

Liberal Democrat Leader - Budget Speech 2018

Some of my fellow members will be sad to learn that this will be my final budget speech.... for this year.

Only last week, I spoke at Hampshire County Council, making the point that conservatives have nobody else to blame but themselves for increasing council tax and cutting services.

The Conservative Chairman of the Local Government association, Lord Porter, expressed his view of the Chancellor's Autumn budget.

"It's hugely disappointing that the budget offered nothing to ease the financial crisis facing local services". I could not have put it better myself.

Local Government should be valued. I think the public value what we do, more than central government does.

It talks about devolving power, but look what it does in practice. On something we all care very deeply about... **crime and anti-social behaviour**. It's put all the decision making in the hands of one man, the Police & Crime Commissioner. Now I don't like to personalise politics, but when he behaves the way he does, it's hard not to. The phrase "Remote arrogant and out of touch" with what we need doesn't come close.

When he tried setting a budget recently, it was voted down by the Police Panel, including all the conservative Councillors who could see that the absolute stupidity in what he was trying to do, doubling the size of his office operation, whilst losing 110 front line police officers.

Leader, whatever you proposed in your budget this evening, it would not have topped his efforts. It is high time that we dropped the whole idea of Police & Crime Commissioners and got back to local Councillors holding the Chief Constable to account and setting the budgets.

So my **first plea**, is for you to start lobbying for this to happen. Otherwise, our communities, already hit by crime and lack of police resources are only going to suffer more.... and I note that the governments answer to overcrowded prisons is to release prisoners early. What impact do we suppose that will have?

My **second plea** is about **housing**. We know that good, secure, well-maintained housing is a pre-requisite to living any sort of quality life. We have a housing waiting list of over three thousand people for the best part of twenty years whilst we have lost half our council housing.

I acknowledge that, for some, home ownership is something to be applauded. But it should never have been allowed to happen at the expense of depriving others of no home at all to live in. Can it be right that we have so many families forced to endure living in Bed & Breakfast accommodation and others homeless, even "sofa surfing". I cannot be the only Councillor who regularly receives pleas of help from people with really serious housing issues.

I applaud the work of the housing officers. They do an incredible job without the means to fulfil demands for housing, whether it be those without any housing or those with housing that doesn't meet their needs. Meeting housing need must be a corporate priority, not beach huts, or even super beach huts, but housing.

What sort of crazy government is it that has decided Councils can borrow money to speculate on commercial property deals, including shopping centres elsewhere in the country, whilst denying you the ability to replace the council housing lost under the "Right to buy" scheme here in the New Forest, where we have people desperately frustrated on long waiting lists for any housing for years and years?

Third plea; On recycling waste,

South Oxfordshire District Council, also run by the Conservatives, came first in the 2015/16 municipal waste recycling tables. Their recycling, reuse and composting rates are a phenomenal 67.3%. By contrast, our recycling rate was 29.8%.

Come on folks, let's get our act together. We are in **317th** place out of 351 local authorities when it comes to performance.

I think the public here are confused about what items can be recycled. I think we have made it more difficult for them. Removing most of the well-used "Bring Back" sites across the New Forest has only reduced the amounts of recycling and all the new charges and threats to close or restrict access to the Household Waste recycling Centres, hasn't helped at all.

Fourth plea: Be Pro-active

It's right that this authority has downsized and is working smarter. We Liberal Democrats show just what can be done with small numbers.

Members will know that I have always been supportive of moves that would improve the operational efficiency of this Council. Let me say, at this point, that I am immensely impressed by the quality of our Council employees. It's very clear to me that they are hard-working, professional and have shown huge commitment to public service in all the different areas they operate in.

I am glad that you have finally agreed to ask the Electoral Commission to look at downsizing the number of members. It doesn't matter that it was my proposal originally. However, I don't accept that it will take five years or more for it to be implemented. There is a large sum of public money at stake here. Tell them that we expect them to be able to review this within months and that we want a smaller authority for the next administration.

So, what, I hear you ask, would be different under a Liberal Democrat administration?

I will start by pledging that there will be a lot less of doing things without thought for the consequences to others. It's good to talk. Even the Conservative led Peer Review recognised the need to work better with the National Park Authority.

You will also see a lot more lobbying for a better deal from government. This Council almost never troubles the postbag of our two MP's, or even plays any active role within the Local Government Association. We can therefore hardly expect to get a better deal than we do. We need to grow a spine and start asserting ourselves with the powers that be.

My party has a clear vision for reforming things in the New Forest and I hope to publish the detailed manifesto in the next few weeks.

Fifth plea: Good Governance - Sometimes, good governance is about what you don't do, rather than what you do. Please no more, time, energy and expense in dealing with reviews and proposals for changing local government structures. It's already cost taxpayers about £1 million, with nothing to show for it.

And don't send letters out to residents informing them that they owe one penny on council tax. I have an example of that here. It surely makes no sense at all to incur costs a hundred times greater than the size of the debt you seek to recover. Let's make sure our computer systems are programmed not to waste money.

Sixth plea: Let's help where it is most needed....

Whether this issue is lack of adequate housing, subsidised transport, an absence of support for children in the early years, mental health issues, crime and anti-social behaviour or lonely, isolated older people, I think that this Council should and could be doing much more to support the people who need it.

With long waits on housing lists with thousands of people, we have taken away hope. We have taken away a quality of life everyone should feel entitled to. We are not offering hope and a home to young families. We are only offering yet more years in cramped and difficult conditions.

Members, we should be ashamed of ourselves. We have let down a generation of New Forest residents who look to us, their Council, their elected representatives to do something for them.

I am really pleased that you have decided to focus on the issue of homelessness. Frankly, it is a scandal that things have been allowed to get to as bad as they are. We need to look at the new obligations being placed upon us by new legislation and embrace it as an opportunity to help those who have been abandoned. It's why I have agreed to work cross-party and join the panel.

I think we can look towards the positive approaches taken by Winchester City Council and well away from the really negative things that Bournemouth Council have tried.

I have a specific proposal, an amendment to your budget plans that I would like to offer for consideration.

I think we all recognise that the way council tax works is unfair. It's a regressive tax. Every time it increases above inflation, it has a disproportionate impact on lower income residents.

Reform isn't going to happen anytime soon, so as a temporary measure, I would like you to consider this.

I am not claiming this as our own, unique, idea. In fact, I have taken this initiative from Westminster Council, who – like us – have a large number of wealthy people living in their area, many of whom say that they are concerned about public services and particularly issues such as homelessness and foodbanks and that they would be willing to pay a bit more council tax if it was used to alleviate the worst impacts of poverty in their area.

Westminster Councillors, have decided to write to all owners of "Band H" properties, worth more than £1 million and above, asking that they pay a voluntary extra sum. I cannot think of any good reason why we shouldn't at least try such an initiative here in the New Forest.

So the motion is "This authority, when sending out council tax bills, includes an invitation to residents living in Band H properties to pay a voluntary additional sum of £100, £250 or £500 which the council will use to support programmes that maintain and improve public services, especially those that have most impact on the poorest, most vulnerable members of our community".

Thank you for listening. I so move.