



West Devon
Borough Council

Working for our communities

Our 2023-24 Annual Report



April 2023 - March 2024

Introduction

As the Leader of the Council, I am pleased to welcome you to the 2023/24 Annual Report for West Devon Borough Council.



Cllr Mandy Ewings

Leader
West Devon Borough Council



Following the elections in May 2023, we have developed a council plan reflecting the priorities of our residents and ambitions of the new West Devon Alliance administration. This new plan sets out a clear long-term vision for our place, supported by detailed annual delivery plans. They are very much a vision of people and place, going beyond the core services of the Council, reflecting the opportunities and challenges faced by residents and businesses. They embrace a broad range of ambitions and actions, many of which will be delivered in collaboration with our key partners.



The Council is looking to lead by example on climate change. West Devon was ranked 7th nationally amongst District Councils on its strategic plans which were independently reviewed by Climate Emergency UK. We also declared a housing crisis in 2021/22 and the delivery of affordable housing continues to be a key priority. The Council has taken the opportunity to lever in Government funding through the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF) to purchase 8 new build homes for refugees and temporary accommodation as a secondary use.

In March of this year, we invited the Local Government Association (LGA) to undertake a Peer Challenge of both West Devon Borough Council and our shared services partner, South Hams District Council. Their key finding was that 'West Devon is a high performing council,

which is well led and managed and is delivering consistently well on behalf of its communities'. The report pointed to the key significance of the partnership arrangements between West Devon and South Hams supported by a single workforce, and integrated systems and process, and concluded that 'it is this joint working that is at the heart of a highly productive organisation'.

The report also highlighted the Council's sound financial management. The report stated that 'the Council has an excellent track record of financial management and planning, which is one of its underpinning core strengths'. We are proud of the findings of the LGA report and its recognition of our work to date, and we will continue to build on those strong foundations to make West Devon the best it can be for our residents, businesses and communities.

The peer team commented on the good organisational leadership, robust governance and effective performance culture which is delivering improved outcomes. We would like to thank all of our councillors, staff and partners who have delivered this together. We have finished the year with our finances reporting an underspend (surplus) of £149,000 against budget (1.7% of a £8.588m net budget for 2023/24) which is a good position to be in for the year ahead. The Council is on a stable financial footing and this will help it to navigate the uncertainty of the future local government funding reforms, including the fair funding review, changes to the new homes bonus scheme and the planned business rates baseline reset.

Our Ambitions for the future ...

West Devon is an incredibly special and important place, home to a World Heritage Site, bustling market towns and stunning moorland. However, there are challenges which many residents face. The ongoing cost of living is putting a squeeze on household incomes and the affordability of housing means many residents are struggling.

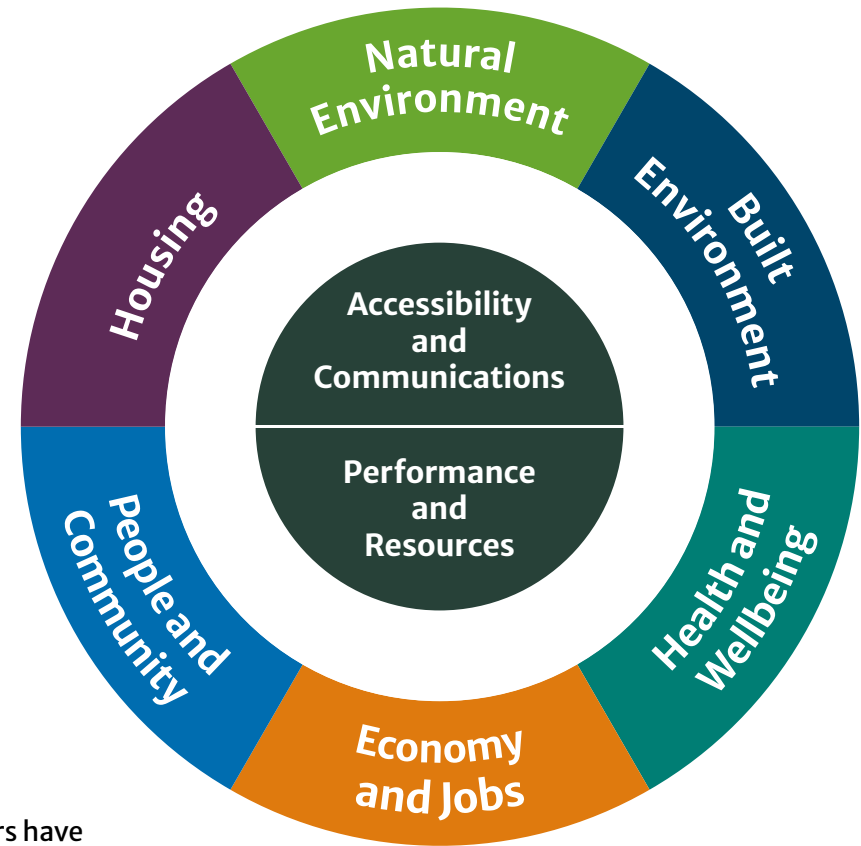
To ensure we focused on the right things over the next four years, throughout 2023/24 we developed our new Council Plan.

