

## Extraordinary Council – 18 February 2014

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Minutes of the meeting of **Council** held on **18 February 2014** when there were present:-

Chairman: Cllr Mrs B J Wilkins  
Vice-Chairman: Cllr Mrs J R Lumley

Cllr C I Black	Cllr Mrs G A Lucas-Gill
Cllr Mrs L A Butcher	Cllr C J Lumley
Cllr J P Cottis	Cllr M Maddocks
Cllr T G Cutmore	Cllr Mrs C M Mason
Cllr R R Dray	Cllr J R F Mason
Cllr Mrs H L A Glynn	Cllr Mrs J E McPherson
Cllr K J Gordon	Cllr Mrs J A Mockford
Cllr J E Grey	Cllr T E Mountain
Cllr J D Griffin	Cllr R A Oatham
Cllr Mrs A V Hale	Cllr Mrs C E Roe
Cllr B T Hazlewood	Cllr C G Seagers
Cllr Mrs D Hoy	Cllr S P Smith
Cllr M Hoy	Cllr M J Steptoe
Cllr K H Hudson	Cllr I H Ward

### APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Mrs P Aves, P A Capon, Mrs T J Capon, M R Carter, D J Sperring, Mrs M J Webster and Mrs C A Weston.

### OFFICERS PRESENT

A Dave	–	Chief Executive
A Bugeja	–	Head of Legal, Estates & Member Services
Y Woodward	–	Head of Finance
J Bourne	–	Head of Community Services
J Bostock	–	Member Services Manager

### 17 SETTING THE COUNCIL TAX FOR 2014/15

(Note: Cllr T G Cutmore declared a non-pecuniary interest in this item by virtue of being a member of Groundwork Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk which was involved in the low carbon business programme).

Council considered the report of the Head of Finance on the level of Council Tax for 2014/15.

The Leader of the Council made the following statement:-

“Chairman and, through you, Councillors, members of the public and press.

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This is my tenth budget as Leader of this Conservative Administration and comes at a time of continued austerity for the Country as a whole.

The Government introduced major changes to the way that local government is funded from 2013/14 with the implementation of a Rates Retention Scheme and the Local Council Tax Support Scheme. Both have provided challenges to the Council in terms of delivering economic and jobs growth, supporting residents affected by the changes to benefits and the importance of accurate forecasting of economic growth and income.

The New Homes Bonus, which is a Government incentive to encourage more homes, was introduced in 2011/12. The Council received a New Homes Bonus of £440,000 in 2013/14 and we will be getting £596,000 next year. During 2013, there was a Government consultation on top slicing 30% of total New Homes Bonus to fund a Growth Fund for Local Economic Partnerships. Fortunately, the Government listened to the consultation responses and withdrew this proposal. However, they are reviewing the scheme so raising the risk that this source of funding may reduce.

The local government finance settlement has now been confirmed. Whilst our income from Retained Business Rates and Revenue Support Grant has been cut from £3.83m to £3.63m, a cut of 5%, this has been offset by the increase in New Homes Bonus. This means that our total Government grants of £4.278m is a small increase on the £4.267m we received in 2014/15.

However, although we welcome the Government's announcement of provisional figures for 2015/16, they indicate that funding from business rates and revenue support grant will fall by £400,000. We will need to ensure that we achieve the growth targets in new housing to make up for this loss.

Looking further ahead, it is clear that the Government will maintain its tight squeeze on the public purse, including the funding that is available to local authorities, so we will have to continue to look for ways of reducing costs or raising income in order to protect the services that Members and Residents value.

I would, at this point, like to thank all Members and Officers for their participation in this year's budget process and for helping to identify ways to meet the budget gap.

We will continue to look at areas where costs can be reduced or income generated. Plans that are being developed include:-

- Looking at ways to encourage residents to use more efficient and effective ways of contacting the Council;
- New leisure attractions within the District;
- The electronic delivery of papers to Members;

- The consideration of options for the Council to increase the provision of temporary accommodation across the District.

The Government announced a further Council Tax freeze grant for 2014/15 based on a 1% increase. They also said that any council tax increase of 2% or more would trigger a referendum, giving residents the opportunity to veto the increase. Whilst pleased that the Government made the announcement about the cap earlier than recently indicated, the uncertainty over the cap did not help the budget process.

