

LEADER'S BUDGET SPEECH

Intro

Thank you Mr Deputy Mayor

It is a couple of years now since the demise of the budget rabbits at Stevenage but I am pleased to tell you that the 2009 budget does contain an element which can be described as the bunnies return. I will come to that later in my speech.

When I delivered my budget speech last year it was against a background of strong economic growth. There were three major concerns: increasing inflation, the fear that this could push interest rates back up to 6% and oil prices at \$120 a barrel creating rocketing fuel costs. What a difference a year makes!

The global economic downturn has pitched us into a new era, one that is already bring difficulty to many Stevenage people. We have seen the impact already on our High Street, with the closure of Woolworths, Adams and other stores. Equally worrying are the problems it is creating for some of the more vulnerable people in the town. The CAB is experiencing a 42% increase in the number of clients with debt and mortgage arrears, and unemployment, while still low in national terms, has crept up from below 2% to just over 3%.

It is in difficult times that leadership is most important, Labour is leading at a national level to deliver measures which will tackle these problems

- Stopping the banking system collapsing, so that businesses and families have a safe and secure system they can rely on. And let's be clear about this colleagues, saving the banking system is not to save bankers, it is our savings, businesses, homes and pensions that are being protected.
- Getting lending moving for small businesses, medium and large businesses as well as mortgage holders, and bringing forward capital projects such as motorways and new housing to provide jobs and much needed social housing.
- Boosting funding by £10m to enable Citizens Advice Bureaux to provide more debt advice and longer opening hours.

In Stevenage Labour is leading too, our Credit Crunch Task Force was set up in November with a clear plan of action covering four areas

- Support for our community – making sure we do all we can with our partners to support Stevenage people through the recession.
- Support for businesses
- Support for our Voluntary Sector
- And addressing the key issues for the Council arising from the credit crunch

On the 2nd March we will be proposing that our Credit Crunch Task Force is renamed the Economy Task Force and moved into the remit of the So Stevenage Partnership, but we have already achieved some tangible results including

- Setting up a rapid response to redundancy helpline with North Herts College and Stevenage Business Initiative
- Providing government with detailed information about what the Council would need to build 306 social rented homes in the next 18 months.
- Improving the support we give to the Credit Union including them operating from our Customer Service Centre
- And providing extra funds and additional office space to Citizens Advice Bureau to help them deal with their workload.

Our project has achieved national recognition, including national press interest. More important than that it is already delivering much needed support to Stevenage people.

So leadership is more important than ever and as I deliver this budget speech to you tonight, you will hear me refer often to the role of Stevenage Borough Council as community leader.

In an economic storm, it is even more important that we do not lose sight of our vision for Stevenage. I will start by restating that vision which we have developed together with the people in the town. It is also right to remember and recognise our achievements this year, so I will do that before I move on to this year's budget.

Let me start then with the vision for the Town.

Vision

Our vision acknowledges Stevenage's new town heritage but looks forward to a town that meets the aspirations and lifestyle of 21st century people. I am looking to the time beyond the recession, to the time after Labour achieves a historic fourth term of office, to the Stevenage of 2021 and then beyond.

Our vision sees Stevenage as the major centre in North Hertfordshire - a town which has a broad range of major and smaller businesses, a town which enjoys its proximity to London but also is pleased to be separated from it, a town which has a good built and natural environment.

For the people of Stevenage, I want excellent sports, leisure and recreational facilities and affordable housing; I want our children, the Stevenage citizens of the future, to do well at school (perhaps even better than the rest of the county) and to see their future in Stevenage, I want all our people to be able to live healthy and fulfilling lives and I want our older people to enjoy their well earned retirement in safety and comfort.

To achieve this vision, we will work closely with our partners on So Stevenage to achieve our ambitions for our children and young people, to tackle the health

inequalities in the town, to make Stevenage an even safer place to live, to create job opportunities, increase prosperity and improve our housing.

All of this requires investment and I want to outline now how our Labour government and this Labour council are investing resources that are making a real difference to the lives of people in Stevenage.

Update on last year

Let's look back over the last year.

You will recall that, in last year's speech, I welcomed the government investment in education in Stevenage through the Building Schools for the Future programme. However, I was concerned that the Council had not been consulted sufficiently on the programme's development. I am delighted to report that this is no longer the case and that we have been involved extensively as this programme has been developed.

I met with over 250 developers, designers and architects last week who are the prospective bidders for this project to rebuild all our secondary schools and to build a brand new school at Great Ashby. Young people were there to give the bidders their views, they were lively – a clear message, keep talking to us, we must not waste this wonderful, once in a lifetime opportunity.

The programme means a total investment in Stevenage's schools of over £200 million; the plans should be finalised in the coming months and work will start next year. We are the first town in Hertfordshire to benefit from our Government's pledge to make education a priority, and this should make a real difference to the opportunities and aspirations of our children.

Plans to make the Lister Hospital the major centre for acute and trauma care are now well advanced and the £110 million refurbishment and expansion will start later this year. I understand from Nick Carver they now have the go ahead for the surgicentre and improvements to the maternity unit which will start soon.

