

**MINUTES
OF A
SPECIAL MEETING OF THE ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL
HELD IN THE ARUN CIVIC CENTRE
ON 21 FEBRUARY 2024 at 6.00 PM**

Present: Councillors Mrs Cooper (Chair), Walsh (Vice-Chair), Ayling, Batley, Bence, Birch, Bicknell, Blanchard-Cooper, Mrs Bower, Bower, Brooks, Butcher, Cooper, Edwards, Elkins, Goodheart, Greenway, Gunner, Haywood, Huntley, Jones, Kelly, Lawrence, Lloyd, Long, Lury, Madeley, May, McAuliffe, McDougall, Nash, Needs, Northeast, O'Neill, Oppler, Partridge, Patel, Penycate, Pendleton, Purser, Stainton, Stanley, Tandy, Turner, Wallsgrove, Warr, Wiltshire, Woodman, Mrs Worne, Miss Worne and Yeates.

654. WELCOME

The Chair welcomed Councillors, representatives of the public, press and officers to the meeting.

655. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for Absence had been received from Councillors English, Hamilton, Harty and from Honorary Aldermen, Mr Dingemans and Mr English.

656. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Declaration of Interest Sheet set out below confirms those Members who had made a declaration of their personal interest as a Member of a Town or Parish Councillor or a West Sussex County Councillor, as confirmed in their Register of Interest as these declarations could apply to any of the issues to be discussed at the meeting:

Name	Town or Parish Council or West Sussex County Council [WSCC]
Councillor Kenton Batley	Bognor Regis
Councillor Trevor Bence	WSCC
Councillor Paul Bicknell	Angmering
Councillor Carol Birch	Aldwick
Councillor Billy Blanchard-Cooper	Littlehampton
Councillor Jim Brooks	Bognor Regis
Councillor Alan Butcher	Littlehampton
Councillor Andy Cooper	Rustington
Councillor Alison Cooper	Rustington and WSCC
Councillor Roger Elkins	Ferring and WSCC
Councillor Steve Goodheart	Bognor Regis

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Councillor Keir Greenway	Bersted and WSCC
Councillor Thomas Harty	Felpham
Councillor Shirley Haywood	Middleton-on-Sea
Councillor David Huntley	Pagham
Councillor Lesley-Anne Lloyd	Rustington
Councillor Jill Long	Littlehampton
Councillor Martin Lury	Bersted
Councillor Maralyn May	Littlehampton
Councillor Roger Nash	Bognor Regis
Councillor Claire Needs	Bognor Regis
Councillor Mike Northeast	Littlehampton
Councillor Peggy Partridge	Rustington
Councillor Jacky Pendleton	Middleton-on-Sea and WSCC
Councillor Matt Stanley	Bognor Regis
Councillor Freddie Tandy	Littlehampton
Councillor Sue Wallsgrove	Barnham and Eastergate
Councillor Jeanette Warr	Bognor Regis
Councillor Christine Wiltshire	Littlehampton
Councillor Bob Woodman	Littlehampton
Councillor Amanda Worne	Ford and Yapton
Councillor Amelia Worne	Littlehampton
Councillor Gillian Yeates	Bersted and Bognor Regis

The following Councillors asked for their details to be updated on the declaration sheet displayed to the meeting, as set out below:

- Councillor Bence – to add that he was a Member of Aldwick Parish Council;
- Councillor Lawrence – to add that she was now a Member of Aldingbourne Parish Council;
- Councillor Birch – to have removed that she was no longer a member of Aldwick Parish Council; and
- Councillor McAuliffe – to add that he was a Member of Walberton Parish Council

No additional Declarations of Interest were made.

The Chair then reminded Members of the restrictions on voting outlined in Section 106 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992. This confirmed that where a Member had at least two months arrears of Council tax they must not vote on any other matter relating directly to the setting of the next year's Council Tax, though they could remain in the meeting and could speak.

657. PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

The Chair confirmed that five public questions had been submitted for the meeting. These questions have been very briefly summarised below:

- (1) From Mr Chester to the Planning Committee, Councillor Hamilton regarding the 112 Bo Klok homes in Littlehampton. In the absence of the Chair of the Planning Committee, Councillor Hamilton, a response was provided by the Vice-Chair, Councillor Wallsgrove. A supplementary question was asked and it was confirmed that a written response would be provided.
- (2) Mr and Mrs Smith to the Chair of the Policy & Finance Committee, Councillor Stanley regarding the payment of Council Tax and other options available for the payment of Council Tax. A supplementary question was asked and it was confirmed that a written response would be provided.
- (3) Mr Neathercote to the Chair of the Policy & Finance Committee regarding the Council's finances.
- (4) Mr and Mrs Smith to the Chair of the Corporate Support Committee, Councillor Opper regarding electoral registration. A supplementary question was asked and it was confirmed that a response would be provided in writing.
- (5) Mr Neathercoate to the Chair of the Environment Committee, Councillor Wallsgrove regarding landowners undertaking their riparian responsibilities with regard to ditch clearing.

The Chair in drawing Public Question to a close confirmed that a schedule of the full questions asked, and the responses provided would be uploaded to the Full Council Public Question Time Web page within ten working days of the meeting.

658. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS WITH PECUNIARY/PREJUDICIAL INTERESTS

No questions were asked.

659. MINUTES

The Minutes of the Council Meeting held on 10 January 2024 were approved by the Council as a correct record and would be signed by the Chair at the end of the meeting.

660. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair confirmed that there were no announcements to be made.

661. URGENT MATTERS

The Chair confirmed that there were no urgent items for this meeting to consider.

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662. ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL BUDGET - 2024-2025

The Chair confirmed that this Special Council Meeting had been called to consider the Budget for 2024/2025 and to set the Council Tax for Arun District Council. Councillors were referred to eight recommendations set out within the agenda papers for them to consider as well as the need to note four further recommendations and the minutes from the meeting of the Policy & Finance Committee held on 8 February 2024. These minutes had been circulated to Members and published to the Council's web pages on 20 February 2024.

Before inviting the Leader of the Council, Councillor Stanley, to present his Budget Statement, the Chair reminded Councillors of the procedure for this meeting as confirmed in the Constitution at Council Procedure Rule 4.3 and as set out in the covering agenda for the meeting.

Councillor Stanley stated that he had great pleasure in presenting the first Budget Statement to be made under the new administration. Firstly, he wished to extend his gratitude to all who had contributed to its development, from Officers to Members and not forgetting the invaluable input from residents. All had been instrumental in producing the budget to be considered. During its journey, through the committee system, there had been more briefings; meetings; and more information being made available than ever before. The Council had even embarked upon a public consultation exercise which would be expanded and enhanced in forthcoming years. Throughout its development Councillors had had the opportunity to scrutinise; ask questions and present counter proposals. Members from all sides of the Chamber had chosen to support the budget through its journey and thanks were extended to them for doing so.

Councillor Stanley highlighted that there were significant challenges impacting the finances of local government and Arun was not immune to this situation. Coastal communities had been underfunded for years and more recently Councils had seen Central Government moving away from providing consistent long term funding resulting in the need for Councils to use their precious resources to develop bids and compete against each other for short term investment, this could not be a long-term solution for front line community services. Councillor Stanley stated that he wished to reaffirm that the Council was in a good financial position. Much work had been undertaken to address internal culture and member behaviour; the essential review of the Local Plan had been launched; and the Arun Flood Forum had been established despite Arun not being the lead responsible authority for this area and the multiple associated issues. Councillor Stanley stated that he fully appreciated that there were individual items within the budget that Members might not wish to support. Due to the economic environment imposed onto the Council it was necessary to have to make difficult decisions and the budget being presented was the responsible option as it sought to tackle the challenges being faced by looking at operational savings and managerial realignment whilst focusing on preserving community facing services. At the same time, there was a lot to

be excited about. The Council had an ambitious capital programme ahead and was committed to the successful completion of the district's Levelling-Up Fund projects at the Regis Centre, in Bognor Regis and the Seafront Project in Littlehampton. From a housing perspective, the Council was continuing to seek opportunities and purchase new council homes providing good quality homes for communities. There were projects underway looking to develop brownfield sites, one being the Bognor Regis Arcade with the Council continuing to work alongside stakeholders to improve and enhance play areas for the community. Councillor Stanley repeated his thanks to the Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer and his team for the development of the budget and the clear and concise advice that had been provided and he urged Councillors to support it.

