

# Cheltenham Borough Council

## Council

## Minutes

**Meeting date:** 20 February 2023

**Meeting time:** 2.30 pm - 5.10 pm

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**In attendance:**

**Councillors:**

Sandra Holliday (Chair), Matt Babbage (Vice-Chair), Glenn Andrews, Victoria Atherstone, Paul Baker, Adrian Bamford, Graham Beale, Nigel Britter, Jackie Chelin, Ed Chidley, Barbara Clark, Mike Collins, Iain Dobie, Stephan Fifield, Bernard Fisher, Wendy Flynn, Tim Harman, Steve Harvey, Martin Horwood, Peter Jeffries, Tabi Joy, Alisha Lewis, Paul McCloskey, Emma Nelson, John Payne, Richard Pineger, Julie Sankey, Diggory Seacome, Izaac Tailford, Julian Tooke, Simon Wheeler, Suzanne Williams and David Willingham

**Also in attendance:**

Gareth Edmundson (Chief Executive), Claire Hughes (Monitoring Officer) and Paul Jones (Executive Director of Finance, Assets and Regeneration)

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### **1 Apologies**

Apologies were received from Cllrs. Barnes, Bassett-Smith, Boyes, Clucas, Hay, Oliver and Wilkinson.

### **2 Declarations of interest**

There were none.

### **3 Minutes of the last meeting**

The minutes of the meetings held on 6 December and 9 January were approved and signed as a correct record.

#### **4 Communications by the Mayor**

The Mayor began by welcoming the new Member for Battledown ward, Councillor Chidley, who won the recent by-election, following the resignation of Councillor Savage. She also asked the Deputy Leader to pass on Council's best wishes to the Leader as she recovers from surgery, and to wish her a full and speedy recovery.

She was delighted to have been asked to shortlist some categories for the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) awards – a difficult task as there were over 60 entries submitted across all 12 categories, and they all deserved to win. On 12 January, she and the Deputy Mayor had the pleasure of attending the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual NCLB awards event at the Town Hall, a great night with over 300 guests celebrating the achievements of organisations, teams and individuals who work towards long-term change by addressing inequalities and offering support, and highlighting the fantastic work being done to assist Cheltenham's children, young people and families facing a range of challenges. Guests were also treated to exciting and inclusive music performances from Oakwood Primary School samba band and Belmont School Choir. It was an emotional and humbling evening, and both she and the Deputy Mayor were honoured to be part of it.

Finally, she informed Members that she would be hosting a quiz night, in support of the Mayor's Charities, on Friday 31 March, at St Mark's and Hester's Way Community Centre. Details can be found on the website.

#### **5 Communications by the Leader of the Council**

The Deputy Leader told Members that he would pass on their best wishes to the Leader, who was resting and recuperating at home, and looked forward to welcoming her back to the Chamber in due course.

He also welcomed Councillor Chidley, the first Liberal Democrat councillor to represent Battledown Ward.

He told Members that Councillor Payne, as Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee, had raised an urgent request, just when the deadline for questions and motions had passed. Given the seriousness and urgency of the issue, he felt it right to action the request (displayed on screen at the meeting, and below) in his role as Deputy Leader, and thanked Councillor Payne for bringing it to Council's attention:

*At the December meeting of the GCC Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, it was reported that efforts to improve the provision of NHS dentistry in Gloucestershire had not resulted in any improvement. It was reported adult access to NHS dentistry had dropped below 30%. The Committee also reported that there was no longer a school dental provision, and that as a result, many children will never see a dentist. It was estimated that 20% of five-year-olds already had significant dental decay.*

*The results of dental decay are painful and distracting but are not considered serious by many, but the reality is that dental decay can lead to a range of life-threatening conditions. It is for that reason that as Chair of Overview and Scrutiny, I am requesting that the Council writes to the Chair of GCC's Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Cllr Andrew Gravells, expressing the Council's concern about the decrease in the availability of adult dentistry and the non-existence of a service for school children, and to encourage the Council its efforts that it is already taking to address this situation.*

He said Members will be aware that CBC was not successful in its levelling-up bid. As the council believes that the cyber innovation centre will have huge and positive implications and significance, not only for Cheltenham but across the county, he is keen to understand why the bid was not successful, and conversations with relevant government departments are already underway. He added that the council's resolve in delivering the project is not weakened in any way.

## **6 To receive petitions**

There were none.

## **7 Public Questions**

No public questions were received.

## **8 Member Questions**

**(2 total)**

### **1. Question from Councillor Tim Harman to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, Councillor Peter Jeffries**

Can the Cabinet Member update Council on the Minster Gardens Project following the closure of one area as reported in the local media?

#### **Response from Cabinet Member**

The Council's main contractor identified some remedial works required to the stone circle. This involved taking up and relaying a section of the circle, the hope was that the existing stones could be reused but this was not possible, hence a new delivery of stone had to be cut from the quarry. The circle will be re-opened as soon as the new stones have been laid, which expect to be completed in the next few weeks. There is no additional cost to the Council.