The Council plan was developed to build upon election manifesto commitments, what our Councillors have heard from residents in their communities and through a formal consultation.

The consultation ran for 8 weeks and was made up of an online survey, short polls on social media, public engagement events – such as pop-up conversations at events such as Health and Wellbeing meetings, Tavistock Dickensian and Okehampton Edwardian evenings and a paper survey for residents that aren't online.

The consultation means that we now have a clear focus for delivery for the next four years, with a plan that reflects the challenges and opportunities facing the borough.

➔ **West Devon Council Plan**



A sustainable West Devon

*Looking to the future while
celebrating the past*

From taking local action to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss to protecting and celebrating everything that makes West Devon the place we love to call home.

Throughout the year we've celebrated community action, improved trails within the borough bringing them back in to use for active travel and encouraged others to play their part by using less and recycling more.





Celebrating our community climate heroes

During the year, the Mayor (Cllr Daniel) celebrated community heroes across the borough. It's really important that we encourage our young residents to do all they can to play their part for a future which is theirs!

Winners during the year include Okehampton Girl Guides, South Zeal Brownies and the 'Explorers' from Whitchurch Primary school. .



Tamar Trails Improvement works

Despite battling some terrible weather over the spring, contractors Landmarc and Dart Fabrication managed to restore the full width of the trail over various points. Where there had been some encroachment, along with cutting various new gulleys to assist with drainage and hopefully avoid accumulation of mud on the trails.



Some stretches of mud became almost impassable on the trails, resulting in lots of muddy shoes at the weekly Parkrun. Contractors cleared the worst sections of mud, adding some new stone which will help with keeping those sections in good condition.

A new galvanised bridge has also been installed on the Bedford Trail, replacing a timber structure which had surrendered to weathering. With some excellent work from the Tamar Community Trust to reinstate steps on the steep hillside recently, this means that the Bedford Trail can once again, be enjoyed down below the Bedford Sawmills carpark.



Helping residents to recycle more

Many residents are already committed to recycling and reducing waste, which is great news, but we can do more.

In a bid to improve kerbside recycling rates, during the year we launched a campaign to encourage our residents to recycle their metal packaging including food and drinks cans, aluminium wrapping foil and foil trays, as well as empty aerosols and metal screw tops.



Spearheaded by the Aluminium Packaging Recycling Organisation (Alupro), the 'MetalMatters' programme will have leaflets distributed to all households within the council area to communicate the widespread benefits of metal packaging recycling.

More campaigns are planned for the coming year.



Plymouth and South Devon
Community Forest



A community forest for West Devon

23/24 was the year we secured funding and signed the agreement with Plymouth and South Devon Community Forest to start our natural regeneration (woodland creation) schemes – at one site near Grenofen, another near Yelverton.

