

TUNBRIDGE WELLS BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES of a meeting of the Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, duly convened and held at the Council Chamber, Town Hall, Royal Tunbridge Wells, TN1 1RS, at 7.30 pm on Wednesday, 14 December 2022

PRESENT:

The Mayor Councillor Godfrey Bland (Chair)
Councillors Allen, Atkins, Atwood, Bailey, Barrass, Barrington-King, Brice, Britcher-Allan, Chapelard, Dawlings, Ellis, Fairweather, Fitzsimmons, Funnell, Goodship, Hall, Hayward, Hickey, Hill, Holden, Johnson, Knight, Le Page, Lewis, Lidstone, March, McMillan, Moon, Neville, Ms Palmer, Patterson (Vice-Chair), Poile, Pope, Pound, Rands, Roberts, Rogers, Rutland, Sankey, Wakeman, Warne, White, Willis and Wormington

IN ATTENDANCE:

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

FC1/22 Apologies were received from Councillors Everitt, Dr Hall and Morton

MINUTES OF THE EXTRAORDINARY MEETING DATED 05 OCTOBER 2022

FC2/22 No amendments were proposed

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the extraordinary meeting dated 05 October 2021 be approved as a correct record.

MINUTES OF THE ORDINARY MEETING DATED 05 OCTOBER 2022

FC3/22 Councillor Bailey requested the minutes reflect a wording change from Moat to Note.

RESOLVED –

1. That FC38/22 be amended to replace the word Moat with Note; and
2. That, subject to the above amendment, the minutes of the meeting dated 5 October 2022 be approved as a correct record.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

FC4/22 No declarations of pecuniary or significant other interest were made.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

FC5/22 The Mayor made the following announcements:

- I would like to bring to your attention that TWBC will shortly be losing Jane Clark and Mark O'Callaghan as they move onto pastures new I am sure you will join me in wishing them all the best.

Announcement from Leader of the Council Councillor Chapelard:

- The Leader of the Council advised that he had the pleasure of joining Southborough, Tunbridge Wells and the Cemetery.
- He also had the please of meeting a Son of a former resident of Tunbridge Wells who was killed in WW2 whilst his mother was pregnant with him.
- Which reminds us all that with event in the Ukraine it is our duty to remember those that have given their lives and he expressed how it was a real privilege to represent TWBC as these event.

Announcement from Portfolio Holder for Rural Communities Nancy Warne

- The cost-of-living crisis is directly impacting upon many of the most vulnerable households in the borough. Tunbridge Wells Borough Council wishes to provide financial assistance to organisations within the Community that are working hard to support our residents.
- £100,000 has been set aside to create a Community Support Fund and the Council would welcome applications for this funding.
- A link to the Community Support Fund is now live on the Council's website <https://tunbridgewells.gov.uk/community-support-fund> where you can find the Terms of Reference and an application form.
- The intention is to offer approximately 5 one-off grants of around £20,000 for specific projects, the expansion of existing services due to a growth in demand or new needs that have been identified. As part of the application process, we will be asking for a business plan to explain the nature of the support you intend to provide and will require an auditable return once the funds have been spent. The council does not have the resources to administer many small grants, so we suggest that small groups work together or with larger organisations to make a joint application.
- The closing date for applications will be 5.00pm 11th January 2023. We cannot accept any late applications and any further information requested must be submitted by this date. It is intended that the grants be paid by the end of January.
- Details of the eligibility criteria and how to submit an application are available on the council's website.
- I would encourage members to share this information with the eligible organisations of which there are aware.

Announcement from the Chieve Executive

- Due to technical issues the broadcasting of the meeting was paused for 10 minutes.
- The Chief Executive had not announcements to make.

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

FC6/22 The Mayor advised that no questions from members of the public had been received under Council Procedure Rule 8.

Question 1 from Mr James Tansley

Good Evening, and Season's Greetings to everyone. The Council claims it has a wealth of information on residents' views on the way it spends their money from previous budget consultation exercises and surveys. Yet the most recent comprehensive consultation, according to an earlier draft of this year's budget, was in 2015 i.e. pre-CoVid, pre-Brexit, pre-£8 million Amelia overspend and pre-£11 million Calverley Square debacle. Will the Council conduct a full and open consultation with local Council taxpayers before agreeing this year's budget, in particular, around their desire to see any increase in Council Tax?"