### **2. Question from Councillor Emma Nelson to the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets, Councillor Peter Jeffries**

Will the Cabinet Member confirm the plans for the site of the former Taxi Hut site by the Royal Well Bus Station? Recent media reports indicate that the site is currently being rented

out to a developer working on revamping business properties close by. How long will this somewhat unsightly use be in place and what plans does CBC have for developing the site, which is, I believe, in the Conservation Area?

### **Response from Cabinet Member**

In October 2021, the taxi rank hut in the Royal Well which is land owned by the Council was demolished. At this time, the Council were undertaking a review of car parking income as the town emerged from the pandemic which fed into the clear strategy in the 2022/23 budget to reduce our reliance on this income stream. This is also aligned to the Corporate Priorities around carbon net zero. At this time, the Council were approached by a developer looking for some land nearby to a vacant commercial premises which they were looking to refurbish. The Royal Well was well placed to meet this request and support the growth and recovery of the town's economy post pandemic whilst also providing a stable rental income stream for the Council's general fund in the short term. Negotiations are ongoing with a small local business to bring the site back into use as a private car park in support of their business.

## **9 Corporate Plan 2023-27**

The Deputy Leader introduced the item by reading a statement on behalf of the Leader. Before talking about the new corporate plan, she reflected on what has been achieved in the last few years, including the development agreement with HBDX Factory to take forward the Golden Valley development; £40m invested to increase provision of affordable homes; creation of the Climate Emergency Action Plan and SPD to raise standards for sustainable housing development; £1.1m external funding secured to support carbon-busting initiatives, skill-boosting schemes, business growth, and a new cycle hub; the launch of the Cheltenham Lottery, which has raised over £100k for local good causes; new digital services making it easier for residents and businesses to contact and transact with the council, with the newly-opened reception providing drop-ins or appointments for anyone preferring to see someone in person. Our work has been nationally recognised with several national and regional awards, and overall resident satisfaction with Cheltenham as a place to live is 90%, well above Local Government Association benchmark, and all this has been achieved despite the pandemic and the challenging financial position faced by district councils.

Looking ahead, there are huge opportunities and challenges for Cheltenham, and the new corporate plan continues our ambition, by continuing to enhance Cheltenham's reputation as cyber capital of the UK, progressing the Climate Emergency Action Plan, including exploration of heat networks; further increasing the supply of affordable, carbon neutral homes and retro-fitting existing homes; and renewing the focus on culture, leisure, economic and community development to ensure Cheltenham is a great place to live work and explore. This will be underpinned by continuing to improve customer services and how the Council works through new technology, and finding ways to increase income to continue investing in frontline services. He thanked the many officers who had contributed to the plan, and recommended it for approval.

The Mayor introduced a [four-minute video](#) outlining the Corporate Plan, before inviting Members to ask questions.

Before commenting, the Leader of the Conservative Group added his group's best wishes to Councillor Hay, and also, in the historic week marking one year since Russia's invasion of

Ukraine, invited Members to join him in remembering the late Chris Parry, a Cheltenham resident who lost his life in Ukraine while undertaking humanitarian work.

He went on to say that the plan is great and his group was happy to support it in principle, but delivery is what matters, and the 90% satisfaction of Cheltenham residents isn't only a result of CBC's input but equally due to many other factors that make it a good place to live. Regarding the Golden Valley Development, he asked if CBC is confident it can fund the aims and aspirations, and that it has a robust plan for delivery. The Deputy Leader confirmed that the plan is robust – the business case will be brought to Members in due course - and has undergone a great deal of scrutiny. There is a chance, in view of ongoing economic uncertainty, that the figures will need to be revisited, but it will be closely monitored.

In response to a Member's question regarding how many people actually responded to the residents' survey which produced a 90% satisfaction rating, the Deputy Leader did not have the figures to hand but the Chief Executive was able to confirm that all the figures could be found in the cabinet report, and the sample size gave a statistical level of confidence in the answers provided. A Member of Overview and Scrutiny Committee subsequently checked the figures on line, and confirmed that 1346 residents took part in the survey.

In the following debate, Members thanked the Deputy Leader and officers for bringing the plan forward and the sound underlying financial management which made it possible to address a wide range of issues. They raised the following points:

- the plan rightly focusses on environmental concerns, with climate change and the move towards net zero as the headline issue, but another equally important environmental issue is biodiversity. The catastrophic species and biodiversity loss is leading many people in the environmental movement to talk not just about conservation – protecting what is left – but about nature recovery and building biodiversity gain into everything we do, and CBC is committing itself to this through the plan. Experts agree that what really makes a difference on biodiversity is decisions on the ground in councils and local communities. The UK is in the bottom 10% for biodiversity loss since the industrial revolution, and as part of the problem, we have to be part of the solution too. It is good that the Corporate Plan provides practical steps to start on the journey towards nature recovery;
- the long-term and ongoing commitment of officers to deliver the Corporate Plan is to be commended, such as the huge amount of work done by the licensing team in terms of the town's Purple Flag status. Cheltenham has the best night-time economy between Bristol and Birmingham, as a result of hard work by officers and supported by Members. The council aims high and strives to deliver but we need the government to support and invest in the town;
- the five priorities are equally weighted and will be taken forward together;
- the Cheltenham Plan involves other strategies, including the HRA and HRA Business Plan. CBC has committed £180m to investment in affordable homes, having already spent £43m over the last 3.5 years to build 51 affordable homes, and allocating a further £22m for an additional 76 homes. The Plan gives structure to the way forward in delivering these homes, with net zero carbon dwellings the target on CBC and CBH-owned land;
- regarding the clean and green initiatives, CBC has already introduced some successful improvements, including in-cab technology, a revolutionary and responsive service, to reduce the amount of fuel used in waste recycling and in parks and gardens services, better for residents and leading to a greater degree of fuel efficiency and fewer carbon emissions. CBC is already at the national forefront in extending kerbside recycling,

