

Council Minutes

Date: 26 February 2015

Time: 6.30 - 9.20 pm

PRESENT: Councillor Mrs L M Clarke OBE (in the Chair)

Councillors Mrs J A Adey, K Ahmed, Z Ahmed, D H G Barnes, I Bates, W J Bendyshe-Brown, D J Carroll, A D Collingwood, R B Colomb, C A Ditta, R Farmer, M A Foster, R Gaffney, J Gibbs, A R Green, G C Hall, M Hanif, A E Hill, M Hussain, M Hussain JP, D A Johncock, Mrs G A Jones, M E Knight, Ms R Knight, S P Lacey, Mrs J D Langley, Ms P L Lee, Mrs W J Mallen, N B Marshall, H L McCarthy, I L McEnnis, R Metcalfe, S F Parker, B E Pearce, B R Pollock JP, J L Richards OBE, J A Savage, R J Scott, D A C Shakespeare OBE, A Slater, T Snaith, Mrs J E Teesdale, A Turner, P R Turner, Ms J D Wassell, D M Watson, R Wilson and Ms K S Wood

70 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Honorary Aldermen E H Collins, Mrs K M Peatey and Mrs P Priestley; Councillors M Angell, D A Anson MBE, M C Appleyard, S Graham, C B Harriss, A Hussain, Mrs D V C Morgan, Mrs M L Neudecker and C Shafique MBE.

71 MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 15 December 2014 be approved as a true record and signed by the Chairman.

72 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

73 CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman explained that during the past few weeks, in the Chairman's office the promised refurbishment was to be undertaken. It was reported that this should be completed by mid-March.

The Chairman reported that the Guarantors dinner, held in January, had been a superb event with nearly 200 people in attendance, all of which had lived within the town were over 80.

The Chairman also stated that the High Sherriff had said earlier in the Chairman's year that he did not really know High Wycombe, so he was taken on a whistle-stop tour around High Wycombe visiting the sports centre and ending up with a visit to Instron on Cressex Business Park.

The Chairman wished to thank those Members who attended the Civic Service in February and that some delicious cakes and biscuits were provided by Michael Brown of Empower to Cook.

The Chairman then asked for Members to note some key events due to take place and referred to the Rural Forum which would take place on Thursday 19 March at 5.00pm. The Chairman stated there were three meetings per year, which included a Farm Tour which was scheduled for 18 June.

The Chairman's Reception would be held on Thursday 26 March at 7.00pm and the Chairman requested that Members please respond to the invitations that had been sent out.

74 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

(a) Question from Dr L Derrick to the Cabinet Member for Community

"In January, I wrote to Councillor Gaffney about the IRC's review of urgent healthcare.

I said it was limited, superficial and complacent. The IRC had failed to grasp the problems of the NHS providing integrated urgent healthcare when the healthcare is provided by different private sector companies alongside the public sector.

IRC recommended that the MIU provide additional services at Wycombe hospital. To illustrate my point, I asked if the IRC had found out what was already required to be provided by the private sector company running the MIU.

Councillor Gaffney hasn't answered my question.

He had 20 working days under the Freedom of Information Act. The deadline is 23 February.

Could WDC answer my question?"

Response by Councillor Mrs J A Adey (Cabinet Member for Community).

Councillor Gaffney replied to you on the 21 February before the deadline under the Freedom of Information Act request. I appreciate you had to submit your question before the deadline expired for a reply to you.

However, you fail to say that your first letter, dated 26 January, was sent to Councillor Gaffney in your position as spokesperson for Health and Social Care for the Wycombe Constituency Labour Party. Councillor Gaffney replied to your first letter on 6 February.

Supplementary Question

I take it the answer to my question is no - the IRC did not ask what the MIU was already required to provide. If it had, it would have discovered that the contract

has 8 months to run and the clinical commissioning groups have set-up boards for the re-procurement of the services.

So the IRC's recommendations for the provision of additional services including joining up the IT systems of the MIU and the A&E at Stoke Mandeville make no sense at this late stage in the contract. It would be a poor use of resources if another private sector company was given the contract. This is what happens when services are contracted out; each organisation runs its own systems and the patient suffers.

Won't it make more sense for WDC to recommend restoring the provision of urgent care at Wycombe hospital to the public sector? And halt further privatisation in the NHS?"

Supplementary Response

Councillor Gaffney, in his letters, refuted your points and explained that he considered your comments were based on a misunderstanding of the purpose and focus of the review undertaken by the Improvement and Review Commission.

The Commission did hear about the services being provided, but it was not specifically focused on the detailed requirements, compliance and penalties of BUC's contract with the Clinical Commissioning Group, as the purpose was to follow the lead of patients' experiences shared at the public listening event in accordance with the scope of the review, which was agreed by the Improvement and Review Commission at its meeting on 15 September 2014.

