



## **LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT**

**Minutes of the ORDINARY (BUDGET SETTING) MEETING OF THE COUNCIL  
held in the Conference Hall on Thursday 27 February 2025 at 6.00 pm**

### **PRESENT:**

**The Worshipful the Mayor**  
Councillor Tariq Dar MBE

**The Deputy Mayor**  
Councillor Ryan Hack

### **COUNCILLORS:**

|              |                  |
|--------------|------------------|
| Aden         | Afzal            |
| Agha         | Ahmadi-Moghaddam |
| Ahmed        | Akram            |
| Bajwa        | Begum            |
| Benea        | M Butt           |
| S Butt       | Chan             |
| Chappell     | Chohan           |
| Choudry      | Clinton          |
| Conneely     | Crabb            |
| Dixon        | Donnelly-Jackson |
| Ethapemi     | Farah            |
| Fraser       | Gbajumo          |
| Grahl        | Hirani           |
| Hylton       | Johnson          |
| Kabir        | Kansagra         |
| Kelcher      | Kennelly         |
| Long         | Lorber           |
| Mahmood      | Matin            |
| Maurice      | Miller           |
| Mistry       | Mitchell         |
| Moeen        | Molloy           |
| Nerva        | M Patel          |
| Rajan-Seelan | Rubin            |
| Ketan Sheth  | Krupa Sheth      |
| L.Smith      | T.Smith          |
| Tatler       |                  |

### **1. Mayors Introductory Statement**

The Mayor welcomed all those present to the meeting and thanked everyone for their attendance.

## 2. **Mayors Statement - Order of Business**

Before consideration of the formal agenda, the Mayor informed members of a change to the order of business. Given the attendance of Paul Dossett (Grant Thornton) as the Council's External Audit Partner for the External Audit Annual Report, he advised of the intention to move that report (listed as Item 7 on the agenda) for consideration in advance of the main Budget and Council Tax debate. The Mayor advised members this would also be followed by consideration of the proposed changes to the Council Tax Support Scheme (listed as Item 8 on the agenda), which he intended to move at the same time given the need for those proposals to be considered in advance of the main budget report.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** that:

- (1) The business to be considered at the meeting be re-arranged in the following order:
  - Agenda Item 6 – Auditors Annual Report on the London Borough of Brent
  - Agenda Item 7 – Review of the Working Age Council Tax Support Scheme 2025-26
- (2) The remaining items of business to then follow in the same order as listed on the agenda.

## 3. **Procedural Motion - Conduct of Business**

The Mayor advised that as this meeting had been designated as the Council's formal budget and Council Tax setting meeting, he would be inviting Councillor Ahmadi Moghaddam (as the Majority Group Chief Whip) to move a procedural motion, in accordance with Standing Orders, relating to the conduct of the debate on the budget report. Councillor Ahmadi Moghaddam then proceeded to the move the procedural motion.

Prior to being put to the vote, Councillor Lorber spoke (as Leader of the Liberal Democrats Group) to highlight his objection to the proposed change in timing for Group Leaders speeches during the budget debate, which he felt required further explanation and should have been subject to prior consultation with the respective Group Leaders. The concerns highlighted were also shared and supported by Councillor Kansagra, as Leader of the Conservative Group.

In addressing the comments raised, Debra Norman (Corporate Director Law & Governance) clarified that there was no provision for debate on procedural motions. Should members not wish to support the proposals, as moved, they were advised this would require them to vote against the procedural motion. Should that not be passed, they would then have the opportunity to move any alternative proposals.

Having noted the advice provided, it was **RESOLVED** (on being put to the vote with all Liberal Democrats & Conservative members voting against) that the following procedural motion be agreed:

- (1) That the Leader of the Council be permitted to speak for up to 20 minutes in presenting the report to the meeting and setting out the Cabinet's proposals for the budget, after which, the following arrangements be agreed for the purpose of debating and voting upon the Budget and Council Tax:
  - (a) The Leader of the Conservative Group (or their nominated representative) be permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes in response to the Leader and in order to move their alternative budget proposals;
  - (b) The Leader of the Liberal Democrats Group (or their nominated representative) be permitted to speak in response to the Leader and in order to move their alternative budget proposals for up to 5 minutes;
  - (c) The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources be permitted to speak for up to 15 minutes;
  - (d) The Chair of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group be permitted to speak for up to 5 minutes;
  - (e) A general debate follow during which the usual rules for debate will apply as set out in Standing Orders (save as set out in this procedural motion);
- (2) At the end of the general debate, the Leader of the Council be permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes to submit his closing remarks.
- (3) Following the close of the debate, recorded votes on any amendments to the budget proposals and then the final substantive budget proposals be taken in turn with the recommendations each taken as one block for voting purposes.

Following a request from Councillor Lorber, under Standing Order 43 (f), the names of the Liberal Democrats Group members who voted against the above procedural motion were recorded as follows – Councillors. Clinton, Lorber & Matin.

#### **4. Apologies for Absence**

The Mayor reported that apologies for absence had been received from Councillors Collymore, Knight (who it was reported was currently on Maternity Leave) Jayanti Patel and Shah.

#### **5. Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the previous Council meeting held on Monday 18 November 2024 be approved as a correct record.

#### **6. Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

#### **7. Mayor's Announcements**

The Mayor made the following announcements:

(i) Alpertton By-Election result

The Mayor began his announcements by formally congratulating and welcoming Charlie Clinton as the newly elected ward councillor for Alpertton, following the outcome of the by-election held in that ward on Tuesday 18 February 2025.

Highlighting the rewarding nature of being elected to serve as a councillor and in being able to represent local residents, he took the opportunity to wish Councillor Clinton well during his remaining term of office.

The opportunity was also taken to formally thank the Chief Executive and all other staff involved for the successful delivery of the by-election, which it was recognised had required a significant effort to organise.

(ii) Kings New Years Honours List

The Mayor then moved on to continue his announcements by congratulating all those associated with Brent who had received an honour in the Kings New Year Honours list for 2025.

(iii) Holocaust & Genocide Memorial Day

The Mayor advised members that January had included this year's Holocaust & Genocide Memorial Day event, which had included commemoration of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau & the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genocide in Bosnia.

In reflecting on the nature of the human tragedy involved, the Mayor welcomed King Charles III becoming the first British Head of State to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau in order to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day, with the events held serving to highlight the lessons for members from all faiths and communities about what could happen in allowing hate and discrimination to be tolerated.

(iv) HM Queen Camilla & Princess Royal visits to Brent

The Mayor advised he was delighted to have recently been invited to join Her Majesty Queen Camilla on a visit to the Asian Women's Resource Centre in Harlesden to celebrate its 45th anniversary, which had highlighted the charity's vital support for women facing domestic abuse. During her visit, the Mayor reported that the Queen had met survivors of domestic abuse along with staff, and officially opened the centre's new Healing Garden.

In addition, members were advised the borough had also received another royal visit in February when her Royal Highness The Princess Royal visited the Central & North West London NHS Foundation Trust's Brent Occupational Therapy and Community Service at Church End and Roundwood Unity Centre. The Mayor advised that during her visit the Princess Royal had met with Occupational Therapists and members of the local Somali community to view the efforts being made to tackle health inequalities through Brent Health Matters, recognising the important nature of the work being undertaken in Brent.

(v) 107<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations – Mrs Mary Thomas

Following the announcement made last year, the Mayor advised he was pleased to be able to share and celebrate the wonderful achievement of a local Brent resident Mrs Mary “Mama” Thomas reaching her 107<sup>th</sup> birthday. In celebrating this achievement, all members joined the Mayor in wishing Mrs Thomas a happy 107<sup>th</sup> birthday.

(vi) Mayor’s Charity Appeal event and thanks to Deputy Mayor

The Mayor then took the opportunity to thank the Deputy Mayor Councillor Hack for the work undertaken to cover his engagements during a recent short break away and also to remind members of his Charity Appeal event being held on Friday 7 March 2025 in support of his chosen charity, the Pakistan Community Centre. He hoped as many members as possible would be able to join him for what would be a special charity Iftar in support of the charity.

(vii) Passing of ex-Councillor K D Patel (husband of ex-Mayor 1996-97 Councillor Lata Patel)

The Mayor advised that it was with regret he had to announce the sad passing of former Councillor Mr. K. D. Patel. Members were advised that former Councillor Patel had served as a member of the Council during the 1990’s, with his dedication and commitment to making a positive impact on the local community he served fondly remembered by those who knew him.

On behalf of Brent Council, the Mayor offered his sincerest sympathy and heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of former Councillor Patel.

(viii) Changes to Senior Management Team

As a final announcement the Mayor took the opportunity to advise members of some key changes to the Council’s Corporate Management team that would shortly be taking effect.

Following the decision taken by Peter Gadsdon, Corporate Director of Partnerships, Housing & Resident Services, to retire from the Council, confirmation was provided that he would be leaving Brent in early April 2025. The Mayor advised that Peter had worked at Brent for over ten years including roles as the Director of Policy, Performance and Partnerships, Assistant Chief Executive, Strategic Director for Customer and Digital Services and then Corporate Director for Resident Services as well as holding directorships in the council’s subsidiary housing companies.

These various roles had involved Peter leading the delivery of services which the Mayor pointed out continued to meet the needs of the borough’s residents, including the effective use of technology to improve services and outcomes whilst increasing productivity and delivering cost efficiencies.

At the same time, members were advised that Debra Norman, Corporate Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer, had also taken the decision to retire at the end of March. The Mayor advised that Debra had started with Brent in January 1996 and having joined Islington Council for a period in 2007, then returned to

Brent in October 2016 to take up the post of Director of Legal Services prior to being appointed to her current position. During her time at Brent her role had included leading the Council's Audit & Investigations, Procurement and HR services in addition to the legal team and more recently Democratic Services, which had involved her working closely with many councillors.

In recognising their legacy, the Mayor felt it would be no understatement to highlight how much both Peter and Debra would be missed by everyone who had worked with them over the years. On behalf of the Council, he therefore took the opportunity to wish them both all the best in their future endeavours and to thank them for their service to the Council and residents of Brent.

*All present at the meeting then joined the Mayor in a brief round of applause to thank Peter & Debra for their service to Brent and wish them well for the future.*

(ix) Petitions

As a final announcement, the Mayor referred members to the list of current petitions tabled at the meeting, in accordance with Standing Orders which also detailed the action being taken to deal with them.

## 8. **Appointments to Committees and Outside Bodies**

The Mayor referred members to the list of changes circulated in relation to appointments to Council Committees, Sub Committees and other bodies.

It was **RESOLVED**

- (1) To note that effective from 30 January 2025 the Leader of the Council had appointed Councillor Teo Benea to fill the position of Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Planning & Property
- (2) To approve the following changes in the membership of Committee and Outside Bodies:

Committee Appointments:

(a) Community & Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee:

- Councillor Teo Benea to be replaced by Councillor Bhagwanji Chohan as a full member and as a substitute on the Resources & Public Realm Scrutiny Committee.
- Councillor Charlie Clinton to replace Councillor Paul Lorber as a full member with Councillor Paul Lorber to fill the vacancy as one of the Liberal Democrats two substitute members.

(b) Council Tax Setting Committee – Councillor Shama Tatler to be replaced by Councillor Teo Benea as a substitute member.

(c) General Purposes Committee:

- Councillor Teo Benea to replace Councillor Shama Tatler as a full member. Councillor Shama Tatler to fill the vacancy as a substitute member.
- Councillor Paul Lorber to replace the Liberal Democrat vacancy as full member with Councillor Charlie Clinton to replace Councillor Paul Lorber as one of the Liberal Democrats two substitute members.

(d) Licensing Committee:

- Councillor Ajmal Akram to replace Councillor Tony Ethapemi and Councillor Lesley Smith to replace Councillor Ryan Hack as full members.
- Councillor Charlie Clinton to replace Councillor Paul Lorber as the Liberal Democrats full member.

(e) Resources & Public Realm Scrutiny Committee – Councillor Paul Lorber to replace the Liberal Democrat vacancy as full member with Councillor Charlie Clinton to replace Councillor Paul Lorber as one of the Liberal Democrats two substitute members.