Answer from Councillor Hall

Thanks you for your question and Season's Greeting to you to. The budget survey for 2023/24 went live last week, and is an interactive exercise where residents are able to both learn about the services the council provides and set a hypothetical budget to each service. It's modelled on the current scenario the Council faces of a budget deficit. Residents are invited to balance the budget, by giving consideration to their spending priorities, amending the funds allocated to each service with the aim of trying to balance the budget with the limited income the council has available. This consultation will form the basis of informing the Council of where our residents' priorities lie, where they might want us to make efficiency savings and to inform any budget decisions we make in January. And yes, the public will be consulted on increasing Council Tax by 3% for 2023/24

Supplementary Question from Mr James Tansley

Thank you I am an avid completer of previous budget surveys and one of my disappointments is that it offers little scope to express views on elements of the budget it very limiting just to provide budget in between preordained list of service will you update that budget to allow local taxpayers the flexibility to express their view more clearly on the use you are making of their money.

Supplementary Answer from Council Hall

I very much welcome feedback, on the budget survey, this time it is somewhat different to previous ones, and we have listened to previous feedback and try to improve, if you can think of any further improvement I am more than happy to hear them once you have attempted the survey, thank you very much.

Question 2 from Mr David Scott

Seasons Greeting to you all, "Will you please confirm that during 2022/3 Financial Year (post COVID year), Tunbridge Wells Borough Council income has recovered with income which was substantially confirmed in Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 reports (Q1 & Q2, 2022/3):

1. Extra income from existing car parking charges of approximately £300,000
2. Over £750,000 of investment income earned on the large cash reserves held
by the Council
3. Increases in new Business Rates which I understand is about £800,00.
4. Supported by post COVID income recovery from entertainment, (including the
Assembly Hall, The Amelia Scott and likely income from the Ice Rink), and
income from other services including garden brown bin collections, planning
etc

Please confirm that these anticipated receipts were not included in the 2022/3 revenue budget due to the level of prudence in the budgetary system" and instructed by UK Government

Answer from Councillor Hall

Thank you for your question Mr Scott, welcome back to the Council Chamber and Season's Greeting to you too.

Yes your numbers are correct and I would like to clarify a few things on each point:

1. Yes its true car park income is recovering but its still not at pre pandemic levels.
2. Yes there is extra interest was really the result of fantastic treasury management and investment decisions from out finance team rather than the recent rise in interest rates.
- 3 We will not know until year end the amount of business rates

proceeds but this will either help to fund the revenue gap or the capital programme.

- 4 In terms of post-Covid income recovery, I would just like to perhaps, issue a word of warning and caution here, the Amelia continues to require a subsidy of £1.4m, the Assembly Hall a subsidy of £300k, and whilst we hope for a very successful Christmas programme including the Ice Rink, Diesel prices have rocketed and the cost of fuelling the ice rink is likely to rise from £28k last year to £82k this year

In summary yes, these anticipated receipts were not included in the 2022/3 revenue budget. But neither were the additional costs from running The Amelia or from soaring inflation that has seen energy costs doubled.

Supplementary Question From Mr David Scott

Thank you Councillor Hall for your answer, given these items have actually substantially likely to fill a hole that there is the potential obviously of inflation etc, occurring next year and er, there are elements of increase obviously coming from potential rental from this place and also the other post Covid recoveries but what else are you going to do for the deficit you are likely to occur under your observation.

Supplementary Answer from Councillor Hall

Yes in terms of the inherited deficit we have already made some progress within year budget review, and Car Parking increases came into effect the 1st of December. That will follow through this year but also the budget that will come before this council in March next year. We are doing a comprehensive review of all of our service with each cabinet member. Which is still be finalised but we are still looking at potential efficiencies there and we will continue to look at other ways we can try to look to generate further revenue we need to really look at the cost of our asset base the council is very rich in terms of assets but extremely costly and need potential iceberg we could potentially be facing the future so we need to really review those carefully and look at whether they are delivering best value for the council and which if any we can then look to dispose of.

Question 3 from Mr James Tansley

The draft 2023/24 Budget Projection and Strategy presented to Cabinet earlier this month makes no reference to any plans to improve the efficiency of Council operations. Please can you provide details of the Council's target for efficiency savings next FY, and the value of efficiency savings achieved in the 2021/22, 2020/21 and 2019/20 FYo".

Response from Councillor Hall

The Budget Update 2023/24 report that was considered by the Finance & Governance Cabinet Advisory Board and approved by Cabinet on 11 October 2022 included the results of a comprehensive financial benchmarking exercise.

This report used government data from the council's nearest statistical and geographical neighbours to compare unit costs per resident. This confirms that the council is still operating on a very lean base and has amongst the lowest net unit cost for services within the comparator group. Whilst this is reassuring to residents it does make it more difficult to seek further efficiencies.

The council continues to look for efficiencies but after a decade of austerity which has seen the Revenue Support Grant cut to zero and a pandemic that hit income streams further savings will be very difficult without stopping valued local services.