The recommendations set out within the budget were then seconded by Councillor Nash as Deputy Leader of the Council.

In line with the procedure for debates at Special Meetings, the Chair confirmed that she would now invite questions from Members to Officers. No questions were asked.

The Chair then invited Councillor Gunner to respond to the Budget as the Leader of the Opposition and Leader of the Conservative Group.

Councillor Gunner responded by referring to the choices that were available to Members in considering this budget. He stated that the new administration had made the wrong choice in aggregating all responsibility for the setting of it and by not making choices of their own. Councillor Gunner then referred to the Council's key priorities and how these related to the proposed budget. The first was "Fulfilling Arun's Economic Potential" and he questioned how this could be achieved by reducing staffing in the Economy section. The next priority was "Supporting our Environment to Support Us". Councillor Gunner stated that budget cuts were proposed by up to 40 per cent for climate change and there was no funding identified for beach access. Turning to the next priority "Delivering the Right Homes in the Right Places", Councillor Gunner made reference to the additional 1,536 new homes being provided as a result of approved planning applications approved by the Council since May 2023. There was concern that Council tenants would be paying an additional £500 extra a year in rent. On the final priority which was "Improving the Wellbeing of Arun", cuts to playgrounds and lifeguards would not improve the wellbeing of younger people. Coupled with a reduction in community wardens the budget would not improve the wellbeing of the district's Town Centres and without the promised money for the regeneration of the Windmill Theatre, this would not improve the wellbeing of Littlehampton.

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Councillor Gunner referred to the Council's healthy reserves which were in place due to the prudent planning undertaken by the previous administration. Councillor Gunner said it was disappointing that the Council would only receive 2% more from the income from its assets. The Regis Centre remained empty and was costing the Council £99k per year and this did not include the loss of income from a tenant, this income could have prevented the Council from having to make savings in respect of playgrounds, foreshores and lifeguards. Expenditure for the Civic Centre and the Bognor Regis Town Hall was being increased by £63k at a time when most staff continued to work from home for part of the week. More money was being spent on senior staff when the Council could be looking at efficiencies using the Transformation Fund. Services could have been shared with neighbouring authorities and it had been confirmed that there were no proposals for this until next year. Savings could have been found elsewhere making the choice to protect some of the areas being cut.

Finally, Councillor Gunner listed a range of cross party election pledges which he said had been broken stating that this was a misleading and disappointing budget as it did not support a commitment to climate change initiatives; it did not boost the local economy; it proposed cuts to staffing in areas that were critically needed such as the Economy team; foreshores; and by reducing the number of Senior Planners.

The Chair then invited Councillor Northeast to respond to the Budget on behalf of the Labour Group. He outlined that his experience in setting this budget had been very different to previous years as he was leading the Labour Group which was a member of a cross party ruling alliance. He confirmed that it had been refreshing to be part of a new way of dealing with and prioritising Arun's finances. Although the budget dealt with the past, it delivered the now and planned for the future. He accepted that all Groups had pledged things in election leaflets that could not be achieved with this budget, however, he was hopeful that with the direction the budget would take, many of the pledges could be revisited in the future.

Councillor Northeast highlighted a number of challenges that the Council had experienced resulting in it losing continuity with its residents and becoming unapproachable and seemingly uncaring for many. This budget planned to rectify those issues through management savings and improved income. The Council had undertaken consultation with staff to identify savings that would not have a detrimental effect on statutory services. These improvements could already be seen, and good staff were being recruited showing a commitment to care to residents. The reliance on expensive agency staff had been dramatically reduced and there was strong commitment to reduce this even further. The budget's new approach meant that the Council had not had to raid balances to the level of last year, securing the Council's financial future. Councillor Northeast thanked the Group Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer and his team; the Interim Joint Chief Executives and all staff involved in the budget consultation for their efforts. He had never seen such a level of member involvement and participation which had to be applauded. Councillor Northeast confirmed that the budget would set the Council on the right course putting the Council

onto a strong economic footing which would allow it to work on the issues that mattered most to residents and so he urged Councillors to support it.