(f) Brent Connects – Councillor Ajmal Akram to replace Councillor Teo Benea as Chair of Wembley Brent Connects

(g) Service User Consultative Forum – Disability – Councillor Fleur Donnelly-Jackson to be replaced by Councillor Rajan Seelan

(h) To note that the Leader of the Council has appointed Councillor Teo Benea to replace Councillor Shama Tatler as a substitute member on the Barham Park Trust Sub Committee.

(i) To note that the Leader of the Council had replaced Councillor Shama Tatler as Brent's appointed representative on the West London Economic Prosperity Board and had appointed Councillor Teo Benea to fill the second deputy position.

(j) Subject to confirmation by the General Purposes Sub Committee on 10 March 2025:

- Senior Staff Appointment Sub Committee - Councillor Teo Benea to replace Councillor Shama Tatler as a substitute member.
- Senior Staff Appeals Sub Committee - Councillor Teo Benea to replace Councillor Shama Tatler as a substitute member.

Outside Bodies:

(k) Capital Letters – Councillor Muhammed Butt to be replaced by Councillor Fleur Donnelly-Jackson as Brent's representative.

- (l) London Road Safety Council – Councillor Shama Tatler to be replaced by Councillor Neil Nerva as Brent’s alternative member
  - (m) Newable Ltd (Greater London Enterprise Board) - Councillor Harbi Farah to replace Councillor Tatler as Brent’s appointed representative.
  - (n) Old Oak Common & Park Royal Development Corporation (ODPC) – Councillor Teo Benea to replace Councillor Tatler as Brent’s Deputy representative.
  - (o) Queens Park Joint Consultative Group – Councillor Lesley Smith to fill the vacancy.
  - (p) Local Government Association General Assembly – Councillor Teo Benea to replace Councillor Tatler as one of Brent’s Deputy representatives.
  - (q) London Council’s Greater Employment Forum – Councillor Mili Patel to replace Councillor Muhammed Butt as the full member with Councillor Muhammed Butt replacing Councillor Mili Patel as Deputy.
- (3) To agree (on the basis of the recruitment process detailed within the paper) the appointment of Sebastian Evans as an Independent co-opted member of the Audit & Standards Advisory Committee with a focus on audit matters for a four-year term of office, ending at the Council’s Annual Meeting in May 2029 (subject to confirmation of the ongoing appointment at the Annual Council meeting each year).

## 9. **Auditor’s Annual Report on the London Borough of Brent**

In accordance with the change in the order of business agreed at the start of the meeting, the Mayor then invited Paul Dossett (Grant Thornton) as the Council’s External Auditor Partner to introduce the External Audit 2023-24 Annual Report on Value for Money (VFM).

In introducing the report, Paul Dossett summarised the approach towards the VFM audit and drew Members attention to the focus of the Annual Report on the Council’s arrangements in relation to three areas, Governance, Financial Sustainability and Improving economy, efficiency along with the key findings detailed within the Annual Report. Members were advised that work to finalise sign-off of the Council’s 2023-24 Financial Statement of Accounts was now in the process of being completed, with the Executive Summary providing an overview in relation to the Value for Money assessment of the Council’s arrangements.

As part of the auditor’s work, members were advised that whilst no significant weakness had been identified in the Council’s arrangements for Governance or Improving Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness a significant weakness and key recommendation had been raised in respect of the Council’s Financial Sustainability, highlighting the use of reserves in 2023/24 and 2024/25 to fund in year overspends arising from the unprecedented pressures in homelessness and temporary accommodation. This had been identified as a key risk in the Council’s financial sustainability and resilience on the basis that the continued use of



reserves to manage these pressures would be unsustainable. In recognising the significant pressures and challenges on local government funding, Paul Dossett advised this was a position faced by a number of other local authorities, with the report including a detailed commentary on the review of arrangements in relation to maintaining the Council's financial sustainability. These included the plans in place to address the significant financial pressures in relation to short and medium term plans, action being taken to address the funding gaps identified and deliver achievable savings in response, plans to support the sustainable delivery of services in accordance with strategic and statutory priorities and other key programmes as well as identify and manage risks to financial resilience (including unplanned changes in demand). In order to stabilise its financial position, the report had recognised that the Council had been compelled to make difficult decisions in order to balance its budget and ensure it maintained its finances on a sustainable footing avoiding the continued use of reserves to meet unplanned expenditure resulting in £16m of new savings having been proposed for delivery in 2025-26 with the auditors having found that the Council's financial planning both short and longer term had been based on sound judgements.

In terms of the arrangements relating to Governance and Improving Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness members were advised that whilst a number of improvement recommendations had been identified, these had been designed to enhance existing processes rather than in response to any weaknesses identified. In commending the report to Council thanks were expressed to all officers involved in supporting the audit process.

The Mayor then invited Councillor Mili Patel, as Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources, to respond to the Annual report on behalf of the Council. In welcoming the report, she felt it important to recognise and value the independent nature of the audit opinion and findings identified with all recommendations acknowledged and accepted. Management response had been provided on all issues, as detailed within the report and in highlighting the value of continued collaboration given the ongoing financial and economic challenges faced, the opportunity was taken to thank Paul Dossett and his team along with the Council's finance officers and Audit & Standards Advisory Committee for the diligent work undertaken on the audit.

The Mayor then invited contributions from other members, with the following comments received.

In response to further assurance being sought by Councillor Kansagra on the basis of the assessment relating to the significant weakness which had been identified in relation to the Council's Financial Sustainability Paul Dossett advised that this had reflected, in line with many other local authorities, the significant challenges and cost pressures being driven by the unprecedented increase in demand for services. The challenging nature of the measures taken by Brent in seeking to balance its budget and ensure it maintained a sustainable budget position moving forward had been recognised, with no need identified at this stage to consider the issue of a Section 114 notice.

In response to the outline of the audit process provided, Councillor Lorber sought further detail as to whether this had included any review of the costs incurred as a result of delivery of the Altamira Morland Gardens housing scheme not being

progressed along with the arrangements for management of the Barham Park Trust accounts and way in which Gifts and Hospitality were currently required to be registered by members. In responding on the issues raised, Paul Dossett advised that the scope of the audit had been focussed on the Council's overall arrangements for delivering Value for Money as prescribed within the National Audit Office Code of Audit Practice rather than on the delivery of specific schemes or projects. Whilst again not focussed on specific schemes, an assurance was provided that should concerns be raised External Audit would be able to consider whether any further audit activity was required with the issue regarding the level of disclosure provided by members when registering Gifts & Hospitality involving "exceptional items" having also been recognised and identified as an improvement recommendation in order to enhance transparency.

As no other members indicated they wished to speak the Mayor once again thanked Paul Dossett for his attendance and then put the recommendations in the report to the vote which were declared **CARRIED**.

It was therefore **RESOLVED** to note the External Auditor's Annual Report on Value for Money as part of the 2023-24 audit of the year end accounts.

#### 10. **Review of working age Council Tax Support Scheme for 2025-26**

In accordance with the change in the order of business agreed at the start of the meeting, the Mayor then invited Councillor Donnelly-Jackson (as Cabinet Member for Housing & Resident Services) to introduce a report from the Corporate Director of Partnerships, Housing & Resident Services setting out proposals to introduce a revised local Council Tax Support Scheme 2025-26, as recommended to Council by Cabinet on 10 February 2025.

In introducing the report, members were advised that the significant nature of the changes to the scheme being proposed had been recognised, with the approach taken in developing the revised scheme having sought to balance the competing need for fairness and transparency against the Council's overall financial sustainability given the challenging financial context within which the Council was having to operate. Unlike many other universal benefits, members were reminded that Council Tax Support schemes were determined at a local level meaning the levels of support available would vary from area to area. In recognising the important role of the Council Tax Support scheme in supporting many households across the borough and challenging nature of the proposed changes outlined, members were advised that the scheme had reached a point at which it was no longer affordable to deliver. Whilst supporting nearly 17,000 working age individuals and just over 8,000 pensioners this had involved costs of approx. £33m during the previous year, with nearly 20p from every £1 collected in Council Tax t being provided in the form of Council Tax Support.

In highlighting the financial challenges faced not only within Brent but across many other local authorities (resulting in many having to seek additional financial support) members were advised that the cost associated with provision of local Council Tax Support Schemes was an issue being revisited by many other local authorities across London. In view of the budget gap currently faced by the Council, the need had been identified to re-evaluate every aspect of spending in order to identify where the greatest efficiencies could be unlocked enabling the

Council to achieve more with less. In reviewing current operation of the scheme, confirmation was provided that the statutory pensioner element of the scheme would remain protected with the proposed changes therefore focussed on the working-age element and including a standard 35% minimum contribution and simplified non-dependant deductions designed to make the system clearer, and easier to navigate whilst also reducing the administrative burden and ensuring that all working-age households contributed fairly towards local services, whilst also continuing to protect the most vulnerable and with a built in annual review of income bands to ensure they continue to reflect economic realities.

Having outlined the proposals for which approval was being sought, Council was reminded these were not being put forward as a matter of choice but out of necessity and in recognising the impact which the proposed changes were likely to have on affected households, the opportunity was also taken also to highlight the measures which had been developed to provide targeted support for those most in need. These included the reinvestment (from the savings identified) of £1.5m into a hardship fund alongside a programme of proactive outreach and support through the Welfare Advice Service (working through Brent Hubs alongside partners such as Citizens Advice Brent) designed to provide financial guidance and debt management support. In addition, work would continue with voluntary organisations, community groups and other local service providers to ensure those affected were aware of their entitlements and were able to access the support needed.

In ending her introduction, Councillor Donnelly-Jackson felt the changes outlined reflected the delicate balance needing to be achieved in seeking to meet the Council's broader aims to secure the Council's financial sustainability whilst also targeting support where it was needed most across the Council in order to work towards a fairer and more financially sustainable future for Brent with all those involved in helping to shape the review and ensure the scheme remained as fair and functional as possible thanked for their support and efforts.

Having thanked Councillor Donnelly-Jackson for moving the report the Mayor then invited contributions from other members, with the following comments received.

Outlining his concern at the proposed extent of the changes, Councillor Lorber began by highlighting the significant impact he felt they would have on local residents already struggling as a result of the cost-of-living crisis with, what he felt, had been insufficient time to make them aware and allow them to make any necessary adjustments. Concern was also expressed about the extent and meaningfulness of the consultation process undertaken given the preferred option which had been identified as the basis of that process, following the initial modelling undertaken. In highlighting the responses provided as part of the consultation, including those by Brent Citizens Advice, Councillor Lorber ended by urging members when considering the proposals and impact locally to consider, as a minimum and as proposed within the Liberal Democrats alternative budget proposals, increasing the level of the financial hardship Support Fund from £1.5m to £3m.

In recognising the challenging nature of the financial position faced by the Council as context within which the proposals had needed to be developed, Councillor Grahl felt it was important for members when considering the proposals to

acknowledge the efforts being made to ensure those households most in need would continue to be supported with all those involved in developing the wide range of support available thanked for their efforts. The opportunity was also taken to draw attention to the way in which the proposals served to highlight the regressive nature of the current Council Tax regime and need for fundamental reform of the funding system for local government, with the ongoing efforts being made to lobby for the necessary change and longer term funding settlements proposed by the new Government therefore welcomed.

As a final contribution, Councillor Mistry whilst also recognising the challenging nature of the financial position faced by the Council as context within which the proposals had needed to be developed as a result of the Council having to deliver a range of essential demand led services amidst rising costs, advised that the Conservative Group were in support of the proposals having recognised the scheme previously operated by Brent as one of the most generous across London and which was recognised as no longer affordable to deliver. In support of the review undertaken, the Conservative Group felt there was scope to seek further changes with their alternative budget proposals having recommended raising the 35% Single Persons Discount to 40%, in order to save an additional £1m which could then be used to provide additional support to pensioners who had narrowly missed out through loss of the Winter Fuel Allowance, and more robust enforcement to tackle fraudulent claims.

As no other members indicated they wished to speak and Councillor Donnelly-Jackson advised she did not intend to exercise her right of reply the Mayor then moved on to put the recommendations in the report to the vote and they were declared **CARRIED**.