They key point I wish to make is that this review was scoped and designed to primarily look at the existing arrangements for urgent health care for residents in Wycombe District based on the views of the public. His was a review conducted on a cross-party basis and all Members, including those of the Labour party, had the fullest opportunity to input into the shape and findings of the review.

It is clear to me from reading the Commission's report and being party to some of the discussions, that the Commission fulfilled its remit and has come up with very practical suggestions to improve services for residents, based on residents' views and concerns.

I therefore think you are doing a great disservice to the residents of Wycombe District in your remarks about this review, which was a cross-party report, and I fully concur with the views and concerns of the public, which were reflected in the Commission's report, in the way you describe.

(b) Question from Ms O Hafiz to the Cabinet Member for Community

"Firstly thank you for taking the time to answer my questions on the phone and via email. I would like to ask what guarantees can be given that the services we currently have including the Cardiac/Stroke and Maternity unit will still be on Queen Alexandra Road in 5-10 years time and what measures will be taken to listen to the views of the public and staff who haven't participated in this Improvement and

Review commission process – in particular what support can be given to those of us who wish to see lost services restored?”

Response by Councillor Mrs J A Adey (Cabinet Member for Community)

Thank you for your question. The guarantees you are seeking can only be given by the organisation responsible for those services, which is the Clinical Commissioning Group not the District Council.

However, the reason the Improvement and Review Commission undertook the review into urgent health care is because we understand the importance of this issue to our residents. The recommendations of the Commission, when agreed later tonight, will be passed to the health providers for a response which will be given to the Bucks County Council's Health and Adult Asocial Care Select Committee which has the responsibility for health scrutiny.

The review did have the benefit of the public's views both at the public listening event on 15 October, which the Council organised, and from the Healthwatch Bucks survey results. These public experiences were the main driver for the review and the Commission's recommendations.

The review was not about investigating the return of lost services, but the report does highlight the challenge that a more fundamental re-assessment may be required if the measures currently being taken to improve the range of services at Wycombe and Stoke Mandeville hospitals are insufficient. It is through the County Council Committee that this debate will continue.

No supplementary question.

75 QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS

(a) Question from Councillor A Turner to the Cabinet Member for Environment

Since the introduction of the ANPR car park system in Princes Risborough the Town Centre has seen a marked drop in footfall. Retailers and residents alike have raised concerns about the system and the adverse effect it is having on the viability of the Town Centre, so much so that proposed investment plans for the Town of at least two national chains have now been thrown into doubt. All of the hard won success of town centre regeneration achieved over the last six years is now in jeopardy, due to the intransigence of Wycombe District Council.

As the Cabinet member has declined any further discussion on the matter, how does this Council plan to address this serious situation?

Response from Councillor Mrs J E Teesdale (Cabinet Member for Environment)

There is no evidence that the new system has created a drop in footfall. Indeed, the national average over the whole year was reported to be of 5.2% and the media

has also reported recently, large retailers drop in footfall over the current year. Indeed, our own income figures for Horns Lane compare favourably and in line with the outturn for the same periods last year.

It is a very easy target to point blame at parking, but there are greater issues with local economy and tightening of household budgets, which are continuously being reported in the press throughout the current era of austerity that more affects public spending. Times are tight for everyone, local businesses and councils alike.

WDC has kept parking charges down with no increases now for several years in Princes Risborough, albeit we have incurred substantially higher operating costs year on year. New systems are in place in order to control and reduce overheads further. If this is not possible, then changes may have to be reviewed.

Supplementary Question

Thanks for the response although I doubt residents and retailers will be impressed. Further to the issue of ANPR in Princes Risborough, there was a recent article in the Daily Mail which claims councils may be operating outside the law as the system was not approved by the Government. Could you confirm whether car parks in Princes Risborough are not in breach of the law?

Supplementary Response

That is an entirely different question so I will not answer it. Car parking in Princes Risborough is very reasonable with three hours of parking for £1. In High Wycombe the cost in Easton Street for an evening's parking cost £3. People have commented they like the new system as it gives them flexibility. We have not put up our parking prices for some time.

(b) Question from Councillor G Hall to the Leader of the Council

With AVDC committing themselves to thoroughly investigating the benefits or disadvantages of creating a single unitary council for their own area, the remainder of Buckinghamshire is left in a very difficult and potentially untenable position as we clearly could not continue to function in our current format should Aylesbury Vale democratically choose to go it alone.

Do you share my concern that WDC's leadership team's indication and dithering on this crucial issue to date has left our district, our residents, businesses and prospective businesses in a precarious position, creating a vacuum of economic and social uncertainty.

Are you going to take some inevitable bold and proactive moves towards a unitary council this side of the elections or have you a wish to go down in history as the councillors who ruined our future?

Response by Councillor R Scott (Leader of the Council)

I do not share your ludicrous view that I, or this Cabinet, will go down in history as the councillors who ruined our future – quite the opposite!

