

\*\*\*\*\*

**DACORUM BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**MEETING OF THE COUNCIL**

**28 FEBRUARY 2024**

\*\*\*\*\*

Present:

**MEMBERS:**

Councillor Tindall (Leader) Councillors, Adeleke, Allen, Anderson, Banks, Barradell, Barry, Bhinder, Bristow, Bromham, Capozzi, Cox, Deacon, Dhyani, Douris, Durrant, Elliot, England, Freedman, Gale, Guest, Hannell, Hobson, Hobson, Johnson, Link, Link, Maddern, McAreyve, Patterson, Pesch, Pound, Pringle, Reynolds, Riddick, Santamaria, Silwal, Smith-Wright, Stevens, Stewart, Symington, Taylor, Timmis, Weston, Williams, Williams and C Wyatt-Lowe

**OFFICERS:**

CHamilton	Chief Executive
MBrookes	Assistant Director Legal & Democratic Services
NHowcutt	Chief Finance Officer
CONeil	Democratic Services Manager
CDempsey	Financial Planning and Analysis Manager
LFowell	Democratic Services Lead Officer
JGowlett	Desktop and AV Support Analyst

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

**1 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 15<sup>th</sup> November 2024 were agreed.

**2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**3 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

The Mayor introduced Mr Mike Ridley, who submitted a question to be addressed to the Leader of the Council, Cllr Ron Tindall.

Mr Ridley read out his question as follows;

*'Bearing in mind that in the Hemel Hempstead Town Centre Master Plan the Market Square was earmarked as a "Leisure Zone", and now that the square has been provisionally allocated for the delivery of a Health Campus, what are the Borough's plans for delivering a leisure zone, including a much called-for multi-purpose Arts Venue, which would enliven the Town Centre with a crowd drawing cultural community asset, funded perhaps by section 106 or CIL money from the developers of the Hemel*

*Garden Community and the increased income from Council Tax that the population expansion will yield?’*

Cllr Tindall responded by advising that The administration is keen to improve Hemel Hempstead’s cultural and leisure offer. Last year we published the new Hemel Hempstead Town Centre Vision which recognises this and one of the eight objectives we have set is specifically aimed at doing this. The previous Town Centre Masterplan was published over ten years ago now, in 2013. Much of its aims have been achieved. It didn’t propose a ‘Leisure Zone’ on the former Market Square, but set out proposals to allow for “a range of leisure, retail, business and cultural facilities with new housing” in that part of the town centre.

Circumstances have changed over the past decade, and this is why we have brought forward a revised strategy for the next stages in Hemel Town Centre’s future. Delivery of a new Health Campus, working with our NHS partners, presents an important opportunity for the town and would secure the regeneration of the former Market Square.

But we remain committed to growing the cultural and leisure offer to our residents, visitors and businesses. The new Town Centre Vision sets an ambitious framework for the future to harness investment and deliver ambitious regeneration. We are working with the development and investment sector to deliver this vision, which includes leisure uses and supporting development of the evening economy.

Officers will be embarking on the production of a cultural strategy for the whole of Dacorum this year, with a particular focus on how we can improve the offer in Hemel Town Centre, and a new Head of Arts and Culture is joining the Council next week to lead on this work.

Furthermore we will be delivering the Hemel Imaginarium – an exciting programme of community activities and meanwhile uses to drive footfall and activity in the town centre, many of which will have an arts, culture or sports based theme. We are delivering this working with partners such as Sunnyside, Frogmore Paper Mill, Apex 360 and Hemel BID.

Over the course of this year, therefore, we will be looking forward to both developing the new cultural strategy and seeking to make provision for the arts, culture and new leisure wherever possible as the town centre changes and develops. We look forward to engaging the community and our partner organisations through the Hemel Place Board in these plans as they evolve.

Securing developer contributions through the section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy routes will have an important part to play and we will of course be seeking to maximise these wherever possible. The outward expansion of the town through Hemel Garden Communities is some years off as our new Local Plan progresses and master planning work for this transformative programme continues.

Cllr Tindall summed up by expressing his hope that when we get through the next year or two and we can indulge in discussion on how we can develop the activities of the town over all.

The Mayor invited Mr Ridley to ask a supplementary question, to which he responded; I am wondering, with all these ideals, if the Borough has thoroughly investigated the merits of a health hub versus an arts centre on what is known as the market square as

**CHAIRMAN**

this would revitalise the town centre taking into account both the daytime and night economy?

