

Liberal Democrat Leader Budget Speech 2019

Members won't perhaps be too surprised to learn that I enjoy writing speeches. I only wish that my joy was matched by those that have to listen to them.

The annual budget speech is the one chance I get to provide Council colleagues with a reflections on the performance of this council, how it uses the resources available to it and to offer some alternatives to that being proposed by the Leader.

Can I start, please, with a message of thanks.

Thank you to the officers and staff of the Council for all that you do, delivering services to our residents, not always in the most ideal circumstances. I think this Council has always been blessed with high calibre employees who work really hard, with a strong public service ethic. I hugely admire their fortitude, often facing uncertainty about the future, having to cope with huge demands, but always delivering for our residents.

And on the subject of thanks, I am grateful also to fellow Councillors, Conservative, Independent and Liberal Democrat, for another year of doing what we do, usually in a friendly manner. With elections around the corner, may I wish everyone, particularly those choosing to stand down, all the very best for the future.

Some of you will be hoping to retain the confidence of the voters, subjecting yourself to the possibility of my company for another 4 years. That deserves some respect.

In my memorable speech of 2018, I made six requests.

The first of these was to ask that you lobby government to abolish the post of Police & Crime Commissioner. I don't believe you accepted that challenge. I can only say that most of our residents are dismayed by the lack of community policing. Police resources are far too thin on the ground. The police we have are doing an incredible job. However, for too long, the numbers of officers have been allowed to reduce, whilst the demands on them have heavily increased. We have a police force that can only react to crimes already committed, rarely deter it from happening in the first place.

We should be playing our part in making our communities safer and I commend the actions of some of you who are trying hard to allay community fears and offer advice and assistance and support the police. However, I feel that a remote Police & Crime Commissioner is no substitute for what should be direct accountability of locally elected Councillors who understand what their communities are suffering and should have the means to decide on the right level of resources.

My second plea was for the Council to improve performance when it comes to housing. None of us can feel proud about the lack of affordable housing in the district. It's an increasingly common situation now that our young people are forced to move away from the New Forest area because of very high house prices. Free market economics isn't delivering for our young people. I am extremely discomforted by the fact that some of our New Forest villages comprise of 50% or more of second homes for wealthy people.

I know that the ability of this Council is restrained by government policy such as the loss of half our housing stock under the "Right to Buy" scheme. However, if you conservatives cannot, or will not, influence a conservative government, who else will?

My third plea? I am sure you will remember it. It was to improve our performance when it comes to recycling. Most people would expect a place like the New Forest, much of it a National Park, to have a first rate record when it comes to recycling.

Not even being in the top 300 of 351 local authorities is a bit embarrassing. I don't see much action being taken locally that is likely to improve matters.

Judging by what I read, it may be necessary for central government to compel this authority to collect food waste and provide a free garden waste scheme. Almost everyone I know thinks that recycling could and should be made simpler. Are we too proud to take on lessons from better performing authorities? Are we too short-sighted when it comes to removing most of the bring back mini recycling sites around the New Forest?

My fourth plea was that you start behaving in a more pro-active fashion. In some ways, this Council has been very sluggish. Other local authorities realised the benefits of commercial property investments a decade or so ago. I suspect that all the relatively lower risk, higher return investments have all been snaffled up. I have grave doubts about entering the market at this late stage in the knowledge that there will very likely be a downturn in the economy. I am also decidedly uncomfortable with the idea that delivery of vital public services should depend on having a good year of investments.

It pains me also to remind you that had you resolved to reduce the number of Council members by about a third when I first proposed it, we would already be better off to the tune of about £400,000.

My fifth plea was about good governance. Many of you have remarked privately to me how unhappy they are with the decision making processes of the Council. We have seen a very small number of elite Councillors get to decide what happens, with most of the other members feeling that they can't give proper scrutiny or challenge for fear of appearing disloyal to the ruling group.

I would also say be honest with the voters. You may have always denied that you would privatise the Health & Leisure Centres. The fact that you have decided to spend £100,000 on exploring a different model of running them is something you are entitled to do, but such an idea never appeared in a Conservative manifesto and the decision to do so was undertaken without any consultation.

It really seem a bit pathetic to now insist that you are only considering a “partnership” when the likely outcome is that the management of the centres will be completely taken away from the Council, and staff transferred from our employment. It is “privatisation”.

My final, sixth, plea was aimed at bringing in some extra money, to offer support for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community. I invited you to consider the idea of a voluntary extra council tax payment, which could bring in a few hundred thousand pounds, (as it has done in the case of Westminster City Council).

Sadly, this idea has not been adopted. Perhaps, another opportunity lost.

Chairman, I recognise a brick wall when I see it. The forthcoming elections give me an opportunity to go around the wall, rather than for me to be bashing my head against it with a detailed alternative budget.

The political times are changing. I would invite any members who listened carefully to what I have said to consider whether they want the Council to carry on as now or maybe to switch their tribal allegiance and improve things. I am always available for a coffee and a chat.

Councillor David Harrison
Leader, New Forest Liberal Democrat Group
New Forest District Council.