In fact, I think it is quite insulting to all the hardworking Members and staff of this Council whose actions continue to deliver real and lasting improvements for our residents, businesses and prospective businesses, making Wycombe District the exact opposite of what you describe.

1. This Council has brought half a billion (£0.5bn) of investment leverage into this District as a result of our work, contributing to Wycombe District's £4billion economy.
2. Unemployment is 1.2%, the lowest level since 2008, with the Council directly involved in helping to create and retain more than 2,000 jobs by 2016.
3. The first two phases of the Handy Cross Hub redevelopment are underway, with the new coach way park and ride being available this year; the new sports centre opening in January 2016 and the Waitrose store is under construction.
4. The NEXT home and garden store, the first of its kind in the country, opens at Cressex Island at Easter this year.
5. The Hughenden Quarter scheme has commenced with the spine road being constructed now, which includes the student village with a day centre / extra care and care-home complex.
6. Improvements have been delivered to High Wycombe Town Centre with the Paul's Row improvements and plans well advanced to deliver the alternative route, starting with the construction of the Westbourne Street link, plus bringing back into use town centre properties.
7. The state-of-the-art running track has been relocated and opened at Little Marlow.
8. We continue to deliver a broad range of services with added improvements; for example, our new waste contract which is proving a much wider range of kerbside collections and delivering significant savings.
9. We have frozen Council Tax for the last four years and will do so again this coming financial year.
10. Our latest residents' survey shows that over half (51%) of local residents recognise we provide value for money, bucking the national trend with an 8% increase since 2012 and continue to be satisfied with the way this Council works for them.

This Council has, and continues, to deliver services and improvements for our residents and businesses. We are one of the largest District Councils in the country, financially strong and able to be self-sufficient with ambitious and exciting plans for the future. So, to paint a picture of impending doom and gloom is, frankly, just political scaremongering, not based on the reality of the current situation of this council.

I almost forgot that part of your question on Unitary Authorities. We, along with the other two southern District Councils have made our position quite clear. We will review how best we can share further services after May 2015 when new Councils are in place; and I would remind Councillor Hall again, the Government has stated

that it is not interested in supporting the formation of new Unitary authorities at this time.

Supplementary Question

What a shame the Leader answered about the past, not the future. AVDC (Aylesbury Vale District Council) has committed money to Unitary and splitting Bucks seems inevitable. Is this political convenience?

Supplementary Response

I cannot control what AVDC does and other councils do not agree either. This council will work with the two other councils after the election.

(c) Question from Councillor R Colomb to the Leader of the Council

The future for Local Government finance is bleak with the prospect of reduced Government grants a real possibility regardless of which Party wins control in the May 7th General Election.

Would the Leader outline the strategies he and his Cabinet are pursuing to protect Wycombe District Council's residents from swingeing Council Tax increases in the medium and long term by developing alternative revenue streams to offset the loss of Government Grants?

Response by Councillor R Scott (Leader of the Council)

Thank you for your question – it is widely recognised that Government funding will fall in the coming years and Councillor Colomb will that this issue is addressed in the Cabinet budget report.

This is not a new phenomenon and we have been taking a series of actions to address the significant challenges that the Council has been facing over the last 5 years – with cuts in Government funding running at around 15% per annum – and successfully been able to maintain the level of Council services whilst at the same time, protecting residents from any increase in Council Tax.

Looking to the future, we are pursuing a twin-track approach to mitigate the impact of Government funding cuts.

To address our cost base and better manage the Council's operations, we will continue to explore every opportunity to maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of Council services, including evaluation of new ways of working, co-operation and collaboration, with costs reductions as a key outcome. For example, you have seen the new shared service contract for waste which delivers both savings and an improved range of recycling; and the new recently introduced IT and customer service contractor who will delivery enhanced services at a reduced cost.

From an income perspective, we have several programmes in place to ensure that alternative revenue streams can be identified and exploited to achieve balanced budgets in the future.

Councillor Colomb will be aware that over the past four years, we have implemented a number of significant revenue-generating projects, such as the new Waitrose store at Handy Cross and a new Joint Crematorium, both of which will contribute towards closing the funding gap over the next two to three years. Further work will be required to address possible deficits in the longer term.

We have other schemes in various stages of development and, of course, these will be shared with Members as these plans are further developed and come to fruition.

Supplementary Question

Are you able to speculate and give a figure for the Handy Cross development to help reduce Council Tax and do without a Government grant?

Supplementary Response

Investments are being looked at and it is not appropriate to talk about Handy Cross Regeneration although the Council's assets and money are being used wisely.

(d) Question from Councillor T Snaith to the Cabinet Member for Planning & Sustainability

Is the Planning department and service fit for purpose and delivering what residents want for our District and Towns?

Response by Councillor N Marshall (Cabinet Member for Planning & Sustainability)

Simple answer, yes.