Cllr Tindall responded that ideally we would like both, but unfortunately at the moment the only option in prospect is the health campus as the NHS have been very willing to engage and talk with us. The financing of a health campus versus an arts and leisure facility are completely different and we would hope that over the coming years most of the funding for the health centre will come from central government. When it comes to an Arts and leisure centre, we have a new officer joining us next week; to know what we want and to set those important conversations with interested parties, it is necessary to get this officer in post and then look at what the gaps are in this provision across the Borough to develop a robust plan going forward.

The Mayor thanked Mr Ridley for his question and Cllr Tindall for his response.

#### **4 ANNOUNCEMENTS**

4.1 The Mayor welcomed newly elected member Cllr Smith-Wright.

The Mayor congratulated Cllr McArevey who is a local nurse, and one of two local nurses put forward for an NHS Hero Award with Hertfordshire Heart. The Mayor celebrated the notable achievement of Cllr McArevey who was the winner of this award.

The Mayor invited the Democratic Services Officer to address the meeting with housekeeping announcements.

4.2 The Chief Executive, Claire Hamilton, announced the following;

“A borough by-election was held on Thursday the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 2024 in the Tring West and Rural Ward.

I can confirm that there was a 27.2% turnout and the candidate elected was Caroline Smith-Wright of the Liberal Democrat party.

I would also like to inform members that the Police and Crime Commissioner election will be held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2024. Notice of election will be published on 15<sup>th</sup> March which is when the pre-election period will commence.”

4.3 The Leader, Cllr Tindall, also expressed the best wishes of the Council to Cllr Birnie who has recently been taken unwell.

The Group Leaders tendered apologies on behalf of Cllrs Birnie, Wilkie, Pringle, Mitchell and Walker. Cllr Pringle subsequently joined the meeting at 19.57.

#### **5 CABINET MEMBER UPDATES**

5.1 Leader of the Council

**CHAIRMAN**

Cllr Tindall advised he was pleased to advise that Cllr Capozzi has agreed to be the Cabinet members for Corporate & Commercial and will be taking up the post directly following this meeting.

Cllr Tindall further advised a change in reporting for the Climate & Ecological portfolio which will now report to the SPAE OSC rather than the F&R OSC.

The Mayor advised that updates from the individual Portfolio Holders have been circulated with the agenda and invited questions.

## 5.2 Climate & Ecological Emergency

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe asked; is your use of Net Zero based on Co2 alone or does it include Carbon equivalent, methane and other gases?

Cllr England referred back to the Climate Emergency Strategy produced under previous administration, confirming all the measurements of Carbon are Co2e, that 'e' stands for equivalent and that does include methane and other fast gases, which are gases which don't exist very long in the environment but do a lot of damage while they are there.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe followed up and asked; presuming then that the polices take note of this and that you have thought of what measures you can carry out to achieve that whole package of reductions?

Cllr England responded that plans are developing and are dependent on resources, but absolutely all the gases are included in what we are trying to do. Cllr England added that we are also trying to prevent the escape of money; a lot of money to be saved and generated through the activities we are looking to deliver over next few years.

Cllr Douris referred to page 6 of the Portfolio Holder's update, where it says 'residents can save up to £720 a year following 4 simple steps', and asked the Portfolio Holder; can you please justify to us what those 4 simple steps are?

Cllr England advised he does not have that information in his head but will arrange for the Social Media Team to circulate.

**Action: Cllr England to arrange for the 4 simple steps information to be provided to Democratic Services for distribution.**

Cllr Barradell asked, when do you hope to be back on track with the carbon budget forecast?

Cllr England responded with his view that this is a difficult question, in particular the previous administration need to explain why they got so far off track in last few years.

Cllr England explained that the situation is, if you look at chart carefully, it starts to dip quite sharply around 2019/20 as that is when the improvements we are looking for are supposed to start. It is not a steady linear progression to zero, instead it drops much more steeply in first 5 years if all measure are put in place. It is a reality that the steps taken by central government are wrecking the chances we have of meeting the specified line, but we are going to do our best.

**CHAIRMAN**

Cllr England advised there are two aspects to this; making a decision and putting resources behind it. The current situation demonstrates that historically, we haven't been 'meaning it', both at this Council level and, crucially, in central government, which was apparent having attended a net zero conference last summer where universally, cross party, it was agreed that central government are not doing enough.

