

Minutes



Council

Date: 29 February 2024

Time: 5.00 pm

Present: Councillors S Cocks, E Stowell-Corten, J Harris, A Screen, L James, T Harvey, M Howells, P Bright, J Peterson, A Pimm, D Batrouni, D Jenkins, P Drewett, B Davies, S Adan, M Pimm, C Baker-Westhead, J Reynolds, A Sterry, J Jones, G Horton, J Cleverly, P Cockeram, D Davies, M Al-Nuaimi, M Evans, D Fouweather, D Harvey, M Kellaway, M Linton, D Mayer, R Mogford, J Mudd, M Spencer, K Thomas, C Townsend, T Watkins, K Whitehead, J Clarke, Y Forsey, J Hughes, L Lacey, S Marshall, W Routley, A Morris, F Hussain and B Perkins

In Attendance:

Apologies: Councillors C Reeks, R Howells, P Hourahine and J Jordan

1. Preliminaries

1.i Apologies

Councillors Jordan, Reeks, Hourahine and R Howells.

1.ii Declarations of Interest

The following Councillors declared an interest in Item 6: Councillors Corten, Marshall, Horton, and Linton

1.iii Presiding Member's Announcements

The Presiding Member led a minute's silence for former Councillor Sally Mlewa who sadly passed away earlier this month. Sally Mlewa was Councillor for Rogerstone Ward during 2012-2017. The Presiding Member passed on his thoughts to Sally's family and friends.

The Leader also added that Sally was part of the 2012 intake and that it was a pleasure to work alongside her. Sally was incredibly intelligent and diligently dedicated herself to Rogerstone ward. Sally was also a preacher and gave many of her colleagues' comfort and strength with her wise words.

Councillor M Evans agreed that she was a passionate and intelligent woman who had made a difference.

Councillor Morris observed that Sally's achievements were astonishing and that he was proud to be her friend.

Councillor Whitehead recalled the support Sally gave him when he joined the scrutiny committee.

Councillor Reynolds had attended Sally's funeral and was in awe at all of Sally's achievements. Councillor Reynolds reflected on how much she would be missed.

2. **Minutes**

The Minutes of the last meeting held on 23 January 2024 were accepted as a true record.

3. **Police Issues**

The Presiding Member introduced Superintendent J White of Gwent Police, who provided Council Members with an update on police issues within East, West, and Central Newport including tackling organised crime, thefts in shops, and e-bikes.

The Presiding Member invited the Leader to address Superintendent White.

The Leader offered her thanks to Gwent Police on behalf of the Council regarding the collaboration shown in relation to a number of public protests recently. The Leader was pleased to see the police city centre team working with protestors and passed on her thanks. The Leader asked for clarification on work being done to address knife crime in Gwent, following the recent publication of an article on this topic, and asked how councillors could support residents to access the facts regarding the work being done across the region. Superintendent White confirmed that Inspector Welti had been given the portfolio regarding public engagement and the Police were benchmarking other forces to understand the level of knife crime issues being experienced. Street surgeries were being conducted to support communications. Inspector White considered this visibility within the community combined with transparency and working alongside councillors and stakeholders to get the message out to the community as being the right way to take this forward. As Superintendent of Newport, positive news was something that would be pushed further as well as conveying positive news at Council.

The Leader also mentioned that there were still safety issues relating to Almond Drive that were reported at last Council and asked if this could be picked up outside the meeting with Superintendent White.

The Leader thanked Superintendent White and staff for their support following recent security incidents she had experienced.

Councillor Cockeram thanked Police for their work in Shaftesbury.

Questions to the Police raised by Councillors:

- Councillor Mogford had read online that some children were going to school on e-scooters and there was a near miss relating to this. Councillor Mogford asked if there was a police liaison with schools and if the police were aware of this happening. Superintendent White advised that the police were committed to bridging the gap with funding police officers as school liaison until the end of the academic year. The police would also consider how to maintain the gap longer term. Chief Superintendent Carl Williams was leading this and there was currently engagement with school liaison officers as part of an All-Wales approach including tackling e-scooters and knife crime. Preventative work to make sure young people did not get involved in criminal activity is key and the Superintendent would update Council on this matter. Changes around the sale and management of e-scooters would also be required to tackle the issue, taking a preventative approach.

- Councillor Batrouni commended police for their work concerning bikes. At a recent ward surgery with Maesglas and Gaer, residents had a fear of being hit by bikes. Councillor Batrouni asked if more could be done in relation to public engagement and building intelligence. The Superintendent agreed that engagement was important and took this on board.
- Councillor Forsey referred to an incident that took place in Belle Vue Park on 22 January, where the park was cordoned off for some time. Councillor Forsey wanted to pay thanks to the park ranger, Rob Brown who came across someone who was seriously unwell, whilst locking up the park and stayed with the person for two hours until paramedics arrived. Councillor Forsey asked if there an update on the wellbeing of this person. The Superintendent was aware of this and mentioned that it was in relation to a medical episode and not anything criminal.
- Councillor Fouweather had received a number of concerns from residents regarding males trying car doors and front doors in the early hours of the morning. Councillor Fouweather requested additional patrols to address this. The Superintendent assured Councillor Fouweather that this would be picked up. There was a sharp increase in this type of crime, but this was not unique to Newport, and was also happening in Cwmbran.
- Councillor Whitehead referred to the escalation of bad behaviour in Ogmores Crescent, with a car having been set on fire. Councillor Whitehead asked for reassurance that this was on police's radar. Superintendent White would contact Inspector Welti and added that the police were looking to reinvigorate community partnership task meetings. This was a weekly meeting in the fire station with partners such as the Council, South Wales Fire and Newport City Homes taking a collaborative approach to addressing community issues. If there were spikes in issues, then this would be picked up in the partnership meetings.
- Councillor M Howells mentioned issues at Pontfaen shops as previously reported and whilst this had been addressed through engagement with officers, this may re-occur now that the evenings were getting lighter, and therefore asked how councillors could get ahead of this. Superintendent White mentioned that the council had recently employed Paul Davies, ex Chief Inspector, now working with the community safety team, as the Community Protection Manager was keen to improve collaborative approaches with wardens visiting the respective areas within Newport. Joint patrols would be undertaken including at Pontfaen Shops.