Supplementary Question

Members of the public have an important role to play in the process. Do you agree that there are staffing, funding and resourcing issues in Planning? Do you agree it is difficult get ward related issues? Do you agree that in relation to reserved sites, WDC is abdicating brief to sites? Are we doing a disservice to all?

Supplementary Response

Resource issues across the country and step change resources are a problem generally. We do manage resources the best we can and mandatory processes are being delivered. Constraints mean we are suffering. We are tackling the backlog of enforcements. In relation to reserved sites / abdication, we have to start somewhere and that if something were to be put on the table it would be looked at.

(e) Question from Councillor W Bendyshe-Brown to the Cabinet Member for Economic Development & Regeneration

What boost to the Wycombe District economy, have you been able to achieve over the last two years, or have plans to achieve in the immediate to near future?

Response from Councillor T Green (Cabinet Member for Economic Development & Regeneration)

Our major regeneration schemes are now at the stage of being built and we have some exciting times ahead. The NEXT Home and Garden store opens its doors at the end of March at Cressex here in High Wycombe, creating with it around another one hundred jobs. The new Coachway Park & Ride will open in January 2016 along with our £35m state-of-the-art sports centre with the new Waitrose store opening in March 2016, again creating more jobs. We are on-site at Hughenden Quarter Spine Road which unlocks the site to provide a much-needed retirement community and care home, following on from the additional student accommodation for Bucks New University, which opened last year. Improvements to High Wycombe town centre include de-cluttering of the High Street, upgrading of Paul's Row and a programme of refurbishing vacant shops in Church Square / Frogmoor. Two, so far, which had remained empty for seven years are now open and trading with businesses new to the area. We have also been working with the County Council to help rejuvenate Frogmoor with plans for free short-term parking and are proposing 'pop up shops' along the blank Chiltern Centre frontage.

Further afield we are also looking at plans to convert Grange Farm into a business centre.

We have focused on working with local businesses by supporting the High Wycombe Business Improvement District through its first five-year term. In Marlow, we initiated and delivered the Globe Park Business Improvement District, which will generate over £750,000 to improve the Business Park. In Princes Risborough, we have worked hard to ensure the ex-SEEDA land is kept for employment use. We have also held business breakfasts around the District in order to meet with local businesses and hear their views.

These achievements, of which we can be rightly proud, are a direct result of the priority this Council has, and continues to give, to growth and regeneration by means of major projects and economic development activities. We will continue to invest in growth and to continue to make our District an attractive place to be and to do business.

Supplementary Question

Is there anything specific for Princes Risborough?

Supplementary Response

I did say earlier about keeping SEEDA land for employment use. We held a business breakfast which was well attended. We have worked with you and local

businesses to get a Business Improvement area in Princes Risborough which will help the community and Princes Risborough will benefit through job opportunities being created in the District. Your other two colleagues are downbeat about Princes Risborough, but I am upbeat and have not heard major retailers not putting plans into Princes Risborough; generally with the economic upturn, Princes Risborough will see improvements.

(f) Question from Councillor B Pearce to the Cabinet Member for Planning & Sustainability

As the new Next store on Cressex island is near complete and that the new coach station at Handy Cross sports complex is near completion whereby the PR1 bus route will terminate at the new complex, I understand that the service has been guaranteed to run for a further 5 years from that point, is it possible to have a bus shelter with seats constructed in the vicinity of the Next Store on John Hall Way as the residents in Lansdowne Way will sorely miss the waiting room at the PR1 terminus which is at the moment located on Cressex Island. Could we also have a shelter with seats constructed at the lay-by-pull-in for this route on the Cressex Link Road? It would be very nice also to have a similar shelter constructed outside the Westwood aged person dwelling complex on Holmers Farm Way?

Response from Councillor N Marshall (Cabinet Member for Planning & Sustainability)

Yes it is correct that the Section 106 Agreement for the sports centre includes a public transport contribution payable to Bucks County Council to ensure the continuation of the Park and Ride service from the new Handy Cross Hub facility. The S106 Agreement for the NEXT development also includes a public transport contribution, and the County Council will be looking to use this toward a new bus service connecting Cressex Island to High Wycombe railway station and bus station via Cressex Business Park though the full details of this service have yet to be confirmed. It is expected that proposals will be available in the coming months.

Whilst there is no provision in these legal agreements for new bus shelters, this is something we are asking passenger transport colleagues at Bucks County Council to consider as part of measures being brought as part of the Southern Quadrant Transport proposals.

From experience, it is known that a problematic issue in the installation of bus shelters is liability for ongoing revenue costs and this would need to be addressed as part of any proposals.

No supplementary question

(g) Question from Councillor M Hanif to the Cabinet Member for Community

It was in the local press recently that telephone scammers claiming to be from 'Wycombe Council' have been targeting residents across the district.

Can you please update us on this and what actions and safeguards are in place so to alert and reassure the local residents about this?

