

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 6.30 pm on Wednesday, 28 February 2024

PRESENT:

The Mayor Councillor Hugh Patterson (Chair)

Councillors Pope (Vice-Chair), Allen, Atkins, Bland, Brice, Chapelard, Dawlings, Ellis, Fairweather, Fitzsimmons, Goodship, Hall, Hayward, Hill, Holden, Knight, Le Page, Lewis, Lidstone, March, McMillan, Moon, Morton, Neville, Ms Palmer, Pound, Roberts, Rogers, Rutland, Warne, White, Wormington, Curry, Francis, Munday, O'Connell, Opara, Osborne, Sharratt, Webster and Wilkinson

IN ATTENDANCE: William Benson (Chief Executive), Claudette Valmond (Head of Legal Partnership and Monitoring Officer), Renee Dillon (Democratic and Executive Support Manager) and Caroline Britt (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

FC66/22 Apologies were received from Councillors: Barras, Barrington-King, Johnson, Sankey and Wakeman

Absent - Cllrs Britcher-Allen.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING DATED 13 DECEMBER 2023

FC67/22 Councillor Christopher Hall requested the minutes be changed to reflect a typo where the word NOT is missing before the statement suitable re the 2017 Landscape Plan and should read as "The Ramslye farm is NOT 'suitable' for housing, NOT suitable for employment". In the minutes reference FC56/22.

RESOLVED –

1. That FC56/22 be amended to replace with the following statement.
The Ramslye farm is NOT 'suitable' for housing, NOT suitable for employment.
2. That, subject to the above amendment, the minutes of the meeting dated 4 October 2023 be approved as a correct record.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

FC68/22 No declarations of pecuniary or significant other interest were made.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

FC69/22 **The Mayor announced:**

- He had attended Skinner Academy along with Councillor Pound, Councillor Barrington-King and William Benson Chief Executive
- Skinners provide a Ukraine language a school for local children from Ukraine, where a very moving ceremony was held in

recognition of the Ukraine war.

- The children were showing their determination to rebuild their homes when they returned to Ukraine

The Leader of the Council: Councillor Chapelard

- Advised that the consultation on the Strategic Plan is underway and encouraged everyone to take part to ensure the 5 key priorities for the borough should look like.

The Portfolio Holder for Rural Communities: Councillor Warne:

- Advised that the Community Support Fund met 30 January 2024 to consider 13 applications.
- The Panel awarded 5 grants of 20,000 each to:
 - St, Philips Church Community Ladder
 - Nourish Community Food Bank Limited
 - Home start South West Kent
 - Age UK Tunbridge Wells
 - West Kent Mind
- Thanks were expressed toward Jane Fineman and her team for all their hard work and efficiently collating the applications.
- Councillors Roberts, Hill and Wilkinson were also thanked for their support and ensuring transparency with the selection process.

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

FC70/22 The Mayor advised that one questions from members of the public had been received under Council Procedure Rule 8.

1. Question from Mrs Lilly Key.

During the last January JTB meeting a petition was discussed. The petition with well over a thousand signatures was titled "Scrap Traffic Restrictions and Enforcement on Mount Pleasant, Tunbridge Wells (Public Realm 2) with Immediate Effect"

However, during the JTB meeting, only two alternatives were tabled for consideration:

Option A: Do nothing

Option B: Retain the Public Realm 2 scheme with adjustments to signage.

The crucial matter of scraping the traffic restrictions, the heart of the petition, was not discussed when will this be addressed?

Answer from Councillor Sharratt

Thank you for this question Mrs Key, I welcome the opportunity to talk

about this. I understand how strongly you feel about this issue, and how much work you have put into engaging with other residents and the council about this, and that you have done so because you care deeply about the town you live in and the experience of living here. I always welcome feedback from residents.

I'm sorry that we couldn't address the request to scrap the traffic restriction on PR2 in the report that went to the Joint Transport Board. This is because we couldn't make a recommendation in the report that would not be possible to implement, and discontinuing the traffic restriction on Mount Pleasant is not possible to do without jeopardizing public safety, because the road scheme was engineered for a low traffic volume, and any increase in traffic volumes would put pedestrians crossing the road at risk. It was this concern for safety that led to us enforcing the scheme – it was always intended to be a deterrent. Road safety is not something we are prepared to compromise on.

Public Realm 2 was planned and executed from 2018 as a low traffic scheme to improve safety, air quality and the pedestrian experience in the centre of town – and at this level it does work. When I got off the bus this afternoon to come to this meeting I walked easily across the road and when I have children with me I feel confident in letting them cross independently because I know that it is safe. This is a considerably pleasanter environment from how this road was in the past, when I worked in the library between 2009 and 2015. I would like to commend the vision of the Conservative administration at the time who brought this scheme in, with the caveat that it is a shame there was not more engagement and consultation with residents at the time because this might have helped us understand the specific difficulties some residents are experiencing at an earlier stage.

