

COUNCIL
21 FEBRUARY 2024
7.30 - 8.48 PM



Present:

Councillors Penfold (Deputy Mayor), Allen, Bailey, Bidwell, Brown, Cochrane, Collings, C Eberle, T Eberle, Egglestone, M Forster, S Forster, Frewer, Frost, Gaw, Gillbe, Haffegée, Harrison, Hayes MBE, Jefferies, Karim, McKenzie-Boyle, McLean, Neil, O'Regan, Pickering, Purnell, Robertson, Smith, Temperton, C Thompson, P Thompson, Virgo, Watts, Webb, Welch, Wright and Zahuruddin

Present Virtually:

Councillors Hayes MBE

Apologies:

Councillors Ejaz, Barnard and Mossom

48. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

49. Financial Plans and Revenue Budgets 2024/25

The Council considered the report by the Executive Director: Resources which set out the financial plans and revenue budgets for the financial year 2024/25. The recommendations had been submitted to the Council by the Executive and covered all planned spending, service developments and expenditure reductions for next year. A separate document presented an overview of the Council's spending plans for 2024/25 and the Council's Council Tax Resolution.

Questions of clarification were asked by Councillor Phillip Thompson and Councillor Christoph Eberle.

Councillor C Eberle stated that on page 87 of the report, an additional savings proposal of £186,000 had been put forward. This was to be achieved by reducing the support being given to young people who were disadvantaged by not being in education, training or employment; reducing the support provided to schools which need to improve; and other measures.

These specific savings proposals had only been made public following the end of the consultation period on the draft budget and there were concerns about the possible impact these proposals could all have on vulnerable children and young people without proper consultation.

The report indicated that the specific measures to achieve these savings were still to be determined and that further consultation on the specific implementation of the savings would be conducted with schools 'if required'. In

light of this Council's commitment to giving residents a stronger genuine voice in Council business, it was requested that the Executive Member commit to running a full and proper public consultation before the final proposals for implementing the savings be approved.

Councillor Bailey, Executive Member of Children, Young People and Learning responded that this hadn't been part of the initial proposals but came out of the Safety Valve proposals and discussions. Any opportunities to gain additional funding would be maximised, and full and inclusive consultations would be maintained.

Councillor P Thompson stated that Paragraph 3.6.5 of the report stated that it would be necessary to draw a significant sum from the Council's accumulated reserves to meet its legal obligation to set a balanced budget. Under recommendation 2.2 it was proposed that £1.509 million be taken from reserves to support revenue expenditure within the next year. Elsewhere the report acknowledges the growing costs of demand-led services and the continued uncertainty over central Government funding for the Council.

Whilst it was recognised that there was an unavoidable need to draw upon the Council's financial reserves for this budget year, given the short-term financial outlook, reserves were by nature finite and would eventually run out. This was clearly an unsustainable long-term financial position, as the Council could not rely upon use of reserves to achieve a balanced budget indefinitely. It was asked that the Executive Member confirm their intent to distance themselves from reliance on the use of financial reserves in future budgets and to provide an indication of the period within which they hoped that this would be achieved.

Councillor Neil, Executive Member of Finance and Business Change responded that the budget update report which had been presented to the Council's Executive in October 2023 had included an illustrative medium term financial position of the Council, this had shown a cumulative budget gap over the next three years to 2026/27 of nearly £9.5m with £8m of that in 2024/25 this had been due mainly to inflation at that point. The report noted that reserves could be used to smooth the phasing of actions needed to address the situation but reinforced that reserves could only be used once and didn't provide a permanent solution. Budget planning for 2024/25 aimed to draw less from reserves than the Council did in 2023/24 when £3.6m of reserves had been used to balance the budget. Achieving this would mean the Council was moving towards a more sustainable long term financial position. The Executive's draft budget proposals would have used £3.1m of reserves based on the proposed Council Tax increase which would have been £0.5m lower than 2023/24. However, with the extra money available since December, it was proposed that only £1.5m be used from reserves to balance the 2024/25 budget which was a more sustainable position to move forward from. It was impossible to predict the future pressures and demand for services. The plan was to reduce the use of reserves to balance the budget each year with the hope that by 2027 they would not need to be used.

