

Crawley Business Council  
**Crawley Business Debate**  
28 May 2008

**Strategic Context**

**Councillor Robert Lanzer**  
**Leader, Crawley Borough Council**

**I. Crawley Business Debate**

**1. Conception**

Welcome to the inaugural Crawley Business Debate, which I hope is the first of many. This event was conceived at the State of the Borough debate, which was held at The Hawth for residents of Crawley. The business people who attended that event felt that a business-orientated evening would be similarly constructive, and it is pleasing to see that even more people have attended this event than attended the State of the Borough. When engaging with business, we are very aware that you have particularly busy lifestyles and so it is excellent that you have been able to fit this Local Authority event into your schedules.

**2. Key Aims**

The aim of this event is to engage with business, and to convey to you what the council does to support business in Crawley Borough, while providing an overview of the plans that we have for Crawley Borough and throughout the Gatwick Diamond. A great deal of investment is already taking place in Crawley, and it is important to note that not all of it is focused on Town Centre North. There is much more happening than that. We also want to provide an opportunity for people to ask questions of our panel, and to network with us over refreshments. We will answer your questions tonight if we can, but if that is impossible we are committed to answering to those questions at a later time.

**II. Strategic Location**

**1. Rapid Growth Potential**

Crawley has a strategic location in the South East region. It is one of nine economic sub-regions in the South East, which are marked out by their potential to grow more rapidly than other areas in the region. These nine enjoy above average economic growth, but also share common traits such as a commitment to social justice.

## **2. Gatwick Airport**

The strategic importance of the Gatwick Diamond is well-known, but we must be mindful that within this borough itself we have the world's second-busiest single-runway airport, along with outstanding transport connections by road and rail. It is important that these benefits are allowed to continue, as they will help us to attract more world-class businesses to Crawley.

## **3. The Gatwick Diamond**

This is not just a shape, or a logo, because the Diamond has genuine significance. It comprises six District Authorities, three from West Sussex and three from Surrey. Two County Councils are also involved, and all of the different groups work together energetically with business. This collaboration involves promoting the interests of the Diamond, and working towards new governance arrangements related to it.

## **III. Attracting New Business**

Communicating that Crawley is an excellent place to do business is a very serious responsibility, and although it is well-known that Crawley is packed with world-class businesses we must not become complacent. It is important to attract new businesses, although we recognise that there is a fine balance to be struck between allocating investment to the retention of existing businesses, while at the same time promoting ourselves to potential newcomers.

## **IV. Business in Crawley**

### **1. Existing Businesses**

This slide shows a few of the world-class businesses in the borough. Please do not take offence if you cannot see your own business this year because it may come to be represented here in the future. There are almost 4,000 businesses in Crawley, which help to make us the 13<sup>th</sup> largest knowledge economy. A very powerful measure of our business strength is the fact that Crawley contributes 37% of the business rate in West Sussex, even though we constitute only 2% of the land. It is true to say that we are the economic powerhouse of the area.

### **2. Mobile Workforce**

Another indicator of the town's economic importance is that 30,000 people commute to Crawley every day. This is more characteristic of a London borough, so the name Crawley Borough is not casually or symbolically applied by virtue of our having a mayor, and this is reflected in those business figures which I stated a moment ago.

### **3. Securing a Variety of Business Types**

Much of the town's business is on a large scale. 60% of people in Crawley work in firms with over 50 employees. However, our attentions are not solely focused on those companies, and we work with small, medium and large enterprises on the Neighbourhood Parades, or centres. A strategy is in place to ensure that the work done on those Parades can be improved, particularly in terms of land usage.

## **V. Business and the Community**

We are not complacent in anything that we do, and we work hard to do what is right for the entire community. We had a straw poll earlier, which indicated that a majority of our delegates do not live in Crawley, but with regard to economic issues we believe that this wider group is part of the Crawley's overall economic community.

## **VI. The Future**

### **1. Corporate Plan**

Finally, here is an extract from the Council's Corporate Plan. This guides all of our work, through its four key themes of the environment, our community, our council's performance and the economy. In reality those four elements are strongly interlinked, even though tonight's focus is on the economy.

### **2. Key Economic Priorities**

The three main priorities in an economic sense are the development of a sustainable local economy, cultivating flourishing neighbourhood centres, and enhancing Crawley's contribution to the regional economy and the Gatwick Diamond. Those are key priorities for the council, and within them we may operate as a leader, a service provider, a partner or an influencer. I hope this provides some grounding in the strategic context for the council's support for the local economy. I will now hand over to Councillor Claire Denman, who is the cabinet member for planning and economic development.

## **Crawley in Detail**

### **Councillor Claire Denman**

**Cabinet Member for Planning and Economic Development, Crawley Borough Council**

### **I. Preamble**

It is wonderful to be able to look around tonight and see faces that I recognise from so many forums, such as Peter Ross from the Town Centre Partnership. It is worth remembering that we all have the best interests of Crawley at heart, and its economic interests in particular.

### **II. Developing Crawley**

#### **1. A New University**

Crawley is currently a very exciting place to live, and this slide shows the range of developments that are already underway in the town. In particular, the proposed new university is exciting,

especially considering the problems that we have had with regard to levels of educational attainment. We are trying to respond, thereby raising the aspirations of our residents and improving the skill levels of the workforce that is so important to all of you.