I am glad that in the report to the Joint Transport Board the recommendation that we introduce further road markings and signage has been agreed, and I am also committed to a consultation of residents in the nearby streets to the scheme so that we can fully understand what their experience of it is and what they want. I am sorry it hasn't been possible to begin this consultation process before the elections in May due to the pre-election non-publicity period, meaning that in order to give the consultation enough time for residents to respond we will have to wait until after the elections, but I am looking forward to reading the responses to this survey and I hope that it will give all local residents a chance to let us know how the PR2 scheme impacts them, so that we can try to take action to improve it where that is possible.

Supplementary question from Mrs Lilly Key

Could you please explain what is the point of a petition, bearing in mind that the specific statement on the petition has not been addressed.

Supplementary answer from Councillor Sharratt.

I think the point of the petition was to. I assume obviously I didn't start the petition, but I think that it has obviously raised awareness of the unhappiness of some residents and it is enabling us to look at the consultation that I've already mentioned and that will give residents a further chance to voice their opinions.

QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

FC71/22 The Mayor advised that there were five questions from members of the Council had been received under Council Procedure Rule 10.

1.Question from Councillor Moon

My question I did actually address it should the Leader of the Council and any appropriate Cabinet Member.

It has come to my attention from some Paddock wood residents that the housing association town and country have sold council housing stock on the open market privately over a number of years. With a present total of 243 homeless and a total of 619 residents seeking housing on the present register in the borough a mountain to a waiting list of 862.

I asked the Leader of the Council to confirm or deny this practice has been taking place over the last 10 years and actually confirm the actual numbers lost in the boroughs councils housing stock over this time and outline the steps he is willing to take towards review of this unjustifiable practice resulted in valuable needed housing stock being lost to try and meet the present needs of all residents across the borough..

Answer from Councillor Pound.

Wrapped up in that question, there are a number of issues, I'm afraid my responses is quite long, firstly, like you and like many other Members in this Chamber, I suspect I'm very frustrated by the lack of social housing for rent across the borough. By way of background, we need to remember that the effective privatisation by the Conservative government of council housing through the transfer of all of our stock of how-to housing associations has left this borough with no stock of its own, and that has been the case since 1992 this Council administered for 28 of the last 30 years since the transfer of all of that stock has not built a single unit of social housing of its own, so there is no such thing actually as council housing. It is owned and managed by a number of housing associations, for the last two years the Borough Partnership, not just one party, but all of us have been focused on improving the number of social housing units for rent in the current financial climate and with the legacy that this administration inherited, this has been a challenge I am now having discussions with

officers about how we can better calculate residual land values on development sites to facilitate a better return of social housing for rent. We are at the early stages of working through a number of potential delivery vehicles to address the lack of all forms of genuinely affordable 10 years in our housing stock.

We are trying to push through the local plan which will allow the council to hold developers to account in developing the correct proportions of affordable and social housing across the borough we're funding a scheme to reduce the risks of homelessness, the use of emergency and temporary accommodation, and we have undeniably built a better relationship with our principal provider which is Town and Country Housing. However, for context I provide you with the following figures, which will be in the minutes, I'm sure so you don't need to make too much of a note of them now, in 2018 & 19, the total number of homes for rent, at social or affordable rents was 6,898, 6,200 of which were for social rent, 698 for affordable rent in 2022A& 23, which are the most recent figures we have, the total was 7,085 homes, 6,154 for social rent and 931 for affordable rent, that is an increase of 187 to our total housing stock available for rent albeit that too much is affordable currently but I'll come on to that between 2018 and now.

Almost all of this stock was transferred to town and country housing in 1992, following a consultation with tenants of those properties who voted 60% in favour and 40% opposing the transfer, so, although often referred to as council housing as I've said, that this is not council housing stock is stock within the borough, but not directly under our control. It isn't Borough Council stock and neither the Leader nor I is in a position to take preventative action. The following figures provide the total number of homes that Town and Country own and manages in the Borough broken down into categories. General needs that is properties available for rent is 5,114 shared ownership 194 sheltered units 486 and supported living 22 Town and Country. Housing does occasionally sell social rented homes.

