Alderwoman Hilary Cole, Honorary Alderman Paul Bryant, Honorary Alderman Graham Jones, Honorary Alderwoman Mollie Lock, Councillor Nick Carter, Councillor Lee Dillon, Councillor Biyi Oloko, Honorary Alderman Graham Bridgman, Honorary Alderman Rick Jones, Honorary Alderman Gordon Lundie, Honorary Alderman Graham Pask and Honorary Alderman Alan Law

Councillor(s) Absent:

PART I

71. Declarations of Interest

The Monitoring Officer, Sarah Clarke, advised that all Members had completed an application for a Grant of a Dispensation in relation to any beneficial interest in land within the Authority's area. The dispensation was granted to allow all Members to speak and vote on the budget items. A number of personal interests had been declared in relation to the agenda items, they had been published on the website and were on display on the door of the Council Chamber. Also included in the minutes as follows:

Amirtharaj, Anthony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundation Governor at St Joseph's Primary School • Parish Councillor of Speen Parish Council • Children attend Trinity Secondary School, and St Joseph's Primary School
Benneyworth, Dennis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member of Royal Berkshire Fire Authority
Dick, Paul	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chairman of Curridge Residents Association • Trustee Berkshire Charity Mentors • Trustee Newbury Academy Trust • Trustee Bucklebury Community Bus • Deputy Lieutenant

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Gourley, Stuart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parish Councillor for Speen
Hooker, Clive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parish Councillor for West Ilsley
Jeffery, Owen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member of Royal Berkshire Fire Authority • Thatcham Town Councillor • Substitute on Henwick Worthy Joint Management Committee (appointed by Thatcham Town Council) • Member of Kennet Leisure Centre Joint Advisory Committee (Thatcham Town Council appointment) • In receipt of a pension from the Royal Berks Pension fund • Observer to the Berkshire Maestros (WBC appointed)
Mayes, Geoff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beech Hill Parish Councillor • English Heritage • CPRE • BBOWT • Stratfield Mortimer Fairground Trust • Wokefield Common Committee • Son is Finance Director for TAFisher Housing Developers in the District and local areas
Oloko, Biyi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambassador for the Institute of Directors (Berkshire) • Deputy President Thames Valley Society of Chartered Accountants • Treasurer/Trustee Commonwealth Pharmacists Association • Member, Calcot Park Golf Club
Poole, Vicky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business owner within West Berkshire • West Berkshire Council liaison with AWE • West Berkshire Council representative on Thames Valley Police and Crime Panel
Stewart, Joanne	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employed by Daisy's Dream who received a grant from the West Berkshire Council Lottery Fund • Partner of Cllr Richard Somner who is employed by the Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust • Tilehurst Parish Councillor
Steevenson, Stephanie	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thatcham Town Councillor
Somner, Richard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holybrook Parish Councillor • Employed by The Royal Berkshire NHS Foundation Trust • Partner employed by Daisy's Dream and they were the recipient of grant funding from WBC
Woollaston, Howard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chairman of the Lambourn Valley Flood Forum (voluntary position)

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72. Public Questions

A full transcription of the public question and answer session is available from the following link: [Transcription of Q&As](#).

73. Medium Term Financial Strategy (C4442)

The Council considered the report (Agenda Item 4). The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) set out the financial planning assumptions for future years, these were aligned with the Council Strategy to ensure that Council Strategy would be delivered. The MTFS highlighted the overarching key issues facing the Council's finances as well as the fact that there were many different scenarios and uncertainty concerning the future revenue streams for the Council.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Iain Cottingham and seconded by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

That the Council:

“approve the Medium Term Financial Strategy”.

Councillor Cottingham stated that the MTFS was a very important document for the Council in setting out the financial plan for the next four years. It provided a direction of travel for the Council to achieve greater financial resilience.

The forecasting of financial performance over an extended timeframe was challenging, particularly in a time of financial uncertainty.

The finances of local government were a concern nationally. The results of a recent local government survey showed that a high proportion of Council Leaders were concerned about financial stability. One in ten respondents felt there was a risk their local authority could go bust in the next year. Approximately half of those responding felt this could happen in the next five years without additional funding.

Post the 2023 local elections, the Executive considered the Q1 financial performance reports. The projected revenue overspend at that time was £8m (in excess of the General Reserves at that time). Radical action needed to be taken and much hard work was put in place to strengthen financial controls. This included the formation of the Financial Review Panel (FRP) which reviewed expenditure in excess of £2k. This approach had helped to reduce the overspend to £3.3m.

It was the intention, over the period of the MTFS, to replenish General Reserves by £6m to improve the Council's financial resilience. This would require annual Council Tax increases of 4.99% (2.99% Council Tax and 2% Adult Social Care precept).

These steps were also necessary to help meet increasing Adult Social Care and Children's Social Care costs and because of the inadequacy of Central Government funding.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon noted the introduction of the FRP to tighten controls, but then referred back to debate at the 19 December Council meeting and the proposal from the Administration to withdraw the Local Plan. The Government stepped in to prevent this from happening. Had it been withdrawn then the Council would have incurred costs in the region of £2m. He therefore considered that the Administration was not in a position to raise concerns with regard to the budget.

Councillor Tony Vickers was pleased to note that the Council would be continuing with the Municipal Bond scheme giving home owners who could afford it the opportunity to invest in schemes to help the wider community such as the solar farm.

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Councillor Brooks responded to the points raised by Councillor Mackinnon. The Liberal Democrat Administration inherited financial difficulties from the previous Administration and inherited the flawed Local Plan. The costs of fixing the Local Plan, in the region of £1.7m, would have been found over a two year period. It would not have been an immediate cost pressure.

Councillor Brooks stated that he would continue to raise concerns over the financial situation inherited from the Conservative Administration.

This MTFS set out a clear financial plan for the next four years and would keep a firm grip on the Council's finances.

Councillor Brooks thanked the Portfolio Holder and the officers for all their hard work in producing the budget papers.

Councillor Cottingham commented that the MTFS gave a much needed level of reassurance on the Council's finances. Financial resilience would continue to grow and the Council would build back its reserves.

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

74. **Investment and Borrowing Strategy 2024/25 (C4444)**

The Council considered the report (Agenda Item 5). The report sought to consolidate the Investments and Borrowing Strategy for the year ahead by detailing how and where the Council would invest and borrow in the forthcoming year, within a particular framework.