### 5.3 Place

There were no questions.

### 5.4 People & Transformation

There were no questions.

### 5.5 Corporate & Commercial Services

Cllr Elliot referred to the statement within the update that 96% of our commercial properties are occupied and asked; how many of those are on payment plans?

Cllr Tindall responded that he does not have that information in front of him but commented that officers work very hard to make sure that the businesses, most of which are located in neighbourhood centres around hemel, maintain a good rent record and are thriving. There are a number of measures put in place to help them if they run into trouble.

Cllr Tindall confirmed that he will ask the question of how many of the 96% of occupied properties are on payment plans and feed that information back.

**Action: Cllr Tindall to arrange for the data regarding number of tenants in commercial properties that are on payment plans to be provided to Democratic Services for distribution.**

Cllr Elliot responded that, as a follow on from that, he would also like to know the bad debt provision for the commercial asset side.

Cllr Tindall responded that he would also arrange for that information to be provided.

**Action: Cllr Tindall to arrange for the data regarding bad debt provision for commercial assets to be provided to Democratic Services for distribution.**

Cllr Guest asked; has the Portfolio Holder read the budget consultation result summary where 78% of respondents were least in favour of charging more for green waste collection?

Cllr Tindall responded that he did review it and advised that it was necessary to take a view; on the one hand there is a need to achieve a balanced budget and keep services in line with the increased cost, particularly after Prime Minister Truss wrecked the economy a year or two ago. Also, we have a duty to maintain as low an increase as possible in order to not put additional pressure

**CHAIRMAN**

on our residents with cost of living pressures; we believe we struck the right balance.

Cllr Guest responded; as this budget proposes to do exactly what 78% of those who replied said they didn't want it to do, how can this administration claim to be a listening administration?

Cllr Tindall responded that they listened overall to residents, both those who responded to that survey and those that provided feedback by other means. Took account of current budget proposals, took account of the fact central government has not provided sufficient funds for this year, as in previous years, for local government across the board. We have had to rely on other charges and means of income, as did the previous administration. This increase doesn't go into large amounts of money.

## 5.6 Housing & Property Services

Cllr Guest advised that some weeks ago herself and Cllr Pound attended a meeting between Dacorum Borough Council officers and residents of the Great Sturgess sheltered housing scheme, at which officers said the supporting people charge for residents in schemes with a Supported Housing Officer will be increasing from £6.90 a week to £21.00 a week phased in over 5 years and asked; why is this being done?

Cllr Dhyani advised that for more than 10 years we have not been charging in line with the actual costs/charges, no review had been carried out, this is a build-up we now have to recover. It is a service we provide to supported housing residents in terms of having warden services. Previously there were some government grants which were withdrawn, but we had continued to give that discount to residents. When we reviewed and found a large gap to make up, we decided instead of charging residents the large difference in one year, it will be a gradual increase over 5 years to ensure it doesn't hit as hard as it could. Consultations were held within the schemes and residents have expressed they understand and support the increase.

Cllr Guest commented that after the funding was removed in 2011 the previous Conservative administration froze the supporting people charge, but in its first budget the new Liberal Democrat administration is increasing it progressively over next 5 years. Cllr Guest asked the Portfolio Holder; are some of the most vulnerable, elderly members of the community the right ones to choose to raise funding in this way?

Cllr Dhyani responded by asking; what then do you propose we do to bring this in line? What we are charging for these services has fallen behind; the funding will not come from elsewhere; they are well received services that residents want to continue receiving. Based on what we have heard from residents, there are not any concerns about this increase.

Cllr Williams commented that later in the meeting we will be asked to approve a rent increase of 7.7% as part of the budget, commenting that whilst he does not disagree with the increase, he has been advised that tenants have today received letters advising them of the increase. Cllr Williams asked; do you think it is right that tenants are being advised of this increase before it has been agreed by Full Council?

**CHAIRMAN**

Cllr Dhyani responded to confirm that letters have gone out, advising she would be happy to provide a copy and advising that they have hosted quite a few visiting sessions for residents to help if they don't understand, having checked with residents this has been well received.

Cllr Williams responded to advise that was not his question, clarifying that he was asking if it is appropriate that the democratic process has been bypassed and residents have been notified prior to Council making a formal budget decision.

Cllr Dhyani responded that this has been brought before Tenants Leaseholder Committee and as she understand, has also been reviewed at scrutiny committee, therefore believe it has been through the correct process, but happy to discuss with officers and get written response to circulate.

