

## Budget Speech 2021

“This evening we will be discussing our annual budget in circumstances we have never experienced before, following a year like none we have never experienced before but we will, I hope, come together to offer our community a sense of certainty in a very uncertain world.

It scarcely seems possible that it was just one year ago that we met to debate our council’s budget for 2020. At that time the UK had just left the European Union, a new government had been elected two months earlier and all the political chatter revolved around the laudable ‘levelling-up’ agenda and infrastructure spending.

At our budget setting meeting in February 2020 we debated and voted on a budget that looked to 2020 and the 2020s as a time in which Worthing was set to roar into a new phase of development. We had recently approved the latest iteration of our Platforms for Places strategy and that budget served to ensure that we would deliver a range of ambitions to make Worthing an even better place to live, work and enjoy.

Following a great deal of progress in delivering regeneration to neglected areas, purchasing the former police station site at Union Place, enabling new development at the former Aquarena, demolishing dilapidated buildings and a multi-storey car park at Teville Gate and beginning the process of laying mile upon mile of dark fibre we committed to go further and faster. Securing a planning permission for Union Place, decontaminating Decoy Farm, pressing forward with public realm regeneration and hooking up homes, businesses and public services across Worthing to ultrafast broadband.

Over the previous years we had driven forward a number of projects to support the health and wellbeing of our communities. Our social prescribing programme ‘Going Local’ had helped over 2000 people across Worthing and Adur; we had prevented 717 households from becoming homeless since 2017 and in 2019 our ‘One Stop Junction’ had supported over 200 local residents into employment.

Last year we committed to going even further by working with local health partners on the delivery of a new town centre health hub; to bring on new council owned housing options for those at risk of homelessness and to improve the way we harnessed and used available data to make more timely preventative interventions to support those in our community who needed our help the most.

Our environmental credentials had been well burnished in the years leading up to 2020 as we improved our recycling rates, worked to eliminate plastics, let the wild flowers bloom across Worthing, reduced our carbon emissions and delivered a renaissance at Brooklands Lake. Taking up the challenge from our community and the government to go further we pledged to go net-zero by 2030, trial a new commercial food waste collection service, hold a climate assembly and investigate opportunities for tree planting and rewilding.

By digitising services, improving our technological capabilities and moving to the cloud among many other initiatives we had already improved the way we maintained and delivered services to the extent that residents were able to book services online and be seen to within

hours, if not minutes in some cases. Last year we undertook to move further and faster in improving the way we work with and serve our local residents, businesses and customers.

And we reflected on our success in previous years in securing government funding, over £10m to assist with schemes in Worthing and pledged to lead the way in fighting, not just for Worthing, but the wider area too, for more recognition in the levelling up agenda.

But then, just a few weeks later the coronavirus pandemic that had struck other parts of the world had its deadly impact on our country and we were thrust into lockdown. Our communities needed support from our council like never before and we had to face a new challenge that none of us had foreseen.

The impacts of the virus and the effects of lockdown are well known. People's lives and livelihoods have been affected or lost in far too many instances. I know that all councillors would wish once again to place on record our sympathy with those who have been affected in such ways.

Over the past year the people of Worthing rose to the Covid challenge amazingly. More than one observer described it as 'Worthing's finest hour'. Community support groups sprung up. Every street had a WhatsApp group and neighbours looked out for each other like never before. Whether it was by volunteering for the community effort, by working as a key worker or by limiting contact with loved ones every person was playing a role in the fight against the pandemic. Every one helped to save lives and every one helped to protect our NHS. For that we are all very grateful.

Special recognition must go to the officers and employees of Worthing Borough Council who were tested like never before and passed with flying colours. The transition to home working for staff was seamless and people needing to contact the council were able to do so with the same level of ease as when customer contact staff were office based. Our refuse collectors didn't miss a round. The cleansing teams kept up their great work keeping Worthing spik and span. Our Environmental Health officers worked with the providers of the burgeoning hot takeaway sector to ensure that all food reaching residents, key workers, volunteers and people in need was safe to eat.

