

Budget Speech 2022

This time last year we were discussing our annual council budget remotely using online technology. Tonight as the full lifting of Covid restrictions comes ever closer, we are again meeting in unusual circumstances here in the Assembly Hall with us all not yet able to be back in the Council Chamber.

Since that time last year there have been over 139 million vaccinations given, over 48.5 million people are fully vaccinated and over 37 million booster vaccines, a remarkable achievement by any standard. I would like again to pay tribute to all those who have led on these vaccination schemes, from the scientists, the NHS staff and the army of volunteers up and down the country and especially here in Worthing who have stepped up and helped out. Without all of them this collective effort would not have been successful.

Firstly I wish to put on record my thanks for the work of the officers in preparing this budget and to Cllr Sparkes for her microscopic interrogation of it.

I would also like to pay tribute to the work of my executive, fellow councillors and all the council staff who have continued through another pandemic year providing a quality service to residents across Worthing. Despite the challenges they have adapted, innovated and delivered; and that is across the board from our very visible front line staff providing refuse and street cleaning, parks and garden, right across to our not so visible, but just as important, areas of service delivery. Not to forget the residents and businesses themselves, for continuing to work together when times have been difficult.

As we all know not everything is the same, how we work and how we live has changed. One of the largest changes in 'how we work', has been seen here at the Council as staff are, where possible, still working remotely and this has allowed us to review and re-shape how our buildings are managed.

In the last year we have seen a change in our Chief Executive Officer with Alex Bailey retiring and Catherine Howe now at the helm.

As we near closing the 2021/22 financial year we are still facing a number of challenges, but our position remains good with the projected overspend currently showing at about £14,000 pounds, remarkable in the current situation. Our planned work has continued and the vast majority of our projects are on track and many have accelerated. Proof, if proof is needed, that home working can be just as or even more productive.

But we are not out of the woods yet, the pandemic has left its pressures on our fees and charges income, particularly in relation to car parks, is reduced. Whilst throughout 2020/21 and in the first quarter of 2021/22 the Government committed to providing 75% funding for any lost income, that support is no longer available. Consequently all future losses will have to be funded by the Council and must be factored into our financial planning.

The human cost from the impact of the pandemic is clear, not more so than on our homelessness, as caseloads continue to rise, there remains an ever present risk that demand and associated costs may increase further over the coming year.

To address the known, and as yet unknown pressures, and to realise our ambitions we have in place several strategic programmes delivering new income and savings for the next 5 years.

These include the Strategic Asset Management programme, delivering the income growth especially from the Strategic Property Investment Fund. The Commercial programme to promote income growth from commercial services and seeks to improve our customer experience. The Affordable Homes Working Group leads on improving the supply of affordable homes and on reducing the cost of temporary and emergency accommodation and our Corporate Landlord programme seeks to rationalise our own council accommodation, generating capital receipts from the sale of surplus assets.

Alongside those strategic programmes, this budget identifies savings proposals that amount to £1,136,000 pounds. Savings managed through prudent fiscal management, digitalisation, successful investment and commercial management.

National and locally, economic recovery is happening with signs of strong growth. The number of people in work continues to grow, rates of pay are rising and the number of people claiming out of work benefits are showing signs of decreasing. With the Chancellors support we have benefitted from unprecedented support for residents, businesses and the public sector during the pandemic; Furlough, homelessness prevention, loan schemes, grants and business rates holidays and hardship grants.

But as we all learn to live with Covid we recognise that families and businesses are facing their own cost of living pressures and in this budget we will set out how we can help.

Recently we have seen the government provide £200 support on fuel bills and a further £150 payment reduction for Council Tax for households in bands A - D with additional arrangements for those that fall outside of this. In addition, a new WSCC arrangement to provide £150 support for households in receipt of council tax reduction relief is proposed, plus our own £100,000 pounds discretionary hardship fund support. All of these will go a long way to helping those who are most at risk in our community.

To support these needs we are investing nearly £2,000,000 pounds through our Health and Wellbeing budget that will support the delivery not only of our New Health and Wellbeing Plan, but work with our Wellbeing Hubs and Social Prescribing teams, helping residents to access support and advice around mental health, weight management, addiction and social isolation. Continued support for the third sector including local charities and community groups helping the most vulnerable. Continued work to address food poverty and support the Food Partnerships. Linked to this work we will be continuing our support for residents struggling with their finances. Our Proactive Project is a key part of this work that aims to identify households and help them increase household income, reduce household debt and also address depression, anxiety and loneliness that often accompany financial exclusion. The work of the OneStop 'Money Coaches' support service, along with our investment in Citizens Advice is all part of this approach.

Worthing's economy and communities are getting stronger with the plans we have put in place to protect families and support businesses; our economic bounce back has been stronger and more successful than many other areas across the UK. But we can and must go further, so tonight alongside all these budget proposals I am announcing that in order to help accelerate that bounce back, to help encourage residents and visitors back into our town, to visit, to stay local, to shop local, to eat local, from the 28th March until the end of 2022 we plan to reduce the cost of parking for the second hour in our multi storey car parks down, to £1.00. This is what residents and businesses have told us is the help they would like we have listened.

Throughout 2021/22 we delivered Covid grants and support for businesses, in Worthing 8502 applications processed and over £39.6 million distributed. Our Good Work programme is supporting people into employment and skills development - addressing health and wellbeing at the same time so that they can sustain employment. The Youth Hub has opened, focussing on helping young people to secure employment opportunities.

In November the Worthing Local Plan was subject to examination, in there it identified the creation of new sustainable homes that our residents need, on brownfield sites such as Teville Gate and Union Place, while large open spaces, such as Brooklands Park, Goring Gap and Chatsmore Farm, will be preserved and enhanced for generations to come.

