

Thank-you Madam Mayor

First I must start by thanking John Turnbull, his team and all the other officers for the time they have given members of my group over the last year. They have had to work especially hard this year and been quizzed more extensively as we look for savings and their efforts are much appreciated.

This is the second year when, despite technically being out of recession we find ourselves facing pressure on budgets. It is obviously a challenge to find savings especially as this has been ongoing for a number of years. Clearly we have identified savings from the optional spending, which I was surprised to learn accounted for nearly 50% of our activities. As a group we have commented on the various cuts during the committee meetings. We have to say we are pleased that Mayoral expenses are being addressed; a modern green car offers an acceptable compromise. Sadly we do have to express our concern over cuts that affect the more vulnerable members of society, particularly Cox lane, public conveniences and the blue badge concessions. For our budget we felt that £140K of the savings are acceptable but public consultation with affected groups needs to take place before other schemes can go ahead.

The need to stop the revenue budget rising is self evident as the depletion of capital reserves has to halt. The capital programme is now on a much sounder footing with the appropriate use of \$106 million being earmarked for projects that enhance the environment. What does disappoint is the emphasis on cost cutting rather than income generation. This council can be described as asset rich and cash poor. Many of our assets require very high subsidies, but only the playhouse has a reduced budget target this year that will force income generation. The documents show that when it comes to the Ebbisham centre for example we have shied away from investing for the future this year; reports are the order of the day. We need to investigate income generation now, because if it does not work then asset disposal may be the next step. However this time next year, when the government calls for public sector cuts we will be in the same position. This fear of risk is clearly illustrated by the cut to the Economic development budget.

Whilst we accept the re-negotiation of the business partnership contribution it may have been better to have retained the money in the budget and earmarked it for marketing our venues. From investigation I know that HR has used industrial placement students and this could be a method of using a small budget wisely. Do we advertise our venues, frequently and widely: from a small survey I conducted I conclude we don't?

Our most valuable assets are the open spaces and we need to go beyond ice-cream vans if we are to generate a useable income. Hook road arena appears to be in an ideal location to be offered for greater public use. It is close to the

new housing developments with excellent cycle routes. Now is the time to open up the area to community sports, green fairs etc and I would like to include a target of at least £40k in next year's budget.

The salary budget has as expected been frozen, which leads the officers to rely on vacancies to keep on target. However there are several posts vacant which are having an effect on our ability to deliver both a service to National Indicators and the quality of our environment. Three from 2009/10 that spring to mind are enforcement officer, help with waste re-cycling and a parking manager. I am very pleased we now have a parking manager who has increased staffing levels and residents are noticing the difference. The theory behind these posts is that they are largely cost neutral which is good news for the budget. I benefited from a meeting with Surrey highways about the Scoot system; we have a demonstrated opportunity to improve traffic flow. I believe we should invest money in using the CCTV footage to enforce yellow box infringements. This may generate income but more importantly increase traffic flow and reduce pollution. We would welcome a paper and action in this area.

Car Park fees covered much debate and yet we feel that more income could have been generated without resorting to charging blue badge holders. In order for the disabled to pay, work has to be done so that they can access the pay machine. Where is the capital budget that facilitates this? It is still waiting funds. There is an irony that a supermarket is facing court action as its clamping policy discriminates against badge holders whilst this council introduces parking charges. Are we really that out of touch with residents needs whilst councillors accept their own free bus pass?

Coming back to the normal car user I'd like you to consider that my average car costs about £2000 a year to run and as such parking costs are quite a small contribution. In places where alternatives are unavailable or convenience is high we would have raised prices by an extra 10p. For example Bourne Hall at 50p would generate an additional £23K. So we would be looking for an additional car park income of £30 thousand pounds, whilst checking that every school has suitable facilities for parking bikes and children's scooters.

However there is still much to do for residents who have nowhere to park their car, due to additional house building and commuter parking. We will continue to push for residents parking schemes for streets that want it. A small scheme to offer annual permits in a local car park has sadly been over-priced for the average nurse's salary.

As you would expect from this group we are keen to promote a green agenda. The current recycling is well supported and it is now time we worked with the business partnership to encourage trade recycling. With anticipated land fill charges of £80 a ton diverting 1000 tonnes from landfill would save £80K,

that's a target of 50% recycling. Tariffs for trade bins and collections should be adjusted to offer an incentive and we would suggest raising the cost of a normal bin for businesses.

The council has signed up to the 10:10 agenda and so we should start now with a target to reduce energy usage. A reduction of 10% can be achieved by simple measures, such as turning down the heat by 1 degree and switching off the lights when the sun is out. The theatre is always too hot in the hopes visitors will buy a drink, but people now dash outside to cool down and bring a water bottle. A 10% fuel saving could save £30K.

Continuing with improving the environment we should thank the planning department for their efforts with Plan E. We now need to focus on how we might turn round the dwindling income from planning applications. Their fees are fixed by statute but a trawl of other boroughs web sites illustrate that this can be overcome by charging for advice. Changes to permitted development, a desire for solar panels and conservation area consents could make this a reassuring service for home owners wanting to check the need for planning permission. We should be offering this consultancy service; a link on the web site with a series of charges would take little time to set up and could be used to evaluate the future income potential.

From the auditor's report it was clear that partnership working is in vogue. I'd like to see the council go beyond the boundaries of Surrey. Projects in the IT area maybe suitable as internet connectivity using remote servers are much more reliable. The stalled e-planning programme may be a candidate for such an investigation. Whilst it is imperative to have robust systems, the public may feel the costs are high compared with the services they are losing.

I would like us to encourage internet uptake as the recent snow showed how important it was for schools as they used it to set work. There are too many low income families that are disadvantaged by the lack of access. There is a funded scheme which offers a laptop and 1 years broadband to low paid families. Advertising this scheme would enable us to reach more people and make online insight a suitable communication vehicle in the future.

Returning to the ruling groups savings I was disheartened by the proposal to close Cox lane whilst still locking park gates. It could have been saved if there was a will whilst a suitable alternative was sought close by. The cuts may help the target of at least £2.5 million in the bank by 2012 but at the expense of the elderly. In a borough with an aging population is this a wise move, what image does it portray of Epsom? We should ask what can we do to make this centre attractive and viable.

Many of the cuts chosen have suffered from a lack of public consultation. Before implementing changes it is vital to discuss the options with those that

will be affected. Unless we understand their needs we cannot reach a suitable compromise.

In summary we have a duty to keep our council tax low, without resorting to cutting services to the vulnerable. This is still a town with low unemployment and so we can afford to care for each other. We must monitor progress carefully looking for opportunities to increase the income from our assets. All optional services should be checked for their benefit to the community and incorporated into our key priorities.

Our budget would have seen a council tax increase of 2%, with a reduction in the use of the reserves to £200 K. This would be achieved by an emphasis on commercialisation and a green agenda that focuses on trade waste.

Thank- you very much for your attention.