

Budget Speech 2021.

Good Evening,

I want to start by paying tribute to everyone who has helped in whatever way they have, responding to the pandemic. Officers and staff have been absolutely brilliant.

When I gave my last opposition budget speech, I really had no idea as to the deep and lasting impact the spread of the Corona virus would have. I could not have imagined the lives lost, the suffering that comes from Covid related symptoms, the impact on people's lives generally, and on businesses. Let's face it. It has been a hammer blow. It will take a long time to recover from.

For some of us, the help and sacrifice was limited to respecting the restrictions. For many, this included the pain of not seeing family members and cuddles with grand children.

Others have been able to do more. I have been deeply impressed by the way members of the community organised voluntary support, often without prompting from official sources – whether it was helping people who would otherwise be isolated, with food and medicines, helping in the food banks, at the vaccination centres, providing transport, litter picking and clearing footpaths. It has been truly awe inspiring.

From the outset, the Liberal Democrat opposition group offered to support and work with the administration when it came to the District Council's response to the pandemic. I am proud of my team for doing so. At times, it has simply been a question of stepping aside and letting things happen without involving the party politics. All Councillors, whether you are in the blue tribe or yellow tribe, recognise when it is right to partner up in the face of a National emergency.

I pay tribute to the District Council workforce. It really cannot have been easy being forced to rapidly adapt to new methods of working. I like to think that Councillors understood the scale of the challenge and were more understanding when the Council was at great strain with things like home working increasingly the “new normal” along with some staff even taking on new roles, such as the Health & Leisure Instructors helping with household waste collection.

In the context of partnership working, it is rather more difficult for an opposition group to operate normally. However, I felt that it was important that we did our job, which is on the one hand to take collective responsibility for what the Council does, but also to hold the administration to account and challenge those things where it is appropriate to do so.

Another important thing to remember and never forget is that although much attention has rightly been given to the pandemic crisis, there is another crisis which has equally damaging or even more serious consequences should we fail to take action. I refer, of course, to climate change. It is an emergency, even if the administration here declined to acknowledge this. We will support any actions which reduce carbon emissions, even if it means things like permanent virtual meetings.

As most of you should know, we do think that it is a mistake to pursue privatisation of the management of our Health & Leisure Centres, especially at this time. We participated fully in the task and finish groups and only withdrew when it became clear that our views about the disadvantages and lack of a public mandate to pursue the policy was not being listened to.

Similarly, my group has been consistently critical of the very poor recycling record of the District Council, to the point that the administration are now claiming that they are being more or less forced into adopting a new system, using wheelie bins. This is of course, a big about turn on the part

of the administration that always used to campaign in elections, accusing the Liberal Democrat opposition of wanting to impose wheelie bins.

Whether it is a blanket denial of what you are doing to the Health & Leisure Centres, a complete turn around on Wheelie bins, decisions to spend excessive amounts on Concrete beach huts or local government re-organisations.... there is a common theme. It is a refusal to understand the need for proper consultation, which isn't merely asking the right questions, but framing policy around what our residents actually want.

In two years', time we will be looking at District wide elections through a very different prism. A much-reduced Council size (a lib Dem initiative don't forget): very different ways of talking to the electorate, a reduction of our staff by 40% once the leisure centres have gone; the very real economic impact of Brexit and the costs of the mistakes made through the pandemic. It will be a very bumpy ride for the Conservatives.

A very important difference in the way we run the council would be in true partnership with the community we represent. I know Conservatives take the view that if they gain control of the council, they must direct everything using a very centralist Cabinet system of governance. They even think it is necessary and advantageous to have Conservatives in all the lead scrutiny positions because that way, there is little challenge or holding to account.

In China during the late Mao period it was known as the Gang of Four. Here we have the Gang of Eight running it all. That came to an abrupt end too.

Liberal Democrats believe that democracy works best and better decisions are made when you don't adopt the attitude that the Council policy is really what eight Cabinet members decide. We think also that much more could and should be done in engaging with the public, whether by use of social media or other means.

Liberal Democrats have been looking right across Europe at the way local authorities communicate with the public. We are way behind the curve and a much more active online, younger, electorate are beginning to find their voice and their vote.

We will carry on doing what we are doing – sometimes supporting, sometimes challenging, but always with the best interests of the community at heart.

We know that a wholesale opposition budget redraft that reflects our wishes would never be accepted, so we are not proposing one. Of course, it doesn't mean that we accept what you are doing in all areas, particular the closure of public toilets, the wasteful vanity projects and the privatisation of our much loved Health & Leisure Centres.

However, reflecting our support for local businesses, particularly the local retailers, we tried to make a stand for their benefit, by doing precisely what Conservative Councillors in Totton have asked for and indeed Conservative Councillors in opposition in Southampton are always asking for – a few months suspension of car parking charges, to attract shoppers and get them spending locally. Of course, it is what you do on the run up to Christmas. These are unusual times, real businesses are under the sort of extreme pressure that can only be helped if we share some of the pain and use reserves to stop them going bankrupt and then see the consequence of loss of business rates.