The report also had a statutory footing under the Local Government Act 2003. The Council must have an approved (by Full Council) Investment and Borrowing Strategy (or similar) for the forthcoming financial year. The Council was also required to comply with other regulatory requirements as highlighted in this report.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Iain Cottingham and seconded by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

That the Council:

“agree and adopt the proposed Investment and Borrowing Strategy for 2024/25;

agrees the revised Commercial Property Terms of Reference in Appendix D; and

agrees that the capital receipts generated from disinvestment are applied to offset potential future financing costs or are utilised as part of the flexible use of capital receipts policy.”

Councillor Cottingham made the point that the current financial climate was one of unprecedented risk. It was therefore crucial to manage funds in a prudent and risk averse way. The Strategy set out the borrowing and investment plans for the Council. Officers in the Treasury Team managed these plans and followed a rigorous process of risk management in doing so.

Borrowing was one of the avenues used to fund the Capital Strategy and the current borrowing strategy was for shorter term borrowing as this achieved lower rates of interest at the present time. Capital receipts also funded the Investment and Borrowing Strategy, and the investment of those funds helped to reduce borrowing and associated costs.

As mentioned by Councillor Tony Vickers, Councillor Cottingham was pleased that the Municipal Bond would be relaunched in 2024/25 to help fund the solar farm.

The Council was evaluating the potential to borrow from the UK Infrastructure Bank as the cost of borrowing was less than that available from the Public Works Loan Board.

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The Council's borrowing costs for 2023/24 were in the region of £168m, this was expected to reduce to £164m by 2027/28.

Councillor Cottingham concluded by stating that the Section 151 Officer was confident that this Strategy would provide an effective, robust and prudent platform to support the Capital Strategy.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon noted the points made on risk aversion. However, he questioned if the Administration was clear on its plans for commercial property investment following a recent meeting of the Executive when amendments were sought to the Property Investment Strategy. The decision taken on the Strategy was called-in and it transpired that this was not a decision for the Executive to take. The Property Investment Strategy had since been amended with disinvestment planned over the longer term.

Councillor Mackinnon made reference to paragraph 5.17 of the report which outlined that the Executive could invest funds of up to £17.5m in real estate investment trusts with the aim of achieving rental income. He noted this would be a continuation of property investment and would be a high risk approach.

(Councillor Phil Barnett joined the meeting at 6.08pm).

Councillor Adrian Abbs commented that the ability to borrow and invest sums did not mean it was always the right thing to do. He felt that the prior property investment of the Council had not proved successful and the competition for properties amongst local authorities had led to overly inflated prices. Disinvestment had become the approach but property prices had lowered.

He felt it would have been more sensible to invest in solar and other energy schemes as these would have achieved ongoing benefits.

Mention had been made of the costs of implementing the Care Director system. He felt that the project had proved to be a waste of money that should have been halted by the Conservative Administration. The situation had been inherited by the Liberal Democrats who had sought to remedy it.

Councillor Brooks referred to plans to disinvest in commercial property. He stated that it was the intention to reinvest monies from capital receipts for the benefit of West Berkshire residents.

Councillor Cottingham stated that the Council was highly unlikely to invest in real estate investment trusts and agreed it would be high risk. However, the option was being retained in the Strategy should the market in this area show improvement in the future.

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

75. Capital Strategy Financial Years 2024 to 2034 (C4443)

The Council considered the report (Agenda Item 6) which outlined the Capital Strategy covering the financial years 2024 - 34 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 along with providing an overview of how associated risk was managed and the implications for future financial sustainability.

Decisions made on capital and treasury management had financial consequences for the Council for many years into the future. Decisions were therefore subject to both a national regulatory framework and a local policy framework.

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MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Iain Cottingham and seconded by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

That the Council adopt the following recommendations:

“That the Capital Strategy and supporting Capital Programme for the period 2024 -2034 is approved (Appendix A).

That the Council approves the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) statement for 2024/25 and the revised MRP policy for 2023/24 (Appendix C).

That the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts Policy (Appendix D) is approved.

That the proposed CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) Bids be approved for inclusion in the Capital Programme (Appendix E).”

Councillor Cottingham was proud to be proposing the first West Berkshire Council Capital Strategy for a Liberal Democrat Administration since 2005.

The Strategy proposed the investment of £330m across the district over the next ten years. The key areas of investment aligned with the Council Strategy and included £123m towards a prosperous and resilient district, £145m for a fairer West Berkshire with opportunities for all, and £28m to help tackle the climate and ecological emergency.

The Strategy would be supported by £140m in Council borrowing which was within prudent limits.

For 2024/25, £53m would be invested across West Berkshire. This included £10.5m in Education, £4m on highways, as well as investment in biodiversity and active travel schemes. The final stage was being entered for the Thatcham Flood Alleviation Scheme and a Bus Service Improvement Plan would be implemented.

Further details would follow from individual Portfolio Holders.

A key element of the Strategy was the flexible use of capital receipts. The Government had advised local authorities to minimise risks with property investments and the strategic approach with the Council’s property advisors was to disinvest in order to deliver best value to residents.

Councillor Cottingham made clear that the disposal of assets, particularly buy to let properties, was not a ‘fire’ sale. This was currently a common approach in the property market. He reiterated that receipts would be reinvested to benefit residents.

Councillor Cottingham concluded by advising of a technical accounting change to the Minimum Revenue Provision that would allow the Council to adjust its process for meeting the costs of borrowing as it was considered overly prudent. This was with the Council’s external auditors for validation.

(Councillor Geoff Mayes joined the meeting remotely at 6.20pm).

AMENDMENT: Proposed by Councillor Carolyn Culver and seconded by Councillor Adrian Abbs:

Original text: Falkland Primary School – Classroom replacement budget

Proposed amendment: “Move £2m from 25/26 to 24/25 to enable this essential work to start without further delays.”

Original text:

Reference	Project	Amount / £m
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Reference	Project	Amount / £m
109	Corporate Storage Systems & Attached Network	0.15
112	Refresh Multi-Functional Device Fleet	0.17
113	Corporate Database Server Replacement	0.075
124	Digitalisation Infrastructure/ Allocation ICT	0.05
150	Refresh DC A/C & Generator	0.1
216	Provision of full fibre broadband to schools	0.28
35	Expansion of Berkshire Records Office. Reading	2.508
217	A capital budget to purchase items for the West Berkshire Museum Collection	0.01

Proposed amendments:

2a) To remove the following items for the capital budget whilst cloud options are investigated (total £0.375m):

Lines:

- 109
- 113
- 124
- 150

2b) Change MFD procurement to replace on failure (allow for 1-2 machines to fail in 2024-25) - £0.17m

2c) Remove all purchasing options from museum – instead allow long term loans from interest parties - £0.01m

2d) Investigate alternative to Full Fibre in schools - £0.28m

2e) Defer extra storage of paper for minimum of 1 year whilst we lobby for digital alternative - £2.508m”

Prior to entering the debate, Councillor Abbs requested a small amount of additional time to speak both as seconder to the amendments and as the Ward Member for Falkland Primary School. The Monitoring Officer, Sarah Clarke, responded that Members could

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only speak once on each debate and the timings had been agreed in advance in consultation with Group Leaders. Councillor Abbs felt that the timing permitted was not sufficient and therefore debate was being restricted.