I cannot reveal to you a target for the next financial year as such, as we don't set such specific targets, but as any efficiency savings we might make or intend to make would have to be communicated through our internal channels first before being included in the forthcoming budget.

Supplementary Question from Mr James Tansley

Do you think it is right, with the councils facing a 'Budget Shortfall', that it is not making more effort in this area?

Supplementary Answer from Councillor Hall

I would say that we are making efforts in these areas, but erm appreciate you want more information at this stage but would ask you to wait for further announcements when we are ready to make them.

Question 4 from Mr James Tansley

"How much has the Council so far spent on consultants in compiling the Local Plan?"

Answer from Councillor Pound

The Council has spent £1.27M (actual £1,268,499) over the preceding 7 years on consultants for the production of the emerging Local Plan, which is equal to approximately £180K per year since 2016/17. That compares favourably with the six million pound spent on consultants

during the development of the Calverley square project or debacle as you described it earlier.

Supplementary Question from Mr Tansley

Since May 2019 the council paid a contract Public Interest Planning limited, a firm with no employees according to the 2020/21 accounts. Headquartered in a housing estate in Health field, with 2 Directors David Marlow a 66-year-old former planning officer and Rother district councilman's wife Nicola at least £198,900 and possibly significantly more. Given a number of months data is missing from the council's transparency of spend website, what value has Public Interest Planning Limited added to the Local Plan which cannot be provided by the council's planning department.

Supplementary Answer from Councillor Pound

Thank, you Mr Tansley that is a reasonable question and one which I will explore and come back to you.

Update Response provided –

Thank you for your questions at Full Council in December 2022. I promised to come back to you in relation to your supplementary question regarding Public Interest Planning Ltd.

As you will be aware, preparing a Local Plan is a very resource intensive exercise and there was and still is a need to obtain additional capacity and expertise to support the inhouse Planning Team.

Public Interest Planning Ltd has been engaged on two separately tendered contracts; the first in 2018/19 – 2019/20 as Local Plan Coordinator, the second from 2021/22 – now in that continuing role. The first contract paid £140,483.59 from 2019-2021 and the second, from August 2021 to date, has paid £105,712.84

In relation to the second contract, an Invitation to Tender was published on the Kent Business Portal and Contracts Finder in June 2021. Following a competitive evaluation process, Public Interest Planning Limited were appointed in August 2021 to assist the Head of Planning and the Policy Team with the Local Plan.

Since the resignation of the Head of Planning and several senior officers within the Planning Policy Team the services of PIPL are still required as further evidence needs to be gathered in response to the Inspector's Initial Findings Letter. Consistency of advice at this stage of the examination is essential to ensure continuity and that the right support is available.

I have also explored the competitive nature of the tender process and

can confirm:

1. There were 35 expressions of interest in the opportunity
2. Of these 35, 4 suppliers opted out of the process and 28 were 'no response' (which means they failed to opt or to submit a response to the ITT)
3. We received 3 tender proposals, which were scored by the evaluation panel.

The tender was weighted 70% in favour of Quality (which consisted of a requirement for tenderers to submit detailed case studies to showcase previous experience), and 30% in favour of Cost. PIPL was selected on that basis.

The Council is still aiming to have a Local Plan adopted as soon as is practicably possible but there is a considerable amount of work yet to be undertaken.

Question 5 from Mr James Tansley

“According to the Council’s budget figures, staff costs rose by 30.2% between the 2016/17 FY and the 2021/22 FY, which in real terms represents an increase of around 15%, significantly more than the increase in average real wages in the UK in that period (5.2%). Given this, the fact that the Council is facing a budget deficit of £1.376 million and the fact that local residents are facing a cost of living crisis, why does the latest draft of the 2023/24 budget propose increasing staff pay by over 7% in the coming year, costing an estimated £1.115 million

Answer from Councillor Hall

Despite soaring inflation which is way above the Bank of England’s target of 2 per cent, the council’s pay awards for its hard working, professional and valued staff was zero in 2021/22 followed by 2 per cent in 2022/23. It’s not correct to assume that the forecast increase in establishment costs is the same as a pay award.

The council is looking to make a pay award for 2023/24, this has yet to be determined but will need to reflect the local market pay conditions to address current staff recruitment and retention issues.

