



COUNCIL
22 FEBRUARY 2023
7:30pm – 9:25pm

Present:

Councillors Bhandari (Mayor), Mrs L Gibson (Deputy Mayor), Allen, Atkinson, Dr Barnard, Bettison OBE, Bidwell, D Birch, Mrs Birch, Brossard, Brown, Dudley, Ms Gaw, Gbadebo, MJ Gibson, Green, Mrs Hamilton, Mrs Hayes MBE, Heydon, Mrs Ingham, Kirke, Leake, Mrs Mattick, McLean, Ms Merry, Mossom, Neil, Temperton, Turrell, Virgo and Wade

Present Virtually:

Councillors Angell, Finch, Harrison, Ms Hayes, Mrs McKenzie, Mrs McKenzie-Boyle, Porter and Skinner

Apologies for absence were received from:

Councillors Brunel-Walker, Kennedy and Parker

40. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Brunel-Walker, Kennedy and Parker.

41. Minutes of Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Council meeting held on 11 January 2023 be approved and signed by the Mayor as a correct record.

42. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

43. Mayor's Announcements

The Mayor announced that the money raised for the Mayor's charity this year would be spent on causes within Bracknell Forest. The decision to focus on the local area was a conscious choice, and the Mayor felt proud and happy to be able to support the community in this way.

The Mayor explained that the funds would be distributed to up to five charities, voluntary organisations or community groups who were focused on helping the residents of Bracknell Forest. They were pleased to have found good partners in Berkshire Community Foundation, who helped them to raise funds. The Mayor and their team organised various activities and drives to raise money, and they were grateful for the support they received from fellow councillors, residents and local businesses. The Mayor felt overwhelmed with the response from the community and was delighted to see so many people coming together to support a worthy cause.

The Mayor also mentioned that he attended The Lexicon Awards a couple of weeks ago, celebrating the success of The Lexicon. The Mayor was joined by Chief Executive, Susan Halliwell, and Councillor Mark Brunel-Walker at the event. The Mayor was proud to be associated with The Lexicon, which is considered to be a

jewel in the crown of Bracknell Forest, and he felt honoured to be part of such an exciting event.

Good News

Councillor Mrs Hayes, Executive Member for the Environment, announced some good news to the meeting. The Councillor mentioned that Crowthorne Reduce Our Waste community were organising a Repair Cafe to take place the next Saturday at the Baptist Church on Crowthorne High Street. She encouraged attendees to visit and support the community's efforts to reduce waste. The Councillor expressed a desire for more Repair Cafes to open in the area to reduce landfill waste. She also gave notice that she would share success stories about the flats and houses at the next meeting.

Lastly, she invited people to meet the officers who collect electrical goods and clothing at the John Nike Centre, as well as the team that brings food waste out of landfill. She asked everyone to mark their diaries and join her in supporting these initiatives.

Councillor Dr Barnard, Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning, announced that all schools in Bracknell Forest had achieved a good or outstanding rating in the latest Ofsted report. This achievement was a focus and a key objective of the administration since Conservative candidates pledged in May 1997 to make all schools good schools.

Councillor Dr Barnard highlighted that this achievement was a tremendous one, given that Bracknell Forest has 40 largely independent institutions, including academies and local authority schools, that had signed up to the school improvement and accountability strategy. The strategy was in partnership with the school improvement team at the Borough Council, and it had been delivered successfully.

Councillor Dr Barnard acknowledged that there were huge challenges facing schools, especially after Covid, which has caused unprecedented sickness, illness, and staffing pressures. Despite these challenges, the whole school communities, including school leaders, governors, and staff, had worked collectively and collegiately together to drive up the standards of education in Bracknell Forest. Dr Barnard emphasised that the good or outstanding rating meant that parents applying for secondary school places in Bracknell Forest were to receive an offer to attend a good or outstanding school. Dr Barnard thanked everyone who contributed to this success, including the former Head of the School Improvement service, Rachel Morgan, and Zoe Livingstone, the current Head of School Improvement.

The Mayor added his thanks to the team at the Council who were going above and beyond to achieve these results.

44. Executive Report

The Leader of the Council, Councillor Bettison OBE, presented his report on the work of the Executive since that reported at the Council meeting on 11 January 2023. The Executive had met twice since that date: on 24 January and 7 February 2023. The Leader highlighted the following matters that had been considered:

- The Executive had worked hard on the budget and the Executive Member for Finance and Resources was to share more about it later in the meeting.
- A polling districts and polling place review had been conducted after the boundary reviews, including the appointment of designated alternative polling

places to relocate polling stations at short notice if the primary venue were to not be available.

- The Executive had approved the basis of the settlement with the Council's leisure services provider Everyone Active, relating to the financial support provided by the Council in recognition of the impact of COVID-19 on trading at the sites managed by them.
- The Executive had agreed to extend the design and construction support contract with the existing managing partner for a further two-year period.
- The Executive had agreed to the terms for a new shared service agreement between all the Berkshire local authorities and the joint Child Care legal team employed by Reading Borough Council.
- The Executive had approved the final draft of the housing strategy for the period 2023 to 2028, including the amendments made in response to stakeholder consultation.
- The Executive had approved the procurement plan to re-tender Public Health nursing services for 0 to 19-year-olds from April 1, 2024, for a period of five years with up to two further 12-month extensions.