This included erecting deer fencing to around areas totalling 2 hectares at each site (i.e. 4ha total). We'll now be monitoring to check we are getting some natural regeneration, albeit we have and will collect acorns from the site to grow on and plant into the sites in the event we don't get the natural regeneration we are hoping for.



Vibrant communities

Supporting West Devon Residents to live well and thrive

Supporting West Devon's communities is a priority for the Council, working together with key partners and empowering our communities to bring forward projects that enhance the lives of our residents.

The increased cost of living also continues to impact our residents. Throughout the year we have continued to work closely with partners such as Citizens Advice to respond to the needs of our residents.



Borough Councillors supporting community action

Each year our Borough Councillors have a budget to support local community projects – helping support projects that matter to our residents. During 2023/24, Councillors awarded a total of £8,600 to 27 individual projects. The projects supported range from exercise groups for residents with disabilities through to contributions to community christmas lights!

A further £25,000 of funding was awarded during the year for community capital projects – these tend to be larger projects such as repairing essential community facilities like community halls.



As another way of supporting community groups we operate the Seamoor Community Lotto which is raising over £30,000 a year for good causes across West Devon and South Hams.

Community projects that make a difference

During the year the Council was pleased to be able to support a number of community projects by allocating S106 funding (in simple terms, funding paid to us by developers to deliver community projects). Schemes supported during the year include improvement to Tavistock Cricket club which was able to install a new disabled toilet, a girl's changing room and extend existing changing rooms.



Celebrating our diverse communities

In June we supported our LGBTQIA community and joined them for Tavi Pride. It was a great opportunity for us to hear firsthand the particular challenges facing this community but also to celebrate our diverse communities that make West Devon the special place that it is!



Cost of living – an impact on us all

We know that the ongoing cost of living continues to be a real concern to our residents. During the year we've taken a number of steps to support our residents including:-

- Awarding 3215 residents with Council Tax Reduction to help towards paying their Council Tax bills
- In July we made £150 payments to single income households in receipt of Council Tax reduction, those with caring responsibilities and military veterans with a further payment of up to £250 being made in December 2023 – direct financial support for 289 residents
- Launched a further fund for residents to apply to where they found themselves in financial hardship which saw us award 616 residents with a total of £135,264 in financial support.
- Launched a Council Tax discretionary discount of up to 100% to Devon County Council care leavers within the borough up to their 25th birthday.

- Awarded £2,303,183.46 in Retail, Hospitality and Leisure relief to 381 local businesses to support them through difficult trading conditions.
- Seen our key partner West Devon Citizens Advice, offer help to 2,844 residents to generate £1.6m of income gain

Looking ahead to 2024/25, it is clear that cost of living will remain a challenge. In January 2024 we took steps to update our Council Tax reduction scheme for the coming year.

Find out if you're eligible for Council Tax Reduction visit:

[➔ Council Tax Reduction](#)



An enterprising future

*Well paid jobs, thriving businesses
and future proof economy*

There has been a significant focus throughout this year to progress with delivery of our UK Shared Prosperity Fund programme which has a strong emphasis on supporting businesses to reduce their climate impacts and in particular, the agricultural sector to explore opportunities to diversify.

We've also progressed with a number of key projects such as delivering a multi-million transport Hub in Okehampton and a Business Improvement District for the Town and developing a Borough wide Local Cycle and Walking Infrastructure Plan to encourage active travel to and from our towns.



Shaping our future towns

During the year we've continued to work with Okehampton Town Council and businesses in the area to explore options for enhancing the town. In January we held a series of workshops in the town to explore the potential of setting up a Business Improvement District (BID). A BID is a business-led formal structure where all businesses in the area pay into a funding pot to develop projects that will benefit the town. The businesses themselves will decide how the money is spent. Having gained broad support, the proposal will proceed to a formal ballot in 2024/25 and if supported, will launch later in the year.

Million pound Investment in our economy

The Council's UKSPF programme sees the delivery of a range of business and community support projects including an award-winning regenerative farming project.

