

Worthing Borough Council Budget Speech – February 2024

Good morning everyone.

Before we get started on Worthing's 2024/25 Budget, I would just like to offer some thanks. Firstly to all my fantastic colleagues for everything they do and in this case in particular to **Cllr John Turley** for seeing us through one of the toughest financial years in the history of this council. And he does it so calmly! And there's me, tearing my hair out! It's amazing, it really is.

I would also like to thank the officers - especially **Emma Thomas and the Finance Team**, along with our **Chief Executive, Directors and all the dedicated staff of the council**. And a special mention for **Martin Randall** who is retiring after many years of service in Local Government. Our thanks for all your hard work Martin and we all wish you well in your next adventures.

We live in a wonderful part of the world and are rightly proud of our town and borough. As the local Council, we are one of many partners contributing to the health and wellbeing of all our residents, helping them to thrive. So when we are setting our annual budget and choosing how to spend the public resources available to us, we do our best to make sure that we are reflecting the priorities of our communities and are working productively with our partners.

In 2023-24, in spite of very tight resources, we managed to achieve some great things with our communities and to start some projects that will bear fruit this year and in the years to come.

For example, one of our priority areas is social housing, ensuring that all our residents, regardless of their incomes, are able to access good homes. This year we have invested £4.2m in developing emergency and temporary accommodation provision within the Borough. This will allow local residents who find themselves homeless (often through the scourge that is no fault evictions) to remain within their social networks and not have to make long, expensive daily journeys to their places of work and children's schools. Housing is a major budgetary pressure for us (costing £5m in 23/24) and a reduction of B&B bills and out of town placements is good news for both our communities and Council.

However, reducing B&B costs is of course only a halfway house to providing good homes. This year, as well as strengthening our relationship with Worthing Homes and other housing association partners, progress has been made toward developing our own social housing offer. Focussing on our key brown field sites means that we expect to see work underway at Union Place later this year and an offer finalised with Homes England for the development of Teville Gate. If it feels like these projects have taken forever to see the light of day, it is not least because our Officers have had to take endless time away from their day jobs to find significant savings in the budget! But more about that later...

This year, we have also prioritised urban greening and sustainable living, protecting and enhancing our green spaces and wherever possible, increasing biodiversity in

our urban areas by planting native and sustainable species, for example on our High Street and Prom. I should also say that protecting and enhancing our coastline is very much part of this work too, but I don't know if urban blue'ing has quite the same ring to it!

We continue to work with the Friends Of Groups who do so much great work in our parks and green spaces – this type of community partnership is in many ways the backbone of our town and we greatly value these relationships.

Of note we have delivered a new playground in Palatine Park with a full refurbishment planned and budgeted for, for Homefield Park. And it is great to finally see the café in Brooklands open and doing well.

In our blue spaces, Sussex Bay goes from strength to strength, aided by additional funding successfully brought in by our officers. Our local fishing community will also benefit from this revival, with Councillors and Officers set to secure long-term fishing licences that underpin the sustainable practices of our historic coastal heritage.

And the Fisherman's Society of Worthing are only one of the many beneficiaries of our revamped Community grants scheme. Good use of the Community Infrastructure Levy has been a key goal, ensuring that we are reflecting the needs of our neighbourhoods in the allocation of available resources. This work was Borough wide, Council wide (cross Party) and Community wide and I would like to thank everyone who gave their time and effort in championing these 45 projects and ensuring that funding was allocated fairly and transparently.

This, alongside the Big Listen and large-scale public realm initiatives in areas such as West Durrington, will be at the heart of our Council transformation work. We were elected on a manifesto promise to be a Council for the Community, and in order to do this we are moving to a neighbourhood model where officers and residents can work side by side in community settings.

But before I come to next year with all its challenges and opportunities, I want to return to my earlier comment on time spent by officers (and members!) in finding the large amount of savings needed in order for the Council to get to the end of this year as a going concern.

After 14 years of callous, chaotic and clueless Tory government, it should come as no surprise that councils up and down the country are now stretched to breaking point. Shockingly, in real terms, Worthing Borough Council is receiving around £7m less in central government funding than it was in 2010.

In order to try to replace some of that funding, Worthing, like so many other Councils, has dedicated precious officer time and money to commercial investments. The Strategic Property Investment Fund is generating a good return but there remains a shortfall in our Budget. The significant reduction in funding means that when inflation and the cost of living crisis hit, Worthing Council, like so many others, did not have enough resilience in its budget. The only way forward has been to hit pause for several months on work that benefits our communities, in order to strip the old structure of the Council to its bare bones and to prepare for a rapid transformation. I

repeat that our plan was always to transform into a Council for the Community – a 21st Century Council model which is flexible, resilient, digital and embedded in its neighbourhoods. But that was a 5 year plan! We anticipated a transition that would allow enough time for the Council and Community to adapt to new ways of working, and new iteratively-built structures.

However, thanks to the appalling lack of trust and respect of Local Government shown by the Conservatives, we have no choice but to shortcut much of this transition time, and work as hard and as fast as we can to put our transformed model into practice. And despite this inevitably being a bumpy ride, our S151 officer is assured that our budget is sound.