highlighted in the past year or so with the first pod-back scheme, collecting and recycling coffee pods, in conjunction with a commercial producer. Two million have been recycled so far, and thousands of trees been planted as a result. In the survey, 81% of residents were satisfied with kerbside collections. Looking to the future, CBC will extend soft plastics recycling, maintaining its position at the forefront for recycling, and with 88% of residents declaring themselves as satisfied with its parks and open spaces, continuing to build on and extend the green flag status;

- CBC should be proud of the Corporate Plan and its challenging but deliverable vision, although it takes more than a document such as this to make a great town. We are lucky to have so many component parts – the friends groups, the Civic Society, the Architects Panel, football and rugby clubs – all of which take a proactive role; the council plays a big role, not only leading but also enabling and contributing;
- unfortunately, the National Planning Policy Framework and other planning dictats from the government are outdated, and restrict what the council can do - it is difficult to protect the greenbelt and AONB and greenbelt if we can't control our own planning decisions. We need a modern planning framework and proper planning regimes to deliver;
- the state of the Strand at the top of the High Street, and many other roads around Cheltenham is a disgrace, and has been so for many years. We need Gloucestershire County Council to deliver for Cheltenham;
- at Overview and Scrutiny last week, young people from Young Planet Cheltenham and Balcarras Years 9 and 11 came to present their findings from a county-wide climate action survey, with a 70% completion rate from participating schools. They said specifically that they wanted more democratic engagement and there were matters they would like the council to consider. The council used to have a youth rep on Overview and Scrutiny, which was phased out around 2004; it would be good to see this restored, to allow young people to contribute to the Corporate Plan, feed in their views, and address a longer term approach. Other councils go much further with youth democracy representation, and it would be within our capacity to execute and fund a 2030 Community Engagement Board. For young people still at school who don't see any future opportunities, it would be a good way for them to feed into democracy;
- the residents' survey returned a 90% satisfaction rate, but there is a high proportion of people with disabilities who have felt left behind in recent years. The need for a strategy and commitment to specific communities has been raised at Overview and Scrutiny Committee;
- through Priority No. 1, the cyber innovation centre initiative, it is important to make sure the council is working with lives of colour, that they are being funded adequately and given the support they deserve;
- the plan is well presented, easy to digest, and includes a lot of good ambitions and commitments, including the regeneration of housing estates – hopefully the Cheltenham West Vision Master Plan can be dusted off and revisited;
- the focus on the environment, including development of an ecology and biodiversity planning document is very welcome;
- one concern is that a lot of priorities in the plan seem to be dependent on Key Priority 1 being successful and soon - but it all seems to pivot on the innovation centre and with no funding in place and the failure of the £20m levelling-up bid, together with existing council loans of £150m and interest rates going up, this is a worry.

The Deputy Leader thanked Members for their positive comments across the Chamber, all of which have been noted. He cannot respond to them all, but said the plan is a bold and future-thinking vision which will affect every resident in the town. He and other Members got involved in politics because they care about their communities they serve, and the Corporate Plan reflects the council's ambitions for those communities. He commended the report to Members on behalf of the Leader.

## **RESOLVED THAT:**

- **the draft Corporate Plan 2023-27 be approved.**

### **10 Housing Revenue Account - Revised Forecast 2022-23 and Budget 2023-24**

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets presented the report, which summarised the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) revised forecast for 2022/23 and the Cabinet's budget proposals for 2023/24. He emphasised the impact of the cost of living crisis and financial turbulence on the HRA, with excess cost inflation, increased interest, energy costs and additional compliance costs increasing overall expenditure in the HRA by £2.5m next year. Whilst the budget proposal was for rents to increase, this had been capped at 7%.

The long-term impact of high inflation and the rent cap on the 30-year outlook was substantial, with capacity in the HRA reducing by an estimated £79m. This reduced capacity meant that the scale and pace of investment in existing and new homes needed to be carefully managed to ensure that vital services to residents were protected. While the scale and pace of demonstrated the council's commitment to its ambitious plans for delivering new homes, improving the quality of existing homes and protecting services for tenants.

