

Economic Development Strategy

Q&A with Ann Barlow Transcript

Worthing is developing a new Economic Development Strategy. Council Deputy Leader Ann Barlow answers some of the key issues.

Why do we need an Economic Development Strategy?

[Ann Barlow] – It's really important to the Council and the town to encourage the community. We're looking at doing an overview of all types of businesses, not just the town centre but at the business trading parks, right across the district. And really we want to look at a plan, a strategy, that isn't the Council telling the businesses what to do. We want to engage with the businesses, find out what their concerns are, how we can address them, how we could actually work together. Maybe bring in new ideas, new ways of thinking, especially in today's economic climate, when there's so much uncertainty. I think this is a really critical step for Worthing to develop the Strategy, it's so important to the Council that we've allocated extra resources. We're making this a real priority now. We want to support the community, but also engage with the business community.

Why does this strategy not include Adur?

[Ann Barlow] – Worthing does quite a lot of joint working with Adur at the moment and we look at very different services. There is obviously the option to look at Economic Development with Adur but that's not on the table at the moment. If we were to wait, which we could do, we might look at starting a joint strategy with Adur in about two to three years time. But we felt that it is

a really important time, in Worthing, to get some momentum behind this strategy. So we're going forward – Worthing only, but that doesn't rule out that maybe in the future we can review the Strategy and do some joint working with Adur. However, we would have to do some serious research first, because the business community in Adur might not be the same as Worthing. So, it's still an option; it's not ruled out.

Why is the Strategy consultation process taking 18 months?

The most important thing to us, as we develop the Strategy, is to find out the issues that concern the business community and we're making sure there are three rounds of public consultation. It could seem that the strategy is eighteen months, but in January 09, which is not that far away, there will be 'Issues and Options' document, going to all the businesses and companies in the town and these options will have been built up on the feedback from the questionnaires, that everybody filled in for us earlier on in the year. So, it can seem a slow process but we need that consultation, if we chop out the consultation, I think we're back to a stage with an Authority telling you what you want and telling you how to do it. We don't want to do that, we recognise that's the wrong path.

Why is there no Interim Economic Development Strategy in place?

To think that doing a strategy and nothing else will happen, isn't the reality of what's happening. We will still be doing the day to day work. This strategy is to get a clearer overview, a long-term plan, so we do also have plans for the town centre that are ongoing plans and we do have business support officers still working on trading estates. So, everything hasn't come to a standstill, just while

we do the Strategy. So, it's not really an interim plan but we are doing the day work. One thing we would like to see to happen very, very quickly is to set up an Economic Development and Regeneration Partnership where we can get all the local businesses representatives – the Worthing Chamber of Trade and Commerce, the Town Centre Initiative, Worthing First, FSB – round the table to look at our shared priorities, our shared projects and discuss what we can do together and deliver together and resource together. So that wouldn't be waiting eighteen months. That is a partnership that we could get off the ground within weeks.

What can individuals do to get involved in the Strategy consultation?

The really important thing is to be honest and share your views, and if you recognise things in the town as an overall town, not just in the town centre, or maybe you're aware as a business of problems with transport or community links. Whatever it is, be honest and share those views. You can always get in touch with Suzy and Tina at the Town Hall and your views will be fed back in to the Strategy, to look at how we can address those. Also, they will come back into the options that will be presented in January. It is really, really important that this strategy isn't us telling you how to do your job. It's up to you to tell us how can we aid and assist, and serve you better, because if we don't have a vibrant economy, we can promote Worthing all we want, but we need a vibrant economy here to sustain the town.

What can businesses expect from this Strategy consultation period?

After the Strategy is in place and adopted, I think it's fair to say that Economic Development is a top priority. We have put more resources in already but I

think that when we can see what is coming out of the Strategy, what the priorities are from the business community, we can actually look as well, as a Council, how we support that. Not just in man power and staff, but also in resources, and how we can generate it. We will also be looking at the wider economy and not in isolation; from housing developments and from education developments. A lot of regeneration that happens in towns isn't purely through the business community. There is a lot of regeneration through education. I mean Worthing is such a wonderful tourist town. Could we not have a facility that trains people for hotel catering but is also a hotel that people can go and stay in? That's just an idea, a thought, as an example. I think we need to start thinking bigger and looking bigger as a town.

What does the Strategy consultation process consist of?

The original consultation was a business questionnaire which hopefully all businesses in the town did get and returned. If you didn't, it's not too late to send them back. In January 2009, there will be an Issues and Options document, which is based on the responses from the questionnaire in March 2007. That begins another consultation period for you to look at the Issues and Options that have already put forward from your thoughts and ideas, and to feed in there if you think that the Council's got it wrong, or if there are areas that you think need a higher priority than they've got at the moment. In preparation for the final draft strategy to be presented to the business community, there'll be research analysis going on as well as the business input. And again, it's really, really important to get your feedback before we adopt it. And when I say adopt it, I don't mean just Worthing Borough Council adopt it, I would really hope that the whole business community can adopt this strategy as the way forward for Worthing over the next ten years.

How important is Economic Development to Worthing Borough Council?

At the moment it's the top priority for Worthing Borough Council and we've already moved some resources into Economic Development. We're now looking at reviewing resources to put even more in, but also to interlink Economic Development with some of the other portfolios. You can think of leisure as just going to the Theatre or going for a swim. But actually it's integral to Economic Development and we are having a bigger overview. Instead of working in a silo system, we as a Council need to be a bit bigger and look at how we interact. How often we clean the streets in the town centre will have an impact on a business that is generating a tourist income. We need to be a bit bigger, looking at how we resource it as well.

How are Worthing's businesses handling these difficult economic conditions?

I think we are in a very, very difficult economic climate at the moment and I think it's fantastic actually how the businesses in Worthing have managed to still carry on, still trade and be so successful. I think also for Worthing, it's been a huge, huge encouragement to have a huge investment from Marks and Spencer, and we know Marks and Spencer around the country are actually withdrawing their investment. But here in Worthing they've spent over £12million on refurbishing their store. It is also fantastic news that Travelodge will be opening soon. So there is obviously huge confidence in Worthing from the big inward investments and even though it's shaky times at the moment, I think the businesses in Worthing are doing really, really well to hold on, keep

steady and keep their head, and keep working and keep promoting the town. I think it's a huge encouragement that we are getting that inward investment at the same time.

What is required from the business community?

We need businesses to engage with us, as much as possible and as I've said earlier on, to be honest. This is the opportunity for proper consultation, not one party telling another party. And not having one business community dictating to another business community. Let's all get it out in the open, get together, identify the concerns but also identify the positives. There are a lot of positives in Worthing and through the Economic Development and Regeneration Partnership early issues can be identified. We don't have to wait eighteen months. We can identify something now, get together now and implement and deliver now.

For further information please contact Tina Barker or Suzy Bastable from the Economic Development Team on 01903 221306 or ecodev@worthing.gov.uk.