Councillor Bidwell asked the Leader of the Council, Paul Bettison OBE, to provide details of the settlement that was agreed between Bracknell Forest Council and Everyone Active. The Leader advised that they could not be shared in public and offered to arrange for Councillor Bidwell to be briefed by the relevant officers and/or Executive Member.

The report contained a recommendation that the Council was asked to resolve in respect of the following matter:

- The Polling District and Polling Place Scheme

On the proposition of Councillor Dale Birch, Executive Member for Adult Services, Health and Housing, seconded by Councillor Chris Turrell, Executive Member for Planning and Transport, it was **RESOLVED** that the recommendations relating to the Polling District and Polling Place Scheme as set out at paragraph 5.1.1 of the Executive Report be approved.

45. **Financial Plans and Revenue Budgets 2023/24**

The Council considered the report by the Executive Director: Resources which set out the financial plans and revenue budgets for the financial year 2023/24 and the supporting information which presented the Council's spending plans for 2023/24 and detailed budgets for the General Fund and Capital Programme.

Councillor Heydon presented the report and said:

"I am delighted for the first time since 2020 to be introducing the budget in the Council Chamber, with all Members able to actually be here. That is a very welcome return to normality.

Unfortunately, outside of this Chamber, the rest of the world continues to be in turmoil. No longer is it really caused by COVID-19, though sadly it's not yet left us completely. In its place we have economic turmoil; inflation and interest rates are at levels not experienced for years; the dreadful situation in Ukraine is impacting us everywhere; and we have national Political turmoil; with now having our third Prime Minister in just over six months.

That has inevitably brought a high degree of uncertainty to our budget planning for 2023/24. I worry that I seem to say this most years, but it really has been difficult, but I will go on to explain the specific challenges we have faced this year and how we have dealt with them.

Non the less I am proposing a budget that is only possible because it is built on sound, prudent and strong financial management. In addition to maintaining our high service levels (which we are justifiably proud of), it is preserving a green borough which I know is important to residents and providing a great place to live work and relax. Lastly, and certainly not least, is our particular attention and care of vulnerable residents, which is even stronger this year because of the underlying financial and international climate.

All councils have a legal duty to set a balanced budget each year. In very simple terms, which means that what we plan to spend must come within the level of resources available to us. Sadly, in recent times we have seen a growing number of authorities – one a near neighbour – for whom that has not been possible.

Let me make this clear - Bracknell Forest Council is not in, or even close to, that situation. However, we have known for many years that our future level of Government funding is at risk. The business rates retention system – which has served Bracknell Forest well since 2013 – has long been set to change in 2023/24.

We expected the planned national business rates revaluation to proceed, but the impact of a national revaluation is always extremely difficult to predict. All Members will be aware that this Council has been facing the added uncertainty of our single biggest ratepayer being transferred to the Government's central list – i.e., potentially a significant drop in revenues.

The impact of those changes could have been catastrophic for our finances. Bracknell Forest has been proportionately the largest beneficiary from the business rates retention system in England. This of course means that proportionately we had potentially the most to lose from any changes to it.

I really do want to acknowledge our financial strength - and our finances are very strong – this is a measure of our Director of Resources (Stuart McKellar) and his team – and believe me I know there isn't a stronger team anywhere. They have helped us plan for a worst-case scenario, this has enabled us to plan and take steps to ensure that this possibility was averted. Stuart – may I put on record our thanks to you and your team. Thank you.

I mentioned the loss of our largest single business rate payer – in the finance settlement we have been compensated £ for £ for the central list change and seen a modest increase in overall business rates income next year. We had been facing a potential recurring loss of income of over £4m, I am sure members will agree that is a very positive result for the Borough.

Of course, it is inevitable that there will be further changes to the local government finance system in the future. However, with a general election certain to come in or before January 2025, there is little chance that the funding system will change significantly in the next few years. This gives us a period of relative financial certainty which is welcomed and will enable [this Administration] to focus on what it does best – delivering high quality services for the residents and businesses of Bracknell Forest.

Within all the terrific services we provide it is almost impossible to single out any specifically. However, I am going to! I feel a special mention is due to our Children's Social Care team. Following an extremely rigorous Ofsted inspection in July last year, the team was judged outstanding, an almost unprecedented rating, of "Outstanding". We should be proud – I am.

This is an exceptional achievement and one that all Members should be proud of. Our investment in the Family Safeguarding Model over the past few years has achieved the impact we hoped it would, delivering the highest possible levels of care and support to the most vulnerable children in our Borough.

It has also helped us buck the national trend of ever-increasing costs to deliver these critical services. The team's focus on early support is reducing the number of children becoming looked after and requiring very specialist, very expensive placements. As a result, the Children's Social Care budget is reducing next year, by over £1.5m. I have to stress – this is NOT to make savings, but to reflect current, actual costs. This proves that it is possible to provide the highest quality services for less money – one of the primary objectives of this Conservative Administration. It is also a reflection on the capability and confidence of our own officers.

We are, of course, having to increase all our budgets due to inflation. The Council is affected by rising prices in the same way as all households and businesses. We have allowed £9.8m in the budget to cover the cost of inflation - three times the inflationary costs we would normally face. In providing this in full allows us to maintain current service levels – which is why I've already said that we haven't cut any services – despite the prevailing pressures.