He highlighted a number of key points, including £63m over three years for additional affordable homes, £32m investment in improving existing homes and £6m specifically for energy improvement measures for the least efficient houses. A further detail which did not go out with the consultation paperwork was at paragraph 5.5. Cheltenham had been allocated £2.36m from the government's Local Authority Housing Fund to support refugee guests, predominantly from Ukraine and Afghanistan. The total cost of providing those homes was estimated to be around £6m, following a list of criteria given by the government, including a condensed timescale for their provision. Officers from CBC & CBH were already working hard on this.

The 2023/24 proposals continued their focus on supporting tenants through the cost of living crisis, with CBH's Benefit and Money Advice and Training and Employment teams targeting resources in a proactive and preventative approach that was really working for tenants in need. The Help2 initiative was equally beneficial, working with a range of partners and agencies. Funding for these services had been protected, recognising the challenging period ahead for their tenants and communities

The budget continued to invest in their priority to deliver net zero homes, and continued with their ambitious investment in delivering more affordable homes. All of this investment would help improve outcomes for residents and our communities, reduce inequality and support the economic recovery of Cheltenham throughout this challenging period. The cost of living crisis, energy crisis and continuing housing crisis had put a real strain on CBH officers but their work in support of tenants had been exemplary, and he put on record his thanks to all of them for their efforts and continued hard work. He also thanked the Executive Leadership Team and the CBH Board, and commended the HRA budget proposals to Council.

There being no Member questions, the Mayor moved into debate, where the following points were made:

- CBH was to be congratulated on the transformation of the council's housing stock over the last few decades. Back in the 1980s, the stock had been appalling, with record levels of complaints and outstanding repairs;
- CBH's exemplary service to tenants deserved high praise, and the way refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine have been supported as they settle in the town;
- central government seems to announce grant funding on a whim, offering only a tiny window for millions of pounds in funding and putting unnecessary pressure on officers as a result. This was not the way things should be run, with local authorities forced to bid against each other. Local authorities should have been given more discretion over how to spend the money as well;
- echoing the Cabinet Member's words about the challenge of moving forward in tough economic circumstances, and his thanks to senior officers, it was noted that balancing the budget had been tough but they were continuing to deliver affordable carbon-neutral homes, with 24 coming at 320 Swindon Road, nine under S106 with a local developer this year, a future pipeline of £69m over the next three years and ambitions for 70 more on existing HRA land-led schemes. It was not just about new homes, but also about ensuring a continued, valuable service for tenants, including repairs, maintenance, community investment, and financial advice;
- thanks to CBH for the work they did, especially in the more deprived areas of Cheltenham. CBH had worked hard to find ways to tackle deprivation, though there was no quick fix. Hopefully there would be good news about the bid soon;
- Cheltenham is extremely fortunate to have CBH in the town. They not only provided good quality homes but also had a social conscience, which was more important now than ever. Mental health and wellbeing issues needed to be taken seriously by housing providers, and it's doubtful that any tenants in the country were being served better than here. The report contained alarming details about the impact of the cost of living crisis, supply chains, the cost of fuel and rent caps on the HRA, but they were reassured that the officers were capable of dealing with it.

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets thanked Members for their comments and agreed with the points raised. The tight timescales for grant applications placed undue pressure on officers, but CBH did an outstanding job in coping with it.

**RESOLVED THAT:**

- 1. the HRA budget proposals for 2023-24 be approved;**
- 2. a rent increase of 7% for social rent homes, affordable rent homes and shared ownership homes be approved (capping affordable rented homes rent at the Local Housing Allowance where applicable);**
- 3. change to other rents and service charges as detailed in the report be approved;**
- 4. the HRA capital programme for 2023-24 as shown at Appendix 3 and Appendix 4 be approved;**
- 5. entering into a Memorandum of Understanding with DLUHC (Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) be approved, in respect of**



**£2.36m grant for the provision of 21 affordable homes during 2023-24 under the Local Authority Housing Fund (Subject to DLUHC notifying CBC that their proposed grant funding allocation has been confirmed);**

**6. the performance and satisfaction targets set by CBH for 2023-24 be ratified;**

**7. the revised HRA forecast for 2022-23 be noted.**

**FOR:** 31 (Cllrs. Andrews, Atherstone, Babbage, Baker, Bamford, Beale, Britter, Chelin, Chidley, Clark, Collins, Dobie, Fifield, Fisher, Flynn, Harvey, Holliday, Jeffries, Joy, Lewis, McCloskey, Nelson, Payne, Pineger, Sankey, Seacome, Tailford, Tooke, Wheeler, Williams, Willingham)

**AGAINST:** 0

**ABSTAIN:** 0

## **11 General Fund Revenue and Capital – Final Budget Proposals 2023/24**

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets presented the report, which summarised the revised budget for 2022/23 and the Cabinet's final General Fund Revenue and Capital budget proposals and pay policy statement for 2023/24.

He reflected on the economic changes over the last twelve months, including record inflation of 11.1% compared to 5.1% when last year's budget was agreed. Interest rates had increased eight times since then, from a base rate of 0.5% in February 2022 to 4% last week. This time last year a unit of electricity had cost 15p while a unit of gas was 3p, and these were now 40p and 10p respectively even with government caps on pricing. In addition to this, there had been three Prime Ministers and four Chancellors during the year, causing a circus of economic self-harm which everybody in the country was paying for.