As part of our programme, businesses are being provided with free specialist support to help decarbonise their activities, and grant support is available to help them deliver projects that will reduce their environmental impact.

Connecting West Devon

The West Devon Transport Hub (now known as Okehampton Interchange) has continued to make positive steps forward during 2023/24.

The interchange, which will include a new rail station on the Dartmoor Line – the line that was the first to be reinstated under the Department for Transport's 'Restoring your Railway' fund.

The new station will include:

- step-free access to platforms;
- car parking with electric vehicle charging points;
- high quality cycle facilities;
- a new bus stop;
- The new station is located close to the A30 junction and will be in addition to Okehampton's existing station on the West side of the town.

The new hub will level up the Okehampton region, connecting communities in the town. It will also connect the wider West Devon and North Cornwall areas with Exeter.

It's anticipated that the station will open in Spring 2026.



Cycling and Walking ... a plan for the future

During the year we've been developing our thoughts on a Local Cycle and Walking Infrastructure plan for the next 20 years. The proposal has been seeking the views of residents from across the borough to help shape how we can improve the ability to get around the area by walking or cycling. The plan is that a document will be developed to set out how future planning and policy decisions can take cycling and walking connectivity into account – reducing peoples reliance on vehicles and making healthier lifestyle choices.



A safe, warm and secure home

Providing genuinely affordable housing is a key priority for the council, as well as tackling homelessness, making sure residents' homes are fit for purpose and free from damp and mould.

We believe we have made a positive start during 2023/24.





Housing that meets the needs of residents

Having a warm, safe and secure home is fundamental to the wellbeing of our residents. We've taken a number of steps this year from playing a lead role on a new Devon Housing Taskforce to supporting residents with damp and disrepair in rental properties.

Joining forces to solve Devon's housing crisis

During the year we played a key role in pushing for action to tackle the housing crisis in West Devon and the rest of the County. Leader of West Devon, Cllr Ewings, was appointed a chair of a new Housing Task Force – a partnership between the eleven local authorities across Devon. Its focus this year has been on developing a series of recommendations which will come forward and form a clear ask of local and national government.

Taking action on below standard rental homes

Making sure that residents have access to safe and good standard housing is essential to their wellbeing. In June, we took steps to give residents in social and private sector housing a route to report concerns about the quality of their home. Our team will then offer support and advice to tenants and where it is a serious issue, follow up directly with the landlord for a resolution. To date, 31 residents have accessed the support.

Enabling residents to stay in their own homes

Sometimes residents find themselves in a position where their current housing is no longer suitable due to a disability. Rather than them moving to another property, the Council has funds to support the adapting of their current home meaning that they can stay in their local community. During 2023/24 we completed 22 complex schemes, installed 115 stairlifts and adapted 58 bathrooms.

Affordable Housing

Throughout 2023/24 we've seen 75 new affordable houses coming forward across the borough which include 39 properties which will be rented, 23 shared ownership and 13 rent plus.

Housing for those who need support

We know that some residents will find themselves in a little more help than others when it comes to accessing safe, secure and good quality housing.

Through the year we've had a focus on doing more to support those who find themselves in difficult circumstances, residents faced with becoming homeless, young residents who are leaving care and refugees living in the borough.



Supporting those in need of accommodation

During the year, 150 households have been supported to move to permanent, secure accommodation through our Devon Home Choice waiting list. We have also secured 8 properties which the Council owns and can be used for temporary accommodation. Using some of our own funding but also government funding from the Local Authority Housing fund it means we'll have our own temporary accommodation units to support residents who find themselves in need.

During the year we also agreed a business case to begin the development of three flats for temporary accommodation in Tavistock.

Supporting those residents who have been in care

The Council is committed to ensuring young people leaving the care system have somewhere safe & secure to live as they transition to independence. Most importantly that they have the same opportunities as other young people.

We are taking a lead role in partnership with other councils in Devon to expand supported accommodation options, access to tenancy training & specialist support, and wherever possible support young people into suitable housing when they leave care.