The council needs to employ a broad range of professional staff whose skills are in high demand from the private sector who are paying 8 per cent more than the public sector in the South-East if I can refer you to the (Source: Institute of Fiscal Studies).if you wish to confirm that

Supplementary Question from James Tansley

Please can you tell me why the staff establishment is increasing at this time as I understand the Chief Executive made to his cabinet that he is looking to increase by 5 to 6 taking staff levels up to 320 which is a significant increase since 2015/16

Further clarification provided to the supplementary –

I understand the Chief Executive is looking to increase the number of the staff establishment from 315 currently by 5 or 6. I am aware that in 2015/2016 the staff establishment according to the council figures 285 what is the reason for that increase both from the 285 figure and looking to increase the staff establishment by 5 or 6 in the coming financial year.

Supplementary Answer from Councillor Hall

The question really does not fall within my remit, as portfolio holder of finance, I am afraid I do not have an immediate answer for you, I am going to have to go away and find out for you.

Updated Response provided

There is a difference between FTE (Full Time Equivalents) which is a financial explanation and Headcount, which gives actual numbers of staff that make up those FTE. For example, our headcount for 1 FTE role could easily be 2 people on the headcount as they may both work part-time.

The figures provided show numbers as of 31 March each year, and are only a snapshot at that time, as staff start and leave throughout the year.

Headcount for TWBC (number of staff both full and part-time) on 31 March for each year as follows:

31 Mar 2015: 295

31 Mar 2016: 301

31 Mar 2017: 304

31 Mar 2018: 313 *this was the year the Environmental Health shared service came into effect and TWBC took on Swale BC and Maidstone BC staff and TWBC Revenues & Benefits staff transferred to MBC*

31 Mar 2019: 294 *during the year 10 people left Environmental Health shared service*

31 Mar 2020: 307

31 Mar 2021: 313

31 Mar 2022: 314 *Staff from Kent County Council TUPE transferred from Library Services into the Amelia Scott to assist in providing the library services (KCC make a contribution to staffing costs)*

And as of 31 December 2022, our headcount was 316 (*this year new posts created for the Homes for Ukraine Project, which is funded by Central Government*).

Question 6 from Mr James Tansley

“According to the Council’s Carbon Action Plan Progress report, despite spending significant amounts of taxpayers’ money – just under £1.5 million - the Council has fallen seriously behind the carbon dioxide reduction targets set in its Corporate Carbon Descent Plan, and will not meet its zero emissions target for 2030 unless, inter alia, it abandons waste collections (or else spends even more taxpayers’ money on carbon credits). In light of this, will the Council abandon its virtue signalling climate action plans, and, instead, seek to reduce carbon emissions (and expenditure) through effective management (such as stopping subsidised parking for Councillors and officials - a perk that only incentivises car use)?

Answer was read by Councillor Pound on behalf of Councillor Everitt

I am assuming you are referring to the £1.489 m grant funding secured by the Council from the Public Sector Decarbonisation fund which will be utilised to reduce carbon emissions at the Weald Leisure Centre by approximately 9%.

Whilst our commitment towards net carbon zero by 2030 was a challenging target, Council emissions reduced by approximately 1,000 Tc02e between 2018/19 and 2021/22. This reduction demonstrates we are making progress but net carbon zero can only be delivered by addressing our carbon consumption across the council’s estate, through its energy purchasing arrangements and through the delivery of its contracts. We will continue to produce annual action plans and measure the progress of our Corporate Carbon Reduction plan as we seek to meet this Councils ambition.”

Supplementary Question from Mr Tansley

Can you tell me whether carbon reduction target will be built into the contract with the waste management supplier when that come up for review in 2026?

Supplementary Answer for Councillor Pound on behalf of Councillor Everitt

My understanding is that it will, and I will speak to the portfolio holder to ensure that enquiry is addressed.

Question 7 from Mr James Tansley

According to the Autumn edition of Local, the Council's Town Hall Pravda, in response to a Council survey, fewer than 5% of respondents said that they wanted to be kept updated about events in the Borough by a leaflet (such as Local). In light of this, the environmental damage caused by printing and distributing Local, and the fact that Ministers have described Town Hall Pravdas as a "corrosive abuse of taxpayers' money", will the Council finally put an end to this unwanted and unnecessary propaganda sheet?

Answer from Councillor Chapelard

Thank you Mr Tansley, for that Cold War analogy, as you can appreciate the depths of the Soviet era was a bit before my time, but I get the sentiment to your question.

The Borough Parentship started just of 6 months ago and as you know our administration has inherited year and year deficit from the previous administration, as part of our focus on the 5 priorities we are making progress on safe guarding the councils finances we are therefore reviewing our costs including the publication of the councils local magazine and no decision has been made at this stage.

Supplementary Question from Mr Tansley

I am grateful that this decision is under considerations, I should draw to your attention that erm comparable publications for Waltham Forrest and Hackney council which are produced on a quarterly basis are a cost of £318,761 and £446.142 respectively there is scope for significant savings, and I hope your consideration will take this into account.