Councillor Neil, Executive Member of Finance and Business Change, gave a presentation on the financial plans and revenue budgets for the financial year 2024/25 placing particular focus on the following matters:

- This was the first Labour budget in 25 years.
- This budget had been approached during a very difficult economic situation.
- Local Government funding had been in decline since 2010, with 40 MPs lobbying Government for more funds for Local Government services.
- All Councils had a duty to set a balanced budget each year. An increasing number of Local Authorities, including others in Berkshire, were currently unable to do this.
- A potential overspend of £4m had been reported last summer which was the most difficult in year position that the Council had ever faced.
- Due to a range of measures put in place, the potential overspend had been reduced to £0.5m.
- Many of the pressures experienced in the current year would also move into next year.
- It was impossible not to notice the deterioration of the road surfaces across the Borough caused mainly by weather conditions. This was being combated with an extra £5m on highways. This received overwhelming support in the budget consultation.
- Investment in the Boroughs property assets was also important to ensure they didn't deteriorate and that they were fit for purpose for current and future use.
- An additional £1.3m had been received from SILVA Homes which related back to the transfer of the Councils housing stock back in 2008. This would be used to supplement maintenance and enhancements on the Councils current smaller housing stock.
- Suicide prevention measures had been included within the capital funding.
- This year's budget consultation had been very different, with active engagement and a number of events in local communities. There had been 330 responses, which was a record.
- Feedback from residents and the Overview and Scrutiny Commission had been listened to ahead of the final budget proposals.
- The provisional Local Government Finance settlement was announced on the 18 December 2023 and set out grant figures for individual authorities. The net impact for Bracknell Forest Council was an additional grant of £0.5m compared to what was expected.
- The other significant change in funding, which was known, was the level of retained business rates income. As expected, following the large number of business rate refunds to businesses, there was a deficit of £3.7m in income this year which would need to be carried forward. Following an adjustment to the business rates baseline, which had been backdated to 2023/24, the Council had benefited from a gain of £1m.
- Feedback from the consultation had been listened to carefully and the reduction of bins and grass verge cutting had been removed from the

final proposals. It was believed that there was still work to do in those areas from an environmental perspective.

- It was never the plan to close libraries.
- Further considerations would be made to how the home library service could be delivered more cost effectively but changes to the service would not be made in the next year.
- Plans to reduce management and supervisory roles in libraries was being taken forward.
- An additional £0.010m would be used to fund a library assistant post as set out in the tabled recommendations.
- Plans to dim streetlights by 10% would be taken forward.
- £4.5m would be provided for the cost of inflation.
- £7m would be added to service budgets to meet higher demand.
- It was proposed that a total net revenue budget of £97.356m be funded by a 4.99% increase of Council Tax and £1.5m be drawn from the Council's future funding reserve.
- An additional Social Care grant of £0.753m had been received and £0.268m was also received through the funding guarantee grant. Both would be used for Social Care and SEND services.
- It was known that the Council Tax increase would be unpopular, but it was the only realistic way to protect services for the future.
- Council Tax was the only income source entirely in the Council's control.
- It was understood that the maximum Council Tax increase would be taken in almost all other Local Authorities. The administration would continue to lobby the Government for more grant funding, but the case for that was limited if the full Council Tax increase wasn't taken.
- It was known that this increase may affect some households harder than others, and therefore it was proposed that a £75 discount be provided for those lowest income working age households, funded from reserves.
- This had been a hard budget to bring forward, but it was thought it was a fair one.

On the proposition of Councillor Neil, Executive Member for Finance and Business Change, seconded by Councillor Temperton, the recommendations as set out on the tabled papers were moved.

In line with tradition the Opposition Groups were invited to respond to the budget.

Councillor Allen spoke on behalf of the Conservative Group, and made the following observations:

- The change in administration had not meant that the Council Tax increase would not be taken.
- The consultation outcome had removed some of the less popular items set out in the draft proposals.
- The additional spend on the road network was welcomed.

- It was pleasing to see that the Shepards Meadow footbridge had been included as it had been out of commission for 18 months as it had been deemed unsafe.
- Thanks was given to the Blackwater Valley Countryside Trust for the generous donation of £0.020 towards the replacement of the bridge.
- It was noted that the carparks in Great Holland had been resurfaced.
- There was no detail included in the budget on how the decision was made or how changes may be implemented.
- There had been mixed messages from Officers and the Executive to how the dimming of streetlights would work.
- Concerns were raised about public safety with the dimming of streetlights from 12 – 4am.
- It was hoped that any savings made through the climate change savings be ringfenced and reinvested in other climate change options.
- There were concerns that the budget for the resident's survey had been removed for the rest of the administration.
- It was pleasing to see that the home library saving had been removed.
- The Conservative Group were pleased to see that their request had been included within the tabled recommendations this evening.

Councillor Mike Forster, spoke on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, and made the following points:

- The Liberal Democrats had asked for two changes to the budget proposals.
- The first was the reduction of litter bins, a request also made by residents, and the Liberal Democrats were thankful for this change.
- The second was in relation to not charging Officers for parking whilst at work, this was a request that had not been fully accepted but had been informed that lower paid staff members would not be charged.
- Two questions had been asked of which were very important areas to the Liberal Democrats, and the responses provided by the Executive Members would be monitored.
- The Government were letting the Council and its residents down badly.
- It was thought by Officers that any changes made by the Government to the Local Government Funding system would have a long-term detrimental impact on the funding of the Council.
- In the face of challenging circumstances, the Liberal Democrats thought that the Executive and Officers had made a credible attempt in steering the Council.
- The Liberal Democrats would be supporting the recommendations with a heavy heart, as nobody wants to see reductions in services or an increase in Council Tax.
- Bracknell Forest Council, like other Councils, was a victim of inadequate grant funding by Central Government and would support any approach by the Executive to Government.