Councillor M Howells was also sorry to hear that the Leader had experienced a security incident and with the recent funding for raised security for MPs asked what could be done to provide further support for councillors working in the community. Regarding security for members, Superintendent White added that this needed to also be extended to community councillors who had the same issues. Superintendent White asked councillors to reach out and contact their local inspector and sergeant if there were any concerns. The Superintendent understood that councillors needed to be visible within the community for residents and if there were any issues, councillors must tell the police and they would receive the tailor-made advice and guidance they required.

- Councillor Marshall mentioned bikes in the Maesglas area causing a nuisance and asked what could be done to address this. Councillor Marshall also mentioned motor vehicles in Maesglas retail park where drivers would perform car rallies, and asked if this could also be addressed. Finally, there were a group of young people that loitered around Lidl's throwing items at people causing intimidation and Councillor Marshall had come under attack himself with people throwing stones at him. Superintendent White confirmed that addressing car meet ups has been very successful in other areas and the same tactics can be applied here. Mobile cameras and surveillance support can be provided to provide assurance for residents.

- Councillor James passed on her thanks to the police on behalf of residents regarding Wheeler Street and residents were also meeting with police this evening. Councillor James also echoed comments about aggression in the community, and referred to an assault she experienced in October which had left her feeling unsafe working in the ward. The Superintendent was sorry to hear about the incident and assured her that measures would be put in place to support councillors.

4. Council Tax and Budget 2024/25

The Presiding Member reminded members of the Council's procedural rules in relation to proposed amendments and advised that there was an alternative budget proposal to amend the Council proposal which was circulated for information.

The Presiding Member invited the Leader of the Council to present the Council Tax report, approved by the Cabinet on 14th February 2024, for the 2024/25 financial year.

Leader's comments on the proposed budget

The Leader said that the Cabinet continued to develop the Council's budget in a very challenging environment. Whilst inflation decreased over the year, the legacy of the covid pandemic, societal issues and the cost-of-living crisis were significant issues affecting the Council services.

Within that context, several key issues had to be addressed in the budget, including:

- The demand on Council services continued to increase, particularly in housing services and children's social care. There continued to be huge pressure on the most vulnerable families, individuals, and communities.
- The Council's spending levels were historically lower than comparable Councils in all service areas. The increased capacity required to deal with increasing demand for services and support must be acknowledged.
- The Council has a vast amount of infrastructure and assets it is responsible for, and this is integral to delivery of services. Additional funding was required so that these could be maintained.
- Inflation increases must be considered. Newport is a Living Wage employer, and the budget continued to ensure the external organisations the Council works with also pays a living wage.

The budget consultation was extensive with nearly 1,400 public responses received for the draft budget. The summary responses from the consultation and the minutes of the meetings with scrutiny, schools' forum and unions were included in the papers. On those budget savings specifically consulted on; the consultation confirmed that almost all of them met with the majority or relatively high levels of support and agreement with the public.

The funding increases and decisions on budget investments recommended would ensure:

- Increased school funding – both by investing more funds over and above cost inflation increases and by not making savings from school budgets. The Council is investing nearly £10m into school budgets for increased costs and increased pupil numbers.
- Continued support for the most vulnerable families and individuals in communities. Investing nearly £12m in homelessness services, social care and additional learning needs budgets for cost increases and higher demand.

- The need for investment in highway infrastructure and assets for service delivery. Direct investments in these areas and the capital financing budgets contributed towards this.

The budget proposed £4.5m of new savings of which nearly £4m were efficiency savings with no service impacts. The consultation confirmed that residents understood and agreed with the vast majority of those savings.

Councils across the UK are finding it difficult to deliver more services with the funding available to them. Savings which do not have significant impact on the services provided are becoming harder and harder to find.

The overall budget therefore struck a balance between increased funding for some areas with new savings and ensured that residents continued to pay one of the lowest rates of council tax across Wales and the UK. It represented a relatively small increase of £1.75 to £2.26 per week for those houses in Newport's most common bandings and the council tax reduction scheme continued to support those households who were eligible.

Today, Newport has the third lowest rate of Council Tax in Wales and has maintained that position for many, many years. Council Tax was not higher, in relative terms, to other Councils and the Council had recommended and implemented £70m of savings over the last decade. Demand for much needed services which help the most vulnerable individuals and families have increased significantly over the last decade and in particular over the last three or four years, which funding levels have not kept pace with.

The Council has met the challenge of that increasing demand and found significant savings over that time. In the context of continuing increases in demand for services here in Newport, and savings found over the last decade, the increase in Council Tax of 8.5% is needed.

Producing a balanced budget was a difficult process and the Leader thanked Cabinet colleagues and the officers who worked tirelessly to ensure that Cabinet was able to propose the balanced budget and Council Tax recommendation being presented today. The Leader and Cabinet colleagues believed that this was a fair, sustainable, and responsible budget, prioritising the most vulnerable residents and therefore asked the Council to support the report.

The Leader reserved the right to speak after the debate.

Councillor D Davies seconded the proposal and also reserved the right to speak after the debate.

The Presiding Member announced that an alternative budget had been submitted and declared an interest in relation to the proposed alternative budget. The Presiding Member therefore announced that he would vacate the chair and invited Cllr. Screen, as Deputy Presiding Member, to take the chair for the next part of the meeting.

Cllr. Fouweather raised a point of order with regard to the appointment of the Deputy Presiding Member and in particular stated that Cllr. Screen had never been appointed to that role. The meeting was adjourned at 5.54pm in order to enable officers to investigate the matter.

The meeting was reconvened at 6.19pm. The Monitoring Officer advised that members would need to elect a chair to replace Cllr. Cockeram for the next item of business.

Cllr. Evans proposed that Cllr. Screen should chair the meeting in Cllr. Cockeram's absence. This proposal was seconded by the Leader. A vote was conducted, and it was agreed

unanimously by Council that Councillor Allan Screen should take the chair during Cllr. Cockeram's absence.

Councillor Screen then took the chair of the meeting.

The Deputy Presiding Member invited Councillor M Howells to speak on the alternative proposed budget.

Councillor Morris seconded the motion and reserved the right to speak after the debate.

Councillor Lacey suggested that Councillor Sterry declared an interest as he lived in Thompson Avenue, which was included within the alternative budget.

Councillor Sterry therefore declared an interest as a resident of Thompson Avenue.