Council therefore **RESOLVED**

- (1) To approve the revised Local Council Tax Support (CTS) Scheme for 2025-26 incorporating the following changes:
  - (a) Introduction of a standard 35% minimum payment for working age households and application a percentage reduction to each of the income bands. This means all CTS claimants would be expected to contribute a minimum of 35% towards their Council Tax liability. Their CTS would then be calculated based on their income and that would determine which income band they feed into. This would reduce the cost of the scheme by £7.6m with detailed explanations and calculations, number of residents impacted and the proposed weekly reduction in CTS outlined in Appendix A of the report.
  - (b) Simplification of the non-dependant charges incorporating two flat rate non-dependant deductions for most households with other adults living in the property, £8 per week for non-dependants “out of work” and £20 per week for non-dependants “in work”. This would remove the need to verify income for non-dependants for CTS claims and reduce the administrative burden. Adopting this proposal would reduce the cost of the scheme by £0.7m with detailed explanation and calculations of the proposed non-dependant deduction, number of households affected and

proposed weekly reduction in CTS support outlined within Appendix B of the report.

### **Technical and administrative changes**

- (2) To approve the amendments to CTS scheme to include the Universal Credit notification received from DWP for Council tax, as the start date of the claim for Council tax reduction if there was entitlement to it.
- (3) To approve the alignment of the backdating rules for new CTS claim with the Housing Benefits and Universal Credit regulations i.e. for a maximum of one calendar month. The backdating request is made at the time of submission of a new claim. This change would reduce the administrative burden, and customers would not lose out as the start date would be accepted as per DWP notification date to start date of entitlement. In exceptional circumstances, the Council would consider revising the claim for more than a month e.g. bereavement of close relative.
- (4) To approve the income bands for households being reviewed every year in line with the Consumer Pricing Index (CPI) from September of the previous year to be considered for the new financial year.
- (5) To approve that a review and update of section 13A policy for hardship fund for Council tax, including an additional £1.5m fund to support residents, be considered at the 10 March 2025 Cabinet meeting

## **11. Budget and Council Tax 2025 - 2026**

The Mayor then moved on to receive the report from the Corporate Director of Finance & Resources setting out the Council's budget proposals for 2025-26. Included within the report were the results of the budget consultation, scrutiny and equalities processes along with a summary of the overall financial position, risks, issues and uncertainties facing the Council over the medium term.

In accordance with the procedural motion agreed at the start of the meeting, the Mayor invited Councillor Muhammed Butt, as Leader of the Council, to introduce and move the budget proposals within the report.

*At this stage in the meeting Councillors Clinton, Lorber and Matin as members of the Liberal Democrats group withdrew from the meeting.*

Councillor Muhammed Butt began by thanking members, officers, the public and other stakeholders for their contribution in preparation of the budget. Highlighting that the proposals were the first to be presented under the leadership of a new Labour Government seeking to invest in communities, strengthen public services and put people first, building what he felt would be a brighter future for all, he felt this needed to be contrasted with the impact of the previous Governments mismanagement of the economy and programme of austerity and with the new Government working at pace to reverse a decade of managed decline in public services.

As with the new Government, rather than focus on short term convenience and in recognising the difficult nature of choices reflecting current reality as opposed to political rhetoric and opportunism, he felt it important to recognise the way in which the current Administration had once again be able to present a balanced budget which had not only been designed to deliver a fair and responsible long term approach but would also continue to make a difference for residents across Brent.

Recognising the difficult nature of the decisions needing to be made given the financial challenges faced by local government, which it was noted had resulted in at least seven local authorities across London and more across the country (of all political persuasions) needing to approach the Government for exceptional financial support, he highlighted the need for urgent reform of the current system of funding local government services given the regressive nature and reliance on Council Tax increases which Council's, in exercising responsible leadership (and once again of all political persuasions) would once again be required to seek.

Reflecting on the range of issues needing to be addressed by the Government, Councillor Muhammed Butt felt it was important to keep advocating for the prioritisation of local government and outlined the extent of work undertaken to ensure that the proposals presented for consideration had been subject to detailed consideration and represented a reasoned and rational financial judgement reflecting the careful stewardship of the Council's resources and the difficult and often unpalatable nature of decisions which had needed to be made given increasing levels of demand. He felt this was best demonstrated in relation to the current housing crisis, which had resulted in increasing levels of homelessness and a reduction in supply of temporary accommodation; the increased reliance on foodbanks and widening of health and economic inequalities being experienced by many communities and made worse by the previous Conservative Government's approach towards austerity. As an alternative, the approach adopted by the new Labour Government was welcomed, including the prospect of genuine devolution and levelling up and the opportunity to collaborate even more closely with the Mayor of London recognising, despite the progress already made in terms of the delivery of affordable homes across the borough, the extent of demand still to be addressed.

In highlighting the ongoing impact of the previous Government's programme of austerity and funding restrictions imposed on public services, Councillor Muhammed Butt also felt it important to recognise the cumulative impact not only across London as a whole (with London Council's having calculated that funding per Londoner had decreased by 28% since 2010) but also for Brent given the £218m worth of cuts which had needed to be delivered since 2010 representing a 78% reduction in core funding. Despite this context, he felt it important to outline the Administration's commitment to continue protecting those services relied on by the most vulnerable in society and to matching realism with real delivery and change.

Moving on to focus in detail on the budget proposals set out within the report, Councillor Muhammed Butt was keen to highlight the way in which the following key commitments identified by the current Labour Administration had been supported through the budget:

(a) Establishing a Foundation for Growth – including:

- investment of £31.4m to deliver 1,700 safe and secure new homes by 2028;
  - a £10.4m commitment to improve standards for private renters through enhance licensing to address standards;
  - additional investment for housing services, including new area tenancy managers and efforts to address mould and damp issues;
  - setting aside, recognising the pressure on household budgets, £1.5m in a new hardship fund to assist to residents with rising costs and to address fuel and food poverty aimed at providing dignity to those struggling to make ends meet;
  - allocating £500k to Brent Works to support the provision of employment opportunities and £2.9 m to Brent Start for skills programs recognising the benefits of investing in skills and jobs in terms of the borough's future;
  - increasing digital skills training funding and partnering with major employers to help develop future talent.
- (b) A Cleaner and Greener Brent – including:
- investing £8.2m in maintaining the boroughs road and pavement, including an additional £700k provided by the Government, allocated for reactive repairs (including potholes) in order to ensure the borough remained connected, accessible and safe for all;
  - the increased level of enforcement to tackle fly-tipping and support the “Don’t Mess with Brent” initiative;
  - an investment of £2.3m in maintaining Brent's award-winning parks and open spaces, serving as a green lung within the borough;
  - continuation of the £21.6m spending plans, facilitating rubbish and recycling collection from homes while ensuring the borough’s streets remained clean and enhancing recycling rates;
  - seeking to encourage ongoing behaviour change with the continued programme of EV charging point installation;
  - use of the Fix my Street App, working in partnership with residents to detect and remove waste;
  - continued support to tackle climate change, including a comprehensive Climate Action Plan, supported by £11m in grant funding and utilising the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to establish Green Neighbourhoods;
  - ongoing work supported by TfL to lead on the delivery of Brent's first cycleway from Willesden to Wembley.
- (c) Fostering Thriving & Strong Communities - including
- Investing £3m in the Library, Arts, and Heritage service, and allocating £300,000 for cultural activities to build on the Brent 2020 “Borough of Cultures “ legacy recognising the valued nature of Brent’s libraries as a resource;
  - Allocation of £1.5m towards community projects – empowering local people to improve their neighbourhoods from the grassroots;
  - The prioritisation of capital projects based on robust invest-to-save principles and utilising CIL reserves, thereby avoiding borrowing from commercial markets and alleviating additional strain on the daily revenue budget, with the Capital Investment Strategy providing significant

investment in various projects and the supply chain within Brent including a range of significant schemes such as Hillside Corridor, Staples Corner, and new Neasden Civic Partnership.

- (d) Investing in Our Children's Future – including the aim for every child in Brent to have the opportunity to reach their full potential, regardless of their background or circumstances. Recognising that 97% of Brent's schools had been rated good or outstanding the ongoing commitment to providing outstanding education services had included:
- the establishment of 427 new school places for children with special educational needs funded through a £44m investment;
  - the allocation of £900k to assist eligible children and young people during school holidays, acknowledging that the Council's responsibility extended beyond term time; and
  - the comprehensive support the Council continued to provide (in its role as corporate parent) for children in care and as they transitioned into adulthood.
- (e) A Healthier Brent – including:
- An ongoing commitment (recognising the significant challenges facing social care) towards providing essential social care services for over 4,600 elderly and vulnerable residents across the borough totalling £117.9m designed to ensure dignity and high quality care whilst also seeking to focus service delivery on future demand;
  - An investment of £24.3m in enhancing health and wellbeing and £4.2m in supporting residents through initiatives focussed around Brent's Leisure Centre facilities;

Whilst recognising there were no immediate solutions to the complexities of social care, it was felt the initiatives outlined demonstrated the Council's going commitment to aiding those in greatest need.

In thanking the Budget Scrutiny Task Group for their input into the budget setting process and recommendations made as a result, he compared that to the approach taken by both Opposition Groups in terms of the presentation of their alternative budget proposals outlining his disappointment at what he felt to be the lack of responsible and reasonable alternative proposals submitted, which it was felt would place the future financial resilience of the Council at risk.

In highlighting the difference in approach between the Administration and both Opposition Groups in terms of the support provided for local residents in an effort to ensure those most in need were protected, the Leader advised that, whilst recognising the additional burden any increase in Council Tax would have on households across the borough the decision, although challenging, had been necessary in order to ensure essential public services were protected as far as possible taking account of increasing demand and the impact of austerity on increasingly stretched resources.

Although not seeking to undermine the challenges and difficulties identified and impact of the budget proposals, the Leader also felt it important to recognise the support available for those most in need and also the way in which the budget (acknowledging that things could not stay the same) had been designed to not only



address the significant challenges currently faced in relation to housing, climate change, social care and economic inequality but also provide a strong foundation for the future working as one unified borough to tackle and deliver the level of change required in way services were being delivered.

In summing up, Councillor Muhammed Butt advised that the Administration, in presenting their budget proposals, had recognised and sought to match the realism of the financial challenges and pressures faced by the Council with a desire to do more in responding to the needs and aspirations of local residents across Brent which would not only protect crucial frontline services but also sought to invest in the future reflecting the values of fairness, opportunity and community in order to face the future with confidence and unity. On this basis he urged members to oppose the Opposition Groups alternative budget proposals and commended the budget, as set out in the report, to all members for approval.

The Mayor thanked the Leader for opening the debate and then invited Councillor Kansagra, as Leader of the Conservative Group, to respond to the budget proposals.

*Councillors Clinton, Lorber and Matin returned to the meeting at this stage in proceedings.*

In presenting the alternative proposals, Councillor Kansagra began by challenging what he felt was the Leaders ongoing rhetoric in relation to austerity and lack of reference to the impact of recent changes introduced by the new Labour Government in relation to cuts in the Winter Fuel Allowance, Inheritance Tax and the increase in National Insurance contributions on not only the financial stability of households and local businesses across the borough but also in relation to the financial challenges faced by the Council, given the impact on costs for commissioned providers and across the care sector. In querying the Labour Government's approach and focus in its support of the Trade Unions, he advised that the Conservative Opposition in Brent remained committed to holding the Labour Administration to account in order to ensure residents received the best possible services at a fair cost and once again challenged the democratic basis on which the change in speaking rights for Opposition Groups in responding to the budget had been introduced without prior consultation.

Moving on to focus on the alternative budget proposals submitted by the Conservative Group he advised that whilst willing to support those proposals which it was felt would support residents in paying less for services and receiving better value for money, such as the changes in the Council Tax Support Scheme, enhanced enforcement and initiatives to tackle fraud, they were not supportive of the budget proposals moved by the Leader. In moving the Conservative Groups alternative budget proposals, Councillor Kansagra highlighted not only the enhanced level of detail provided but also the way in which the proposed amendments had sought to ensure the Council took a more robust approach towards management of the budget recognising the need to maintain fiscal responsibility, efficiency, and the well-being of local communities. As a result, he pointed out the Conservatives alternative budget proposals had sought to identify a number of areas where it was felt savings or enhancements could be made without compromising the quality of services provided. These had included:

- The amalgamation of two Cabinet Member posts in order to reflect the upcoming implementation of a streamlined senior management structure within the Council, with the Group also keen to review the current vice-chair arrangements on the Council's scrutiny committees and level of Special Responsibility Allowance for various positions;
- The provision of up to 1-hour free parking (on and off street) within town centres across the borough designed to support revival of the high streets and support local businesses and employment opportunities;
- Removal of the landlord incentive scheme. In commenting on this proposal, Councillor Kansagra highlighted the Conservative Groups concern at the impact of the scheme on the housing rental market and at incentivising landlords to seek alternative funding for property improvements. Concern was also expressed at the impact of the Landlord Licensing scheme, which it was felt would lead landlords to pass on any increase in costs and further disincentivise them from renting their properties;
- Discontinuing the printed version of the Brent Magazine and offering a digital only format;
- Increasing the budget for potholes and pavement repairs, ensuring safer roads and footways funded through the reallocation of the New Homes Bonus grant from capital to revenue;
- Utilising unspent public health reserves to support vital health initiatives;
- Introducing additional measures to tackle fly-tipping, including the use of technology and bringing back the free bulky waste collection scheme recognising the level of Council Tax already being charged for services.