This is mainly due to the costs of refurbishment to decent homes standard or bringing them up to EPC C or above, where refurbishment is judged to be prohibitive or where the provider finds a property hard to let because of its condition or location, it is practiced throughout the country to sell those properties, and it is the practice of all housing associations. Since 2022 Town and Country have sold 39 homes, saving 1 million pounds of potential repair costs, but delivering eight and a half million pounds of income which can be reinvested in its stock or used to buy new homes. It cannot be used for any other purposes the sales generally through auction. So, to call this action unjustified, I'm afraid is actually not correct and is not a fair reflection of what town and country is trying to do, which is to provide safe and secure sustainable properties for use by our residents.

I do acknowledge that they do not always succeed, and I have very regular meetings with an associate director who is our conduit

through to housing managers and others in the organisation raising issues constantly to better represent the interests of our residents my most recent meeting with him was on Thursday last week. in the same period, 2022 to late 2023 Town and Country has delivered 138 new rented homes, 69 at social rent and 69 at affordable rent. going forward. Town and country is converting, affordable to social rent on re-let, affordable rents at up to 80% of market rate are, as we know, untenable in the highly priced south-east, and the Government's Local Housing Allowance completely is completely inadequate in meeting the needs of many, many residents, town and country has decided going forward to only let properties at social rent values up to 60% of market rate, which is slightly more manageable for some families. As at this week we are currently 621 households accepted onto the Housing Register, seeking an allocation of housing of the 243 homeless households that you mentioned. This includes all households owed a housing responsibility by Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, including those who are homeless and threatened with homelessness. many of these households will already be active on the Housing Register and included in the 621 figure. There will also be some households who are not seeking an allocation of social housing but will be receiving assistance to retain their existing homes to prevent their homelessness.

Supplementary Question from Councillor Moon

I'm not happy with some of the data that was just given to me. As far as I know, there is a right to buy scheme within government legislation and not, as I recall, a right to sell scheme, could the Leader of the Council/Councillor Pound, confirm the legislation that authorises this within the reply that has just been given?.

Supplementary answer from Councillor Pound

Thank you I do not have the answer to hand let me check and provide you with a written response.

Follow up response to Cllr Moons Question (13 March2024)

Legislation does allow a Registered Provider of social housing to dispose of land and property. Parliament granted the power under section 171 of The Housing and Regeneration Act 2008.

Section 176 (as amended) creates a requirement for a Registered Provider to notify the Regulator of disposals, rather than needing to seek approval.

Guidance and Directions set out how and when notifications of any Relevant Disposals need to be given to the Regulator.

Directions

(assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c0fd355e5274a0bd964def5/Final_disposal_notification_2017.pdf) were issued by the HCA that, from April 6th 2017 (i) no HCA

consent is needed to dispose of any land and (ii) if a PRP disposes of a dwelling which is social housing and the disposal amounts to a Relevant Disposal, then the HCA needs to be told about it.

There is also **Guidance** (www.gov.uk/government/publications/notifications-about-disposals/guidance-notification-of-disposalsnk) for Registered Providers on how to notify the regulator about the disposal of social housing.

2.Question from Councillor Roberts

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council introduced a near miss reporting tool in 2021, to allow incidents where a collision has almost taken place involving vehicles, pedestrians, cyclists or horses, to be recorded. However, the JTB in January 2024 and officers' report omitted any data from this database, citing the data wasn't suitable. When asked if it had been used or referred to, can any examples be given where data has been used by the officers when compiling reports and its subsequent impact.

Answer from Councillor Sharratt

Thank you for your question Councillor Roberts, the safety of all road users is always a high priority, and I am glad that since April 2021 there has been a near miss reporting tool available to residents and near miss is a minor incidents that could have been worse, for example a driver who had to perform an emergency stop or a pedestrian who has had to jump back onto the pavement. It can be particularly relevant in places where people and traffic interact, such as junctions and crossings, the near miss online reporting form allows a resident allows residents who have had or witnessed a close call of this kind either as a driver or a cyclist or horse rider as a pedestrian to have a simple way of telling the council about it. All reports are reviewed by our Community Safety team with the aim of identifying any patterns and looking if safety can be improved as a result of this greater awareness. to be clear, Kent County Council told us at the outset that the data collected through this tool will not influence their casualty reduction programme, which has stringent and specific criteria for potential improvements through engineering works. I'm told that we have had around 360 submissions to the near miss reporting tool of varying quality, and these have now been categorised after some initial technical issues, that delayed analysis near misses in St James and St Johns have been provided to the economic development team for the better streets project, which is working to improve the street environment there and they will use this data to feed into the project and near misses in Pembury have been passed onto the KCC. Warden there KCC, cross-reference 12 months to submission with their crash data, but it is not felt that this provided much of great value. The Community Safety Manager plans to produce a report later this year to include data from the near miss reporting tool

sorted by wards parishes and incident type.