Councillor Collings, spoke on behalf of the Green Party, and raised the following points:

- It was clear that there were significant pressures on Local Government spending and grant funding across the Country,
- Demand for services was increasing whilst there was also a cost of living crisis and high inflation.
- This was the Green Party's first involvement in the budget setting process.
- The amount of hard work that makes up the budget setting process was greatly appreciated, and Officers and Councillors were thanked for their time.
- The Green Party were thankful to Officers and the Executive for answering questions.
- The desire to reach more residents in the budget consultation process was welcomed and were pleased with the increase in responses from 2 in 2023 to 330 this year. It was hoped this would be increased next year.
- Councillor Temperton had attended surgeries in Binfield and Warfield in January primarily to discuss and promote the budget consultation. Turn out had exceeded expectations.
- It was thought that more detail needed to be provided for some of the budget proposals to avoid misinterpretation such as incorrect information about libraries. It was requested that more detailed written proposals be included going forward.
- Multi questions in the consultation didn't give residents the opportunity to select which proposals they were or weren't in favour of.
- The continued investment in Social Care was welcomed.
- The new suicide prevention measures in high-risk areas were also welcomed.
- The retention of bus subsidy through grant funding was welcomed and greater bus usage throughout the Borough needed to be promoted.
- The highways proposals were welcomed.
- The dimming of streetlights was welcomed, and it was understood that underpasses wouldn't be included, this should have been made clear from the outset.
- The proposed amendment to the recommendation would be supported.
- It was hoped that the home library provision be as good, if not better, than the current provision.
- There was little detail around the reduction of bins and grass cutting included in proposals.
- The Green Party would be supporting the budget and hoped that next year more detail would be included.

A recorded vote was taken on the substantive motion and the voting was as follows:

FOR (37): Councillors Allen, Bailey, Bidwell, Brown, Cochrane, Collings, C Eberle, T Eberle, Egglestone, M Forster, S Forster, Frewer, Frost, Gaw, Gillbe, Haffegge, Harrison, Jefferies, Karim, McKenzie-Boyle, McLean, Neil, O'Regan, Penfold, Pickering, Purnell, Robertson, Smith, Temperton, C Thompson, P Thompson, Virgo, Watts, Webb, Welch, Wright, Zahuruddin

AGAINST (0): None

ABSTAIN: (0) None

Therefore, it was **RESOLVED** that:

Capital Programme 2024/25 - 2026/27

- i. General Fund capital funding of £13.016m for 2024/25 in respect of those schemes listed on pages 175 to 177 as amended by recommendation i, of which £8.462m be funded from Council resources;
- ii. The inclusion of £4.554m of expenditure to be externally funded (including £0.380m of S106 funding) as outlined in the summary report for Council (page 170) and included on pages 175 to 177;
- iii. That those schemes that attract external grant funding be recommended to the Council for inclusion within the 2024/25 capital programme at the level of funding received;
- iv. Capital schemes that require external funding can only proceed once the Council has received confirmation that the grant will be awarded;
- v. The inclusion of an additional budget of £1m for 'Invest to Save' schemes.

Revenue Budget 2024/25

- 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 to 3.5 (pages 3 to 6), 3.7 (pages 7 to 8), 3.9 to 3.10 (pages 9 to 10), 4.1 to 4.5 (pages 10 to 14), 4.7 (page 16) and 6.2 to 6.4 (page 18) of the report, be agreed;
- ii. That additional funding be provided for a Library Assistant post (at a cost of £0.010m in 2024/25 with a fully year effect of £0.040m) to maintain the current number of front-line staffing hours in libraries;
- iii. Fees and charges as set out in Annexe G (pages 109 to 164) be approved;
- iv. A provision for inflation of £4.507m be approved;
- v. A further council tax discount is funded by Bracknell Forest Council in 2024/25 of £75 for working age households receiving council tax support (section 3.10.1(a) page 9);
- vi. The additional grant funding received in the Final Local Government Finance Settlement announced on 5 February 2024 be allocated to social care services (£0.754m in Social Care Grant) and to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities services (£0.268m in Funding Guarantee and £0.010m in Services Grant) with no net budget impact;
- vii. The commitment budget as set out in Annexe A be approved (pages 20 to 21);

