

Minutes of a meeting of the
Worthing Cabinet
6 February 2024
at 6.30 pm

Present:

Councillor Dr Beccy Cooper (Chairman)
Councillor Carl Walker (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Caroline Baxter
Councillor Sophie Cox
Councillor Rita Garner
Councillor Emma Taylor-Beal

Councillor John Turley
Councillor Vicki Wells
Councillor Rosey Whorlow

WCAB/8/23-24 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest

WCAB/9/23-24 Public Questions

A Member of the Public asked the following question: Is the Cabinet Member aware that the number of jobs in Worthing is falling?

Response: The Cabinet Member did not agree with the premise of the question and produced recent figures that employment in Worthing had risen slightly over recent years. The Committee was told of actions taken to support employment and the business community including protection of commercial spaces, the development of new commercial spaces and support and interaction with local business groups

WCAB/10/23-24 Members Questions

A Member asked the following question: For the 2023/24 budgetary year in order to create a balanced budget Worthing Borough Council committed to making savings of £3.203m . Can you please tell me how much of this saving has been actually achieved in real terms of savings to date and whether the Council is on track to achieve the full figure of £3.203m by the year end?

Response: The Cabinet Member explained that £2.2m savings had advanced in year with a further £1m revenue savings. The Council had faced reduced income from fees such things as bereavement services and planning and had added financial pressures from an increase in need for Housing, Housing Benefit and has been subject to added pressures from a Housing subsidy change. The introduction of focused governance and tight spending controls had realised savings in the current year, this governance was built into the budget for the next financial year.

A Member asked the following question: Could the Cabinet confirm if it is proposed within the draft budget for 2024/25 to cut 2 Park Ranger posts and, if so, could they explain why

this is being proposed, has there been any form of consultation with greenspace groups, other stakeholders and the wider public, and what would be the amount of saving to the budget?

Response: The Committee was told that there was ongoing consultation with the Parks Team and UNISON regarding a redesign proposal. Concerns were respected, however it was emphasised that no decisions had been made as the consultation remained ongoing. Whilst this was the case it would not be appropriate to consult with greenspace groups or other stakeholders or in any public forum. More generally the Council faced a difficult financial climate and some important choices about how services would be organised in the future. This meant that the authority was undertaking a significant piece of organisational redesign intended to deliver both savings and a more sustainable organisational model.

A Member asked the following question: Given the past performance of 2023/24 in that the Council is not on track to achieve its savings targets, what information has been presented to the S151 officer that gives them confidence that your budget plans for 2024/25 are robust, that the target for 2024/25 of £2,816m will be fully achieved and that this budget is able to be signed off as a balanced budget?

Response: There was a need to recognise the overall performance in year which amounted to £3m, £2m of which had come from the previous budget. Not all savings had come from the specified budget. Tighter spending controls had been introduced after the first quarter monitoring report. Members should be cognisant of unavoidable spending pressures. The meeting was told of the forthcoming organisational design and the importance of this work to realise savings that were needed.

A Member asked the following questions: In the draft budget for 2024/25, could the Cabinet confirm the total amount of the proposed cut to the funding for Community Works (I can see £15,700 but understand it may be as much as £20k). Even though they have been offered access to funding to undertake additional work on top of their core service, this reduction to their budget may well lead to the loss of staff and since they do vital work supporting over 400 community groups, could you explain why this particular saving is being proposed?

Response: Members were told that the reduction in funding had been fully discussed with Community Works and is in keeping with the budget reductions the councils needed to make in order to balance the budget. Community Works understood the position and are working with the councils to see how they can adapt the way they work whilst working with them to review their priorities over this coming year.

A Member asked the following question: Recognising that the council faced additional in-year pressures on its finances. Nonetheless aside from that the Council is firmly on track to fail to meet its 2023/24 budget savings target. Can you explain what has caused this breakdown in delivery and the weakening of the council's financial position.

Response: the Cabinet Member responded by saying that the council had delivered on £3m worth of savings including additional in year savings. There was also an ongoing review of Council Assets. It was important to recognise the in year financial pressures with a reduction in demand of the councils fee paying services and an increase in demand relating to Housing matters

A Member asked the following question: Your plans for organisational redesign includes 'making the best use of community capacity' . Given this is one of a number of key strands to the Council's work to save £2,816m this new financial year and a minimum of a further £1.1m plus each year for the 4 years to 2028/29; can you explain what you see as community capacity, what you expect it to deliver and how you will harness it?