In formally moving the Conservative Groups alternative budget proposals, Councillor Kansagra ended by highlighting that the proposals had been assessed as producing a legally balanced budget which he felt would also provide a responsible approach in seeking to not only deliver savings and efficiencies but also deliver a more sustainable and strategic approach towards management of the budget over the longer term whilst also helping to ease the financial burden currently being faced by the Council and experienced by many residents across the borough. In thanking the Corporate Director and Deputy Director of Finance for their assistance, he ended by commending the Conservative Groups alternative budget proposals to Council.

The Mayor thanked Councillor Kansagra for his comments and for moving the alternative budget proposals on behalf of the Conservative Group. He then invited Councillor Lorber, as Leader of the Liberal Democrats Group, to move the alternative budget proposals submitted on behalf of the Liberal Democrats Group.

In presenting the Liberal Democrats alternative budget proposals, Councillor Lorber began by thanking the Corporate Director and Deputy Director of Finance for their assistance in developing their alternative proposals designed to provide a balanced and realistic budget which had been designed to enhance the offer from the Council to local residents. Whilst recognising the challenging nature of the financial situation faced by the Council, it was felt this had been compounded by the lack of progress on reform of the local government finance system as well as spending decision taken by the current Council Administration, such as those related to Civic Centre improvements and the pursuit of what he regarded as unviable development schemes including the Altamira Project in Stonebridge.

Whilst recognising the need for difficult decisions in order to provide a balanced and sustainable budget, Councillor Lorber advised he was keen to ensure that residents priorities remained at the forefront of the budget proposals being considered, with the Liberal Democrats Group having therefore proposed a number of amendments seeking to address areas of concern including the current state of cleanliness across the borough. He then moved on to outline the key budget proposals recommended by the Liberal Democrats Group as follows:

- Reflecting on concerns relating to street cleanliness and cuts in the street cleaning and refuse collection service, an increase of £500k was proposed in the street cleansing budget to reinstate weekly visits and daily street cleaning that were within 50 metres of a junction with busy shopping areas/ high streets; an increase in enforcement activity by establishing an invest to save pilot with teams targeting dumping, drinking and paan spitting hotspots and issuing on the spot Fixed Penalty Notices along with provision of more dual litter/ recycling bins and the introduction of 1000 lamp post bins and a reduction in the charge for bulky waste collection.
- Highlighting concerns regarding the state of repair of local roads and pavements across the borough, an increase of £10m was proposed in the capital budget provision for highways and footways upgrades (funded through the New Homes Bonus reserve) along with the introduction of additional flexibility to target pavements and roads surfaces not properly reinstated following works by utility companies based on the negotiation of financial contributions towards the upgrade works.
- Recognising the impact of the current overspend on the Council's finances as a result of the supply and cost pressures relating to temporary accommodation and having expressed concern regarding the nature of developments being approved by Planning Committee, to increase the provision of more genuinely affordable housing involving the reintroduction of more stringent planning strategies and a 50% target in relation to the provision of affordable housing within all new developments and through the targeting of underoccupied properties.
- Having expressed concern at what the Liberal Democrats Group felt to be a decline in the standard of green and open spaces across the borough, it was proposed to allocate £500k to support the protection, maintenance and cleaning of parks and open spaces across the borough, supported by the introduction of segregated cycle lanes in parks. In addition, it was proposed to allocate £1m to support the installation of CCTV in parks and open spaces, particularly in anti-social behaviour hotspot areas with the package of measure designed to ensure parks and open spaces continued to be well utilised by local people in a safe and comfortable environment given the priority placed by residents on access to green spaces and wider environmental and health impacts.
- In recognising the current challenges and financial pressures faced by many community and voluntary organisations across the borough, it was proposed to allocate £300k to establish a special grant fund to support local groups in being able to hold and celebrate community events. In addition, the opportunity was also taken to express concern at the impact of the newly introduced Property Strategy given the imposition of what were felt to be unrealistic rent increases on facilities used by many valued local community groups.

Given the proposed increase in Council Tax, Councillor Lorber felt there was a need for the Council to ensure that as residents were being asked to pay more for services funding was refocussed and prioritised on local areas of concern. In highlighting the additional detail provided within the proposals included as part of the agenda papers, Councillor Lorber ended by outlining the important role members had in representing residents and local communities, which he felt the budget amendments presented by the Liberal Democrats had been designed to reflect in a balanced and pragmatic way that would enhance the offer from the Council recognising priorities being identified locally. As such he hoped all members would be able to support the amendments outlined and commended the Liberal Democrats alternative budget proposals to Council.

The Mayor thanked Councillor Lorber for his comments and moving the alternative budget proposals on behalf of the Liberal Democrats Group and then moved on to invite Councillor Mili Patel, as Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources to speak as the next stage in the budget debate.

Councillor Mili Patel began by highlighting the duty of care and responsibility which it was recognised the Labour Administration had in seeking to properly manage the Council's budget and tax payer money. This often involved the need to take difficult decisions in seeking to protect the longer term interests of the Council and local residents, with the associated challenge in achieving a balanced budget whilst also seeking to preserve essential services made even more difficult as a result of the impact of the previous governments programme of austerity and increased level of demand and costs for services, including social care and homelessness.

In highlighting what she felt had been the previous coalition and Conservative Governments record of economic mismanagement an outline was provided of the contract in approach with the new Labour Government's more responsible long term view as opposed to the more reactive and short term politics of the previous Conservative Government, Prime Ministers and their Chancellors which it was felt had resulted in many of the challenges the Labour Government was now having to address in relation to the economy and public services. Reflecting on the lessons learnt, Councillor Mili Patel felt this had identified a need to firstly recognise that short term decision making did not work, secondly that there was a need to ensure decision made were taken in the interests of all rather than any particular political party and lastly that it appeared even in Opposition the Conservative Party appeared not to have changed based on their support for means testing the triple lock on pensions and support for tax breaks in relation to private schools.

Moving on to reflect on the Opposition Groups alternative budget proposals, Councillor Mili Patel felt these also displayed a similar approach given the nature of the financial risk relating to the proposed use of reserves by the Liberal Democrats to fund temporary projects and associated future revenue costs (without the ability to fund them on an ongoing basis) and way it was felt this would jeopardise the Council's financial resilience. Concerns were also expressed at the way in which the Conservative Group's alternative budget proposals were felt to impact on working people given their stance in relation to the London Living Wage and criticism of recent public sector pay awards which had benefited a range of key frontline workers as opposed to the Trade Unions. As a result, the Deputy Leader felt there was a need to recognise the cumulative impact of the programme of

austerity introduced by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government, on the Council, wider public sector and local residents rather than seeking to place the blame elsewhere and avoid the difficult longer term decisions that had been required to continue meeting the need and aspirations of residents across the borough.

Councillor Mili Patel felt it was clear the new Labour Government had recognised the impact that their policies would have across local communities, with a clear plan to deliver longer term growth and a more robust economy, including essential infrastructure projects and reform of the planning system. Moving on to reflect on the difficult nature of the decisions that had needed to be made locally in setting a balanced budget, the Deputy Leader felt it important to recognise the way the choices made had also been designed to support a longer term strategic approach focussed on local growth and investment. Despite the decrease in core government funding and resulting £218m worth of cuts which had needed to be made since the start of austerity she was proud that Brent had still provided a strong foundation in being able to continue delivering the right services for residents. Despite the significant challenges faced in being able to achieve a balanced budget whilst also seeking to preserve essential services, it was felt this highlighted the Administration's commitment towards prudent financial management and maintaining fiscal discipline whilst reflecting the reality that many other local authorities also faced in being pushed to their financial limits with little option but to seek Exceptional Financial Support.

Whilst aware of future challenges and pressures that would need to be addressed in maintaining the Council's financial sustainability, Councillor Mili Patel also felt it important to assure members of the Administration's ongoing commitment in relation to the building of new, safe and secure homes across the borough, including the highest number of social housing starts in London; raising of standards for private renters; supporting residents experiencing fuel and food poverty; equipping people of all ages with access to training and jobs; keeping Brent clean and on the move by looking after its infrastructure and environment; maintaining the borough's award-winning parks and open spaces; providing the best start in life for children as well as dignity in the last stages of life through the social care offer.

In concluding, Councillor Mili Patel took the opportunity to thank all residents who had contributed towards the budget consultation process along with the Finance Team and all other officers involved for their efforts and support in preparing the budget proposals. In commending the budget to Council, members were reminded of the detailed consultation and scrutiny which the budget proposals had been subject to, along with the prudent approach adopted by the Administration in order to protect and renew the provision of essential services, growth and investment for residents across the borough on a sustainable and long-term basis designed to ensure the interest of all communities was placed before the interests of the party they represented.

The Mayor thanked Councillor Mili Patel for her comments and as the final contribution prior to opening up the debate then invited Councillor Conneely, as Chair of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group, to present the key themes within the Budget Scrutiny Task Group report, which had been included as an appendix to the Budget and Council Tax 2025-26 report.

Councillor Conneely in introducing the Budget Scrutiny Task Group report began by highlighting the ongoing financial crisis in local government which it was felt continued to threaten the stability of services and communities across Brent and required extensive reform of the current way in which local authorities were funded with the current system no longer felt to be fit for purpose. Whilst welcoming the new Labour Governments initial steps towards reforming local government finance it was recognised that more needed to be done. Although acknowledging the positive measures introduced such as increased investment and additional funding to address key pressures in relation to homelessness, simplification of grants to allocate funding based on need rather than false competition between authorities and confirmation of multi-year funding settlements as steps in the right direction, it was recognised these still fell short of the comprehensive reform needed for local government to be able to fully meet its responsibilities to local residents and avoid over reliance on the use of reserves.

In presenting the Task Group report, Councillor Conneely highlighted the extensive nature of the review and recommendations which had been identified in relation to the budget proposals, as detailed within section 2 of their report. In terms of the issues highlighted, particular reference was made to the recommendations in relation to the promotion of value for money, social value and community wealth building through the Council's commissioning and procurement arrangements in order to drive economic growth and deliver social value, with the Task Group keen to ensure the work already underway continued to be monitored.

Highlighting other key recommendations made as part of the review, Councillor Conneely also referred to the Task Groups support, as part of the wider approach towards addressing the budget challenges identified, for the strategic prioritisation and enhanced investment in the Council's debt recovery efforts, specifically targeting those who refused rather than were not able to pay. Whilst recognising the regressive nature of the Council Tax system and ongoing impact of funding Council Tax Support Schemes through local authorities, the Task Group had also acknowledged the significant impact of the changes approved in relation to support being provided through the scheme. Whilst necessary to ensure financial stability and sustainability of Council services, the Task Group had been keen to ensure that the effect of these changes were carefully monitored in order to avoid impacting on the most vulnerable local residents. Despite the challenges identified, the Task Group had also recognised the way in which the Council's budget setting process had continued to demonstrate a commitment to prioritising those most in need with support expressed for the shift to a more localised community-based approach for social care assessment as a means of enhancing collaboration with community partners and providing support to residents in their own communities and networks.

In thanking all members, officers and other stakeholders who had supported the review and wide variety of engagement undertaken, Councillor Conneely ended by commending the recommendations made by the Budget Scrutiny Task Group for consideration as part of the budget setting process.

The Mayor advised that this now concluded the opening statements and thanked Councillor Conneely for her comments. He then moved on to open up the debate on the budget proposals for comment by other members.