We have already introduced a council tax reduction and a leisure pass scheme so that we can support people with managing their money and their physical and emotional wellbeing

Playing our part of a global effort

Throughout 2023/24 we continued to support those residents arriving in West Devon from areas affected by conflict through government resettlement schemes. The Council's resettlement team have worked with 216 individuals providing advice and ensuring that the homes they move in to are safe and sufficient for their needs. Working with partner organisations such as Citizens Advice and West Devon Community Action, a complete support package has been put in place for each of the arriving families.

We would like to take the opportunity to again say a huge thank you to the hosts who have opened their homes to Ukrainians arriving under the government Homes for Ukraine Scheme.

Energy Efficient Homes

Our efforts around housing are not limited to delivering more homes, but also centre around ensuring that the homes residents have are as energy efficient as possible. This is really important, not only for the health of residents who can have warmer and cheaper to run homes, but also to contribute to reducing the boroughs climate impact.

Enabling lower income households to make greener energy choices and save money

The Council has a key role to play in facilitating energy efficiency grants for local residents. We have secured government funding to offer grants to local residents looking to improve their energy efficiency. From solar panels, better insulation, greener heating, improved ventilation and more, we are helping residents lower their energy bills and give them more control over their energy use. For the year ahead, we've set ourselves a target of delivering 55 further energy efficiency grant projects to properties within the borough. This may not seem many in the scheme of things but given each scheme can cost between £10,000-£20,000, it's a significant annual investment in supporting energy efficiency. To find out if you are eligible for support visit:

[➤ Help to Reduce Fuel Bills](#)

Trialling a new service for our residents

During the year we were really pleased to be able to launch a small but important new offering to residents on a trial basis. As the cost of energy remains high, its important that our residents understand what they can do to improve their energy efficiency which is why we've been trialling a thermal imaging camera scheme. Working with Town and Parish Councils who kindly facilitated the loaning to residents, we're now evaluating the trial.

Where residents identify issues with heat loss from their property, they've been able to get advice and support from partners such as South Dartmoor Community Energy and Energy Saving Devon who have supported free home upgrade plans, applications for energy grants and to signpost to reputable installers of energy efficiency measures.

Due to the nature of the scheme, it can really only operate during colder months. If you're interested in the scheme, visit:

[➤ Thermal Imaging Camera Hire](#)

Good Quality Council Services

While we've been making great progress in delivering on our council ambitions, we've had an equally sustained focus on ensuring that our core services have remained good quality and responsive to the needs of our communities.



Just some of the activities we've been up to include:

- In May 2023, we ran local elections for the Borough Council which resulted in the Council becoming a West Devon Alliance controlled authority. Our elections service is the only one that must plan to offer a service to every eligible adult within the Borough on a single day.
- In October 2023, our Senior Leadership Team won a coveted Municipal Journal Award for Senior Leadership Team of the Year, recognising the hard work and dedication of the top team and indeed all staff working to support our communities.
- October also saw the launch of a new website for the Council, intended to be easier to navigate and to find the top tasks that our residents use. Making our website easier to use means that less residents will need to phone us, freeing up our phonedlines for those residents who are not online or have more complex issues. 75% of our online transactions are now rate 4 or 5 stars out of 5 for ease of use.
- November saw us going live with a new planning portal which makes it easier for interested parties to engage with the planning process, enhancing the customer experience.
- At the end of March we invited the Local Government Association to carry out a Peer Review of the Council – a chance for sector leaders to consider how we're delivering for our residents. After 4 days, 60 meetings and over 100 views from stakeholders, the report concluded "West Devon is a high performing council, which is well led and managed and delivering consistently well on behalf of its residents and communities".



“West Devon is a high performing council, which is well led and managed and delivering consistently well on behalf of its residents and communities.”

Delivering the services you need

98.37%

Council Tax collected – thank you to our residents!

53%

Annual average Recycling rate – more we can all do!