Response: The Cabinet Member explained that an outcome of the big listen exercise had been the expressed desire of residents to have more engagement and involvement in the work of the Council. Response to the Covid lockdown had demonstrated the capacity and willingness to be involved with community response.

As residents would have different needs and motivations in how they want to get involved, the cabinet wanted to create and showcase opportunities that people can get involved in the:

Short term: Support residents to make a difference to their neighbourhoods (i.e. community clean ups).

Medium term: Bring together staff, residents and partners to improve outcomes on areas where the Council can't act on its own (i.e. improving town centres)

Long term: Empower residents to influence future strategies of their services and communities (i.e. improving housing).

The activity would enable:

- Residents get more involved in improving their streets and communities and feel more connected and resilient as a result.
- Staff to better empower residents to make a difference to their communities and services better respond to their needs.
- Partners better use their levers and resources to support community action so residents can see all sectors are doing their bit.
- Civil society feels better valued to help communities thrive and work with the Council to develop solutions to issues.

- It was proposed to plan work to support better community engagement through the development:
 - Digital tools that enable residents to have their say and volunteer, including a participation offer and calendar of opportunities.
 - Physical tools that enable residents to make a difference (i.e. clean ups).
 - Programme that trains people up to develop their skills and apply them on practical challenges.
 - Toolkits that enable staff to adapt the methods in their everyday work on how to better work with communities.
 - Portfolio of participation projects that are focussed on both Adur & Worthing priorities.

WCAB/11/23-24 Items raised under urgency Provisions

There were no urgent items

WCAB/12/23-24 A report to determine the level of Council Tax Premiums and Discounts for Empty Properties and Second Homes

The Cabinet had before it a report from the Director for Sustainability and Resources, attached to these minutes as item 5.

This report identified decisions to be made by Full Council and made recommendations to change the council's approach in respect of certain discretionary areas within council tax legislation. If agreed, changes to Empty Property premiums will take effect from 1 April 2024 and changes to Dwellings Occupied Periodically (Second Homes) shall take place from 1st April 2025. These changes arise from the The Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 which enables councils to make further amendments to the levying of council tax premiums within the District.

Members were told that the report recommendations would seek to reduce the number of empty homes within the District in line with the Council's Empty Homes Strategy and to encourage the use of premises as main residence by local residents rather than as second homes.

Decision

That the following be recommended to Worthing Borough Council

1. That from 1 April 2024 to continue to levy the maximum level of premium for empty properties as follows noting the change for empty homes after 1 year:-
 - Premium of 100% for dwellings which are unoccupied and substantially unfurnished (Empty Homes Premium) after 1 years up to 5 years of becoming empty;
 - Premium of 200% for dwellings which are unoccupied and substantially unfurnished (Empty Homes Premium) between 5 years and up to 10 years; and
 - Premium of 300% for dwellings which are unoccupied and substantially unfurnished (Empty Homes Premium) for 10 years or more.
2. From 1 April 2025 to approve the application of a premium for second homes (Second Homes Premium) of 100% for all dwellings that are no persons' sole or main residence and which is substantially furnished
3. (Exceptions to premiums) that mindful of the current consultation by government which recommends exceptions in certain circumstances, to the second homes premium to be charged, and subject to the outcome of that consultation, it is recommended that the Section 151 Officer is given delegated authority to

implement this Council's policy on premiums in line with statute and any following guidance issued by the Secretary of State.

4. Recommend no changes to existing Council Tax Discounts.

Reason for Decision

To reduce the number of empty homes within the Borough in line with the Council's Empty Homes Strategy and to encourage the use of premises as main residence by local residents rather than as second homes

Alternative options considered

As outlined in the report.

Call In

There are no call-ins for recommendations to Council

WCAB/13/23-24 Budget Estimates 2024/25 and setting of the 2024/25 Council Tax

Before the Committee was a report by the Director for Digital, Sustainability and Resources, copies of which had been circulated to all Members and a copy of which is attached to the signed copy of these minutes as Item 7.

The report before members was the final budget report of the year, the culmination of the annual budgeting exercise, and asked members to consider: final revenue estimates, an updated outline 5-year forecast and the provisional level of Council Tax for 2024/25 prior to its submission to Council for approval.

