

Minutes of the Meeting of the Council held on 1 March 2023 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors James Halden (Mayor), Susan Little (Deputy Mayor), Qaisar Abbas, John Allen, Alex Anderson, Deborah Arnold, Paul Arnold, Chris Baker, Gary Byrne, Adam Carter, Daniel Chukwu, Gary Collins, George Coxshall, Mark Coxshall, Jack Duffin, Shane Hebb, Victoria Holloway, Andrew Jefferies, Barry Johnson, Tom Kelly, Cathy Kent, John Kent, Martin Kerin, Steve Liddiard, Ben Maney, Fraser Massey, Allen Mayes, Sara Muldowney, Augustine Ononaji, Srikanth Panjala, Maureen Pearce, Jane Potheary, Shane Ralph, Joycelyn Redsell, Sue Shinnick, Jennifer Smith, Graham Snell, Luke Spillman, James Thandi and Lynn Worrall

Apologies: Councillors Colin Churchman, Tony Fish, Robert Gledhill, Terry Piccolo, Georgette Polley, Kairen Raper, Elizabeth Rigby, Sue Sammons and Lee Watson

In attendance: Ian Wake, Acting Chief Executive
Les Billingham, Interim Director Adult Social Care
Mark Bradbury, Interim Director of Place
Jackie Hinchliffe, Director of HR, OD & Transformation
Asmat Hussain, Director of Law and Governance
John Jones, Director Law & Governance, and Monitoring Officer
Gareth Moss, Chief Finance Officer
Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Julie Nelder, Assistant Director of Highways, Fleet and Logistics
Ewelina Sorbjan, Interim Director Housing
Luke Tyson, Chief Intervention Officer
Matthew Boulter, Democratic Services Manager and Deputy Monitoring Officer
Jenny Shade, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being recorded, with the audio recording to be made available on the Council's website.

Items 11 and 17 fell prior to the meeting.

112. Minutes

Councillor Jefferies noted on item 109 of the minutes from the Council meeting held on the 25 January 2023 it had been recorded that Councillor Holloway had voted in favour of the motion whereas she had voted against. On that amendment being made, members agreed the minutes.

113. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

114. Declaration of Interests

Councillor J Kent declared a non-pecuniary in respect of item 22 as he was an employee at Lifestyle Solutions.

115. Announcements on behalf of the Mayor or the Leader of the Council

The Mayor made the following announcements in regard to his mayoral events:

Saturday 11 March 2023, celebration of Commonwealth Day at the Purfleet Military Heritage Centre

Monday 13 March 2023, raising the Commonwealth Flag at the Town Hall

Friday 28 April 2023, Civic Dinner

The Mayor's events had raised over £19,000 for his mayoral charities.

The Mayor hoped members could support these events with further information available from the Mayor's office. The Mayor thanked the large business donors who had continued to support the Mayor's charities so generously.

Councillor M Coxshall, Leader of the Council, made the following announcement that over the last four to six months he had been proud in leading this council, working with the acting chief executive to secure a stable footing and a future for the borough of Thurrock.

116. Questions from Members of the Public

One question was received from a member of public.

A copy of the transcript of questions and answers can be viewed under the relevant meeting date at <http://democracy.thurrock.co.uk/thurrock> and are attached at Appendix A at these minutes

117. Petitions from Members of the Public and Councillors

The Mayor informed the chamber that two notices of petition had been received this evening.

Councillor Byrne presented his petition regarding the closure of Corringham Post Office. In response to this Councillor M Coxshall acknowledged the petition.

Mr Green presented his petition calling on Thurrock Council and the Police to work together to better support the community. In response to this Councillor Maney acknowledged the petition.

118. Petitions Update Report

Members received a report on the status of those petitions handed in at Council meetings and Council offices.

119. Appointments to Committees and Outside Bodies, Statutory and Other Panels

The Mayor enquired whether there were any changes to be made to the appointments previously made by committees and outside bodies, statutory and other panels.

The Leader of the Council, Councillor M Coxshall, stated he had one change to replace Councillor Abbas as substitute on the Planning Committee with Councillor Mayes.

The Leader of the Labour group, Councillor J Kent, stated he had no changes to make.

Councillors Byrne, Massey and Allen stated they had no changes to make.

120. Appointment of Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer

Councillor M Coxshall presented the report by stating under Section 35 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 required the Council to appoint a Returning Officer and under Section 8 of the same Act the Council must appoint an Electoral Registration Officer. The purpose of the report was to make appointments to these roles.

RESOLVED

That Ian Wake be appointed Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer.

121. Interim Appointment - Director of Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer)

Councillor M Coxshall presented the report by stating that in accordance with the relevant legislation and constitutional requirements the report sought Council's approval to appoint to the Interim Director of Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer) role. Councillor M Coxshall thanked John Jones for his contribution whilst at Thurrock. Councillor J Kent echoed this comment and welcomed Asmat Hussain to her new role.

RESOLVED

Approved in accordance with the Council's Constitution the appointment of Asmat Hussain as Interim Director of Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer).

122. Independent Remuneration Panel

Councillor M Coxshall stated the report had set out the new arrangements for the Independent Remuneration Panel including the appointment of a new panel member set-up with the first meeting taking place in July. Councillor M Coxshall recommended to Council that recommendation 1.3 be approved.

Councillor J Kent stated he had been offended in that the remuneration of councillors was being undertaken given the financial backdrop of the authority and therefore would not be supporting the recommendations.

Councillor M Coxshall stated that once the panel had met, their views could then be presented back to Council for members to decide but at this point the legal obligations would have been met.

A vote was undertaken, with 24 votes in favour and 16 against recommendation 1.3 was carried.

RESOLVED

Council agreed to a fee for panel members that this fee be £250 per day of attendance per panel member.