134

Families supported and prevented from becoming homeless

11 days

On average to process a new benefits claim (6 days quicker than national target)

80%

Of interactions with the Council were online

87%

Planning Applications determined on-time or with agreed extensions

40,090

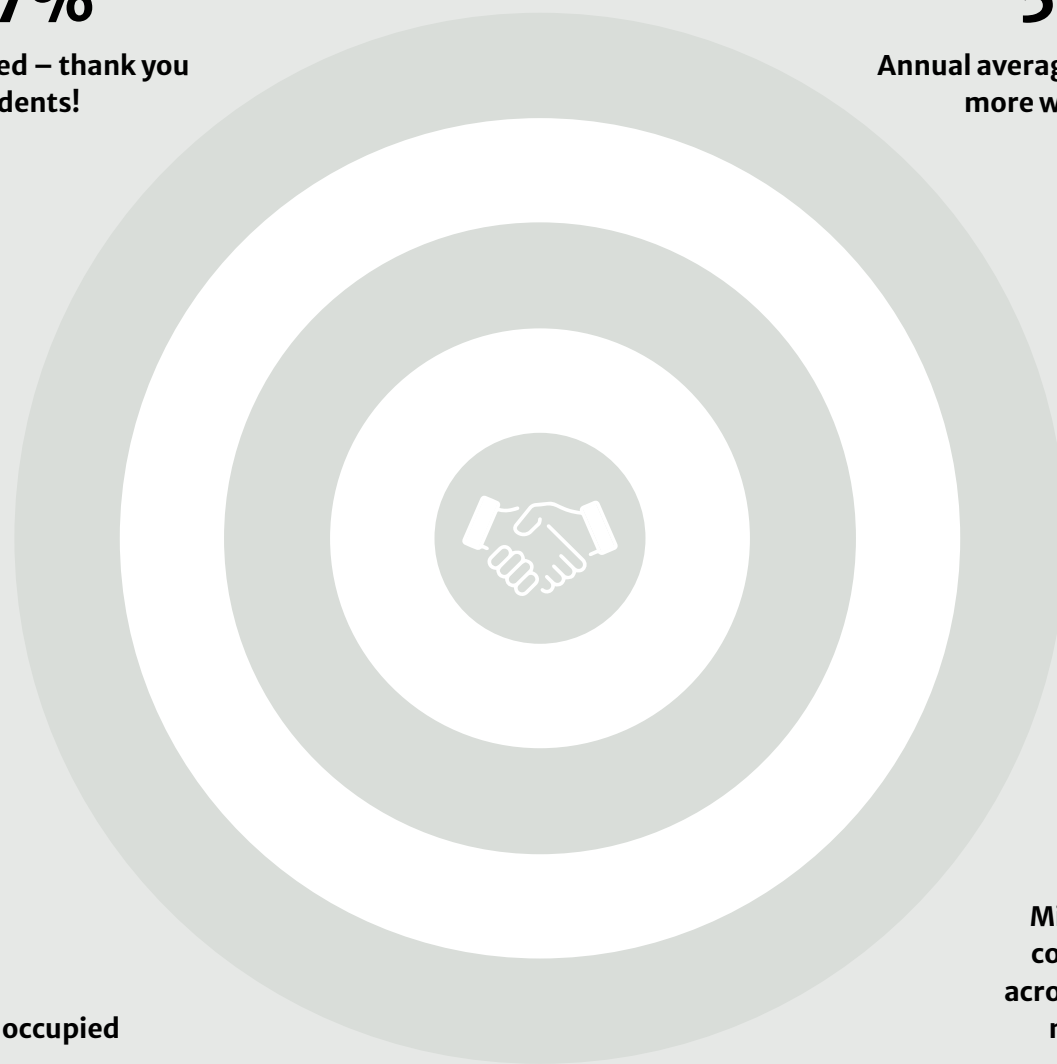
Calls handled by our contact centre with 81% being answered in under 5 minutes

63

Missed bins per 100,000 collections due (average across year) (better than the national target of 80)

90%

Of Council Business Units occupied



Well managed finances

In 2023/24 the Council generated savings and additional income of £1.546 million. This was from extra treasury management investment income (£0.989 million) by realising the opportunity from high interest rates and securing advantageous rates from reviewing market offers on a daily basis. In addition there were salary savings from vacancies of £0.237 million. The Council also secured extra business rates income from identifying renewable energy sites (£0.216m) and generated additional car parking income (£0.104m). This additional income and savings were offset by the fact that the Council also incurred additional costs and a shortfall in income of £1.480 million (equating to 17.2% of the Council's net budget of £8.588 million).

