



Ashtead Independents

Keep national party politics out of local government

Ashtead Independents – Budget voting preferences

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Ashtead Independent Councillors are independent of other parties and of each other. This puts a responsibility on your individual Councillor to THINK about what's best for Ashtead or Mole Valley or their ward. Some Councillors that are subject to a party whip think this is a bad thing. But all Lib Dems voted against the budget and all Conservative voted for – how many of them actually think? Independent Councillors believe that politics should be taken out of managing Local Government but some current SCC candidates believe Councillors should blindly follow a hierarchy that can and does force Councillors to vote 'out of touch' with their ward.

For instance, the current Chair of the Development Control Committee at Mole Valley will support a spatial strategy that causes development to be directed to Ashtead, because the majority Conservative administration is elected mainly from the countryside wards.

Mole Valley District Council (MVDC) Conservatives (including the member for Ashtead) vote for subsidies for Dorking Halls to the tune of £100,000 per year. Over the last 10 years, they've had about £2M pounds of MVDC ratepayers' money. But there's been no policy for spreading that support for the arts around the district (including Ashtead). That's particularly 'out of touch' with Ashtead.

Here are some notes for the THINKING behind Independent Councillors voting on the budget.

First, the current administration can hardly criticise those Ashtead Independent Councillors that supported their view, so we've no need to explain their position. A well thought out budget was presented and the figures added up. The administration had spent a long time preparing this budget, and if those Independent Councillors had no burning reason to object, it's good to appreciate and recognise hard work.

By the same token, if all the Ashtead Independents (AI's) had voted against, it would not have defeated the Conservative majority, so there was no political opportunity missed. We had discussed it before hand, and everyone made their own mind up.

Cllr Hawksworth abstained from voting on the budget as the basis of various items was unclear or had not been justified in appropriate detail. In addition to the major problem of reliance on future investment income, that may well not materialise, as pointed out by Cllr Harper, he was also especially concerned that there was no debate on whether elected Councillors should, or should not, accept the pay rise recommended by the Officers (even though that was requested by a Liberal Democrat Member). Further, he objected to changes being made in the accompanying MVDC Corporate Strategy document which watered down the Council's overall policy on development in the Green Belt. He concludes that the Conservative Executive is set on pushing its own policies and wishes through without the courtesy of affording the full Council an opportunity to fully question and debate such important matters. He would have voted against but was concerned that rejection at that Council meeting would have left insufficient time for a revised budget to be prepared and agreed before the Council Tax demands were due to be sent out.



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Cllr Harper voted against the budget and felt it was totally irresponsible to rely on a single, unguaranteed source of income, and to ignore other potential revenue stream altogether.

They are relying on...

The Conservatives budget is based upon the assumption they can borrow £50M at 0.5% fixed for 50 years from the Department of Communities and invest it in commercial property in the hope of getting a higher return. They assume this will establish an income stream in the next 3 years that will cover the drop in new homes bonus. Without this investment, the Council's budget will not balance. At last months council meeting he questioned their progress with this initiative and it was stated that, so far, no offers for investment had been accepted from any of the MVDC bids made. They say they are 'on-target' but they would not answer the question 'what is the possibility of this income source failing when there would be 100% certainty of raising revenue from rates?' They did not answer this most pertinent question. It seems that they will not acknowledge the feasibility of their investment strategy failing. Furthermore, they have no contingency plan in place should they, indeed, fail to generate funds.

By the way.... Cllr Harper thinks this is 'State Aid' in local government. They 'get around' it by setting up a wholly owned private company. The concept is that they loan that company money at (say) 2.9% and it covers its costs by getting 3% yield. One Conservative Councillor outside Ashtead raised the question of creating an asset bubble – but being Conservative..... was ignored. How is this fair compared to you and me wanting income for our pension? They are competing with Trusts and Funds, such as Schroder etc, bidding up the cost of assets.

They are ignoring...

Cllr Harper asked at Executive how many homes MVDC need to build to retain the new homes bonus (currently £1M comes from this source per year). In response Conservative Executive member for planning, Doug Irvine, said that, to retain the New Homes Bonus, the Conservative Government had set MVDC a target of 400 new homes each year. Currently, Mole Valley District Council is building around 150 (less than 38% of the Government target). By failing to meet the target, the Conservative MVDC Executive Committee is allowing this income to drop from its current level of around £1M to about £100K (out of a total income of around £10M). Duncan Irvine stated that won't be bribed but also confirms that these homes are critically needed for our (not so young) buyers and to meet Central Governments 'Broken homes' theme. They won't face up to the housing crisis in our community nor the difficult decision of where to build them (the Spatial Strategy). The Conservative-run Executive Committee realises that the Government housing target cannot be accommodated by Ashtead, Bookham, Fetcham or Dorking (broadly Lib Dem for Dorking, Ashtead Independent and a minority of Conservatives). It would appear that members of the Executive are doggedly avoiding building them in suitable places within their own electoral heartland (see Spatial Strategy – time for a change? paper). To do so, might cause them to lose electoral seats and, thus, the small majority they have at Council.

The consequence of not balancing the budget would be inevitable cuts in services – and greatest impact of this would be felt by the vulnerable, the poorer, and the less able rather than the more affluent and able bodied residents. Cllr Harper was appalled to learn, in one instance, that a homeless family was re-housed outside MVDC (Horsham) because MVDC only has one family home



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within its borders. The re-located family was asked to pay for transport to maintain their children's' attendance at their usual school. To ensure maximum stability for them, Cllr Harper argued that MVDC should pay for a taxi to minimise disruption to the children's daily routines. The Conservative Executive agreed, so the request had a positive impact. But these types of gesture will be impossible should the budget fall into deficit – the Conservative Executive will be forced to cut and minimise services rather than provide the support that some people desperately need.

Cllr Pat Wiltshire joined Cllr Harper in voting against due to a collection of the reservations expressed above.

TO BE CLEAR – The views of Councillors Harper, Hawksworth and Wiltshire are independent and do not represent the views of the Ashtead Independent group nor of Ashtead Residents' Association.