123. Annual Pay Policy Statement 2023/24

Councillor Snell presented the report which sought the approval of the Council's Annual Pay Policy Statement, this Statement included a pay policy for all categories of employees which reflected existing employment terms and conditions.

Councillor J Kent stated with the caveat there would be a report when the senior manager pay had been determined, he would be happy to support the recommendation.

Councillor Spillman stated his support for a pay increase for staff working on lower bands, emphasised to members of the public that councillors would not see any increase in their allowances for some time. Councillor Spillman was also not of the opinion that senior staff should get an increase considering the position of the Council had been placed in.

Councillor Byrne stated his support to the recommendation.

RESOLVED

The Annual Pay Policy Statement 2023/24 was endorsed in line with the Council's obligations under the Localism Act 2011.

124. Capital Strategy 2022/23

Councillor Snell referred to the report in the agenda and requested this went straight to the vote.

Councillor J Kent stated this item would be the one that would prove to have been at the centre of Thurrock's difficulties, he continued to state the care that had been taken to put this together this year with scrutiny, external experts and the validation undertaken had been exemplary. Councillor J Kent stated he had more confidence in supporting this, this year, than he had in many previous years.

Councillor M Coxshall stated it had been a hard few months but had enjoyed going through this and other items with the opposition, this was the way forward in making sure of openness as the Council moved forward, with some hard decisions to be made in the capital programme to enable these to be delivered.

RESOLVED

That Full Council:

- 1. Approved the Treasury Management Strategy for 2023/24 including approval of the Annual Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) statement for 2023/24.**
- 2. Considered the current assumptions (set out on page 3 of the strategy) underpinning the Treasury Management Strategy and note that this will be subject to further updates in 2023/24.**
- 3. Considered the strategy in the context of the directions issued by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Homes and Communities and specifically the need for a strict debt reduction plan.**
- 4. Noted the increase in the Council's Capital Financing Requirement (CFR) in 2022/23 as a result of the expected support from DLUHC in the form of a capitalisation direction, as set out in section 3.16.**
- 5. Noted the divestment of investments and the sale of property assets are required to repay the Exceptional Financial Support from DLUHC and this is a key assumption supporting the strategy.**
- 6. Noted the Council's borrowing level will exceed the CFR in 2022/23 but is planned to be managed within this from 23/24 and onwards, as set out in section 3.17.**
- 7. Noted the Prudential indicators included within the strategy that show commercial capital investments are generating net losses to**

the Council in the context of the revised MRP charges and current and projected interest rates, as set out in section 3.6.

- 8. Noted that the borrowing strategy supporting the commercial investment portfolio will be reset alongside wider revisions to the strategy in 2023/24.**

125. General Fund Budget Proposals

The Mayor invited the Leader of the Council, Councillor M Coxshall, to introduce the budget and advised he had 20 minutes to do so. The Mayor agreed that Councillor Snell, Portfolio Holder for Finance, could speak as part of the Leader's 20-minute allocation.

Councillor M Coxshall

Tonight, is the most important decision we will ever make in this chamber as elected councillors. Let me be even clearer on this decision for you not to vote for the budget before us tonight means then there is no future for Thurrock as a standalone council. That's what you see in the letter. Now some may want that, and some may say we should not survive but I and the Conservatives this side love the borough and believe there is a future for Conservatives here. This budget gives us a chance. This is about a new start. This is about correcting errors from the last 25 years, not the last six and setting us on a path for the next 25. This budget was always inevitable but a budget that Thurrock needs. The budget moves us towards to being a council with still a below average council tax, but much improving. While still adding funds to the budget that we need to deliver those people's services. Thurrock has always been, had, a tax that is too low to pay for the services we need to deliver for local people. Some of that is about the fact that our average home is a band c and not an average band d that the rest of the country works on. Some of that was about successive administrations unwilling to increase council tax, some of that was about the government incentive for us not to increase Council Tax. But that is the past. Our decision tonight is a simple one, do we make a modest increase and keep the cheapest council tax in Essex and nearly second in the nation and definitely the second in a unitary authority after the budget increase, or do we repeat the mistakes and have to have another £8.5m worth of service cuts on top of what you see in front of you. Now, I understand Labour have pledged to fight the council tax. So, what are they going to do, repeat the same mistakes of the past 25 years. Keep us a council tax too low to maintain services, have a fire sale and extra cuts. In the past this has led us to the ill thought our investment strategy to just keep the lights on here. We can't do that again and I realise that and that's why we have got to make tough decisions and I said that when I became leader here and this is one of them. I am on the side of making tough decisions to fix this. If that means the issue, and its hard choices, this means we will grow the tax base and therefore make our public services that we want to see delivered, bins, elderly care services, children's services, the things we value, that I value. I live in the borough, I moved to the borough in the last 15 years, and I do hope you can all support me tonight.

Councillor Coxshall invited Councillor Snell as Portfolio Holder for Finance to speak. Councillor Snell stated he was pleased to confirm that we had received the confirmation of Exceptional Financial Support on the 1 March 2023. This had come in the form of a minded to agreement from the minister. The request has been through a process of approval including with the Department LUHC and Treasury. The EFS is £632.66m of which £180.17m is support for 2023/24. The £180.17m is the support we require to meet the 2023/24 deficit in the budget as presented to you today at page 72 of the budget report. Acceptance of this support will enable us to set a balanced budget. Let's be clear that the EFS support you have received is based on the budget that you see presented here tonight. Any increase to the EFS would need to go back to the Minister, which he may or may not be minded to approve. The EFS support is a minded to support and as you would expect, there is a considerable process to undertake before the secretary of state can approve any capitalisation directions in respect of the above years. The council will need to demonstrate that it continues to take the necessary steps towards improvement and the department and ministers will require assurance from the commissioners that the council is making good progress against the improvement and recovery plan, as per the directions issued. At section 4.4 the progress against the directions is summarised. In some areas, there has been good progress, not least the production of a treasury management strategy and compliant minimum revenue provision policy. However, there remains considerable challenges ahead. Specifically, whilst balanced for 2023/24 this budget does not enable Thurrock to get to financial sustainability from 1 April 2024 nor the years ahead. Considerable further work and creativity will be required within Thurrock Council to ensure it achieves the position we are all working towards which is that of financial sustainability. It is also the case that given the scale of the challenge, inevitably it will be necessary to continue to seek exceptional financial support from the Minister to Government beyond this request to 2023/24. Those discussions with Government for that period will commence if this budget is approved. Thank you.