## **2. Town Centre North**

Town Centre North is another key development, one I am sure that many of you have heard of, and it will help to focus attention on Crawley. However, we are not only talking about shops, because office accommodation is also included in the plan. We are very aware that there is an issue around relatively substandard office accommodation in the town, so we hope to address that. In addition there will be a wonderful John Lewis, and I know that Brenda and I are looking forward to many happy hours shoe-shopping there.

## **3. New Housing**

New housing will be addressed and brought forward to the west of Crawley, because we are also aware that housing is a key part in driving the town forward. In particular we must make provision both for social, low-cost housing, along with more aspirational housing.

## **4. Manor Royal**

Additionally, there is the Manor Royal study. The study grew out of the Local Economy Action Group, which is a partnership linked to the Local Strategic Partnership. I am very proud of being a member of that group, but it is steered by people like yourselves. They have identified issues with Manor Royal, such as the fact that one of the most important trading estates in the South East is, as Michael likes to remind me, served only by a burger van. That is ludicrous. Consequently, a visioning exercise was carried out to assess what is happening at Manor Royal, and we will talk about that in more detail later.

## **5. Gatwick Airport**

Gatwick is another asset, which presents some interesting issues. We are all aware of its importance to the Crawley economy, but there are interesting times ahead as we wait for a steer from the Monopolies and Mergers report. At the moment the way ahead for Gatwick is unclear, but we do know that we must ensure it continues to succeed as a one-runway airport.

## **6. The Three Bridges Corridor**

Finally, we have the Three Bridges corridor. I am sure that many of you have sat on the train coming into Crawley and seen the area between the Paymaster General's office and the station where everything looks rundown. That is an area we have identified as having huge potential for economic development and all kinds of business use.

# **III. Opening the Dialogue**

## **1. Communication Links**

To ensure that we move in the right direction, we must continue to listen to you. It is a two-way process, however, because we need you to tell us when problems arise. Without that strong

dialogue, we are forced to crystal ball-gaze. One of the benefits of this kind of event is that we can open that dialogue and listen to what you have to say.

## **2. Cultivating Prosperity**

Naturally, it is not possible for us to address every issue during this process because we do not have that power. However, as a Local Authority we can try to leverage our influence and make provision where possible, because we are aware that ensuring your prosperity will have a direct impact on our residents.

## **IV. Ongoing Initiatives**

### **1. Responsive Governance**

These are a few examples of how we have listened to you and responded. I was chatting to Steve Sawyer about this, because we seemed to be involved in such a remarkable amount of work. Drilling down, I realised that we have not always clearly communicated what we can offer to you. That is another motivation for having this kind of debate.

### **2. Working with all Business Types**

We are focused on the needs of large businesses, but at the same time we know that we must look after smaller enterprises through initiatives such as the small businesses rebate scheme. I do not know how many smaller businesses are aware of that scheme and, similarly, we need to ensure that we are properly articulating to the business community the numerous smaller schemes in which we are involved. A good example is easit, which is lead by Mel Mehmet, who is here tonight. We must put more effort into opening those lines of communication so that all of the messages reach you.

### **3. Manor Royal**

#### *a. Visioning*

To return to Manor Royal, as mentioned above, I would like to show you the results of the Manor Royal visioning exercise. There are issues around fragmentation of land ownership but, as a Local Authority, there are areas in which we can help. This Manor Royal improvement scheme was conceived by the Local Economy Action Group, which is a group of businessmen who work under the auspices of the Local Strategic Partnership, to inform us how the economy fits into Crawley as a whole.

#### *b. New investment*

The results of the study make grim reading, because even with the level of investment available for Manor Royal the area has fallen into a parlous state. In response to that I am pleased to announce that we, the Local Authority, are prepared put £50,000 from Local Authority Business Growth Incentives (LABGI) to start the Manor Royal scheme. We will be looking at signage, for example, to raise awareness of the estate's existence, along with a number of other small-scale improvements. We are aware, however, that a huge amount of investment is still needed.

#### **4. Intelligent Planning**

Sometimes a Local Authority can facilitate improvement, for example in looking at the work of the Planning Authority. That does not mean that we will approve every application for planning, but we can be very clear about both the kind of development we are seeking and what we can do to facilitate it. These are some of the ways to help bring forward the Manor Royal improvement scheme, but it must be stressed that working in partnership with business is crucial in this area.

### **Question and Answer**

#### **Jeremy Taylor, Cadia**

A number of you have already posed questions via the booking form for this event, and I cannot imagine that this audience will be shy in asking them tonight. Perhaps I can begin by calling on David to ask his question.

#### **David Butcher, FD Outsourcing**

One of the key elements of a successful business lies in getting the best possible premises. I know that the borough is doing work around Manor Royal, and to ensure the upgrading of facilities for larger businesses through initiatives such as Town Centre North. What will the borough do for small and medium enterprises (SME), when it comes to facilities? Six or seven years ago we cooperated with the borough to build Basepoint, but now there is a waiting list for the units there. What proposals are being made, particularly in relation to opportunities such as the old tip and the enterprise court? Is there anything you can tell us?