The Lliswerry Independents' Proposal

Councillor M Howells presented the Lliswerry Independents' alternative budget proposal to Council for debate and agreement. He said that the principle of the budget proposal is to bring the council tax increase closer to inflation because residents are saying that they are really struggling with rising costs and the cost-of-living crisis. The alternative budget proposes to increase council tax by 4.63% instead of the 8.5% proposed by Cabinet. The amendments to the budget aren't significant and it is hoped that colleagues have had a chance to consider them in detail prior to the meeting today.

Councillor Howells went on to state that the motion made the following proposals:

- To remove the role of the presiding member and revert to the Mayor chairing the council meetings, saving £9k.
- Reduce the publication of Newport Matters from 2 monthly to 4 monthly. This will not only save costs of £21k it will help to reduce the Council's carbon footprint by reducing the amount of paper we use. It might be possible to prepare some digital content to replace the reduced posted service.
- To remove the Leader's car and reduce the driver budget accordingly. The Leader should be able to travel to engagements by themselves and doesn't require a car and chauffeur. This would save £17.5k. The Mayor should retain their car and driver as asking them to travel themselves and robe and de-robe by themselves would be more challenging.
- To remove the proposed new Newport Live contract manager with a saving of £65k. At Scrutiny, no evidence was forthcoming that the contract is not working well or that the post is needed for betterment and therefore is considered too much of a luxury whilst cutting other posts are being cut from budgets elsewhere.
- To delay the implementation of the closure of the Civic centre for 2 days per week. This will require additional investment of £91k. There is an ongoing asset management review which is looking at all the council's assets and what best ways we can streamline them. The saving proposed here is being considered prematurely and without undertaking a thorough audit of all Council assets and the best use of them. There is no data on how many people work at the Civic Centre for 5 days each week and cannot work from home. Until we properly understand the impact of this decision, more work should be done in line with the ongoing asset management review.
- To re-instate the maintenance of the watercourse at Thompson Avenue, spending £30k. The decision to remove this work as part of budget savings last year will have a devastating impact on flood risk to hundreds of residents and should be reversed.
- Councillor Howells went on to say that the bulk of the saving in the proposed alternative budget is because of a bold proposal to use some reserves to help with the challenges currently being faced in Children's Services for the next two years. It is understood that reserves are for a rainy day and shouldn't be used long-term to prop up continued revenue costs. However, as part of this proposal, officers would be tasked

with producing a sustainable strategy that moves away from using out of area placements in children's social care within the next two years. This is realistic and we want better for our looked after children. It also is in line with the Welsh Government's aspirations to remove profit from the care of looked after children by 2027.

Whilst the use of reserves isn't always ideal, there is currently a forecasted underspend in 23/24 of circa £2.3 million which is likely to replenish the reserves in the first year in any event, so the use of reserves is small and time limited and it is the right time and circumstances to do it.

It is proposed to keep the majority of the investments proposed by the Cabinet, with the exception of investing £700k in capital maintenance as opposed to £1.2m. Up until the final Welsh Government settlement there was a proposal for £500k in this area, and it is proposed to increase that by £200k overall to £700k.

Comments of Councillors on the proposed amendments:

- Councillor Mogford did not support the 8.5% increase in council tax and therefore supported the alternative budget, as he felt that the Council had to find ways to be creative in saving money and reducing the impact on residents. Councillor Mogford asked if the Leader needed to declare an interest in using a Civic car. The Monitoring Officer confirmed that this was not the case as the car was owned by the Council and used for Civic duties.
- Councillor Whitehead congratulated Councillor M Howells on his hard work in providing an alternative budget and felt that there were similarities to the original proposed budget. Councillor Whitehead considered that residents' opinions should be taken on board and took priority and therefore supported the alternative budget.
- Councillor Marshall opposed the alternative budget and highlighted the risks to the proposals in relation to earmarked reserves for Children's Services and to the Council's capital programme. Councillor Marshall also mentioned the statutory responsibility to provide emergency placement for young people when required and that we must not forget this as a corporate parent. The Council tax reduction would also affect the support for social services provision, which was in high demand.
- Councillor Hughes opposed the alternative budget which he felt exposed vulnerable young people in care. This was too important a budget to get wrong and therefore did not support the alternative budget.
- Councillor D Davies noted with concern the use of £4.28M in reserves to bring out of county placements back. Social Services worked hard to ensure children stayed in the city, which did reduce costs. In addition, a school had been created for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder. Councillor Davies therefore did not support the amendment.
- Councillor D Harvey did not agree with the use of reserves as outlined in the alternative budget and thought that report indicated that the Section 151 Officer did not support the budget. Councillor M Howells mentioned that the Section 151 Officer had met with Llisbury Independent members, and he thought the Section 151 Officer was satisfied that the proposed alternative budget was balanced. Councillor D Harvey read out the alternative budget – *The proposal to utilise earmarked reserves to fund the £2.264m Children's Services out of area placements pressure for a two-year period will result in the Capital Expenditure Reserve reducing by £4.528m. Utilising reserves in this way reduces the scope to support emerging capital expenditure pressures, should they emerge over the medium term. Should such pressures be unavoidable, this would potentially create an unfunded pressure upon the Council's capital programme. Whilst it has been suggested that future revenue underspends could be used to replenish*

reserves, this is not guaranteed and cannot be relied upon. Councillor D Harvey therefore concluded that she did not support the alternative budget.

