



Worthing Labour Group – Budget Speech 22/23

Our Labour Group budget presentation this year is, in effect, a game of two halves.

As outlined, we have put forward a number of amendments to the current administration's proposed budget for 2022/23 and in the debate which will follow, the Labour team will provide more details about what these amendments will deliver for the residents of Worthing.

However, it is important that these amendments are seen in the much broader context of a significant change in direction for our town. We are confident that the elections this May **will** deliver an historic Labour-led Council in Worthing. That's just a few months away, so this budget speech will also set out the strategic change that will come with that political change. And looking forward, as we should do, that will be reflected in **our** 2022/23 budget.

Over the last five years in opposition, we have been engaging with and listening to our local communities. Our group of 17 Councillors, working alongside a team of passionate and engaged Labour activists, have come to a clear understanding on the key changes we need to make to ensure this Council can serve our residents and communities better.

First and foremost, we need a new Social Contract between our communities and the Council. There is an enormous enthusiasm and capacity across our communities, to get involved with the Council and the services it provides. This was seen at its best during the Pandemic. But all too often, residents have told us just how hard this is in practice. They can't put a bench in their local park, run a campaign to encourage children to walk to their local school, or green their local high street. It's just so much hard work and, not surprisingly, their enthusiasm wanes in the face of convoluted processes and timelines that stretch into the distant future.

A Labour-led Council will transfer responsibility for community specific decisions to the communities that live every day with the results of these decisions. We will review our Council budget to identify the funding that communities can spend directly in their neighbourhoods so that their decisions can become a reality ... and at a pace that matches the need.

As Leader of the Council, I don't think that it should be my prerogative to sign off on a bench that I will rarely sit on, or a community event that I may not be able to get to. Those are decisions for the community itself. Ward Councillors are likely to play a key role in working with neighbourhood communities, making this a Council-wide initiative, whatever the political persuasion of the Councillors. Our Council will work with and for all our communities.

We do not underestimate the enormity of this change in the way our Council works and we are currently drawing on the best guidance we can get on community participatory decision



making. We are committed to moving forward with this new model and rebuilding the relationship between our Communities and our Council.

There are parts of our town that are local to us all, most notably the town centre and our seafront. These are areas where some of our best assets are located, including the Pier, the Lido building and the Dome. But this area also epitomises what can only be described as the managed decline of our beautiful coastal town. Where there should be green, community-friendly spaces, we find too often concrete and dirty walls.

The demise of the high street is not a phenomenon unique to Worthing, but we have found many fantastic examples of Councils up and down the country that have faced up to the challenge and embraced the opportunity to build back fair, green and local!

Our amendments ask for funding for a listening campaign and a big clean up. We are determined that the listening relationship that we have built with our constituents should continue and become a key feature of our Council culture. In the big clean up, we will bring together Councillors, Officers, local businesses and community volunteers to breathe new life into our town centre, the beating heart of our Borough. We want to celebrate all that the town can be, and work with our residents to deliver this.

We are ready to write a new narrative for our Town Centre and Sea Front. Regenerating our town should be holistic, developed in partnership with our local residents, rather than the piecemeal approach we have seen for so many years. Our urban design budget amendment will allow us to create a cohesive visual plan, jointly with our communities.

Teville Gate, Union Place, Montague Square and the seafront all need to reflect the beauty, creativity and heritage of Worthing, as well as providing the housing and amenities that our town requires. This does not have to be an either/or choice. Great architecture, green spaces and practical solutions can work seamlessly together – we just need new ideas and a willingness to do things differently.

Our built and natural environment can and should go hand in hand. Sitting on the top of the Worthing wheel last summer, I was struck by the stunning blue of the sea to the south and the green of the Downs to the north, and the contrast of the mostly grey area that runs between them. Worthing residents spend most of their time living and working in our built-up areas and, as the Council, it is our responsibility - and our privilege - to lead the charge in repainting the grey with the blues and greens that surround us.

In our Labour Team, we have created a new Councillor post solely responsible for responding to the Climate Emergency. Cllr Silman will work across all directorates to make sure that we are greening our town in a sustainable, responsible manner at the quickest pace we are able to. We will restructure Council strategy to ensure that the climate emergency response is a golden thread that runs through everything we do and spend, in partnership with ensuring the health and wellbeing of our communities. Greening our town



is going to look stunning, will be great for the planet and has countless benefits for our physical and mental wellbeing.

Currently health and wellbeing is unevenly spread across our town, with an average **eight year difference** in life expectancy between those living in our most and least affluent wards. We are all aware of the cost of living crisis, with increasing numbers of people having to make the unacceptable “heat or eat” choice.

Worthing residents are particularly vulnerable as our average house prices are 12 times higher than average wages, one of the biggest gaps in the South East and a gap which is increasing – those keyworkers that we clapped on our doorsteps during lockdown are struggling to feed their children. This has been highlighted again this evening with the issues raised by the Worthing Food Partnership – our inequality gap is growing at an alarming and unacceptable rate.