Supplementary question from Councillor Roberts

We had a meeting with our Parish Council some 18 months ago, along with the national highways present. And they were interested in this data, and so I encouraged, via social media, for people to report the incidents in Pembury in that area, will this data be available to national highways in the future? and if so, how?

Supplementary answer from Councillor Sharratt

Thank you that does sound like a positive thing to do, but I will check with the officers and communicate with you later, thank you.

Follow up response to Cllr Robert Supplementary Question (4 March2024)

“The National Highways can have access to this information and can be requested from Terry Hughes”.

3. Question from Councillor White

Will the Leader apologise to the thousands of people fined by TWBC accidentally driving through an added incomplete signposted public realm to in Tunbridge Wells after he personally insisted on collecting the fines as a Council money-making scheme?

Answer from Councillor Chapelard

Thank you for your question, Cllr White. To answer your question on the Public Realm 2 scheme - shortened to “PR2” - we need to go back to the beginning of the scheme in 2018.

PR2 was approved by the previous Conservative administration in April 2018 at a cost of £1.3m. The fact is our Borough Partnership administration has inherited the scheme from your party.

The 2018 Cabinet papers show that PR2 had 3 objectives:

- 1 create a more pedestrian friendly space
- 2 make the War memorial a focal point
- 3 create a sense of public square for Tunbridge Wells

PR2 was never designed to be a “money making scheme”. As a highways scheme, financial matters are subject to strict national

regulations, and any surplus is legally ring-fenced. I therefore reject the premise of your question.

The Borough Partnership's objectives align with those of the Conservative administration, with a stronger emphasis on active travel. We all want a thriving and attractive town centre. However, unlike the Conservatives, who now criticize a scheme they themselves initiated, we are committed as a Borough Partnership to making PR2 a success for all the benefits we believe it will bring to the town.

We recognize there are signage issues and are working with Kent County Council, who are responsible for them, to improve the situation.

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council has already agreed to fund some immediate improvements estimated at £15,000, and we are willing to commit more towards any further agreed improvements

We value input from the public and will conduct a consultation to gather residents' concerns and incorporate their feedback into the improvements.

I am grateful to Kent County Council's Conservative administration for their support in making PR2 better before they assume enforcement responsibilities on 30th June 2024.

Supplementary question from Councillor White

I was interested to say that you have accepted as a signage problem, but I think that became very, very obvious when an enormous number of fines were issued in a very short space of time, so I was just interested whether you would actually apologise to those residents who find themselves caught up in the bad signage and you as a Councillor did not take action when that enormous number of fines came to light in the year as soon as a scheme was put in place.

Supplementary answer from Councillor Chapelard.

As I said in my previous answer signage is part of the Highways brief for KCC and us and I can assure you if we had control of the signage TWBC would have gone and ordered some new signs but it is KCC responsibility further to that under the national regulations for fines there is an appeals process and I believe TWBC has ran a very understanding policy for anybody that feels they have been treated unfairly in the matter.

4 Question from Councillor Bland

Can the Leader give an assurance that the money taken from thousands of local drivers in fines for accidentally entering the PR2 scheme will not be used to create more anti-car fine schemes.

Answer from Councillor Chapelard

Please refer to my earlier answer to Cllr White about the history of the PR2 scheme which was put in place by the previous Conservatives administration..

The national legislation is very clear and restrictive as to how any money from highways schemes can be spent on.

Any money from PR2 will be used for 2 purposes.

1 Fund climate change initiatives

2 fund improvements to the public realm and highways

The Borough Partnership has been clear that investing any money from PR2 in our town and borough will only happen once the issues are resolved.

Our transportation policies are focused on finding a balance between managing traffic flow, prioritizing pedestrian safety, and promoting sustainable transport options.

Supplementary question from Councillor Bland

Can the Leader understand that there is a natural suspicion. Based on his previous performance, that any found views will be used, simply to generate more money. Rather than improve. The boroughs, environment or traffic flow.

Supplementary answer from Councillor Chapelard

Thank you Councillor Bland, the money is ring fenced by legislation so if you are saying are we going to use any surplus from the PR scheme to fund the day to day running of the council, then no we are not, because we can't do that and as I said earlier the Cabinet papers from 2018 clearly did not intend this to be a money making scheme, rest assured this administration is doing everything it can to improve it and make it work so we have a vibrant town centre.

5. Question from Councillor Dawlings

I have listened to the webcast of the Planning Committee debate on 5 Calverley Park, in which approval was given to the full application, but then within minutes the listed building application was rejected this seems an entirely illogical, even a risible decision and I wonder what needs to be done to prevent any recurrence.