Supplementary Answer from Councillor Chapelard

Unlike those other two councils the net cost of publishing local Tunbridge Wells Borough Council is about £20,000 pounds that's two, zero, zero, zero significantly less than those other two councils but it's under review.

Question 8 from Mr James Tansley

In April, the then Portfolio holder for Culture Leisure and Tourism

Councillor March said that the council would work closely with Kent Cricket and Tunbridge Wells Cricket Club to enable County matches fixtures to be held at the Neville Ground in the summer of 2023. Yet, Kent County Cricket Club has now announced that the venue facilities are not considered to meet the necessary standards and will be playing no matches in Tunbridge Wells next season. How much will it cost to bring the facilities at the Nevill Ground up to the standard required to bring first class cricket back to Tunbridge Wells?

Answer from Councillor Fitzsimmons

The ECB have published the new extensive requirements in their document "Facility Standards for First Class Cricket Venues" The facilities at The Nevill ground will need investment but we don't currently have costed details at this stage."

Supplementary from Mr Tansley

I was reading on 'Twizzle Sphere' or whatever they are called in advance of this meeting and there was some discussion of the question of county cricket returning to the Nevill ground and I understand one tweet from the former chair of the Tunbridge Wells cricket club claimed that the council showed disinterest in pursuing proposals in upgrading facilities at the grounds, can you comment on this please.

Supplementary from Councillor Fitzsimmons

Thank you Mr Tansley, I think that you shouldn't believe everything you read on Twitter, we have had actually comprehensive discussions with the Nevill cricket club and also our Officers are going to have scheduled meetings with Kent Cricket Club I hope that satisfies your questions

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

FC7/22 The Mayor advised that no questions from members of the public had been received under Council Procedure Rule 10.

Question 1 from Councillor Rands

Noting that the land on which Tunbridge Wells Target Shooting Club sits is on the list of assets for disposal and recalling this council voted on the 7th of July 2021 as follows:

"Mindful of the potential for changes in the allocation and use of sports facilities within the Borough, we recognise our commitments under the

National Planning Policy Framework in general and paragraphs 96-101 in particular. This Council welcomes the policies in the Pre-Submission Local Plan (in particular Policy OSSR1) on the retention of open spaces and the requirement that losses should be made good by alternative equivalent or better provision. At the same time, we urge Cabinet to commit to always seek to ensure that alternative provision is available before any site is withdrawn for use or, if there are exceptional reasons why this cannot happen, all reasonable efforts are made to ensure that temporary facilities are made available to bridge the gap.”

What reasonable efforts has cabinet made to ensure the continuity of the club after a potential sale of that land and how much is that expected to cost?”

Answer from Councillor Fitzsimmons

The Council have been trying to engage with the shooting club for the past five years but have been unable to reach an agreement. Discussions are now with the Land Tribunal Service to broker a resolution and it is not appropriate to comment whilst this process is taking place.

Supplementary Question from Councillor Rands

Nothing to add

Question 2 from Councillor Roberts

“The council is to get around £800,000 in additional income from its investments, an additional £300,000 in carparking fees and extra income from Business Rates. So will the coalition now admit that the Conservative budget of last February, which we are still under, is set to return a surplus. And will you further admit that because of good Conservative management, the £944,000 black hole in our finances the Coalition claimed to have inherited is now, and always was, a myth used for political sloganeering with no financial reality.

Answer from Councillor Hall

Thank you very much for your question Councillor Roberts I appreciate someone who says what they mean and means what they say

There are two parts to this, so let's deal with the question of the current deficit which you raised.

It's still far too early to say what the final position will be for 22/23 but as reported in the latest financial management reports for Q2, the projected deficit for the financial year now stands at £706k. Any gains have been partly wiped out by doubling energy costs and inflation which you have already heard. We are still waiting on a local government financial settlement this month and there are no guarantees it will be favourable to us. A lot will depend on the economic success of the town centre over Christmas and visitor numbers. We will then be able to report on a revised position, for better or worse, when we have Q3 numbers, but any talk of a surplus is premature, unplanned and at this stage wide of the mark.

Now to the second part of your question. I must admit that in common with most people in our borough and the country at large, we have yet to be acquainted to anything resembling 'good Conservative management.' Unless, that is, you meant it ironically, quoting as you must be from a book of political oxymorons. But, I'm guessing you may have actually asked the question in all sincerity and really meant it. So, allow me also to answer it factually.