#### **Cllr Claire Denman**

Thank you very much. Before I answer that question, I would like to explain a little about my background. I used to be an antiques dealer with three small shops in Halifax, so I am aware of the pressures being faced by small businesses. One of the issues in Halifax was that land ownership was fragmented, so I was able to rent shops at a reasonable rate because property was not tied up in the ownership of large pension companies and other landlords, which is the case in Crawley.

I have spoken to Bob about the potential redevelopment of the old amenity tip, and I think it is time the council took action on this. If we think that economic development is important to us, we should perhaps reconsider how we prioritise the sale of some potential assets. In my opinion, that site would be perfect for small units. Several small businesses have recently been calling to inform me that they need accommodation for their business, and I think there is a link between that and the fact that Crawley has 10% fewer start-up businesses than the South East average.

We are aware that we are a large-business economy, but I think that we should aim to have a variety of businesses in the town. After all, without start-up businesses there is less room for the economy of the town to grow.

**Cllr Robert Lanzer**

I certainly support that principle. However, I must comment that the site in question has not yet been transferred to us.

**Cllr Brenda Smith, Crawley Borough Council**

As the opposition, we do not have the benefit of the advice received by our colleagues. However, the previous administration provided Basepoint and it has been a very successful scheme for us and the town has benefited. Unfortunately it is not enough, and I am also aware that the tip site is not yet in the ownership of the Borough. When transfer takes place, we will be looking to see proposals put forward for the site, and I am sure that my group will look favourably on any development that supports the local economy.

**Cllr Gordon Seekings, Crawley Borough Council**

I have been on the council for 21 years, and during that time we have provided small units for businesses. However, Crawley's largest problem is its physical boundaries and the amount of land available for use. The town centre, for example, is mostly owned by pension funds. Staffordshire County Council owns a chunk of Queen's Square as their pension fund, so sometimes all we can do is try to influence its use.

We certainly need to take the opportunity to build more small units in the town, but I am not convinced that the old tip site is big enough. We need to find something larger, and there is a site that I can think of next to Virgin Atlantic. I do not know if there is planning permission for its development, but that seems to be a classic example of a site that could be used for a number of smaller developments rather than one large one. We need to talk to landowners, and that is something that we should be facilitating at a county level, because ultimately we do not own that much land in the town.

**Michael Coughlin, Crawley Borough Council**

Talking to Carol at Basepoint, I have identified that start-up companies succeed in Crawley but we lack the accommodation for them to move into when they outgrow their premises. We are discussing with Basepoint how we might provide slightly larger accommodation, so that companies can see the path they would follow from starting with nothing to ultimately taking up a large site in Manor Royal such as the premises we find ourselves in today. I would not want to discuss specific sites here but there are a number of opportunities, as Claire mentioned, that will emerge over the next few years. I think it will be crucial for the council to bear that in mind.

**Jeremy Taylor**

Geoff, would you like to come back on that?

**Geoff Williamson, Federation of Small Businesses**

We at the Federation of Small Businesses are aware of the problem, but I do have a different question that I would like to ask.

**Jeremy Taylor**

Then are there any other questions around business premises in the town, and the availability of opportunities for our businesses to grow?

**Participant**

I am an immigrant from Reading, and it is interesting to compare Reading, Bracknell and Crawley. It seems that both have outperformed Crawley for the last 10 years in terms of shoppers, average earnings, inward investment and exports. The current theme is clearly about small businesses, so let me tell you about [Niu?], who runs a small curry house in the town centre.

She, among many others, is struggling. I feel that this is not just about the infrastructure, it is about the culture, the marketing and the management of the town centre. To be controversial, I suggest that we should outsource the management of the town centre to a private, professional destination-marketing management company, so we can really upgrade. I think it is the cultural side rather than the physical side that is an issue, so that is one point to be debated.

**Jeremy Taylor**

In summary, your question is about the perception and profile of Crawley, and how other people view the town. There are people running businesses on Manor Royal who are barely aware of the shopping area because they are only interested in the motorway and access roads, so the question is about the perception of Crawley and how we can attract more people in.

**Cllr Claire Denman**

Your question about town centre management is very apt. We have a very strong town centre manager, Bob O'Brien, who is in the audience today. One of the issues we will face, particularly in relation to Town Centre North, is how we handle the management of Crawley town centre itself. Peter and the Town Centre Partnership are very aware that we cannot just wait for Town Centre North and hope that it will act as a panacea, allowing us to ignore any other issues and problems. The Town Centre Partnership are currently looking at these questions, and while it would not be true to say that I have the answers at the moment, we are now getting to grips with these issues.

**Peter Ross, Town Centre Partnership**

We are certainly aware that there are issues to be dealt with in respect of Crawley's image. We cannot just wait for Town Centre North to happen, so we must address it before then, and that will come down to our ability to raise funds to do the work. It is an expensive pastime, and we are currently discussing this with Crawley Borough Council because it is permanently at the top of our agenda. This is a problem that must be dealt with because Crawley does have an image problem, and it will require a lot of time and expense to change it.