The Mayor then invited the Leader of the Opposition, Councillor J Kent, to respond and advised he had 15 minutes to do so.

Councillor J Kent

Mister Mayor I am suddenly starting to feel really old, I'm old enough to remember when the Conservatives used to think that being a low council tax authority was a good thing. This year's budget setting council meeting is very different. Different both in tone and substance, to that we've had in previous years. For instance, for the last six years we have been asked to agree the level of council tax and the global budget envelope for the council. Every other decision on the budget had been deleted to the cabinet. This year we're asked to do a little more for instance were asked to vote in support of a range of savings proposals, saving proposals that come to just over £8m. Unfortunately, Mister Mayor we only learnt that we would be asked to vote on those savings package at 6.45pm last night. There are 70 proposals here, and

it may be that there are specific proposals that we would be able to support, but there is a very little detail as to just what each proposal entails. There's no impact assessment for any of the proposals, and neither are there any risk assessments. Without any of that information, we cannot support recommendation number 8. Mister Mayor when I went to cabinet last week, the leader made a great play of telling us that this budget is somehow a fresh start that somehow, he and his cronies are nothing to do with the council's catastrophic financial situation. So, let's be clear, they have overseen the greatest financial crash of any council in Britain, ever. Their toxic tory debt stands at very nearly one and a half billion pounds, the losses on their dodgy investments stand at £275m, there's a funding gap of £469m in this year's budget. The shortfall for next year's budget is more than £180m and we will be spending £49m next year on debt interest payments. And we've learned tonight we can only set the budget relying on £632m of exceptional funding from government, which is like to be a capitalisation direction, in other words, treated as a further loan. Far from being a fresh start, Councillor Coxshall and his deputy have sat in the cabinet for every single day since May 2016. They've been at that top table and taking crucial decisions as this financial disaster was unfolded. Frankly Mister Mayor his claims that he is somehow a fresh start is like the arsonist who set fire to your house reappearing saying its ok I'm back and I've brought a bucket of water with me. Mister Mayor it just won't wash. The leader also last week made a plea for all members to, as he put it, to be responsible and I agree with that, I've always taken my responsibilities as a councillor extremely seriously. I led the council for six years, and in that time, we set a balanced budget and returned a surplus every year, despite government funding being cut by around £64m over that period. At the same time, we increased reserves by 300%, council tax low left office council borrowing stood at £345m. It is practically goaling to be lectured of responsibility by Councillor Coxshall. When we did the responsible thing and raise at an extraordinary council meeting our very real concerns that their design as borrow investment activities rather than act in that responsible way, they did nothing but ridicule and try to belittle us for having the temerity to question them and raise our concerns. We were told we were sanctimonious and disingenuous. We were a complete embarrassment and a disgrace. Councillor Coxshall himself told us that he really enjoyed the meeting saying that he loved sitting here. I couldn't chuckle to myself enough. There is scarcely acting in a responsible way. They sanctioned spending £70,000 in fighting through the courts to keep the details of their investments secret by refusing to answer freedom of information requests, that wasn't acting in a responsible way. They continually voted to end council meetings before all business had been completed to avoid answering difficult questions or allowing motions to be debated. That wasn't acting in a responsible way, they removed opposition chairs from scrutiny committees in year, refused to offer so much as the vice chair of a scrutiny committee. Again, that is not acting in a reasonable way and whilst we await the outcome of the best value inspection, the progress report that was published on the 13 December last year also takes a view on just how irresponsible they've been. On their borrowing and investments, it says the income from this strategy allowed local political leaders to forestall or void difficult decisions on raising council tax for several years. It said that Thurrock council built the revenues from high-risk

investment into its base budgets and allocated surpluses to fund short term political priorities and it said that clean it cut it fill it regularly dominated the attention of leading members and senior officers and had become a yardstick for how success is measured and whilst these matters are, of course, important they have provided distraction from more challenging concerns. None of that Mister Mayor suggests that this has in any way been a responsible administration. But now they lecture us on the importance of acting in a responsible manner and of supporting a 10% increase in council tax a modest increase according to the leader of the council. That 10% increase would bring in around £8m, £1.6m of that is the adults social care precept, which we support, leaving £6.4m extra for services. However, Mister Mayor we're told at paragraph 11.2 of tonight's agenda that the costs of intervention come to £6.2m a year, so practically every penny raised by their 10% council tax hike will be swallowed up by the costs of dealing with their failure and it isn't the residents of Thurrock that crashed the council and they shouldn't be penalised with a 10% hike in their council tax and alongside that punitive council tax increase over £8m worth of service cuts and increases to fees and charges the cuts increases listed aren't enough to balance the books so were told we would have to find a further £4m of cuts by the summer and fees and charges will have to be increased again almost immediately. Mister Mayor I will close by saying this we all live here in Thurrock; we all care about the place and most importantly we all care about the people who live here. We all want Thurrock to be best that it can be, but the truth is the Conservatives have broken Thurrock council with their catastrophic management of finances, which has resulted in bankruptcy and the largest ever financial crash of any council in Britain. We cannot change history and the people of Thurrock will have to live with the consequences of this conservative disaster through higher council tax and few and diminished frontline services for years to come.