The £944k budget deficit, your party's budget, presented by your administration this year and debated and voted on at Full Council is no myth. It might be an inconvenient truth to you, but it's an indisputable fact and one that your party would do well to acknowledge. To even present it as a myth does a huge disservice to the public, who are being asked to believe that, contrary to what you've said in the past, not only was there never a budget deficit but that your party has by some miracle travelled in time to see into the future and spirit it away. The fact is this administration inherited a £944k budget deficit from the Conservatives. It also inherited a devastating outlook of worsening public finances over the next three years, which will rapidly deplete this Council's reserves if left unmanaged. None of this was of our making.

I don't point the finger at one individual for this. It's a collective failure. Year after year of Conservative failure. Years of austerity and neglect of local government by the Conservatives at Westminster. And in Tunbridge Wells years of Conservative waste and neglect. Waste in spending over £10m of tax payers money on the misconceived Calverley Square project. Neglect in putting off the necessary decisions to tackle living beyond its means. We, as the Borough Partnership have not shied away from making a start on the tough decisions to address the budget deficit we inherited. The in year budget review, which your party opposed, is proof that the Borough Partnership is serious about its priorities and its promise to the public.

Our in-year budget review was the first step in our ambition to safeguard the Council's finances. It is projected to deliver an additional £600k in income. However, in opposing every step this Council makes to put the finances on a more sustainable footing and denying that there is a problem, the Conservative party is signalling to the public that it would do nothing to address it. It would be better if they used

their time in opposition to reflect on what they would actually do instead.

Supplementary Question from Councillor Roberts

Your answer was slightly unclear and rather ramblings, so I take it you do not accept that last May's conservative Budget which is the one we are still operating under is going to bring in a surplus this year, which was articulated by the conservatives in 2022, and the supposed black hole which you claim is a myth created by the coalition.

Supplementary Answer from Councillor Hall.

Absolutely correct, I do not accept.

Question 3 from Councillor Bailey

In July, Cabinet gave council officers the authority to draw up Terms of Reference for the Community Support Fund to set out the basic details of how the fund will work. Given that we are now in December, has this document been completed and, if so, can it be shared with Full Council?"

“In light of the statement made by Councillor Warne at the beginning of the meeting, this question was withdrawn”

Question 4 from Councillor Holden

Your election material said, this would be an administration "committed to more open and consultative politics and to listen to the public and act accordingly". So do you accept that the 2/3 majority in favour of all out-elections in the recent consultation was a decisive expression of public opinion and will you now tell the public that you are no longer committed to listening and acting accordingly which is why you failed to support all-out elections"

Answer from Councillor Chapelard

Thank you Councillor Holden for your questions, I am not sure which specific item of election material you are referring to but as one of the most experienced councillors both here at TWBC and Kent County Council and previously at Hart Council in Hampshire, you will know why councillors consult with residents in my view public consultation is to inform the council's decision and as you said earlier this evening in your speech a consultation is not a referendum councillors are the final decision makers.

Supplementary Question from Councillor Holden

Thank you the bit that followed in my speech about a consultation not being a referendum, is that when you get a two third majority then it really is a referendum. Having voted against that overwhelmingly decision made by the resident on the all-out elections how having failed as a leader to say a single word in this debate not much leadership there is there will you now go and explain why you did that in the next edition of 'Local' please

Supplementary Answer from Councillor Chapelard

Thank you Councillor Holden I appreciate there are two arguments, argument for all outs and argument for by thirds and my belief is that this borough is best served by elections by thirds.

Question 5 from Councillor White

“Can Councillor Rutland please provide information as to how many applicants there were to Rural England Prosperity Fund and how many were successful”?

Answer from Councillor Rutland

The Council was required to prepare a Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) Addendum to its UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) Investment Plan within a tight time schedule. *The Department for Rural Affairs, Food and Agriculture* (DEFRA) indicated to local authorities that the REPF was a successor to the EU LEADER funding and would have a focus on Supporting Local Businesses and Communities and Place.

The Council worked with Sevenoaks District Council and Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council to develop a grant scheme similar to the highly successful West Kent LEADER programme. Our three authorities enjoy an excellent track record of working in partnership, pooling resources to deliver these grants effectively and speedily.

Care was taken to make the eligibility for grants as flexible as possible. No call for individual applications from businesses or local communities was made by Tunbridge Wells at this stage and the same goes for Sevenoaks and Tonbridge and Malling.

Instead, all three West Kent authorities convened a meeting of the rural stakeholders who were part of the Executive Local Action Group that previously administered West Kent LEADER grants to discuss setting up the REPF grant scheme. This group includes representatives from rural businesses and communities, who advocated for a replacement for the LEADER programme with a greater remit for who could apply and what projects could be supported.