However, it can be done because there are so many other positive aspects to the town, such as the airport, the strength of the business community and the fact that we are the third most active finance centre. We are far beyond what Bracknell could ever be, but at the same time we must accept that we will never be at the same level as Reading. This is a very dynamic centre, and we will try to sell those positive points very hard. Rest assured that, as a voluntary group and with Bob's help, we are working very hard to address these issues.

**Cllr Brenda Smith**

I welcome the question, and the comments that Peter has made. I have been part of Crawley as a resident and councillor for many years, and it was not long ago that the Town Centre Management Group did not exist at all. The Chamber of Commerce, which was the only body in the town capable of representing small businesses, struggled to raise money or have much input into the town. Scraping the money together to get Christmas lights in the town centre was an impossibility.

I think that the Town Centre Management Group has done an excellent job of bringing Crawley forward, but there is still a long way to go. The responsibility to do something about this must also fall with businesses. The progress that we have made is very good but sometimes I do believe, and this could also be controversial, that people who come to Crawley to work do not realise that the town is also about living, our culture and our townspeople. The success and prosperity of the town as a whole is very important, and so we must put something into the town in order to get something back out of it.

I think it is down to everyone who has the opportunity to come together, for example as part of the Town Centre Management Group, to do something about promoting the town. As we heard, the problem is that Crawley Borough Council does not own the property and does not even own the substructure of Queen's Square apart from the bandstand and town hall. It is not enough for the council to have the will to make changes if we do not have the necessary finances.

**Cllr Gordon Seekings**

Previous speakers have referred to Crawley's image problem, which has not been helped by having our road signs hacked and appearing on YouTube. That was embarrassing, but things like that happen in many towns. Last summer, we councillors went out over a period of several days to interview residents and other people who were walking across Queen's Square.

We spoke to many people, and the most surprising outcome was the number of people who had come from Horsham, Brighton, Redhill and Croydon to do their shopping in our town centre. However, they strongly expressed their antipathy to the idea of living in Crawley, which they associated with chavs, among other things, even though they had gone out of their way to come here to shop.

When we say that we have a bad image, then, it is mostly in the general public perception. When it comes to individuals, we perhaps do ourselves no favours by repeating the notion that we have an image problem. I think that the town is a lot better than many people say it is.

**Geoff Williamson**

We in the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) are all volunteer business people. There are 3,600 members in the Gatwick Diamond area with over 18,000 employees, and the FSB has over a million employees in the UK. We are very concerned by the government's assertion that by 2015 there will be no retail shops other than those owned by chains, so we are campaigning to protect local trade. How will the panel take on board the government's assessment in what they are trying to do in Town Centre North, and in local community shops as already discussed?

**Cllr Claire Denman**

Geoff, you are absolutely right. When I go shopping as a treat to myself, I usually go to Brighton because it has more independent outlets and that gives it a particular flavour. One of the issues that we still have is around land ownership, particularly with so much tied up in large pension companies. Grosvenor will take on a considerable amount of space, and because they have to get a return on their investment they will probably look to get large companies in.

However, there are things that a Local Authority can do. The old market, for example, is an area where we must look to see whether we have up to date development briefs with a proper focus on smaller businesses. That, the old St John's Walk area, and the Cross Keys area attached to it, are ripe for a different kind of development. As a Local Authority we can be much more intelligent about our overall vision for Crawley. This does not only comprise Town Centre North and the red line around it, but it must include the whole town centre vision.

The Town Centre Partnership and the Borough Council have conducted a visioning exercise, looking outside the red line for the opportunities that are out there. They have also focused on what the town needs outside the red line to make it a more rounded community. That is where I see potential for small business sites. We must be very clear with our development briefs, as part of our overall leadership, to ensure that developers know what we want and expect from them. Within that overall framework we must be much more intelligent about how we achieve better outcomes.

**Cllr Gordon Seekings**

Claire mentioned the Cross Keys site, and that is a very good example of what we are talking about. I was on the council before Claire was elected and the site was being talked about even then. It is the site behind the parish church where the old electricity board showrooms were situated, and it is actually quite a large area. The development brief was designed 10 or 15 years ago, but the last time I spoke to a planning officer, they said that only one developer had inquired about it. The developers may be at fault for not looking in the right places, but perhaps we as a council have not gone out to sell these sites. I do not know the exact reason, but it seems there are parts of this town that have not been marketed properly, and we should look at how we manage them.

**Cllr Brenda Smith**

Government was mentioned as part of the question, and Claire asked if I would like to answer the question first in my capacity of Labour member. I declined, however, because her group is in control in Crawley. If the government did make the assessment that you identified, and I have not heard it myself, I think everyone in Crawley would agree that this is not what we want for our town. It is not what shoppers want, as Claire said, and we have not wanted it for a long time.

There is nothing more disappointing than going to visit another town or city and feeling that you could be walking down any high street in the country. It is down to us to ensure that small units are brought into the town. We have heard mention of the old market and Cross Keys sites, but there is also potential in the Martlets, where many of the shops are closing down in quick succession. This is also true in the High Street area, which has long been the centre of development but which seems to have stagnated. There is clearly work to be done, and I am sure that all the parties will be supporting each other, because this is not what we want for Crawley.