The Mayor invited Councillor M Coxshall to respond to Councillor J Kent and advised he had 10 minutes to do so.

Councillor M Coxshall

Thank you. I will respond on some of them before I let in all the members to speak tonight because I think it needs to be all 49 still need to hear us. Let's be clear that it's not cabinet that decides the investment strategy, that was in a budget in 17, 18, 19 and 20 and three, maybe four, of that years that the Labour party voted with us to revive that, that all members here voted with that and that's my point it didn't come to cabinet, it wasn't cabinet that decided that, it was members d that decided that. At one point I think it was less than two minutes in 2019 we decided. That is what I am talking about, how we have to look at ourselves and what we did at that point or how we asked and that 49 of us, all of us, all of us voted for that not just the Conservatives, we all voted for that and that is the problem. Now I understand that, and he makes the point about me and cabinet, I think Councillor Kent knows that he wasn't the leader then, I understand that, and it wasn't the leader of your group then. What we want is to be working together inside these groups and you abide by what we were doing. That was the decisions then and quite rightly the cabinet

member for finance made some decisions, recommended decisions, under the right authority. If you look at what there was, we have now found out the MLP was not correct. All of us voted on that, three times, now that's what we have to look at and why did that happen and that's the important thing and turning into throwing a partisan and making this. I completely understand its six weeks to go to an election, he wants to do that that's fair enough, but that's not going to solve the issue here and I take responsibility for the decisions I made. Let's make sure you take decisions you made on this meeting.

The Mayor asked Members for any questions.

Councillor Kerin referred to the brand-new start and correcting errors and stated the same errors were still being made and this was not the way things should be run. It was not fair to be running the council like this. He referred to the modest 10% council tax increase and stated this was not a modest rise for the residents of Thurrock and that decisions being made would affect all residents. Councillor Kerin summed up by stating if this continued, Thurrock Council would cease to exist.

Councillor Spillman stated he was not a cabinet member when decisions were made but took responsibility of the decisions that had been made during that period; all members had voted on the investment strategies and members had been repeatedly misled in reports presented; appealed to Councillor J Kent to do the right thing to vote to close the structural deficit otherwise the Council would have no future.

Councillor Ralph stated Conservative and Labour members had been in the same meeting with the commissioners when they were informed the low option council tax was not on the table and 9.9% was the minimum increase that could be undertaken otherwise there would be consequences.

Councillor Worrall stated Labour had not agreed the borrowing strategy they had agreed borrowing limits and had been promised transparency of no investments of more than £10m; no information had been shared with members and stated the Conservatives had hidden their investments. Councillor Worrall referred to a press statement made by Councillor Spillman. Councillor Worrall stated it had been a political decision to raise the council tax by 10% and would not be supporting; the financial disaster had not been caused by Thurrock residents who should not be asked to pay back those debts. With mistakes and errors still being made by cabinet members on recommendations presented at cabinet. Councillor Worrall summed up by stating she would not support recommendation 8 as she was not confident that sufficient impact assessments on the cuts to services had been undertaken.

Councillor Spillman called a Point of Order requesting that Councillor Worrall withdraw the statement she had made as this was incorrect and had misled the chamber.

Councillor Mayes confirmed this was not residents' fault and ultimately the blame fell to members, and they would take responsibility for that. The consequences, which he had regarded as threatening, would be local government reform, pushing Thurrock into Essex or London, both would be £400 more council tax. There was year on year financial pressures to be met and he questioned without raising council tax what services could be delivered to Thurrock residents. Councillor Mayes concluded that he would be supporting the 10% increase as 5% increase would be the end of Thurrock Council.

Councillor Massey stated he did not believe we would have had this budget if it was not for the failure of the investments. He recognised there were still challenges and with other investments into companies the amount invested would still be close to an entire year of annual budget. He had questions unanswered on those investments, some from two years ago. The scale of the financial issues was alarming and shared the concerns of residents on the increase of council tax without a referendum. Councillor Massey summed up by stating he would support the adult social care as those services needed to be protected in the community. He would also be supporting the increase in normal referendum limits and not one that had been specially arranged by the Government.

Councillor Collins questioned the Labour group on their alternative budget proposals.

Councillor Potheary stated the Labour group, during this six-year period, had fought and asked for greater transparency and openness for an investments board so that investments could be scrutinised and have an oversight of investments. With vice chair positions being taken away from Labour members and requests for information being denied. Councillor Potheary stated that the administration had to take responsibility and not expect Thurrock residents to pay for those mistakes.

Councillor Byrne stated the financial issue was now with Thurrock for decades to come with the revenue stream coming from residents, businesses, and the Government. The 10% increase was not a one-off with Thurrock never seeing their council tax go below 4.9%. He referred to the decisions expected to come from this evening's budget and compared services of other local boroughs but due to the incompetence of members and officers, residents were now expected to pay more.

Councillor Duffin stated there were two options that would come out of tonight's budget, one was to support the 9.9% increase or take a step into the unknown. Not supporting would mean the exception support would be gone and likely that Thurrock Council would no longer exist. He questioned whether this scenario had been explained to residents that moving to Essex Council would mean a 20% council tax increase or an increase of 40% as part of London.

Councillor Abbas stated his support for the budget as this was a practical and responsible decision and Thurrock would still remain the lower council tax in Essex. This would enable more funds to help and support those who would be able to pay and provide better support for vulnerable residents.

