

### Liberal Democrat Leader - Budget Speech February 2016

I don't think any of us can remember a more difficult time for local government, having to deal with severe cuts in funding from central government, whilst having to pull off the almost impossible trick of keeping services running whilst avoiding punitive council tax increases.

In all that we do, we have to have regard for what the people of the New Forest want.

I want to start by saying something about delivery. Delivery is the bit that our officers and staff do, carrying out the wishes of elected members. We have been particularly blessed by having high quality officers over the years. It's always sad when really good ones move on.

Never more have I had that sense when attending the leaving celebration of our Director, John Mascall. It was patently obvious, just from the number of people who attended, what high regard and respect he was held in.

Such times, bring us together and help us reflect. John was one of a number of really good officers and there are others who will follow.

So a general thank you, to all officers, some of whom slipped away rather more quietly, for all the work that you did and of course a special thanks to those who are still with us !

### Housing

We are all well aware the Council has had a waiting list of about five thousand or so people waiting for a home to live in, for over a decade.

Whatever view you take on the "Right to Buy" policy, it has meant the District has lost half it's council housing stock. Housing demand, especially for young people, has never been higher.

We, or I should say, our taxpayers, are paying £300,000 a year putting people up in temporary Bed & Breakfast accommodation. It's great news for B & B owners but bad news for the families in this temporary accomodation and bad news for the taxpayers. I can only hope that the policies and practices of this council start to turn things around – and quickly.

I hope we can learn some lessons from the situation at Savoy House, Totton, late last year. As I said at the time, well done for finding alternative accommodation for the fifty or so residents affected, but it surely can't be right where things have got to the stage where there are damp & mould health issues, fire safety risks, serious defects in the building and asbestos. A long hard look at the Councils' leasing arrangements is required.

### Leisure & Health

I recently visited and was shown around Totton's Health & leisure Centre. It a really high quality facility, well run, with good staff. I'm sure this is true of the other centres.

The staff will be somewhat perplexed that you are once again reviewing the structures and the model of delivery with a view to achieving efficiencies, when you have already ruled out my

suggestion of a fresh look at the number of Councillors we have, the need for so many and the savings that could be achieved if we downsized in line with the staffing structures.

I would guess that we all agree, the council should be encouraging people to exercise and lead healthy lifestyles. This is especially important for the increasingly older population.

One older customer of our Health & Leisure Centres, complained that they don't feel welcome anymore. It seems likely that some will have been put off renewing an annual membership when asked to pay an extra £121 a year.

I think also that the recent research that shows children, in this relatively affluent country, are so woefully low on the happiness scores. I think that this Council has a role to play in examining the causes of that and thinking about what we might do, with others, to try and reverse this. This is the next generation we are concerned with. Frankly, it looks to me like we aren't given them enough freedom to play. If I have an amendment, it's that we set up a task & finish group to deal with this.

I also want this Council to move quickly and appoint a Champion for mental health. We are a little bit behind others, including Hampshire County Council. It's partly symbolic, to demonstrate that we understand what a neglected area this has been in the past, but also practical, to have somebody supporting initiatives that improve the lot of people who have mental health challenges and oversee our policies with this topic uppermost in their minds.

## **Environment**

I think I was right to request a review of car parking charges across the New Forest. The world won't collapse if it's delayed a year, but I do think that the opportunity to generate extra income, better manage traffic and help local businesses has been delayed.

The council should be full square against any cuts to the Household Waste Recycling Centres in the New Forest. Any closure will likely lead to more fly tipping and increase the costs to this council. You members can join the 1,900 residents who have already signed the petition I raised about the Marchwood tip, as well as contributing to the formal consultation.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the issues of dog fouling, on our pavements and on our green areas, including recreation grounds and sports pitches. I cannot be the only Councillor who is always getting complaints about this. Even where we supply bins, the problem persists. It's time, I think, to get tough and start prosecuting the irresponsible owners. We have just had another year of zero prosecutions. We have those powers, we should use them and perhaps more importantly, we should advertise the fact that we are doing so.