And our staff went above and beyond the call of duty in providing extra levels of support to the community. The food distribution centre in the Assembly Hall meant that no one in Worthing facing hardship needed to worry about not having food. Our homelessness team ensured that no one had to sleep on the streets by arranging an offer of a bed for all our known rough sleepers. Businesses that would have had to close were provided with grants, disbursed by our team as quickly as possible. We should all be proud of the efforts our staff put in over the past year.

And while none of this could have been achieved without their dedication it is also true that a great deal of this could not have been accomplished without the decisions taken by councillors on this council in recent years. The move to the cloud and the digital programme that I've already mentioned were crucial components in enabling our officers to deliver these remarkable achievements. It is relevant and appropriate to reflect briefly on the fact that

other councils nearby that had not taken such decisions in recent years were not able to deliver the uninterrupted programme that our team did.

The subsequent financial challenge to this council was daunting and we wouldn't have been able to continue with our work for the community without the prudent decisions we had previously made - not least in regard to our strategic investment programme, the digital programme and the commercialisation work that has been pursued. And nor would it have been possible without the government support that was sent our way from the Chancellor of the Exchequer. With car parking and commercial income drying up overnight, our leisure centres needing support and extra burdens falling on the council's finances it was critical that more funding was provided and over a million pound was quickly awarded to us. The subsequent pledge to fund 75% of lost income will be critical to Worthing's ability to build back in the coming months.

So through this, what of the ambitions that we had set ourselves twelve months ago? With the distraction of Covid many would forgive a council for reducing the activities it was working on. This council though took no such course. In fact the six and twelve month reviews of Platforms for our Places showed that, remarkably, we are well on track to meet the ambitious targets that we set ourselves.

Planning permissions were granted for the Health Hub, the Boklok scheme at Fulbeck Avenue and the Union Place development. Remediation works, funded by the Coast to Capital LEP, have been completed at Decoy Farm readying that site for long term employment use. Similarly the council purchased land with planning permission on Southdownview Road to safeguard critical employment space. Contracts have been awarded for regeneration projects in the town centre which this council is project managing and the installation of ultrafast fibre has actually been accelerated meaning that Citizen Wifi should reach the town centre even sooner than planned.

The renovation of the former Downview Pub has been completed and people formerly at risk of homelessness now have the security of a place to live. A similar scheme on Rowlands Road is due to be complete soon.

On our environmental initiatives the achievements of this council have been similarly commendable. We recently reported a 13% reduction in carbon emissions for 2019/20. The planned Climate Assembly did go ahead on Zoom with 45 local residents engaged throughout and resulted in 18 well thought through recommendations. The council's recycling rates continue to go up and we have adopted a new sustainable procurement strategy. In an attempt to improve our enforcement work on litter and dog fouling we have adopted a scheme to be run by colleagues at East Hampshire District Council.

I could go on and on but I suspect we will be here for quite some time this evening so I'll leave the list of achievements there and conclude by reflecting on the national recognition that Worthing Borough Council received in being shortlisted for not one but both of the national Council of the Year awards. While we were shortlisted for both, no other district or borough council in the country made the shortlist for either award. A high commendation for our council that I'm sure all colleagues will agree demonstrates that we've set very high standards over recent years.

So this year's budget brings us back to our ambitions and how we continue to achieve our successes against the financial challenges that we still face. My colleague the Executive Member for Resources and the finance team at Worthing Borough Council have excelled themselves once more in delivering a balanced budget that provides us with the means to serve our communities and drive Worthing forward with exciting plans for regeneration and improvement.

The savings identified in these papers amount to nearly £1.3m and are a significant proportion of our revenue budget. It is no mean feat to once again drive these improvements in our financial performance without having to reduce our services, ambitions or plan for draw downs from reserves.

This budget enables us to go further on our work to deliver regeneration projects in and around the town centre. It means we can deliver more apprenticeships through the kickstart scheme. It offers support to the local NHS and those in our community in greatest need. It funds the delivery of more and more of our environmental initiatives for which we have received over a million pound of grant funding. It means prudent planning for the next twelve months through the creation of a contingency fund and of new posts to accelerate the delivery of our digital services and use of data that have been so important to this council's ability to serve the community through the pandemic.

Colleagues, we have much to plan for and a great deal to be proud of. I commend this budget to the virtual chamber as a means to build the platforms that our residents, employers and public servants will need to thrive in the post pandemic world.