Response from Councillor Mrs J A Adey (Cabinet Member for Community)

Thank you for your topical question Councillor Hanif. Regrettably there is very little we can do to stop scammers from using Wycombe District Council's name in vain in their attempt to defraud innocent members of the public of their hard-earned cash.

What we can do however, is to alert members of the public of any scams if and when we become aware of them. Some of the ways we do this are through the local media, our website and social media. Other ways are through local neighbourhood watch schemes, or general advice about avoiding being the victim of a scam in online and printed materials, some of which are posted directly through the front door.

In the most recent case that you refer to, which you read about in the local paper, we were contacted by a handful of concerned local residents and businesses who had been called by "Wycombe Council". The residents were falsely informed that they – the scammers – had been given their phone number by NHS Direct. The scammers then asked if the person they were speaking to has had an accident in the last two years, or if a family member has had an accident. In one of these calls, the scammers asked the resident for their bank account details. We are aware that similar scams have been reported by Dorchester Town Council in recent weeks after their residents also received calls of a similar nature.

Wycombe District Council, or any other council, would never request bank details by phone, email or at the door. Our advice to residents and businesses is therefore not to answer any questions of this nature and to end the call immediately. If the scammers have given any information which may help trace them, we would encourage residents to please report it to Thames Valley Police on 101 or to the Council. We would also encourage residents to ensure that vulnerable family members and neighbours are aware of any scams.

Supplementary Question

Do you have any statistics?

Supplementary Response

I do not, but can get them for you if you wish.

76 PETITIONS

A petition was received from Mr R File which read as follows:

"We, the undersigned, wish to object to what appears to be happening to the driveway to the Main Gate to Bassetbury Manor.

Since the WDC decided to sell Bassetbury Manor to Crown House School, the once gracious open driveway has been allowed to deteriorate. For the last year it has been gated off to secure the building site for the school which has now been open for a term. During this time the drive has remained enclosed by a 2.5m high site gate and littered with dustbins, skips and building detritus. The principal use, however, has been to park anything up to a dozen cars, whilst the previous car park behind the Main gate has been vacated for use as a playground.

In a Historic Conservation area, the Manor, Bar and Mill constitute a complex with a history going back to a mention in the Domesday Book. The open driveway not only suggested the link between the three listed buildings, but provided the best public viewing point for passers-by and should not be enclosed to provide car parking which can be accommodated in its old location. There remains ample ground on the other side of the Manor and school building to provide play areas.

We fail to see any good reason why the site-gating to Bassetbury Lane should not be removed forthwith and the attractive open driveway, verged with grass, restored.

We call on the Council to reinstate the driveway of Bassetbury Manor to its original condition.”

The Chairman received the petition and commented that it would be validated against the Council’s Petitions Scheme. Members would be informed outside of the meeting how the petition would be administered once the validation had take place.

77 CABINET

The Leader of the Council presented the minutes of the Cabinet Meeting of 9 February 2015 with the exclusion of Minute 79 (Council Tax Setting 2015/16) which would be recommended to Council separately as part of the Council Tax Setting item to be presented by the Cabinet Member for Finance.

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet held on 9 February 2015 be received and the recommendations as set out at Minute numbers 75 and 76 be approved and adopted.

78 COUNCIL TAX SETTING 2015/16 AND PRESENTATION FROM LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

The meeting then specifically turned to the recommendation outlined in minute number 79 of the Cabinet Minutes of 9 February 2015 (Revenue Budget & Council Tax Setting 2015/16) along with the supplements issued to this item outlining the final Parish / Town, Buckinghamshire County Council, Thames Valley Police Authority and Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority precepts and confirmation of the Formula Grant figures required in order to set Council Tax.

The Leader of the Council introduced the item and explained that the budget was prudent with expectations and focused on maintaining essential services whilst continuing to drive down costs and to see further efficiencies and utilise the council’s asset base.

The Leader explained that the Council was financially robust and continued to maintain good reserves which meant no borrowing was required. It was kept in mind that it was taxpayers' money being dealt with and that for the last five years Council Tax had been kept at the same level.

The Leader also explained that the national economy, as a whole, was looking decidedly better as more positive news was being reported. Job creation levels were at record levels compared with recent years meaning that unemployment continued to fall dramatically. Recent reports on the UK economy indicated continued growth as the Conservative led Government got the country back on track. However, because the Government was still running a deficit there would be further challenges for all Local Authorities' finances for many years to come. This meant that the budget before the Council took a realistic view of future funding and not just a single year.

The Leader explained that it was not all about cost reduction and efficiency savings; the extensive asset base was used to generate revenue to fill the gap left by reductions in Government funding – examples of such were the new Waitrose at Handy Cross and the purchase of three retail units in Wycombe Town Centre, two of which were full let.