Answer from Councillor Pound

Thank you, Councillor Dawlings for your question, you say that you listened to the webcast I was there and it was an interesting experience and so, as you noted, watching the webcast of the Planning Committee

regarding this matter, you will have noted that on this occasion, officers prepared a very detailed recommendation which they felt respected the decision to refuse a larger extension on the same building made by the Planning Committee at its meeting on the 5th of December 2023, which you may have also watched.

There is a good deal of respect from Members for the various and valuable guidance and contributions and expertise and experience that such matters bring to complex and nuanced decision-making such as occurred here. There were a number of questions raised and a detailed discussion was had about the proposals where officers tried to answer all the matters raised. The incongruity of the two decisions has obviously led to arrange a discussions between myself and officers between the highly experienced Chair of the Planning Committee, whose here this evening, and officers as well.

Membership of the Planning Committee does carry expectations as set out in our Constitution, the ability to understand the planning legislation and regulations and their application in the determination of planning applications, the ability to understand the effects of the Committee's decisions in relation to the Council's priorities and strategies and plans, e g, of the Local Plan and the needs of the community, and a working understanding of the planning protocol and the constitution in relation to planning issues, so training for planning committee members is undertaken at various points throughout the year through short bite sessions and how to address the matter that you have raised is under consideration.

Finally, I would say that, in light of the Council decision on this application, officers will seek to defend that decision shouldn't appeal be raised

Supplementary question from Councillor Dawlings

I presume that there are going to be costs involved, in any appeal, and I suspect, having listened to the debate that some Members of the Planning Committee felt that further information was given in the course of the discussion of the second application, which possibly led to a change of mind, now, what I wonder whether it's possible is, could all the information be given, I mean, I'm sure that legally these things have to be dealt with separately, but I wonder whether all the information could be given, so that that does not happen in future, so that no one is short of information in the course of the difference of full planning application and listed building application

Supplementary answer from Councillor Pound

There are two questions there in relation to any costs that might be involved in an appeal if an appeal comes forward and is proceeded with, and there will be costs to the Council undeniably in relation to that appeal, but we aren't at that stage. Currently, there are discussions taking place between Planning officers and the applicant currently.

In relation to your second question, all of the information in relation to the two applications that were considered on that evening were, of course, available to Members within their packs and also members of the Planning Committee, and it's something that I have been urging more activity on have the opportunity to speak to officers before the meeting rather than necessarily raising matters only at the meeting. the two matters had to be heard separately, which is quite correct, but all of the paper, other papers contained all of the information relating to both, and it had been with Members for seven days beforehand.

NOTICE OF USE OF URGENCY PROCEDURES

FC72/22 The Mayor moved, and the Deputy Mayor seconded the recommendations set out in the notice on the agenda

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation.

RESOLVED –

1. To note the use of the Call-In and Urgency procedure, in accordance with Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rule 14, in respect of the following Cabinet decisions
2. Premises demised by a Sublease at Royal Victoria Place The decision was made on Thursday 8 February 2024
3. <https://democracy.tunbridgewells.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?AllId=39520>

COUNCILLOR DISPENSATION

FC73/22 Councillor Pound moved, and Councillor Neville seconded, the recommendations set out in the report.

The report was taken as read.

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation.

RESOVLED - That Full Council approve a dispensation for Councillor Alex Britcher-Allan from meetings of the Council on the ground of ill health from and including 14 December 2023 until the end of the current civic year

RE - APPOINTMENT OF INDEPENDENT MEMBER TO THE AUDIT & GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

FC74/22 Councillor Munday moved, and Councillor Lidstone seconded, the recommendations set out in the report.

The report was take as read

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation.

RESOLVED – That Mr Geoffrey Turner be re-appointed to the Audit & Governance Committee as an Independent Member for a further term of four years.

APPOINTMENT OF INDEPENDENT PERSON FOR TUNBRIDGE WELLS BOROUGH COUNCIL.

FC75/22 Councillor Munday moved, and Councillor Lidstone seconded, the recommendations set out in the report.

The report was taken as read

The Mayor gave the following thanks and appreciation to Mr Michael O'Higgins:

“Mr Michael O'Higgins on behalf of the Council, for the invaluable advice and support provided to the Council's Monitoring Officers (past and present) during his time as the Council's Independent Person. The Council is grateful for the opportunity to have worked with you. Thank you once again for all your help and support.”

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation.

RESOLVED – That Mr James Yardley be appointed as the Council's Independent Person for a term of four years commencing 29 February 2024.

GOVERNANCE REVIEW REPORT

FC76/22 Councillor Chapelard moved, and Councillor Pound Seconded, the recommendations set out in the report.