The Chair invited Councillor Wallsgrove to respond to the Budget on behalf of the Green Group. She stated how important it was to think of the climate in all that the Council did, especially at a time when many parts of the district remained flooded with water and sewage. Turning to some key parts of the budget, the 7.7% increase in council rents had been unavoidable, however, there was help for those that needed it. Councillor Wallsgrove stated that this budget ensured that key projects would remain on target. The Bersted Brooks project would assist with flooding and biodiversity and residents would be able to visit it free of charge to experience what was left of the green fields of Arun.

The Chair then invited Councillor Huntley to respond on behalf of the Independent Green Group. He confirmed that his Group felt that this was a responsible budget given the constraints previously mentioned. Councillor Huntley referred to the rate support grant that had been non-existent for many years meaning that the Council had had to robustly respond in setting its budget. There was a need to invest for the future and to focus on building and developing brownfield sites and increasing the Council's housing stock. Councillor Huntley confirmed that his Group supported the budget.

The Chair invited Councillor Goodheart to respond on behalf of the Arun Independent Group. He confirmed that his Group were looking forward to supporting the new budget as it moved forward in times of economic crisis and cutbacks. The Council needed to support regeneration projects in the district, and it needed to encourage investment by exploring all opportunities. Councillor Goodheart confirmed that his Group was looking forward to being involved in any type of development that would deliver prosperity to the area. He supported Arun delivering strong climate emergency programmes and he looked forward to working with all political groups to deliver the budget.

The Chair thanked Group Leaders for their responses and invited debate.

The first to speak was Councillor Stanley and he confirmed that he wished to move a small amendment to the capital programme detail in Appendix 3 to add the following wording to the line under Housing and Wellbeing entitled 'Housing Improvements' to read **Housing Improvements and Energy Efficiency**. This amendment had no financial impact on any of the figures in the budget it proposed to confirm the Council's focus and commitment to applying climate change to key projects. The amendment was seconded by Councillor Wallsgrove.

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As proposer of the amendment, Councillor Stanley confirmed that the amendment had been requested by the Green Group.

In line with Council Procedure Rule 20.6 – the voting on the amendment was recorded.

Those voting for the amendment were Councillors Ayling, Batley, Bence, Bicknell, Birch, Blanchard-Cooper, Mrs Bower, Bower, Brooks, Butcher, Cooper, Edwards, Elkins, Goodheart, Greenway, Gunner, Haywood, Huntley, Jones, Kelly, Lawrence, Lloyd, Long, Lury, Madeley, May, McAuliffe, McDougall, Nash, Needs, Northeast, O'Neill, Oppler, Partridge, Patel, Pendleton, Penycate, Purser, Stainton, Stanley, Tandy, Turner, Wallsgrove, Walsh, Warr, Wiltshire, Woodman, Mrs Worne, Miss Worne and Yeates (50). No Councillors voted against the recommendations. Councillor Mrs Cooper abstained from voting (1).

The amendment was therefore declared CARRIED.

The Chair then returned to the substantive recommendations, as amended, and invited debate.

Many observations were made. Debate commenced with concerns raised over the 2.9% increase in Council Tax; the 7.7% increase in Council rents and the 10% increase in car parking charges when a promise had been made the previous year to reverse such increases and this could not be seen in this budget. Concern was also expressed over the 40% reduction in the climate change budget and cuts to the Foreshores Team that would mainly affect Bognor Regis. Other concerns expressed were that there was no funding for beach access and accessibility, though this was not prevent work continuing. Cuts in staffing in areas such as foreshores, the Economy team and planning would not help the Council to fulfil its regeneration and other aspirations.

The cut in the community wardens service was also a concern and at a time when anti-social behaviour was increasing, this was also an issue that was of great concern and of importance to residents.

Further observations made covered the lack of member consultation in setting the budget; the Local Government Finance Settlement and central government funding; the national economy; the position of the Housing Revenue Account reserves balance; and the performance of previous administrations.