The following interventions were selected:

- 1.1 *Capital Grant Funding for Small Scale Investment in Micro and Small Enterprises in Rural Areas*
- 1.3 *Capital Grant Funding for Developing and Promoting the Visitor Economy*
- 2.3 *Capital Grant Funding for Creation and Improvements to Local Rural Green Spaces*
- 2.4 *Capital Grant Funding for Existing Cultural, Historic and Heritage Institutions that make up the Local Cultural Heritage Offer*
- 2.6 *Capital Grant Funding for Active Travel Enhancements in the Local Area.*
- 2.7 *Capital Grant Funding for Rural Circular Economy Projects.*

Subject to approval by DEFRA, this grant scheme will launch in Year 2 of the REPF programme (April 2024). The scheme will be promoted widely to potential applicants.

In Year 1 of the REPF 2023-24, again subject to DEFRA approval, the Council will direct funding to urgent works to support the Weald Sports Centre. This facility is considered vital to rural communities in the east of the borough.

It is important to understand that the Rural England Fund is an add-on to the UK SPF which is itself aimed at the whole borough, including our many rural communities and businesses. This investment plan was approved by government last week and we are pretty much ready to go. The priority projects for year one include:

- The West Kent Business Support Programme, also in partnership with Sevenoaks and Tonbridge & Malling, in which start-up and newly formed small businesses across the borough will be provided with mentoring and small-scale financial support.
- Funding for Visit Tunbridge Wells to grow tourism in all parts of the borough
- Funding for Creative Tunbridge Wells which seeks to maximise social and economic benefits of the cultural and creative economy.
- And the Cranbrook and Sissinghurst Community Kitchen.

I hope this answers your question.

Supplementary Question from Councillor White

Thank you for a very comprehensive answer to that question, but I

guess the short answer was that nobody was invited to apply and there were no successful applicants.

Question 6 from Councillor Rands

Cabinet may be aware that it is common practice for employers of reserve personnel to grant some additional paid leave to enable to complete their annual training commitment (typically a two week "camp" but not less than eight days consecutively deployed). As an employer of reserve personnel and a signatory to the Armed Forces Covenant does Tunbridge Wells Borough Council have a policy on reserve forces leave?"

Answer from Councillor Hall

This is covered in our Time off for public duties policy which stipulates that:

"Leave without loss of pay will normally be granted to a member of staff to attend the annual summer camp for volunteer members of the non-Regular Forces

Supplementary Question from Councillor Rands

Do you know if reserved forces within the councils employment know about this policy.

Supplementary Answer from Councillor Hall

Councillor Hall advised that he would have to go away and ask the question and a written response will be provided

Update Response provided – A communication was shared via 'all Staff Email' prior to the Christmas break.

Question 7 from Councillor Bailey

At the October Cabinet meeting, Cabinet agreed to a very late change giving the s151 officer, the Monitoring Officer and the Portfolio Holder for Finance the power to terminate the decarbonisation works at the Weald Sports Centre if the project becomes financially unviable. Given the importance this Council places on reducing its carbon emissions, and given that the Weald Sports Centre is a large source of CO₂, can Cabinet give assurance that the decarbonisation works won't be permanently terminated without first presenting all relevant evidence and options to Full Council?"

Answer read out by Councillor Rutland on Councillor Everitt's behalf

The decisions taken at the Cabinet meeting in October have ensured that we were able to confirm to SALIX (a Government funded agency providing grants for carbon reduction) that the Council had the wherewithal to deliver the scheme securing the £1.4m of Government (SALIX) investment and ensuring this was not lost to the borough. The decision also enabled us to confirm with suppliers the contracts for delivery. Ongoing engagement with SALIX and particularly UKPN has enabled the Council to confirm its ability to deliver the scheme. There are always risks within construction and current price inflation is not helping anyone. Also the challenges of the UKPN process, timescales and costs has resulted in many local authorities having to abandon their carbon reduction schemes.

The amendment made to the decisions was to ensure that if for example the UKPN estimate we were expecting, but had not been received by the time of the Cabinet decision had been unaffordable and there was a very real risk that the new quote could have still been in the same cost territory of previous quotes, the Council would be able to re-evaluate the position and take appropriate action. I am however happy to confirm that the engagement with UKPN, with the welcome support from both Helen Grant MP and Greg Clark MP, we have agreed a future proofed cost for the works and are now awaiting dates for the works to take place. As a result we are confident that the scheme will progress as planned.

APPOINTMENT OF MONITORING OFFICER

FC8/22 Councillor Chapelard moved, and Councillor Hayward seconded, the recommendations set out in the report on the agenda.

The Mayor took a vote by affirmation.

