



Elmbridge
Borough Council
... bridging the communities ...

Council Tax Public Meeting Jan 2010: List of questions asked

How is the Council influenced by other regional authorities not elected by Elmbridge residents?

The Council is influenced by other regional authorities such as the Regional Assembly which became the regional planning body for South East England in 2001. The key task of this regional planning body is to prepare and keep under review a Regional Spatial Strategy for the region for the next 20 years. The Regional Assembly has to be consulted on local development frameworks and large scale planning applications. Responsibility for regional planning and the production of a new Single Regional Strategy rests with the South East England Partnership Board, which is supported by staff from the former Assembly and from SEEDA.. For further information visit their website at: www.southeast-ra.gov.uk

Residents do not know which authority, SurreyCC or Elmbridge, to approach when there is a problem. Are there any plans for a Unitary Authority?

There are no plans for a Unitary Authority at present, although of course this could change after the next election. The Council wherever possible works with Surrey County Council and the other Surrey District/Borough Councils to provide the best possible service for residents.

Can the Council take back some responsibility for roads? Why is there not a proper specification for repairs for road services as it's the same potholes that keep reappearing?

There are currently no plans to transfer responsibility for roads to District/Borough authorities. The same potholes keep reappearing as once repaired they cannot be sealed, as this creates a slippery hazard for motorcyclists.

Pensions for employees. Does the Council still have final salary pension scheme and if so when will this stop?

The Council does still have a final salary pension scheme, however, the future of these schemes is a Central Government decision.

Is the Council putting pressure on central government to do away with final salary pension scheme?

This has been reviewed by the Surrey Local Government Association and representations have been made to central government. However, these are national policies and a change centrally would be required. Councillors have already made their views known through various discussions and committees.

Who decided to put the obelisk in the middle of Portsmouth Road?

This is the responsibility of Surrey County Council.

Explain figures on corporate development?

This is basically the cost of running the Council. The following are included: cost of Councillors including their allowances, servicing the committee meetings of the council and the cost of running the boroughs elections; Internal Audit, Corporate Policy, looking after the website, ensuring that we meet central government regulations, and the Personnel function.

The Council has a large number of Councillors. What steps can the Council take to reduce the number of Councillors and does the Council think we can manage with less?

The Electoral Commission has overall responsibility for the number of Councillors. This has been the subject of discussion at Council meetings but Councillors have opted not to challenge current numbers. The number of Councillors at Elmbridge was considered: firstly at Corporate Affairs O&S Committee on 19 June, 2008 and secondly at Cabinet on 9 July, 2008: Links to these papers are below:

http://www.elmbridge.gov.uk/committees/meetings.htm?pk_meeting=874&comid=10

(Agenda Item 3)

http://www.elmbridge.gov.uk/committees/meetings.htm?pk_meeting=808&comid=12

(Agenda Item 3)

Staff numbers. Has this reduced over the last 5 years and what is the profile of staff that has reduced?

Staff numbers fluctuate depending on the number of contractors we employ at anyone time. For example, we employed a number of short-term contract staff to assist with our road shows explaining the new waste recycling scheme. Also a greater number of posts are funded from external sources than was the case 5 years ago. The council is committed to reducing its staffing cost by 10% over the next two years.

Staffing figures can be found in our monitoring reports. These are reported twice a year. Figures for 2009 can be found at the following location:

http://www.elmbridge.gov.uk/documents/detail.htm?pk_document=14645

http://www.elmbridge.gov.uk/documents/detail.htm?pk_document=15779

The Council has a large number of assets. What could we do with those? How can we increase the income?

The Council is in the process of reviewing all our property assets. Part of this review will be to look at existing arrangements and also be able to identify alternative use or even assets with a potential for redevelopment or disposal.