- viii. 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 10 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;
- ix. A general contingency totalling £4.000m 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;
- x. Subject to the above recommendations the revised draft budget proposals be agreed;
- xi. A contribution of £1.519m to be made from the Future Funding Reserve (including £0.038m additional interest from the use of balances) to support revenue expenditure;
- xii. Total net expenditure (after use of balances) of £97.356m (page 19), be approved;
- xiii. The Council's Council Tax requirement, excluding Parish Council precepts, be set at £80.312m (page 19);
- xiv. 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	1,077.42
B	7/9	1,256.99
C	8/9	1,436.56
D	9/9	1,616.13
E	11/9	1,975.27
F	13/9	2,334.41
G	15/9	2,693.55
H	18/9	3,232.26

- xv. The Council approves the following indicators, limits, strategies and policies included in Annexe E (pages 78 to 99):
- The Prudential Indicators and Limits for 2024/25 to 2026/27 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 2024/25 to 2026/27 and Treasury Management Limits on Activity contained in Annexe E(iv);
- xvi. The following additional Council Tax premiums be applied from 1 April 2025:

- A 100% premium for properties which have been empty and unfurnished for longer than one year (rather than 2 years as currently) and;
- A 100% premium for second homes.

xvii. 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, as amended, be agreed.
- ii. That it be noted that the amounts calculated for the year 2024/25 in accordance with Section 67 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 are:

(a) 49,694 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	4,799
Bracknell	20,968
Crowthorne	3,429
Sandhurst	7,999
Warfield	5,538
Winkfield	6,961

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 2024/25 in accordance with Sections 31 to 36 of the Local Government and Finance Act 1992 as amended (the Act):

- (a) £353,214,472 **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) £268,699,150 **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) £84,515,322 **BOROUGH AND PARISH PRECEPTS NET EXPENDITURE TO BE FINANCED FROM COUNCIL TAX**

being the amount by which the aggregate at 3.3(a) above exceeds the aggregate at 3.3(b) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31A(4) of the Act, as its council tax requirement for the year

- (d) £1,700.71 **AVERAGE BAND "D" COUNCIL TAX FOR WHOLE BOROUGH**

being the amount at 3.3(c) above, divided by the amount at 3.2(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) £4,203,358 **PARISH PRECEPTS**

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

(f) £1,616.13 **BOROUGH COUNCIL TAX FOR BAND "D" PROPERTIES**

being the amount at 3.3(d) above less the result given by dividing the amount at 3.3(e) above by the amount at 3.2(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)	Part of the Council's area	BOROUGH AND PARISH COUNCIL TAX FOR EACH PARISH FOR BAND "D"	£
		Binfield	1,676.84
		Bracknell	1,715.43
		Crowthorne	1,709.77
		Sandhurst	1,694.67
		Warfield	1,665.89
		Winkfield	1,703.04

being the amounts given by adding to the amount at 3.3(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 3.2(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	1,117.89	1,304.21	1,490.52	1,676.84	2,049.47	2,422.10	2,794.73	3,353.68
Bracknell	1,143.62	1,334.22	1,524.83	1,715.43	2,096.64	2,477.84	2,859.05	3,430.86
Crowthorne	1,139.85	1,329.82	1,519.80	1,709.77	2,089.72	2,469.67	2,849.62	3,419.54
Sandhurst	1,129.78	1,318.08	1,506.37	1,694.67	2,071.26	2,447.86	2,824.45	3,389.34
Warfield	1,110.59	1,295.69	1,480.79	1,665.89	2,036.09	2,406.29	2,776.48	3,331.78
Winkfield	1,135.36	1,324.59	1,513.81	1,703.04	2,081.49	2,459.95	2,838.40	3,406.08

being the amounts given by multiplying the amounts at 3.3(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 2024/25 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	54.21	63.24	72.28	81.31	99.38	117.45	135.52	162.62

- v. That, having calculated the aggregate in each case of the amounts at 3.3(h), 3.4 and 3.5 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 2024/25 for each of the categories of dwellings shown below:

(a) Part of the Council's area **TOTAL COUNCIL TAX FOR EACH VALUATION BAND**

Parish	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	£	£	£	£	£	£	£	£
Binfield	1,351.62	1,576.89	1,802.16	2,027.43	2,477.97	2,928.51	3,379.05	4,054.86
Bracknell	1,377.35	1,606.90	1,836.47	2,066.02	2,525.14	2,984.25	3,443.37	4,132.04
Crowthorne	1,373.58	1,602.50	1,831.44	2,060.36	2,518.22	2,976.08	3,433.94	4,120.72
Sandhurst	1,363.51	1,590.76	1,818.01	2,045.26	2,499.76	2,954.27	3,408.77	4,090.52

Warfield	1,344.32	1,568.37	1,792.43	2,016.48	2,464.59	2,912.70	3,360.80	4,032.96
Winkfield	1,369.09	1,597.27	1,825.45	2,053.63	2,509.99	2,966.36	3,422.72	4,107.26