The report was taken as read

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation

RESOLVED –

1. That Council note the results of the research activities carried out.
2. That Council note the results of the Councillor Survey.
3. That Council agrees the recommendations, committee structure, and number of seats set out in section 4 of this report.
4. That Council note that any consequential changes to the

Constitution and/or Terms of Reference for any Committee or Board, because of the new arrangements, will be brought to Full Council at its meeting on Wednesday 3 April 2024.

5. That Council agrees that a review of the new arrangements be undertaken by the Head of Governance and Democratic Services after 12 months.

RECOMMENDED CHANGE TO WARD NAME

FC77/22 This agenda item was already covered in the earlier Extraordinary meeting held on the 28 February 2024.

AUDIT AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE REPORT

FC78/22 Councillor Munday moved, and Councillor McMillan seconded, the recommendations set out in the report.

Councillor Munday expressed his thanks and appreciated for the Finance team for all there help along with Councillor Christopher Hall for his hard work carried out during his tenure in the role.

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation.

RESOLVED –

1. That the Audit & Governance Committee Annual Report for 2022/23 (appendix A) is agreed.
2. That the Chairman of the Audit & Governance Committee presents the report to Full Council to demonstrate how the Committee has discharged its duties

BUDGET & MTFS 2024-25

FC79/22 The Mayor exercised his discretion under Council Procedures Rule 13.4.4 to allow leaders of each political party more than 10 minutes to speak.

Councillor Ellis moved, and Councillor Neville seconded, the recommendations set out in the report.

The debate on the motion included the following comments:

- Thanks were given to officers who had provided input into the 2023/24 Budget report (Colyer, Fineman, Candlin and Hirst)
- Thanks were also expressed to the Leader of the Council Ben Chapelard along with fellow members of the Cabinet for their contribution to the budget.
- Special thanks, were shown to Councillor Christopher Hall for laying the groundwork which provided the starting point of the report.
- 2024/25 Budget reflected the vision for a resilient, prosperous and sustainable borough.

- The Budget invested in the future of the Borough, whilst protecting the services, and multiple residents.
- It supported local businesses, promoted a cultural of natural heritage and enhance our quality of life while achieving an ambition to be a carbon neutral council by 2030.
- This budget demonstrated fiscal responsibility and prudence, unlike many other Councils.
- Tunbridge Wells Borough Council achieved a balanced budget without needing to tap into reserves, which was achieved by making efficiencies, increasing income, and securing grants from central government
- The rising costs and growing demands meant that the council had to rely more on its own income sources, such as a share of business rates, which were subject to fluctuations and uncertainties
- The high proportion of older people and the high cost of living affected the demand and cost of services, as well as the ability for residents to pay for them.
- The government needed to stop the sporadic one-year funding formulas and allow local authorities to plan better for the future.
- Council tax was capped at 3%, which created growing pressure on finances, and ways had to be found to bridge the gap between expenditure and income.
- Alternative sources of funding, such as income from fees and charges, had to be balanced to limit the impact on residents and the quality of services.
- The council needed to consider the possibility of bringing some services in-house or forming joint ventures of the council's organizations to achieve better value for money and more flexibility and control.
- The council had prudent levels of reserves, which were essential for managing unforeseen events and emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, reserves were not a sustainable source of funding for ongoing expenditure.
- The council generated social value for its residents through the work it did, such as providing affordable housing, supporting mental health in a meaningful way, and by providing leisure facilities and looking after open spaces.
- The Council's community support fund granted £100,000 pounds for projects directly involved in improving the quality of life for many residents who were in desperate need due to the cost of living crisis.
- TWBC had ambitious plans to improve the town and the borough through its decision to buy back the lease of Royal Victoria Place.
- The goal was to create a vision to transform the destination for residents, not only as a shopping centre but also as a social and cultural hub.
- The transformation of the Town Hall had cross-party support and was developed into a facility that met the needs of staff, partners, and residents.
- The project involved retaining one-third of space for the council's core functions, with the main two-thirds of space being used for co-working, often flexible, affordable workspaces for local businesses, start-ups, freelancers, and social enterprises.
- This generated much-needed income for the Council but also created a sense of entrepreneurship and innovation in Tunbridge Wells.
- The Council invested £4.5 million into RVP, along with £850,000 into the Great Hall car park to update the service for both residents and visitors to

Tunbridge Wells.