- Councillor Lacey sought clarification regarding funding for infrastructure and felt that the proposed alternative budget put pressures on the capital programme. Councillor Lacey did not support the alternative budget.
- Councillor Clarke disagreed with the alternative budget, referring to the use of reserves, and that the same pressure could still exist in two years. Councillor Clarke also mentioned a recent survey that showed residents supported receiving Newport Matters. Councillor Clarke also suggested that by removing the Civic drivers there was a potential to create a threat to the security of the Leader, in light of discussions that took place under Police Issues.
- Councillor Cocks referred to the effect the alternative budget would have in relation to the cost of living and therefore did not support the report.
- Councillor Sterry mentioned that the Council had £144M in reserves and that the proposed alternative budget was only considering using £4.5M of those. Councillor D Harvey asked for a point of order as reserves were savings for a disaster. Councillor Sterry added that the Council was in a state of disaster and referred to feedback, where 70% of residents said the council tax increase was too high. In summary Councillor Sterry recommended their proposed council tax increase was more in line with inflation and asked councillors vote for the alternative budget.
- Councillor Corten did not support the alternative budget.
- Councillor Batrouni referred to out of area placements and transformation, which was costly and time consuming and therefore did not support the alternative budget.
- Councillor D Davies asked for a recorded vote on the alternative budget. Councillor Mudd, D Davies, D Harvey, Lacey, and Clarke supported this.
- Councillor Forsey listed a number of UK councils that had submitted section 144 notices, declaring themselves bankrupt. Councillor Forsey felt that the alternative proposed budget was focused on the short term and risky as the reduction in reserves increased the risk of capital funding being affected. Councillor Forsey therefore did not support the report.
- Councillor Mudd spoke to the amendment and referred to a recent Newsnight programme which was described the challenges facing public service provision, as ‘the bedrock of society’. There was a significant risk of bankruptcy for councils including in Wales if prudence was not exercised. The way that reserves were managed and calculated was explained in the appendices and the Leader urged Lliswerry ward members to look at this. The Leader welcomed that the Lliswerry Independents had provided an alternative budget, but she could not support it. The Leader added that the Council needed to deliver on much needed capital support going forward including a new primary school in the Bettws area.
- Councillor Morris considered that Councillors had a choice in raising the tax by 8.5% or by 4.6%. Councillor Morris felt that the alternative proposed budget was not putting vulnerable people in danger.

Councillor M Howells concluded by saying that it was great to hear the debate around this and that colleagues gave the budget full attention considering the impact of decisions on the citizens of Newport. This should not be a rubber stamp exercise of a proposal from officers but a full debate on the impacts the decisions would have.

Councillor M Howells said that he heard the comments around utilising earmarked reserves and the risks that presented and referred colleagues to the comments from the Section 151 Officer in the alternative budget proposal. He referred to the officer's comments regarding utilising reserves in this way, which reduced the scope to support emerging capital expenditure pressures, should they emerge over the medium term. He said that his emphasis was on "should they emerge". Councillor M Howells also considered that the Section 151 Officer had also referred to future revenue underspends that could be used to replenish reserves, as this was not guaranteed and could not be relied upon. He noted however from the last Council meeting that there was £41million of underspend in the last five years. Therefore, it was prudent and sensible to use a small number of reserves such as this. The minimum was likely to be £2.5M and a maximum of £4.7M. There was nearly £140M of reserves built up by good robust financial management.

Councillor M Howells said that the Section 151 officer dealt with risks in the original cabinet proposal. A small amount of risk was appropriate, and we must be bold.

Councillor M Howells said that using a small amount of reserves would help our residents out whilst a proper plan was put together to deal with the pressures on children's social care. He considered it a sensible policy to use a small number of reserves (less than 4%) in a time limited way to ease the financial burden on residents who were feeling the pinch right now.

Councillor M Howells also drew attention to the Section 151 Officer's comments which stated that by reducing the proposed rate of council tax increase to 4.63%, the Council was unlikely to improve its position, relative to other councils, in terms of the rate being one of the lowest in Wales. There was an element of unhappiness that Newport had one of the lowest council tax rates in Wales and a desire to put up council tax above inflation to catchup with other councils.

Councillor M Howells felt that the Council should be proud to have one of the lowest council tax rates in Wales. It was the reason people were moving to Newport in their droves and why Newport is the fastest expanding city in Wales. Increasing the council tax risked stifling growth considering the burden that higher rents and mortgages had recently on the housing market.

Councillor M Howells felt that the council tax increase was set to 8.5% and a budget was then set to match it, rather than looking at what was needed and then setting a budget increase that naturally flowed from that. This was backed up by the fact that the budget was prepared with a proposal of 8.5% which cabinet was satisfied balanced the difference between investment and spending. Further funding had come from Welsh Government which could be used to reduce that increase and the resulting burden on residents. But instead, further investment was made with no decrease of council tax for residents. Councillor M Howells fully supported investment in services but not at a cost burden to residents.

Budgets were hard to balance but, on this occasion, Cabinet had failed to consider what officers proposed to them.

Councillor M Howells felt this was a more realistic rate increase and proper scrutiny of spending residents' money was required.

Councillor M Howells also requested a recorded vote on this issue.

The Monitoring Officer gave a role call for a recorded vote:

	Councillor Name	Apologies	For	Against	Abstain
1	Adan, Saeed			X	
2	Al-Nuaimi, Miqdad			X	
3	Baker-Westhead, Claire			X	
4	Batrouni, Dimitri			X	
5	Bright, Paul			X	
6	Clarke, James			X	
7	Cleverly, Janet				X
8	Cockeram, Paul	Temporarily absent			
9	Cocks, Stephen			X	
10	Davies, Bev			X	
11	Davies, Deb			X	
12	Drewett, Pat			X	
13	Evans, Matthew		X		
14	Forsey, Yvonne			X	
15	Fouweather, David		X		
16	Harris, John			X	
17	Harvey, Debbie			X	
18	Harvey, Tim			X	
19	Horton, Gavin			X	
20	Hourahine, Phil	X			
21	Howells, Mark		X		
22	Howells, Rhian	X			
23	Hughes, Jason			X	
24	Hussain, Farzina			X	
25	James, Lauren				X
26	Jenkins, Debbie			X	
27	Jones, John		X		
28	Jordan, Jason	X			
29	Kellaway, Martin		X		
30	Lacey, Laura			X	
31	Linton, Malcolm			X	
32	Marshall, Stephen			X	
33	Mayer, David			X	
34	Mogford, Ray		X		
35	Morris, Allan		X		
36	Mudd, Jane			X	
37	Perkins, Bev			X	
38	Peterson, James	X			
39	Pimm, Alex			X	
40	Pimm, Matthew			X	
41	Reeks, Chris	X			
42	Reynolds, John			X	
43	Routley, William		X		
44	Screen, Allan			X	
45	Spencer, Mark			X	
46	Sterry, Andrew		X		
47	Stowell-Corten, Emma			X	
48	Thomas, Kate			X	
49	Townsend, Carmel		X		
50	Watkins, Trevor			X	
51	Whitehead, Kevin		X		

	Total	6	11	32	2

Following the roll call vote the amendment was defeated.

Cllr. Cockeram returned to the chair and invited comments on the substantive motion.