Councillor Culver talked specifically on the Falkland Primary School amendment on Councillor David Marsh's behalf, she thanked him for his hard work in preparing the amendment.

There was an urgent need to bring forward funding as proposed in order to make much needed improvements to the school's classrooms. Funding that had earlier been promised for a new building (from 2022/23) had sadly been postponed and the situation was worsening. This was a significant concern as the classrooms were cold and damp, resulting in high heating costs.

Some initial progress was made within 2022/23 in terms of assigning a project officer and looking to procure a design, but had not been taken any further forward and the Capital Strategy was proposing that funding and therefore works would be pushed into 2025/26. The only provision for 2024/25 was to allocate a relatively small amount of funding for the design phase only.

This situation was extremely frustrating for all concerned.

The Section 151 Officer's comments on this particular amendment explained that the bringing forward of funding would have little impact on the 2024/25 finances. Much of the funding was external, meaning that the amount to be borrowed was relatively minimal.

Councillor Abbs concentrated the bulk of his comments on IT related amendments. He explained that he had a strong IT background and had worked in the sector for many years.

On amendment 2a, he felt it would be sensible to remove those proposals and extend existing warranties so that cloud-based alternatives could be considered in order to achieve best value.

Amendment 2b, Councillor Abbs felt the Council could save money by opting to not replace all its Multi-Functional Devices at once.

While the proposal for amendment 2c was small this was a time of financial crisis and so this was a saving that could be made.

Councillor Abbs questioned why full fibre had not been rolled out to schools (amendment 2d) already meaning there would be no need to spend additional public money.

He felt there should be no need to expand the provision for paper storage (amendment 2e). The retention of more recent records should be via digital means. The £2.5m would be far better spent on delivering a school.

Turning to the Falkland Primary School amendment, Councillor Abbs advised that he had been contacted by the very concerned Headteacher on the situation. Funding should be provided earlier as per the amendment, the current poor situation was impacting on the education of pupils.

Councillor Dominic Boeck referred to the high performance of West Berkshire's schools at the conclusion of the Conservative Administration and the important role the Capital Strategy played in maintaining the education estate, which included two new primary schools and additional provision for children with special education needs. Good quality facilities were needed for the most effective education.

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Improvements to Falkland Primary School had been in the Capital Programme since 2021 and the project was due to commence during 2023/24. The delay proposed by the Liberal Democrat Administration to 2025/26 was not acceptable. The school's classrooms should not be sub-standard porta cabins.

He sought assurance that West Berkshire's children be put first and questioned why the cheque could not be written and the works allowed to proceed.

Councillor Boeck was pleased to support the amendment. The Council had a duty of care to the children of West Berkshire and should strive to do the best possible for their education. He urged all Members to add their support.

Councillor Heather Codling agreed that West Berkshire's children should be put first and therefore the classrooms should have already been replaced for Falkland Primary School. She clarified that a feasibility study had been carried out, but a design had not been produced. Unfortunately, during the course of last year, staff members had been lost and it had been difficult to recruit good quality project managers to replace them.

Councillor Codling had reviewed the Capital Programme for Education with the Executive Director for Children and Family Services shortly after she was appointed and Falkland was at the top of the pile. Provision had been made for the provision of a design statement in the coming year (£40k) and additional funds in the region of £250k also brought forward to help make progress. Councillor Codling stated that further funds would be brought forward within 2024/25 if sufficient progress was made and it became possible to deliver the project.

Councillor Codling provided an assurance that she would be keeping a close eye on the project and was determined that it be delivered as soon as possible.

Councillor Chris Read explained that he had also worked within IT for many years and agreed with the benefits of a move to cloud based services. However, he added that in his experience it was better to invest capital funding up front which would save costs at a later stage. He did not therefore support the delay of IT proposals.

Councillor Marsh was pleased to note support to the Falkland Primary School amendment. He was deeply concerned that the school's damp and cold classrooms were not fit for purpose. As already described this had been an ongoing situation which was unsustainable.

The parents and carers of the children at Falkland would be within their rights to feel the school was being neglected, particularly when making comparisons to developments at other schools. It had been necessary recently to close the school following flooding and a resultant loss of electricity. He thanked other schools and community groups for their support during that time.

Councillor Marsh asked the Portfolio Holder to commit to ensuring that the school did not have to meet the repair costs following this incident.

He added that the Minority Group would closely monitor the care of the school estate.

As had been stated by Councillor Codling it was possible to bring funding forward and Councillor Marsh therefore urged approval of the amendment.

Councillor Ross Mackinnon agreed the funding should be brought forward which would give an assurance to the school, parents and children. He suggested that a separate vote be undertaken on this particular amendment.

He stated his disappointment at the criticisms made around delays to the Falkland project. It had been ready to go in 2020 but unfortunately was delayed as a result of Covid. However, any delay since May 2023 was a matter for the new Administration.

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Councillor Clive Taylor made the point that the borrowing of funds clearly needed to be repaid with interest. The IT savings proposed would reduce borrowing costs and savings could be put to exploring cloud-based options.

Councillor Howard Woollaston supported the investment proposed for the Royal Berkshire Archives which provided an excellent facility. The expansion was needed to ensure that archived documents were stored in the most appropriate environment. He clarified that the £2.5m proposed was shared across the six Berkshire unitary authorities and West Berkshire Council's costs would be £200k per year over two years. He supported a separate vote on Falkland Primary School.

Councillor Paul Kander noted from previous Council meetings that £1.7m had been found by the Liberal Democrats to fund a new local plan and queried why this sum could not have been put to schools. There had been no progress with Falkland Primary since May 2023.

Councillor Patrick Clark thanked his fellow Ward Members for their comments on Falkland Primary School. This was of high importance and he thanked Councillor Codling for her assurance that funding would be allocated to the project as soon as it was ready for delivery.