In addition, there are some services where demand is increasing and others where we believe that increasing budget levels from the current year is important. The first such area is Highways another area where our roads are excellent. Bracknell Forest has typically spent more than the level of its Local Transport Grant allocation every year. For 2023/24 we are proposing to go even further and double the capital investment funded by the Council. In total, our capital spending in the highways infrastructure is increasing by £1.8m in 2023/24 and more in subsequent years.

We are also investing in brand new, temporary housing for homeless families at a site between Opladen Way and the Bagshot Road. It is currently inaccessible, but our officers have successfully bid for external funding to construct a new access road. This is quite innovative, making it possible to develop the current brownfield site and build up to 7 new homes for households who desperately need them.

Turning to the revenue budget, we are adding almost £0.4m to the budget used to support bus services across the Borough. With the current bus contracts ending this Autumn, our aim is to secure a continuation of current routes for those who still rely on them. The social value of this should not be underestimated, nor its contribution to the environment. In passing we have a well thought environmental strategy – and its objectives and its achievements are well worth following.

Despite Bracknell town centre's economy faring relatively well compared to other town and cities, our car parking income remains around 15% below pre-pandemic levels. This means we need to re-set the income budget, at a cost of £350,000. Finally in terms of the most material budget issues, the pressures on our adult social care and mental health budgets continue to rise, as is the case every year and in every council. For 2023/24, we are adding £2.1m to the base budget for these

services, which simply reflects the current levels of demand and cost that we are facing.

When we published our draft proposals for consultation, we hadn't received the provisional local government finance settlement to confirm our funding level for 2023/24. We estimated that there was a potential budget gap of just over £8m at that stage, before any Council Tax increase. With a maximum permitted increase generating just over £3.5m, we knew at that point there would need to be a significant drawing from our reserves to get to a balanced position.

Disappointingly, only three responses were submitted to the budget consultation this year, one of which was from Cllr Temperton on behalf of the Labour Group. The other responses were generally supportive of our proposals, with one raising concerns about our low level of Council Tax and how that might impact on our ability to deliver services.

While I make no apology for Bracknell Forest having one of the lowest tax levels in the country, it is perhaps interesting to note that it is currently around £182 per year below the unitary authority average. That equates to almost a £9m difference in the income we receive.

I can understand why someone may think that this would affect the level of services we can provide and might assume that our budget plans would need to include deep cuts in services. Let me assure you all that this is not the case.

As normal, our Overview and Scrutiny Commission considered the draft budget proposals at its meeting in January. I think it is fair to say that members of the Commission understood the difficult context we and all other local authorities are facing. They did, however, ask that further consideration be given to some specific savings proposals affecting the Environment portfolio. I am pleased to report that the Executive has been able to respond positively and remove those savings from the final budget proposals.

While we have managed to identify a total of £7.5m of savings to help fund spending pressures, which total an eye watering £17m, I am pleased to be able to say, as already mentioned that, once again for 2023/24, our proposed budget does not include any reductions in front-line service delivery. No facilities will close. No one who needs our help will be left wanting. I am incredibly proud of our track record in supporting vulnerable people. It always has been and always will be a priority. For example, we have developed a Financial Hardship Action Plan that is guiding our approach to providing support to households who most need it, through funding things like free school meals during holiday periods. Next year's budget also includes funding, from our own resources, for an extra post to support the delivery this.

Low-income households will also receive financial assistance with their Council Tax bills. Through the Government's Council Tax Support Scheme all households eligible for council tax support – both working age and pensioner households – will automatically receive a £25 discount. That will benefit over 4,000 households in our Borough.

There is also a discretionary element of this scheme. Earlier today, I took the decision under powers delegated to me by the Executive to use this to provide an additional £25 reduction for eligible low-income pensioner households, and to almost double the size of our Council Tax hardship fund for 2023/24, increasing it to £19,000. This fund is managed by our Welfare and Housing team and is available to provide support to any household experiencing financial hardship.

In each of the past three years this Administration has made available local funded reductions in council tax bills for low-income working age families, totalling £400. We will continue this support in 2023/24, supplementing the Government's £25 scheme with a further £75 council tax discount, funded by this Council. That will bring the support provided for council tax bills to a cumulative £500 over 4 years. This Administration doesn't just say that we wish to support vulnerable households – we deliver on our promise to do so.

I want to stress our continued support for the thousands of households who are finding the current climate difficult – we have always supported our vulnerable people and as the needs rise, we are also increasing our support – it would be a record we should be proud of but we also recognise that pride isn't enough – actual support needed is being provided.

Funding for our schools is provided through the separate Dedicated Schools Grant. The total average increase of 6.2% is relatively generous, however indications are that it will not be enough to cover all inflationary cost pressures. This will continue to attract our attention.

Funding for children and young people is provided separately, through the High Needs Block element of the Dedicated Schools Grant. High Needs Block funding for Bracknell Forest is increasing by almost 10% in 2023/24, however it is still not sufficient to meet our spending needs and is an ongoing issue everywhere. The welfare of our young people – both physical and mental – is paramount and The Council is participating in the DfE's Delivering Better Value in SEND programme, with additional funding and focus.

While the projections show that this plan will reduce the current (£7.5m annual) High Needs Block deficit, the scale of this issue both locally and nationally can only be solved by more Government intervention.