Councillor D Arnold stated that Labour had started the investment in solar farms, and it had been publicly noted that they were glad the Conservatives had continued their borrowing to invest policy. Councillor D Arnold stated she was sorry for her part she had played and every day since had continued to make things better. All members were responsible for the too low tax base to work which Thurrock now found itself in, with not enough income from council tax to pay for services. Even after the increase, Thurrock would still have the lowest tax rate in Essex and second lowest in England. With Councillor M Coxshall having to make some very difficult decisions to keep Thurrock viable, he deserved the support, faith, and trust in his leadership.

Councillor Redsell agreed the 4.9% increase would not provide a balanced budget and agreed with Councillor Collins, Labour group had not provided an alternative budget to solve this. Over past years the Council had tried to help residents by having the lowest council tax, which was where this may have gone wrong, increasing 1% each year may have prevented this. Councillor Redsell agreed with the 2% social care as this would be required by all at some point. Councillor Redsell made members aware that the Labour Group had increased council tax by 20% in 2003 and residents had found that a difficult time. Councillor Redsell summed up by stating members needed to pull together.

Councillor Allen stated he would not be supporting the 9.9% increase as this would cause more pressure on resident's outgoings and health. The Council should have undertaken more due diligence on the solar farm investment as this would have highlighted as not a good investment strategy. He asked why the administration and cabinet members had not questioned senior officers more on the transfer of large amounts of money and stated the statements made by the administration had been misleading. Councillor Allen summed up by asking who would be accountable for this.

Councillor Carter stated the second lowest council tax in England was not sustainable and it was all 49 members, who had voted three times, on this decision therefore all members should bear the responsibility.

Councillor Jefferies stated only being elected five years ago he stood here this evening and took responsibility for what had happened and emphasised that there were members in the chambers this evening who had been elected members for much longer who needed to take some responsibility. Councillor Jefferies stated nobody was blaming residents. He echoed comments previously made, that stark choices had to be made this evening, members had to be sensible and responsible. Councillor Jefferies summed up by stating he would not vote on a rate that would see the abolition of the council and its residents with a 20%, 30% or 40% increase and the ULEZ charge.

Councillor Johnson stated the question members had to ask was “do we want Thurrock to survive as a sustainable council and be sustainable going forward”. The income lost over a decade of both Conservative and Labour administrations, both failing to make good decisions on council tax, had cost the council tens of millions of pounds. Although Thurrock would still be the second lowest in Essex this would be the opportunity to put Thurrock back on a financial footing by ensuring the increases embedded cumulative growth in pace with services. This would reset Thurrock and make it fit for purpose in future years. Councillor Johnson echoed the comments previously made that if the budget was not agreed, Thurrock Council would fall, and council taxes would increase immediately by some 20%. Councillor Johnson stated a hardship fund would be created to support those most vulnerable residents. Councillor Johnson summed up by stating he would be supporting this budget but would continue to work to find a solution to the proposed stop of bus services in his ward. Councillor Johnson urged all members to agree to the necessary budget and to stop playing political games.

Councillor Holloway stated that nobody believed a word that the Conservative group had said.

Councillor G Coxshall stated he deliberately took on responsibility for what had happened even though he had only been elected a member last year, this had to be the decision for all 49 members. With members voting against the 9.9% this evening could be seen as giving up on Thurrock, Thurrock Council would be gone and come under either Essex or London. This was the only option on the table and would be proud to support the Leader on his budget this evening. He referred to the hardship fund of over £600,000 on discretionary funding for those who could not afford to pay the increase. Councillor G Coxshall summed up by stating the tough decision had to be made as this was the start for Thurrock to move on.

Councillor Chukwu stated the cost of living, energy, inflation, and food costs were all high and now the proposal to increase council tax was not fair on residents, who should not have to pay for the mistakes that had been made.

Councillor Shinnick stated she would not be supporting the 9.9% increase of council tax as this was a Conservative mistake and they should own it and not put it on the Labour group.

Councillor Snell stated there were two different approaches this evening, mistakes should be acknowledged, realise what had been done and move on. Councillor Coxshall had apologised numerous times on behalf of the Conservative group for the errors that had been made, nobody was in the position they wanted to be in, but those problems had been acknowledged. Emphasised to members of the public that the opposition had the opportunity to come up with an alternative budget, which had not been received. Reiterated that the investment strategy had been agreed by all members for three years on the trot. Councillor Snell agreed with Councillor Massey’s comment that there were questions still to be answered.

At 8.44pm the meeting was suspended due to a disturbance in the public gallery.

At 8.45pm the meeting reconvened.

Councillor Snell stated if the 9.9% was not voted on this evening, Thurrock Council could not continue as it had done previously, the budget deficit would get worse if the 4.99% was voted upon, with services not being provided as they currently were. The 9.9% increase needed to be agreed to put Thurrock in the right direction to put that deficit right. This needed to be undertaken to guarantee the exceptional financial support from Government to help solve the problems. Councillor Snell summed up by stating the mistakes had been acknowledged and a plan had been put forward to resolve the issues.

Councillor Maney stated from conversations he had with residents was very clear they wanted answers, but they actually want solutions. He referenced that no alternative budget, plans or solutions had been presented this evening. Councillor Maney summed by stating the administration would explain themselves to the residents of Thurrock who were owed answered and offer them a solution.

Councillor Smith echoed some the comments made this evening and did not want to see the demise of Thurrock and was here this evening to represent those Thurrock residents who were not in favour of this 9.9% increase as they saw this as paying off a Tory debt. Councillor Smith believed that residents had not been properly informed and deserved some explanation or even offered a referendum. Therefore, on behalf of her residents and without a referendum Councillor Smith would not be supporting the increase this evening.