The council had to act in a volatile and unpredictable financial situation, and had to take decisive action to ensure resources were balanced to deliver on their commitments, particularly considering the economic challenges which were forecast to continue into the medium term. The final Local Government Finance Settlement setting out government funding for 2023/24 only included a 3% increase in core funding and only a one-year guarantee of this. They had only received single year settlements since 2019, and no long-term guarantee of funding was expected until the Fair Funding review which had been delayed again until at least 2025/26. After a decade of austerity, this was a bitter pill to swallow.

With the latest budget monitoring report for 2022/23 reporting a £2.39m overspend against what was a reasonable and prudent budget this time last year, they were placing reliance on their general balances to balance the budget this year. These balances were finite, and this was not a long-term strategy. Greater reliance had been placed on local tax generation and the council's own commerciality to enable them to balance the budget for 2023/24. In order to meet their financial commitments and deliver services whilst maintaining robust reserves year after year while spending pressures continued to outstrip the funding received from government, it was a challenging savings strategy to deliver.

The council's challenge had been to continue to drive forward with the goals outlined in the COVID-19 Recovery Strategy and in the new Corporate Plan agreed earlier in the meeting. These priorities were to continue with the aim of making Cheltenham the cyber capital of the

UK, to invest in the sustainable economic growth of the town, to continue to support the most vulnerable communities through the No Child Left Behind initiative, to continue their £180m affordable housing program and deliver more homes across the town, and to continue with their commitment to make the council and town net carbon zero by 2030.

He added that they were looking forward to the coronation of King Charles III and wanted Cheltenham's communities to be able to commemorate this occasion, so they were relaunching the existing Community Pride grant as the King Charles Coronation Grant, centred on some of the King's known values including inclusion, young people, biodiversity and the environment. He hoped that this would provide opportunities for our communities to come together and celebrate as they looked to the future, in the same way as the Platinum Jubilee Grant did last year.

He summarised that the budget presented today reaffirmed this administration's commitment to the delivery of the Corporate Plan, in spite of the extraordinary economic environment they were operating in. There was a lot about Cheltenham that made him optimistic, including the people, the ambition, the skills and their communities. He placed on the record his thanks to the council's finance team, who had worked through these ongoing financial challenges and brought this budget together, and commended the report to Council.

In response to questions from Members, the Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets and Regeneration confirmed that:

- planning fees haven't increased for four years, but the council has no direct control over planning, licensing or gaming fees, with many of these fees being set nationally;
- the figures for vehicles and recycling equipment at the bottom of Appendix 6 – in the 2022/23 budget set at £1.7m but with an actual spend of £500k – were provided by Ubico; this was a rolling replacement programme;
- regarding the 10% increase in cemetery fees, this was the starting point and that discussions took place with each department about what exactly was appropriate. In the cemetery's case, the increase was most due to inflation, and fuel prices in particular. The Member noted that the cost of the service was £1.5m but it raised £2.7m in fees, and asked where this surplus went. The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets did not have the figures to hand but was happy to provide more information outside of the meeting;
- the £1m earmarked for the future development of the Cheltenham Trust – which operates independently of the council – was allocated a couple of years ago to pump prime commercial opportunities.

Cllr. Harman gave his statement as the leader of the Conservative group. He outlined the amendments to the budget that were proposed by his group, namely to reduce the number of Cabinet Members by two, restore the previous opening hours to the Swindon Road recycling centre, move to four-yearly elections and to allocate £50k grant funding to mark the coronation for biodiversity and tree planting projects. He acknowledged that the world had changed hugely since last year, and thanked CBC and CBH officers for their support throughout.

He highlighted that the reduction in opening hours at the recycling centre had only saved £35k, and there had not been a trial to assess the impact on this very valued service. Cabinet was too big, and its functions could easily be covered by seven Members. Next year, there would be an all-council election, but only because of boundary changes. CBC was the only district council in Gloucestershire that elected in instalments, and he suggested

keeping the four-year terms so the public had the option of changing the whole council in one go.

Cllr. Payne gave his statement as the leader of the People Against Bureaucracy group. He was pleased to confirm that the PAB group would not be putting forward any amendments, but emphasised that this did not mean they didn't have any reservations. He thanked officers for producing the budget, as well as CBH and Cabinet, acknowledging the balancing act between political ambitions and the availability of resources. The council was fortunate to have a Cabinet and finance team that had balanced investment, retention of key services and the creation of reserves. These reserves had come to our rescue in what had been a financially turbulent year.