I will turn now to Council Tax. The level of council tax increase is one of the most difficult decisions we face each year. [As an Administration] we have to strike a balance between what feels appropriate for the short-term and what we know is required to maintain the level of services our residents need and deserve in the longer term.

We are proposing £7.5m of savings to help balance the budget. We simply cannot go further without starting to impact on front-line services – and I've already mentioned our commitment not to reduce these. Given this, we are proposing the maximum level of council tax increase next year. A 2.99% general rise and a 2% increase to help fund adult social care services, totalling 4.99%. We understand that this is the level of increase being proposed by the vast majority of upper tier councils in England. If you forgive me, I must also mention that this is lower than the current rate of inflation.

While we acknowledge that this won't be universally welcomed, Council Tax in Bracknell Forest will still be in the lowest 10% of unitary authorities, maintaining one of our key manifesto commitments.

Even this level of increase isn't enough to secure a balanced budget. We will therefore be drawing £3.6m from our Future Funding Reserve. This has been deliberately built up over the last few years to support our medium-term financial plans and it is therefore absolutely appropriate that we use it to balance next year's budget.

In these difficult times, I believe that this is the best possible budget. It is possible due to strong, astute financial management. It is also maintaining a borough that is universally popular as being well run, full of facilities and green space and is a great place to live, work, and play. It protects all front-line services and provides targeted financial support at the most vulnerable households who need it most. On that note, I commend this budget to the Council and formally move all the recommendations shown in your budget papers.”

On the proposition of Councillor Heydon, Executive Member for Transformation and Finance, seconded by Councillor Bettison OBE, the recommendations as set out in the agenda papers were moved.

In line with tradition, Councillor Temperton, Leader of the Opposition, was invited to respond to the budget. The Councillor did so by saying the following:

“It is very disappointing to find that besides my own and that of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission there were only 2 responses from residents to the Budget consultation. I do not know how this compares with other Councils, but I truly believe that one of the main causes could be that the Budget is always a change budget and so residents can never see the full amount being spent on items such as road maintenance, waste removal, adult and children’s social care.

I was pleased to see that the suggested removal of 25% of litter bins throughout Bracknell Forest has been dropped. We need more bins not less. Also, the reduction of the large fly tipping budget - fly tipping is a blight in every one of our communities.

The Labour Group supported the reduction in the spraying of weedkiller from 3 times a year to two. The Council uses Glyphosate. I appreciate that this is a very effective broad leaf weed and grass killer, but it is a chemical that will be banned in France and Germany by the end of 2023. It kills insects as well as plants and the use of it as has been recently shown to have reduced the seed eating house sparrow population by 25%. It is sprayed between May and October - seed producing months. A compromise of twice a year until another less environmentally invasive chemical is discovered would show Bracknell Forest’s Leadership and commitment to Biodiversity.

The Labour group also opposed the introduction of the payment via QR codes at the Bracknell Forest car parks as a non-essential luxury we could do without in these times of extreme financial pressures. We would ask instead that this money be spent on resurfacing more public car parks - those listed as priority 3 and 4. Both of these are in Great Hollands and serve the doctors surgery, the shopping precinct, the school, flats, industrial units and a gym. These carparks were patched last year, but some of the holes were said to be too deep to be filled. The surfaces have ridges where the tyres have worn away the area between the white markings. I know residents who have tripped, obviously they did not report it in. These car parks are number three and four in priority. Both have a huge footfall and are nearly always full. The athletics track car park is only used when there is a track event- it is empty whenever I drive past it. If this is essential, then so too are the ones at Great Hollands. The cost to resurface priority number 3 is £32,000. It is hoped that the funds will be sufficient to enable this car park also to be resurfaced in 2023/24. The cost for Car park number 4 is £44,000.

The maintenance of the Council’s Housing Stock is essential. In a freedom of information response, it was stated that out of the 155 properties, 61 were energy D

rated and 5 were E rated. We hope improved insulation will be prioritised as essential for carbon reduction.

As for the budget itself:

Since the draft was consulted on, the Final settlement has been published. Compared to the allocations predicted in December, there have been increases and reductions.

Government funding to Local Councils assumed all Councils would raise their Council Tax to the maximum permitted level to cover inflation, energy costs, funding for adult social services and children social care.

These budget Proposals indeed raise the Bracknell Forest Council Tax by the maximum of 4.99% permissible without a referendum.

2% of this rise is to support the high costs of Adult Social Care which dominate the pressures for this Council, as they do for every other. These are costs that should be covered directly by government and not Local Councils. In Bracknell Forest most of the properties are rated Band C and above, every 1% rise in council tax brings in £715K. In areas where most homes are A – C rated the return is very much less – but the needs are still the same.

Obviously, using Council Tax to cover the increasing costs in Social Care is a postcode lottery. This cannot be fair or equitable. Nor can it be sustainable in the long term. Central Government should resource this with adequate increased relevant funding.

Throughout the budget papers there is reference to grants. Some of these are ring fenced but others have to be competed for. Preparing bids for this money is time consuming and costly. Every bid is said to cost about £30K. From a Freedom of Information response - the Bid for £5m for the Deck in 2021 cost £15K for work done by officers and another £13,568 for external contractors. The Second Bid for £8.8m - £16K for officer's time - and £15,450 for external contractors - both bids failed. Such sums are being lost by every Council in the country- at a time when funds are so limited. There must be better ways of funding these projects than having to compete with other Councils from the same pot, for ever resulting in winners and losers.