Councillor Paul Dick spoke on the Falkland amendment, stating his extensive experience of the Education sector. The district's children were indeed the Council's highest priority and the Council should be doing all possible to support and care for them. Project Managers existed and the funding was available, it should therefore be brought forward without further delay.

Councillor Tony Vickers highlighted the importance of securing planning consent for Education projects. He completely acknowledged the concerns raised in relation to Falkland Primary School but considered it more realistic to schedule works to the following year to allow sufficient time to design the scheme, obtain planning permission and then go out to tender for delivery. A project plan needed to be in place, something that had been lacking in previous years.

Councillor Jeff Brooks strongly agreed with many aspects of the argument made for Falkland Primary School and gave a firm assurance that this project would be fast tracked as soon as practically possible. He would be receiving regular updates on the progress being made. As stated by Councillor Codling, the money would be allocated in the coming year if the project could be delivered within 2024/25. Every effort would be made to do so. However, after considering all steps that needed to be taken he felt that delivery was more practicable in 2025/26.

Turning to the IT related amendments, Councillor Brooks stated that staff needed the right tools to perform their roles to the best of their ability.

The Royal Berkshire Archive was indeed a wonderful facility which should be retained and expanded.

In summary, Councillor Brooks advised that the Liberal Democrat Group were not in support of the amendments, but repeated his assurance that the Falkland Primary School works would be undertaken, with funding allocated, as soon as practically possible.

Councillor Culver felt that the Council should take the step of bringing forward and allocating funding for Falkland Primary School in the coming year. It could always be pushed into the following year if necessary. This would send a clear signal to the school community of the Council's intentions.

She requested separate votes on the amendments.

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The Chairman agreed that a separate vote would be taken on the Falkland Primary School amendment. The remaining amendments from the Minority Group would be voted for en bloc.

The Falkland Primary School amendment was put to the vote.

FOR the Amendment:

All Members of the Conservative Group.

All Members of the Minority Group.

AGAINST the Amendment:

All Members of the Liberal Democrat Group.

ABSTAINED: None.

The Falkland Primary School amendment was declared **LOST**.

Amendments 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d and 2e were put to the vote.

FOR the Amendment:

All Members of the Minority Group.

AGAINST the Amendment:

All Members of the Liberal Democrat Group.

All Members of the Conservative Group.

ABSTAINED: None.

Amendments 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d and 2e were declared **LOST**.

Debate returned to the substantive Motion:

Councillor Stuart Gourley outlined the significant investment in his portfolio which aligned with the Council's strategic imperatives of climate action, recycling and bio-diversity. A key project was the Grazeley solar farm with £2.5m allocated in the coming year.

More Council assets would have solar pv installed, including the Padworth Household Waste Recycling Unit.

£17.2m would be invested over the next four years in delivering renewable energy provision and greater infrastructure would be implemented for electric vehicle charging.

Other initiatives would also be explored to help achieve net zero. A micro hydro feasibility study would be undertaken and natural climate change projects would be explored such as large scale tree planting.

Councillor Gourley highlighted the Thatcham Flood Alleviation Scheme. Efforts would be made with partners to secure further funding streams for projects, including for further flood defence schemes.

This was an ambitious plan for the coming year and beyond. Climate action did come at a cost, but a cost worth having. Councillor Gourley looked forward to working with officers to achieve benefits for the district and its residents.

Councillor Abbs was pleased to see these projects coming through. He hoped that the scope of the Grazeley project would retain the potential to be widened to incorporate developing technologies, and that micro hydro initiatives would be taken forward.

Councillor Owen Jeffery warmly welcomed plans for Thatcham as the area had suffered greatly from flooding in the past. It was excellent to see that the final element of long

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terms plans for flood defences was being reached, preventing homes from further flooding in the future.

Councillor Mackinnon commented that it was a shame that the Falkland amendment was not approved.

He referred back to Councillor Cottingham's comments on the policy change to MRP and the ability this gave to release funding to revenue. This was on the view that the previous approach was considered too prudent, this conflicted with the points made that the Conservative Administration had not been prudent.

There was much to support in the Capital Strategy, including the 179 items that had rolled forward from the previous Strategy. He was also pleased to note that a ten year strategy was being retained.

Councillor Mackinnon referred to the Manifesto pledge to fix dangerous pot holes in 24 hours and all pot holes fixed on a permanent basis with no temporary measures. However, he noted that the highway improvement plan was due to be cut in 2026/27. Roads needed to continue to be improved in the years ahead including the fixing of pot holes.

Councillor Mackinnon concluded by referring to the Newbury Sports Hub, a project he believed to have been cancelled by the Administration. However, funding of £2.3m was still allocated.

Councillor Tony Vickers highlighted the importance of new residential development. The Council was able to secure capital funding from housing developers in order to ensure that the necessary infrastructure was put in place to offset development, much of this came from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). While the Council had some control over the levy charged, the market was controlled by developers.

He considered the £43m forecast from CIL charging to be a low estimate compared to the level of infrastructure improvements that would be needed. 26 projects due for 2024/25 were totally dependent on CIL. It was therefore necessary to review CIL charging in the years ahead and make efforts to secure higher CIL contributions.

The Council also held the role of collating CIL on behalf of other bodies including the NHS and Thames Water. They had a legal right to access CIL for their infrastructure needs.

Councillor Martha Vickers gave her support for active travel initiatives. These were very important in helping the health and wellbeing of residents.

She highlighted safer school projects in particular and welcomed the support that would come from the Council via the Capital Strategy in implementing projects that aimed to reduce traffic congestion around schools and encouraging more walking to school.

Councillor Antony Amirtharaj commended the Capital Strategy. Importantly, it focused on achieving the Council's key priorities as well as business as usual projects. He particularly praised accessibility improvements in Speen.

Councillor Janine Lewis spoke on plans for improving leisure facilities. This included continuing to listen to communities in order to best meet their needs. The Playing Pitch Strategy was to be reviewed to ensure sporting needs were being met.

However, factors such as cost of living and inflation had to be acknowledged. This was being reflected in the costs of materials for projects and this could push some schemes over budget or cause some delays. Project costs were therefore being reviewed.

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The funding for new projects would not be agreed until business cases had been approved. Additional funding streams would also be explored with partner organisations.