He raised a number of issues with potentially important financial implications in the future, the first of these being the Golden Valley development, which aimed to ensure the council's financial sustainability. Developments of this size could deliver significant returns, but they were also risky, and these risks were not entirely within CBC's control. As Chair of the O&S Committee, he had requested that GV officers report emerging risks to the committee on a regular basis, as well as how they were being mitigated. He encouraged the council to continue with its diverse investment program to mitigate risk. On the topic of climate change, CBC had been one of the first councils to declare a climate emergency, and recently published its climate change SPD. If Cheltenham were to become carbon neutral by 2030, government funding would be absolutely critical. He noted CBH had submitted a bid for £2.2m towards the £6m needed to retrofit 200 houses. In total, CBH owned 4,000 houses. Finally, on the topic of deprivation, he noted that priority 4 of the corporate plan was to ensure residents and communities benefitted from future growth. This was critical to Cheltenham's success and was clearly articulated within the Place Strategy. The ongoing O&S task group on deprivation had demonstrated that they were some way away from being a town where everybody thrived. Limited resources restricted intervention, and a lot of topic areas weren't under the council's control, but they could look to provide resources in forthcoming budgets to address these issues.

Cllr. Joy gave her statement as co-leader of the Green group. They had participated in the budget consultation and while they had not been able to put forward a strategic and inclusive proposal of their own, they had raised some concerns to take into account going forward. As a relatively new councillor, she was still getting to know the budget process, and it could be onerous to unpick what exactly was within the council's sphere of influence. A more integrated and holistic approach would allow them to adapt to unexpected circumstances, and they needed to be transparent about processes to ensure they were as proactive as possible, preventing problems before they arise. The Green group would keep checking in on the progress of the budget proposals and assorted projects.

Cllr. Harman formally moved the Conservative group's amendments, with Cllr. Fifield seconding.

The meeting was adjourned between 16:00 and 16:15 to facilitate consideration of the amendments. Upon returning to the Chamber, Cllr. Jeffries confirmed that the amendments had not been accepted.

The Mayor moved into the debate on the proposed amendments. Members made the following points:

- the Cabinet Member for Waste, Recycling and Street Services recognised the importance of the Household Recycling Centre to the people of Cheltenham and went the extra mile to provide it as a discretionary service. CBC was the only district council in the country to do this. In order to continue delivering it in the

face of year-on-year cuts to local authority funding, it was necessary to look at its opening hours, especially since the pandemic as new patterns of usage had emerged. Energy usage was also a key concern, and they had not taken this decision lightly;

- the recycling centre's former hours should be restored, as making it harder for residents to recycle would lead to more fly-tipping;
- which two Cabinet positions should be deleted, noting that one of the newest two portfolios was to manage and support the Golden Valley development, which was an essential project for the council, town and county. In addition, reducing the number of the Cabinet Members would increase the workload of those remaining, which might discourage people from standing for Cabinet if they worked or had a family;
- a separate Cabinet Member for the climate wasn't necessary as the issue should be embedded within every portfolio anyway;
- the annual allowances received by the nine Cabinet Members totalled £15k each, 10% of which went to local party for campaigning costs. Another Member clarified as a point of information that public funds were not being diverted to a political party. It was stated that there may be private arrangements where councillors chose to give money to their party, but this was not a diversion of public funds;
- it was important to have some level of continuity, to ensure experience was retained and shared with new Members, and electing by halves made this easier. Another Member agreed that two-yearly elections gave this continuity and were also more democratic, as the public could vote more often. There used to be all-Member elections, leading to the criticism that there were too many new Members in one go lacking experience, and there were plenty of Conservative authorities around the UK happy with elections by half, and a number of district councils that elected by thirds;
- two-yearly elections brought greater accountability, were an important part of councillors providing the best service to residents. Elected Members had to learn a huge amount in just a year or two of service, and it made a real difference that their ward colleague was elected a year before them and could lend their experience;
- in future, proposed budget amendments should be submitted further in advance to enable a more detailed discussion;
- the request for biodiversity funding was cost-neutral so would have to be redirected from somewhere else. The new Corporate Plan, which had just been unanimously agreed by all Members present, contained a specific focus on biodiversity, and a range of policy changes like the Climate Change SPD. As Conservative group leader, Cllr. Harman clarified that they did not advocate for cutting any frontline services, and instead wanted to increase the availability of the recycling centre;

In seconding the amendments, Cllr. Fifield praised the hard work of officers and suggested that the proposal to reduce the size of Cabinet to seven would give officers more resources to do their jobs. Continuity was provided by council officers, not by entrenched Members. The justification given for two-yearly elections surely meant that annual elections would be even more democratic. The current system entrenched the local Lib Dem advantage, and should change to the national standard.

In summary, Cllr. Harman noted the importance of democracy and open debate, and was grateful for the support of the Green group on the amendments.

The Mayor moved to the vote on the proposed amendment:

- to reduce the number of Cabinet Members by two;
- to restore the previous opening hours to the Swindon Road recycling centre;
- to move to four-yearly elections;
- to allocate £50k grant funding to mark the coronation for biodiversity and tree planting projects.

**FOR:** 7 (Cllrs. Babbage, Fifield, Flynn, Harman, Joy, Nelson, Seacome)

**AGAINST:** 25 (Cllrs. Andrews, Atherstone, Baker, Bamford, Beale, Britter, Chelin, Chidley, Clark, Collins, Dobie, Fisher, Harvey, Holliday, Horwood, Jeffries, Lewis, McCloskey, Pineger, Sankey, Tailford, Tooke, Wheeler, Williams, Willingham)

**ABSTAIN:** 1 (Cllr. Payne)

The amendment was lost.