The Budget for schools is ring fenced. Schools will also have to pay the huge increases in energy costs and inflation costs on all resources. Let us hope any pay award settlement comes with extra money from the Government.

The biggest pressure for school funding is in support of those pupils who require SEND and especially those with the most challenging educational requirements- the High Needs Block. Again, the money from government has increased but it still does not cover the cost of the provision. This budget indicates an overspend of £7.166m this year. This deficit has been accumulating for years and by March 2024 it is estimated to be £30m. I know the officers and Heads are working to provide a solution to this ongoing debt and have acquired a £1m grant to aid the plans. There is also one of the famous 'bids' to fund the provision for two new schools. All the plans seem to be to reduce the annual deficit - not on paying the huge accrued deficit. The DfE has extended the time limit of their responsibility for this debt until 31 March 2026 but then... This is a very large amount of money owed.

This was raised by the Head Teachers at the Schools Forum.

SEND provision is an ongoing issue and we welcome the new appointment of a Designated Social Care Officer to provide social care oversight when developing the Educational Health Care Plans. We also support the paying for the Independent Advice to parents on SEND as this grant is to be cut by Government.

We also of course support the additional staff in the Children's Social Care Duty and Assessment team; the post to support Mental Health and the Out of Hours Teams; and finding the funding to continue the project supporting families with unborn and under 1-year olds again needed to be paid by this Council as the grant is to be cut by government.

The Labour Group is very supportive of the initiative to continue the £100 Council Tax discount for low income working age households, uplifting the £25 Government Council Tax support allowance.

The Covid- 19 reserve is paying for the additional officer to support the much-needed welfare work. This is just a one-year appointment but may well be needed way beyond this.

There will still be £1.656m left over from the Covid funds in March 2024. I am a proud member of this Cross-Party Welfare Group and commend all that has been achieved by its dedicated officers.

The permanent post of Climate Change Officer is applauded.

We fully support the initiative to build flats in Opladen Way to support the homeless. This budget just reflects the changes to be made - not the ongoing expenditure. It therefore says nothing about money to be spent in providing more parking spaces in residential areas. However, there is £200K to be spent on more bays in areas 'experiencing difficulties.' Only 7 locations. But anyone who has recently knocked on a door in Bracknell knows there are very many more areas 'experiencing difficulties' than these 7. Many of our grass verges are now trenches of mud. Many residents are prisoners in their own home, because if they go out after 6.00pm they will not find a place to park on their return. There must be a way to make this better. This is the major concern for many, many residents.

We therefore propose that an extra £100K be allocated to find solutions, to provide some of these bays and improve the verges so that there can be parking but without the destruction. Where there is a will, there is a way. Estates in other towns do not look like ours.

We are fully appreciative of the fact that balances once spent are gone forever. For many years, money has been put aside to support the finances the day the Council no longer receives the business rate from Vodafone - £4m a year. This is saved in the Future Funding Reserve Fund. This business is now to be moved onto the Government's central list, but Bracknell Forest will be compensated for this loss in revenue.

This reserve was set up for a 'rainy day' and this day has come.

There are many gaps in this budget.

When parents with children with Special educational Needs contact me they feel the capacity of the Council is inadequate to deal with the surge in demand for Educational Health Care Plans- lack of Educational Psychologists, Speech and

learning Therapists and Occupational Therapists. All essential when completing an EHCP.

Resolving this will be expensive.

This is a very tough year for all, including Local Councils.

£9.76m included for inflation and the fact that this Conservative led administration is proposing to raise the Council Tax by its maximum permissible level, in an election year, says it all.

There is so much uncertainty for the future funding of Local Councils from the Government- a business rate reset, the Fair Funding Review, the Public Health grant merged into a revised baseline.

To enable future years to resolve the issues of the High needs Block, and SEND provision in this borough, more money will be needed. The Government grants are never sufficient and have fallen far short over the last ten years.

New contracts will reflect increased pay awards, higher energy costs, inflation. Youth Provision throughout the borough is so needed.

Every resident is being hit be they mortgage payers or rent payers.

This is the hardest year any of our residents have experienced for a very long time. In April, Energy prices will rise an average of 20% and Water bills are due to go up 7.5%.

Access to the Local Welfare Scheme, using money from the Government's Household Support Fund, for one-off grants for food and essential bills is now well advertised. But knocking on doors has found residents not yet aware of the help available, so publicity needs to be continued. The present funding ends next month. The need to support will not end then.

I am relieved that new Government funding to support this has been announced - £1.1m over the next 12 months.

There are so many uncertainties about future funding from the government to this Council.

The Council Tax will have to be raised to provide a basis for future years as it is the only guaranteed source of income."

On the proposition of Councillor Temperton, Leader of the Opposition, seconded by Councillor Brown, the following amendment was proposed:

"(a) the capital programme:

Funding for the parking infrastructure upgrade (£0.041m) is removed;
Funding of £0.044m from the identified £0.200m for surface car parks in 2024/25 is brought forward to 2023/24, to accelerate funding for the Great Hollands car park identified as priority number 4;
An additional £0.100m of funding is made available to improve parking on local housing estates, supplementing the current £0.200m allocation.

and to b) the revenue budget:

That the proposed reduction of weed spraying from 3 to 2 times per annum, included in the Executive's draft budget proposals but removed in the final budget, be reinstated, saving £0.028m and that the net additional costs of these amendments be met from further use of the Future Funding Reserve of £0.076m in 2023/24 (including £0.001m to reflect the loss of interest from using the reserve)."

