

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 continue to work hard as we look ever closer for revenue generation and their efforts are much appreciated.

This year a budget without the use of reserves has been set. Given current interest rates and shrinking capital reserves this is essential. Whilst savings seem to have been found we are still concerned that our efforts at greater commercialisation are proving challenging. How are we going to manage in 2013 as we cannot rely on a further 10% reduction in staff?

The loss of 37 full time posts over 2 years has put pressure on officers leaving gaps in the work we do: this includes currently a sustainability officer and from our perspective a town centre manager. Resolution of the appropriate staffing requirements has been put further away as the ruling group accepted a delay in the analysis of the mandatory and optional elements of the council's services.

Again we must stress that we are asset rich and cash poor and over the last 7 years the leisure committee buildings, all optional spend, needed £9 million in revenue just to keep the buildings open. On top of this they require an extensive capital maintenance program to keep the buildings sound.

Whilst the partnership with the Rainbow centre is planned to generate £33,000 to council funding next year, the Playhouse will need £200K to keep it going, despite the marketing efforts this year. Though the policy book targets a £40K increase in revenue, we now have a separate marketing budget of £80K. Like leisure centres there are organisations, such as the Ambassadors theatre group, that will support and run local theatres. The other local theatres I checked are not always run by the Boroughs and many make use of local business sponsorship. Now is the time to explore these options as success in this area could remove the need for tax increases in the future.

Waste Management is one of the few mandatory elements for the councils and we are disappointed to note that no progress has been made this year due to a lack of man power. This leaves trade waste recycling at a level of 5% and yet work in this area could set a good example and lead to a reduction in landfill tax. We hope that the council can move forward with the sensible Tariffs that we were pushing for last year, for trade bins and collections that will prove an incentive so that we can increase recycling. We earn money from recycling, whilst it costs money to process residual waste.

We would like the council to investigate the possibility of extending the household waste collection to include small electrical appliances, which has been implemented in Woking. The more we collect from the home as part of the normal weekly service the less likely we are to be plagued by fly- tipping which we note has almost doubled in a couple of years.

Where the Council has done well is in energy conservation and praise must go to all officers involved for their dedication and expertise. However those in control of this council have paid lip service to the wider issue of sustainability, having signed up to the 10:10 agenda some years ago and currently there is no officer whose prime purpose is to push this forward. This topic is included in the Corporate Plan for the next 4 years, but we are not confident that there are any real objectives nor any resources dedicated to achieving them. So far nothing has been done whatsoever to raise awareness within the local community and the council has been subjected to ridicule over its confused policy regarding renewable energy sources, e.g. solar panel installation.

And on the matter of confused policy residents in the Town centre are outraged as there is a blatant disregard for planning enforcement needed for the new works around the Station. More recently, Licences well into the small hours are granted to businesses ignoring objections from the Police and our own Planning department. Local residents have become cynical about how our own policies operate when it comes to noise disturbance and we find this unacceptable.

On the good side, there have been some worthy consultations, on biodiversity and housing land allocations, but a binding Development Brief for Upper High Street has taken seven years to progress since it was originally deemed necessary. Since we all remember the community interest in this site which includes the land owned by Tesco, it's just another example of how the ruling group on this council, don't put residents' priorities first. And frankly seven years pales into insignificance when we consider just how long it has taken to achieve virtually nothing on Horton Chapel.

Following on from planning one of the biggest complaints that residents raise is the issue of parking. We have expensive long term parking that encourages on street parking. The introduction of residents parking and reliable pay machines mean we must divert the staff to the on-street area and not use it as a cost cutting measure. Currently there is no Parking Strategy for our Borough – yet another example of the lack of importance given to the needs of our residents.

One of the Budgets that have seen an alarming increase is that for Homelessness which has trebled since the start of the recession. In addition to that we have an increasing waiting list for social housing. Many planning applications come with excuses for not supplying social housing on site, and there are boarded up sites awaiting development. This is despite a housing boom on the hospital cluster where we are pleased with the additional income this generates from the New Homes Bonus. Despite plan E though only 8% of the new properties are affordable. We need to tackle this issue as we need a diversity of residents that can afford to live and work in the area as well as commute and retire. Therefore we would like to see a strategy that investigates the empty properties, the private rental sector and the re-use of unused offices to see if they can be brought back into use. This activity needs to be a properly resourced role with its own managed strategy as there is really no end in sight to the issue of expensive housing in the South East. The funds for this could come from the new homes bonus much of which is being used to remove the use of reserves.

It is clear that we need to build bridges between the council and the business community to ensure we have a vibrant borough, before many more shops close. We need a Town Centre Manager and a team to focus on the current issues affecting the residents. We need to address the housing needs, the parking and the needs particularly of those who live in Epsom town centre which will become more and more densely populated as we fight to keep our open space and our Green Belt.

In summary, we would take advantage of the government's proposals concerning council tax, which would offer a 0% increase to our residents. This would give us an extra year to generate additional income and reassess our priorities to ensure the staffing roles helped us reach our goals. We would build on partnership working and seize opportunities which help reduce our costs. All discretionary services must be reviewed and we must challenge ourselves as to their benefit to our community as a whole. We should make it clear to our residents which services are discretionary – in other words which we don't HAVE to provide. We should make it clear what the mandatory services cost us and how those costs affect council tax and we should be giving our residents choices about how we spend our money – which is, after all, their money.