In considering whether or not to accept the grant and freeze Council Tax, the Council has had to look at the longer term expectations for further cuts in funding and changes to, for example, benefits services and also the uncertainty around the New Homes Bonus as a major funding stream. The Council has noted the response to the question about a Council Tax increase in the public consultation carried out over the autumn. 49% of respondents agreed that they would be happy to see an increase in Council Tax if it avoided further reductions in services. 34% did not agree and 16% had no view or did not answer the question. Therefore, in order to protect the future delivery of services, the Council has reluctantly agreed to apply an increase of 1.89% on the average Band D Council Tax. This equates to an increase of less than 7½ pence per week.

Looking to the future, Rochford District Council has a clear set of priorities – making a difference to our community, environment and local economy with the focus on economic growth and job creation, the provision of housing and the delivery of efficiency savings. Despite the challenges faced, we have continued to uphold these priorities and have not let services slip. Our achievements over the past year include:-

- Reclaiming the title of being the best Authority in England when it comes to recycling, with a rate of 66.7%;
- The Council's Legal team and the Environment Agency won the Prosecution Team of the Year award for its joint work in taking prosecution action against serious planning and environmental breaches at Michelins Farm;
- The Rochford Art Trail scooped two regional Towns Alive awards; it won the 'Culture and Environment' category for the East zone and overall winner in the East;
- 'Shop at my Local' celebrated another milestone as the 1000th shopper signed up and pledged to shop locally in the Rochford District;
- The new Grounds Maintenance contract, which covers the maintenance of open spaces and the cutting of grass verges, started in December. Other aspects of maintenance, such as the cutting of rural verges, the provision of ground staff for football and the cleaning of pavilions are now managed as stand alone contracts. The booking of

football pitches, maintaining of cemeteries and the inspection and maintenance of play spaces are now delivered directly by the Council.

- The Council is on target to deliver the reductions in expenditure in 2013/14 of £423,000, primarily through savings on the grounds maintenance contract and the generation of an additional £180,000 in income.
- The Rochford Economic Development team have helped the Low Carbon Business Programme reach 235 Rochford Small and Medium Enterprises and secure £265,000 of European Regional Development Fund grant funding for these local businesses since 2009. To date, £250,000 of this has been successfully allocated to 44 different companies, enabling 31 to proceed with environmental projects and a further 13 to use funding towards employing an apprentice. In addition to these 13 apprentices, a further 81 Rochford jobs have been created and 71 confirmed positions safeguarded through the intervention of the Programme.
- Over 200 businesses attended the three business breakfasts that the Council organise and host each year.

The Council finalised its Allocations Plan and submitted it for examination to the Secretary of State. The Government-appointed Inspector's interim report indicates that the Plan is sound, subject to minor alterations, paving the way for the Council to be able to adopt the Plan for the sustainable delivery of 250 dwellings per year until 2025.

Our Wild Woods Day in June 2013 was extra special, as it celebrated its tenth birthday with over 3,000 people enjoying the party! The event was also successful in helping to introduce families to new activities and local sports clubs. From running clubs to golf, everyone who came could try their hand at different sports.

London Southend Airport has enjoyed its busiest year ever with almost a million passengers using the airport in 2013, and is now looking forward to even more exciting developments in 2014. The London Southend Airport and Environs Joint Area Action Plan has been prepared to respond to the challenges and opportunities offered by London Southend Airport and its surrounding area by managing growth, directing investment and ensuring the protection of areas and places sensitive to change. The proposals in the Plan will help create over 6,000 new jobs.

One of the priorities identified during this year's budget process is flood prevention. During the last six months, the District, like other parts of the Country, has experienced severe flooding which has directly affected residents. Although not a direct District Council responsibility, this Council recognises the distress and inconvenience that flooding can bring to the lives of residents. Next week's Council meeting will receive details of a Rochford Flood Forum which would, in conjunction with Essex County Council, work on

the implementation of the Rochford elements of the South Essex Surface Water Management Plan.

The introduction of the Local Council Tax Support Scheme was another challenge this year. Working with the County and Essex authorities we have implemented a scheme that is fair to all residents. The Government believes that local authorities are best placed to drive economic growth which will lead to job generation and reduce the demand for Council Tax Support.