The report outlined the Worthing Cabinet specific decisions to be made with respect to areas such as fees and charges and the setting of council tax. It also included the Worthing Cabinet decisions on the shared services which are reported to the JSC for review at its meeting on 8th February as part of the Joint Services Budget. The report outlined the medium term financial challenge through to 2028/29 and describes the key risks and assumptions which underpin this medium term financial view. The budget estimates reflected the council's priorities for 2024/25 and its focus on three key areas which underpin the council's vision of fair, green and local for Worthing: Clean, green, fair borough, Social housing, Town centre & seafront regeneration

The major points raised within the report included:

- A full update on the impact of the Local Government Finance Settlement.
- Indicative funding for initiatives to support the councils' ambitions.
- Proposals to invest in services, Appendix 3, alongside outlined savings.

- Considerations to be taken by the cabinet as to whether to increase council tax by 2.99% or by a lower amount (section 5.10).

The budget was analysed by Cabinet Member portfolio. In addition, the draft estimates for 2024/25 had been prepared, as always, in accordance with the requirements of the Service Reporting Code of Practice for Local Authorities (except in relation to pension costs adjustments that do not impact either on the Budget Requirement or the Council Tax Requirement).

The Sussex Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) had been informed that the referendum criteria for this year is an increase of £13.00 per Band D property which would be equivalent to an increase of 5.42%. The proposed 2024/25 budget is due to be considered by the Sussex Police and Crime Panel (PCP) on 26th January 2024. If the proposals were vetoed by the PCP, revised proposals would be considered by the PCP on the 19th February 2024 at which point the PCC would be in a position to confirm their precept for setting the council tax for 2024/25 in time for Full Council on the 20th February 2024.

The draft Local Government Finance Settlement allowed councils to increase core council tax by up to 2.99%. Those councils with responsibility for Adult Social Care could increase council tax by up to a further 2%. Therefore a council tax increase of 4.99% for councils with social care responsibilities was allowed for 2024/25.

The precept for West Sussex County Council had not yet been finalised and would not be confirmed until 16th February 2024. The formal detailed resolution setting the overall council tax for the following year would be presented directly to the Full Council meeting on 20th February 2024.

The Cabinet took a recorded vote on the individual recommendations before it

For: - Councillors Cooper, Walker, Baxter, Cox, Garner, Taylor Beal, Turley, Wells, Whorlow,

Against: (0)

Abstentions: (0)

Decision

1. That the proposals for savings outlined in Appendix 2 be approved.
2. That the proposals to invest in services outlined in Appendix 3 be approved
3. That it be recommended to Full Council to approve the use of capital receipts to support the delivery of the Organisation Design Programme and the budget as set out at appendix 4;
4. That it be recommended to Full Council the draft budgets for 2024/25 at Appendix 7 (broken down by cabinet member portfolio) and the transfer to reserves leading to a net budget requirement of £15,224,580, which includes provision for the proposals in Appendix 2 and 3, subject to any agreed amendments.

5. That it be recommended to Council an increase of 2.99% in Council Tax, making Band D £267.66 per annum for Worthing Borough Council's requirements in 2024/25, as set out in paragraph 4.3
6. That the council tax base of 39,330.7 for 2024/25 as set out in paragraph 11.3. be approved

Reason for Decision

Statutory requirement to set a budget.

Alternative options considered

As outlined in the report.

Call-in

The call-in deadline for decision (a) and (b) and (f) will be 5.00pm on Friday 16th February 2023.

There is no call-in for recommendations to Full Council, (3), (4) and (5).

WCAB/14/23-24 Investing in our Places - Capital Programme 2024/25 to 2026/27

The Cabinet had before it a report from the Director for Sustainability and Resources, attached to these minutes as item 7.

This report before members recommended the investment programmes for Worthing Borough Council which supported both the strategic ambition of the Council, and the vital regular investment toward the upkeep and improvement of our public assets and the delivery of services.

Members were asked to approve the new schemes for 2024/25. The report recommended:

- the schemes for inclusion in the overall Capital Investment Programmes for 2024/25; and
- an indicative list of schemes for 2025/26 which will be confirmed next year.

The report informed the Cabinet of the resources available for future capital investment, and updates Members about the financing of the proposed programmes.

Decision

1. That the General Fund Capital Investment Programmes for 2024/25 the schemes to be included as detailed in Appendix 2 and 3 be confirmed
2. That the full programme detailed at Appendix 3 be recommended for approval by Worthing Borough Council on the 20 February 2024;

Reason for Decision

To protect and maintain the Borough's Assets

Alternative options considered

As outlined in the report.

Call In

The call in deadline for this decision is Friday 16 February 2024 at 5.00pm.

There is no call in for 2) as it is a decision for Council

The meeting ended at 7.45 pm