In opening the debate Councillor Kabir, in supporting the budget proposals, began by thanking all those involved for their work in being able to produce a balanced budget. Taking the opportunity to focus on proposals relating to children and young people she felt it important to recognise the support required and being provided to assist young people seeking to improve their life chances and realise their aspirations. In referencing the Council's SEND priorities, Councillor Kabir welcomed the additional SEN school places and Additional Resourced Provision being delivered alongside additional Post 16 provision based at the Welsh Harp Skills Centre but, as chair of The Village School Governing Body, acknowledged the increased support needed by families in terms of both respite care and housing. Despite the significant financial challenges identified, Councillor Kabir was pleased to recognise the way in which the budget proposals had sought to protect services for the most vulnerable and on this basis advised she was proud to support the budget proposals, as moved by the Leader, for approval.

Other members who spoke on the budget proposals were as follows:

Councillor Donnelley-Jackson, Cabinet Member for Housing & Resident Services, was next to speak and began by highlighting the financial pressure faced by the Council as a result of the current housing crisis and need, in response, to deliver more affordable homes and high quality provision for those in the private rented sector. In highlighting what she felt had been the origins of the crisis in political decisions made by Governments over previous years, the need for the provision of safe, affordable and sustainable housing had been recognised as a fundamental right with the Council committed to making the necessary interventions in order to tackle the crisis. In terms of the budget proposals these had therefore sought to identify plans not just to build but also improve existing housing and address existing tenant satisfaction measures including the introduction of area tenancy Managers working within local communities. This had been accompanied by measures designed to support the enhancement of standards in the private rented sector and to tackle unscrupulous landlords through the landlord licensing regime. In terms of managing demand for Temporary Accommodation members were also advised of the support which continued to be provided through the budget for the Council's New Council Homes Programme (NCHP) and in working towards the objective of delivering 5,000 affordable homes by 2028. In highlighting progress, reference was made to specific developments across the borough including Alpertons Bus Garage, Fulton Road, Church End Regeneration and Clock Cottages although the rise in homelessness was still identified as one of the most significant challenges faced by the Council with the number of households in emergency accommodation expected to rise to 1,643 in 2025-26, increasing costs by approximately £10.2 million. Whilst work continued to address the pressures identified, including the provision of additional temporary accommodation, the significant nature of the challenges identified were once again highlighted with the budget proposals commended on the basis of enabling further investment in new developments, greater homelessness prevention and a new approach to housing repairs as part of the decisive measures needed to work toward a future where every resident of our borough had a place to call home.

Councillor Krupa Sheth, Cabinet Member for Public Realm & Enforcement, was next to speak in support of the budget proposals recognising the important role of the public realm in terms of keeping Brent clean, green, safe and on the move. Despite the financial pressures identified, the opportunity was taken to reflect on the

programme of work and investment being provided in relation to the boroughs highway infrastructure and to make Brent cleaner and greener. This included a £9m programme of highway repairs and improvements as well as delivery of the School Streets programme for which further investment had been secured from the Mayor for London. In addition, reference was made to the investment of £2.3m focussed on maintaining the boroughs award winning parks and open spaces in order to ensure the borough remained cleaner, greener and more resilient moving forward with an additional £400k allocated towards improving sports facilities, playgrounds, park signage and pathways in Gladstone Park. The opportunity was also taken to highlight the work being undertaken through the “Don’t Mess with Brent” campaign to tackle fly-tipping and other environmental crime including the provision of additional enforcement officers and increased fines as well as funding to support the return of the Community Skip initiative. Members were also reminded of the work being funded to support the Council’s ongoing efforts in tackling the climate emergency, which included expansion of the Green Neighbourhood pilots, ongoing support for active travel schemes and (in seeking to ensure the necessary balance in keeping pavements free from clutter) the provision of mandatory parking bays for use by the Lime dockless e-bikes. In commending the budget proposals to Council, Councillor Krupa Sheth ended by thanking all members and officers involved for their support in delivering the commitments outlined, which had been designed to protect residents and maintain vital service provision both now and over the longer term.

Councillor Rubin, Cabinet Member for Climate Action & Community Power, also speaking in support of the budget proposals, opened his comments by focussing on the way the budget had been designed to support ongoing delivery of the Council’s action in relation to the climate emergency in a way that reflected the values of social justice, collective action and the empowering of communities. At a time when the Council was facing severe financial pressure, Councillor Rubin advised he was proud of this approach with reference made to the launch of the Council’s Green Corridors scheme in Church End and Roundwood, based on an investment of £3m designed to transform those areas into models of sustainable urban living, including activity to deliver cleaner air, safer streets and support transition to a greener Brent. In terms of active travel, reference was also made to the investment of £500k towards improving cycling and walking infrastructure supported by a further £2m planned over the next four years. In recognising the wider impact of the climate emergency, the opportunity was also taken to highlight the investment of £1.5m in community-led projects designed (recognising their importance in terms of social justice) to empower local people to shape and improve their own neighbourhoods, with £3m also being invested to support libraries, arts, and heritage services and £300k to support cultural activities designed to build on the legacy of Brent 2020. Reference was also made to the Green and Healthy Streets fund which had secured £610k for Brent to support work in making the spaces outside the boroughs schools safer, greener, and more welcoming. In addition to the work focussed around building a greener borough, Councillor Rubin also highlighted the support being provided to ensure residents had the necessary employment skills for the future, including work with United Colleges to open a Green Skills Centre at the College of North West London, equipping students with the skills to support the move towards a carbon neutral economy. Other initiatives highlighted included the Council’s new Sustainability Procurement Policy as well as work being undertaken with community and faith leaders (recognising the diverse nature of the borough) in seeking to embed sustainability across all communities. On this basis, Councillor



Rubin concluded by commending the budget proposals to all members recognising the support provided towards making Brent a greener and fairer borough.

Councillor Grahl, Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Schools, then spoke to highlight what she felt represented the renewed optimism provided by the new Labour Government in relation to the transformation of services for children and young people following the stance taken by the previous Conservative Government in relation to funding and service provision. In support of the budget proposals moved by the Leader, she highlighted the importance of the new children's residential centre being opened by the Council along with the creation of over 400 additional places for children with special educational needs and disabilities (which it had been estimated would generate savings of up to £6m annually) alongside plans to develop a Post-16 Skills Centre at Welsh Harp. Reference was also made to the recent Ofsted and SEND inspections which had demonstrated that the services being provided by the Council were making a real difference with the Family Wellbeing Centres also offering essential support for many families which would also be supported by the recent launch (hosted in Brent) of the Government's new national child poverty strategy. Despite the financial challenges identified she pointed out how these initiatives were also being supported more widely by the Mayor of London's Free Schools Meals programme as a means of tackling food poverty, public transport subsidy by the Council for care leavers as well as £1.7m of grant funding to support local youth organisations helping to provide safe and enriching spaces for young people. Expressing concern at the increase in child poverty and health related issues being experienced by children and young people, support was also highlighted for the Government's Children's Wellbeing Bill, including the proposal to provide free breakfast clubs, action to address private profiteering in care home provision and the restoration of local authority oversight in relation to school admissions, which it was felt would create a fairer, more accountable education system. Councillor Grahl felt this was in direct contract to the stance taken by the previous coalition and Conservative Government who had presided over a decline in youth services and more locally with the Conservative Opposition Group having opposed proposals to deliver a Children's Residential care home. In thanking officers for their work to support children and young people across the borough she ended by urging all members to support the budget as moved by the Leader given the way it had been designed to support children, young people and their families in seeking to secure a better future at each stage in their life that would empower them to feel valued and prioritised.

As the next contribution Councillor Benea, speaking as Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Planning & Property in support of the budget proposals moved by the Leader, highlighted what she felt reflected the bold, community focussed regeneration commitments enabled within the budget designed to drive real opportunities for change, investment and the creation of new communities at scale. Referring to recent data she advised that Brent had been ranked as one of the top three boroughs for the approval of affordable housing schemes in terms of Planning Committee performance and Brent being one of only three boroughs across London to achieve their housing targets and with the work being undertaken by all officers and members involved in seeking to encourage businesses and developers to invest in Brent commended. Councillor Benea also felt it important to recognise the way these efforts were also being supported through the wider programme of regeneration being funded with a recent example including the delivery of 99 new

council homes as well as commercial spaces to support local businesses and job opportunities as part of a scheme in Church End. Whilst recognising the ongoing financial viability challenges in delivery of many schemes, Councillor Benea assured members the Administration remained committed to delivering its programme of regeneration across the borough including South Kilburn, with 1,400 homes already delivered another 500 under construction and a £60m investment secured to ensure a streamlined, community first approach to its completion. As further evidence of the approach outlined, members were also reminded of the £10.5m investment in the Neasden Civic Partnership alongside work across the borough from Staples Corner to the Grand Union Canal bridge seeking to deliver investment and encourage thriving communities across Brent. On the basis of what Councillor Benea felt to be the sustained, ambitious, and inclusive level of growth included with the budget she ended by once again commending the proposals to Council.

Speaking in support of the Conservative Group's alternative budget proposals, Councillor Mistry then moved on to express concern at the ongoing impact of the proposed increase in Council Tax included in the budget moved by the Leader, given the additional financial burden placed on local residents and with the alternative proposals moved by the Conservative Group highlighted as providing local residents with the opportunity to pay less for better value service provision. Rather than seeking to blame the previous government for the challenges faced, she felt the Administration needed to recognise the impact on local households of the proposals introduced by the Labour Government in relation to the increase in National Insurance, Capital Gains and Inheritance Tax, as well as Stamp Duty and the failure to reduce household energy bills. Concern was also highlighted in relation to the impact arising from introduction of the Selective Landlord Licensing Scheme within the borough, with the need also identified to consider the way in which Housing Benefit, Single Person and Council Tax Discount claims were being managed alongside the process for collection of debts and overpayments. As a result, Councillor Mistry advised she would be voting against the budget proposals moved by the Leader and in support of the Conservative Groups alternative budget proposals given the way they would reduce the financial burden on local residents.

Councillor Maurice spoke next, also in support of the Conservative Groups alternative budget proposals, highlighting concern at the impact of the Labour Government's recent increase in Employer National Insurance contributions given their impact on local businesses and schools across the borough as well as on the cost of a range of services being commissioned through the Council, including the provision of adult and social care. Taken alongside the increase in borrowing and cuts in Winter Fuel Allowance it was felt the cumulative impact of the approach adopted by the Labour Government was placing an additional financial burden on working households whilst public sector workers and Trade Union allies received above inflation pay increases and with the new Chancellor having failed to take advantage of the strong economy inherited by the previous Conservative Government. In recognising the impact on households across the borough, Councillor Maurice outlined how the Conservative Groups alternative budget proposals had sought to minimise the increase in Council Tax and on the basis of the comments outlined also commended the Conservative Groups alternative budget proposals for approval.

In addressing Council for the first time since his election, Councillor Clinton spoke next in support of the alternative budget proposals moved by the Liberal Democrats Group. In highlighting what he felt was a need to focus within the debate on the residents of Brent he began by outlining the key issues raised by residents during the local by-election campaign relating to the state of roads, pavements and cleanliness of the borough alongside concerns relating to anti-social behaviour and safety. Whilst recognising the nature of financial challenges and pressures needing to be addressed by the Council, Councillor Clinton felt there was also a need to ensure residents were not left feeling neglected, which he pointed out had been the basis on which the alternative budget proposals had been presented by the Liberal Democrats. In seeking to address the concerns highlighted by local residents, he drew attention to the proposals for an additional £1m investment in street cleansing, refuse collection and bulky waste collection along with the £10m additional investment in highway and pavement maintenance and repair (funded as a one off through the New Homes Bonus). In terms of parks and open spaces the proposals had also included £1.5m for their maintenance, cleaning and safety improvements. In concluding, whilst recognising the nature of the challenges identified it was felt bold, decisive and creative thinking was required by the current Administration and on that basis he commended the Liberal Democrats alternative budget proposals to Council for approval.

Speaking next, Councillor Agha, outlined his support for the budget proposals as moved by the Leader which he felt reflected not only the Council's values in terms of fairness and responsibility but also sought to protect residents as well as essential services. The protection and support included for young people was also commended in terms of the positive outcomes being delivered, with a particular focus highlighted on schools, the proposals to deliver additional SEND, safeguarding and provision and support for Brent Starts. In reminding members that young people across Brent provided a foundation for the future he advised he would be supporting the budget on the basis of the balanced, fair and responsible approach taken towards protecting so many of the services on which young people depended across the borough.