Councillor Denise Gaines noted that the condition of roads and pavements were observed by residents, both local roads and further afield. £8.5 was in the programme for highway projects, funding for which came from a combination of CIL, Central Government funding and the Council's capital funds. Highway schemes were of course important from a safety perspective and funds were being invested in helping to reduce accidents, but it was also important to make West Berkshire an attractive place in which to live and work, helping residents feel proud of their district. Funding was therefore set aside for signage and footway improvements, and traffic signal updates.

Funding was allocated to village speed limit schemes and on street electric vehicle charging. Sustainable transport measures were being funded, including cycle lanes and canal paths. Upgrades were being made to the transport fleet.

On the subject of pot holes, 1881 pot holes were reported in January and February, this was ten times the amount reported for the same period last year. Since May 2023, the Council had spent £400k more on pot hole repairs than the amount spent by the previous Administration in the last three years. Dangerous pot holes were being fixed in the promised timescale. She did however acknowledge that temporary fixes had been necessary on some occasions.

Councillor Codling repeated the commitment for Falkland Primary School, but also outlined other education projects. These included the expansion of the Castle School to improve the provision for its children and the expansion of early years provision at Thatcham Park. There were also a number of smaller scale works planned to help foster parents in caring for their families.

Councillor Brooks was delighted to support the very good Capital Programme and thanked Portfolio Holders for their comments. It was important to deliver projects, there had been a trend of projects being slipped and this was something to be improved upon. This was a challenge for both Members and officers.

Councillor Cottingham gave thanks for the robust debate. The Capital Strategy would do much to benefit West Berkshire's residents whilst also ensuring the Council protected its finances.

In accordance with the provisions outlined in the Constitution, the vote on the Capital Strategy would be recorded. The names of those Members voting for, against and abstaining were read to the Council as follows:

FOR the Motion:

Councillors Antony Amirtharaj, Phil Barnett, Jeff Brooks, Patrick Clark, Heather Codling, Martin Colston, Iain Cottingham, Laura Coyle, Billy Drummond, Nigel Foot, Denise Gaines, Stuart Gourley, Owen Jeffery, Janine Lewis, Alan Macro, Erik Pattenden, Justin Pemberton, Vicky Poole, Christopher Read, Matt Shakespeare, Stephanie Steevenson, Louise Sturgess, Martha Vickers and Tony Vickers.

AGAINST the Motion:

None.

ABSTAINED:

Councillors Adrian Abbs, Dennis Benneyworth, Dominic Boeck, Jeremy Cottam, Carolyne Culver, Paul Dick, Clive Hooker, Paul Kander, Jane Langford, Ross Mackinnon, Richard Somner, Jo Stewart, Clive Taylor and Howard Woollaston.

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

76. **Revenue Budget 2024/25 (C4441)**

The Council considered the report (Agenda Item 7). Full Council must set a balanced budget for the 2024/25 year ahead by the 11 March 2024. This was to ensure that the Council had the resources set aside to achieve its objectives and to ensure that Council Tax bills could be issued to residents across the district before the start of the new financial year. This report detailed the budget proposals for the year ahead that formed the basis of the 2024-25 Revenue Budget and detailed the respective Council Tax proposals and resolutions.

The report included various appendices to support Members in the decisions before them. In advance of this budget paper the Council had run a budget consultation exercise (further information in Appendix J) where, following a meeting of the Executive on the 23 November 2023, a range of proposals had been consulted upon. Other appendices to the report included the overall savings proposals, budget investment, fees and charges, and changes and items relating to the setting of Council Tax. There were appendices on levels of reserves, which were particularly important for this Revenue Budget given they were forecast to be below the minimum level set by the s151 officer.

MOTION: Proposed by Councillor Iain Cottingham and seconded by Councillor Jeff Brooks:

That the Council:

“Approves the 2024-25 Council Tax requirement of £124.2 million, requiring a Council Tax increase of 2.99% with a 2% Council Tax Precept ring-fenced for adult social care.

Approves the Fees and Charges as set out in Appendix G and the appropriate statutory notices be placed where required.

Approves the Parish Expenses of £18,510 as set out in Appendix H.

Note the following amounts for the year 2024-25 in accordance with regulations made under Section 31B of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, as amended (by the Localism Act 2011):-

- (a) 67,867.50 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.

Calculates that the Council Tax requirement for the Council's own purposes for 2024-25 (excluding Parish precepts) is £124,203,641.

Notes that the following amounts be now calculated by the Council for the year 2024-25 in accordance with Sections 32 to 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, amended by the Localism Act:-

- (a) £408,064,670 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.
- (b) £284,963,208 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.

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- (c) £123,101,462 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) £1,813.85 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) £5,629,081 being the aggregate amount of all special items (Parish precepts) referred to in Section 34(1) of the Act (as per Appendix K).
- (f) £1,730.91 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.

Notes that for the year 2024-25, Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley & the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service had issued precepts to the Council in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 for each category of dwellings in the Council's area as indicated in Appendix K.

In accordance with Sections 30 and 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, hereby sets the aggregate amounts shown in the tables in Appendix K as the amounts of Council Tax for 2024-25 for each part of its area and for each of the categories of dwellings.

Notes that the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act contained a provision to amend the definition so that from the financial year 2024-25 a long-term empty home only needed to be empty and substantially unfurnished for one year to be liable for a premium. The Bill also contained provision that an unoccupied and furnished home (second or holiday home) only needed to be unoccupied for one year before being liable for a premium providing that one year's notice has been given. The recommendations are therefore as follows:

- (a) The ability to charge the additional 100% premium from 1st April 2024 once the property has been unoccupied and unfurnished for more than one year.
- (b) The ability to charge the additional 100% premium from 1st April 2025, having given one years notice in March 2024, once a second/holiday home has been unoccupied and furnished for more than 1 year.

Approves the fees and charges as set out in Appendix G.

Councillor Cottingham presented the report. The revenue budget was a financial representation of the Council's strategic plan.

The Council had a legal requirement to set a balanced budget, but also a duty to protect the district's finances and maintain the Council as a going concern. Moving forward this included the need to rebuild the Council's depleted reserves while at the same time ensuring the delivery of a number of different services to residents.

The impact of high inflation was felt across the country in 2023/24. The Council's costs increased and there was a significant increase in demand for social care, with client numbers well beyond the forecast level. Demand also increased for special educational needs and home to school transport. The increase in the cost of living unfortunately created an increased need for temporary accommodation.

The new Administration began its work on the revenue budget eight weeks after taking office in May 2023. At that time the Council had a projected overspend of £8m which

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would have exceeded the level of reserves held at that time of £7.2m. The work that had since been undertaken had brought the Council back from the brink of bankruptcy. The forecast overspend had reduced to £3.3m, leaving £3.9m in reserves.