Councillor M Coxshall summed up by thanking and welcoming members for their comments and views this evening. In turn he replied to some of the issues raised. Apologised for the late note of the recommendations and moving forward agreed that members should have the information available to them to make decisions. That using overview and scrutiny to ensure a good council for residents and changes made to the constitution through the constitution working group had been welcomed. Agreed to be open and transparent as secrecy had been a concern and to talk about all issues and referred to the youth provision as being a very important provision. For the survival of the council would be to agree the 9.9% increase. Referred to the great opportunity of the £8m project in Tilbury with no costs to the council. Referred to the group's whip and agreed there had been some issues in the Conservative group. When the investment strategies started, this could not be taken through as a Conservative administration, work had to be undertaken with all parties to work through that with the previous portfolio of finance continuously working with groups and leadership groups. Councillor Coxshall stated this was the start of the problem and had owned up to that and his party had questioned him why he was not confronting the opposition. This was for the opposition to understand the realities of what they had done wrong and how they should be helping. This evening was about the plan to

move forward. Referred to Councillor Massey comment about unanswered questions and stated these would come, there may still be issues to come and regardless of answers it was important they were heard. To make sure this did not happen again, there were learnings to take away not just for Thurrock but for other councils. Thanked Councillor Byrne for his comment and agreed work still needed to be done to ensure members had the right information. Compared the 9.9% increase to a previous Labour proposed increase of 20% which had not been ringfenced. The proposed 9.9% increase was actually 7.9% in council tax and 2% of adult social care, he continued to state that the 2% would not cover the adult social care bill because the most vulnerable residents needed that money. Councillor Coxshall stated the hardship fund was really important with £600,000 in the budget, ringfenced for that fund. Councillor Coxshall summed up by stating this had been a helpful and important debate, would have happily listened to a budget from the opposition and believed could have worked through this with the opposition groups. Councillor Coxshall stated this was disappointing and questioned how those groups proposed to pay for social care and vulnerable adults if they did not agree to the budget this evening. Questioned how they would pay and keep the theatre open and following some misinformation there had been no decision to close the theatre. Questioned how bins would continually be emptied and to make sure a better bin service be provided, how would they pay for frontline staff, care for the homeless and those on the street. Councillor Coxshall stated none of that could be done without the finances and stability of the council.

The Mayor moved to the recommendations.

A non-recorded vote took place en-bloc on recommendations 1.1. 1.2 and 1.3. Whereupon the Mayor declared recommendations 1.1. 1.2 and 1.3 was unanimously carried.

A recorded vote took place on recommendation 1.4, the result of which was:

For: Councillors Qaisar Abbas, Alex Anderson, Deborah Arnold, Paul Arnold, Adam Carter, Gary Collins, George Coxshall, Mark Coxshall, Jack Duffin, James Halden, Shane Hebb, Andrew Jefferies, Barry Johnson, Tom Kelly, Susan Little, Ben Maney, Allen Mayes, Augustine Ononaji, Maureen Pearce, Shane Ralph, Joycelyn Redsell, Graham Snell, Luke Spillman and James Thandi (24)

Against: Councillors John Allen, Chris Baker, Gary Byrne, Daniel Chukwu, Victoria Holloway, Cathy Kent, John Kent, Martin Kerin, Steve Liddiard, Fraser Massey, Sara Muldowney, Srikanth Panjala, Jane Pothecary, Sue Shinnick, Jennifer Smith and Lynn Worrall (16)

Abstain: (0)

Whereupon the Mayor declared recommendation 1.4 be carried.

A recorded vote took place on recommendation 1.5, the result of which was:

For: Councillors Qaisar Abbas, John Allen, Alex Anderson, Deborah Arnold, Paul Arnold, Chris Baker, Gary Byrne, Adam Carter, Daniel Chukwu, Gary Collins, George Coxshall, Mark Coxshall, Jack Duffin, James Halden, Shane Hebb, Victoria Holloway, Andrew Jefferies, Barry Johnson, Tom Kelly, Cathy Kent, John Kent, Martin Kerin, Steve Liddiard, Susan Little, Ben Maney, Fraser Massey, Allen Mayes, Sara Muldowney, Augustine Ononaji, Srikanth Panjala, Maureen Pearce, Jane Pothecary, Shane Ralph, Joycelyn Redsell, Sue Shinnick, Jennifer Smith, Graham Snell, Luke Spillman, James Thandi and Lynn Worrall (40)

Against: (0)

Abstain: (0)

Whereupon the Mayor declared recommendation 1.5 be carried

A non-recorded vote took place on recommendation 1.6. Whereupon the Mayor declared recommendation 1.6 was unanimously carried.

A non-recorded vote took place on recommendation 1.7. Whereupon the Mayor declared recommendation 1.7 was unanimously carried.

A recorded vote took place on recommendation 1.8, the result of which was:

For: Councillors Qaisar Abbas, Alex Anderson, Deborah Arnold, Paul Arnold, Adam Carter, Gary Collins, George Coxshall, Mark Coxshall, Jack Duffin, James Halden, Shane Hebb, Andrew Jefferies, Barry Johnson, Tom Kelly, Susan Little, Ben Maney, Allen Mayes, Augustine Ononaji, Maureen Pearce, Shane Ralph, Joycelyn Redsell, Graham Snell, Luke Spillman and James Thandi (24)

Against: Councillors John Allen, Chris Baker, Gary Byrne, Daniel Chukwu, Victoria Holloway, Cathy Kent, John Kent, Martin Kerin, Steve Liddiard, Fraser Massey, Sara Muldowney, Srikanth Panjala, Jane Pothecary, Sue Shinnick, Jennifer Smith and Lynn Worrall (16)

Abstain: (0)

Whereupon the Mayor declared recommendation 1.8 be carried.

A non-recorded vote took place en-bloc on recommendations 1.9 and 1.10. Whereupon the Mayor declared recommendations 1.9 and 1.10 was unanimously carried.