**Jeremy Taylor**

I would now like to bring in Peter Tuppen. We have already mentioned the Parades, and his question will bring in broad issues around the Parades and rent reviews in that area.

**Peter Tuppen, Spencer Dry Cleaners.**

I have been the unfortunate tenant of my premises in Three Bridges for the last 22 years. Your slides asked what the council does for business. In the case of mine, they destroyed it totally. A rent review comes up every five years, and the last was due in 2003. The council did not carry it out. When the new rent was finally agreed at just under double the previous rate, four and a quarter years late, the provisions of the lease allowed them to claim backdated rent. The council sent me a bill for £33,000, and that destroyed my business.

A small business like mine serves the local community and tries to give a good quality of service, but this is how I have been treated. Initially the council came on strong and demanded the money immediately. They soon relented slightly and gave me a year to pay up. Eventually I was allowed three years to pay it, with no interest accruing on the sum. The result was that they suggested I pay double rent and also set up a standing order for another £892 per month over three years.

I sent the Council a copy of my accounts, and if there is a numerate employee among them they must see that my company cannot sustain that level of payment. The only option I had was to get someone to buy the business, which I have done, because that is the only way in which I can pay the money back. My business has been destroyed, after 22 years.

Additionally, I have sent emails to Michael Coughlin about Graves Jenkins, your preferred agent. They have had free advertising on our Parade for years because the shops have not been let as a result of the overly high asking price. Some of those properties have been empty for years. I asked what Graves Jenkins were being paid to do this work, and you replied that the information could not be disclosed because it is commercially sensitive. It is our money, public money, so I want to know how much you are paying them.

**Jeremy Taylor**

In summary, I think the question goes to what can be done to help landlords be more sensitive to these kinds of issues.

**Cllr Robert Lanzer**

Thank you for your question. You will understand if I do not respond in any detail, although I have begun to access the full details of your specific case. We did have issues with resourcing the rent reviews, so in 2004 we supplemented our resources by bringing in external people. It is a feature of the rent reviews that if you disagree with the proposed rent you can take the matter to binding arbitration. A tenant can also follow the council's complaints procedure and then take the council to the ombudsman if you remain dissatisfied with the service you received.

In terms of the rents themselves, there was a policy decision taken in 2004, informed by national legislation, that we must realise a sensible return on our assets, including the shops on the Neighbourhood Parades. As part of the negotiations with our agents, it is possible to submit accounts to us, and we will take account of them and sometimes agree payment plans with the

businesses in question. To illustrate the scale of this scheme, there are 59 payment plans in operation at this time.

There are 144 council-owned shops, hardly any of which are unoccupied, and we are proud of the very high occupation rate across the neighbourhood centres, which we intend to maintain. We recently conducted a scrutiny review of the neighbourhood centres, and our relationship with Parades tenants. Going forward this will not only affect rents, it also signals a change in our approach to maintenance of the Parades.

You mentioned that your case took a few years to resolve, and I am aware that there are other cases which were decided over a similar period. However, it is natural that a rent discussion must involve dialogue, and both sides must respond promptly so that settlement can be reached. As I said, I have begun to access the details of your case, and I will be happy to discuss it with you after this debate.

### **Cllr Gordon Seekings**

I do not want to make any specific comments about Peter's case because he and Robert will deal with it. However, Peter referred to the recent review of the Neighbourhood Parades, and I had the pleasure of chairing that review group, which was brilliantly supported by [the officer John Thread?] and one or two others. That was probably the biggest drains-up exercise on the Neighbourhood Parades since they were built, and we went into every possible detail about the properties. We covered the incomes problem, the take-up of the shops and the relevant maintenance liability of the shops and the premises above them.

The reports from our deliberations are still on the council's website, where we made some serious recommendations which should result in over £1 million being spent on improving the Parades in the coming years. The take-up of the Parades is actually very high, and there are very few shops that are empty for any length of time. When they are empty for a while it is usually because there is some maintenance work that needs to be done before we can re-list them.

### **Cllr Robert Lanzer**

Additionally, and this is a general point that is not specific to this case, there is sometimes a perception that a Local Authority can be placed at the bottom of an individual or organisation's list of creditors. That is wrong, because when the local authority is a creditor, they are owed taxpayers' money. It might be that in our discussion of shop rents across the borough we have not been sufficiently clear about our rationale or intentions with regard to this. I would like to take this opportunity to make it clear that one of my fundamental objectives is that the council will not allow itself to be seen as a creditor of least importance. On behalf of taxpayers we will be pursuing that kind of debt.

### **Michael Coughlin**

I would like to address the question of what we pay Graves Jenkins for the specialist property and evaluation work they do for us. The contract with them was arranged through a competitive tendering process. If the figure we pay them was submitted on a competitive basis it is clear that it would not be appropriate for any authority to release that information into the public domain. It might then be set against other bids, which could potentially give competitors an advantage next time the contract comes up for renewal, and that could lead to the council not getting value for

money as a result. However, I may be able to offer Mr Tuppen some comfort by giving him a range of figures for the sum we pay Graves Jenkins, and I would be happy to discuss that with him.