- A decision was made to sell off Mount Pleasant Car Park as it was surplus to requirements.
- The partnership continued to focus on its pledge for tackling the Climate Change Emergency and wanted to lead by example to show how local authorities play a vital role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting sustainability.
- Investments into solar farms were made to generate clean renewable energy for the council's own purposes and the national grid, as well as creating a long-term source of income for the Council.
- It was the Council's intention to invest in long-term staff, where staffing shortages had left officers overworked.
- The Conservatives advised they would not be supporting the budget.
- In the 2010s, the revenue support grant of 5 million pounds received by the Council was reduced to zero over a five-year period, starting in 2011. At that time, council tax receipts were then about £8 million pounds.
- The Council established shared services with neighbouring boroughs, rationalised services, and introduced charges for some services based on the principle of user pays, and the revenue budget always remained in budget.
- In March 2020, the country went into lockdown at a time when the council was unsure of its ability to collect Council.
- These concerns were alleviated with the Government's furlough scheme.
- No income was being generated from car parks, and the shortfall in the first three months was £1 million a month; this fell to £500k when the country opened up again, and the government forecast assistance of 70% for any income lost.
- The 2021 Budget prudently forecast drawing £2 million from reserves to balance the revenue budget.
- The Finance Team did an excellent job coordinating the payment of £53 million pounds of government grants to businesses in the borough.
- There was no revenue shortfall at the 31st of March 2022, and so there was no need to draw from reserves.
- The financial position of the Council and the measures taken by the Finance Team successfully claimed back over 5 million pounds from the government to cover the impact of the pandemic.
- The auditors and Council staff worked remotely to prepare the accounts for 2020/21 and 2021/22 to the timetable set by the government for the 12th and 13th consecutive years.
- Despite this, the coalition administration continued to describe the council's finances as a shambles, which is ridiculous, and their emergency interim budget resulted in increased fees.
- Unfortunately, the increased parking fees in Tunbridge Wells, Southborough, and Paddock Wood did not encourage or attract visitors. As for the 2023 accounts, there was no mention of an interim budget.
- The accounts showed a year-end revenue surplus of £1.1 million, resulting from increased income from deposits, increased use of car parking, and staff vacancies.
- The Council was placed in the top 1% in the country for the 14th consecutive year and received an unqualified audit report, which is an extraordinary achievement.
- The council's strong financial management and highly competent finances were down to a good team led by Lee Colyer and Jane Fineman.
- Additionally, RVP fell into the council's hands, and huge

congratulations for that are down to William Benson and Lee Collier for identifying and delivering the opportunity.

- Rivington Harkes Asset Management and Knight Frank are appointed as the property agents.
- The council is now the owner of a very significant property portfolio, which presents the opportunity to deliver the income needed to fund the budget gap that will arise in 2027 when the council's major contracts are due for renewal.
- However, the Conservative Group remains unimpressed with the imposition of parking fees in Dunorlan and the PR2 enforcement.
- It should have been apparent within weeks that signage and road markings were unclear, fining thousands of people, including many visitors to the town, simply puts people off coming to Tunbridge Wells.
- After the May 2022 elections, the coalition advised that its first priority was finance, which is as it should be. However, this priority is no longer included in their strategic plan.
- Labour advised that the Borough partnership has been addressing the issues that residents and businesses have judged more important, more successful, and more effective.
- The budget made back in May and comments from Councillor Ellis have made it clear that over the last two years, they have all been staring at the crocodile jaws of the revenue budget gap, which is ever-widening, particularly as they have contracts that will soon be emerging going forward.
- Unfortunately, the Conservative government in 2010 failed and delayed on the fair funding review, meaning long-term plans were only ever making single-year plans.
- What they need is to be able to build a much better three or five-year plan for the future.
- The new homes bonus, which is particularly pertinent, was offered by the Conservative government as a powerful, predictable, permanent incentive to reward the delivery of housing growth.
- But it fails on all three adjectives. It wasn't powerful, it wasn't predictable, and it hasn't been permanent.
- The birth rate is at its lowest rate for 32 years, the reason is families are unable to afford to live here.
- They're also unable to move here from outside because we don't have housing, infrastructure, and economic incentives for people to come here.
- The Borough Partnership is looking for ways to develop long-term communities and build an economy within the borough.
- However the current administration has inherited a legacy from the previous one that does not provide enough security or certainty going forward.
- It was noted that the opposition party is now against the Local Plan, which is essentially saying that they no longer support the idea of more housing, infrastructure, and a better economy across the whole borough.
- The administration's main focus is on delivering services to the residents and providing social value, rather than just managing the finances. The Borough Partnership will continue to be focused on this goal after the elections.

The Mayor took a recorded vote on the motion in accordance with Council

Procedure Rule 15.7.