Comments of councillors on the substantive motion:

- Councillor Drewett felt that this was a prudent budget and therefore supported the proposal for housing and community, transformation, environment, and public protection. Councillor Drewett felt that the budget was made with due diligence considering the cuts the council was facing.
- Councillor Spencer supported the substantive motion as families were struggling to pay bills and once the 8.5% was explained to residents they understood the reason for the increase.
- Councillor Evans made comparisons to spending by the Council in the past and present and also referred to the council tax increase. Councillor Evans felt that the increase was staggering and therefore did not support the budget.
- Councillor Clarke commended Councillor M Howells on the alternative budget and made reference to no alternative being provided by the main opposition party.
- Councillor Routley referred to the cost of living and also felt that he could not support the budget.
- Councillor Batrouni referred to capital investment that would determine the success of the city. There is a growing population in Newport and now is not the time to cut capital expenditure. Councillor Batrouni therefore supported the budget.
- Councillor Cocks felt that there was a UK wide crisis and therefore supported the budget.
- Councillor Corten mentioned that the proposed budget was doing the best for our city and supported the budget.
- Councillor Hughes referred to struggling costs and energy bills faced by residents and felt that this budget was supporting people of Newport through education.
- Councillor Fouweather referred to the Council Tax increase and added that he would hold to account the Leader about the poor state of the roads in Newport that needed repair and therefore did not support the budget.
- Councillor Mogford referred to services being provided and felt that the council could do better, such as repairing potholes.
- Councillor Lacey supported the budget, and felt it was right to prioritise schools, social care and the most vulnerable. Councillor Lacey also mentioned the infrastructure maintenance backlog of work of £90.4M in relation to road infrastructure and welcomed the £500K investment within her service area, and therefore supported the budget.
- Councillor D Davies noted that £80M savings were made over last 12 years. Citizens had a right to a good quality of life and the right to access quality jobs, outstanding education and to be able to live safely within their homes. This was why Cabinet strived to set a balanced budget, but this meant increasing the council tax. Across Wales, the cumulative average increase in council tax amounted to 8.25%. This did not account for

the different starting points where the majority of residents across Wales already paid a higher council tax and Newport residents who lived in an equivalent banded property. What the residents elsewhere received was more funding available for schools, social services, and street cleansing, where grant funding was minimal. The proposed increase would in the long-term increase revenue and funding to benefit residents of Newport. This equated to £1.50 per week. With this increase and prudent management of spending, the Council was able to spend additional £10M for schools. Therefore, Councillor Davies welcomed the proposes in the budget, which included a new primary school in Bettws.

The Leader thanked colleagues for their contributions to the debate and gave her closing comments. The Prudential Code required the Council to ensure the financial decisions were affordable, prudent, and sustainable and the Leader felt that the budget before Council today was exactly that. The Leader thanked Council colleagues for their comments and thanked senior officers for their hard work and effort to provide a budget that continued to support and deliver services across the city. The Leader also thanked partners and stakeholders for responding to the consultation, including Scrutiny Committee colleagues, headteachers, the schools' forum, trade unions and members of the public for engaging in the consultation. In addition, the Leader thanked officers for supporting ward meetings, which enabled residents to come out and engage in discussion on the budget proposals. The Leader reflected on the comments made by colleagues and also reflected on balanced and fair comments made by members of the public, referring to comments from one member of the public in relation to council tax who stated they were fine with the increase, but the money needed to go on services they actually used, such as improving roads. The proposals before colleagues would deliver on this, and this budget struck the all-important balance. The Leader added that Council would protect and deliver for the people of Newport.

The Presiding Member asked for councillors to place their votes.

There was a majority vote supporting the council budget, with 31 for, 8 against and 2 abstentions.

The Council therefore resolved:

That Council -

Revenue budget and Council Tax 2024/25 (section 2 - 6)

- 1 To note the Cabinet's budget proposals for the financial year 2024/25;
- 2 To adopt those budget proposals as the Council's budget for 2024/25;
- 3 To note the Head of Finance's recommendations that minimum General Fund balances can be maintained, in the short term, at a level of at least £6.5million, the confirmation of the robustness of the overall budget underlying the proposals, subject to the key issues highlighted in section 5 of the report.

Medium term financial plan (MTFP) (section 3)

- 4 To note the MTFP and the potentially significant financial challenges over the medium term in the context of funding challenges and increasing demand within service areas.
- 5 To agree to the implementation of the three-year financial plan as set out in the report;
- 6 To note and approve the Council's reserves strategy and transformation fund protocol as set out in Appendix 6 of the report and to approve the planned use of earmarked reserves, as set out in Appendix 5a of the report, including the proposed use of the Transformation Fund.

5. **Capital Strategy and Treasury Management Strategy 2024/25**

The Presiding Member invited the Leader to present the Capital and Treasury Management Strategy for 2024/25.

The Leader stated that this is an annual report focusing on the Council's capital expenditure plans, the financial impact of those in terms of borrowing, and investment strategy for the year.

The Council was asked to approve both strategies for the year, including the prudential indicators and limits within them.

It was noted that both the Cabinet and the Governance and Audit Committee considered the report in their most recent meetings. Governance and Audit Committee endorsed the proposed strategies, with no concerns raised.

It was also noted that this version of the strategy was updated to reflect the announcements made in Cabinet on 14 February, in relation to additional annual sums investment and an increase in borrowing capacity.

In terms of the report itself, there were a number of key points to draw Council's attention to the 5-year capital programme was managed on a rolling basis, meaning that a new year (2028/29) was added to the programme.

The programme itself continued to reflect the challenging financial circumstances and, as such, continued to comprise ongoing and previously approved schemes, as well as annual sums (for activities such as asset maintenance and highway maintenance).

Whilst there were no new schemes being included, the programme, especially in 2024/25, was still significant and contained a number of the Cabinet's highest priority schemes such as new school projects, the Transporter Bridge project and new leisure and wellbeing provision.

Beyond the £7m new borrowing headroom recently agreed by Cabinet, there was no new borrowing headroom to be approved at this point. The programme included indicative new borrowing from 2027/28 onwards, which, if still affordable nearer the time, would be available to pursue new schemes, such as the next wave of school development projects under the Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme.