This is an appropriate time to mention some of the tangible health improvements which we have seen thanks to government funding and effective partnership working. Ten years ago, Stevenage had the highest teenage pregnancy rate in the region. As a result of a concerted effort by the Council, our schools and our partners in health, the number of teenage pregnancies has reduced by 40% over the past ten years. We are now lower than the national average and about level with the average across the county. In the same time frame, life expectancy in the town has increased significantly, up by two years in a decade, which is a remarkable achievement.

The Labour government and this Council have invested heavily to ensure that Stevenage is a safer place, the results are dramatic with crime down by 15%. We have increased our state of the art CCTV system which is one of the most modern and most effective in the country, including ten new mobile cameras we have just bought.

We will continue with our close partnership with the police and, as part of this, we will yet again provide funding for our popular Police Community Support Officers for the town at a cost of £90,000. This investment helps to ensure that Stevenage people enjoy that most basic right – to feel safe in their own homes, streets and neighbourhoods. Colleagues, Britain (and certainly Stevenage) is not Broken – let's stop talking our country down, and get on with working in partnership to make it better.

The £7 million extension to the Business Technology Centre is almost complete, we hope to have an official opening in June and we would love the Prime Minister to come and open the Centre. Of course we know he is a little busy at the moment but perhaps if we ask Mo Knowles to make the tea – who knows.

It will open in the coming month and will double the capacity of our business incubation programme. We have just let a contract with WENTA to run the BTC and to strengthen our relationship with business. This will provide valuable assistance to those seeking to start their own businesses and is just the sort of initiative which is needed in these difficult financial times. We do not do enough to recognise the success of our world leading businesses in my view, Astrium, leading the way in space and satellite technology – I am told they are developing satellite based monitoring for energy efficiency, Glaxo Smith Kline making huge strides in the fight against cancer, tb, malaria, epilepsy and even obesity (I'll have some of those pills). And MBDA considering how their world leading military technology can be used to benefit civilian populations in peaceful times.

Stevenage young people are creative, innovative and bright, we want to inspire them to think about using those qualities to create business opportunities, so we will be participating in the "Make your Mark for a Tenner" scheme, a competition to provide a £10 investment and give them a month to make as much profit or social impact as they can. We have set aside £500 to do this, let's hope it provides us with a few local Richard Bransons or Anita Roddicks.

We are proud of our town and its people. Our new Pride of Stevenage Awards aim to recognise local people who are doing amazing things in the community. The awards were presented at the Mayor's Civic reception in October where we were able to recognise what our award winners had done and celebrate their achievements in public. This coincided with the visit from our twin towns of Autun and Ingleheim, and our colleagues from Europe were very impressed with this demonstration of community spirit.

We ran a competition last autumn for the people of the town to vote for their favourite places to be awarded one of five Stevenage Blue Plaques. Places that will be displaying the blue plaque this year are Fairlands Valley, Old Town High Street, Stevenage Rugby Club, the Wine Society and The Coptic orthodox Cathedral of Saint George

We have invested £250,000 in the indoor market. The cafeteria has now been replaced by a modern, international food fayre which has improved the feel of the market and the quality of food.

We have run a series of Environmental Action Days which have contributed to the quality of the areas, and we have introduced our Street Smart scheme. We now have two vehicles on call to respond to environmental calls across the town. John Healey launched this service last Spring commenting, "Street Smart is a great initiative ...and I'd like to see other Council's follow Stevenage's lead." The scheme is successful and popular, with members of the public who have called on Street Smart 9500 since last May and they are delighted when their issues are resolved quickly, sometimes within minutes!

Our in-bloom partnership met with success again, winning a Gold award in the 'Best Small City' category at Anglia in Bloom and Silver at the Britain in Bloom awards.

Our contact with the people of Stevenage is a crucial part of our work. The "Chronicle" magazine is recognised as one of the best council newsheets in the country. Its clear English and distinctive branding makes it popular and informative and it is widely read across the town. However, it is one of my aims this year to move us to a much greater level of engagement with the people of the town. It is our people who know better than us what they want and what's best for Stevenage - our role is to help them achieve it through listening and acting on what we hear. In return, I am looking for the townspeople to take on greater responsibility for certain aspects of the environment – this should be a shared responsibility between council and people and I will be investigating how we can best strike that balance.

The "Make Stevenage Sparkle" campaign is the first step towards reducing the £1.6m we spend on collecting litter each year so we can spend it on more worthwhile projects. We will do this with a combination of education, incentives and penalties. You can watch out for Captain Sparkle coming to a neighbourhood centre near you in the near future, and perhaps you will be one of the lucky people to be presented with a cash reward for putting your litter in the bin or helping to keep the town tidy.

Work has begun on the £2.8m modernisation of our town centre gardens. Supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Green Heart Partnership, the Green Flag standard gardens will balance the built with the natural environments. We never lose sight that this is the community's town, not the council's – we had the interesting if rather surreal experience of local people taking part in 'planning for real', moving life-size inflatable park- and street-furniture to the best positions. It looked strange, but it achieved the aim of a good solution which the residents decided upon.

