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Budget Report: More council tax for Epsom and Ewell

Epsom and Ewell households will pay more council tax from April after the Borough Council agreed on its budget for 2022-23 at a meeting of the full Council on Tuesday evening (February 15).

The budget-setting meeting sets out the Borough Council's expected revenue and expenditure for the forthcoming year and, as a consequence, the additional amount the Council needs to raise in council tax.

The budget proposals were put forward by the governing party, in Epsom and Ewell's case the Residents' Association group, stating how they are managing the council's finances. This was followed by speeches from the opposition council groups.

Councillor Colin Keane (RA, Nonsuch), chair of the Strategy and Resources Committee proposed a Borough council tax increase of £4.95 a year for a B and D property, or 2.38%, as a result of what he called "a robust and sustainable budget" and despite "another challenging year". "Our strong financial position" he said, "has been the result of many years of sound advice and excellent financial management by our finance team."

Councillor Keane criticised the Labour opposition for arguing that council tax should not be raised. He argued that such a course would create a £165,000 shortfall and accused Labour of failing "to propose what policies and strategies could be adopted to fill the reduced income".

Cllr Kate Chinn (Lab, Court Ward) argued that "residents of Epsom and Ewell, along with everyone else in this country, are facing a huge rise in the cost of living" and put forward ways of increasing revenue and cutting costs. "Review of venues such as the Playhouse and Bourne Hall can increase revenue and tackling homelessness can reduce costs," she argued and went on to propose other measures, even questioning whether the Town Hall itself is needed now that many staff continue to work from home.

But, later in the debate, veteran Councillor Jan Mason (RA, Ruxley Ward) responded angrily to Labour, saying that, for the £4.95 rise, "we get weekly bin collections, we get our parks and open spaces that are second to none, and we have the wonderful centre in Sefton Road. These are things we are choosing to do for our residents. We have one of the best boroughs in this country. If the Labour party are worried about nine and a half pence a week, the price of 2 cups of coffee a year, then all I can say to them is – get a grip of yourselves."

Speaking for the Liberal Democrat group, David Gulland (College Ward) concentrated on the Climate Emergency, arguing that, 3 years on from the Council's own Climate Action Plan, "we still have no funds allocated for specific actions to reduce our own emissions…Let's get on and do some of these projects." He also suggested that the Council should take a lead by shifting its own investments. "It would be relatively easy to ensure some of our …. portfolio is redeployed into equivalent funds with Green credentials," he said "Let's join up and live our values."

Another veteran Councillor, Eber Kington (RA, Ewell Court) quoted independent auditors as saying that "the Council has a track record of delivering robust financial plans". He attacked the Labour party's zero tax rise policy and went on to criticise the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives, whose one Borough Councillor was unable to respond as she was in the hospital.

Leading committee member, Cllr Hannah Dalton (RA, Stoneleigh), was the last to speak in the debate. Also responding to Labour's comments, she said that "review of the venues and venue strategy, the Town Hall strategy, and homelessness, they're all in here [the annual plan being discussed]'. And responding to a Liberal Democrat comment about sharing services with other Councils, she said that "we are working closely with East Surrey to look at opportunities [for] synergy – we've got to be doing that".

26 Residents' Association Councillors, voted for the budget, the Labour group voted against, and Liberal Democrats, arguing they were broadly in favour but there were some aspects they couldn't support, abstained.

The £4.95 increase in the Borough Council's precept is not the only extra amount of council tax to pay in the forthcoming year. The Borough Council accounts for only 10% of the overall amount of council tax collected. Conservative-controlled Surrey County Council receives 76% of the council tax and the remaining 14% is taken by Surrey Police. SCC's portion is increasing by £77.31 this year (4.99%) for a Band D property and Surrey Police's precept by exactly £10 or 3.4%. This means that the overall council tax increase for a band D property in the forthcoming year will be £92.26 or 4.52%.

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