Councillor Kelcher then spoke, also in support of the budget proposals moved by the Leader, and began by highlighting the recent independent consultancy report which had identified the performance of Brent's Planning Committee in being only one of three boroughs across London to meet and exceed its housing targets in relation to the level of approval for new homes. Outlining the importance in the delivery of new homes, not just in terms of the opportunities to address housing demand but also in contributing to the economic growth of the borough and level of funding the Council was able to generate through the Council Tax base and New Homes bonus he compared this to the approach taken by the Opposition Groups in their alternative budget proposals. Referring to the proposals presented by the Liberal Democrats Group in seeking to change the policy around delivery of Affordable Housing he outlined what he regarded as the poor track record of delivery by other Liberal Democrat and Conservative controlled local authorities and lack of understanding regarding the associated impact on generation of New Home Bonus funding, which they had both proposed to utilise to support their alternative proposals. In contrast he welcomed the approach taken by the Labour Administration in recognising the need to deliver new homes not only in terms of the long term viability of the Council but also from a social justice perspective and, on this basis, advised he would be supporting the budget as moved by the Leader.

Moving on, Councillor Matin then spoke to highlight her support for the alternative budget proposals moved on behalf of the Liberal Democrats Group. In congratulating Councillor Clinton on his first speech at Council she echoed the previous comments made in support of the alternative budget proposals, highlighting the concerns being raised by residents regarding the cleanliness and safety across the borough with reference to specific concerns relating to street cleansing, littering, licensing enforcement and street drinking particularly within Alperton as the ward she represented. Speaking from a personal perspective, she took the opportunity to outline the way in which these issues had impacted on her own perception as a visually impaired person living in the borough being able to safely navigate the boroughs footways, parks and open spaces unaided with a guide dog given the level of litter (including glass debris) experienced and risk posed for more vulnerable residents or those with mobility issues. In seeking to achieve a level of consensus on the collective need for the budget to deliver improved outcomes and living standards for all within the borough, including cleaner and safer streets, parks and open spaces, Councillor Matin commended the Liberal Democrats alternative budget proposals to Council.

As a further contribution to the debate, Councillor Fraser felt there was a need to acknowledge the political rhetoric displayed so far during the debate along with the focus of the Labour Administration in seeking to address the challenges identified. Rather than just blame the Council, she felt there was also a responsibility on all councillors to support their local residents in working to address the type of issues identified including, as an example, encouraging use of the Fix My Street App to report local issues across individual wards. In expressing her support for the creative thinking which she felt had been demonstrated by the Labour Administration in developing a budget which not only sought to address the significant challenges faced by the Council but also delivered a balanced budget, Councillor Fraser was also keen to highlight how this had been demonstrated through her involvement as a member of the Budget Scrutiny Task Group, with officers thanked for their support in the process. Recognising the challenging financial context within which the budget proposals had needed to be developed and way in which austerity (enabled by the previous coalition and Conservative Government), had impacted on funding for services across the public sector and left not only the Council but many residents struggling financially, she felt it important to contrast this with the approach of the current and previous Labour Government's in establishing and supporting (rather than seeking to dismantle) the welfare state and provision of free healthcare. Whilst recognising the difficult nature of choices faced, Councillor Fraser ended by advising she was also proud to commend what she regarded as the balanced, fair and resident focused budget that the Administration had proposed in seeking to protect the most vulnerable and build a better future for all.

Councillor Choudry, also speaking in support of the budget proposals, commended the balanced nature of the proposals and their approach in seeking to protect the most vulnerable, particularly given the significant reduction in the Council's core funding due to austerity and the diminishing local government financial settlements provided by the previous Conservative Government. In praising the Administrations continued commitment towards the Resident Support Fund and programme of regeneration across the borough he felt this demonstrated the type of empathy required in seeking to support those most in need through such challenging times.

Concern was also highlighted (given the issues identified by the External Auditor earlier in the meeting) regarding any overreliance on the use of reserves given the unsustainable nature of this as an approach, with support expressed for ongoing lobbying to reform the system of funding local government in order to provide an adequate and stable level of resource. In recognising austerity as a political choice and the difficult nature of options needing to be considered, he confirmed he would also be supporting the budget as moved by the Leader, highlighting the protection the proposals would continue to provide for the most vulnerable and their progressive, pragmatic and sustainable nature.

Following on, Councillor Mitchell also supporting the budget proposals moved by the Leader, felt it was important to recognise the challenging financial context in which the budget had been developed, given the impact of austerity and increasing demand for vital services faced by the Council. In supporting the concerns raised regarding what she felt to be the overreliance within the Opposition Groups alternative budget proposals on the use of reserves, Councillor Mitchell highlighted (in contrast) what she felt had been the clear financial stewardship and fiscal responsibility demonstrated by the Labour Administration in their approach to managing the Council's finances and in presenting a fully costed and balanced budget aimed at providing stability over the longer term and not just quick fixes. At the same time, she praised the way in which it was felt the budget proposals had been designed to protect the most vulnerable in society, including supporting those in food and fuel poverty and on this basis advised she would also be fully supporting the budget, as moved by the Leader.

Councillor Ahmed, also highlighting his support for the budget, then spoke to outline what he felt was the importance of the proposals and investment focussed around delivering safer and cleaner streets alongside improved transport links and the maintenance and improvement of the boroughs parks and open spaces as key elements in creating a healthier borough. Amongst the proposals outlined, he advised he was particularly supportive of the investment in Gladstone Park (as part of his ward) alongside the investment to support the work in seeking to tackle the climate emergency through the Green Neighbourhood pilots and in encouraging more active modes of travel as well as seeking to invest in maintaining the boroughs highway infrastructure. Councillor Ahmed therefore advised he was also proud to be able to support the budget which was not only balanced but which he felt would also provide the investment required to continue building a cleaner, greener, safer and more stable borough.

Councillor Nerva, Cabinet Member for Public Health and Adult Social Care, also speaking in support of the budget proposals, opened his comments by responding to concerns raised by the Opposition Groups earlier in the debate regarding the boroughs parks and open spaces by highlighting their award winning status and investment being provided to ensure they remained well maintained and safe given their wider value in terms of residents health and wellbeing. Expressing concern at the way in which the previous Conservative Government had overseen a deterioration in adult social care and widening of health inequalities during their time in power, he felt the new Labour Government provided real hope and opportunity to address the challenges faced as a result in terms of health and social care. In commending the work being undertaken across Brent's Adult Social Care service to support this approach, he highlighted the ongoing increase in demand and number of residents being supported by the Council in relation to social care,

many with increasingly complex needs, which he felt also supported the need for a timely roadmap for social care reform. Whilst recognising the work being undertaken to deliver effective care to residents (including the retention of the New Millennium Centre and its reopening as the New Horizons Centre) the need to continue the delivery of a programme of service transformation was also acknowledged with reference, as an example, made to the pioneering introduction of same day community social care assessments. Reference was also made to the use of AI technology by social care teams aimed at enhancing efficiency and ensuring time could be focused on more face-to-face engagement with residents with enhanced framework contracts also being introduced for a range of externally provided day care opportunities to promote independence. In terms of Public Health, Councillor Nerva felt it was important to recognise the way in which the Brent Health Matters partnership had fundamentally changed the approach towards health provision in the borough. This had included the introduction of a network of Community Champions working alongside a range of community organisations providing a community-led approach towards the provision of health services within individual neighbourhoods supported by a range of health and wellbeing events, directly reaching over 4,200 residents, programmes of emotional wellbeing support to more than 2,500 people and the award of grants totalling £433k to local organisations so they could run their own health projects. In looking forward to continuing the collaborative work with health partners and in supporting the move from treatment to prevention, Councillor Nerva ended by taking the opportunity to thank all health & care staff, including carers, for their excellent work in such challenging circumstances and commending the budget proposals to all members.

In continuing the debate, Councillor Hirani then spoke in support of the alternative budget proposals moved by the Conservative Group. Highlighting concern at the Council's approach and ability to manage the programme of reactive highway and footway maintenance repairs she outlined the levels of neglect, damage, nuisance and compensation associated with potholes and poorly maintained roads across the borough along with her support for the Conservative Groups proposal to provide additional investment of £1.1m for reactive maintenance works to cover all highway assets including lines, signs, street furniture, footways and carriageways. Concerns were also expressed at the ongoing impact of the Blue Bag recycling scheme, which Councillor Hirani felt was not working, unviable and had continued to cause frustration to residents along with an increase in rubbish on the streets. As a result, she advised the Conservative Group was seeking to reverse the scheme and revert back to the blue recycling bins. Referring to concerns relating to the current state and maintenance of the boroughs parks and open spaces Councillor Hirani supported the issues being highlighted in relation to lack of toilets, littering broken benches and playground equipment as well as vandalism poor lighting and lack of CCTV coverage, which she felt supported the need for additional investment identified on top of the green infrastructure budget proposals. In commending the alternative proposals moved by the Conservative Group Councillor Hirani ended by highlighting what she felt had been the reasonable approach adopted given concerns expressed by residents relating to the level of services being provided locally.

Councillor Farah, Cabinet Member for Safer Communities, Jobs & Skills, then spoke and began by highlighting concerns at the impact of government austerity on the provision of public services, focussing specifically (in relation to his remit) on the reduction in funding for the police and neighbourhood teams as well as the cuts in

services for domestic abuse victims and youth crime intervention. In recognising that community safety was about more than enforcement, involving a focus on building trust, prevention and ensuring residents felt safe, he outlined the work being undertaken by the Council to address the challenges identified and in seeking to reverse the impacts of austerity. This had included various community safety initiatives, which he was pleased to advise had yielded tangible results, most notably in relation to a 6.6% reduction in domestic abuse incidents which represented the largest decline among comparable boroughs. Action to address youth safety also remained a key priority, with the Council having secured three years of Public Health funding to combat youth violence, targeting the most vulnerable areas. Additionally, members were advised Brent had received £800k from the Mayor of London as further support with a robbery reduction initiative also launched, funded through the Violence Reduction Unit, aimed at protecting young people during after-school hours again as a prevention initiative. Acknowledging that the prevention of crime was not purely a police issue, Councillor Farah advised that the Council had also recognised the need to empower local communities involving a programme of investment in community-led safety programs, supporting local organisations to prevent crime at local level. Highlighting the link between employment and crime, Councillor Farah pointed out this had also been recognised within his recently revised Cabinet remit which had also provided the opportunity to focus on the provision of job opportunities and skill development in seeking to steer individuals away from crime. In support of the approach, members were advised of a £500k commitment within the budget to support connecting residents with new jobs through Brent Works and of the £2.9m to support residents in further developing their skills through Brent Start with the social value potential of the South Kilburn regeneration programme also highlighted as strengthening the jobs and workspace offer. In concluding, Councillor Farah extended his gratitude to all staff and partners, including the police, for the work being undertaken to keep residents across the borough safe and commended the budget (as moved by the Leader) to Council on the basis of the way it would support ongoing efforts to strive for a safer, stronger, and fairer Brent.

Following on, Councillor Lesley Smith (also speaking in support of the budget proposals moved by the Leader) challenged the basis of economic context provided in support of the Conservative Groups alternative budget proposals highlighting the impact of previous Conservative Chancellors management of the economy, including increases in mortgage interest rates, inflation and the impact on individual households. In contrast, she outlined the way in which the budget proposals developed by the Labour Administration had been designed to support residents across the borough including significant levels of investment in housing and neighbourhoods alongside support for social care and efforts being made to tackle poverty. In supporting the prudent and compassionate approach adopted by the Labour Administration in seeking to safeguard and improve the quality of life for local communities across the borough, Councillor Lesley Smith ended by also commending the budget to members.

As a further contribution, Councillor Rajan-Seelan spoke and once again highlighted what he felt to be the damage being caused by the previous Conservative Government's programme of austerity and underfunding of local government and other public services, including the impact of the introduction of student loans on young people in higher education across the borough. In outlining the difficulties in seeking to produce a balanced budget in such circumstances,

Councillor Rajan Seelen felt that the Administration should be commended for delivering a financially responsible and workable budget (recognising the support also provided by the new Labour Government) and in closing commended the budget proposals moved by the Leader for their effective management of the limited resources available, which he felt was in contrast to the alternative proposals moved by both Opposition Groups.