Many of the additional costs were as a result of the current economic climate with high inflation and the cost of living crisis. The extra costs incurred in the year included the impact of the national local government pay award (£0.130 million), the waste and cleansing service (£0.156 million) and temporary accommodation costs (£0.251 million).

In addition there was an increase in the overall bad debt provision for debtors (£0.094 million) and higher inflation than budgeted mainly in respect of IT, utilities and insurance totalling £0.215 million. The Council also experienced a shortfall in planning income of £0.103 million. The difference between the higher costs and the additional income achieved in 2023/24 equates to the overall underspend (surplus) of £149,000.

COMPREHENSIVE INCOME AND EXPENDITURE STATEMENT	Actual 2022/23 £million	Actual 2023/24 £million
Spending on Services		
Customer Service & Delivery (mainly frontline services such as Waste and Recycling, Grounds Maintenance and Revenues and Benefits)	5.411	6.060 ¹
Strategic Finance (including Pension Costs, Corporate Management and Finance)	1.279	1.282
Place & Enterprise (including Housing, Car Parking, Assets and Environmental Health)	3.052	2.771
Governance & Assurance (including Planning, Land Charges, Elections, Legal Services, Democratic Services and Insurance)	0.844	1.494
Cost of Services	10.586	11.607
Removal of technical accounting adjustments e.g. depreciation, revaluation and IAS19 retirement benefits	(3.274)	(2.506)
Cost of Services – excluding technical accounting adjustments	7.312	9.101
Income from Investments and other Adjustments*		
Investment Properties	(1.165)	(1.199)
Interest and Investment Income	(0.601)	(1.390)
Interest payable and repayment of principal debt	1.380	1.379
Other adjustments	0.781	0.808
Net Cost of Services – to be met by local taxation and government grants	7.707	8.699
Financing - Income from local taxes, government grants and budgeted reserve contributions*		
Council Tax income	(5.103)	(5.391)
Surplus on Council Tax Collection Fund	(0.152)	(0.377)
Business Rates	(1.900)	(2.133)
Non ringfenced government grants	(0.690)	(0.752)
Budgeted earmarked reserve contributions	0.059	(0.195)
Total Financing	(7.786)	(8.848)
Surplus for the year (to be added to the General Fund Balance)	(0.079)	(0.149)



£2.3m

a year savings (since 2016) for West Devon by sharing services with South Hams

¹ For example, this figure should be read as £6.060 million

* Income figures are shown in brackets

The 2023/24 budget for West Devon was £8.588 million but the actual spend was 1.7% lower, providing an underspend (surplus) of £149,000 as shown opposite.

Looking ahead

As part of our Council Plan, we have set out a number of projects for the coming year which include:

- Taking steps to decarbonise our council buildings and operations;
- Securing a further 3 Local Authority Housing fund properties for temporary accommodation;
- Launching a West Devon Housing Offer to support communities bring forward housing proposals;
- Consider options for our site at Wonnacotts Road, Okehampton;
- Progressing with the delivery of Okehampton Interchange station;
- Continuation of installation of both fleet and electric rapid chargers;
- Developing an Arts and Culture Strategy;
- Retrofitting 55 properties with energy efficiency measures;
- Finalising a 20-year Local Cycle and Walking Infrastructure plan for the borough.



Keep up to date with what's
happening at the Council
throughout the year



West Devon
Borough Council

www.westdevon.gov.uk