Councillor Cottingham described the considerable strain to the Council's finances from increased social care and education costs which equated to a rise of £28m between 2021/22 and 2024/25. However, the revenue budget proposed increased investment of £12.4m to help the most vulnerable.

Cost savings and increases to income were sought in the region of £14.5m and a comprehensive consultation exercise was held on some of these proposals and the responses received were carefully considered. Meetings were held as part of the consultation and this included the business community where support to businesses was discussed as was the potential for a higher proportion of business rates being retained to support the local area.

Councillor Cottingham thanked the respondents to the consultation which proved to be a very worthwhile process. The feedback from residents was listened to and decisions were made to not adopt some proposals. These included decisions to maintain gully clearing, maintain the frequency of dog and waste bin collections and continuing contributions to community transport.

The Council Tax increase for 2024/25 was proposed at 2.99% with an additional 2% for the Adult Social Care precept. A total of 4.99%.

Investment was planned. In addition to helping the most vulnerable, investment was proposed for home to school transport, family support workers and to enable a reduction to the green waste charge.

As stated earlier, the Council's reserves had reduced considerably. This was not sustainable, the Council needed to spend within its means. The majority of local authorities were facing financial challenges and some might be unable to balance their budget. It was important to increase the Council's financial resilience and the prudent step was proposed to put £1.9m into general reserves in 2024/25, with the intention of bringing the reserves level up further in future years.

In conclusion, Councillor Cottingham stated that the revenue budget would meet the Council's commitments which included helping the most vulnerable and reducing the green waste charge. The consultation feedback had been listened to and action had been taken on this.

AMENDMENT: Proposed by Councillor Ross Mackinnon and seconded by Councillor Dominic Boeck:

Original text: Chargeable Garden Waste (£100k investment – to reduce charge to £55)

Proposed amendment:

1. "Remove the saving from reducing the garden waste charge by £3, and instead increase the charge by £3, generating £201k extra income compared to the proposed budget
2. Reduce the number of Executive allowances payable from 10 to 9, saving £10k (so £211k in total)
3. Remove the savings of:

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- FTE in the Emotional Health Academy (£45k);
- Planning Enforcement resource (£46k); and
- reducing bridge maintenance (£80k).

Total £171k

4. Balance of £40k to increase the General Fund”

Councillor Mackinnon felt these were sensible and measured amendments for consideration. On the green bin charge, the expectation was that the Administration would be stopping this, but instead it was to be phased out over four years, starting with those least able to afford it. However, those individuals might not make use of this discretionary service. Therefore any cut would be felt by all users of the service. The Manifesto commitment was not sensible and was not being met.

The increase proposed in the amendment would generate additional income of £201k. This could be used to help avoid making difficult cuts to other services. The amendment proposed that savings related to the Emotional Health Academy, Planning Enforcement and bridge maintenance could be removed.

The amendment also proposed reducing the Executive to nine Members. The Leader was not in attendance and held only a small portfolio, the number could therefore be reduced to make a saving.

Councillor Mackinnon also commented on the proposal to remove green bin stickers. He did not feel this was a practical proposal that could be implemented on the ground.

Councillor Abbs described the high number of requests he had received from residents to remove the green bin tax. The charge was being phased out as had been promised.

Councillor Stuart Gourley stated that the green bin charge was a barrier to people doing the right thing. Phasing this out would help residents and the environment. Removal of the plastic bin stickers would reduce officer time and be good for the environment. Councillor Gourley added that waste collection crews knew their areas well and were clear on which residents were eligible for green waste collections. He did not support the amendment.

Councillor Howard Woollaston stated that the garden waste collection service was popular and well used. In comparison to other local authorities, West Berkshire's charge was one of the cheapest available. A small increase to the charge would generate income. It was not appropriate for non-users of the service to subsidise the cost of those who made use of it through Council Tax payments if the charge was removed.

Councillor Tony Vickers agreed with the concerns raised in relation to planning enforcement, a matter on which residents were unhappy. He pointed out that planning enforcement suffered a severe cut by the Conservative Administration some years ago. It was not a statutory service, however a report would be coming through to consider improvements to enforcement processes.

Parish and town councils, as well as the district council, had a role in enforcement. It was Councillor Vickers intention to encourage local communities to come forward to alert the Council of enforcement concerns in order to assist professional officers.

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Councillor Paul Dick received many complaints relating to enforcement from residents who were frustrated by the situation. Breaches did get reported by residents and parishes but these went into a 'black hole'. This lack of action could result in further enforcement breaches and could be seen by residents as a lack of care from the Council. The Council needed to act on the information they received. Planning enforcement needed to be in place with the necessary level of resource.

Councillor Richard Somner explained that his parish was very engaged in and well aware of planning developments in the area. Residents reported enforcement concerns to their parish. This was not the issue. The difficulty was the limited time available to enforcement officers to do the work required across the district. Officers needed to be supported, but recruitment and retention had been a challenge in this area. They were already reliant on the intelligence they received from parish councils.

While not statutory, planning enforcement was a high priority and solutions needed to be identified.

Councillor Brooks explained that the green waste charge had been in existence since 2018 after the ability to do so was introduced by the Government. Prior to that it was covered by Council Tax payments.

The Administration was phasing this charge out. It was not right for the cost of the service to be within the Council Tax and then taken away, unless a resident was willing and able to pay for it.

The Executive needed ten Members to cover the many portfolio areas the Council had responsibility for. Councillor Brooks stated the intention for the Council to be run more smoothly, with transformation of services playing an important role in that. It could therefore become possible to reduce the number of Executive Members in time.

Councillor Dennis Benneyworth recalled previous comments by Councillor Brooks, when the Liberal Democrats were in Opposition, that the routine rejection of amendments was not serving residents. It was looking likely that the Conservative amendments would be rejected.

The proposed reduction in the green bin charge of £3 was only a token gesture, saving residents the smallest of amounts on a weekly basis. This Manifesto pledge was not successful. Many of the pledges that had come through were started by the previous Administration.

Councillor Jeffery stated that if the Liberal Democrats had not inherited such severe financial problems then so much more could be delivered. The limited level of planning enforcement was an inherited situation.

The green bin charged would be scrapped over time. This was only the first step in doing so.

Councillor Boeck clarified that the reduction in planning enforcement resource was a Liberal Democrat proposal. He added that parishes were already monitoring their local areas and reporting concerns.