On being put to a vote the amendment fell.

A recorded vote was taken on the substantive motion and the voting was as follows:
FOR (27): Councillors Allen, Atkinson, Dr Barnard, Bettison OBE, Bhandari, D Birch, Mrs Birch, Brossard, Dudley, Gaw, Gbadebo, Mrs Gibson, Gibson, Green, Hamilton, Mrs Hayes, Heydon, Ingham, Kirke, Leake, Mattick, McLean, Ms Merry, Mossom, Turrell, Virgo, Wade

AGAINST (0): None

ABSTAIN: (4) Councillors Bidwell, Brown, Neil, Temperton

Therefore, it was **RESOLVED** that:

Capital Programme 2023/24 - 2025/26

- i) General Fund capital funding of £14.987m for 2023/24 in respect of those schemes listed on pages 184 to 186, of which £6.621m be funded from Council resources;
- ii) The inclusion of £8.366m of expenditure to be externally funded (including £2.930m of S106 funding) as outlined in the summary report for Council (page 164) and included on pages 168 to 171;
- iii) That those schemes that attract external grant funding be recommended to the Council for inclusion within the 2023/24 capital programme at the level of funding received;
- iv) Capital schemes that require external funding can only proceed once the Council is certain of receiving the grant;
- v) The inclusion of an additional budget of £1m for 'Invest to Save' schemes.

Revenue Budget 2023/24

- i. The budget proposals set out in Table 1 (page 2) of the summary report for Council, subject to the changes identified in sections 3.2 (page 3), 3.3 (pages 3 to 5), 3.4 (pages 5 to 7), 3.6 (page 7), 3.9 (pages 8 to 10), 4.3 (pages 11 to 12), 7.2 (page 18) and 7.3 (page 18) of the report, be agreed;
- ii. Fees and charges as set out in Annexe G (pages 93 to 158) be approved;
- iii. A provision for inflation of £9.760m be approved;
- iv. A further council tax discount funded by Bracknell Forest Council in 2023/24 of £75 for working age households receiving council tax support (section 3.9.1(a) page 9);
- v. Notes that the Government has made available a Council Tax Support Fund to provide a £25 reduction in the Council Tax bills for working age and pensioner households receiving council tax support as set out in section 3.3.9 (page 4) and agrees that the Executive Member for Transformation and Finance be authorised to determine the approach to the discretionary part of the fund;
- vi. The commitment budget as set out in Annexe A be approved (pages 20 to 21);
- vii. That the Council should make additional funding available for distribution to schools through the local funding formula at the level set out in section 4.1 (pages 11 to 11) of the summary report for Council subject to any minor

- amendments made by the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning following the receipt of definitive funding allocations for Early Years and High Needs pupils;
- viii. A general contingency totalling £2.750m be included, use of which is authorised by the Chief Executive in consultation with the Executive Director: Resources in accordance with the delegations included in the Council's constitution;
 - ix. Subject to the above recommendations the revised draft budget proposals be agreed;
 - x. A contribution of £3.590m to be made from the Future Funding Reserve (including £0.081m additional interest from the use of balances) to support revenue expenditure;
 - xi. Total net expenditure (after use of balances) of £89.287m (page 19), be approved;
 - xii. The Council's Council Tax requirement, excluding Parish Council precepts, be set at £75.053m;
 - xiii. The Council Tax for the Council's services for each Valuation Band be set as follows:

Band	Tax Level Relative to Band D	£
A	6/9	1,026.24
B	7/9	1,197.28
C	8/9	1,368.32
D	9/9	1,539.36
E	11/9	1,881.44
F	13/9	2,223.52
G	15/9	2,565.60
H	18/9	3,078.72

At the meeting on 07 February 2023 the Executive recommended the 2023/24 Treasury Management Strategy Statement and noted that strategy together with the Prudential Indicators and the Minimum Revenue Provision Policy Statement were matters which the Council needed to approve.

- xiv. The Council approves the following indicators, limits, strategies and policies included in Annexe E (pages 60 to 83):
 - The Prudential Indicators and Limits for 2023/24 to 2025/26 contained within Annexe E(i);
 - The Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Policy contained within Annexe E(ii);
 - The Treasury Management Strategy Statement, and the Treasury Prudential Indicators contained in Annexe E(iii);
 - The Authorised Limit Prudential Indicator in Annexe E(iii);
 - The Investment Strategy 2023/24 to 2025/26 and Treasury Management Limits on Activity contained in Annexe E(iv);
- xv. The formal Council Tax Resolution contained in section 3 be approved:

Council Tax Resolution

- i. That the recommendations of the Executive outlined in sections 2.1 and 2.2 be agreed.

ii That it be noted that the amounts calculated for the year 2023/24 in accordance with Section 67 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 are:

(a) **48,756 Tax Base for the Whole Council Area**
being the amount calculated by the Council, in accordance with regulation 3 of the Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) Regulations 1992, as amended, as its council tax base for the year

(b) **Tax Base for Part of the Council's Area**

Each Parish Area

Binfield	4,636
Bracknell	20,614
Crowthorne	3,242
Sandhurst	7,986
Warfield	5,349
Winkfield	6,929

being the amounts calculated by the Council, in accordance with regulation 6 of the Regulations, as amended, as the amounts of its council tax base for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which one or more special items relate

iii That the following amounts be now calculated by the Council for the year 2023/24 in accordance with Sections 31 to 36 of the Local Government and Finance Act 1992 as amended (the Act):

(a) £344,283,953 - Total expenditure including general fund, parish precepts and the council's share of any deficit on the collection fund.

being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(2) of the Act.