Until the point at which that new borrowing could be formally approved, it meant that capital headroom (which was used to pursue new schemes or address cost increases on existing schemes) was limited to the new borrowing headroom, those amounts already held in specific earmarked reserves and uncommitted capital receipts. As a result, careful prioritisation would be required when making new commitments from the headroom and every opportunity would need to be taken to boost it via one-off sources, to continue to respond to emerging pressures as and when they arise.

Whilst there was no new large-scale borrowing included in the next few years of the programme, previously and recently approved borrowing would be incurred over that timeframe and would increase the overall Capital Financing Requirement and the Council's level of debt.

The borrowing limits proposed in the report took this into account and the revenue consequence of additional borrowing (e.g. interest payable on loans) is already budgeted for, following the budget investment made in 2021/22 and planned for 2024/25. The programme

proposed was affordable, prudent, and sustainable, based on current information and assumptions.

In terms of Treasury Management, the report detailed the Council's approach to borrowing and investing.

It confirmed that the Council would continue to pursue an internal borrowing strategy, by using available cash resources to defer external borrowing for as long as possible and only undertake borrowing in advance of need where there was a clear financial rationale for doing so.

It was important to highlight the large refinancing requirement the Council had during 2024/25, which saw a handful of large loans repaid and new loans taken out in their place. The strategies reflected a prudent assumption of the capital financing cost that this replacement borrowing resulted in.

For investing, the Council continued to prioritise security, liquidity, and yield, in that order and would strike an appropriate balance between risk and return.

A minimum investment balance of £10m was still required, which was currently being met via three covered bond investments and continued to be the case for the next few years.

The Head of Finance's commentary within the covering report directly addressed the question of affordability, prudence and sustainability and confirmed that the proposed strategy and programme met all of those criteria.

Councillor Davies seconded the report.

The majority of councillors supported the report, with two abstentions.

Resolved:

That Council -

- Approved the Capital Strategy (Appendix 2 of the report), which incorporated the approved capital programme, and the borrowing requirements/limits needed to deliver the approved programme.
- Approved the Treasury Management Strategy and Treasury Management Indicators, the Investment Strategy, and the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) policy for 2024/25. (Appendix 3 of the report)
- As part of the above:
 - Noted the increasing debt, and corresponding revenue cost of this, in delivering the rolling Capital Programme, and the implications of this over both the short and medium-long term with regard to affordability, prudence and sustainability.
 - Noted the Head of Finance comments that borrowing needs to be limited to the extent that it stabilised the Capital Financing Requirement over the long term and did not add future pressure to the Council's Medium Term Financial Plan, and the recommended prudential indicators on borrowing limits to achieve this.
 - Noted the feedback provided by the Governance and Audit Committee on 25 January 2024 (paragraph 8).

6. National Non-Domestic Rates - Discretionary Relief: High Street Relief Scheme 2024/25

The Presiding Member invited the Leader to present the final report which dealt with the legislative requirement for Council to formerly adopt the Welsh Government's Retail, Leisure, and Hospitality Rate relief scheme for 2024-25.

This scheme was fully funded by Welsh Government and provided a 40% reduction in business rates due by businesses that met the criteria set by Welsh Government. This scheme was set out in Part A of the report.

The report also included a proposal to extend the Newport City Centre Local Rate Relief Scheme for one year.

Initially, the scheme was introduced in April 2022 and was intended to conclude on 31 March 2024.

This is a local scheme which was fully funded by the Council and provided additional financial support in the form of a 25% rate reduction for City Centre businesses that operated in the retail, Leisure, and hospitality sectors.

The Newport City Centre Local Rate Relief Scheme that Council was considering extending was unique to the City Centre.

This innovative scheme was designed to assist existing businesses to remain viable and also incentivised new businesses to open in empty city centre retail units.

To date, the scheme has helped more than 100 businesses, and provided additional financial assistance to city centre businesses.

Due to the fact that there was less expenditure to date than anticipated, it is possible to fund the proposed extension to the scheme from unspent funds originally set aside for this purpose.

Councillor Davies seconded the report.

Comments of Councillors:

- Councillor Fouweather said that this was good news, but the results would be reflected in how many businesses would remain and thrive as well as how many new businesses this would attract to the city centre.
- Councillor Thomas welcomed the report and considered that all measures within the report supported new and existing businesses.
- Councillor Horton felt that this support for businesses was helpful. He therefore supported the report and felt that individuals should actively support Newport by spending within the city.
- Councillor Bright referred to the Corn Exchange, a brand-new venture opening this weekend with a capacity for 500 people to come into the city centre and therefore welcomed the report.

The report was unanimously supported.

It was therefore Resolved:

That the Council –

- a) Adopts the Welsh Government's Retail, Leisure and Hospitality Rate Relief Scheme 2024-25 as set out in this report and in Appendix 1 thereto.
- b) Extends the Newport City Centre Local Rate Relief Scheme so that the scheme, as described in the report and in Appendix 2 thereof, operated during the 2024-25 financial year; AND
- c) Delegates to the Head of Finance the authority to take such decisions as may become necessary to enable the operation of both schemes, including but not limited to:
 - i. the setting-up and operation of an appropriate application procedure.
 - ii. the power to determine whether or not an individual application was within the scope of the scheme; AND
 - iii. the power to revoke a grant of relief in circumstances where an applicant no longer qualified for such relief according to the scheme.

7. Questions to the Leader of the Council

Before Questions, the Leader gave the following announcements.

Leader's Announcements

Royal Visit

The Mayor and the Leader welcomed Her Royal Highness, The Princess Royal, Princess Anne on a recent visit to the Newport Ship and the transporter bridge earlier in the month.

Both are key parts in the story of Newport. They show the city's heritage as a trading port and an industrial city. They evoke memories of the past and amazing work is taking place so that they can be enjoyed and celebrated by generations to come.

At the Newport Ship centre, Her Royal Highness was given a tour of the works, from the initial excavation through to the current day, as well as future plans. She also became the first person to sign the Centre's brand-new visitor book.

Students and professors from Cardiff University were on hand to talk about some of the artefacts that were found during the excavations, and how these have been conserved.

Her Royal Highness was also able to step back in time to experience what life was like on the ship, thanks to a virtual reality headset which the project team has developed in conjunction with researchers at Swansea University.

The Leader paid tribute to former councillor Charles Ferris and thanked him for his work and continued work to support heritage assets in Newport.

Her Royal Highness has a keen interest in engineering, so naturally a visit to the city's engineering icon, the Newport Transporter Bridge, was necessary.

