

Councillor Sandra Dunn – Opposition Speech on Council Budget

Mister Mayor – I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Leader for prior sight of his Budget speech as this allows me to make more relevant comments.

Firstly, I would like to thank the Council Officers for all their hard work over the last year and for their amazing response to the Covid19 pandemic. We must also remember the vital contribution of the many volunteers who have given so generously of their time and energy supporting our residents.

We recognize that the Council is fortunately in a relatively strong financial position, and that this is because of commercial property investments. But we would all be wise to recognise that change is inevitable, and that once we get back to some sort of normality, we can expect to face very challenging financial conditions.

The Leader & his cabinet have made the decision this year that a 0% Council Tax increase is in the best interests of our residents, and whilst we agree that this is a principled position to take, we believe that we will have to re-address this in budgets to come and a modest 1% rise for a Band D householder would have yielded £80,000 and have cost each household less than £3 for the year. It is also very disappointing that the Leader did not consult with the other Opposition Group Leaders before making this decision.

It is heartening to hear that the Leader is now committed to an affordable housing programme and we will be watching this carefully to ensure that real progress is made on not only our Council owned sites but also developments put forward from outside companies wishing to take advantage of the government's programme for house building.

We welcome the LGA report and believe that this provides a good starting point for actions to take forward to increase transparency and accountability, but we need to see the action plan. The report did offer several reassurances, but it also highlighted deficiencies that must be addressed. For so long we Councillors have not been privy to so many actions that have been taken and with a Council of 'no overall control' this is even more important.

As a member of the Grants Panel this year, I was happy to contribute towards the process of making grants to local charities and we also recognize the importance of supporting local businesses with grants to prevent them from closing due to a loss of income. However, going forward we must recognize that life will not be the same after this pandemic and if Staines High Street is to survive, a realistic and sustainable plan must be envisaged.

We agree that the staff have worked extremely hard this year to cope with the pressures that have been forthcoming, and they deserve a pay rise and the bonus of £100 for each member of staff is welcomed. However, we must also remember that many of our residents are facing uncertain futures and we cannot be seen to reward

without being accountable for how we spend the Council taxes we raise. We are still facing savage cuts to our Council finances from national government and are only too aware of plans to do away with Spelthorne and go to a single Unitary authority.

We welcome the provision for Climate Change and the change of mind brought on by Overview and Scrutiny to increase the original £100,000 proposed to £250,000. It is a shame that last year Climate Change, as a priority, was voted against by this Council and it has taken pressure from outside to make the administration take this seriously and begin to put in place a sustainable plan for this to happen.

We also support the Council's own building plans but must make sure that these are high quality developments we can be proud of, and a review of the existing plans in the pipeline must take place. In particular, we welcome an inquiry to investigate how the Arora hotel development evolved without Councillors being involved or even aware.

Finally, we look forward to the introduction of the Committee System in May. We see this as a progressive step and all Councillors will be involved in decision making. We look forward to the extra work that this will entail which we feel will bring improved governance and bring transparent benefits to the residents of Spelthorne.

Thank you Mister Mayor.