The delay in the Government's announcement of the criteria for a Council Tax referendum has held up the Police and Crime Commissioner in setting his Council Tax. I am pleased to confirm that Essex County Council and Essex Fire and Rescue Authority have both frozen their council tax for 2014/15. The parish and town councils average council tax is £39.78, an increase of 1.6% compared to 2013/14. However, it is pleasing to note that six councils were able to reduce their Council Tax.

In conclusion, although Rochford District, and indeed the rest of the UK, is still suffering from the effects of the economic downturn, we remain committed to providing excellent services to our residents and partners. With this in mind we will be doing all we can 'to make Rochford District a place which provides opportunities for the best quality of life for all who live, work and visit here'.

The Leaders of local authorities have recently received a letter from Brandon Lewis advising of the Government's intention to make it mandatory for councils to adopt the practice of recorded votes on any decision relating to the budget or Council Tax. Whilst this won't become mandatory until next week, I would propose that, in the interests of transparency, we record the vote on the Council's proposal for next year's Council Tax and accordingly, Chairman, I commend the Rochford District Council Tax for Members' approval".

The Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group, Cllr C I Black, referred to the difficult financial climate faced by the Council. It was observed that, notwithstanding that the Council would be able to look to the sustainable delivery of 250 dwellings per year until 2025 with associated financial benefits, any specific planning applications would need to be judged on their individual merits from a planning perspective.

The Leader of the Green Group, Cllr M Hoy, observed that he could not support a proposed increase in Council Tax on the basis that he had not agreed with the budget proposals considered at the last Council meeting.

The Leader of the Rochford Residents Group, Cllr J R F Mason, observed that it would be appropriate for the District Council to look to Essex County Council to fully fund verge cutting rather than expect the District to continue covering the shortfall of £65,000.

The report recommendations were moved by Cllr T G Cutmore and seconded by Cllr S P Smith.

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On a requisition pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 17.4, a recorded vote was taken on the motion as follows:-

For (28) Cllrs C I Black; Mrs L A Butcher; J P Cottis; T G Cutmore; R R Dray; Mrs H L A Glynn; K J Gordon; J E Grey; J D Griffin; Mrs A V Hale; B T Hazlewood; K H Hudson; Mrs G A Lucas-Gill; C J Lumley; Mrs J R Lumley; M Maddocks; Mrs C M Mason; JRF Mason; Mrs J E McPherson; Mrs J A Mockford; T E Mountain; R A Oatham; Mrs C E Roe; C G Seagers; S P Smith; M J Steptoe; I H Ward and Mrs B J Wilkins

Against (2) Cllrs Mrs D Hoy and M Hoy

Abstain (0)

The motion was declared carried and it was:-

### **Resolved**

- (1) That the Council Tax requirement for the Council's own purposes for 2014/15 (excluding Parish and Town precepts) is £6,125,852.
- (2) That the basic rate of Council Tax relating to the District Council without Parish and Town precepts is £208.98. (HF)

## **18 COUNCIL TAX EXEMPTION FOR FLOODED PROPERTIES**

Council considered the report of the Head of Community Services on granting a discretionary Council Tax discount to residents who had temporarily moved out of their properties as a consequence of flooding in August 2013 and a process for considering future discounts.

Council concurred with the observation of the Leader that it was right and proper for the Council to assist affected residents.

Responding to a Member question the Head of Community Services confirmed that the Rochford Housing Association would be approached on concern at the time taken by the Association to bring flooded properties back into habitation.

It was unanimously:-

### **Resolved**

- (1) That, under the powers of Section 13A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, the following Council Tax discount be agreed:-

Properties that are currently uninhabitable as a result of the flooding that occurred across the District in August 2013, to receive a 50% Council Tax discount from 1 April 2014, in addition to the 50% discount

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they will be receiving under the Class D uninhabitable discount for a period that extends the current discount to a total period of up to 12 months.

- (2) That the proposed amendments to the existing Section 13A policy, as detailed in the report, be agreed so that any future crisis scenarios are catered for. (HCS)

The meeting closed at 8.00pm

Chairman .....

Date .....

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