As the next speaker, Councillor Begum, also expressed her support for the budget and praised the aspirations of the Labour Administration in seeking to support residents experiencing hardship as a result of the cost-of-living crisis and seeking to manage the increase in demand for services as a result of the housing crisis and an increasingly ageing population. Amongst the commitments highlighted the support provided in relation to the delivery of affordable housing, youth, social and health care provision alongside the efforts to address homelessness were commended as a means of addressing the gaps and level of need identified in relation to the most vulnerable members of society with concerns highlighted regarding levels of child poverty, rough sleeping and the barriers identified in being able to access, safe secure and affordable housing. In commending the budget proposals to members, Councillor Begum highlighted her pride at being part of an Administration seeking to protect the most vulnerable members of society and in seeking to provide a more inclusive and equitable future for all with support also expressed for the investment in the New Horizons Centre and Brent Hubs as a means of continuing to make a real difference for communities across Brent.

Councillor Kennelly, also expressing his support for the budget proposals, felt it important to begin by highlighting what he felt to be the unviable and unsustainable nature of the alternative budget proposals moved by the Opposition Groups especially when compared to the way in which the proposals presented by the Leader had been designed to stand up for local residents and maintain the provision of essential local services despite the funding restrictions imposed by the previous Conservative Government and impact of austerity. Whilst recognising the impact which any increase in Council Tax would have on households across the borough he felt these needed to be considered on the basis of the support being prioritised for local communities and the most vulnerable. Referring to what he felt to be the progressive and forward-thinking nature of the proposals identified in the budget, specific reference was made to support being provided for local high streets and economic plan for investment with efforts being made to lobby for the extension of the Bakerloo tube line also supported in this respect. The proposals being developed to expand Safer Neighbourhood Teams were also welcomed as a means of addressing concerns relating to crime locally, including shoplifting, with the support expressed for the role and value of the voluntary and community sector also recognised as crucial to ensure they were not adversely impacted by the burden in having to fill any gaps in service provision.

As a further contribution to the debate, Councillor Chohan also took the opportunity to express his support for the budget proposals moved by the Leader, highlighting the ongoing impact and difficulties being created for an increasing number of residents as a result of the previous Conservative Governments approach towards austerity and funding of public services. Despite the significant challenges and pressures on public services created as result, Councillor Chohan highlighted his pride at the way in which the current Administration had sought to protect key services such as parks and open spaces whilst also supporting the delivery of new



affordable homes, services for young people and local and those more vulnerable residents. Whilst acknowledging that the budget proposals would require difficult decisions to be made, Councillor Chohan was keen to commend the compassionate approach adopted in seeking to protect the most vulnerable and continuing to work for local communities.

Councillor Johnson also speaking in support of the budget proposals moved by the Leader felt it important to recognise the prudent approach adopted by the Administration to management of the Council's finances given the challenging context in which the budget had needed to be set driven by the previous Government's mismanagement of the economy and cuts imposed as a result of austerity. In terms of key challenges, Councillor Johnson highlighted the housing emergency as one of the most significant issues faced by the Council given the level of demand and number of households currently in temporary accommodation with the associated cost. As a result, support was expressed for the commitment within the budget and ongoing efforts towards increasing the supply of affordable housing across the borough. Whilst recognising the work that would be required to tackle the housing crisis the lead being taken by the Council in this respect was welcomed with the budget, as moved by the Leader, commended on this basis to members for support.

Councillor Mahmood, also expressing support for the budget, took the opportunity to thank council officers and elected members for the continued work to support Brent residents despite the challenging financial climate. Despite the impact of austerity, he felt it important to recognise the efforts being made by the Council to support residents in terms of the delivery of affordable housing, social care, libraries, parks and open spaces as well as the efforts being made to regenerate the borough and ensure it remained as accessible and open to investment as possible. As specific examples he referred to the work being undertaken with partners in relation to delivery of the Staples Corner regeneration scheme designed to boost infrastructure, environment and housing in that part of the borough along with the recently approved Neasden Civic Partnership. As a result, Councillor Mahmood ended by urging all members to support what he felt had been the proactive and resident focused budget which the current Administration had proposed.

As a final contribution to the debate, Councillor Molloy, also took the opportunity to express his support for the budget proposals moved by the Leader and to challenge members about what more they could do individually to address the financial pressures under which the Council was continuing to operate. This included the use of local knowledge to identify potential opportunities for additional regeneration activity including, as an example, underutilised or empty properties, support for the collection of Council Tax and Business Rates as well as enforcement activity related to illegal parking and fly-tipping. In concluding, he encouraged members to consider how best they could support the development of income generation and revenue sources designed to enhance the Council's overall financial position.

Having concluded the debate, the Mayor thanked all members for their contributions and then invited Councillor Muhammed Butt to summarise and respond to the points raised.

In response to the debate, Councillor Muhammed Butt began by thanking all members for their contributions at the meeting. In summing up, he felt that the debate had demonstrated the commitment amongst councillors to deliver for their residents. In responding to the Conservative and Liberal Democrats alternative budget proposals he expressed concern at the financial and budgetary literacy which he felt had been demonstrated in terms of their approach given the associated risks which had been identified in relation to both their impact and unviable way in which it had been proposed to fund them.

In contrast, he felt the Administration's budget proposals not only demonstrated an understanding of the challenges faced but were also designed to protect and support residents in the borough, with reference made to delivery of investment to support:

- the delivery of new secure, accessible and affordable housing options for residents alongside action to protect tenants and drive up standards in the private rented sector through the Landlord Licensing Scheme.
- the continued regeneration and growth of the borough including initiatives to connect residents with job opportunities and skill development programmes, fostering a thriving and empowered workforce.
- the protection of services for young people, including provision of additional SEND places.
- the ongoing provision of efficient waste management and street cleaning services alongside enhanced enforcement measures to address fly tipping through the Don't Mess with Brent campaign.
- community projects, empowering local residents and groups to actively contribute to improving their neighbourhoods alongside ongoing support for Brent's libraries.
- The ongoing provision of support to elderly and vulnerable residents including ongoing assistance to residents facing financial difficulties with bills and essential needs through the Resident Support Fund and advice and guidance available through Brent Hubs.
- the delivery of a programme of activity to address the climate emergency, including the Green Neighbourhood pilots and to encourage more active modes of travel alongside the maintenance and enhancement of the boroughs parks and open spaces.

In concluding, whilst recognising the difficult nature of decisions which had needed to be made, he outlined his pride that despite the challenges highlighted during the debate the Labour Administration had been able to present a balanced budget that reflected a more hopeful vision for Brent that would not only continue to prioritise essential services for the well-being of local residents but would also seek to foster a spirit of empowerment in order to meet the needs and aspirations of communities across the borough. On this basis he ended by once again commending the budget to Council.

Having thanked Councillor Muhammed Butt for his closing comments, the Mayor advised that this now concluded the debate on the budget and he would therefore be moving to the vote on the alternative budget proposals and then (subject to any amendments agreed) the recommended budget moved by the Leader of the Council. As the recommendations to be considered related to the budget setting

process he reminded Members that, in accordance with Standing Order 43, these would all need to be subject to a recorded vote.

The Mayor then moved on to put the budget and alternative proposals to the vote.

On a recorded vote being taken the budget proposals, as moved by the Leader of the Council were declared **CARRIED**.

Accordingly, it was **RESOLVED** to:

- (1) Agree an overall 4.99% increase in the Council's element of Council Tax for 2025/26, with 2% as a precept for Adult Social Care and a 2.99% general increase.
- (2) Agree the General Fund revenue budget for 2025/26, as summarised in Appendices A and B of the report.
- (3) Agree the savings proposals for 2025/26, as set out in Appendices C (i) and C (ii) of the report.
- (4) Note, based on approval of the amendments to the Council Tax Support scheme, that there would no requirement to consider the use of reserves to cover any associated budget shortfall during 2025-26, as set out in section 6.19 of the report.
- (5) Note the Equalities Impact Assessments on the budget proposals, as set out in Appendices C (iii) and C (iv) of the report.
- (6) Note the report from the Budget Scrutiny Task Group in Appendix D of the report.
- (7) Note and agree inclusion of the HRA budget and business plan in the overall Council budget for 2025/26 as set out in section eight and appendix O of the report.
- (8) Agree the Dedicated Schools Grant, as set out in section nine of the report.
- (9) Agree the changes to the existing Capital Programme in relation to additions of new schemes and reprofiling, as set out in section ten of the report, and note the Capital Pipeline Schemes in Appendix E of the report.
- (10) Agree the Capital Strategy, the Non-Treasury Investment Strategy, the Treasury Management Strategy and the Minimum Revenue Provision Statement as set out in Appendices F, G, H and I of the report.
- (11) Agree the Reserves Strategy and schedule of reserves, as set out in Appendices J (i) and J (ii) of the report.
- (12) Agree the schedule of fees and charges, as set out in Appendix K (ii) of the report.

- (13) Note the results of the budget consultation, as set out in section seven and detailed in Appendices L (i) and L (ii) of the report.
- (14) Note the legal advice from the Corporate Director, Law and Governance, as set out in Appendix M of the report.
- (15) Agree the Pay Policy Statement for 2025/26, as set out in Appendix N of the report.
- (16) Agree to transfer the funding from the Extended Producer Responsibility (ERP) for packaging scheme to reserves in 2025/26.

### **Council Tax recommendations**

- (17) In relation to the Council Tax for 2025/26 we resolve:

It was agreed that the following amounts be now calculated as the Council's element by the Council for the year 2025/26 in accordance with Sections 31 to 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 as amended:

- (a) £1,127,293,760 being the aggregate of the amount that the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(2) of the Act.
- (b) £948,861,011 being the aggregate of the amounts that the Council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(3) of the Act.
- (c) £178,432,749 being the amount by which the aggregate at (a) above exceeds the aggregate at (b) above, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31A(4) of the Act, as its Council Tax requirement for the year.
- (d) £1,642.77 being the amount at (c) above, divided by the amount for the tax base of 108,617, agreed by the General Purposes Committee on the 15 January 2025, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 31B of the Act, as the basic amount of its Council Tax for the year.
- (e) Table 1: Brent Valuation Bands

| A        | B        | C        | D        | E        | F        | G        | H        |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| £        | £        | £        | £        | £        | £        | £        | £        |
| 1,095.18 | 1,277.71 | 1,460.24 | 1,642.77 | 2,007.83 | 2,372.89 | 2,737.95 | 3,285.54 |

being the amounts given by multiplying the amount at (d) above by the number which, in the proportion set out in Section 5(1) of the Act, is applicable to dwellings listed in a particular valuation band divided by the number which in that proportion is applicable to dwellings listed in valuation band D, calculated by the Council, in accordance with Section 36(1) of the Act, as the amounts to be taken into account for the year in respect of categories of dwellings listed in different valuation bands.

- (18) That it be noted that for the year 2025/26 the proposed GLA precept issued to the Council, in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, in respect of the GLA, for each of the categories of dwellings are as shown below:

Table 2: GLA Valuation Bands

| A      | B      | C      | D      | E      | F      | G      | H      |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| £      | £      | £      | £      | £      | £      | £      | £      |
| 326.92 | 381.41 | 435.89 | 490.38 | 599.35 | 708.33 | 817.30 | 980.76 |

- (19) That, having calculated the aggregate of the amounts at paragraph 17(e) and 18 above the Council, in accordance with Section 30(2) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, hereby sets the following amounts as the amounts of council tax for the year 2025/26 for each of the categories of dwellings shown below:

Table 3: Overall Valuation Bands

| A        | B        | C        | D        | E        | F        | G        | H        |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| £        | £        | £        | £        | £        | £        | £        | £        |
| 1,422.10 | 1,659.12 | 1,896.13 | 2,133.15 | 2,607.18 | 3,081.22 | 3,555.25 | 4,266.30 |

- (20) That it be noted that the Corporate Director, Finance and Resources has determined that the Council element of the basic amount of Council Tax for 2025/26 is not excessive in accordance with the principles approved under Section 52ZB of the Local Government Finance Act 1992.