Cllr Williams advised, that with respect, the question has not been answered.

Cllr Tindall commented that an offer has been made to discuss this outside meeting and to provide a follow up response; we will need to find out what officers have done so that information can be provided.

The Mayor commented that this response should also include clarification that this went through scrutiny as suggested. The key matter is; was this letter informing them of something or consulting with them on the Boroughs intention of potential increase?

The Mayor asked Cllr Williams if he accepts that action?

Cllr Williams confirmed he would accept it, but expressed he is not content that it was an appropriate answer, or that the Portfolio Holder has answered in an appropriate way so not content.

The Mayor asked Cllr Williams if he is happy that the Portfolio Holder will look into whether the scrutiny process has been followed properly and confirm if the letter was consultative or informative?

Cllr Tindall raised a point of clarification that the question Cllr Williams posed was; should this letter have gone out before the Council had taken a decision on the budget item that refers to the contents of that letter; that was Cllr Williams question and we will undertake to establish what happened and what the process was, as well as what happened in previous years, to respond to that point.

**Action: Cllr Dhyani to arrange for confirmation of whether the rent increase letter sent out was informing residents of a rent increase, or consulting on the potential for a rent increase.**

Cllr Santamaria addressed the Portfolio Holder and referred to the number of ways engagement has been increased, with opportunities for residents to scrutinise aspects of our work, asking; can you please tell us how residents are responding to this change in approach and tell us of any improvements it has yielded?

Cllr Dhyani responded that we have delivered lots of sessions to create more engagement with residents. There is a new initiative started by repair team,

**CHAIRMAN**

where once a week residents can drop in to discuss issues with officers directly. Also held a walk in session on 30<sup>th</sup> Jan to help people with rent, allocations policy etc. We want to build a good relationship which will help us find our right strategy for the future.

#### 5.7 Neighbourhood Operations

Cllr Anderson advised that he understands the Portfolio Holder nearly had a bicycle accident riding over the entrance to Gadebridge park opposite Marlowes, with the new barrier down, and he himself nearly went into it in his car with the barrier up because it wasn't big enough to secure the park, but big enough to cause significant damage if I did not stop. Cllr Anderson asked; does the Portfolio Holder agree that the new barrier does not increase security of the park and has in fact reduced the safety and needs to be replaced with a proper barrier that does the job properly?

Cllr Bromham confirmed it is an observation he has made previously about that barrier, the issue has been raised with officers and he expects it to be actioned soon as he agrees the barrier is not as visible as it should be.

Cllr Douris referred to the of electric trial 26 ton dust carts and asked; what are the vehicle charging arrangements are for those, how long it takes to charge and where this will happen?

Cllr Bromham confirmed the vehicles are charged in the depot overnight and commented that as a service they are learning all the things that will need to be taken into account when we fully electrify with new generation of bin lorries. There is limited power available, the grid connections are one of the big challenges for the bin lorries; to be charging large number of vehicle's. We have learned other things about operation of an electric fleet, such as they are very good in start stop operation but use a lot of charge to go all the way to Watford to unload; all this will need to be taken into account when we design our new depot or depots.

Cllr Douris asked; can you give me a reasonable idea of how many times they have been out on runs and roughly how many miles they have done?

Cllr Bromham advised they have been running for a couple of weeks on full rounds. In terms of exact mileage, that will become part of a report on the whole trial of these vehicles, therefore do not feel there is any benefit in reporting very specific things like that at the moment but instead propose we wait to the end of the trial to report all significant findings.

Cllr Maddern advised that in her capacity of Herts County Councillor she has received a lot of complaints from people about the removal of all the dog waste bins all the way along canal by The Canals and River Trust.

Cllr Bromham responded this is an important issue, approximately 45 bins have been removed by The Canals and Rivers Trust, motivated by reduction in funding from central government; they cannot afford to service them anymore. The Canal and Rivers Trust approach is a towpath code to take rubbish home, but in urban areas we do understand there is still an issue and to that end one of the things I am trying to drive is procedure and efficiency, one of which is a database mapping all the bins in the Borough, each with a photograph and detail of what type of bin it is. We can look a t where the bins have gone from

**CHAIRMAN**



towpath and ensure there is a good network of bins , accessible also by road, one of officers in my portfolio is having regular meetings with The Canals and Rivers trust for this and a lot of other issues.

