

INDEED Thank you

I enjoyed the tears of frustration and anguish from the party of the bankers to my left – they're not voting for us and certainly not voting for these guys so must be voting for somebody. We are in this position nationally because of the failure of regulation which is the fault of the Labour Party but fundamentally it was not the Labour Party who made these people go out and play. And that is the background to what we see this year and the background to what we will see in future years.

I think the administration has got to be more careful than it has been in previous years, not always to blame 'them out there', 'them up north', 'them in Whitehall' for the difficulties that this council may face. The blame is correct, difficult really to agree with 1(b) but difficult to support anything else in 1. We see a great deal of Conservative Party spin here which makes it impossible for us really to support it. 'Deplores', it says 'the Government's continued use of the council tax as a stealth tax', that's the term that the Conservatives have been using for some time. It's an odious term because it actually gnaws at the fabric of our society, namely the need to pay taxation but actually what strikes us more is when are we going to see the alternative proposals to council tax from these benches or from the national party. We have not seen those proposals. We have made proposals which are workable and yet we see nothing other than 'oh well, let's just fiddle with council tax and complain about it', and this is the thrust of this. I would be more impressed if there were an alternative workable tax which the Conservative Party was proposing.

Over the page, we are told we have to welcome the budget – we can't welcome a budget which needs so many amendments. We are told that there will be an increase of £185,000 in the Youth Connexions Budget – my colleague Aislinn Lee will speak about that later, but that is not the correct figure. We are told that at a time of austerity just before an election that we are all going to be given collectively £1M, £13,000 each to spend in our division. Well, I'm glad you proposed it, not us because it will not go down well on the doorstep, and we see this without anything actually attaching to it in a sense of control and audit. This is something which is capable of grotesque misuse and misappropriation and if used by the villains, misappropriation by the recipients and mistakes by the Member.

We have a system under which whilst we have the right and duty to disagree with our officers - we also have the right and duty to listen to their advice. The £1M scheme is not one which facilitates that. It relies upon a councillor's guess. I don't think that is the appropriate way to spend large amounts of public money at a time of difficulty.

We recognise planned efficiency savings but we would say from these benches that efficiency savings can be harder than ever this year because of the fear faced by our suppliers. Whereas a year ago you might have to wait a week or two for something to be printed, something to be delivered, now you can wait very little time at all, as they sit staring at their printing presses, sit staring at their lathes or whatever, desperate for work. We can drive costs down and we should drive costs down but £17.4M is too modest.

Turning to our own amendments – there are a long series of these – so I will be as swift as possible, so that all of you can keep up.

Increased spending on youth a fair point, very fair point, was made by Ian Laidlaw-Dickson about how we approach youth provision. Yes, we need it on Friday and Saturday nights. We keep getting it wrong in this council – it is far too centred around delivering a curriculum looking after people as pseudo-pupils rather than simply providing them with something to do. That's what they want, something to do. If they are doing something they are not doing something wicked. District Councils get it - we would propose that this money be given to District Council leisure services.

And social workers under CSF and ACS – there is an enormous pressure on salaries, some bonuses, sorry to use that word bonus, but there we go, are provided already to our staff we think they should be increased.

On the environment I notice that it was said we have a proud record of spending on highways and there is a proud record of spending money. Whether it is all spent on highways in the way that we would wish or efficiently, we continue to doubt. As do the residents of Hertfordshire. Nice spin indeed from the administration post-snow, saying thank goodness we can blame all the potholes which we have left unrepaired, all the unrepaired roads that we have suffered complaints about are all now due to snow! Your front page, a good press exercise. Well you know what we think of the press department – lots of them delivering lots of spin. What should be happening, of course, is the sort of thing that we see in other councils. Stockport, oh it's Liberal Democrat control what the heck, nevertheless they do proactive pothole repairs that will save money. That is how you run your house. You don't run around thinking goodness the ceiling's fallen in, let's repair it, you say that ceiling's got a crack in it let's deal with it now. A modest amount of money we discovered when asking officers the question, we think this would be something popular with the people of Hertfordshire and we would urge you to adopt it otherwise we will just put in our manifesto and claim credit for it - you wouldn't want that.

Bus services, we received an eloquent petition this morning about problems with bus services. We propose a massive expansion in order to increase frequency. A bus service which comes once day is not a service at all; a bus service which comes once an hour is barely a service and not one that most of us would use. We go into London - everybody uses buses, why, because you don't have to think about it. If we are going to reduce congestion we have to start moving down this particular road.

We wish to retain one highways manager for district area. There has already been centralisation in Herts Highways and certainly I have been dismayed by the disconnect which is now happening between local members and the centre. When the centre decides the local member loses out. We've seen it with CSF, it's now spreading to Environment.

Gully cleansing: I get fed up with all the complaints about gully cleansing. It is not done often enough. We need to spend more on it to make it more frequent and also to work with districts to clear up the leaves faster.

Monitoring and inspection: everybody knows that our contractors do a bad job from time to time but there is not enough monitoring and inspection to hold those contractors to account. Our footways need to be separately identified as a priority – they are deprioritised at the moment and some of them are turning to gravel.

20 mile per hour limit – now stop messing around with this. I was up in Aberdeen at the weekend having a look around, doing a little bit of work for somebody and everywhere I went in this ‘it’s another Liberal Democrat controlled authority’ it’s just remembered here everywhere I went there were 20 mile per hour zones – no humps – so what the Department of Transport has been telling us may not be 100% true I think is the phrase that we actually use in this chamber. Let’s get on with it, the people want it in side streets it’s a populist policy please take it off us and adopt it yourselves.

A little thing here – tourism. This is the year 2009 is the year in which people will say the Euro is too scary. We can’t afford to go abroad therefore let’s come to this country, let’s come to Hertfordshire. But they are only going to come to Hertfordshire if there is actually someone employed full time telling people that Hertfordshire is not the place which is ignored on the 6 o clock news because nothing interesting ever happens here, but a fine county with a fine developing visitor economy – a small investment at a time of recession and of course, as we all say we need to increase resources spent on scrutiny, that is a spend to save, because if you can’t cover your costs at that modest increase then scrutiny is not working. Scrutiny does work in this authority better than perhaps in many others, but it is under-resourced.

..... we funded by savings reduced the headcount by 1 ½% reducing some senior management posts reducing of course press and publicity. The rubbish all those big thick documents that clutter up our pigeonholes and of course get posted to members, thereby increasing further the costs - we don’t need them - we can cut them back and we can cut back Herts Horizons of which there has been recently yet another complaint, that it is a magazine which seems to be entirely unaware of the ethnic make-up of the county.

Our taxis are charging us too much money , they are feeling the pinch, we have a duty, a public duty, to negotiate down the prices of the taxis that we use for children and others, and anyway we should be reducing procurement costs in highways which seems to be continuing a level of inflation which seems implausible and saying to our contractors, you know what the situation is, you know that we are the only people supplying work – we want to see less money spent.

These are our balanced proposals. I would be very, very pleased if council adopted them and then I wouldn’t have to write a press release, it would just be good stuff, but if you don’t then I have to – I haven’t written it yet – what do you think I’ve brought my laptop in for. I am urging you to save my tired old fingers and to adopt this because this actually makes sense and it does actually generally accord with the ambitions and indeed of the administration and of the official, currently official, opposition.

THANK YOU CHAIRMAN