

Mr Mayor,

I would like to start by empathising with the Leader - he has had to present the toughest budget that I am sure that any of us will have seen. I would also like to thank Cllr Packman for providing me with a preview of the speech. Not only does this allow me to better respond to what he has said, but also to guarantee that the Liberal Democrats can commit to a 40% cut - in the number of words that I will use.

This speech will set out a range of concerns about the budget and some of the decisions of the Council - I think that is what most people would expect. I would however also like to recognise that although the opposition voice is most often raised in protest, there are many things that happen across Spelthorne with which we can agree.

The Leader has picked out for special mention the completion of Mitchison Court and the reopening of the Benwell Day Centre. The Liberal Democrats opposed the original proposal to close the Day Centre and sell the site for commuter flats. Although we have been critical of the design of the building, which was an overdevelopment of the site, we now welcome the extra care facility, the return of the Day Centre and recognise the hard work that has gone into the project.

We are fully behind the regeneration programmes for Ashford, Shepperton and Sunbury. Supporting a principle does not mean that one cannot criticise or seek improvements. In the case of the regeneration programme we are concerned that the good work being done may be undermined by changes to parking charge policies by Surrey County Council. We need to support local businesses who are being threatened by the seemingly inexorable rise of the out of town supermarkets. The regeneration work will be severely undermined if the proposed charges cannot be stopped.

We welcome the decline in reported crime and the strength of Neighbourhood Watch in the Borough. To me these demonstrate the strength of “community spirit” in Spelthorne. It may prove hard to maintain improvements in coming years as the impact of central government cuts are really felt. We must not allow the energy and effort of the local partnerships to fall victim to short-term financial expediency.

We also recognise the value of sub-letting parts of this building to partner organisations. This looks like a triple-whammy: income plus closer working plus better use of an expensive community building. This type of partnership working benefits everyone.

Turning away from praise where praise is due, I can see areas in which I believe the Council has either failed to act correctly or is not doing all that it should.

In terms of partnerships the Council is not moving fast enough. Many other Local Authorities have made or are in the process of making giant strides in this direction, but we appear to be only dipping our toes in the water. All across Surrey there are Borough Councils doing exactly the same things on their own - and almost all of these Boroughs are Conservative controlled. There seems to me to be a lack of both the will and the leadership across Surrey to make really substantial saving by partnership working. The savings planned in the budget demonstrate the potential but fall far short of what might be achieved. I appreciate that this is not simple, as partnerships by definition need all parties to want the same things. This must be pursued with real vigour at both the Officer and the political level.

Most improvements come from the refinement of original or good ideas. This Council does not encourage the level of member involvement that I believe could benefit the Council and local residents. The ruling Group seem to regard scrutiny as something negative which is best avoided. Today's budget has received no member's scrutiny before this presentation and vote. Within the

budget detail are changes which are not explained and which prima facie make no sense. In one place the savings relating to refuse collection are given as £88k and in another there is a figure of £176k. I am sure that both are correct and that they can be reconciled, but how can anyone assess what this might mean in terms of service provision to residents if we do not know the value or what is being saved. When it comes to the vote on this budget, most members will be voting as a blind act of faith.

There is another area where I must voice my deep concerns about the behaviour of Spelthorne's Conservatives over the last year and that is over the so called Eco Park at Charlton Lane. On the question of the name, I agree with the Environment Agency, who describe it in their consultation as "a waste gasification (incineration) facility". This is not an Eco Park it is an incinerator. The report on the suitability of the site was published by Surrey County Council in November 2009 - this report described the Charlton Lane site as "ideal". Spelthorne Council apparently did not obtain a copy of the report until April 2010. When it did get a copy it did nothing to correct any of the errors which the report contains. At almost every Council meeting I have asked for the Council to do something, but on each occasion I have been stonewalled. Only at the end of the process does the Council, as

consultee to the planning application, send a “very strong objection” to Surrey - excuse me for being dissatisfied, but that response is simply too little, too late. This council has entirely failed to listen to residents or demonstrate any leadership. If this incinerator comes to Spelthorne it will be because of the supine attitude adopted by the political powers-that-be in Spelthorne.

I shall now turn to the financial situation in Spelthorne and the budget that has been presented. We have had a 16% cut in grant imposed on us by central government. A similar situation is faced by all the Councils in Surrey - we have no reason to feel especially disadvantaged. The magnitude of the task is illustrated by the fact that the net expenditure we expect in 2011/12 is more than £2m less than only 3 years ago. I have to record my appreciation for the exceptional efforts of Officers to produce a budget that works. This is a thankless task as it not only promotes internal friction but also has to be done at a time when right-wing sections of our media want to characterise all public sector workers as overpaid slackers.

Despite the obviousness of severe spending cuts at the high level it is very difficult to see what services are in the firing line. Neither the reports nor the Leaders speech explained the impact of the financial cuts on the Council’s services. In the report of revenue budget savings

we see listed savings in respect of Refuse Collection, Day Centres, Building Control, Development Control and Housing Benefit administration, however there is no description of the service impact. The Leader assured us that the capacity to deliver services would be maintained - I am very pleased that this is the case. But how can it be the case that we can cut so much out of the finances with no impact on services? On this basis I am very tempted to agree with Eric Pickles, who has repeatedly accused Councils of wasting public money in the past. If all this money can be saved now, why could it not have been saved before? What has the Council been doing? It seems to me that belt-tightening has really only come about when someone else has pulled on the belt.

The lists of revenue growth items and savings are very useful but of somewhat limited value. All we have are numbers and a very brief description. What I really want to know is what action will be taken and what the consequence will be. We also have a mix of income changes, expenditure changes and a few transfers to confuse the issue. Without real transparency we are voting on some interesting numbers, not on the choices this Council will have to make in the next and subsequent years -that is what really matters.

The capital budget is also to be reduced - this is no surprise as there is almost no unallocated capital left. Reserves exist to support the Council through hard times. It is a real shame that Spelthorne decided to spend them in the past as we no longer have the same cushion available to us now - when times are really tough. Since April 2006 the level of unallocated reserves has declined by almost £10m. In that same period we have received over £7.5m in interest on reserves. In the past the importance of the contribution of reserves to Spelthorne's finances was not recognised - it was assumed that we could always sell another asset to top them up. This has proved to be a short-sighted policy. Only now is the Council really trying to match income and expenditure. In outlining this latest budget the Leader made reference to having used £2m of general reserves in former years to bolster revenue expenditure. When I pointed out a similar fact a few years ago I was vilified for making such a suggestion - I am glad that he has round to my point of view at last.

This is necessarily a tough budget - the government has guaranteed that. As a Council we are paying the price not only for Labour excess, but also for a lack of prudence in the past over expenditure. If this budget genuinely reduces expenditure without impact to services, all that has been cut will be waste.

Finally, in anticipation of the criticism that we have not offered an alternative budget, I would say that it is unrealistic for us to do so. To produce this budget will have taken months of Officer effort - I do not believe that it would be productive to seek to repeat the exercise in the name of political hubris. In practice I do not think that the Council has many choices.

For all I know this may be a very good budget, but I find it impossible to know. This budget lacks transparency in terms of the impact on services. I cannot vote “for” something that I cannot understand. This budget should have clearly spelt out the consequences of the financial cuts in terms that we can all understand. This budget demanded that Officers take a different view on spending and this they have done, but there has been no parallel change of approach to providing information to members.

On this basis I shall be voting against this budget and I encourage all members to do the same.