Cllr Adeleke advised his question also relates to bins, specifically dog waste bins and referred to the report where it states you are carrying out the mapping of dog bins and asked, is there any plan to increase or decrease the number of bins or is it just a mapping exercise?

Cllr Bromham responded that there is no objective to increase or decrease but to provide overview of where bins are located.

Cllr Adeleke asked if it would be possible to get an additional dog waste bin in Chipperfield. It was suggested that this matter be picked up with the Portfolio Holder outside the meeting.

## **6 BUSINESS FROM THE LAST COUNCIL MEETING**

There were no outstanding actions from the previous meeting, as detailed in the written update published as part of the agenda for this meeting.

## **7 CABINET REFERRALS**

Cllr Tindall introduced the Cabinet Referrals

CA/99/23 FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORT

The recommendations were agreed by the Council

CA/106/23 VCS COMMISSIONING – GRANT APPROACH

The recommendations were agreed by the Chamber

CA/108/23 COUNCIL TAX BASE REPORT AND SUPPORT SCHEME

The recommendations were agreed by the Chamber

CA/09/24 TREASURY MANAGEMENT MID-YEAR REVIEW

The recommendations were agreed by the Chamber

CA/18/24 BUILDING SAFETY POLICY

The recommendations were agreed by the Chamber

CA/19/24 COMMITTEE TIMETABLE

The recommendations were agreed by the Chamber

CA/20/24 HRA BUSINESS PLAN REFRESH

The recommendations were agreed by the Chamber

CA/23/24 BUDGET

**CHAIRMAN**

I stand to present this budget as the leader of a new Liberal Democrat administration, the first change in political administration for 22 years. Since the last budget was set a year ago, the council and the economic outlook has also changed and changed significantly the wider economic and political outlook remains very uncertain with a general election looming during the period of this budget.

The new administration is still developing and revising the council's corporate plan for the next four years and on publication, this will set out the main strategic outlook and objectives of the new administration.

The economic and financial challenges brought by Covid were significant, and the creation of the economic recovery reserve provided a structured financial response to set the foundations for the 2024/25 budget. With the UK economy officially in a time of recession the council has many challenges, but will be positioned in the medium term to continue back to full economic health, as we recover both from the covid period and the Trussonomics of 2022.

Amongst a very challenging economy, Dacorum Borough Council has played a key role in extending help and support to our businesses and communities at a time they needed it most, and the proposed budget for 24/25 continues that investment. The 2024/25 proposed budget continues to support our day-to-day services, amid so much financial uncertainty. I have no doubt that this consistency and reliability will be reassuring for residents across Dacorum, but in particular for the most vulnerable within our community.

Support for Business.

It is a tribute to Council staff, particularly those within the Revenues & Benefits Team and the Economic Development Team that they have constantly evolved to support the local businesses. A key enabler of this has been the development of the Economic Recovery Board and the Hemel Place Board to bring together major businesses, stakeholders and the council to drive forward the key requirements to support business growth.

In addition to this, the Council has worked closely with its commercial tenants throughout the last year to ensure it does all it can to support them through the post pandemic period, which has resulted in occupancy levels remaining incredible high at circa 96%, The next stage of the recovery phase is supporting businesses with the debt they now hold as a result of covid.

The Council will continue to work closely with its public and private sector partners over the coming months to ensure we do as much as possible to help the local economy in what are very testing times with the ongoing cost of living pressures felt by businesses and residents.

Budget context

Over the last 10 years, this council has successfully risen to the challenge of saving over £8m whilst simultaneously protecting and improving the front line services we provide to our residents. This budget outlines plans to achieve a further £1.6m, through income generation in 2024/25, continuing the strong financial stewardship principles.

The short-term future of local authority finance will remain uncertain until the end of the current parliament later in the year, when it is expected that the next Government will undertake a Local Government Finance Review. This in itself may bring uncertainty to

**CHAIRMAN**

future District Council budget cycles as the new Government addresses major public sector demands in health, social services and education.

This is why this council has proposed a budget for 2024 with a strong focus on sustainability, and continuing to deliver its corporate priorities into the medium-term. We have already made significant strides towards balancing the budget in future years, having reduced the MTFs savings targets in the medium term from £2.8m to £2.1m. Continuing to invest in the Borough

Despite the extent of the financial challenges we are facing, the council is in a strong position to propose a highly ambitious capital investment programme ... in excess of £253m over the next 5 years ... to further enhance the services we provide to our residents, and the environment in which they live.