The reasons for these social and economic injustices are not going to be solved overnight by one Borough Council, but we owe it to all our residents to use whatever levers we have at our disposal to reduce these atrocious inequalities. As a Labour Council, we will declare a Poverty Emergency for Worthing and put together a plan to begin to combat some of the issues that people face.

Our budget amendments make clear that a £5 minimum Council Tax charge remains as unacceptable now as it was when we first came into the Chamber and asked the Conservative administration to scrap it. We have allocated an additional £100,000 to the hardship funding already proposed, to make sure that as many people as possible do not have to pay this potentially crippling charge. In addition to the £150 Council Tax Support fund, this total hardship fund of £200,000 will give the Council a good financial base to do this.

However, a Labour administration will not be complacent about how many people may need this fund in 2022/23 and if the fund becomes seriously depleted and the need remains high, we will replenish the fund from our reserves. Reserves are of course there to be used sparingly and generally only in emergency situations. Unfortunately, the most vulnerable people in Worthing have been on an emergency footing for far too long.

This emergency is one particularly stark reminder of the crisis we face in housing across Worthing. Far too many of our residents don't earn enough to buy or rent a home that meets their needs. This Council transferred its Council Housing stock to Worthing Homes, and now, more than two decades later, it is difficult to identify the value for tax payers' money that this Housing Association delivers.

It is time to make good on that £10 million account for our local residents.



A Labour Council will hold Worthing Homes to account for the deliverables in social housing that we expect to see from this public money. And if we do not see results, we will reconsider this partnership. Alongside which, we will also prioritise the identification of the best way to directly deliver Council Housing in Worthing.

We have spoken to many Councils across the Country who are delivering sustainable, beautiful Council housing which compliments and works with the natural environment. There is no reason at all why Worthing cannot learn from these models and adapt them to work for the benefit of our residents in our Green, Coastal Town. We just need new ideas and a willingness to do things differently.

A willingness to do things differently extends into Worthing's businesses and cultural offer. Our local businesses are an essential part of our local economy, providing opportunities for young people training in our Further Education establishments, and delivering valued services, hospitality, retail and leisure opportunities to our town. A Labour-led Council will listen to businesses large and small, to understand how we can best support them to grow, thrive and develop.

We have a vibrant cultural scene that is made up of many different organisations. As a Council we will do all we can to encourage this cultural offer. We will review the current contract with WTAM to ensure that the Council Tax we hand over to this organisation is giving the best value for our residents. And we will work to support the myriad of other individuals, groups and businesses involved in providing a wealth of cultural activities across the town, including increasing events in our public spaces, that bring so much richness and wellbeing to our local communities.

The wellbeing of our local communities would not be possible without a clean environment. Our waste disposal service is the area that is most often identified by residents as "what the Council does," and we need an ongoing conversation with them about how we do this job. What is clear is that Worthing is well down the league table of the percentage of waste we recycle. Too much of what goes to landfill should be recycled and a Labour Council will tackle this with a vigorous education and information campaign.

Alongside this, we also need to tackle the issue of food waste. In 2022/23, we will prioritise a plan to trial and implement weekly food waste collections at the earliest date that we are able to. This will require partnership working with the County Council, resource identification and planning to ensure that our valued waste disposal workforce are fully supported to be able to deliver this service.

Partnership working with the County Council will also help us to address the issue of being able to travel safely and well in Worthing. For too many of us, walking and cycling are unsafe, either because the pavements are in poor condition (particularly for people with a disability) or the roads are too busy and traffic congested for cycling. Worthing is a largely flat town (Salvington Hill excepted!), with a generally temperate climate – perfect



conditions for short walking and cycling journeys (and longer if you are feeling very energetic!). A Labour Council will work with the County, local residents and other key partners to turn Worthing into a walking and cycling town. We will also review our currently inadequate public transport networks, planning to provide an affordable, regular bus service around our town.

A Labour Council will marry our environment and climate emergency work by creating Nature Corridors between the Downs and the Sea. There are many unloved greenish, brownish patches in Worthing that could become well loved community green spaces. The wilding project of verges is a great example of how the Borough could work much more closely with the County to naturalise parts of our highways and byways.

So many residents have contacted us to express their dismay that trees have been removed in their streets, never to be replaced. We will implement a 4-year tree planting programme across the town. We will identify locations where there is no tree planting currently and where trees have been removed and not replaced.

The greenness of our streets will be matched with the clean blueness of our waters. For too long, Southern Water has polluted our sea with little consequence for the company or its profits. We will ensure effective scrutiny of Southern Water and will apply to measure and achieve Bathing Water status at two key seafront locations – Beach House and Sea Lane. We will work hard to make sure that our coast is a clean and healthy habitat.

This budget speech has given a broad overview of the strategic direction of a Labour-led Worthing Council and how we will shape the budget to deliver this fresh thinking and positive approach. Our budget amendments today are modest by comparison, but they give an indication of our optimism for this amazing town. We are passionate about the place that we live and the people who we live alongside. It is possible to take where we are today and breathe new life and ideas into our green seaside town. Worthing – Change is Coming.