(b) £265,223,413 - Total income including government support and the council's share of any surplus on the collection fund.

being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(3) of the Act.

(c) £79,060,540 - Borough and parish precepts net expenditure to be financed from council tax.

being the amount by which the aggregate at iii(a) above exceeds the aggregate at iii(b) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31A(4) of the Act, as its council tax requirement for the year.

(d) £1,621.56 - Average Band "D" council tax for whole borough.

being the amount at iii(c) above, divided by the amount at ii(a) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31B(1) of the Act, as the basic amount of its council tax for the year (including Parish precepts)

(e) £4,007,504 - Parish precepts

being the aggregate amount of all special items referred to in Section 34(1) of the Act.

- (f) £1,539.36 - Borough Council tax for Band "D" Properties.

being the amount at iii(d) above less the result given by dividing the amount at iii(e) above by the amount at ii(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 if there were an area of the Borough to which no special item relates.

- (g) Borough and Parish Council Tax for each Parish for Band "D":

Binfield	£1,599.47
Bracknell	£1,636.71
Crowthorne	£1,628.55
Sandhurst	£1,615.61
Warfield	£1,585.87
Winkfield	£1,622.37

being the amounts given by adding to the amount at iii(f) above the amounts of the special item or items relating to dwellings in those parts of the Council's area mentioned above divided in each case by the amount at ii(b) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 34(3) of the Act, as the basic amounts of its council tax for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which one or more special items relate.

- (h) Part of the Council's area - Borough and Parish Council Tax in each Parish for each Valuation Band

Parish	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£
Binfield	1,066.31	1,244.03	1,421.75	1,599.47	1,954.91	2,310.35	2,665.78	3,198.94
Bracknell	1,091.14	1,273.00	1,454.85	1,636.71	2,000.42	2,364.14	2,727.85	3,273.42
Crowthorne	1,085.70	1,266.65	1,447.60	1,628.55	1,990.45	2,352.35	2,714.25	3,257.10
Sandhurst	1,077.07	1,256.59	1,436.10	1,615.61	1,974.63	2,333.66	2,692.68	3,231.22
Warfield	1,057.25	1,233.45	1,409.66	1,585.87	1,938.29	2,290.70	2,643.12	3,171.74
Winkfield	1,081.58	1,261.84	1,442.11	1,622.37	1,982.90	2,343.42	2,703.95	3,244.74

being the amounts given by multiplying the amounts at iii(g) above by the number which, in the proportion set out in Section 5(1) of the Act, is applicable to dwellings listed in a particular valuation band divided by the number which in that proportion is applicable to dwellings listed in valuation band D, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 36(1) of the Act, as the amounts to be taken into account for

the year in respect of categories of dwellings listed in different valuation bands

- iv That it be noted that for the year 2023/24 the Police and Crime Panel have stated the following amounts in precepts issued to the Council regarding the Police and Crime Commissioner for the Thames Valley, in accordance with Section 40 of the Act, for each of the categories of dwellings shown below:

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£
Police and Crime Commissioner for the Thames Valley	170.85	199.33	227.80	256.28	313.23	370.18	427.13	512.56

- v That it be noted that for the year 2023/24 the Royal Berkshire Fire Authority have stated the following amounts in precepts issued to the Council, subject to confirmation by the Fire Authority on 15 February, in accordance with Section 40 of the Act, for each of the categories of dwellings shown below:

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£
Royal Berkshire Fire Authority	52.63	61.41	70.18	78.95	96.49	114.04	131.58	157.90

- vi That, having calculated the aggregate in each case of the amounts at iii(h), iv and v above, the Council, in accordance with Section 30(2) of the Act, hereby sets the following amounts as the amounts of council tax for the year 2023/24 for each of the categories of dwellings shown below:

Part of the Council's area - Total Council Tax for each Valuation Band

Parish	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£
Binfield	1,289.79	1,504.77	1,719.73	1,934.70	2,364.63	2,794.57	3,224.49	3,869.40
Bracknell	1,314.62	1,533.74	1,752.83	1,971.94	2,410.14	2,848.36	3,286.56	3,943.88
Crowthorne	1,309.18	1,527.39	1,745.58	1,963.78	2,400.17	2,836.57	3,272.96	3,927.56
Sandhurst	1,300.55	1,517.33	1,734.08	1,950.84	2,384.35	2,817.88	3,251.39	3,901.68
Warfield	1,280.73	1,494.19	1,707.64	1,921.10	2,348.01	2,774.92	3,201.83	3,842.20
Winkfield	1,305.06	1,522.58	1,740.09	1,957.60	2,392.62	2,827.64	3,262.66	3,915.20

46. **Annual update of the Council's Pay Statement**

The Council considered the Pay Policy statement for 2023/24.