It was amazing to be able to include staff, volunteers, The Friends, and local students in the visit who were all able to share their involvement in our cultural gems. Her Majesty was extremely interested in their work.

Additionally, in other cultural news, the Leader had welcomed Benji Webbe as a guest to the Civic Centre and showed him the murals as part of a tour of the Civic Centre. Benji Webbe is the Leader of Skindred who recently received Best Alternative Must Act at the MOBO

Awards. The Leader congratulated Benji and his band members on their success and MOBO Award.

Electric cleansing vehicle

The Leader made reference to the electric street washer which is active in the city centre - harnessing the power of renewable energy to help clean the streets of Newport.

The Addex Electra 2.0 Hydro Street Washer is the latest addition to our electric vehicle fleet. The Council is currently trialing its use to see what impact it has on cleaning schedules. This was important as there was a lot of queries about street cleansing. The Street Washer runs on 100% electric power and is estimated to save around 22,500 kgs of CO2 annually when compared to a diesel-powered equivalent.

As well as running on clean energy, the vehicle does not use chemicals so reducing impact on paving, while still delivering the same results as a manual jet wash.

Using the street washer in key areas will also free up cleansing operatives to help cover more of the city.

Equipment like this has the potential to tackle an issue we know is important to residents, in a way that is better for the environment and streets and helps tackle the climate and ecological emergency.

Cosy Cinema

Newport is set to get a new leisure experience with the development of Cosy Cinema in one of the empty retail units within Chartist Tower. The Leader recently went along to see the progress on the project which is due to open later this year.

Fifteen pods are being created which can accommodate up to six people for daytime film viewings and overnight stays can also be booked.

The exciting venture has already been a big hit at two other two sites, but Newport's will be the largest venue so far and the only one that is indoors. The business, started by former Newport RFC player John Colderley and his wife Sian, won the backing of two of the panel on BBC's Dragons' Den, including former footballer Gary Neville.

The Leader said that she is pleased that the Council is able to support this project, with funding also coming from the Shared Prosperity Fund and the Development Bank of Wales.

This is an exciting development for the city centre, something different and new. It will be great for Newport residents but will also attract more visitors from further afield which will inevitably benefit other local businesses.

City and town centres are changing, and Newport is leading the way. The city centre is moving to a more vibrant mix of independent traders, shops, fantastic music and hospitality venues and residential use.

Lunar New Year

The Leader was delighted to work with the Newport Chinese Community Centre and Newport Live to bring a spectacular Lunar New Year Celebration to the city centre earlier this month for the first time.

Titled 'The Dragons Are Coming!', the event featured performances, workshops and activities all celebrating the spirit of the Lunar New Year. The city centre streets were brought alive with energy and excitement thanks to mesmerising lion dancers. Mr Mayor was delighted with the performance which is available to watch on YouTube.

It was amazing to see families and communities come together, and we hope to deliver more positive events like this in the future.

The Leader had visited the cultural hub in Pill, which was derelict two years ago but commitment from volunteers to provide this facility was outstanding and the Leader was pleased to see that it has been transformed. The Leader Congratulated everyone involved and said that she looked forward to seeing it open soon.

In addition, the Welsh Final for the Rotary Youth Speaks was held on 15 February and the standard was incredibly high in this debating competition. St Joseph's intermediate team were runners up and Jo Wakeman, Year 9 won the best opposer. In the senior year competition, Pheobe Lonagan, Year 13 of Llanwern High, won the best proposed. This was a Wales wide competition, and students of Newport were doing incredibly well. The Leader passed on her congratulations and thanked the teachers who enabling this to happen.

Tredegar Park

Plans to improve Tredegar Park have taken a major step forward with a proposal to buy the freehold of the park land from its owner.

Currently, the Council leases the land for the purposes of providing playing fields and a recreation area for the city. However, the lease comes with a number of restrictive conditions attached. Purchasing the freehold will give the council greater autonomy in developing the park in line with the wishes of Newport residents.

Last summer, extensive consultation with residents was carried out to find out what improvements they would like us to make to the leisure offer in the park.

Response to the survey was good, with just under 850 responses received. They reflected a strong community interest in enhancing the park's recreational offer. Further information regarding this is on the Newport City Council website. This was a great opportunity, and the purchase of this land protected the site in perpetuity for the citizens of Newport.

Capital funding for the project will come from Newport's allocation of the UK government's Shared Prosperity Fund, under the 'communities and place' priority. The Council is looking at how it can deliver the priorities identified in the consultation as part of the overall package of investment into the park, as well as the revenue costs associated with operating and maintaining these elements over the long term.

Tree planting

The Leader made reference to the challenge that we have faced due to ash dieback disease which is predicted to infect almost 80 per cent of ash trees in the UK.

Following a survey, trees along 4km of Bulmore Road had to be removed, along with other trees that would be weakened as a result of the work. All the dangerous trees have now been removed and we thank residents for their patience while this work was carried out.

The Leader said that she is pleased to be working with veteran's charity Green Task Force Cymru to carry out replanting along the road. While the road does look a bit bare, some trees – including hazel and hawthorn – will regrow from the coppice stumps that were left and should look very different in the spring and summer.

Questions to the Leader

Councillor M Evans:

The Welsh Transport Minister Lee Waters said in a written statement on 20 February that there appeared to be some inconsistencies in the way highway authorities have applied the guidance to make exceptions and change the speed limit on some roads from the default

20mph back to 30mph. Yet the Council said that it consistently applied WG Guidance, they cannot both be right. Lee Waters said that residents should contact their council to tell them if they think roads should return to 30mph. Now that this revised guidance was received, would the Leader taking into account the views of residents to get main roads back to 30mph, and if so, how would this be done.

Response:

The policy referred to was widely debated across the UK and caught the attention of the media and continued to be debated.

The Minister gathered evidence to support his policy and better understood the impact of this. Evidence showed that drivers were driving more slowly, and this would lead to a reduction in road traffic collisions and fatalities. In terms of the impact of the policy itself, there was a growing evidence base which was starting to demonstrate the impact of this.

Regarding the application of the implementation of this, the Leader suggested that Councillor Evans might recall when he asked this previously at Council that although it was mis-reported in the press, the video of the recording of the meeting and the minutes showed that the Leader clearly stated that it said it would be reviewed as a city council and in line with the growing evidence base and this would also be the evidence base collected at local level. The Leader received quite a few queries from members of the public, some expressing concerns, some not happy but others welcomed the policy. Guidance would be considered by Welsh Government, and it was helpful to have this further guidance.