The Mayor moved into debate on the original budget proposals, where the following points were made:

- inflation was a key factor in the proposals, along with the turmoil caused by the government in Westminster. This was the best budget that could be delivered in the circumstances with the resources available.
- licensing fees were set in law by the Licensing Acts of 2003 and 2005 update, and there was no apparent uplift coming from the government. For the last 18 years they had been asked to do the same amount of licensing and enforcement work on what was, in real terms, a pay cut. The government had failed to support local government in order to deliver statutory services and the discretionary things they wanted to do. Colleagues needed to use their leverage within the county council, LGA, licensing and parliament to make a difference;
- there were some good things in the budget, but the rise in cemetery fees was disappointing. Charging people who had lost a loved one an extra 10% during a cost of living crisis, when the service is already making a huge surplus, seemed incredibly wrong.

In seconding the budget proposals, Cllr. Lewis reflected on the importance of investing in safeguarding and young people. The budget delivered on their priorities and went above and beyond in order to build a Cheltenham fit for the future. Their diverse investment portfolio protected both statutory and non-statutory services which the government would rather see cut to the bone. They needed to support those hit hardest by the cost of living crisis, including community and voluntary sector organisations. She thanked the S151 officer and Monitoring Officer, as well as the Cabinet Member and the wider finance team.

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets thanked colleagues for their questions and input into the debate. Local accountability was central to democracy, and tackling deprivation was an important challenge. Considering the national economic uncertainty, the budget would need continually monitoring and reviewing, and he suspected that the next year would be just as tough as the previous one. The support of officers across his portfolio and across the council had once again been exemplary. He thanked Members across the chamber for engaging with the budget through a variety of forums, and thanked his Cabinet colleagues for their challenge, input, and collective support.

**RESOLVED THAT:**

- 1. the revised budget for 2022/23, reported as part of the budget**

monitoring process for 31 December 2022, be approved;

2. the budget assessment by the Section 151 Officer at Appendix 2 be considered in agreeing the following recommendations:
3. the final budget proposals including a proposed council tax increase for the services provided by Cheltenham Borough Council for the year 2023/24 based on a Band D property (an increase of 2.99% for a Band D property), as detailed in paragraphs 9.1 to 9.5 be approved;
4. the savings / additional income totalling £1,300,000 and the budget strategy at Appendix 4 be approved;
5. the use of reserves and general balances and note the projected level of reserves, as detailed at Appendix 5 be approved;
6. the capital programme at Appendix 6 be approved;
7. the programmed maintenance programme at Appendix 7 be approved;
8. the flexible use of capital receipts strategy as detailed in Appendix 8 be approved;
9. To note that the Council will remain in the Gloucestershire business rates pool for 2023/24;
10. the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) detailed in Appendix 9 be approved;
11. the Pay Policy Statement for 2023/24, including the continued payment of a living wage supplement at Appendix 10 be approved;
12. the proposed fees and charges schedule for 2023/24 at Appendix 11, subject to appropriate consultation where required be approved;
13. a level of supplementary estimate of £100,000 for 2023/24 as outlined in Section 19 be approved;
14. the definition of a Key Decision as set out in the constitution be amended, to increase the threshold for the acquisition or disposal of land from £250,000 to £500,000, and gives delegated authority to the Monitoring Officer to make the associated change to the constitution as outlined in Section 17.

**FOR:** 26 (Cllrs. Andrews, Atherstone, Baker, Bamford, Beale, Britter, Chelin, Chidley, Clark, Collins, Dobie, Fisher, Harvey, Holliday, Horwood, Jeffries, Lewis, McCloskey, Payne, Pineger, Sankey, Tailford, Tooke, Wheeler, Williams, Willingham)

**AGAINST:** 0

**ABSTAIN:** 7 (Cllrs. Babbage, Fifield, Flynn, Harman, Joy, Nelson, Seacome)

## **12 Council Tax Resolution**

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets introduced the report, the purpose of which was to enable the council to set the council tax for 2023-24. The budget includes the level of council tax, included in the report, as well as the council tax requirements of the precepting organisations, Gloucestershire County Council and the Police and Crime Commissioner for Gloucestershire, both of which have met and set their council tax levels for 2023-24.

There being no Member questions or debate, the Mayor moved straight to the vote.

### **RESOLVED THAT:**

- 1. the formal Council Tax resolution at Appendix 2 be approved and the commentary in respect of the increase in Council Tax at Paragraph 6 of Appendix 2 be noted.**

**FOR:** 33

**AGAINST:** 0

**ABSTAIN:** 0

## **13 Council Tax Support Fund**

The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets presented the report, which related to a new one-off fund announced by the government on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2022. Funding was allocated based on the council tax support caseload, both working age and pension age, and CBC had been given £173,493 based on a total caseload of about 6,500 residents.

