

## BUDGET SPEECH 2025

Mr Mayor,

On behalf of the group, I'd like to start by thanking all the council employees. Just when we thought there might be a period of calm following a general election, change is the order of the day. We really appreciate the efforts of the officers as they continue to offer the best service they can for all our residents. Their ability to attract environmental grant money especially chimes with our group's manifesto priorities.

The statements we make this evening reflect on how we would approach running the Borough Council. What they cannot do is consider the impact of a future government reorganisation.

Before us we have a combined set of recommendations. Experience suggests they will not be separated. So, in summary, our views are very similar to those expressed this time last year and reiterated during committee meetings over the last 12 months. Namely, while we agree with the need to increase the Borough's share of the Council Tax, we cannot support all the activities, or lack of activities, that underpin the Budget and its Projections. Last year we split our comments between our manifesto headings of protecting the Green Belt, secrecy, and climate change. Disappointingly many of our comments made last year under those headings remain relevant. So we will supplement those historic comments with additional ones on the issues that are critical to our residents' well-being and the council's financial stability.

This year the homelessness situation continues to cause concern. Firstly, I want to consider the financial impact which means we could easily use up our housing reserves in the next couple of years and thus affect other services. The support from central government continues to be less than our needs. We hope the additional £300K in the budget book is realistic but can we trust the new Labour government any more than the Conservatives. Look what happened to the winter fuel allowance and child benefit.

We acknowledge that some steps have been taken to increase PSL (private sector leasing), use of S106 funds from developers and the bid for government funding for 3 more properties. This is a drop in the ocean for the 90 families that currently seek a permanent home and have been waiting for many years. The ability of these households to remain or find a place in the private sector is hampered by the low level of Local Housing Allowance (LHA) compared to the actual market rents. The number of social housing units provided has all but ground to a halt and it seems that developers can continue to use viability as a reason to opt out.

That said, our primary focus must be how this impacts the lives of many families and their wider support networks and so we need to look at how we as a Borough Council can support them. In this respect we have been alerted to the fact that Epsom & Ewell is consistently not using its government allocation of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) to the full. The only council that uses less of this funding than we do, is the Isles of Scilly. Greater use of this funding could support families so they can remain in their private rental accommodation, and it could top up the LHA and support them in times of need. The process to receive the

grant is tortuous and many need help completing the form. Consequently, we call on the ruling RA group to instigate an urgent review of the allocation of the DHP to see if we can improve the process and make sure that we are not over strict. Our neighbouring boroughs are all allocating at least 95% of their funding and it would be harsh if households in stress must wait until our unknown new unitary authority is formed.

Another area where we seem to have some delay, and confusion relates to procurement and the renewal of contracts. This area is brought to members attention by the urgent decision notices. When analysing the various contracts we spread our wings far and wide, Insurance in Sutton, housing with Reigate and Banstead, planners in Guildford etc Whilst partnership is good and provides financial benefits now would be a good time to align our procurement with our near Surrey neighbours to see if we could gain on the basis of economy of scale and stream line our processes. (This is especially appropriate as we move to a unitary authority with its undoubted confusion)

No opposition speech in the current climate would seem complete without a mention of the elephant in the room, the Local plan. As a group we have to express our disappointment at the timing and especially the lack of commitment to the whole process from the ruling group. A Plan that is rejected will result in much additional spending, or worst still, we could find ourselves with some kind of a Local Plan devised by a unitary authority which is not concerned with our boundaries to other areas, or indeed to Greater London.

My last point in this area is the financial risk we have with the move to East Street and the Town Hall site. It is clear that the Town Hall will at some point be redundant and we have engaged consultants to help us understand our options. The pace at which this is going feels glacial, and it would have helped if a conclusion had been reached in time for the Local Plan submission.

Next, I would like to remind councillors that residents really enjoy the parks, their play equipment and tennis courts. Our group was disappointed that many CIL and capital projects did not come to fruition. Withholding so much CIL money is unacceptable. CIL is basically a tax levied on developers and the monies accumulated should be spent on improving local infrastructure and facilities. The council's Environment Committee made much of attracting Lawn Tennis Association investment in order to help generate income from our tennis courts, but some remain unplayable over a year later. I posed a question at a recent meeting regarding the level of CIL monies and the capital reserves. It was agreed that the proposed £1m reserve would not cover a serious capital failure and borrowing might be needed. With inflation continuing at a steady pace the purchasing power of the fund is reducing and it is time to spend a little more of it on relatively low-cost projects – especially those which could benefit residents who are having to live in temporary accommodation nearby.

We continue to be concerned by the number of reports that have a part 2 component. In other words, the number of committee reports which cannot be discussed in public. It is good that an explanation of the need for secrecy is given, but is this perhaps taken too far? In a recent C&WB report the outside organisations affected were left wondering if their

council funding would cease and this led to many anxious moments. Fortunately, a funding reduction was rejected by councillors. We call for a review of the communications process. It should be possible to contact organisations affected by a secret section of a report, so they understand the level of impact that is being discussed. Open and honest communication is key to good working relationships.

On a positive note we welcome—the central government Electronic Producers Recycling grant of £627K. This is designed to encourage councils to improve the collection and recycling of small electrical equipment, not as a solution to the Budget gap. We urge the Ruling RA Group to ensure it is easy for residents to recycle. In the Council's consultation response concern was expressed at the cost of a kerb-side collection with our existing fleet, and the risk to the income generated from bulky waste collection. We are reluctant to endorse an approach that requires a computer to book a pick-up or relies on a trip in a car to the recycling centre. Ideally a home collection would be best, but failing that collection points in our local shopping parades and car parks would offer a level of simplicity in 2025/26. Could we perhaps trial a recycling bin in some of our larger blocks of flats?

Finally, we are ashamed by the meagre pay award in the recommendations pegged at 2%. This undoubtedly leaves Epsom & Ewell employees on salary scales significantly below their Borough and County colleagues. Experience of Mergers & Acquisitions suggest they may continue to be lower paid when a new county is formed and there will be few opportunities to apply for a new position locally in the next 2 years.

In conclusion we understand the need for a proposed tax increase of 2.98% However, we are saddened by the direction of travel, or rather lack of it and cannot agree with all the plans put before us this evening.

Thanks for your attention.