Some of the areas identified for capital investment include:

£180m investment in our existing and new housing stock, which continues to provide high quality homes for tens of thousands of people across our borough

£41m investment in various ventures, which combine social benefit with financial return, including significant investment in Leisure services and facilities in neighbourhood facilities.

£4m Investment in supporting the local community sector to develop their community services, including the support to Dens and the ongoing development and enhancements of football pitches and adventure playgrounds.

£16m continued ongoing investment in the Council's vehicle fleet, driving the desire for greener vehicles to support the delivery of our frontline services.  
Council Tax.

As part of the budget for 2024/25, the Council is proposing to increase Council Tax by 2.99% or £6.66 p.a. for a Band D property, which equates to 13 pence per week.

Central government is likely to consider each council's ability to raise tax when deciding how much funding it will provide in the future ... in simple terms, Government is likely to reduce future funding by an amount that it expects the council to raise through increasing its council tax.

Proposing this increase in line with government expectation means that we have done all we can to protect Dacorum's overall funding position for future years.  
Housing

In line with Government guidance, the council is proposing to increase housing rents by 7.7%. This is in line with government expectations of increasing rent by CPI plus 1%. The average rent for a council property in 2024/25 will be £137.32 per week.

Despite the recent period of enforced rent reductions, and the below inflation rent cap of 2023/24 the Council has continued to make housing delivery one of its key priorities, and the Council recently completed its 379th new home.

This trend will continue ... the Council has a further 264 new Build homes on site at present.

**CHAIRMAN**

We are also investing in the infrastructure that will enable us to deliver our housing obligations to the most vulnerable in our community in the best way possible.

The council has been awarded several Homes England grants to support the new social house build programme; in total, the council has achieved funding grants from Homes England of £9m to support the delivery of over 180 homes.

In Conclusion

Unquestionably, the Council faces significant financial challenges in the years ahead as we play our role in supporting residents and businesses in a tough economic environment.

However, this Council can enter this period feeling confident that with the commitment of its Members and staff we will continue to deliver for our residents.

I am pleased to move the budget and council tax proposals as set out before you.

The following statements were made:

**Cllr Andrew Williams**

I feel quite flattered that he praises so many of the achievements that were put in place by Conservative administration prior to May and indeed the budget we have before us this evening is mainly a role forward of last years budget, indeed it seems the only area the Lib Dems have tried to make a change is in car parking charges and that has not gone very well with a least three attempts and one cabinet member losing her position due to it being such a farce and it is still not concluded.

My group will support the budget this evening at we feel it is the duty of Cllr's to agree a budget but we do not support the proposed increase in the charge for Green Waste collection, the decision to introduce the charge last year was budgeted to bring in an estimated income of £600k but the final income was over £1.5M which has saved the administration from being in the red this year and given the high level of take up we do not feel the increase is justified.

In summary we support the budget as so much is unchanged, we can reflect that the first year of the Lib Dem administration has been a wasted one”

**Cllr Michela Capozzi**

I support the proposed budget for 2024/25.

I would like to acknowledge the time, hard work and tenacity of the Officers who have compiled the reports and figures to ensure we have a balanced budget to keep Dacorum Borough Council financially viable.

At a time when we see colleagues in other Councils across the country struggling to fund the ever-increasing demands on their ever-decreasing funding, I am proud that Dacorum will continue in to the next financial year on solid footings.

Hard decisions have had to be made. Our Central Government funding for 24/25 has increased, year-on-year, by 5.1% for Dacorum; well below inflation and the budget-busting cost increases we have experienced this financial year. Of the £67m business rates we collect in 23/24 – we keep a miniscule £3m, that's less than 5% - the rest going to central government and other preceptors.

**CHAIRMAN**

With the lack of core funding we have had to review our other sources of income. There may be some criticism of the decisions we have made. But we are a listening Administration and we heard residents' concerns and suggestions and used them when making decisions.

For example, car parking charges will be increasing; after 4 years of not being raised the review was due but we heard residents' concerns about the impact on local businesses and the night time economy. So we worked hard to balance the much-needed income from these assets with protecting businesses and have maintained an element of free parking in all towns and villages.