The reduced FTE in the Emotional Health Academy was greatly concerning.

Finally, he gave the view that the Executive only had nine Members in any case.

Councillor Mackinnon referred to the comments of financial difficulties being inherited and in response pointed to the many pressures that had been felt such as high rises in inflation and increasing levels of demand. He pointed out that the Administration was proposing cuts to key areas, such as planning enforcement and bridge maintenance.

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Councillor Mackinnon felt the Executive could be reduced to nine Members and a £10k saving made. He asked why no ideas from the Opposition could be accepted, as was looking to be the case.

The Conservative amendments were put to the vote.

FOR the Amendment:

All Members of the Conservative Group.

AGAINST the Amendment:

All Members of the Liberal Democrat Group and Councillor Adrian Abbs.

ABSTAINED: Councillors Carolyne Culver and Clive Taylor.

The amendments were declared **LOST**.

AMENDMENT: Proposed by Councillor Clive Taylor and seconded by Councillor Carolyne Culver:

Original text: Chargeable Garden Waste (£100k investment – to reduce charge to £55)

Proposed amendment:

“To cancel the reduction in the Green Bin Charge by £3 per annum and retain the existing charge.

To retain the Green bin labelling that indicates that the Green bin charge has been paid (£43k).

To transfer the saving from the above (£57k) to the Adult Social Care transport budget.”

Councillor Taylor pointed out a £3 reduction in the green bin charge would do very little to help families manage their budgets. It would take many years to remove the charge with such small reductions. He questioned the timing of phasing out the charge with such a challenging financial situation and a number of priorities needing to be met.

Removing the green bin labels would make it impossible for contractors to identify those who had paid and those who had not. The level of sign up for the charge could well decrease if all bins were collected regardless.

Councillor Taylor next referred to the consultation comments received from highly concerned residents on the proposed saving to the Adult Social Care transport budget. This was of significant importance to residents. The service helped reduce social isolation and the Council should support the most vulnerable residents in the district. The amendment therefore proposed putting the £57k saving highlighted into the ASC transport budget.

Councillor Culver acknowledged that originally, the Green Party opposed the introduction of the green bin charge. However, they were willing to change their view. The charge brought in vital revenue and the Council could not afford to lose this money. The service was, in the main, used by those with larger homes and gardens. It was far more important to help ASC clients than it was to reduce the bin charge by £3.

The removal of green bin labels was not practical and could create chaos. Bins could well be emptied regardless and those who paid the charge could think again if bins were collected either way.

The removal of transport from ASC care packages would be an example of introducing a charge for a service that had previously been provided without a charge. No different to the criticism made regarding the green bin charge.

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The equality impact assessment for the ASC transport proposal raised concerns. It conflicted with the Council's key strategic priorities. The reduction could cause greater social isolation, it could negatively impact on residents with the protected characteristics of age and disability. If clients were unable to pay the charge for transport and not attend day centres for example then that could create a cost in another area of the service with additional support becoming needed.

Councillor Mackinnon supported the amendment, noting its similarity to the Conservative Group amendment. He felt that the proposal to put savings to the ASC transport budget was a worthy use of funding.

Councillor David Marsh found it difficult to see how the proposal to remove the green bin stickers could work in practice. As already described it could result in reduced income.

The eventual removal of the green bin charge would create a situation where people without gardens were subsidising the cost of those with gardens through their Council Tax payments.

The £57k should be put to ASC transport.

Councillor Kander felt that the Liberal Democrat budget had served to unite opposition groups. He was in favour of the amendments relating to the green bin charge. ASC transport was of great benefit to residents.

He felt the removal of the bin stickers would only achieve a tick in the box against the Administration's Manifesto. In addition, he added that people able to pay for green bin collections would continue to do so.

Councillor Brooks responded to the points made relating to the green bin stickers. Advice received on this matter suggested this would work well. However, if it proved unsuccessful then they would be reintroduced.

Councillor Brooks also commented on the small number of amendments proposed by the Conservative Group, limiting the potential for amendments to be accepted.

Councillor Brooks felt that the amendment could now be put.

Councillor Nigel Foot referred to points made that the Administration were responsible for budget decisions in the here and now. He felt that the 'elephant in the room' was the fact that the Government was not providing adequate funds for services such as ASC transport.

Councillor Abbs reflected on the 100 day pledges of the newly elected Administration in May 2023. Voters were clear that the green bin charges should go. He would be abstaining on this amendment.

Councillor Alan Macro stated that financial pressures being felt had forced difficult decisions such as on ASC transport that would have been avoided if possible. However, he pointed out that many areas already levied a charge for this transport and West Berkshire Council was rare in not doing so.

Consultation comments on this matter had been reviewed and the potential to cap the charge had been looked at. Unfortunately, this was not possible due to current software restrictions, but the charge had been reduced on the back of the consultation from £5 to £3.75 per trip.

Councillor Martin Colston referred to the concerns raised that residents without gardens could subsidise those who did if there was no green bin charge. However, Council Tax payers contributed to a number of areas that they might not use.

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Councillor Boeck responded to that point by stating that if there was no charge then lower paid residents not receiving green waste collections would be subsidising those who did through their Council Tax payments.

Councillor Taylor felt the amendments were sensible and contained many merits. He hoped they would find support.

The Minority Group amendments were put to the vote.

FOR the Amendment:

All Members of the Conservative Group, Councillor Carlyne Culver and Councillor Clive Taylor.

AGAINST the Amendment:

All Members of the Liberal Democrat Group.

ABSTAINED: Councillor Adrian Abbs.

The amendments were declared **LOST**.

Councillor Gourley commented that this was an extremely challenging budget to deliver when considering the current financial climate and the budget situation inherited from the Conservative Administration, which included reduced reserves. However, this budget would deliver for West Berkshire's residents and would avoid any major impacts on those services working to tackle climate change and achieve net zero.

It was the intention to help residents save money and support them to do the right thing when it came to the environment.

Councillor Jo Stewart thanked the Administration and the Council's officers for their work in proposing a balanced budget. She acknowledged this was a challenging task, particularly when considering social care pressures. However, there were likely to be tougher years ahead.

Pressures relating to health and social care costs could not be solved by local authorities. A major overhaul of the system was needed by the Government who needed to listen to the concerns from local authorities, particularly with the ageing population and complex levels of need.

Councillor Stewart felt that some of the saving and income proposals were sensible. She highlighted the proposal to claim income from other local authorities who accessed the Council's excellent shared lives scheme. She felt that income could be achieved in other areas.