### **Cllr Brenda Smith**

The Neighbourhood Parades have been the poor relation for some time with respect to Crawley Borough Council. It is clear that a lot of work still needs to be done, particularly for anyone who is resident in Langley Green, which is my ward, or those who drive through it on their way to Manor Royal.

I have been working with other councillors and officers of the council for almost nine years on the regeneration scheme for the neighbourhood centres and I am absolutely delighted that we will literally be getting the drains up next month, starting in June. That is part of a massive redevelopment of the centre, which will involve refurbishment of the shops and the accommodation above them.

It is important that we do not lose sight of the fact that the Neighbourhood Parades consist of mixed commercial and residential accommodation. The accommodation above them falls within the lease. Although I cannot comment on Mr Tuppen's case, many of the leaseholders rent those properties out in appalling conditions at extremely high rents. I have been very concerned about properties being let in that way, and the conditions that some people have been living in because they are unable to find accommodation elsewhere. They are being exploited, and I hope that Bob takes that on board, as I know he will. I also hope that the council will be aware of what happens to its property when someone rents it and then sub-lets another resident.

### **Jeremy Taylor**

Thank you for bearing with us on that topic. While the majority of people in the room do not live in Crawley, the people who work for them do, and I think it is important that we understand the issues that affect them.

A number of other issues have been raised, for example around transport, but I would first like to come to Cheryl, who has a question about skills. I think this is being raised on behalf of quite a few people.

### **Cheryl West, Siemens Hearing Instruments**

We are based in Manor Royal, and we have been in Crawley for decades under our previous name, A&M Hearing. I was interested in the skills pledge referred to on the slides, but I saw a metric last year to the effect that Crawley-based workers are earning less than those who commute into the town. With the demand on skills and the associated opportunity to grow skills, how can the council and other agencies help our businesses to get the skills we need when the required mix of abilities changes all the time?

### **Cllr Claire Denman**

Thank you very much. You are absolutely correct, Cheryl, and I am very glad that this has been raised. I think the figures stated that there was a difference of around £44 a week between the pay of a Crawley resident and those who commute to work here. That results in a difference of around £3-4 per hour, especially for women, so this is a very real issue.

Anecdotally, my son went to what used to be Crawley College, and only two from around 16 boys in his year finished their course. Again, although having the service industry around the airport is fabulous, it may be that the young people of Crawley have been treated like cannon fodder for its unskilled jobs. When you leave school and get into work, £200 per week seems a lot of money, but when you pass the age of 30 that is not a sustainable wage.

In terms of what we are doing, the Town Centre Partnership has a strong and active skills group which is trying to get into these issues and is working in partnership with businesses to raise aspirations among young people.

Drilling down, you might ask what this says about people from Crawley. However, the skills level in Crawley New Town in the mid-1960s was higher than the regional average, so it is clear that the issue does not arise from the residents themselves. Something else is depressing our skill levels, and we should look at the employment being offered in Crawley, which will be crucial as the knowledge-based economy develops. Additionally, the physical presence of a university in the town would be hugely positive, because it is up to us to attract employers into Crawley by ensuring that they have access to skilled workers.

### **Cllr Gordon Seekings**

That is correct, but there are always two sides to the argument. Until my present employment I worked on the industrial estate for a firm that no longer has a presence here and are not represented at this debate. I can assure you that they had a very highly-skilled workforce, including people holding City & Guilds telecommunications qualifications.

However, they did not run training courses because they relied on recruiting workers who had previously worked and trained at other companies. They were trading on our experiences with other firms, so they did not invest and I am happy to say they are no longer in the town. So the council must do as much as possible to facilitate training among Crawley residents, but business organisations should also have robust training schemes to provide for the specific requirements of your companies, which you obviously know better than we do.

### **Cllr Brenda Smith**

I agree with both the speakers, and this does go back to managing people's aspirations. Claire mentioned Crawley's past, and it has wholly changed in character over the years. The town was an engineering base with huge companies moving down from London with workforces already in place. The second generation came forward into much larger companies, but those companies had their own training teams and apprenticeships.

My husband worked as a lecturer at Crawley College 40 years ago and ran the apprenticeship scheme for the industries based at Manor Royal. When that closed down he went to London, and for the last 18 years of his working life he taught engineering, maths and technical drawing in South East London and there was no more training of that sort in Crawley. That is where the gap has occurred, because we no longer have the training companies and we do not have investment from companies in our young people.

We know that skill levels are dropping. The skills needed in Crawley are now very much based around the service industry and not heavy or light industry, so we must bring forward the skills that we need now. Claire is absolutely correct that we have problems with large companies offering good money to young people without teaching them any valuable skills. We have to raise the

aspirations of our children so that they do aspire to good jobs. That is why people will come to Crawley, because they are looking for jobs.

A few years ago we were looking at the future of Gatwick Airport and the possibility of a second runway, and all of the Panel members were part of the One's Enough campaign in Crawley who fought the second runway. However, we also looked at the aspirations of the townpeople for more employment, while bearing in mind the fact that we do not only want low-skilled work. The work must be the kind that will allow the second and third generation to acquire skills that will make them into the management workforce of the town. In that way we will not have to bring those skills in from outside.