The Council met regularly with the Minister and Deputy Minister and would be happy to listen to what they said about guidance. It was important also to listen to residents. We gave a commitment to continue to review the implementation of this and it would be reviewed going forward. What was particularly good about this was the improvement of the Council website which would make it easier to engage with residents.

Councillor Morris:

Referred to the state of the city centre and how it affected the residents of Newport. Councillor Morris felt that it was thought of as an embarrassment. With this in mind, could an all-member seminar be arranged that councillors on what was being done in the future and residents could benefit from feedback.

Response:

The city centre has its challenges, but all members voted on the National Non-Domestic Discretionary Rates Relief Scheme to help businesses in Newport. This is a city centre in transition and not in decline. As a local authority, we have a number of regulatory and statutory powers to drive change, but we are limited by financial constraints. The property within the city centre, is not within public domain but privately owned. There are measures in place to address this and incentivise change through grant schemes and loans, and we also have enforcement measures in place.

We have to consider how we can all be brand ambassadors for the city centre and amplify the opportunities for the city and its businesses.

Considerable transitional steps have been made with significant housing increases within the city centre, a mix of tenures comprising privately owned, rented and social housing properties.

We have supported businesses such as Newport Market and the iconic Mercure Hotel. Regeneration does not happen overnight, it takes time, hard work, and effort.

The High Street and market regeneration has been a catalyst for investment in that area and Saturday would see the opening of the Corn Exchange as a community owned venue for the benefit of Newport.

The Leader agreed with Councillor Morris that a strategy was needed. There was a plan for the city centre and the Council had delivered on most of the objectives that were set out in that plan.

The Leader said that she was pleased to report to colleagues that consultation had been secured for a place making plan for the city centre. Consultation will take place for councillors and residents. The development stage of the place making plan is about to launch and will be taking this forward very shortly. Everyone would have an opportunity to respond.

Supplementary:

A follow up question would be put in writing.

Councillor Drewett:

In May 2022 Labour was elected by the citizens of Newport to deliver a manifesto based on community wealth building and social value. Could the Leader provide an update on implementation and share supporting evidence?

Response:

We are committed to community wealth building and this strategic commitment can be found embedded in the Corporate Plan. We are a living wage employer and companies we work with are required to pay the living wage as well. This is done through our procurement, and we are able to deliver social value to citizens. In a recent meeting, Cabinet considered the Newport Themes and Outcomes report which presented that in the first six months, £1M was secured which benefitted the citizens in Newport. A large proportion of this was made up by employees hired or retained to work on contracts. As an anchor institution, we should all value what is happening for residents.

8. **Questions to the Cabinet Members**

Question 1: Question to the Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Assets

Councillor Fouweather:

Can the cabinet member report on the progress that she has made with regard to reviewing the 20mph speed limit on all arterial routes into the city?

Response from Councillor Lacey:

As you will be aware from previous correspondence, Newport City Council has consistently applied Welsh Government guidance when considering where the “place criteria” would dictate the defaulting of the speed limits to 20mph, and exceptions where the 30mph speed limit should remain.

The Deputy Minister for Climate Change has advised local highway authorities that Welsh Government is reviewing how the “place criteria” has been used across the whole of Wales, with a view to whether further guidance is required by local highway authorities in the excepting of certain roads.

During November 2023, a series of meetings were held, led by the WLGA to gather feedback on the application of the exceptions guidance by highway authorities’ officers. The aim was to gain a better understanding of how the exceptions guidance had been applied, whether the officers had encountered any difficulties when applying it and how that feedback could help shape any revisions to the exception’s guidance going forward.

Therefore, until the review is completed and revised guidance is received on the use of the “place criteria” in the setting of excepted speed limits in Wales, there are no immediate plans to revisit the original assessment of any roads within the city.

I provide a link to a recent Welsh Government statement which includes preliminary speed data since the 20mph roll out and information on Welsh Governments ongoing review into the exceptions process, which may be of interest.

The link provided for inclusion in the minutes can be found here:

[Reduced speeds on 20mph roads a ‘turning point’ says Deputy Minister \(gov.wales\)](#)

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Fouweather felt that this would be a disappointment to the residents of Newport by comparison to Cardiff which had arterial routes of 30mph.

Response:

A full review had taken place and as an example, Western Avenue residents wanted 20mph. This was not an easy process, but the Council needed to listen to feedback.

Question 2: Question to the Cabinet Member for Organisational Transformation

Councillor Mogford:

In December 2023 the South Wales Argus ran an article which outlined: - *“The council’s contact centre received 148,362 calls in the first three quarters of 2023. From July, more than one in three callers hung-up the phone due to lengthy wait times.”*

Could the Cabinet Member share what measures have been or are being put in place since December to improve the quality-of-service levels at the Council’s Contact Centre and at what level is the CM involved in ensuring real improvements are made to these services in their portfolio?

Response from Councillor Batrouni:

As Councillor Mogford had mentioned this information is available in the public domain, as the Council and public expect an excellent service.

At the moment the average waiting time is 6 minutes and 52 seconds; we receive around 700-800 calls a week and at peak times, a thousand plus.

In terms of actions, before December 2023, we commissioned an independent review into the contact centre and the compliments and complaints procedure to ensure that the systems in place are working within response times and whether we are meeting the expectations of Councillors and residents. We look forward to that review concluding next month. An interim review briefing took place earlier this month to discuss the results and there are ongoing actions.

Supplementary Question:

Councillor Mogford was surprised by the large number of calls that came into the Council and did not know the nature of the calls by breakdown. It is a huge challenge to cope with this demand, what methods are being used to try to reduce the large number of calls.

Response:

Councillor Batrouni mentioned that we needed to increase the online presence and we are seeing just over 80% of our new website being used. However, there was still an increase in demand and pressure. Part of the work being carried out was to improve the website, led by myself and officers; that was phase one and we were rolling out phase 2 to improve other parts of the website. There was also an App to make online access more efficient, speedier, and more accessible to residents so that they can resolve matters as quickly as possible.

There was no other business.

The Presiding Member declared the meeting closed at 8.45pm.

The meeting terminated at Time Not Specified