A recorded vote took place on recommendation 1.11, the result of which was:

For: Councillors Qaisar Abbas, Alex Anderson, Deborah Arnold, Paul Arnold, Adam Carter, Daniel Chukwu, Gary Collins, George Coxshall, Mark Coxshall, Jack Duffin, James Halden, Shane Hebb, Victoria Holloway, Andrew Jefferies,

Barry Johnson, Tom Kelly, Cathy Kent, John Kent, Martin Kerin, Steve Liddiard, Susan Little, Ben Maney, Allen Mayes, Sara Muldowney, Augustine Ononaji, Srikanth Panjala, Maureen Pearce, Jane Potheary, Shane Ralph, Joycelyn Redsell, Sue Shinnick, Jennifer Smith, Graham Snell, Luke Spillman, James Thandi and Lynn Worrall (36)

Against: Councillors John Allen, Chris Baker, Gary Byrne and Fraser Massey (4)

Abstain: (0)

Whereupon the Mayor declared recommendation 1.11 be carried.

A non-recorded vote took place on recommendation 1.12. Whereupon the Mayor declared recommendation 1.12 was unanimously carried.

A non-recorded vote took place en-bloc on recommendations 1.13 and 1.14. Whereupon the Mayor declared recommendations 1.13 and 1.14 was unanimously carried.

A non-recorded vote took place on recommendation 1.15. Whereupon the Mayor declared recommendation 1.15 was unanimously carried.

Finally, a non-recorded vote took place en-bloc on recommendations 1.16 to 1.19. Whereupon the Mayor declared recommendations 1.16 to 1.19 was unanimously carried.

RESOLVED

- 1. Considered and acknowledged the Acting Director of Finance and Section 151 Officer's s25 report on the robustness of the proposed budget and the adequacy of the Council's reserves, as set out in Appendix 8, including the factors which underpin the budget and specifically the need for exceptional financial support to balance the budget.**
- 2. That Council commented on the proposed updates to the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.**
- 3. That Council noted on 6 February 2023 Thurrock Council was granted permission by the levelling up minister to raise council tax by an extra 5% to 10% without the need for a local referendum.**
- 4. That Council supported the paper assumes a council tax increase of 7.99%, as per paragraph 9.6.**
- 5. That Council supported a 2% Adult Social Care precept increase as per paragraph 9.6 and note that this will be used to fund increased demand and provider fees within older people care services.**

- 6. That Council agreed the council tax requirement of £82.354m as per Appendix 9.**
- 7. That Council noted the net cost of services requirement is £327.647m as per paragraph 8.1.**
- 8. That Council supported the proposed savings as per section 12 and Appendix 4 and note these are insufficient to address the funding gap without the need to seek exceptional financial support from Government.**
- 9. That Council noted that exceptional financial support is required to balance the 2023/24 budget and that discussions with Central Government are ongoing, as per Appendix 3.**
- 10. That Council noted the budget had been set based on the assumption that the request for exceptional financial support in respect of the 2022/23 budget deficit is granted.**
- 11. That Council supports the changes to the capital programme as set out in this report and associated Appendices.**
- 12. That Council agreed the impact of new Prudential Borrowing on the debt levels of the Council as set out in Appendix 5.**
- 13. That Council noted the capital programme will be subject to a further review as set out in the report and following the issue of a Section 114 Notice.**
- 14. That Council noted the projected revenue impact of the Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) costs as set out in Section 14.25.**
- 15. That Council supported the proposed delegation to Cabinet to approve additions to the programme based on the criteria set out in section 14.24.**
- 16. That Council noted the Dedicated School's Budget is set at £51.258m as per paragraph 15.13.**
- 17. That Council noted further reviews have been commissioned into the fees and charges policy and the pay policy as per paragraph 9.23 and 10.4 respectively.**
- 18. That Council noted the Council's position on Reserves, recognising the unique situation the Council faces and a need to revisit the adequacy of Reserves as savings and service transformation are affected during 2023/24.**
- 19. That Council noted that work on the budget will continue during 2023/24, with more savings required to Council services.**

At 9.20pm, Councillor J Kent called a Point of Order to extend standing orders, this was seconded by Councillor M Coxshall and agreed by all members.

126. Questions from Members

The Mayor informed the chamber that two questions to the Leader had been received and ten questions to cabinet members.

A copy of the transcript of questions and answers can be found at Appendix A to these minutes.

Questions 8, 9 and 10 were not heard due to timing of this item.

127. Reports from Members representing the Council on Outside Bodies

No reports were presented.

128. Minutes of Committees

The minutes of committees as set out in the agenda were received.

129. Update on motions resolved at Council during the previous year

Members received an information report updating the progress in respect of motions received at Council.

130. Motion submitted by Councillor J Kent

The Motion, as printed in the agenda was proposed by Councillor J Kent and seconded by Councillor Worrall. The Motion read as follows:

Council calls on cabinet to retain the Thameside Complex as a hub for arts, culture, and heritage for the community of Thurrock to own.

Councillor J Kent presented the motion by stating that Thameside had opened its doors in 1971, was a professional theatre and was a great opportunity for those performing in there. Alongside the museum gallery there were thousands of artifacts that were not on display but stored within the complex. The library was the borough's central library with a purpose-built children's library and moving that into another building filled him with dread. Councillor J Kent welcomed the comments made by Councillor M Coxshall in that he was passionate about Thameside and would not want Thameside lost to the borough of Thurrock and saw this as a sign that there was a future for Thameside.

Councillor Pothecary acknowledged the number of Thurrock residents outside the building this evening saying they want the Thameside complex to be

retained and saved for the community. The residents of Thurrock deserved a theatre, museum, art space and a central library. That closing the Thameside would send the message that the cultural learning heritage and arts were not for the likes of Thurrock residents. The Thameside complex was for the community, should be given to the community and that each member had a choice.