We are asking a lot of our Council staff and community members, and I want to thank them for their ongoing creativity and passion for Worthing. Our Communities continue to suffer from and to pick up the pieces of this broken National Government and I invite them to be as disgusted as we are that Westminster remains both blind and deaf to the consequences of their own inept decisions. We are furious that the Conservatives continue to use Local Government as their scapegoat for the ills that they have inflicted on our residents – unaffordable housing, lack of actual investment in their so-called levelling up agenda, washing their hands of so many in our Community as their bills soar and their living standards plummet.

In spite of this cynical approach from a thankfully dying Conservative government, we are resolved to carry on and to work hard with and for our residents next year.

So in order to do this, what does our overall budget position look like? At the end of this financial year, we estimate that we will need to utilise £1.6 million from our working fund reserves to balance the budget (our ring-fenced, earmarked reserves remain intact). Going into 24/25 our usable reserves balance will be £242,000, which is very low. We will therefore need to put any surplus from this year into reserves. The 24/25 budget has been balanced, with the provision of £200k to go back into the reserves. We will seek to further increase our reserves as much as possible from 24/25 onwards.

In short, the work that we undertake in 2024/25 will continue to be within financial constraints and we will need to be extremely creative to achieve our ambitions within these limitations. As I said, we are determined to do this but we are under no illusion – this is a big ask and will require us all to pull together to transition so quickly into our 21st century Council.

We retain the vision of becoming the greenest, fairest Coastal town in the UK. We have learnt a lot from our community and council officers in our first two years of administration and have honed our priority areas as follows:

- Creating a clean, green, fair Borough
- Development of social housing
- Town centre & seafront regeneration

Our 21st Century Council is going to look and feel different to what has gone before, but it will still of course need to prioritise our statutory services. Most of these are

delivered as joint services with Adur Council – which is currently run by a Conservative administration (at least for now!). But I am pleased to say that we have developed a constructive way of working together to deliver those shared services.

They include waste and cleansing, both of which are essential to delivering our priority of a cleaner borough. Digitalisation will allow these teams to work more efficiently with the resources available. In cleansing, there will be a review undertaken to ensure that key areas such as street cleaning are not delayed for example, by cars parked along the road. We are also acutely aware of the need to find new life for our town centre and night time economy, and keeping the area clean and attractive is a vital part of that.

In waste, we need a solution to our aging fleet that is sustainable and will contribute to our net zero target. If we are to transition to electric vehicles, we need to consider the total cost, waiting time for new vehicles and charging infrastructure. This year, we will put together the best solution, that takes into account possible opportunities to work with other local authorities and travel partners.

We are also awaiting further financial updates on the Environment Bill, which will require us to collect food waste separately from our regular bin collections. We absolutely welcome this direction of travel in terms of being a green and sustainable Borough, but we cannot implement this with the current suggested financial settlement from Central Government. As this is the same for pretty much every Council up and down the Country, we live in hope that there will be sense seen and that the requisite funding for this long overdue service will be forthcoming.

Creating a fair Borough is a central tenet of our Labour administration and is considered in each strategic decision that we make. It means expanding opportunity and we continue to encourage inward economic investment by actively working with local businesses, the Worthing BID and others to support start-ups and encourage more collaboration between businesses, communities and the council.

It also includes our determination to provide decent, sustainable social homes. As mentioned, this year will see work beginning in Union Place and the introduction of Homes England to finally provide long overdue sustainable homes and green spaces for Teville Gate. We are fully aware that Teville Gate continues to be one of the blockers for this town in terms of development, and while we work with Homes England to ensure delivery of this project, we will be making sure that this space is maximised for Community usage.

Another ongoing issue is Montague Place. As part of our town centre regeneration, we will be using developer contributions for public spaces to turn Montague Place into Montague Gardens. It will be green and clean with areas for young children to play, older people to meet and a central stage venue that will give young people the opportunity to perform, watch outdoor cinema and above all feel at home and welcomed in the heart of our town.

Helping to create a fair community also means allocating resources according to need. We will continue to work with and to support our fantastic community organisations to provide a safety net through food banks, warm hubs and meeting

places for old and young. We are also aware of how important it is for us all to have access to art, music and leisure activities and will therefore be once again showcasing the very best of our town's creative talents with the Worthing Festival.

For such a constrained budget, we are still packing a considerable punch and I am incredibly proud to present this budget plan to Council today. The Cabinet Members will give more detail in the debate on some of the specific Capital projects and revenue services that they are working on, with their officer teams to take forward. We are being fiscally responsible, whilst at the same time using all our strategic and operational strengths to deliver a future that is full of possibility, innovation and creativity. Is it risky? Yes, but it is managed to the very best of our ability. Is it the right thing to do? Undoubtedly. Would it be easier if we were properly resourced? You bet! But to realise our vision of becoming the fairest, greenest Coastal Town in the UK we will ultimately need hard work, brains, determination and teamwork. And we know that this Labour Council and our Worthing Communities have those in abundance!

Many thanks.