Going into 2022/23 we will continue to invest in our town, to support residents, businesses and create jobs, and much needed homes.

We will invest £480,000 on economic development and tourism. Investing this year nearly £300,000 to secure a long term plan for the Lido and investment in the pier and southern pavilion.

We have made a multi million pound intervention at Teville Gate to deliver a scheme fit for Worthing, its residents, visitors and businesses. Driven by a need to provide affordable homes, with nomination rights for Worthing residents on the council housing register.

At Union Place we have identified a key delivery partner to create 186 new homes, securing affordable housing which will also be offered to people on Worthing's housing register. The car park will be replaced with more than 250 spaces, commercial units and a potential cinema extension for the Connaught Theatre, much welcomed by the Worthing Theatres and Museum trust.

Our plans for an extended creative and digital hub at Colonnade House have been approved.

Worthing is changing, changing fast and changing for the better under this Conservative administration, a view that is reflected in a plethora of surveys and media articles over the last 12 months.

As Conservatives *we are delivering* - at Decoy Farm - A £4.8 million pound decontamination has been completed and we will now directly build out the site directly and bring forward high

quality employment space, as part of this approach we are actively exploring the concept of a 'net zero business park'.

We are delivering - Montague Place - Work to transform this area into a more attractive place for shoppers and tourists has begun. The current road surface will be raised and decorated so that the whole of Montague Place is level, extra lighting will be provided and new planters will be installed, as well as parklets - seating surrounded by plants and shrubs. This is the start of a much wider scheme, that everyone will be able to contribute their views on.

We are delivering - The groundbreaking £34 million Worthing Integrated Care Centre as part of a new Civic Quarter has started. Opening in Summer 2023 it will bring a variety of much needed health services together under one roof in a state-of-the-art facility.

We are delivering - The new public realm for Portland Road is progressing - the scheme includes free public Wi-Fi, better lighting, comfortable seating areas and landscape planting.

We are delivering - The Boklok scheme at Fulbeck Avenue will deliver 150 high quality modular homes has started. In phase 1, 91% of purchasers were first time buyers, 91% local to the area and 75% were able to access the government 'Help to Buy' scheme.

We are delivering - our pioneering investment in gigabit ultrafast infrastructure is progressing well, now reaching 32,000 homes, and is making the area one of the most digitally connected places in the south east.

We are delivering - Our increased investment in housing providing a total budget of nearly £2.5 million pounds - local new homes in Worthing and increased investment to tackle homelessness.

We are delivering - Our Digital and Environment Budget has been significantly increased to £ 3,754,000 pounds. It will see increases in investment in refuse and recycling - responding to opportunities provided by the Environment Act and other pressures.

We are delivering - A 10% increase in the street cleaning including graffiti removal budget to £796,000.

We are delivering - a budget that includes investment and support in leisure provision of £1,334,500, across our leisure centre and an improved offer in all our local parks throughout the town, so important as we all learn to live, work and play locally. Alongside this will be a £400,000 investment in public conveniences.

Our investment in the Environment continues. Our carbon reduction team is driving a programme of works to decarbonise our buildings and fleet as a critical part of meeting our carbon neutral 2030 target. This Council was recently awarded a £5m grant from central government (BEIS) for the delivery of the Worthing Heat Network, a UK leading district heat network scheme to connect 23 buildings including the NHS, Councils and the police in Worthing centre using a sewer source heat pump.

We've completed significant community engagement work, building on the success of the Climate Assembly. The community section of the SustainableAW shared climate and nature plan was completed following engagement with over 200 organisations and our budget proposals will support this work.

We are continuing to work with the Greater Brighton Economic Board supporting Hydrogen Sussex and Shoreham Harbour to establish this part of Sussex as a future provider of low carbon hydrogen fuel.

Let us not forget only recently the Clean Cities Index - it found Worthing is the second cleanest town in the country, according to its in-depth environmental study. Worthing also ranked highly on climate in the study. According to the data, the town has the highest volume of installed renewable electricity capacity per 10,000 households of any of England's primary urban areas, and the second lowest CO2 emissions per capita.

I cannot fail to mention our work to create a local marine and estuarine reserve called Sussex Bay, restoring kelp habitats and improving local fishing stock, goes from strength to strength, supported by another Defra grant fund. Our project is the only marine project funded by the scheme in the UK.

This budget enables us to go further and kickstart Worthing in what is fast becoming a post pandemic world.

This budget enables Worthing to grow, it gives capacity and enables this council to support those in our community who are at most at risk of economic, health or financial exclusion, whilst at the same time supporting business, nurturing the creation of jobs and life opportunities.

Worthing is changing, and it is changing under this Conservative administration, by us showing strong leadership of place, creating the right environment for people and commerce to flourish, whilst being there to make those important interventions at the right time. We will continue to promote Worthing to central government under the Levelling Up agenda and explore how we can maximise our opportunities from the Shared Prosperity Fund.

None of this however can be achieved without strong financial governance and planning. By using local residents council tax money wisely. But there are many uncertainties still ahead.

So looking at our budget, our planned spending and our reserves and given the relatively low level of reserves, with no guarantee of future government support for loss of income, now or in the future; it is now critical that these reserves be used only as a funding resource of last resort until such time as the reserve level has recovered.. The Council has over the past year minimised new calls on such resources, utilising the ability to use capital receipts to fund initiatives to generate budget savings where possible and we will follow that practice to protect and improve local services.

Colleagues, we have a great deal to be proud of and much more that we plan to do and I commend this budget to this chamber.