### **Michael Coughlin**

What we have identified is a lag between the skills of our workforce and the change that has taken place in our economy over the last 20 or 30 years. Looking to the future, there are clearly a number of tiers of skills, education and training in the town, and with the new secondary schools that have been built over the last three or four years there have been distinct improvements in GCSE and A-Level results coming out of those schools, so the base level of qualifications is improving.

There has been some very innovative work between Central Sussex College and East Surrey College, and that has brought the Skills Escalator into play around the Gatwick Diamond. This allows people to move from HNDs through to A-Levels, foundation degrees and further degrees, and although that work is in its early stages the next phase will be to involve the area's universities. We have the principal of Brighton University here today, and his institution is heavily involved with pupils in Central Sussex College, enabling them to go from GCSEs through to degrees, and we are looking to develop that further.

There is also the potential addition of a university presence in Crawley itself, and that would also feed back into the panel members' hopes of raising the aspirations of the town's young people, as well as feeding back into the business need for skills in Crawley. Furthermore, we are not far away from the Gatwick Training Centre at the airport, and with it there is a change in the perception that was prevalent when I was in the town 30 years ago that the airport was somewhere you went if you only wanted to have to push a broom around.

We are also working with the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA), representatives of which are also present here today, while on the Manor Royal estate we have companies such as Varian, Thales and Virgin. They are all doing excellent things in terms of workforce training, taking people through to a phenomenal level of skill. A recent SEDA board visit to Thales looked at their flight simulator technology, and those who had been trained to use it were at a level that is perhaps beyond any of us on the Panel today. That collaborative range of activities is going on across the town, where everyone has a role to play, and by working together and understanding each other's role we can address the concerns that have been set out here.

### **Andrew Snowdon, Laserhub**

I would like to widen the debate on skills a little. My leisure business employs around 30 people in the centre of Crawley. It is easy to become too focused on skills and training, although I do recognise that it is very important. Certainly, one thing that could greatly improve the image of this town is a university offering a wide range of courses. Consequently, I hope that this will be pushed strongly by the panel, and anyone in the business community.

However, we should not take an overly two-dimensional approach. 75% of my customers come from outside the town, and they see that the people who work here are generally from Crawley. Those that I employ, mainly on a part-time basis, may plan to go on to Oxbridge and are expected to gain five A grades at A Level. These are high-flying students, but they are doing a mundane job, and that allows us to train them to work, which itself is a very important skill.

Skills cannot only comprise formal education, it also comes down to learning how to work and take pride in what you do, and I often have to teach these people a great deal about this aspect of employment. I have managers joining the company who have degrees, or a wide variety of skills, along with those who are embarking on a second career. They are skilled not only by virtue of their education, but because we provide a training ground for them to learn how to work.

This is not supported by a government training scheme or Local Authority benefits. It is supported only by our own time and effort, which is probably much more substantial than would be the case in larger businesses. Many small businesses are disparaged for not spending enough on training, and the service industry is seen as taking on people for low-level employment, but that is a two-dimensional view.

The people who work for me are supporting their university careers and learning to work, so please do not stick to the simplistic view that skills must necessarily equate to organised training courses, important though they are.

### **Cllr Gordon Seekings**

I don't think any of us is denigrating people who do not have formalised training. When I was at BT, I worked in their customer service department. I underwent an extensive 14 weeks of training before I was allowed to pick up a telephone and talk to a customer. I ran a call centre where many of the employees had come straight from school. We taught them a lot about how to talk to people, and look them in the eye, and the little things which are skills both for work and life. I like to think that some of those people are still dotted around Crawley, and they will go on to better things because we had instilled in them a sense of their own capabilities. It is not this kind of non-formalised training that I would criticise, rather that firms are not spending enough time developing their staff.

### **Cllr Robert Lanzer**

Thank you for your comment, Andrew, which I think is very accurate. My understanding of what you say is that the workplace, and your workplace in particular, is naturally a learning environment without the need for formalised initiatives.

### **Dawn Allen, Train to Gain South East.**

We have heard a lot about training, and the pros and cons of qualifications versus training, and I think that Train to Gain and the skills brokerage is still a very well-kept secret. It offers free impartial advice on training and skills to develop your staff and enhance your business. The brokerage does not focus specifically on qualifications or training, but on helping you to find the best way to develop your staff, whether in house, on the job or by creating a learning culture.

Financial help is also available, via the funding schemes that you can tap into. There are eligibility criteria, which can be challenging, but it is important to know that we have nine skills brokers across Sussex alone. I cover Crawley, but we also have brokers across the South East region.

The collaborative approach has also been mentioned, and it is important that we embrace and make the most of what we already have. By working together, we need not look at an agenda not only for training and developing stuff, but also to help business thrive in the long term. Please be aware that help is available for you, and our free impartial advice will help you and your staff to develop your business.

### **Jeremy Taylor**

There are many schemes and advisers around that can help businesses at all stages of development. My personal agenda is that every school should adopt a business and vice versa, and Madeleine Mills from the Education Business Partnership is here, as are SEDA, as well as Julian from the University of Brighton.