Having concluded the debate, the Chair invited Councillor Nash as the seconder to the recommendations to speak. Councillor Nash outlined that he saw this budget as a new start for the Council and as some of the major issues it had been facing were being addressed. Staff moral had improved; recruitment was underway; the reliance on agency staff was reducing, Member behaviour had been addressed; and residents were now looking at Arun in a different light. Setting the budget had not been easy given the difficult and challenging circumstances, which were not unique to Arun, they were a national problem due to high inflation and other issues resulting in the Council having to make difficult and problematic decisions, The budget was realistic and protected many front line services.

Councillor Nash praised the staff involved in setting the budget and he praised the wider public consultation that had been undertaken which would be built on for the future. This budget was a sound budget and provided a steer for the future, opening existing opportunities in terms of regeneration, housing and in terms of how the Council was perceived.

Councillor Stanley, as the proposer of the recommendations, responded to some of the points raised. He said he was genuinely passionate about the views and opinions of residents and he was keen to progress further the public consultation undertaken on the budget in the future. Regarding consultation, he reminded Councillors that every Member had had the opportunity to submit suggestions, to ask questions and to make counter proposals. Councillor Stanley confirmed that the Council was in a robust position as it had good financial reserves which had been down to previous administrations. It needed to be mentioned that the Council could have been in a far better position had it been more ambitious in previous years, when interest rates were low, investing for the council and producing income for the Council. What was before Members was a solid and responsible budget which Councillor Stanley urged Members to support.

In line with Council Procedure Rule 20.6 – the voting on the substantive recommendations was recorded.

Those voting for were Councillors Ayling, Batley, Birch, Blanchard-Cooper, Brooks, Butcher, Goodheart, Haywood, Huntley, Jones, Lawrence, Long, Lury, May, McAuliffe, McDougall, Nash, Needs, Northeast, O'Neill, Oppler, Penycate, Stanley, Tandy, Wallsgrove, Walsh, Warr, Wiltshire, Woodman, Mrs Worne, Miss Worne and Yeates (32). No Councillors voted against the recommendations. Councillors Bence, Bicknell, Mrs Bower, Bower, Mrs Cooper, Cooper, Edwards, Elkins, Greenway, Gunner, Kelly, Lloyd, Madeley, Partridge, Patel, Pendleton, Purser, Stainton, and Turner abstained from voting (19).

The Council, therefore

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RESOLVED – That it

- (1) Approves the General Fund Budget as set out in Appendix 1;
- (2) Approves that Arun's Band D Council Tax for 2024/25 is set at £208.39, which is an increase of 2.99% over 2023/24;
- (3) Approves that Arun's Council Tax Requirement for 2024/25, based on a Band D Council tax of £208.39, is set at £13.451 million, plus parish precepts as demanded, to be transferred to the General Fund in accordance with statutory requirements. Page 23 Agenda Item 8;
- (4) Approves the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget as set out in Appendix 2;
- (5) Approves that HRA rents be increased by 7.7% in accordance with the provisions of the rent standard;
- (6) Approves that HRA garage rents be increased by 7.7% to give an average rent of £15.60 per week (excluding VAT) and heating and water/sewerage charges be increased on a scheme-by-scheme basis, with the aim of balancing costs with income;
- (7) Approves the capital programme as set out Appendix 3, as amended; and
- (8) Approves the Statutory Resolutions - see appendix 5.

The Council also noted that:

- (9) The Group Head of Finance, in consultation with the Leader of the Council has approved a tax base of 64,550 for 2024/25;
- (10) Notes the submission of the Council's NNDR1 return (the estimate of the Council's Business Rate income for 2024/25) to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC);
- (11) The Council's Usable Revenue Reserves minimum balance is set at £10m for 2024/25;
- (12) The HRA reserve balance will continue to remain below the minimum level of £2 million for 2024/25.

The Council also

RESOLVED

That for 2024/25 any expenses incurred by the Authority in performing in part of its area a function performed elsewhere in its area by a Parish/Town Council or the Chairman of a Parish Meeting shall not be treated as special expenses for the purposes of Section 35 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992.

663. MOTIONS

The Chair confirmed that no Motions had been submitted for this meeting.

(The meeting concluded at 7.46 pm)