Air quality is also a major issue, somewhat surprising when you consider this is the New Forest. I can exclusively reveal that a report will be published tomorrow that will shock many people when it comes to determining the risk to human health from polluted air. There are no safe levels, which is why I won't be supporting any moves to revoke Air Quality Management areas in the District. I urge all members to read the research which will be heavily covered in the media, embargoed until Midnight tonight.

## **Governance**

I'm supportive of restructuring the Council, to make it more effective and to reflect the changing economic conditions that the authority operates in. Normally, with such severe cuts in income, the phrase "No Stone unturned" is the phrase in looking to make savings.

Let me say here – just as I did at Hampshire County Council – I am no fan of the Cabinet system. It means that only a handful of members get to make most of the decisions.

It surely can't be right that, at a time when we are making the case for devolution, a transfer of powers from central government to local government, we aren't doing anything at all about empowering locally elected Councillors to discuss and vote on things by way of a committee system.

We need to get our own house in order, to make this council more democratic, before we can adopt new powers. I don't know whether you have long, good quality debates at your conservative group meetings. Perhaps you do. The way in which scrutiny works is sadly lacking. I have tried the method of "Calling In" decisions. Any fair minded individual would say that I had a reasonable point asking why car parking charges weren't being reviewed and the wisdom of older people being asked to pay a massive increase in health & leisure Centre memberships.

My experience wasn't that the committees who considered the call in, having a good, robust debate about the advantages and disadvantages of what I was suggesting. All I got was a rather bad tempered and defensive statement from the Portfolio Holders who had the attitude that I was entirely out of order challenging them and committees who felt it inappropriate to reconsider the issue afresh.

What I want is to empower the back benchers, Yes, I am your Champion ! I want to give you a sense that it is worthwhile attending formal meetings of the council, that you can shape and change policy for the better.

I know that a lot of members here supported my call to reduce the number of Councillors, both to save money and mirror the cuts that we are making in staff and management.

Many authorities, up and down the country, of different political persuasion, have decided this is only the right thing to do. I urge you to re-think your decision. It's a moral obligation. Most of the public think that we could manage perfectly well with rather less Councillors, especially in wards that are represented by two people.

The Council motto is "Old but ever New", it isn't "Same old, Same old". When things change and we can do more, by means of technology or other ways of working, embrace the changes.

We are all about protecting the quality of life, whether it's the air that we breath, providing great homes for people to live in, safe & secure communities with easy access to public transport, leisure facilities that people of all ages welcome.

Underpinning all that we do should be a sense of social justice. Life is difficult for many in our community. The people who are forced to use food banks, the people without housing, the youngster who can't work because there is no bus service. Those who who don't enjoy good physical or mental health.

As leader of the opposition, I could have utilised some officer time, putting together and distributing an alternative budget. It seemed to me a pretty fruitless thing to do. Even if secretly asked George Osborne, to put it together – not one conservative would vote for it, although I would have some fun revealing the truth afterwards !

So, I will maintain my stance. I will work constructively much, or even most, of the time. However, it is hugely to the benefit of this Council that there is an opposition. Two of us who can question the wisdom of decisions, sometimes putting out a public challenge, holding you to account and asking that you justify what you are doing.

Finally, can I just say, that a lot of you have been looking rather depressed and despondent in recent months. I don't know if this is because of the awfully long winter, the economic situation or indeed the need to make cuts upon cuts which you don't always support.

There are vacancies in the Lib Dem party for anyone wanting to cross the floor, who finds themselves agreeing with the things that I say and do and the campaigns I run. I'm not saying your life will be at all easier or more comfortable. Why, you have even decided to take away our office and make us homeless !

But Lib Dems don't require all the trappings. I do think some of you are in the wrong party,

particularly those that are for staying in the European Union.... and you may like to remember that there is more potential to grow my party than your own.

So that's it Chairman, no specific budget amendment that others can pick apart and ridicule, but an important contribution which underlines a different vision for this authority. Do, please consider my ideas for what we might be able to do for increasing happiness amongst our children – and not entirely unconnected, appointing a Champion for mental health. Thank you.