The Council has in the last 12 months moved to an area based approach in respect of the review of all of its assets. The review of the four electoral wards in Walton is nearly completed, along with Weybridge, Cobham and Esher. The exercise involved mapping the ownership details of all principal public sector partner assets for the whole of Elmbridge and this information has been loaded onto our Geographical Information System (GIS) system. We are in the process of sharing the information that we have mapped with Surrey County Council to enable them to follow a similar approach. The mapping of assets at Elmbridge has been recognised as “Good Practice” by Surrey Chief Executives and Elmbridge has also been asked to share the approach and details with Runnymede, Spelthorne.

We have maintained dialogue with Surrey County Council in respect of the assets owned by them within the Borough. We have also engaged with other principal public sector partners, namely Network Rail and the Surrey Police. However, in the current economic climate there is very limited movement in the market to enable joint partnership working to be fruitful.

We have, however, managed to work with Surrey County Council’s Sure Start Team to enable them to provide a children’s centre facility within our Weybridge Centre for Retired People. We have just taken back a public hall from DC Leisure and are working on an Intergenerational Centre at Thames Ditton with Surrey County Council to provide a combined children’s centre and a Day Centre for Retired People. At the same time working with the hirers of the hall. work is commencing on site in January 2010 and we envisage that we will deliver this project by April 2010.

How do you measure your performance? Is it competency based?

The Council measures performance in various ways.

In terms of our annual strategic objectives, these are listed in the Council's annual Corporate Plan (our business plan). We report performance against these objectives on a quarterly basis to our Management Board, Overview and Scrutiny Committees and Cabinet.

We also have a set of quantitative measures called Performance Indicators, which set specific targets for our service operations. Some of these indicators are set nationally by central government (National Indicators) and some are determined locally (Local Performance Indicators). We report on all National Indicators where data is available quarterly, on a quarterly basis. We also publish full year results for all indicators at the end of the municipal year.

The strategic objectives in our Corporate Plan are drawn from the Service Delivery Plans (SDPs) of our individual services. These SDPs are more detailed operational documents which are used internally for the service to determine and plan its work. Each individual staff member also has a Personal Action Plan for the year, reflecting their contribution to objectives in the SDP. Progress against objectives is formally reviewed twice annually through our staff appraisal process. The appraisal system does include a competency-based element for each staff member, which is used to identify both strengths and areas for development.

How does the Council intend to deliver their strategies where they are not the lead authority?

The Council has a good working relationship with many different organisations and we work in partnership with them to deliver various services and initiatives. This helps us provide a better service for local residents and/or save money. For example, we deliver our broad-ranging Sustainable Community Strategy in partnership with other agencies e.g. the Surrey Police, NHS, the Surrey Fire and Rescue, businesses and voluntary and community groups.

Would like to see the Council leading in one or two main themes e.g. the environment. Does the Council lead or just follow on behind?

Below are some examples of recent initiatives:

Environmental Initiatives

A 4 year Sustainable Energy Plan was developed in April 2008 to reduce energy consumption in the Council's buildings which will impact on the Council's carbon footprint.

A monitoring system has been implemented for the Civic Centre, Centres for Retired People, Cemeteries, Drewitts Car Park and out-sourced properties namely public hall and leisure facilities. Smart meters have been installed at the Civic Centre and we continue to monitor the overall consumption of the whole building.

The electricity consumption in the Civic Centre has been reduced in 2009/2010 by more than 6% and we are expecting to exceed our electricity reduction target of 10% from 2005/2006 levels. Gas consumption has also been reduced in 2009/2010 by more than 10% in one year namely between April 09-December 2009 and in comparison to 2008/2009 figures.

Recycling Initiatives

In October 2009, Elmbridge Borough Council joined a handful of council's in the Country who are operating a borough-wide food waste collection service. The Council first introduced this service in 2007, as a pilot to 6500 homes in the Borough and was one of the first in Surrey to do so. The pilot was such a success that residents told us there was no longer any need for a weekly collection of refuse.

Elmbridge Council now provides a fortnightly a refuse and recycling collection, an optional fortnightly garden waste collection and a weekly collection of food waste. This has led to an increase in recycling and composting levels from 38% to over 50%.