Some proposals were however concerning. Proposals for the sensory needs team being an example. People should be supported to live independently in their own homes for as long as possible. The sensory needs team played a key role in this. The waiting list to this service had grown to 77 in January 2024, compared to 39 in the previous year. She hoped the saving would not exacerbate this waiting list.

The excellent reablement service also helped people to continue to live independently, helping residents on discharge from hospital. She hoped that the proposed saving would not result in higher costs for long term care in future years.

Councillor Macro gave thanks to staff in Adult Social Care for their work to reduce expenditure. This was in the region of £1m.

On the sensory needs team proposal, he clarified that the post proposed for removal was an administration role and would not therefore impact on waiting times.

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The reablement service was indeed excellent, but it was costly in comparison to the service provided by other local authorities. The aim moving forward was to provide this service to residents who would feel the most benefit from it.

Councillor Macro explained that the ASC budget for 2023/24 was not sufficient. It did not budget for the high client base, inflationary increases or the pay award. This was why savings, reluctantly, needed to be implemented. Ideally this would not be the case.

Consultation had been undertaken on the proposal to transfer the operation of Council care homes to independent providers. This found broad support and this approach would help avoid closures.

Care homes fees would be increased following consultation. The same proposal had been agreed a year ago but could not be implemented as consultation had not taken place.

Councillor Macro concluded by advising of the proposal to recruit a shared lives officer. This would be a valuable role giving support to clients and their carers.

Councillor Abbs agreed it was appropriate to lobby Government on the social care system and increasing costs. He intended to bring a motion to Council in order to take this step.

Councillor Mackinnon responded to the points made about the budgeting of the Conservative Administration. The level of reserves in May 2023 were £3.5m higher than the position in May 2019. Reserves would go up and down depending on the financial situation. They were drawn on in times of need (as was their purpose) and increased when possible. Reserves had to be called upon during Covid.

Points had been made about the challenges posed by the Council's finances with funding not available for some areas. However, the Administration had been willing to worsen the situation by spending £1.7m on the local plan withdrawal.

Councillor Mackinnon noted that no investments were planned for the Council priority of a prosperous and resilient West Berkshire. Spend on the Faraday Road football ground was mentioned in the report but this meant that the commercial regeneration planned for this land would no longer happen.

Councillor Tony Vickers commented that expenditure in his portfolio was largely business as usual. He clarified that as the local plan would not be withdrawn, there would be no associated investment required. He reported that planning fees could be increased and factored into budgets.

Turning to climate change, Councillor Tony Vickers pointed out that no savings were proposed against the priority area of tackling the climate and ecological emergency. This was an incredibly serious issue that needed to be addressed and the Council needed to provide leadership. Delays to plans in this area would only serve to create further costs down the line. This was an emergency and need to be treated as one. He was pleased to have Councillor Gourley and the excellent team of officers working on this area.

Councillor Heather Codling repeated that one of the most important duties of the Council was in looking after the most vulnerable, but the increased complexity of need was placing significant pressure on budgets. However, Councillor Codling reported that the number of children in care had stabilised and there had been a reduction in social work agency staff from 30% to 20%. These two factors assisted the budget situation.

The Council was recruiting more factors carers, this was an important area of investment. The home to school transport budget was also increasing. She supported this excellent budget.

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Councillor Denise Gaines commented on the extremely wet start to 2024 which had created concerns over flooding. Residents had been listened to and the decision taken to maintain spend on gully clearing. She clarified that £300k of capital funding had been allocated for essential works and improvements on bridges. A £10k saving was not being taken on community transport, another example of listening to the consultation feedback.

Councillor Gaines turned to the concern of the number of empty homes, particularly concerning when many families living in West Berkshire needed a home. As described earlier in the debate, temporary accommodation was a high cost. Therefore, from 1 April 2024, homes empty for a year or more would be charged a 100% premium on their Council Tax. It was hoped that this step would encourage the home owners to occupy or sell the property. Further, it was the intention to charge individuals with a second or holiday home the 100% premium. This would be in place from April 2025 once the statutory one year notice had been given.

This was a challenging budget, but there was every intention to make it work.

Councillor Janine Lewis stated that one of the Council's statutory responsibilities was ensuring that residents had access to exercise and education to benefit their health. This included funding identified to help prevent cardiovascular disease, an initiative that cut across different Council services. A more joined up approach would achieve benefits in other areas of activity. This would help people from across the District benefit from the Council's services.

Councillor Brooks stated that the Administration was beginning to deliver on its Manifesto and the Council Strategy. They were rolling back the green bin tax, football had been brought back to Faraday Road, Community Forums had been introduced and the Scrutiny Commission was being effectively chaired by Councillor Carolyne Culver, an opposition Councillor.

Post the election the Liberal Democrats had faced a 'perfect storm' but they had weathered it through much hard work. He was proud of colleagues and the budget they had produced which protected services. The hard work would continue in order to make a real difference to people's lives. This was just the start of the journey.

Councillor Cottingham repeated the point that it was absolutely key to set a balanced budget whilst still delivering services. Councillors were elected to serve the community they lived in and there was a real desire for the Council to succeed. West Berkshire Council would focus on protecting the most vulnerable and increasing its financial resilience.

In accordance with the provisions outlined in the Constitution, the vote on the Revenue Budget would be recorded. The names of those Members voting for, against and abstaining were read to the Council as follows:

FOR the Motion:

Councillors Antony Amirtharaj, Phil Barnett, Jeff Brooks, Patrick Clark, Heather Codling, Martin Colston, Iain Cottingham, Laura Coyle, Billy Drummond, Nigel Foot, Denise Gaines, Stuart Gourley, Owen Jeffery, Janine Lewis, Alan Macro, Erik Pattenden, Justin Pemberton, Vicky Poole, Christopher Read, Matt Shakespeare, Stephanie Steevenson, Louise Sturgess, Martha Vickers and Tony Vickers.

AGAINST the Motion:

Councillors Dennis Benneyworth, Dominic Boeck, Paul Dick, Clive Hooker, Paul Kander, Jane Langford, Ross Mackinnon, Richard Somner, Jo Stewart and Howard Woollaston.

ABSTAINED:

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Councillors Adrian Abbs, Jeremy Cottam, Carlyne Culver and Clive Taylor.
The Motion was put to the meeting and duly **RESOLVED**.

(The meeting commenced at 5.30 pm and closed at 9.20 pm)

CHAIRMAN

Date of Signature