Members who voted for the Motion: Councillors Atkins, Brice, Chapelard, Curry Ellis, Fitzsimmons, Francis, Hayward, (Christopher) Hall, Hill, Knight, Le Page, Lewis Lidstone, McMillan, Moon, Morton, Munday Neville, O'Connell, Opara, Osborne, Patterson, Pope, Pound, Rogers, Rutland, Sharratt, Warne, Webster Wilkinson, Wormington,(32)

Members who voted against the Motion: Councillors: Allen, Bland, Dawlings, Fairweather, Goodship, Holden, March, (Ms) Palmer, Roberts, White (10)

Members who abstained from voting: (0)

RESOLVED

1. That Council considers the changes to the base budget along with the assumptions and approach detailed throughout the report.
2. That Council considers the responses to the budget consultation.
3. That Council approves the revenue budget.
4. That Council approves the rolling forward of the capital programme including additional gross funding of £5,308,900 for new schemes listed within the report.
5. That Council approves an increase in the 'Basic Amount' of Council Tax of £5.71 (2.9 per cent) for 2024/25 for a Band D property; and
6. That with regards Council Tax, the Council approves to levy a 100 per cent Long Term Empty Premium for properties that had been empty for more than 1 year from 1 April 2024 and to levy a 100 per cent Second Home Premium for properties from 1 April 2025.
7. That Council approves the Pay Policy Statement 2024/25 set out in Appendix E.

COUNCIL TAX 2024-25

FC80/22 Councillor Ellis moved, and Councillor Chapelard seconded, the recommendations set out in the report.

The report was taken as read.

The Mayor took a recorded vote on the motion in accordance with Council Procedure Rule 15.7.

Members who voted for the Motion: Councillors Allen, Atkins, Bland,

Brice, Chapelard, Curry, Dawlings, Ellis, Fairweather, Fitzsimmons, Francis, Goodship, Hayward, (Christopher) Hall, Hill, Holden, Knight, Le Page, Lewis, Lidstone, March, McMillan, Moon, Morton, Munday, Neville, O'Connell, Opara, Osborne, (Ms) Palmer, Patterson, Pope, Pound, Roberts, Rogers, Rutland, Sharratt, Warne, Webster, White, Wilkinson and Wormington.,(42)

Members who voted against the Motion: (0)

Members who abstained from voting: (0)

RESOLVED – That Council approve the Council Tax for 2024/25 as set out in the resolution in Appendix A. be approved.

ASSET MANAGEMENT PLAN 2024-25

FC81/22 Councillor Ellis moved, and Councillor Chapelard seconded the recommendations set out in the report.

All assets are managed in accordance with this property portfolio for which there is a management plan as set out by the council's strategic direction. The Asset Management Plan is critical to support the reduction in carbon emissions

Debate included:

- Confirmation was requested that the Wesley centre would not become part of the Asset strategy moving forward
- Concern was expressed around the advertisement of the consultation due to poor numbers of responses.
- Confirmation was given that at this present time the Wesley Centre was not under review
- It was also confirmed that Paddock Wood Council and Parishes were made aware of the consultation in good time.

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation

RESOLVED - That Full Council approves and adopts the Asset Management Plan for 2024/25.

PEOPLE STRATEGY

FC82/22 Councillor Chapelard moved, and Councillor Neville seconded, the recommendations set out in the report.

The report was taken as read.

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation.

RESOLVED - That Full Council endorse and adopt the People Strategy 2024

CAPITAL STRATEGY

FC83/22 Councillor Ellis moved, and Councillor Chapelard seconded the recommendations set out in the report.

The report was taken as read.

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation.

Resolved - That the Capital Strategy 2024/25, as set out in Appendix A to the report, be adopted.

TREASURY MANAGEMENT POLICY AND STRATEGY

FC84/22 Councillor Ellis Moved, and Councillor Chapelard Seconded, the recommendations set out in the report.

The report was taken as read

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation.

RESOLVED - That the Treasury Management Policy and Strategy 2024/25, as set out in Appendix A to the report, be adopted.

DISCRETIONARY RATE RELIEF REPORT

FC85/22 Councillor Ellis Moved, and Councillor Chapelard seconded, the recommendations set out in the report.

The report was taken as read

The Mayor took a vote on the motion by affirmation.

RESOLVED -

1. To approve the change to the backdating of Discretionary Rate Relief to a maximum period of 12 months.
2. To approve the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Relief Policy for 2024/25
3. That Cabinet recommend to Full Council that a full review of the policy is carried out in 2024/25.

URGENT BUSINESS

FC86/22 There was no urgent business.

COMMON SEAL OF THE COUNCIL

FC87/22 **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

FC88/22 The next scheduled meeting was Wednesday 3 April 2024.

NOTES:

The meeting concluded at 8.20 pm.