

Surrey County Council Environment Select Committee – 22 February 2019

Speech by Cllr Keith Witham (taken from webcast - https://surreycc.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcast_interactive/408073 at 29:54 minutes)

Thank you very much, Chairman. Personally, I would just echo what you just said. I would echo what you said about having the Surrey Wildlife Trust here with us today. For whatever reason they should be here. I've raised this point before. They're not and it's a loss to us that they are not. So, we can answer that query later.

And I entirely agree with your other comments, Chairman, you know, whatever is decided, you can't please everybody. And at some point people need to understand the rationale.

Now, I welcome this summary that we have been given as I believe it lays the groundwork for setting out a strategy for the countryside over the next 25 years. But, those who are opposed to extra money being raised, either through car parking charges or more commercial activities, are simply closing their minds to the reality of the situation. One person said in his submission to us yesterday, referred to having, quote "a council strategy that is not focussed on money but on our environment". And, therein, lies the lack of the grasp of reality. You might as well say to us, "don't bother us with anything as tawdry as money. You know, we can't deal with that it's tawdry".

But, there are always, alas, plenty of people who are not short of opinions, but have absolutely no responsibility for anything. The question that Groups like this never answer is, "how will the annual costs of maintaining places like Newlands Corner and our commons be paid for if not through, amongst other things, charges for car parking and more commercial activities?".

All I ever hear from residents are three things:

one, and I have to put on a grumpy voice "Well, I pay my Council Tax, don't I?". This doesn't grasp the reality that the money now raised by Council Tax is not enough to provide all of the services that everybody would like everywhere. And, at the same time as reduced funding, demands and costs on other services have increased.

The second thing they then always say is, "Well, just take the money from somewhere else, somewhere else that I'm not interested about". Well refer to my previous answer. Because all of the somewhere else's are under the same financial pressure.

Three, they then finally give up and say "Well how you pay for it is not my problem. It's your problem". Now, in that they are right, because Councillors do have the responsibility to find a way of financing these services that people value, rightly so, well into the future.

Some while ago, the Newlands Corner Group did propose to look at a Friends Group, but would only consider setting it up if Surrey County Council dropped the idea of car parking charges. They prepared a plan that had not considered a number of legal issues and Surrey asked them how they were proposing to cover those. Then, of course they backed off and stopped talking about that. I'm

sure that, within reason, Surrey County Council the Cabinet Member and the senior officers would consider any ideas for funding that are legal, can be achieved within resources and are preferably ongoing rather than one-offs.

I'll quote another example of where this approach is working. Those who were concerned about the possible closure of the Surrey Performing Arts library, again, because of budget pressures, took up my challenge at one of these meetings to rise to the challenge. They set up a new charity and have been working with the council to make that successful. They have stopped just campaigning and they've taken responsibility for the subject they care about.

All we get. All we ever get from those who are opposed to either car parking charges or more commercial activities, are the same old rehashed arguments. For example, the health benefits and how unidentified money might be saved in the future on adult social care or NHS costs. But does anyone seriously believe that the NHS are going to give Surrey County Council the odd million or two every year so that Surrey can avoid car parking charges when every NHS hospital has car parking charges to raise extra money for their patient services? No. The suggestion is a total utter nonsense.

As you've referred to Chairman, it was back in 2002 when Surrey County Council first warned that it foresaw the day when it could no longer afford to maintain its countryside estate which led to the arrangement with Surrey Wildlife Trust. Today, 17 years later, the financial realities have come to fruition and this strategy is looking at that reality. How can we make sure that the countryside is properly-maintained for the benefit of everyone, for all of us, including our children and grandchildren over the next twenty five years and beyond?

I am sorry to say, Chairman, that people have rose-tinted spectacles when they look at the beautiful views from Newlands Corner or across one of our commons. They seem to think that it is all natural. But, it is not. It is man-made. It is just as man made as a housing estate built with concrete bricks and tarmac. The views, and the environment we enjoy today at Newlands Corner and on our commons are man-made. They are maintained by man, which does cost money every year and, without that, the commons would soon revert to thickly wooded boggy areas that would be inaccessible and we would be unable use.

That's why this strategy is needed. I welcome the fact that it has arrived. Its not finished, but, hopefully, it will not take another 25 years to actually get it with support from people who want to see it work [sic]. If there are others in this room and elsewhere who have other funding proposals, they should come forward and talk constructively to Surrey County Council and not just oppose everything all the time. That's what I get sick and tired of Chairman; emails from people who just oppose stuff and they never put forward any constructive alternative suggestion at all. Rant finished.