

Mr Mayor,

Thank you for letting me reply to this Budget speech.

Having followed the evolution of the 2010/2011 Budget at the various Cabinet and Council meetings since last July, several things are clear to me. First, our officers, under our Chief Executive Rob Moran, have worked hard to offer up genuine savings where the Council can cut back on expenditure without adversely affecting services valued by residents of the Borough. The £272,000 of 'historic underspends' and the £442,000 of savings from non-replacement of staff, starting at the top with the decision to freeze the Assistant Chief Executive position following Frances Rutter's success in being appointed Chief Executive of Epsom and Ewell, fall into this category. The proposed redemption of our long term debt, saving at least £215,000, is a further example. These three alone account for over half the £1.8m savings set out on page 54 of the Cabinet papers.

Secondly, the overall thrust of the Budget is overtly political, starting with the political calculation that as we have Borough elections this year, we should have a 0% rise in Council Tax, come hell or high water. 3 weeks back the Leader was quoted in the Surrey Advertiser as saying: "I do not think the mood of the people is receptive to any increase in Council Tax. If you put it up, it would not be tolerated." Despite that, a week later, Surrey County Council, of which our Leader is also a member, puts its precept up by 2.5% - which has the same effect as Elmbridge putting up its Council Tax up by 13.5% - and no comment whatsoever from Cllr. Taylor or any of his colleagues there. Another aspect of the Budget is the politically motivated series of cuts to services which, frankly, are ill-thought through, are likely to have a disproportionate effect on services relative to the amount they save, and are likely to hit the vulnerable and less well-off more than the average residents of the Borough.

As an example, last year the administration saw to it that the Council voted through the closure of the 9 brick-built public conveniences in the Borough. So far, and we are a year on from the decision, only those in Church St., Walton and - I believe - Cobham have been closed. In Walton, there are still no stickers in Ruby's front windows to show that they are part of the Community Toilet scheme, and no sign in the Plaza in The Heart to show exactly where the public toilets are. Another dogma-driven policy of recent years has been the so-called policy on car park charges, which has driven commuters out of our car parks to park their vehicles in other car parks or on the streets, causing problems for near-by residents. This Monday morning, just after 11 o'clock, I took a look around our two main car parks by Walton Station. There were over 110 empty spaces - and when I went up to South-West Trains car park a good 5 minutes walk away, and so well-hidden that it is difficult to find unless you really know where to look, I found over 140 cars, taking advantage of a cheaper price. The result for us has been lower net income from a 40% + increase in charges, not higher income. So much for the vaunted business acumen of this administration.

But it is more than just a lack of business acumen. This administration has lost the plot about what a Local Authority is all about. We should be focussing on a good standard of delivery of a range of services that our residents have come to expect. Not on cutting these services just because a political creed says we should be against “big government” and because we can then show we are macho politicians who can cut services as boldly as the politicians in Westminster. We actually have a Vision which includes – and I quote – “an Elmbridge with high quality community services, affordable housing and efficient public services.” Our first Top Priority states “Commitment to better services for our residents”. We also talk about partnership with other parts of the public sector locally. So when Surrey County Council and NHS Surrey talk of a strategic priority of working on enabling local residents to live at home, rather than going into residential care, what do we do? We make large cuts to our Community Transport service and we privatise the Frozen Meals service, which directly affects the elderly who choose to live at home.

So, the question comes, what would you have done differently in the Budget? First, we would have taken the same stance on Council Tax, keeping it at the present level, given it was increased last year by 4.9% - well above inflation.

Secondly, we would not have made the cuts to services which help to make our communities the desirable places to live in that they are widely recognised to be.

Specifically we would not have cut:-

- Arts Development service	£ 14,000
- Mole Hall funding	£ 13,000
- Shout Holiday Playscheme places	£ 9,000
- Community Transport funding	£ 89,000
- CCTV Scheme approx.	<u>£100,000</u>

A total of £225,000

In the case of the CCTV scheme, it has been shown time and again that the cameras have proved useful in combating crime across the Borough and we have yet to be shown that with the lower spend on the service we would have no less of a positive impact. It may be that there would be no reduction in the quality of service, but we feel that we should have that conclusively demonstrated before we commit to the Budget cuts. It is simply the wrong way round of doing things.

Finally, we would review how we could reduce the cost to residents of using our off-street car parks to take parked cars off the roads and reduce congestion and frustration all round, as well as rebuilding our income streams from these assets.

How would this be paid for? Well, we have two additional items of notional expenditure which amount to over £300,000 [Removal of Vacancy Factor £112,790 and Inflation Provision to be Allocated £190,000] which only first appeared in the Cabinet Agenda Papers on 10th February and surprisingly merited no questions or discussion by the Cabinet. I am told that the Vacancy Factor system has operated well this year. We see no reason why this measure should be totally abolished. Similarly the additional Inflation Provision was not seen as needing to be introduced last November and the current upturn in inflation is seen as a temporary matter that is likely to be unwound over the second half of calendar 2010. The fact of the matter is that there are so many uncertainties around at present - not least of which is what kind of central Government we will have in 3 months' time – that it is impossible to tell what will happen to inflation in coming months. Accordingly this generic Inflation Provision could also be drastically reduced.

We would not have to make any additional drawing on reserves and we would be preserving for our residents the quality of services they expect when they choose to live in Elmbridge.

Chris Sadler