This year, the Garden Waste Subscription attracted a 70% take-up creating an income of £1.5m - but the service cost £2m to deliver, leaving a deficit of £500k. So, the garden waste subscription is increasing to £50 in 24/25 to help recover some of the costs, but residents have asked for a mid-Winter collection and so we are looking to see if there is a cost-neutral solution to meet this need.

I am excited to see a reserve of just over £1m being identified for our Climate Change initiatives. A newly established portfolio by the Lib Dems after taking on the Administration in May 2023 to demonstrate our commitment to responding to the climate emergency, this budget will kick-start the delivery of actions, until now not deemed a priority, that will lead to significant annual savings in energy for the council and our residents, as well as creating a greener and cleaner Dacorum. Some may say £1m isn't nearly enough – and they would be right; others might say that the £1m would be better spent elsewhere; but financial balance is needed to ensure we can deliver our services and corporate vision to secure Dacorum's future and that is what this budget achieves.

### **Cllr Barbara Pesch**

The Labour group will not oppose the budget but we would like to raise our concerns with several items

- a. We are very disappointed to see that the green bin charge has been increased, we had hoped that if it was not removed it would at least have been kept the same as at present.
- b. We would like to show our concern with the proposed maximum allowable increase in council house rents, we consider an increase of almost £10.00 per week is too much especially with the current economic situation.

### **Cllr Lara Pringle**

I am proud to be a member of the new administration, with so many talented colleagues in post. I look forward to what we can deliver for our residents in the years ahead. It is unfortunate that our hands are economically tied by the government at Westminster, who have committed no additional funding to local government. Particularly at a time when so many of our residents are facing a cost-of-living crisis, struggling to heat their homes and feed their families, brought on by the irresponsible and ideologically driven economic disaster of Trussonomics. By this time next year, a general election will have taken place and we hope to have a new government which is committed to getting on with the real business of government, the business of serving the people of this country.

A Recorded vote was conducted on the 2024-25 budget. The budget was approved.

**CHAIRMAN**

The recorded vote was as follows:

All 47 members present voted for, no against, no abstentions.

Members in attendance below

Councillor Tindall (Leader) Councillors, Adeleke, Allen, Anderson, Banks, Barradell, Barry, Bhinder, Bristow, Bromham, Capozzi, Cox, Deacon, Dhyani, Douris, Durrant, Elliot, England, Freedman, Gale, Guest, Hannell, Hobson, Hobson, Johnson, Link, Link, Maddern, McAreyve, Patterson, Pesch, Pound, Pringle, Reynolds, Riddick, Santamaria, Silwal, Smith-Wright, Stevens, Stewart, Symington, Taylor, Timmis, Weston, Williams, Williams and C Wyatt-Lowe

CA/24/24 CHILTERN BEECHWOODS SPECIAL AREA OF CONSERVATION MITIGATION STRATEGY AND SUITABLE ALTERNATIVE NATURAL GREENSPACE UPDATE.

The recommendations were agreed by the Chamber

CA/25/24 FINANCIAL MONITORING REPORT

The recommendations were agreed by the Chamber

## **8 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY REFERRALS**

There were no referrals from Overview & Scrutiny for consideration.

## **9 POLLING DISTRICT & POLLING PLACE ORDER 2024**

The Leader, Cllr Tindall introduced the report and proposed the recommendations contained within.

**Decision:** The recommendations as set out in the report were unanimously agreed.

## **10 COUNCIL SIZE SUBMISSION TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND**

The Leader, Cllr Tindall, introduced the report and proposed the recommendations.

Cllr Stevens seconded the recommendations on the following grounds;

The Boundary Commission requires Councils to determine the number of Councillors based on 3 criteria: submissions are required to show how these are met;

- On Governance
- Our representative roles
- Discharge of our legal responsibilities

It is not a foregone conclusion that our recommendation for adopting an increase of 2 Councillors to 53 will be accepted. For the last Review in 2006 it reduced the number by 1 which is why we have 51 Councillors at present. Other Councils' submissions have larger changes imposed.

**CHAIRMAN**

In deciding ward sizes and changes to boundaries, this will be reviewed as Phase 2 during the summer, the Commission aims to limit deviation from the average Councillor/Elector ratio by +/- 10%

The last review was in 2006, so in the 16 years to 2022;

- Numbers of electors increased by 6000 or only 6% to last FY 2022
- Data from our Strategic Planning Team leads to a forecast in period to 2030 of an increase by another 12,000 or 10%
- This implies around another 5 plus Councillors at similar elector/Councillor ratios. The recommendation is for only +2 as;
- Most of this increase will be in the central Hemel Hempstead
- The increases in other wards are relatively small over the coming years: the recommendation should result in relatively minor changes to boundaries for a limited number of wards. This stability I think is important to strengthen community's sense of place.
- Although we looked at other size options, we were conscious that a much smaller membership could increase challenges to Committee workload and ability to properly represent our electors.