- (a) That the Corporate Director, Finance and Resources be and is hereby authorised to give due notice of the said Council Tax in the manner provided by Section 38(2) of the 1992 Act.
- (b) That the Corporate Director, Finance and Resources be and is hereby authorised when necessary to apply for a summons against any Council Taxpayer or non-domestic ratepayer on whom an account for the said tax or rate and any arrears has been duly served and who has failed to pay the amounts due to take all subsequent necessary action to recover them promptly.
- (c) That the Corporate Director, Finance and Resources be and is hereby authorised to collect revenues and distribute monies from the Collection Fund and is authorised to borrow or to lend money in accordance with the regulations to the maximum benefit of each fund.

Prior to the above recommendations being approved, the alternative budget proposals moved as amendments to the budget report by the Conservative & Liberal Democrats Groups were put to the vote and declared **LOST**.

The voting recorded on the amendment moved by the Conservative Group was as follows:

For the Amendment (4): Councillors Hirani, Kansagra, Maurice & Mistry.

Against the Amendment (46): Councillors Aden, Afzal, Agha, Ahmadi-Moghaddam, Ahmed, Akram, Bajwa, Begum, Benea, M.Butt, S.Butt, Chan, Chappell, Chohan, Choudry, Clinton, Conneely, Crabb, Dixon, Donnelly-Jackson, Ethapemi, Farah, Fraser, Gbajumo, Grahl, Hylton, Johnson, Kabir, Kelcher, Kennelly, Long, Lorber, Mahmood, Matin, Miller, Mitchell, Molloy, Nerva, M.Patel, Rajan Seelan, Rubin, Ketan Sheth, Krupa Sheth, L.Smith, T.Smith and Tatler.

Abstentions to the Amendment (2): Councillors Dar (Mayor) and Hack (Deputy Mayor).

The voting recorded on the amendment moved by the Liberal Democrats Group was as follows:

For the Amendment (3): Councillors Clinton, Lorber and Matin

Against the Amendment (47): Councillors Aden, Afzal, Agha, Ahmadi-Moghaddam, Ahmed, Akram, Bajwa, Begum, Benea, M.Butt, S.Butt, Chan, Chappell, Chohan, Choudry, Conneely, Crabb, Dixon, Donnelly-Jackson, Ethapemi, Farah, Fraser, Gbajumo, Grahl, Hirani, Hylton, Johnson, Kabir, Kansagra, Kelcher, Kennelly, Long, Mahmood, Maurice, Miller, Mistry, Mitchell, Molloy, Nerva, M.Patel, Rajan Seelan, Rubin, Ketan Sheth, Krupa Sheth, L.Smith, T.Smith and Tatler.

Abstentions to the Amendment (2): Councillors Dar (Mayor) and Hack (Deputy Mayor).

The voting recorded on the substantive recommendations, as detailed above, was as follows:

For (43): Councillors Aden, Afzal, Agha, Ahmadi-Moghaddam, Ahmed, Akram, Bajwa, Begum, Benea, M.Butt, S.Butt, Chan, Chappell, Chohan, Choudry, Conneely, Crabb, Dixon, Donnelly-Jackson, Ethapemi, Farah, Fraser, Gbajumo, Grahl, Hylton, Johnson, Kabir, Kelcher, Kennelly, Long, Mahmood, Miller, Mitchell, Molloy, Nerva, M.Patel, Rajan Seelan, Rubin, Ketan Sheth, Krupa Sheth, L.Smith, T.Smith and Tatler.

Against (7): Councillors Clinton, Hirani, Kansagra, Lorber, Matin. Maurice, & Mistry.

Abstentions (2): Councillors Dar (Mayor) and Hack (Deputy Mayor).

Prior to moving on to deal with the rest of the agenda, the Mayor advised that as the remaining time available was shortly due to expire he intended to move the suspension of Standing Order 44 (Council Guillotine Procedure) in order to extend

the time of the meeting, initially by a period of 15 minutes, to enable consideration of the remaining items on the agenda.

In advance of the procedural motion being put to the vote, Councillor Lorber sought to move an amendment requesting that the report on the Members Allowance Scheme Annual Review 2025-26 be deferred to enable more detailed consideration at the next Council meeting. Following advice from Debra Norman (as Corporate Director Law & Governance) that this would not be possible given the need for the scheme to be considered and adopted in advance of the new Financial Year the Mayor, in accordance with Standing Order 42 (d), then moved on to put the procedural motion to the vote without further discussion, which was declared **CARRIED**.

## **12. Treasury Management Mid-Year Report 2024-2025**

The Mayor then invited Councillor Mili Patel, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Resources, to introduce the report from the Corporate Director of Finance & Resources updating members on Treasury Management activity for the first half of the 2024-25 financial year. Members noted that the report had also been considered and agreed by the Audit and Standards Advisory Committee on 4 December 2024 and Cabinet on 10 February 2025 who had agreed to refer it on to Council for consideration in compliance with the CIPFA Code of Practice on Treasury Management.

In introducing the report, Councillor Mili Patel advised that as part of the Council's ongoing commitment to financial transparency, the report included details on the Council's borrowing requirement, cash investment balances and compliance with the Prudential Indicators enabling Brent to meet its financial obligations. Members were reminded that as part of the approach outlined in terms of managing Treasury Management activity to support the Council's priorities, it was only possible to borrow for capital investment and not to fund operational day-to-day expenditure, for example, to offset the increasing financial pressures being experienced within the revenue budget with the Borrowing Requirement reflecting the Council's capital ambitions for both the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account.

As a result of the Council's careful financial stewardship and compliance with Prudential Indicators, Councillor Mili Patel advised that the Council's borrowing balance (as at September 2024) was £791.9m with the decrease in this balance, along with that held in cash investments, reflecting the ongoing approach towards the repayment of loans and investment in the Council's capital programme in place of additional borrowing. By prioritising existing cash investments, it was reported the Council had also been able to generate an interest income of £3.6m with the Council's borrowing strategy therefore recognised as continuing to address the key issue of affordability without compromising the longer-term stability of the debt portfolio.

In outlining the importance of the Council's Treasury Management function in underpinning all Borough Plan priorities and in ensuring the Council was able to continue meeting its financial obligations, including those associated with the affordability and delivery of the Capital Programme, the opportunity was taken to thank officers for their support in providing clear direction and delivery of the Council's Treasury Management activity. In commending the report to Council,

Councillor Mili Patel ended by highlighting how this was again felt to demonstrate the prudent approach adopted in terms of the financial management required to support delivery of the Council's wider ambitions and priorities.

The Mayor thanked Councillor Mili Patel for introducing the report and as no other members had indicated they wished to speak, and Councillor Mili Patel advised she did not wish to exercise any right of reply, he then moved to put the recommendations to the vote, which were unanimously declared **CARRIED**

Council therefore **RESOLVED** to note the 2024-25 Mid-Year Treasury report detailing overall financial performance up to Quarter Two, which had been fully compliant with the Council's Treasury Prudential Indicators set as part of the annual strategy.

### 13. **Members' Allowance Scheme Annual Review 2025-26**

The Mayor then invited Councillor Muhammed Butt, Leader of the Council, to introduce the report from the Corporate Director of Law and Governance which sought approval to the proposed Members Allowance Scheme for the 2025-26 financial year.

In introducing the report, the Leader outlined the background to the annual review and proposed uplift in the level of basic, special responsibility and civic allowances for 2025-26, which members were advised had been designed to take account of the latest review completed in 2023 by the Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) on behalf of London Councils. In recognising the importance of the representational role undertaken by members alongside the increasing challenge in terms of managing demand and supporting the delivery of local services, the proposals had also sought to ensure any uplift could be managed within the existing Members Allowance budget, given the current financial pressures faced by the Council, and also reflected the National Joint Council Government Services pay agreement for staff during 2024-25. Members were advised this had therefore resulted in a recommended uplift of 2.5% to be applied across the basic allowance and Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs) for 2025-26.

The Mayor thanked Councillor Muhammed Butt for introducing the report and then invited contributions from other members.

In response to the proposals outlined Councillor Kansagra (as Leader of the Conservative Group), whilst supportive of the attempts made to recognise the importance of the representational role undertaken by members, felt there was a need (given the time and effort involved) for a wider review of the level and allocation of SRA's for specific roles reflecting the different commitments required to deliver them effectively. To better inform the review process, it was felt this should be supported by additional benchmarking against comparative rates with the outcome reported back to the Constitutional Working Group for consideration.

As a further contribution, Councillor Lorber also spoke (as Leader of the Liberal Democrats Group) to highlight what he felt was a need for any increase in allowances to be self-funding and supported by savings achieved through a reduction and consolidation in Cabinet Member positions to reflect and align with the recent restructure of the Council's senior management team. In reviewing the



overall impact of the proposed change on the allowance budget, further clarification was also sought on the extent to which the saving identified during 2024-25 in relation to the Members Allowance scheme and had been delivered.

As no other members indicated they wished to speak the Mayor invited Councillor Muhammed Butt to exercise his right of reply. In response to the concerns identified and in closing the debate, the Leader once again highlighted that the proposals in relation to SRAs had been designed to bring those specific allowances in line with the IRPs recommended percentage bands whilst also reflecting the increase in scope and workload experienced by all members in their various roles. In confirming that the previous saving identified in relation to the Allowance Scheme had been achieved and advising that he would have no objection to a further review of allowances across all positions being undertaken through the Constitutional Working Group, he ended by commending the report as submitted to Council.

Having thanked Councillor M.Butt for closing the debate, the Mayor then put the recommendations in the report to the vote and they were declared **CARRIED**.

Council therefore **RESOLVED**:

- (1) To approve the Members Allowance Scheme in the proposed terms set out within the report for the 2025-26 Financial Year.
- (2) To authorise the Corporate Director of Law & Governance to comply with the statutory requirements to publicise the Council's Members' Allowance Scheme.

#### 14. **Changes to the Constitution**

Prior to inviting the Leader of the Council to introduce the final item of, the Mayor advised that as the extended time available for the meeting was shortly due to expire he would be moving a further suspension of Standing Order 44 (Council Guillotine Procedure) in order to extend the time of the meeting by another 5 minutes in order to complete consideration of the agenda. In accordance with Standing Order 42 (d) the procedural motion was put to the vote without further discussion and declared **CARRIED**.

The Mayor then invited Councillor Muhammed Butt (as Leader of the Council) to introduce the report from the Corporate Director of Law & Governance. In moving and presenting the report, members were advised the report detailed a number of proposed changes to the Constitution designed to reflect the recent restructure of the Council's senior management team and accompanying realignment of Directorates along with changes to the Contract Standing Orders as a result of implementation of the Procurement Act 2023 and to the Property Standing Orders in relation to the arrangements for acquiring, managing and disposing of land and buildings (Part 3 – Responsibility for Functions). Following advice provided by Debra Norman (Corporate Director Law & Governance) members noted that the change to Contract Standing Orders would need to become effective immediately upon approval, following introduction of the Procurement Act 2023.

The Mayor thanked Councillor Muhammed Butt for introducing the report and then invited contributions from other members.

Whilst supportive of the proposals outlined in the report Councillor Kansagra, reflecting comments made earlier during the meeting, reiterated what he felt was the need for the changes made to the speaking rights of members during the budget debate to be reviewed by the Constitutional Working Group.

As no other members had indicated they wished to speak and Councillor Muhammed Butt advised he did not wish to exercise any right of reply, the Mayor then moved straight on to put the recommendations to the vote, which were unanimously declared **CARRIED**

Council therefore **RESOLVED**:

- (1) To agree the changes to the Constitution set out in Appendix 1 of the report. In relation to the changes approved to the Contract Standing Orders this would be with immediate effect with the remaining changes to be with effect from 1 April 2025.
- (2) To authorise the Corporate Director of Law & Governance to amend the Constitution accordingly, including making any necessary incidental or consequential changes.
- (3) To designate the post of Director of Law as the Council's Monitoring Officer post in accordance with s5 of the Local Government & Housing Act 1989.
- (4) To note that, to the extent that the changes related to executive functions of the Council, they had been approved by the Leader.
- (5) To authorise the Chief Executive, in consultation with the Leader, to bring forward the implementation of any of the proposed transfers of functions to a date earlier than 1 April 2025.

## 15. **Urgent Business**

There were no urgent items of business raised at the meeting so the Mayor, in closing the meeting, thanked all members for their co-operation and support and advised that he looked forward to seeing everyone again in person at the next Full Council which would be the Annual Council and Mayor Making meeting on Wednesday 14 May 2025.

The meeting closed at 9.15 pm

COUNCILLOR TARIQ DAR MBE  
Mayor