The Leader stated that the budget had been agreed by Cabinet and was recommended for approval by the Council. He explained that it had also been examined by a Budget Task and Finish Group meaning that it had been through a robust process.

The Leader thanked all Members who took part on the Budget Task and Finish Group for their professional and challenging part in undertaking their review. The Leader also thanked the Chief Finance Officer and Chief Executive along with the Senior Management team and many other officers involved in the budget preparation.

The Leader believed that the budget before Council was the best budget that could have been reached given the challenges faced. He reminded Council that, unlike central Government, a deficit was not legally allowed to be run and that balancing the budget was important, although when sometimes the future was uncertain, certain proposals carried significant risks – hence the need for contingencies but he believed that the budget addressed these. The budget was achieved through a combination of compromise, reality and affordability and was a balance between difficult and often tough choices; meeting legal duties, protecting the most vulnerable, listening to residents, investing in key infrastructure and developing a sustainable financial position for future years. The Leader explained that he was pleased that he would shortly be recommending a freeze in Council Tax for the fifth year in succession.

The Cabinet Member for Finance rose to present the budget and explained that the budget had been prepared and developed to respond to the many challenges faced by this Council.

The Cabinet Member for Finance explained that with the general election looming, a certain amount of uncertainty as the future was faced. Attention was drawn to the fact that central Government had reduced the Council's core formula grant funding for the fifth year in succession which in cash terms meant by 15.3% in 2015/16, which, over the last 5 years and taking into account inflation, equated to a real-term but of 42% in the amount the Council received.

Inflation was also an ever-present challenge even though it was now running at historic low rates, inflation added an additional quarter of a million pounds to WDC costs next year, which would rise to an additional £600,000 a year by 2020/21.

In response to the challenges faced, the Council had again delivered significant financial benefits from the on-going transformation programme which was designed to reduce costs, improve operational efficiency and identify new revenue streams. During 2014/15, the transformation savings amounted to more than £450,000 per annum. A key example of these savings was the new Waste Contract which was now in its second year of operation. In addition to a cost saving of half a million pounds per annum, there had been a large increase in both the range and amount of recyclable materials collected which was good not just for residents, but for the environment.

The Council's major projects programme was delivering outstanding results; the new running track and Synthetic Turf playing fields were now open and the new Sports Centre was taking shape and was due to open in January 2016.

The Cabinet Member for Finance explained that the Leader of the Council had spoken about developing the budget and that the longer term. The proposals by Cabinet included reference to the Medium Term Financial Plan which indicated that additional actions would be needed to address a potential £1.48million shortfall by 2020/21. The projection shows the scale of work needed to cover the coming years to balance the budget. However, as a percentage of the total cost of providing Council services, this would represent only 6%, the lowest of any of the District Councils in the county.

The full budget report set out the major initiatives already being pursued to deliver almost £700,000 of on-going transformation benefits over the next 3 years as well as key risks to be faced along with seizing significant opportunities.

The Cabinet Member of Finance stated that the administration was not complacent, but as there was a strong asset base and a proven record of delivering actions needed to balance the budget, it was believed that the Medium Term Financial Plan challenges could be met. More importantly the full budget showed that Council Tax was to be frozen for the fifth year in succession, despite financial operational challenges and due to implementing comprehensive plans to improve efficiency and effectiveness across the Council.

In freezing Bank D Council Tax at £126.99, Wycombe would have the lowest level of tax in the county. This was a saving of £9 compared with the next lowest authority and a saving of over £39 compared with the most expensive.

The Cabinet Member for Finance concluded his speech by commending the budget to the Council.

Councillor Bendyshe-Brown seconded the budget as presented by the Cabinet Member for Finance.

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, Councillor Pollock, rose to address the meeting and stated that the fiscal situation this year had been really tight particularly given the loss of Rate Support Grant with no surplus funds available to use. Therefore, the Liberal Democrat Group would not make any alternative proposals on this occasion and would support the proposal for a 0% to Council Tax.

However, Councillor Pollock raised the point that his Group would continue to monitor the usage of Capital / Major projects funds in future, particularly where it could be used to support local community initiatives. He also commented that ways would be explored in which greater flexibility could be made in the use of CIL funding for issues which were currently County Council services, such as education and transport.

Councillor Pollock stated that his Group believed that the Budget Task and Finish Group had made some very positive recommendations and urged Cabinet to look at them favourably. One of the key changes in financing had been the continued reduction in RSG which was partly offset by an increase in the New Homes Bonus. However, 20% of the money Wycombe should have received was given to Bucks. Therefore, Councillor Pollock would invite the Leader of the Council and other Group leaders to join together and write to the Secretary of State and his Labour Shadow to request that in future all funding would come to WDC.

Councillor Pollock finished by commenting that if the Chairman was minded to separate the vote on the level of Council Tax his Group would vote in favour. However, if there was one generic vote on the whole budget, his Group would abstain.