Environmental Improvements

The Council is leading the way in Surrey with making environmental improvements. Over the last couple of years we have invested in a number of schemes, these include:

Street Smart

A brand new Street Smart service was launched by Elmbridge Borough Council to help improve the appearance of towns, villages and streets in the Borough. A fully equipped mobile crew smarten up every town and village to make sure they look their very best. This involves repainting and fixing street furniture, and generally carrying out minor repairs and improvements wherever possible.

Upping the Streetscene in Your Neighbourhood

From 1st April 2009, Elmbridge Borough Council took over responsibility for a range of services from Surrey County Council designed to improve the Streetscene in Elmbridge.

Elmbridge Borough Council has taken over the responsibility for highway verge cutting. The Borough's cooperation with external contractors aims to improve the quality of grass cutting services provided to the community. As a result of this cooperation, it has been possible to increase the number of highway verge cuts to 12 per year, with more cuts during the growing season in order to achieve the desired quality and finish for the Borough.

Elmbridge Borough Council has also agreed to undertake weed control on behalf of Surrey County Council. This will allow the Borough to incorporate weed control and removal within its street cleaning service which will help make the service more effective, leaving streets even cleaner and tidier. The Council's street cleaning service provider will now oversee a regular weed treatment programme across Elmbridge. This will ensure that weeds are dead or dying and easily removed when the road is cleaned.

Overall 85.5% of residents are very or fairly satisfied with the local area as a place to live (2008 Place Survey).

Car parks. Has the Council considered pricing car parks so they should be nearly full to avoid parking repercussions on surrounding areas?

Car park charges are an important way of managing parking space, ensuring highway safety and are also a source of revenue and so are regularly reviewed. We consider them to be competitive and not excessive for this area. Car park charges are generally 20p an hour in our villages and 50p an hour in our town centres. For more information on car parks and car park charges please visit www.elmbridge.gov.uk/envcare/parking/offstreetparking.htm

Tax bands. What is the Council doing about unfair tax bands, in particular the small differential between bands, which means poorer people are paying proportionately more than the very rich in the borough?

The council understands that the present system may have problems, however, the decision to change the Council Tax bands can only be made by Central Government. The valuation office sets the bands.

Does the Council get involved in youth unemployment in the Borough ie. apprenticeship schemes?

The Council currently runs an apprenticeship scheme. We are currently in our second year of the scheme. The latest program started in November 2009 for one year and the apprentices are based within the Community Support Services and Housing Divisions at the Civic Centre in Esher. Apprentices are paid £100 per week and during the programme they will also study for a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) in Business Studies with Brooklands College, Weybridge. Where possible we aim to find our apprentices permanent jobs in the Council. We currently have two apprentices in the Council. Further information can be found at the following links:

<http://www.elmbridge.gov.uk/news/news.htm?mode=10&pk=3185>

<http://www.elmbridge.gov.uk/news/news.htm?mode=10&pk=3160>

<http://www.elmbridge.gov.uk/news/news.htm?mode=10&pk=2583>

What should residents do if they do not have access to the website?

Libraries throughout the Borough have free Internet access and there is a free terminal in the Civic Centre reception to use our services online. Most of our residents have access to the Internet. In the 2009 Spring Residents' Panel, 91% reported that they had Internet access either at home, work, at a friends/relatives house or elsewhere (e.g. library). Information is also available at our Centres for Retired People.

How does the Council decide on priorities? Does the council consult residents on priorities?

Council priorities are decided by full Council after a process of advice and consideration from Council Officers. Consulting our residents is a fundamental part of this process. The Council consults residents via the Residents Panel Surveys, web surveys, focus groups and through public meetings such as this one.

Consultation process

During August to October 2008 a variety of consultative processes and activities were undertaken to seek views and opinions as to whether the proposed Top Priorities 2009-11 for the Council are supported by the wider community and stakeholders. These included:

- Consultation with the Residents' Panel (Sept 2008);
- Consultation via the Council's Business Panel (Sept 2008);
- Web consultation (Sept 2008);
- Questionnaire placed on the IMPACT (young persons) website (Oct 2008);
- Workshops with Members of the Staff Panel (Sept 2008);
- Report and presentation to the Member Employee Advisory Group (Oct 2008);
- Consultation with the Corporate Affairs Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Oct 2008)

Further information is available at:

http://www.elmbridge.gov.uk/documents/detail.htm?pk_document=13911

What services would the Council like to provide if there was Utopia?