One of the things I have learned from doing this job is that resources are available for businesses, but they can be difficult to locate. Sometimes the income streams are somewhat hidden, and Claire is right to say that it is tricky to know how to communicate how to get involved, especially bearing in mind that you all have your own businesses to run. The effort and work is worth it, however, and there are people here who can help you with that.

### **Question**

Transport is another subset of the issues around Manor Royal. The estate has been a second class citizen in Crawley for the last 40 years. It is in a time warp, because it is still viewed as a 1960s industrial estate, so it is encouraging to hear that we now have a Manor Royal study. However, I would like to know whether the panel can elaborate on when that study will become an action plan, and how and when any plans might be implemented.

We have seen some improvements in terms of transport, such as Fastway and more recently easit, but they really only address the symptoms of the problem. We have transport problems. A lack of services in Manor Royal means that people need to travel to Crawley town centre at lunchtimes, which aggravates those problems. What can Crawley Borough Council do to improve the services in Manor Royal?

### **Cllr Claire Denman**

The Manor Royal study was instigated on behalf of the Local Economy Action Group, one of our partners, which fits under the wider Local Strategic Partnership. These groups take a holistic approach to what is best for local economies and communities, and they receive a strong steer from the highest level.

The study is owned partly by the Local Economy Action Group and partly by the Local Authority. The former are currently working at disseminating the information that has come out of that study, allowing us to work out how we can bring the necessary improvements forwards. The study was only conducted and approved within the last two months, at the end of a very long process.

We are now trying to work out which elements represent potential quick wins, and which initiatives will take longer to implement. In terms of transport, Brenda probably remembers best the days of the old Manor Royal, when everyone turned up on their bicycles. Those days are long gone, and people now come to the estate in cars, travelling from places as diverse as the South Coast and the top of the Gatwick Diamond. That represents a huge problem as a lot of people try to access a small area via relatively narrow roads.

It would be unrealistic for me to suggest that the problem with the roads can be quickly resolved, so we are using easit as one of the means of finding mechanisms to alleviate the problems via new initiatives. The aim of this meeting in particular is to bring businesses together to discuss the required improvements as identified by the Manor Royal visioning exercise, which will hopefully result in real-time improvements.

I apologise if this sounds vague, but if I were to turn around and claim that I could deliver 10 clear-cut action points at this stage I would be lying. In four months' time, I will be able to deliver just that.

### **Cllr Brenda Smith**

I came to work at Manor Royal on my bike many years ago, as most of the residents of Crawley did. It was like little Holland, but those days are long gone. Listening to this, I realise that I have not heard of easit, even though I have been on the council for many years. I will be sure to find out what it is after this debate ends.

That shows clearly that communication is very important, as it informs everyone's ability to access what is here. Manor Royal has always suffered from the fact that it does not really have elected councillors of its own, and the businesses have always been focused on their own affairs. Perhaps there should be a collective, like the Town Centre Partnership, to help Manor Royal address its problems. I think that may be what the Local Economy Action Group is doing, but it is only a recent development in the town.

For many years businesses have just gone about their own, in house business. I recall that some time ago Manor Royal businesses requested that the Crawley Borough Council clear up the parked vans and burger vans, and the environmental health department waged war on what seemed like hundreds of fast food vans. It is a good thing that chains such as Subway and several pizza companies are now moving in because people will not have to travel to the town centre at lunchtime. However, I remember years ago that companies had their own facilities, with excellent staff canteens and subsidised food. People never left their company, and although I am sure that is no longer the case I know that I would appreciate it if my company provided hot meals during the day.

Furthermore, there are certainly things that individual companies could be doing in addition to the collective action that we have identified. I recently retired from West Sussex County Council as a professional road safety officer, and I know that the county runs the TravelWise scheme to encourage businesses to introduce the initiative into their companies, which can be an enormous aid to reducing transport use. That would in turn feed into green issues, and it is important to remember that the cost to the environment is something that we must not lose sight of when discussing how we get workers in and out of the area.

**Cllr Gordon Seekings**

My house in Northgate is close to a subway which runs from the road to the industrial estate. I have lived there 26 years, and rush hour used to consist of thousands of bicycles going past my house, and there are a few people who still cycle to work every day.

However, the comment I was going to make was around easit. I think that is a classic example of where communication has broken down, because this is the first time I have heard of the initiative. It struck me that the address and contact details of the organisation were in Surrey. I do not know anything about the set-up there, and I am sure that they do a good job, but Brenda and I knew nothing about it and it is based outside the county, and those two factors suggest that there have been communication problems somewhere along the line.

**Cllr Claire Denman**

With regard to easit, it is focused on private companies trying to find real-time solutions in partnership with Local Authorities and other agencies. Perhaps Mel can give our members a presentation after the debate.

I would now like to lay down a challenge. I like to think that we could hold this event again next year, when we will have published the Manor Royal visioning exercise with a list of key aims and objectives, and we will be able to come with complete plans for their delivery.

**Jeremy Taylor**

Thank you very much. We have reached the end of our allotted time. I know that there are some questions that have not been covered, such as the council's procurement policy. I have raised that with the council, so I hope that something will come back to you after this event finishes. If there are any further questions, please put them to the members over refreshments. Finally, I would like to thank the members of the panel for their time and you, the delegates, for coming to this debate.

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