The Chairman responded by saying that the recommendation could not be taken separately.

Councillor I Bates, Leader of the Labour Group addressed the meeting and stated that there was no surprise to this year's budget from the previous two year's budgets. It was soundly and prudently constructed and contained no surprises, no departures from customs and practices of the previous two years with no improvement for the well-being social or community – of the tax payers of Wycombe District or their families.

Within the tight constraints of the settlement from Central Government there was little option but to cut and cut again if the budget was to balance. Even if a decision to raise Council Tax had been taken up to the maximum permitted by DCLG, 1.99%, a spending spree would hardly have been possible. Inflation, as measured by official indices, may well run to less than 1.99%, but the pressures on Council spending ran to a higher figure.

Councillor Bates commented that some efficiencies, such as the shared Waste collection with Chiltern District Council were, in principle, no bad thing, although there had been some teething difficulties. However, Councillor Bates raised the point that if a resident had a problem, it took a telephone call to a call centre in Devon rather than calling their local council to deal with the problem. He therefore believed that WDC had off-loaded its responsibility to the wellbeing of its residents.

Councillor Bates stated that Councillors stood to serve their communities, to do good to improve people's lives. However, as managers of a commercial organisation he believed something had gone wrong and asked not how cheaply things could be done but how things could be made better. Councillor Bates believed that this budget would not achieve this and that he could not support it with any enthusiasm or any sense of optimism for the future.

Councillor Alan Turner, Leader of the Independent Group addressed the meeting by firstly thanking officers and Members who had input a huge amount of work to drafting the budget which in effect, froze the WDC portion of Council Tax at a time when many people, particularly on low-income, were struggling to make ends meet.

However, he believed there was a limit to how much more could be stretched especially as the Government Grant would be lost entirely over the next few years. There was only so much with reducing staff levels and cutting services that could be achieved and that the inevitable was being put off unless drastic structural action was embarked upon.

Councillor Turner had concerns to specific points within the proposed budget, particularly the expenditure allocated for projects in High Wycombe at a time of financial uncertainty.

He believed that a reasonable budget had been achieved under difficult circumstances.

Councillor Matt Knight, Leader of the East Wycombe Independents Group, addressed the meeting and thanked officers for all their hard work preparing the budget although he believed it did not go far enough in making the best of the Council's assets and showed a lack of compassion for the most vulnerable in society.

Councillor Knight accepted that the last Labour Government had left the cupboard bare, but the austerity of the coalition government was not working as it was hitting those who could least afford it the hardest. He also stated that as a member of the Budget Task and Finish Group it was startling to see how much had been cut and how many departments were offering an almost skeleton service. He also commented that Wycombe Homeless Connection recently reported evictions were up 25% of last year and wondered whether Wycombe's housing needs could cope with the increased demand.

Councillor Knight believed that tough financial times meant more needed to be spent on vital public services, not less. He also believed that waste needed to be

cut, not services and that WDC property and investments could be made to pay as the Council owned millions of pounds' worth of property around the district.

Councillor Knight concluded by saying that the biggest way this Council could save money and deliver better services to residents, would be to embrace the challenge of moving towards a unitary authority for Buckinghamshire.

The Leader of the Council responded thanking Councillor Pollock for his comments and that it was a shame they could not support all of the budget. He also thanked Councillor Knight and commented that he had picked up on points in relation to vulnerable residents.

Other Members made a number of remarks in respect of the Budget, particularly that the freeze in Council Tax was good news for residents and the Council.

The Budget was then put to the recorded vote.

In accordance with subsection (5) of the Council's Standing Order 16 (Voting) the voting of the Members in respect of these Council Tax setting decisions was recorded as follows:

In favour of the recommendations:-

Councillors Mrs J A Adey, Z Ahmed, D H G Barnes, W J Bendyshe-Brown, D J Carroll, Mrs L M Clarke OBE, A D Collingwood, R B Colomb, M A Foster, R H W Gaffney, J M Gibbs, A R Green, G C Hall, A E Hill, Mahboob Hussain JP, Maz Hussain, D A Johncock, Mrs G A Jones, S P Lacey, Mrs J D Langley, Mrs W J Mallen, N B Marshall, H L McCarthy, I L McEnnis, R S Metcalfe, B E Pearce, J L Richards OBE, J A Savage, R J Scott, D A C Shakespeare OBE, Mrs J E Teesdale, Alan Turner, Paul R Turner, D M Watson, R Wilson and Miss K A Wood.

Abstentions:-

Councillors Khalil Ahmed, I Bates, C A Ditta, R M H Farmer, M Hanif, Matt E Knight, Ms P L Lee, S F Parker, B R Pollock JP, A Slater, T Snaith and Ms J D Wassell.

In favour – 36

Abstentions – 12

Against – 0

79 STANDARDS COMMITTEE

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Standards Committee held on 6 January 2015 be received.