The government expected that the majority of funding would be used to award up to £25 to all council tax support recipients at the start of the financial year, with the remainder being effectively discretionary, to be allocated to new council tax support claimants and economically vulnerable households. Most authorities did not award 100% council tax support, so would have to give up to £25 to all of their caseload, leaving a small balance for discretionary awards. As CBC provided 100% support to a large proportion of recipients, they would be making awards to only a portion of their caseload, and could therefore afford to increase the £25 to an amount that would make more of a difference and still have enough for other discretionary awards.

There were currently around 2,450 cases of Cheltenham residents with balance left to pay on their council tax after receiving support from the council. This report proposed that each of them would receive £60, costing £147k and leaving the council with £27k to award to new council tax support claimants and other economically vulnerable council tax payers. This one-off fund would in effect operate as an additional hardship policy. Providing support for the most financially vulnerable residents was something this council continued to focus on, and he thanked officers in the Revenues and Benefits team for their work.

There being no Member questions, the Mayor moved into debate. One Member noted that the council tax increase would total more than £100 per year for some residents. While this was modest compared to some authorities, it would be yet another burden for struggling residents. The council's support was needed more than ever, and it was good to see they were supporting 2,500 vulnerable people with 100% of their council tax. The Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets agreed, highlighting that this is a discretionary scheme they

were choosing to provide, in order to give vital financial support to residents. This additional funding allowed them to provide even more.

**RESOLVED THAT:**

- 1. the Council Tax Support Fund 2023/24 in Appendix 3 as an appendix to the Council Tax Section 13a Discretionary Hardship Policy be approved;**
- 2. the Head of Revenues and Benefits in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance and Assets be authorised to implement any changes as required by Government to ensure funding is allocated or the successful operation of the scheme**
- 3. Due to the volume of cases, decisions relating to the application of these awards be delegated to the Head of Revenues and Benefits and officers in the Revenues and Benefits team. In the case of a dispute final reconsideration is to be made by the Executive Director Finance, Assets and Regeneration**

**FOR: 33**

**AGAINST: 0**

**ABSTAIN: 0**

#### **14 Council Order of Precedence - Nominations for Mayor Elect and Deputy Mayor Elect**

The Chief Executive presented the report, explaining that it was a constitutional requirement for Council to elect its Mayor and Deputy for the forthcoming council year at its annual meeting on the 15<sup>th</sup> May 2023. The council maintained an Order of Precedence for fulfilling these ceremonial roles which recognised councillors' length of service, and this was attached as an appendix. He added that the order of precedence had been updated after it was originally published to reflect Cllr. Chidley's election.

Cllr. Matt Babbage had served as Deputy Mayor since last year's Annual Council, and Members would be asked to elect him as Mayor in May. The Members shown towards the head of the Order of Precedence had been approached to ascertain if they were willing and able to have their name put forward for appointment as Deputy Mayor for 2023-24, and Cllr. Paul Baker had put his name forward.

One Member queried what the ballot referred to in the Order of Precedence. The Chief Executive clarified that, when more than one Member was elected at the same time, their names were put into a hat to decide their order in the line of succession.

**RESOLVED THAT:**

- 1. the Order of Precedence in Appendix 2 be noted;**



**2. Councillor Matt Babbage be put to the Annual Council Meeting for election as Mayor for the Municipal year 2023–2024**

**3. Councillor Paul Baker be put to the Annual Council Meeting for election as Deputy Mayor for the Municipal year 2023-2024**

**FOR: 33**

**AGAINST: 0**

**ABSTAIN: 0**

## **15 Council Diary 2023-24**

In the absence of the Leader, the Deputy Leader presented the report, which set out the proposed Council diary for September 2023 to August 2024. This followed the same process as previous years, and aimed to be inclusive as possible and respond to Members' needs. It was an evolving process, and he thanked Democratic Services for their continued work in being as accommodating to Members as possible.

He noted the Executive Director Finance, Assets and Regeneration's proposal to move the February budget meeting from a Monday afternoon to a Friday afternoon. The county council had consulted all districts about changing their meeting in February, and this change would allow CBC to meet after the county council had concluded its budget setting process, which made logical sense.

One Member asked whether party conferences had been taken into account when drafting the diary. The Deputy Leader responded that the Democratic Services team took this into account wherever possible.

### **RESOLVED THAT:**

- **the draft Council Diary of meetings for September 2023–August 2024 be approved.**

**FOR: 33**

**AGAINST: 0**

**ABSTAIN: 0**

## **16 Notices of Motion**

There were none.

## **17 Any other item the Mayor determines as urgent and which requires a decision**

There were none.

## **18 Local Government Act 1972 -Exempt Information**

### **RESOLVED THAT**

**“in accordance with Section 100A(4) Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the meeting for the remaining agenda items as it is likely that, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, if members of the public are present there will be disclosed to them exempt information as defined in paragraph 3, Part (1) Schedule (12A) Local Government Act 1972, namely:**

**Paragraph 3; Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)**

## **19 Exempt Minutes**

The exempt minutes of the meeting held on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2022 were approved and signed as a correct record.