On the proposition of Councillor Leake, Chair of the Employment Committee, seconded by Councillor Allen, the recommendation that Council review and agree the Pay Policy Statement for 2023/24 was moved.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** that the Pay Policy Statement for 2023/24 be agreed.

47. **Appointment of Deputy Electoral Registration Officers**

The Council considered a report seeking authorisation for the Council's Electoral Registration Officer (ERO), currently the Chief Executive, to appoint additional Deputy Electoral Registration Officers (DERO) to exercise specific powers on their behalf if they are unable to act personally.

On the proposition of Councillor Birch and seconded by Councillor Leake, the recommendation that authority be delegated to the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) to appoint additional Deputy Electoral Registration Officers (DERO) to discharge specific powers if the ERO and DERO are unable to act personally was moved.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** that the recommendation be agreed.

48. **Questions Submitted Under Council Procedure Rule 10**

Councillor Temperton asked Councillor Birch, Executive Member for Adult Services, Health and Housing, the following published question:

"The result of the Inspection by CQC of Heathlands Care Centre in August was 'Inadequate'.

Can the Council be given an update on the situation there now?"

In response, Councillor Birch said the following:

"It is disappointing that the CQC found that a number of areas remain below the expected standards and require further improvement.

The council and NHS professionals continue to work closely with partner agencies to support the provider to make required improvements.

Windsar Care has acknowledged the report and has taken steps to address key issues.

A new permanent registered manager started shortly before the inspection and has now been in post for three months.

Windsar Care have engaged a specialist, independent organisation to oversee the immediate improvements required and to provide assurance and gather the evidence of the progress they are making in implementing the required improvements.

Windsar Care has been taking a range of actions to implement the improvements needed, as identified in the CQC report and professionals have been working hard to support them with this.

Our priority remains our residents, particularly the most vulnerable and we are pleased that Windsar Care is engaging well with the council and Health partners to work through the issues to ensure people receive safe, effective and well-led care.

The CQC will undertake a further inspection of the service in the coming months to gain assurance that the required improvements have been embedded in the service.

The council is currently considering options regarding the future of dementia care at Heathlands and how this valuable and much needed service will be delivered in the future.”

In response to a supplementary question the Executive Member advised that the next CQC visit was to be considered a follow up inspection. At that point they were to continue to make the necessary recommendations and deal with the provider regarding any actions that may need to be taken.

Councillor Bidwell asked Councillor Birch, Executive Member for Adult Services, Health and Housing, the following published question:

Following the very concerning reports of Home Care visits being unofficially cut to five or six minutes instead of the allocated time, residents are anxious for assurance that this could not happen in Bracknell Forest.

Can you tell us how the period of time that the Carer actually spends with the resident and quality of provision allocated in the care packages financed by Bracknell Forest are monitored?

In response, Councillor Birch said the following:

“In April 2022 the Council mobilised a new Homecare Framework (FW) and established new contractual arrangements in the Homecare market. To be able to join the new FW, all providers are required, as a minimum to be rated Good or Outstanding by the CQC. This ensures at baseline level of quality assurance.

Through the FW, the Council has taken robust measures to ensure such practice does not occur within BF and has processes in place to ensure, were this to occur, it would be identified very quickly and rectified.

Under the FW, the minimum time allocation for any care call is 30 minutes and providers must submit invoices accompanied by worker timesheets to be paid. Timesheets are generated by the providers electronic call monitoring systems – a further stipulation of the FW. This requires care workers to ‘check in’ at the beginning of each call and ‘check out’ at the end of the call in the client’s home. Discrepancies of any under / over delivery or any changes between the commissioned and actual hours delivered are would be identified and investigated with the provider.

Care Teams also undertake regular reviews of individuals needs and commissioned support, to ensure the needs of individuals are being met by their current care package. Following reviews any required changes will be incorporated into the commissioned package of care accordingly.

Providers are also subject to robust, regular Contract Monitoring as stipulated by our Contract Monitoring framework for additional assurances on quality. This is to ensure that, providers are delivering care to the standard and quality set out in the

contract service specification and to ensure clients are experiencing good outcomes.

If the standard or quality of service delivery falls below required levels, the contract provides a number of mechanisms to address this with the provider e.g. the implementation of an improvement plan. More stringent measures can also be undertaken, for example if serious quality concerns were identified, a provider could be embargoed from receiving any new packages whilst they rectify the issues. Ultimately if there were serious concerns about the quality of a contracted provider, their contract could be terminated.

A small proportion of services are delivered by providers who are not part of our FW, but whom we have worked with for a considerable period and are subject to Contract Monitoring.

We maintain a very positive working relationship with our homecare providers and engage with providers on a one-to-one basis as well as through wider market engagement on a very regular basis. This allows us to work through any identified issues or concerns very constructively to ensure these are rectified swiftly”.

In response to a supplementary question, the Executive Member spoke about the services provided by Forest Care. Forest Care provided devices that monitored blood pressure, breathing, and movement around the house, among other things. They were also able to communicate with delivery personnel and buzz in appropriate carers. The Executive Member emphasised the importance of using technology to care for vulnerable residents while still ensuring that they had human contact and were not isolated. Overall, the Councillor advocated for the responsible and compassionate use of technology in caring for vulnerable individuals.