The submission sets out how our Governance roles are discharged in some detail with the numbers of committees, numbers of meetings and members needed to discharge our responsibilities.

Cllr Stevens expressed the committee's thanks to our officers in steering us through this aspect of the Review in such a short period of time.

Cllr Stevens closed by advising, with the caveat that the Electoral Review Commission may have other suggestions, he proposes members adopt the 2 recommendations is set out in the Report.

Cllr Hannell spoke in support of the recommendations as follows;

As someone who has lived in Hemel Hempstead all their life, and who has no intention of living anywhere else, I have been privileged to sit on the electoral review committee, chaired by Councillor Stevens.

In May of last year I was elected onto a Council that had a healthy gender balance, not quite 50/50 but getting there, with a mix of citizens from different backgrounds, of all ages with different experiences. This combination makes for healthy, stimulating debates.

We were last reviewed by the Boundary Commission in 2005/06 and it is unlikely that we will be reviewed for another 15 years.

So tonight, we have the only opportunity in 35 years to reflect on Council numbers and decide what constitutes the right number for us, not just at present but in the future.

I reviewed 6 Councils who had recently gone through a Boundary Commission review. In total their electorate numbered almost two thirds of a million and they were represented by 273 Councillors to produce an average ratio of 1 Councillor for every 2442 electorate (1:2442).

**CHAIRMAN**

However, on further analysis St Albans and Bracknell Forest Councils were more similar to our own in terms of an urban/rural mix. The ratio across these two Councils was just 1:2224

Under this recommendation the ratio will rise by 6% from the May 2023 figure of 1:2199 to a forecasted ratio in 2030 of 1:2344 but if we leave the number at 51 that rise will be 10.75% to a ratio of 1:2436.

Our constituents rightly expect a service from us their elected representatives. Emails and social media give them direct access to their Councillors. The aftermath of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis has left communities experiencing economic and social challenges. There has also been an increase in constituents and their families experiencing poor mental and physical health.

An ambitious and much needed house building plan will see a forecast rise in our electorate, particularly in central Hemel Hempstead and that will place a disproportionate burden on Councillors elected there.

Servicing our electorate through casework takes time and we should want to protect this mixture of citizens moving forward. To do that, we need to keep that ratio in check to allow those of us elected to not get overwhelmed and become less efficient and more importantly to encourage new citizens of all backgrounds to seek election without feeling that they too would be weighed down by an unreasonable workload.

**Decision:** The recommendations as set out in the report were unanimously agreed.

## **11 CHANGES TO COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP**

The Leader, Cllr Tindall, advised of the following changes to committee membership;

Housing and Community Overview & Scrutiny;

- Remove Cllr's C Link & M Capozzi
- Appoint Cllr's G Stevens & C Smith-Wright

Finance & Resources Overview & Scrutiny;

- Remove Cllr M Capozzi
- Appoint Cllr C McArevey

Development Management Committee;

- Remove Cllr C Link
- Appoint Cllr C Smith-Wright

## **12 CHANGE TO COMMITTEE DATES**

There were no changes to committee dates.

## **13 COUNCIL TAX DECLARATION**

The Leader, Cllr Tindall, introduced the report.

**CHAIRMAN**



**Decision:**

The recommendations were taken to a recorded vote, all 47 members present voted 'for'; the vote was unanimously carried.

Members in attendance below

Councillor Tindall (Leader) Councillors, Adeleke, Allen, Anderson, Banks, Barradell, Barry, Bhinder, Bristow, Bromham, Capozzi, Cox, Deacon, Dhyani, Douris, Durrant, Elliot, England, Freedman, Gale, Guest, Hannell, Hobson, Hobson, Johnson, Link, Link, Maddern, McArevey, Patterson, Pesch, Pound, Pringle, Reynolds, Riddick, Santamaria, Silwal, Smith-Wright, Stevens, Stewart, Symington, Taylor, Timmis, Weston, Williams, Williams and C Wyatt-Lowe

The Meeting ended at 8.45 pm

**CHAIRMAN**