80 IMPROVEMENT AND REVIEW COMMISSION

In introducing the item, the Chairman of the Improvement and Review Commission outlined the work carried out in relation to Minute 31, 'Urgent Health Care Review'. A detailed report of the review had been circulated to Members in advance of the Council meeting. The Chairman wished to place on record his gratitude to all the different branches of the NHS who took, and still are, taking a very proactive and positive approach and reaction to criticism from the public. He also wished it to be noted his gratitude for the Head of Democratic, Legal and Policy Services and his team who worked so hard on this project.

Discussion took place on the recommendations arising from the review and Members were supportive of the proposals.

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Improvement and Review Commission held on 14 January 2015 be received and the recommendations as set out at minute number 31 be approved and adopted.

81 AUDIT COMMITTEE

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Audit Committee held on 15 January 2015 be received.

82 HIGH WYCOMBE TOWN COMMITTEE

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the High Wycombe Town Committee held on 20 January 2015 be received.

83 PLANNING COMMITTEE

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meetings of the Planning Committee held on 29 October 2014, 19 November 2014 and 17 December 2014 be received.

84 PERSONNEL AND DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Personnel and Development Committee held on 19 January 2015 be received and the recommendation as set out at Minute number 32 be approved and adopted.

85 REGULATORY AND APPEALS COMMITTEE

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting of the Regulatory and Appeals Committee held on 2 February 2015 be received and the recommendations as set out at Minute numbers 23 and 24 be approved and adopted.

86 NOTICE OF MOTION

The following Notice of Motion was proposed by Councillor A Turner and seconded by Councillor G Hall:

“Given the recommendations of the recent Ernst & Young report, commissioned by Bucks Business First, on the potential savings through the creation of a Unitary Authority for Buckinghamshire, I believe that further delay in this matter is longer justified. The report concludes that potential annual savings in excess of £20M can be achieved by merging the County and four District Councils in to a single Unitary Authority, with varying savings if two or more Unitary Authorities are formed. With Government funding of local government continuing to decline rapidly both County and District Councils are having to make / consider cuts to service provision and future council tax increases in a desperate attempt to balance the books. Under these circumstances it cannot be right to ignore such huge savings that the creation of a Unitary Authority might bring. Therefore, I move that with immediate effect this Council, in conjunction with Bucks County Council and the three other District Councils in Bucks, commissions an independent review into the practicalities, costs and potential savings of forming a Unitary Authority.”

In proposing the motion Councillor Turner believed that the time was right to investigate forming a unitary authority and stated that over the coming years further cuts would be faced.

Councillor G Hall seconded the motion.

During the discussion on the motion, the following points in favour of the motion were raised –

- That the time had come to move away from County Council format.
- That the Ernst & Young report had raised various options in relation to unitary authorities.
- That AVDC had already commissioned a review on the practicalities and that it was believed to be inevitable that they would follow this route.

The following points against the motion were raised –

- The cost of investigating this route raised concern and that Central Government had stated it would not be in favour of authorities turning unitary as there was no appetite for this issue at present. There was no government funding available to support any review.
- Concern was also raised that if WDC joined other authorities to form a unitary, the Council would have to take on other councils' debts. It was noted that WDC had no debts currently and therefore this should be resisted. The level of debt of other Bucks authorities was reported.
- Central Government were not in favour, as it was believed now was not the right time. Since 2010, DCLG ministers had said that this issue was a distraction and therefore not a priority.

The Leader of the Council believed that the report being commissioned by AVDC, whilst initially costing £80,000, would probably end up nearer £300,000 which is funding WDC could ill afford to commit at this time.

In summing up Councillor Hall believed there was confusion among authorities about who did what. He stated that he had hoped for a full and frank discussion and that a solution was being proposed as there were departments at WDC which were under resourced. Should AVDC go ahead with turning unitary, then WDC would probably have no choice but to follow suit.

An amendment was proposed, and seconded, to the wording of the motion in that 'with immediate effect' should be replaced with 'after the District Council elections' and that the words 'or unitary authorities' should be added at the end of the motion. This was accepted by the mover of the initial motion, Councillor Turner. The last sentence would therefore read –

“Therefore, I move that after the District Council elections, this Council, in conjunction with Bucks County Council and the three other District Councils in Bucks, commissions an independent review into the practicalities, costs and potential savings of forming a Unitary Authority, or Unitary Authorities.”

Upon being put to a vote the motion was rejected.

RESOLVED: that the motion be rejected.

87 QUESTIONS UNDER STANDING ORDER 11.2

88 URGENT ACTION TAKEN BY CABINET OR INDIVIDUAL CABINET MEMBER

The seven individual decisions published since the last meeting of the Council were listed within the summons.

Chairman

The following officers were in attendance at the meeting:

Liz Hornby - Democratic Services
Ian Hunt - Democratic Services Manager
Karen Satterford - Chief Executive