Councillor Kerin stated residents wanted a purposeful theatre for Thurrock and had concerns that once the theatre had gone, it would be gone for ever. He referred to the purpose-built children's library and questioned whether following all the budget cuts a new dedicated library would be built if it were to close. The library was equal to all and requested that when cabinet make any decision on Thameside they make that decision for future generations and libraries were a key part of the rise of new generations.

Councillor M Coxshall recognised the passion and stated outcomes for the community were better services, fewer buildings and gave a guarantee there was a need for a cultural hub with a central library and a good museum. There were monies in the capital programme for a library and a new museum and needed to look how this could be achieved through the process alongside the live, work and play agenda of the Local Plan. To use this as the opportunity to understand the best place, what it should look like and what could be undertaken to deliver the cultural offering in the centre of Grays with a good leisure facility. Councillor M Coxshall stated he could not support this motion this evening but promised Cabinet would move forward on this and deliver.

Councillor Redsell stated the current Thameside complex was not fit for purpose and residents of Thurrock needed a better building with better facilities and would not be supported the motion this evening.

Councillor Abbas stated Thameside complex was on the agenda for Corporate Overview and Scrutiny next week and requested that committee undertook the appropriate scrutiny on the report. Councillor Abbas stated the Thameside complex was 50 years old and required significant repairs and maintenance with costs that would total over £18m. He was opposed to the motion as this did not value transformation or innovation.

Councillor C Kent stated her support for the motion and all members were here this evening to make the lives of Thurrock residents better and all members should have engaged with those residents outside the building this evening to understand why they want the Thameside complex to remain open. Councillor C Kent stated, from experience, she did not have confidence in the promise of a new theatre being built and urged members to support the motion to keep the Thameside complex open.

Councillor Ralph stated the recommendation proposed for Corporate Overview and Scrutiny next week did not include the decision to close or sell the Thameside building which he felt was a great step forward. For 20 years he had been campaigning for a better area to enable those artifacts to be on display. That plans would need to be worked on for the proposal to move the

library to the CO2 building and stood by his comment that Thameside should remain as a theatre but as the motion this evening had moved on following statements made this evening he would not be in support.

Councillor Byrne questioned why the community and culture portfolio holder was not prepared to speak with residents this evening to understand their views and questioned as portfolio holder what he done for residents of Thurrock.

Councillor D Arnold stated the administration were being accused of not listening, open and transparent but herself and Councillor M Coxshall, as part of cabinet, when a paper was presented on the closure of Thameside, had stood up to challenge and to seek options. Councillor Snell had been part of working group looking at the maintenance and repairs required of the Thameside complex. Herself had spoken to groups at the theatre explaining the process being undertaken, formed a round-the-table discussion group where other conservative members had attended, helped those submit community bids and stated members wanted to see a better offer for the community with better arts and culture facilities and therefore would be supporting the leader in his decisions and would continue to listen and talk to residents.

Councillor Maney stated there was a reoccurring theme from the Labour group with impassionate pleas and displays of emotion but with no substance, he referred to the Section 151 comments of the motion that maintenance costs would be around £18m to £20m and asked the Labour group where they expect that money to come from and asked that they come forward with a plan that made this economically and sustainable viable.

Councillor Worrall stated that the recreation of the facilities offered by the library could not be recreated in civic offices. The museum artifacts, some gifted to the library needed to be preserved properly and not just boxed up and moved but more importantly she wanted to give every child that experience of walking through the theatre front door and feel that excitement. Councillor Worrall questioned where the money would come from to pay for a new cultural hub and the effects of shutting the theatre on all those groups was not acceptable, the theatre should be given to the community as they cared and urged all members to do the right thing this evening and vote for the motion. Councillor Worrall also stated that until an alternative building had been identified, Thameside should remain open.

Councillor J Kent summed up by stating his disappointment and had clearly noted Councillor M Coxshall comment that he was "passionate about it and did not want it lost to the borough of Thurrock"; Councillor J Kent remembered the time when Councillor Abbas had stood outside with the protestors; agreed with Councillor Ralph's comments but stated having the library, museum and theatre together would give extra capacity in this type of cultural hub. In regard to Councillor Arnold's comment, he stated we had a better arts and culture offer coming with million pounds coming through the creative people and place bid. Although much of that bid would be based around having

Thameside as that base. Referred to the comments made by Councillor Maney and did not accept the estimate of £18m to £20m of capital works needed with much of those costs did not need to be done, for example lifting and raising of the roof. The pantomime this year had taken over a quarter of million pounds, although not profile had demonstrated that a proper run building, proper run bar, proper concessions and extra big shows a year could drive the revenue which would make the theatre complex work. Councillor J Kent summed up by stating there were business plans and bids on the table that would not need a subsidy, and these should be looked at more closely.

Councillor J Kent requested a requisition vote.

For: Councillors John Allen, Chris Baker, Gary Byrne, Daniel Chukwu, Victoria Holloway, Cathy Kent, John Kent, Martin Kerin, Steve Liddiard, Fraser Massey, Sara Muldowney, Srikanth Panjala, Jane Potheary, Sue Shinnick, Jennifer Smith and Lynn Worrall (16)

Against: Councillors Qaisar Abbas, Alex Anderson, Deborah Arnold, Paul Arnold, Adam Carter, Gary Collins, George Coxshall, Mark Coxshall, Jack Duffin, James Halden, Shane Hebb, Andrew Jefferies, Barry Johnson, Tom Kelly, Susan Little, Ben Maney, Allen Mayes, Augustine Ononaji, Maureen Pearce, Shane Ralph, Joycelyn Redsell, Graham Snell, Luke Spillman and James Thandi (24)

The Mayor announced the motion lost.

The meeting finished at 10.45 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk**