

MINUTES of the meeting of Council held on 27 February 2013 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Yash Gupta MBE (Mayor), Tony Fish (Deputy Mayor), Phil Anderson, Clare Baldwin, Lynn Carr, Mark Coxshall, Charles Curtis, Wendy Curtis, Angie Gaywood, Oliver Gerrish, Robert Gledhill, Sue Gray, Garry Hague, James Halden, Diana Hale, Martin Healy, Shane Hebb, Wendy Herd, Terence Hipsey, Victoria Holloway, Barry Johnson, Tom Kelly, Cathy Kent, John Kent, Charlie Key, Aaron Kiely, Steve Liddiard, Susan Little, Suzanne MacPherson, Ben Maney, Val Morris-Cook, Tunde Ojetola, Bukky Okunade, Barry Palmer, Maureen Pearce, John Purkiss, Robert Ray, Joycelyn Redsell, Michael Revell, Barbara Rice, Gerard Rice, Andrew Roast, Andy Smith, Philip Smith, Richard Speight, Michael Stone, Pauline Tolson, Simon Wootton and Lynn Worrall.

Apologies: There were no apologies for absence.

In attendance: Reverend Darren Barlow – Mayor’s Chaplain

Before the start of the Meeting, the Mayor advised all present that the meeting was being recorded and that the recording would be made available on the Council’s website within 3 working days of the meeting.

The Mayor invited Reverend Barlow to say a few words and lead the Council in Prayer.

Reverend Barlow requested all in attendance at the meeting to be upstanding for one minute’s silence in memory of Reg Lee, a former councillor and Mayor of Thurrock, who passed away on 13 February.

Tributes to Reg Lee were then paid by the Leader of the Council, together with Councillor Palmer, Councillor Revell and Councillor G Rice.

122. MINUTES

The Minutes of the Council meeting, held on 23 January 2013, were approved as a correct record.

123. ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS

The Mayor informed the Council that he had not agreed to the consideration of any items of urgent business.

124. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor Charles Curtis declared a non-pecuniary interest in respect of Agenda Item 12 as he was a trustee of the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Councillor Wootton declared a non-pecuniary interest in respect of Agenda Item 12 as he was a trustee of the Citizens Advice Bureau.

Councillor Gupta declared a non-pecuniary interest in respect of Agenda Item 12 as he was a trustee of seven local voluntary organisations, including the Citizens Advice Bureau, Thurrock CVS, Thurrock Open Door, Thurrock Community Chest, Thurrock Faith Matters and TRUST.

Councillor Hale declared a non-pecuniary interest in respect of Agenda Item 12 as she was the Vice Chair of Thurrock CVS.

Councillor Fish declared a non-pecuniary interest in respect of Agenda Item 12 as he was a Director of Thurrock CVS.

125. ANNOUNCEMENTS

It was with sadness that the Mayor informed the Chamber of the death of Councillor Angie Gaywood's mother, Mrs Pam Major, who died on 12 February 2013. On behalf of the Council, the Mayor sent condolences to her family and special thanks to the staff of St Luke's Hospice.

The Mayor then announced that he was delighted to send warm congratulations on behalf of Thurrock Council and Thurrock residents to Julie Dartnell, for winning an Oscar for her make up skills used on Hugh Jackman in the film Les Miserables.

The Mayor proceeded to inform Members that last week it had been announced by the National Treatment Agency that the Thurrock Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT), using the latest data available, was the best performing DAAT in the country. It was reported that the National Treatment Agency scrutinises the performance of all 149 DAATs nationally and produces performance tables on various indicators. Members were advised that one of the most important identified the number of clients who left treatment successfully as a proportion of the whole treatment population and that the Thurrock DAAT achieved a result of 33.4%, compared with a national average of 14.5%. The Mayor congratulated the members of the DAAT and the service providers for this excellent result for the benefit of the individuals and the wider community.

The Mayor then informed members that on 25 February, along with the Chief Executive, he had attended the Ground Breaking Ceremony of the South East College's new £45 million Thurrock Campus site. He advised Members that the new Thurrock Campus was set to be a "milestone" for education in Thurrock and surrounding areas and that the new facilities would enable the college to better meet the skill needs of employers both locally and regionally. Members were informed that the new College building would be opening for nearly 2000 students in September 2014.

The Mayor announced that he had attended a number of charity events in the Borough and that he wished to share details of two particular events he had attended.

On 1 February, he met 73 year old Dolly Turner who lives in East Tilbury when she came to the Mayor's Parlour with a cash sum of £1,145 after collecting this by selling Christmas puddings. The Mayor was asked to donate £1025 to Little Havens Hospice and £120 to St Luke's Hospice, which he duly did.

Members were informed that on 13 February, the Mayor had attended the Jack Petchy Achievement Awards. It was reported that as many as 86 young people from 12 local secondary and special schools received achievement awards and that this had been an inspiring occasion for young people, their parents, grandparents and teachers.

The Mayor ended his announcements by mentioning one cultural promoting meeting he had attended on 12 February at the Thameside Theatre. It was reported that a relatively new organisation called Thurrock International Celebration of Culture was organising a big event of International Cultural Celebrations in July this year. The Mayor commented that he liked their vision of putting Thurrock's cultural celebrations on the level of the Edinburgh Festival in the next few years and that he had wished them luck with this.

The Leader of the Council was then invited to make any announcements he wished to make. The Leader informed the Chamber that he did not wish to make any announcements at this time but requested that the Mayor allow Councillor Morris-Cook to make a brief announcement.

Councillor Morris-Cook took the opportunity to thank all Members and Officers who had donated nappies and other items for the local Foodbank. It was further reported that each month the Foodbank would advise the Council which particular items were needed.

The Mayor then invited Councillor Gaywood to speak, who proceeded to advise the Chamber that she was pleased to see that the achievements of the Thurrock Drug and Alcohol Action Team had been recognised.

126. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

A copy of the transcript of questions and answers can be viewed on CMIS at <http://democracy.thurrock.gov.uk/thurrock/>

127. PETITIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND COUNCILLORS

The Mayor informed Members that, in accordance with the Council's Petition Scheme, the requisite notice had been given by one councillor that they wished to present a petition at the meeting.

Councillor Charles Curtis addressed the Council and presented a petition on behalf of local residents regarding the use of a property at 131 Daiglen Drive in South Ockendon.

128. PETITIONS UPDATE REPORT

Members received a report on the status of those petitions handed in at Council Meetings and Council Offices over the past six months.

129. APPOINTMENTS TO COMMITTEES AND OUTSIDE BODIES, STATUTORY AND OTHER PANELS

The Mayor enquired whether Group Leaders wished for any changes to be made to the appointments previously made to Committees and outside bodies, statutory and other panels.

The Leader of the Council informed Members that following the Council's successful TIGER bid, a local Panel was to be established for the purpose of assessing bids. The Leader proposed that the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Highways and Transportation should be appointed to and Chair that Panel when it was established.

The Leader of the opposition informed the Chamber that the Conservative Group wished to appoint Councillor Key to the Health and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee to replace Councillor Herd.

Members indicated their agreement to the appointments proposed.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That Councillor Andy Smith be appointed to and Chair a local Panel to be established for the purpose of assessing bids, as part of the successful TIGER bid.**
- 2. That Councillor Key be appointed to the Health and WellBeing Overview and Scrutiny Committee to replace Councillor Herd.**

130. DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH

The Mayor informed Members that the report requested the Council to appoint Dr Andrea Atherton as Director of Public Health for Thurrock Council from 1st April 2013 under a sharing arrangement with Southend on Sea Borough Council, as approved by the Secretary of State.

In addition, the Council were asked to authorise the Chief Executive, or his appointee, to make any necessary contractual arrangements with Southend Council to give effect to the arrangement.

Councillor Barbara Rice and Councillor Hebb spoke in support of the recommendations contained within the report.

Upon being put to the vote, the Mayor declared the recommendations contained within the report to be carried.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That Dr Andrea Atherton be appointed as Director of Public Health for Thurrock Council from 1 April 2013 under a sharing arrangement with Southend on Sea Borough Council, as approved by the Secretary of State.**
- 2. That the Chief Executive or his appointee be authorised to make any necessary contractual arrangements with Southend Council to give effect to the arrangement.**

131. CORPORATE PLAN AND MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY 2013-16

The Mayor invited the Leader of the Council to introduce the report, which asked the Council to approve the Corporate Plan and Medium Term Financial Strategy for the 2013-16.

Members were informed that last year, the Council agreed a new Community Strategy and that this articulated the Council's refreshed vision and priorities for the community.

It was reported that the Corporate Plan and Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) was the Council's strategic planning document which set out the Council's vision, principles and five strategic priorities. It was noted that the Corporate Plan cascades the Community Strategy into the Council's corporate strategic planning process and that the financial part of the plan showed how the Council intended to address the financial challenges it faced in delivering its priorities.

Councillor Anderson informed the Chamber that the Corporate Plan was a hugely important document that set out the ideas, visions and priorities of the Council. It was reported that there was a lot to commend within the document, with one of the reasons for this being that Members had worked together, in many cases across party boundaries, in the best interests of Thurrock.

Upon being put to the vote, the Mayor declared the recommendations contained within the report to be carried.

In accordance with Rule 20.7, Councillor Kiely requested that it be recorded that he had voted against the recommendation in the report.

RESOLVED:

That the Corporate Plan and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2013-16 be agreed.

132. 2013/14 COUNCIL TAX, BUDGETS AND TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

The Mayor informed Members that amendments had been tabled by the Leader and the Leader of the Opposition and that a copy of these had been circulated to Members at the meeting.

The Mayor then informed Members that, as the report contained over 40 recommendations, he wanted to be clear about the process to be followed for voting, particularly in respect of dealing with amendments and the recommendations contained within the report.

The Mayor explained that there would first be speeches from the Leader and Leader of the Opposition, to be followed by debate the budget and any amendments that were put forward. Members were informed that during this debate, all aspects of the subject would be considered and that contributions would be taken from members of all parties. The Mayor then advised Members that once the debate had been exhausted, he would move to a vote on specific recommendations and proposed amendments before voting on the remainder of the recommendations in the report.

The Mayor invited the Leader of the Council to introduce the budget and the Council's priorities within it.

Councillor Kent

"Thank you Mr Mayor. I think that Councillor Anderson and I have seen in writing what you have read out and I promise everybody that it is a lot more straightforward than it sounds when read out.

Mr Mayor, the budget I am recommending this evening will see Thurrock Council levying the lowest Council Tax of any authority in Essex - householders in Thurrock will be receiving the lowest bills in Essex, by quite some considerable margin.

Tonight's recommendations will see us continue to rebuild our finances following the financial incompetence of the Conservative years; deal with the unprecedented cuts in our government funding; and invest in our priorities.

This will also be the first time this council has set out a balanced budget for two years, rather than the usual annual budget process.

This means that we have identified everything necessary for the 2014/15 budget as well as for the next 12 months. Officers and members will therefore know what has to happen, which will ensure this council has the stability and time it needs to plan for and respond to the further funding cuts we know are coming.

Mr Mayor, after the £4m overspend of 2009/10, we have come in on or below budget for each of the last two years and will do so again this year. This is, despite delivering £30m worth of savings and dealing with unprecedented cuts in funding.

We have rebuilt the council's unallocated reserves to a sustainable level of around £8m from the mere £2m we inherited.

And, last year we received our first ever unqualified Value for Money audit opinion from the Audit Commission - independently demonstrating that the council now provides good services at good value for money.

None of this has been easy to achieve and I want to thank those portfolio holders and officers who have worked so hard and taken the tough decisions that have created this solid platform on which we can build.

At the same time as rebuilding the finances and dealing with the cuts, we have also made significant improvements across a range of our services.

We have continued to build on our recycling success which was started by Councillor Revell, and I want to pay tribute to Councillor Revell for sticking with it when not everybody agreed with him. Thurrock is the best performing area in the East of England with less than a quarter of our waste going to landfill.

When you consider this borough's history, that is a fantastic achievement and a great example of how a council and residents can work together for the benefit of the community as a whole.

In planning, we have adopted the LDF Core Strategy which will shape the delivery of growth and jobs for Thurrock.

And in transport we were one of only five councils in the country to receive the full £5 million allocation for the Local Sustainable Transport Fund.

Our Adoption Service was graded as good, following its inspection, as were our Safeguarding and Looked After Children services.

We have also shown innovation in our Housing service, delivering the first new council homes in Thurrock for a generation - and we will build a thousand more in the next five years.

Alongside this, we will upgrade each and every one of our existing council homes, investing £70 million to give our tenants the best. It's what those tenants deserve and it will have the knock-on effect of helping to improve the private stock too, as landlords try to keep up with us.

Of course, Mr Mayor, we have also ended the failing contract with Morrison at no cost to tenants or council tax payers and that has to be good news.

Mr Mayor, we have improved the way in which we engage with local businesses; holding two very successful business conferences, and following them up with a series of business breakfasts, meet-the-buyer events and the establishment of a Thurrock Business Board – all of which has put our relationship with, and our support for, local business on a strong footing.

There has also been a remarkable improvement in bringing external funding to Thurrock. Over the past couple of years, we have won significant bids. In these difficult times it is all the more important that we find new forms of funding so we can continue to boast we have the lowest council tax in Essex.

For instance Mr Mayor, through the TIGER funding, with our partner councils in Kent, we will have £4.3million worth of loans for local businesses, vital at a time when banks are still reluctant to lend; £320,000 to progress the Logistics National Skills Academy work and a £1m from Arts Council for Artists' Studios at High House Production Park; £1m from Big Lottery Big Local for Grays and Little Thurrock; and an £80,000 grant from the EU Interreg Programme for the Walls and Gardens scheme.

And we mustn't forget the on-going delivery of the £2.3m low carbon ERDF programme and again, as I mentioned earlier, there is £5 million for local sustainable transport.

Mr Mayor, I now turn to education, this council's priority and the one overriding issue that we have to get right, for us, for our children and for the whole borough's future.

We have said, often, that we want every school in Thurrock to be classed as "good" or better by Ofsted and I can say tonight that five of our schools are currently classed as "outstanding" and 20 as "good", including four, Bulphan, Orsett, Deneholm and Graham James, that have moved from "satisfactory" to "good" in the last couple of months, that is since Ofsted introduced its new tougher regime. And I pay tribute to all the work from staff and parents involved with those schools to achieve those outcomes.

We all know this is can only be the start and that is why I want to say that over the next three years we are redoubling our efforts and will be investing a million pounds of our hard won reserves in supporting all our schools in reaching their "good" or "outstanding" goal; making sure they have the resources that they need to continue on their improvement journeys.

We will also take £100,000 from reserves to support efforts to help the young unemployed in our borough, the so called NEETs. It is important, Mr Mayor, that we play our full part, with our partners, in doing all we can to help these youngsters find training and a job.

It is sometimes easy to forget that statistics hide real people who are facing real problems, as well as being a dreadful, woeful waste of talent that we can all ill afford in our borough.

We also Mr Mayor, too often, overlook the contribution that our older residents can make to our community. We are committed to doing what we can to help our senior citizens lead as full and active a life as possible through our “Building Positive Futures” initiative.

We must see living longer as being a good and positive thing, whilst at the same time acknowledging that there is a growing and ageing population that does put pressure on those services that we provide.

This budget recognises the need to properly fund those pressures by increasing the funding by £600,000.

And, Mr Mayor, it's not just older people. Over the past year we have seen a huge increase in the demands on our Children's social services and that is not a problem unique to Thurrock as, up and down the country, these services are being stretched.

It is a sad reality of an ongoing economic downturn that as more family budgets are squeezed beyond breaking point more families end in crisis and it is our services that need to be there to pick up the pieces.

Mr Mayor, I fear this is a situation that will only get worse as the coalition's benefit cuts start to bite ... and bite they will. It is essential these services, services that support the most vulnerable in our communities, are properly funded so, again, this budget will deliver the extra funding they need.

Members will recall that, back in July, we unanimously agreed that Thurrock Council should become a “Living Wage” employer meaning that no one employed by the council should earn less than (then) £7.20 and, today, £7.45 an hour.

I am pleased to say this budget means that from the 1st of April Thurrock Council can be a Living Wage employer – the money's is there in this budget, with the pay policy to be agreed next month.

Mr Mayor, earlier I thanked portfolio holders and officers for the work they have put into delivering a two-year balanced budget. I also want to thank Councillor Anderson and the Conservative Group for their constructive approach to this year's budget programme.

By bringing forward their proposals in time for Overview and Scrutiny Committees to consider them, we have been able to accept and incorporate some, though – of course – not all, of their proposals into this evening's budget.

One of the areas where I believed we had found a way forward together is that of Police Community Support Officers.

The Conservative alternative budget proposal says "PCSO match funding may no longer in reality be delivering any additional resources, i.e. it may have effectively been swept up into overall Essex neighbourhood policing budgets."

Mr Mayor, I agree with that entirely and I could not have put it better myself. However, I do not feel we should remove the match funding for PCSOs until we are convinced that we are getting full value for our significant investment and that our extra cash is putting extra officers onto the streets.

I have an amendment that I have tabled, and I know there is an amendment tabled by the opposition, and I am quite happy to withdraw my amendment and accept the opposition amendment. I would, however, just ask that Councillor Wootton chair a working group of Members to carry out an in-depth investigation. If we could agree that now, then I think we will be in a position to move on more quickly.

Mr Mayor, as I have said, setting out a two-year balanced budget will allow us to plan for the further cuts in our funding we know are coming. Over the next two years we will see our funding cut by £12 million and we have been told to expect cuts of around seven per cent for each of the two years after that.

It is essential, therefore, that we use the next 18 months to consider, carefully, how we respond to the continued budget cuts and look at the shape of the council and the way in which we deliver services in the future.

Because of the tough decisions we have made over the past three years, we are now in a strong position to do this.

Unfortunately we are not in a position where we can stop taking those tough decisions and I am therefore recommending a small rise in the Thurrock Council portion of the council tax this evening.

Most of us here this evening are Council Tax payers and none of us relish the thought of having to pay more but, when we are already losing £12 million worth of funding over the next two years, we cannot afford to lose a further £1.8 million over the next three years and that, Mr Mayor, would be the impact of freezing the Council Tax this evening.

Even with this, small, increase we will levy the lowest Council Tax anywhere in Essex;

- *More than £130 lower than Tendring*

- More than £150 lower than Chelmsford
- More than £190 lower than Rochford
- And more than a massive £210 lower than Basildon.

Mr Mayor, I have heard some people suggest we should be matching Basildon on Council Tax. Frankly, I think Basildon and Essex County Council, should be working harder to match us on Council Tax.

I have also, Mr Mayor, heard some people suggest that we should be reducing the level of the council's balances.

We have worked hard to restore our General Fund Unallocated Reserves (our reserves, our balances) to the level recommended by both the external auditor and the Section 151 officer. That is, around £8 million.

There does appear to be a little confusion about the level of these reserves, with some suggesting they are now up to as high as £12½ million.

Mr Mayor, for clarity, you can only get to that figure if you include the £4½ million that we inherited from the Development Corporation which has been specifically set aside to help deliver the Purfleet Regeneration scheme, which is of course a scheme I thought had cross party support.

Some have asked why it important to have reserves at all. Put simply, reserves are important to allow us to respond to unforeseen circumstances or events that simply couldn't be forecast.

To give an example, had the £4 million Conservative overspend of 2009/10 been repeated when our reserves had been reduced to £2 million we simply could not have continued to operate – we would have fallen off what's now known as the fiscal cliff.

Maintaining a reasonable level of reserves is essential to ensure that this council never returns to those days of Conservative boom and bust.

However, as we have been prudent and as we have set the Council's finances straight and established a respectable level of reserves, I am able to put forward further amendments this evening.

Firstly, Mr Mayor, we have regularly had residents from Grays, Tilbury and Ockendon raising the problems caused by commuter parking. It is important that we do what we can to resolve these problems so I wish to move that:

“Officers be instructed to bring forward consultation and, if the consultation is positive, to introduce free resident parking schemes in those areas of Grays, Tilbury and Ockendon that have requested this in the past.

“To fund this, Officers should first look to fund this from any unused prudential borrowing, secondly, from any unused Highways Capital monies and failing that from corporate reserves.”

Mr Mayor, we have heard much talk of late from the opposition about the need for such a scheme on the Flowers Estate. They had six years to deliver it and failed. We will make it happen this year, if it is the wish of residents.

Secondly, Mr Mayor, anyone who drives around the borough cannot fail to have noticed the number of pot holes on our roads. I know that this is a problem up and down the country and one that has been made worse by successive hard winters.

As things stand, by the end of this financial year we will have filled around 3,200 pot holes, but, more needs to be done. I therefore move:

“That £50,000 is taken from the contingency sum which was agreed for use this year, to be spent by the end of March 2013, on filling additional pot holes”

In consultation with the relevant directors, Mr Mayor, we have agreed between us that this money should be enough to fill an extra 500 pot holes across the borough by the end of March.

Mr Mayor, I think that members across the chamber are aware of the severe difficulties facing the Thurrock Citizens Advice Bureau. They have lost a significant amount of their income as a result of changes that have been made to Legal Aid rules, which has led to severe difficulties for them.

I think it is really important that in these tough times we do what we can to help preserve what is a vital source of help and advice for many of our residents.

I, therefore, move:

“The council underwrite the activities of Thurrock CAB, to a limit of £60,000, for the next financial year subject to a sustainability review and conditions recommended by the Assistant Chief Executive and agreed by group leaders”

Finally, next year sees the centenary of the Great War. I had intended to move an amendment to set up a working group this evening but representations from the opposition have asked that I put this forward instead as a motion next month so that everybody has notice and we can debate it properly. I think that is sensible, so I happily withdraw that amendment Mr Mayor.

I will just sum up by saying this. This budget continues to put the Council's finances on a stable footing, it makes sensible savings to respond to the cuts to our funding, it puts money into our priorities and yes, Mr Mayor, it sets the lowest Council tax of any authority in Essex.”

The Mayor then invited the Leader of the Opposition to respond and propose the amendments he had tabled.

Councillor Anderson

“Thank-you Mr Mayor. I want to start by acknowledging the role that Conservative members have played in shaping this year’s budget.

We made a decision before Christmas to engage positively with the budget scrutiny process and to bring forward alternative proposals at an early stage.

We are pleased that some of our ideas have been accepted by the administration. We also acknowledge that some of what the administration have put forwards we have been able to support, either as common sense or in line with our own thinking.

This reflects the type of opposition that we want to be: robust in our criticism, but positive in acknowledging where we agree and in offering creative alternatives.

Voters don’t want to see politicians bickering over every single issue, but they also don’t want to feel that they are a cosy little clique who agree everything behind closed doors. I hope that we have avoided falling into either of those stereotypes.

Having said that, the budget before us tonight is far different from that which would have been put forwards by a Conservative administration.

The truth is that an opposition can only ever have limited influence over what the administration chooses to do. This budget is not one that we would have chosen, and it falls short of our aims in three important areas: it keeps too much power and control at the centre; it ducks the difficult long-term issues; and it fails to tackle waste and inefficiency.

Firstly, this budget misses an opportunity to let go of power at the centre and give real financial clout to the front line.

Money for schools should be given direct to head-teachers and school governors for them to decide what is best for pupils, not managed by a centralised education bureaucracy on their behalf.

Services in the community should not be delivered by a one-size-fits-all council organisation where local voluntary, community, and faith groups have shown they can offer quality and innovation at lower cost.

Arts and leisure facilities should be run by entrepreneurs or non-profit organisations who have the vision, skill and focus to make a success of them.

The pressures of austerity and the opportunities of localism give us the chance to imagine a different type of council; one which trusts those who are best equipped to get on with the job rather than trying to do everything itself.

This opportunity is being squandered, and in a few years it may be too late. The longer we leave it, the more likely we will be forced into hasty cuts rather than properly planned reforms.

Secondly, this budget fails yet again to tackle the politically difficult issues that we all know about but dare not mention.

The Thameside Theatre costs local council tax payers half a million pounds a year to keep open. In tight economic times this is simply unsustainable, but yet again we keep it struggling on in council control rather than bringing in an arts organisation or entrepreneur who might offer the only chance of securing its future.

Social care costs take up more of our budget each year, but we refuse to re-examine them because they are deemed too sensitive to scrutinise.

Denominational transport subsidies are a perk that few local authorities still offer, but Thurrock carries on providing them, regardless of financial need, to the tune of over £1000 per pupil and we only have a weak commitment to, maybe, look at it again next year.

We cannot carry on avoiding making difficult choices, because soon the day will come when we have no money left and the choice is effectively made for us. Big changes need time to implement, and that time is slipping away from us while the administration worries about next week's headlines and next year's elections.

Finally, this budget avoids shining a spotlight into the murky corners of the council's finances where waste and inefficiency still lurk.

In many ways what we have before us tonight is not actually a budget at all.

We have been presented with 176 proposals for growth and savings. The full budget contains over 11,000 lines of expenditure. 98% of these do not appear anywhere in the papers before us tonight and will just carry on exactly as before.

Let me identify just a few of them for you:

- *We spend about £1.5 million on taxis each year. It is difficult to work out exactly because the figures are so opaque.*
- *We spend £9,500 administering a 'Thurrock in bloom' budget of just £1,000;*
- *We spend £87 managing the equality and diversity aspects of collecting dog poo.*

Most businesses now run a system of 'zero base budgeting', where every item of expenditure is examined every year.

It is no longer acceptable that any council just carries on spending taxpayer's money by default, year after year, until someone specifically challenges it.

Overall this is a budget of missed opportunities.

We are missing the opportunity to pass power and money down to the front line; we are missing the opportunity to tackle the difficult issues while we still can; and we are missing the opportunity to really get to grips with waste and inefficiency.

The papers before us tonight are clear that we were about to miss the opportunity to resolve the issue of PCSO numbers with Essex Police, by unilaterally cutting match funding and losing 14 experienced officers without even understanding what kind of deal was on the table.

We opposed this decision in cabinet and we came here expecting to oppose it tonight. So I am very pleased that Cllr Kent has announced that funding will now continue for another year while this issue is properly resolved.

But the final missed opportunity is the one that will hit Thurrock the hardest. The government has offered a grant of over half a million pounds if Thurrock freezes council tax for another year.

Labour are proposing to reject this offer and instead take an extra million pounds out of the pockets of local people by raising council tax. Astonishingly, this money is not planned to be spent on front line services but will put straight into our already adequate reserves.

The 2% tax rise will hit working families, many of whom are not seeing an increase in their salary to pay for it. It will take a million pounds straight out of the local economy, hitting shops and businesses who are already struggling with tough economic conditions.

I have said that I will not look local taxpayers in the eye and demand another penny from them unless I am sure that the increase is absolutely essential.

This budget fails that test.

I will therefore be proposing an amendment to freeze council tax for another year, and accept the Government's offer of half a million pounds cash rather than a million from taxpayers' pockets.

Our amendment also proposes that we continue to fund our PCSOs, and I am pleased that at least here, we now seem to have cross-party support.

We will preserve a balanced two-year budget by bringing forwards savings on energy efficient street lighting which will save money on energy, EU carbon

taxes, and maintenance year on year – an idea that we proposed through overview and scrutiny but have so far fallen on deaf ears.

Mr Mayor, this is not the budget that I would have chosen for Thurrock. As an opposition it is simply impossible for us to fix all of those issues tonight. However, we can still ensure that the biggest missed opportunities are corrected.

I am pleased to move the amendments before you, and I hope that colleagues on all sides will feel able to give them their support. Thank you.”

The Mayor then invited the Leader of the Council to respond to the Leader of the Opposition.

Councillor Kent

“Thank you Mr Mayor, and as always I will take 10 minutes as a ceiling not a floor.

If I can start with the positive, we are happy on this side to accept in full the conservative amendment, not on the council tax but on low energy lighting. This is something that we have looked at in the past and it is somewhere where we do feel we can make savings and if the small sum of £63,000 is helpful to bring that forward, then we are happy to agree that.

Mr Mayor, Councillor Anderson seems to want to have it all ways. On one hand he says that this is a budget that ducks difficult decisions, but on the other hand says that we should be, and also says that we are going for short term headlines, and yet says that we should accept a council tax freeze instead of taking the difficult decision to increase the council tax when he knows that the effect of that council tax freeze would be to take £1.8m away from this authority.

Being in opposition, I know, is really difficult and you do have different competing priorities. When you are in control you have to be responsible and I go back, Mr Mayor, to when the conservatives were running the council. I go back to the cabinet meeting of the 17 March 2010 when they presented their medium term service and financial strategy for the years 2011/12 and 2013/14.

2013/14, Mr Mayor, the year for which we are about to set a budget, what did they say then about council tax? What they said then was that council tax this year would need to rise by 3% Mr Mayor. More than 1% more than we are recommending tonight. Once again, it is easy to be responsible when you have to make the decisions and irresponsible when you don't and not to increase the council tax would be irresponsible.

I also find it just a little bit tough to take this lecture on council tax and waste from an opposition that came into control in Thurrock in 2004 saying that they

would freeze or reduce council tax and in their six years put it up by over 20% Mr Mayor. Once again, it is easy to talk the talk in opposition, but when you have to deliver it, it is a different matter entirely.

So Mr Mayor, I do not support the amendment to freeze council tax. This would be a short term headline grabbing initiative that would cause real difficulties over the medium term and it is that kind of short term thinking that leads to reducing your reserve from £8m to £2m and leads to overspends of £4m within a year. It is not something, Mr Mayor, that I will countenance and not something that we would go back to. Thank you."

The amendments proposed by the Leader were seconded by Councillor Morris-Cook.

The amendments proposed by the Leader of the Opposition, as circulated at the meeting, were seconded by Councillor Gledhill as follows:

- That the Council freezes Council Tax Band D for 2013/14 at £1,102.77, representing a zero percent increase on the basis of receiving a council tax grant from central government (excluding other preceptors)
- That the Council defer the savings included within 2013/14 towards the provision of PCSOs for one year, whilst discussions take place with Essex Police about the future provision within Thurrock.
- That the Council implement a spend to save capital initiative to replace street lighting with low energy bulbs over a three year period, creating a part year saving in 2014/15 in excess of £63,000, the capital investment to come from a mixture of capital resources and reserves as available.

The Mayor then invited debate on the amendment to freeze council tax, as proposed the Leader of the Opposition.

Following debate involving a number of Members, the Mayor called for a vote on the amendment that had been proposed.

Upon being put to the vote, 24 Members voted in favour of the amendment and 25 Members voted against, whereupon the Mayor declared the amendment to be lost.

The Mayor then called for a vote in respect of the substantive motion, as set out below:

"That Council Confirm the Council Tax Band D for 2013/14 at £1,124.73, representing a 1.99 percent increase (excluding other preceptors);"

Upon being put to the vote, 24 Members voted in favour of the substantive motion and 25 Members voted against, whereupon the Mayor declared this to be lost.

The Mayor then requested a brief adjournment.

The meeting was adjourned at 8.30 p.m.

The meeting was reconvened at 8.47 p.m.

It was then proposed by the Leader:

“That Council confirm the Council Tax Band D for 2013/14 at £1,124.64, representing a 1.98 percent increase (excluding other preceptors)”

The proposal was seconded by Councillor Morris-Cook.

During the course of the debate, it was proposed by Councillor Halden that Council Procedure Rule 11.1 be suspended to allow the meeting to continue beyond its terminal hour.

The Mayor proposed that an additional 30 minutes be added to the terminal hour of the meeting and Members indicated their agreement to this proposal.

Following a debate involving a number of Members, the Mayor called for a vote on the recommendation that had been proposed.

Upon being put to the vote, 25 Members voted in favour of the recommendation and 24 Members voted against, whereupon the Mayor declared this to be carried.

The Mayor then invited Members to debate the remaining aspects of the budget that had not already been considered.

At this point, the Chief Executive reminded Members of the agreement to the Conservative amendment in respect of PCSO's but with the addition of a working group to be chaired by Councillor Wootton to carry out an in-depth investigation, and, to the Conservative amendment in respect of street lighting.

Following an extensive debate involving a number of Members, the Mayor called for a vote on the amendments that had been proposed.

A vote was taken in respect of those amendments that had been proposed by the Conservative Group.

Members indicated their agreement to these, with the exception of Councillor Kiely, who advised the Chamber that he wished to vote against the proposals, whilst voting for the amendments proposed by the Labour Group.

The Mayor then called for a vote in respect of those amendments that had been proposed by the Labour Group, whereupon Members duly indicated their agreement to these.

Finally, the Mayor then called for a vote on the remaining recommendations in the report that had not already been voted on, subject to any changes due following agreement to amendments earlier in the meeting.

Upon being put to the vote, 24 Members voted in favour of the recommendations, 1 Member voted against and 24 abstained, whereupon the Mayor declared the remaining recommendations listed in the report to be carried.

RESOLVED:

General Fund Revenue

That Council:

- 1.1 Consider and acknowledge the Section 151 Officer's (Corporate Director of Finance and Corporate Governance) report on the robustness of the proposed budget, the adequacy of the Council's reserves and the Reserves Strategy as set out in Appendix 1 to the General Fund budget report, including the conditions upon which the recommendations are made;**
- 1.2 Confirm the Council Tax Band D for 2013/14 at £1,124.64, representing a 1.98 percent increase (excluding other preceptors);**
- 1.3 Approve a General Fund net budget requirement for 2013/14 of £123.729 million as shown in paragraph 4.4 to this report;**
- 1.4 Approve that no Special Expenses be charged for 2013/14;**
- 1.5 Approve that the use of earmarked reserves for their published purpose be agreed as part of the budget;**
- 1.6 Agree to the use of unallocated reserves as set out in section 5 of the report, and as agreed at the meeting, whilst maintaining an unallocated balance of £8m;**
- 1.7 Note the growth and savings assumptions that have been built into the proposed budget at Appendix 4 to the General Fund budget report, as amended at the meeting;**
- 1.8 Note the savings originally planned for 2014/15 that will now be delivered in 2013/14 as set out in Appendix 2 to the report, as amended at the meeting;**
- 1.9 Note the MTFs as set out in Appendix 3 to the report, shows that the two years 2013/14 to 2014/15 have been balanced over the two year period but that there are still significant savings to be made for the period 2015/16 and beyond;**

- 1.10 Approve the schools' indicative budget as set out in Appendix 6 to the General Fund budget report; and**
- 1.11 Include the precepts for the Fire and Police Authorities in setting its Council Tax.**

General Fund Capital

That Council:

- 1.12 Approve a General Fund Capital Programme and funding of £11.733 million for 2013/14 (excluding further re-profiling of budgets from 2012/13) as shown in Appendix 7, as amended at the meeting;**
- 1.13 Note the indicative capital budgets for 2014/15 through to 2016/17;**
- 1.14 Agree that the release of prudential borrowing for ICT projects be delegated to Cabinet on the receipt of a business case;**
- 1.15 Agree that the release of prudential borrowing for other buildings be delegated to the Chair of the Corporate Property Board with specific consideration of Health and Safety Issues and the Making Our Assets Work initiative;**
- 1.16 Agree that the allocation of any Transport and Education capital grants be delegated to Cabinet;**
- 1.17 Agree that any unbudgeted contributions from third parties in the way of grants or developers' contributions be deemed as part of the capital programme; and**
- 1.18 Agree that housing development be deemed as part of the general fund capital programme should the ongoing discussions about affordable housing development recognise the general fund as the most appropriate delivery vehicle.**

Housing Revenue Account

That Council:

- 1.19 Note that the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) is estimated to generate a surplus of £4.7m as at 31 March 2013;**
- 1.20 Agree that costs pressures (paragraph 3.3, Table 1 of the HRA budget report) be included in the base budget for 2013/14;**
- 1.21 Increase domestic rents by an average of 4.07%, in line with the 30-year HRA business plan following rent restructuring guidance,**

with effect from 1 April 2013 (see paragraph 3.4 and Table 2 of the HRA budget report);

- 1.22 Agree a 2.60% increase in de-pooled service charges (see paragraph 3.5 of the HRA budget report);
- 1.23 Agree a 2.60% increase in garage rents (paragraph 3.6.1 of the HRA budget report);
- 1.24 Increase central heating charges by 2.60% (see paragraph 3.6.2 of the HRA budget report);
- 1.25 Increase the level of Travellers' Site rents by 2.60%;
- 1.26 Agree £0.32m of service improvements (see paragraph 3.4.1 of the HRA budget report);
- 1.27 Agree that surplus funds, after the balance of the General Reserve exceeds "1.7m, be ring fenced to the Development Reserve; and
- 1.28 Note the agreed capital programme for 2013/14 as set out in the HRA Capital Report.

Treasury Management Strategy

That Council:

- 1.29 Agree the Prudential Indicators as set out in Appendix 1 to the Borrowing and Investment Annual Strategy and the Annual Minimum Revenue Provision Statement 2013/14;
- 1.30 Delegate any changes to the Prudential Indicators to Cabinet where changes are required due to the delivery mechanism for affordable homes in the borough;
- 1.31 Agree the Annual Borrowing and Investment Strategy in paragraph 2.33 of the Borrowing and Investment Annual Strategy and the Annual Minimum Revenue Provision Statement 2013/14;
- 1.32 To approve the Annual Borrowing and Investment Strategy and the Annual Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) Statement for 2013/14 as follows;
 - (i) For debt where the government provides revenue support the Council will set aside 4% of the notional debt relating to capital investment, but excluding capital investment on the

HRA housing stock (known as the non-HRA capital financing requirement;

- (ii) For debt where the government provides no revenue support: - where the debt relates to an asset the Council will set aside a sum equivalent to repaying debt over the life of the asset in equal instalments, or where the debt relates to expenditure which is subject to a capitalisation direction issued by the government the Council will set aside a sum equivalent to repaying debt over a period consistent with the nature of the expenditure; and**

- 1.33 To note the revised 2012/13 and 2013/14 borrowing and investment projections as set out in paragraph 2.35 of the Borrowing and Investment Annual Strategy and the Annual Minimum Revenue Provision Statement 2013/14.**

Statutory Council Tax Resolution

- 1.34 That Council note that, in accordance with the delegated authority given by Council on 23 January 2013, the Director of Finance and Corporate Governance set:**

1.34.1 The Council Tax Base as 45,539;

1.34.2 The Collection Fund Balance as a deficit of £472,437 apportioned to Thurrock Council (£400,391), Essex Police (£47,952) and Essex Fire and Rescue (£24,094); and

1.34.3 The NNDR 1 at £106,531,052 apportioned to Thurrock Council (£52,200,215), Central Government (£53,265,526) and Essex Fire and Rescue (£1,065,311);

- 1.35 That Council calculate that the Council Tax requirement for the Council's own purposes for 2013/14 is £51,214,981 as set out in the tables at paragraphs 4.4 to 4.5 of the report.**

- 1.36 That the following amounts be calculated for the year 2013/14 in accordance with Sections 31 to 36 of the Act:**

(a) £338,880,393 being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(2) of the Act.

(b) £287,665,412 being the aggregate of the amounts which the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(3) of the Act.

(c) £51,214,981 being the amount by which the aggregate at 1.36(a) above exceeds the aggregate at 1.36(b) above,

calculated by the Council in accordance with Section 31A(4) of the Act as its Council Tax requirement for the year. (Item R in the formula in Section 31B of the Act).

- (d) £1,124.64 being the amount at 1.36(c) above (Item R), all divided by Item T (1.34.1 above), calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31B of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year (including Parish precepts).
- (e) £0 being the aggregate amount of all special items (Parish precepts) referred to in Section 34(1) of the Act (as per the attached Appendix B).
- (f) £1,124.64 being the amount at (d) above less the result given by dividing the amount at (e) above by Item T (1.34.1 above), calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 34(2) of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which no Parish precept relates.

1.37 To note that the County Council, the Police Authority and the Fire Authority have issued precepts to the Council in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 for each category of dwellings in the Council's area as indicated in the tables below.

1.38 That the Council, in accordance with Sections 30 and 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, hereby sets the aggregate amounts shown in the tables below as the amounts of Council Tax for 2013/14 for each part of its area and for each of the categories of dwellings.

2013/14 COUNCIL TAX FOR THURROCK PURPOSES EXCLUDING ESSEX FIRE AUTHORITY AND ESSEX POLICE AUTHORITY

Amounts for the Valuation Bands for 2013/14							
A £	B £	C £	D £	E £	F £	G £	H £
749.76	874.72	999.68	1,124.64	1,374.56	1,624.48	1,874.40	2,249.28

1.39 That it be noted that for the year 2013/14 Essex Police Authority has stated the following amounts in precept issued to the Council for each of the categories of dwellings as follows:

Amounts for the Valuation Bands for 2013/14							
A £	B £	C £	D £	E £	F £	G £	H £
94.32	110.04	125.76	141.48	172.92	204.36	235.80	282.96

- 1.40 That it be noted that for the year 2013/14 Essex Fire Authority has stated the following amounts in precept issued to the Council for each of the categories of dwellings as follows:**

Amounts for the Valuation Bands for 2013/14							
A £	B £	C £	D £	E £	F £	G £	H £
44.28	51.66	59.04	66.42	81.18	95.94	110.70	132.84

2013/14 COUNCIL TAX (INCLUDING FIRE AND POLICE AUTHORITY PRECEPTS)

Amounts for the Valuation Bands for 2013/14							
A £	B £	C £	D £	E £	F £	G £	H £
888.36	1,036.42	1,184.48	1,332.54	1,628.66	1,924.78	2,220.90	2,665.08

133. REPORTS FROM CABINET MEMBERS

The Mayor informed Members that there were no reports scheduled to be made to the Council this month. He then took the opportunity to remind Members that Councillor Morris-Cook would present her report at the next meeting of the Council and that Councillor Gaywood would present her report to the meeting on 24 April 2013.

134. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS

A copy of the transcript of questions and answers can be viewed on CMIS at <http://democracy.thurrock.gov.uk/thurrock/>.

135. REPORTS FROM OUTSIDE BODIES

As the terminal hour of the meeting had been reached, there were no reports.

136. MINUTES OF COMMITTEES AND SUB-COMMITTEES

As the terminal hour of the meeting had been reached, the Minutes of Committees and Sub Committees, as set out under Agenda item 16, were received.

137. MOTIONS UPDATE REPORT

As the terminal hour of the meeting had been reached, the information report which updated Members on progress in respect of Motions resolved at Council over the past year was received.

138. MOTIONS

The Mayor informed the Chamber that three motions had been submitted for consideration at the meeting.

Motion 1

Councillor Pearce withdrew the Motion she had submitted.

Motion 2

An alteration to the wording of the motion printed on the Agenda had been submitted by Councillor Hebb prior to the meeting and was circulated to all Members at the start of the meeting

Councillor Hebb withdrew the Motion he had submitted.

Motion 3

As the terminal hour of the meeting had been reached, the motion submitted by Councillor Hague, as printed on the Agenda, was deemed to have been moved and seconded.

Upon being put to the vote, Members indicated their agreement to the Motion, whereupon the Mayor declared this to be carried.

RESOLVED:

All council tax payers are entitled to a discounted rate for use of the Dartford Crossing, by filling in a form. Since the council will be writing to all council tax payers next month with the bills, the council resolves to include a copy of the form with each bill, to ensure every resident has the opportunity to take advantage of the discount.

The meeting finished at 10.14 p.m.

Approved as a true and correct record

MAYOR

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Steve Jones, telephone (01375) 652107,
or alternatively e-mail sjones@thurrock.gov.uk**