RESOLVED –

1. That Claudette Valmond be appointed Monitoring Officer for the Council with effect from 15 December 2022
2. That Claudette Valmond was appointed as Head of Legal Partnership in October 2022 be noted
3. The Head of Legal Partnership be authorised to exercise the delegated function and responsibilities of the Head of Legal Partnership as specified in the Council Constitutions

CHANGES TO THE APPOINTMENTS TO COMMITTEE

FC9/22 Councillor Chapelard moved, and Councillor Warne seconded, the recommendations set out in the report if the agenda

The report was taken as read

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation.

RESOLVED –

1. That Councillor Mathew Sankey be appointed Vice Chair of Finance and Governance Cabinet Advisory Board.
2. That Councillor Ellen Neville be appointed Vice Chair of Planning Committee
3. That other changes made under delegated authority be noted

TIMETABLE OF MEETING 2023/24

FC10/22 Councillor Hayward moved, and Councillor Warne seconded, the recommendations set out in the report on the agenda.

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation.

RESOLVED – That the Timetable of Meetings for 2023/24, as at Appendix A to the report be agreed.

COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME 2023/24

FC11/22 Councillor Hall moved, and Councillor Rutland seconded the recommendation set out in the report on the agenda.

The report was taken as read

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation.

RESOLVED –

1. That the progress of the income banded Council Tax Reduction Scheme be noted
2. That no changes are made to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2023/24
3. That the Council seeks to provide support to those struggling on low incomes and with the 'Cost of living' crisis through the establishment of a Community Support Fund and through use of the Household Support Fund

BRENCHLEY & MATFIELD NDP

FC12/22 Councillor Pound moved, and Councillor Warne seconded the recommendation set out in the report on the agenda.

Councillor Pound spoke on the Motion:

1. Expressed the importance of the Plan
2. Parish Council made a number of modifications to the plan, which was accepted and now forms part of the Borough Development Plan.

3. The provision of affordable house and a mix for older residents being considered under this plan
4. Thanks was expressed to all the hard work undertaken by the Parish and Officers

The report was taken as read

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation

RESOLVED –

1. Following a favourable local Referendum result in relation to the use of the Brenchley and Matfield Neighbourhood Development Plan (BMNP) to help in determination of planning applications in the Parish Neighbourhood Area.
2. The Brenchley and Matfield Neighbourhood Development Plan Decision Statement (post Referendum) shown in Appendix A also be Published.
3. The Brenchley and Matfield Neighbourhood Development Plan Strategic Environment Assessment (SEA) Adoption Statement also be drafted and published shortly after the NDP is made.

MEMBERS ALLOWANCES 2023/24

FC13/22 Councillor Hayward moved, and Councillor Chapelard seconded the recommendation set out in the report on the agenda.

The motion was to agree Option C which was published in a supplementary Appendix B published on the 9 December.

This recommendation was to keep the current scheme but to add a new condition that no Cabinet Member will be entitled to a Minority group leader's allowance.

Councillor Dawlings moved a revised motion to consider option B, which was seconded by Councillor Fairweather.

Debate on proposed motion for Option B.

- Option B cannot be considered with the current cost of living crisis due to a 43% increase Option B would have on allowances.
- Confirmation was requested that it was to be made clear to the electorate that there would be no increase to members allowances.
- Confirmed was provided that whatever option was agreed upon there were to be no alteration to Member allowances as originally set in 2012.
- Majority of Councillors did not want to receive an increase in Members allowances and therefore would not be supporting Option B and therefore Option C was the better option.
- Option C was un indexed and would remain that way, unlike Option B which would increase y/y

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by show of hands, votes casts 11 for, 29 against with 3 abstentions

MOTION NOT CARRIED

The debate proceeded on original motion

Debate

- It was highlighted that the council were currently in the middle of a boundary review and members allowances should stay as they were.
- It was highlighted that Option C was a better due to costs and the fact it was not index linked

The Mayor took a vote by show of hands, votes cast 30 for, 0 against, with 13 abstentions

RESOLVED

- Option C – keep with the current scheme but to add a new condition that No Cabinet Member will be entitled to a minority group leaders allowance

URGENT BUSINESS

FC14/22 There was no urgent business.

COMMON SEAL OF THE COUNCIL

FC15/22 **RESOLVED** – That the Common Seal of the Council be affixed to any contract, minute, notice or other document arising out of the minutes or pursuant to any delegation, authority or power conferred by the Council.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

FC16/22 The next scheduled meeting was Wednesday 1 March 2022

NOTES: The meeting concluded at 10.00 pm.

NOTES:
The meeting concluded at 10.00 pm.