

IH Budget Speech response 25th Feb 2021 on behalf of the United Spelthorne Group

Thank you, Mr. Mayor, and first of all, can I just clarify that unlike Cllr Sandra Dunn, I was not given a copy of the budget speech, so my first few comments are going to be slightly off-the-cuff based on notes that I've made over the last twenty minutes or so before I come on to my scripted speech, so if my first few words are a little bit stilted, please accept my apologies.

I want to come back to the very fact that I wasn't given a copy of the budget speech because Cllr Boughtflower, and indeed Cllr McIlroy, made a great deal about openness, accountability, transparency, but when they won't even allow us a copy of the budget speech, nor indeed for a number of months would they even recognise that we were a group, and kept us out of all council matters. Furthermore, there's the issue of the Property Investment Committee which sanctioned the purchase of - or the purchase back of - the lease on Marks and Spencer's back in November, when it turned out that one of the members of that committee didn't even know he was a member of the committee, so first of all, I know this is about the budget, but it has been raised Mr. Mayor, and I do want to take an issue with the lack of transparency.

Moving on, there has been much talk about what the current administration has achieved within COVID. Well, I think probably steady-as-it-goes because the real hard work, Mr. Mayor, was actually in the first three months, which of course I was Leader. At that time, we were spending many hours a day in conference calls, debating, discussing all the things that we needed to do. They have also claimed credit for a lot of the things that are going on such as the White House, Harper Hostel, and many other things which of course were policies of my administration, as was the commercial property investment strategy which I'm delighted to hear is getting almost 98% rent collection – that's absolutely fantastic. But again, that is something that was instigated back in 2016, and we all know that we stopped buying new properties some time before the current administration came on. So, whilst I'm delighted to hear the good reports of how it's doing, please don't claim credit for something you haven't; really done anything for.

And, quite honestly, I would like Cllr Boughtflower and Cllr McIlroy to apologise and retract their criticisms which they were very vociferous in the early days about these policies that took place under my administration, because clearly time has shown that they were good policies, and they were very happy to criticise. I could say more, but I'm now going to move on to my script.

Thank you, Mr. Mayor

Firstly, let me congratulate the Conservatives on persuading so many of their Group to attend tonight. I am sure many will recall that this time last year so many Tories (11 actually) found they suddenly had to be somewhere else. I know there was a couple that had legitimate reasons, including Cllr Attewell, but nevertheless a majority of them were somewhat contrived.

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Before I go into any detail on my comments on this proposed budget may I start by quoting an unsolicited text message that I received a few days ago from the Community Engagement Director of a prominent Spelthorne organisation regarding last Mondays Budget Business briefing:

“Hi Ian, I hope you are keeping safe and well. Just sending you a message to say a huge thank you for the wonderful legacy you left the Borough from your time as leader. I tuned yesterday to the Spelthorne Budget briefing... really astounding. £10.3m income from the commercial property with 98% of rents paid when due and final 2% on an agreed deferment. Sinking fund now up to £25m. Housing program due to deliver 650 units. No increase in council tax this year, balanced budget, etc. Fantastic legacy to the people of the Borough, so on their behalf I write this text to say very well done and a huge thank you... Regards xxxx and all the team at xxxxx

PS - your successor was a no show yesterday ..he had something more important to do ???”

That’s not a bad precis of where we are. I could also say “easy come easy go” – more on that later. I cannot find any evidence that this administration, and I use the word loosely, has done anything to improve our finances. All the successes, and the ability to present a broadly sound budget are as a direct result of the excellent team of officers and councillors that formed my administration for 4 ½ years. The only credit that I can give to the current incumbents is that they have not made a greater mess, but that’s largely due to doing nothing tangible in their 9 months at the helm. I am sure officers have strived diligently to keep the Council on course.

- There are of course glaring omissions and failures in this Budget, for example the recently published report that Spelthorne projects stalled by this administration, delays which will last at least until after the 25th May Annual Council Meeting, cost residents of Spelthorne £9100 a week in interest alone. That’s a likely cost of in excess of £180,000. This is in addition to the other costs and losses arising from these delays, including delayed economic recovery and perhaps most fundamentally delaying homes to up to 650 needy families.
- Then we can turn to the proposed new leisure centre, which it is on the public record as having serious funding shortfalls as a consequence of this administration’s policies. Despite numerous requests by myself and others they have provided no plausible tangible proposals for bridging this gap. One can only assume they have no tangible plans to fund this gap.

As I say easy come, easy go.

- I am very concerned that the £900,000 that we set aside last year to protect the Borough against Green Belt attacks by private developers, and which remains a great

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risk due to the currently much delayed Local, Plan appears to have disappeared into a general reserve fund. Given recent comments by at least one cabinet member we may well be needing to draw on that soon. It is crucial that this remains protected and ringfenced for this purpose alone.

- It is noted that there is a provision for £250,000 towards Green and Environmental issues. I simply ask, in the current climate (no pun intended) and given that the new administration has declared a "climate emergency", "is this really sufficient"; it represents just £2.50 per resident.
- In a similar vein, and given how much over the last 11 months we have been left to our own resources in areas where the County should have primacy in meeting the needs of in particular elderly and vulnerable residents, do we have sufficient resilience in the ongoing COVID-19 battle? I simply pose the question?
- Next, I would like to turn to the Council Tax precept. We are of course all delighted that our finances are such that this can be frozen this year, for the reasons I have already alluded to. However, had we continued the policy of the last 5 Budgets and adopted a Spelthorne Precept increase in line with inflation, that would have resulted in an increase of £1.44 per Band D property per year and raised a total of £56,000. Imagine what this could have been spent on, for example, helping those most affected by COVID, the elderly, children trapped at home, or some environmental initiatives.

In consideration of those suffering the most from COVID, and there are many here in Spelthorne furloughed or made redundant from, amongst others, Heathrow and allied supporting industries, I am not going to propose an increase over and above the presented Budget, which is what the LibDems did last year. and what Cllr Dunn appears to be suggesting this year.

The incumbent administration and their supporting cohort can take no credit for this budget.

Thank you Mr Mayor for allowing me to present my observations on behalf of the United Spelthorne Group and despite our reservations mentioned above and the general lack of political direction and management of the Council, our Group will be supporting this Budget but I wish to propose an amendment "that the £900,000 previously earmarked as a fighting fund but proposed to be moved into a general fund remains as the Green Belt Fighting Fund, to be specifically used towards defending our Green Belt against unwanted development applications".

Cllr Ian Harvey 21Feb 2021