There would be too many services to list. However, to take a current example, the Council cannot afford to maintain and staff public toilets. As an alternative we are setting up a system where businesses allow the general public to use their facilities, but in an ideal world we would provide public toilets.

How much money does the Council spend on brochures and can this be cut back? How much money is spent on self-promotion including officers time and publications?

In 2008 we completed an independent review of all our communications including all our printed literature. It was agreed that where possible all our publications would be included on our website in a downloadable version. This has enabled us to cut down on our print costs. We can print copies internally and send them to anyone who does not have access to the website. We encourage as many people as possible to use the website which is a very cost effective way of giving out information. We also send notices to our Borough Notice boards and we encourage all our officers to place their information in our Borough Magazine, The Elmbridge Review.

What is the cost of the Elmbridge Review (not to be confused with 'Elmbridge Lifestyle' that is not a Council magazine?)

The Elmbridge Review Magazine is the council's flagship publication. It is currently distributed three times annually, with a further fourth electronic edition designed and produced, available to residents via our website.

The costings are: Design, production and distribution for 2009/10 £25,000 for 3 printed editions and we have recently introduced a 4th electronic only edition is designed and produced in house, available to residents via our website.

Where is the Council going to make efficiencies? Does the Council have a list of services that are targeted?

The Council has met targets and balanced the budget through cost efficiency savings. To date there have been few cuts to front line services. In the last two years the Council has saved £3.5m mainly from 'back office' support services.

Is there going to be zero increase in pay for employees?

Yes

How does Government requirements effect planning decisions and how many new homes need to be created in Elmbridge? How does the Council cope with conflicting demands in planning? Do these requirements influence the democratic process?

Government has set targets for the minimum number of new homes to be built, the latest figure for Elmbridge is 5,620 additional dwellings between 2006 and 2026. These targets were set following consultation and an assessment by an independent regional panel. Elmbridge is then obliged to adopt planning policies that will enable this number of houses to be built over that

period. These policies are produced in a document known as the 'Local Development Framework'. This has been subject to a democratic process and several stages of consultation with the public and special interest groups.

What scope is there for cutting costs by outsourcing/combining services with other boroughs?

The Council wherever possible out sources and combines services with other authorities if this produces a more cost effective option.

Planning applications. Have fees been put up, particularly for developers?

No. Planning fees are reviewed and set by central Government, not Elmbridge Borough Council. The government has just announced a freeze on planning application fees this year to help the development and construction sectors in England.

SHOUT scheme – is that self-funding? Can the fees be increased as it can be oversubscribed?

The Council aims for all its discretionary services, wherever possible, to be self-funding. Fees for the SHOUT scheme are constantly under review.

What is the level of Council tax arrears (% , £'s)?

Arrears shown in the Government league table is approximately 1% of total Council Tax due (which is £ 85 million) which equates to 0.9 m.

What is the Councils grounds for the rejection of Government Policy on the number of new homes?

The Council has not rejected government policy on the number of new homes and is not in a position to do so, unless it wishes to risk having unsatisfactory schemes for new housing being imposed. The latest government figure for Elmbridge is specified in the 'South East Plan' of May 2009, a statutory document that sets minimum housing targets for every district in the South East over the next 15 years. The Council is currently adopting policies to ensure that the target for Elmbridge will be achieved.

Are we short of affordable housing? Why is Richmond Housing Trust using our land?

We do have a huge shortage of affordable homes in the Borough.

Richmond Upon Thames, Churches Housing Trust (RUTCH) are part of the Paragon Group which includes the Elmbridge Housing Trust. They have a number of properties in Elmbridge and have been a valued partner for many years. Elmbridge Council receives nomination rights to all new RUTCH properties.