We are investing £400,000 for an extension to the Golf Centre – The 18-hole course has been reconfigured, customer facilities have been improved and we have built a "half way house" for golfers' refreshments (that's bacon sandwiches for the uninitiated) at the ninth hole. We hope these improvements to the Golf Centre will generate more income.

In partnership with Stevenage Leisure Ltd and specifically in response to customer feedback , we are investing £300,000 to improve the changing facilities

at the swimming pool and have also refurbished the diving facilities - this was rewarded by being selected to host two prestigious diving championships.

We are greatly looking forward to the introduction of the government's programme of free swimming for the over 60's and under 16's (I checked and I don't qualify for either). However, I would say shame on our neighbouring Tory councils, North and East Herts, who are not introducing this which will inevitably put pressure on our facility as I understand it is illegal for us to discriminate in favour of our own residents.

My fellow councillors will be aware of the significant progress which has been made in the last couple of years to improve the internal efficiency of the council. This may not be glamorous, or as headline-grabbing as our major building programmes, but every pound which we can save by improving our business efficiency is a pound which we can spend on services for the town

As examples of how improved efficiency helps the people of the town, every one of our planning applications in the last year has been approved on time, while we have reduced the time taken to process new claims for housing benefit from 55 days two years ago to less than 20 days now. There have been improvements in almost every department of the council, and I applaud our officers for what they have achieved, and for improving our Audit Commission Use of Resources score from 2 to 3 out of 4. I would like to make a special mention for those in Benefits who have made their improvements while facing a significant increase in workload.

Budget Process

Now colleagues, it is my pleasure to outline to you how we will be investing the money we receive on behalf of Stevenage people for 2009/10.

Let me give you the topline figures before moving on to the detail for this year. Stevenage Borough Council remains debt free and with £700m worth of assets. In this and the coming financial years, we have a total capital programme of £51m. Not only will this enhance the quality of life for the people of Stevenage, but also the vast majority of this money will be channelled through local businesses employing local people, and so we are playing our part to keeping Stevenage businesses prosperous during these difficult times.

Last year, we set up the Leader's Services Priority Group under Cllr Joan Lloyd's chairmanship. This group reviewed every one of over one hundred services that we deliver and produced a prioritised list following consultation with heads of service and using information gathered from our public consultation processes and their experience and knowledge as councillors. We then used that prioritised list to target savings measures towards the lower priority services and away from the most important services. That process identified £1.5m of savings last year.

I prevailed on Joan again this year to run LSPG2 – a bit like Rocky 2 but with rather more blood on the floor!

Of course, the process becomes ever harder and I confess to finding it extremely difficult to focus on reducing services which, as a Labour leader, I would dearly love to retain. However, it was Nye Bevin that said socialism is the art of prioritisation and the imagination and ingenuity of both members and officers allows us to continue to provide so much more than many of our neighbouring authorities. We have managed, eventually, to remove the final £2.1 million from the programme. If it were not for the credit crunch, this would balance the budget over our five-year medium-term financial strategy. As it is, we are still left with some pressures next year, not least because of higher utility costs and reduced income on many fronts. But we are in a strong position to face the downturn because of the excellent work which has been carried out in the last two years.

Of course there have been savings made in the budget, some of which we regret very much but every one has been carefully balanced and considered with our need to meet new pressures and keep existing services which are much valued.

For those affected, I hope they will realise that our decisions have been taken with the whole of Stevenage in mind. I am confident that the process we have been through is rigorous and robust and the outcome will be that, after further work during this year, by 2010/11 we will be back in a position where we are once again contributing to our reserves.

In common with most councils across the country, we need to increase council tax to meet the demand for our services. Although inflation is now reducing, members will recall that it has topped 5% during this year. However, we know that Stevenage people will want us to keep council tax as low as possible during these difficult times. We have been working with a council tax assumption in the budget of 4.9%.

However, we wanted to try and reduce that further, so we have looked over our budgets again. We did want to introduce plastics recycling during this year, but there is no market for recycled plastic at the moment. Although we have just over £62k in the budget, without income from the material, this would raise to a cost of £95k plus, so we have decided to defer the introduction of plastic recycling until the market recovers – we don't want to collect plastic just to store it at Cavendish Road. Stevenage people will still be able to take their plastic to the household waste site.

Members of the council feel, that with our residents feeling the pinch, some under threat of redundancy or with debt problems. It would not be appropriate for us to take our normal inflationary increase in member allowances this year, so we will forego that increase.

These two measures taken together allow us to reduce the increase in council tax in Stevenage to 3.9% - and to restore the twice weekly glass patrol on our foot and cycle ways which will help keep the town tidy (even more important in an economic downturn) and encourage people to cycle more – look out for Councillor Speller's "First Bike Borough" campaign.

And colleagues, we still have the lowest average council tax in Hertfordshire. This 3.9% increase represents a cash increase for the Stevenage element of the council tax at band C of £6.29 a year, 12p a week or 2p a day.

So let me outline our revenue plans

There have been some marvellous improvements to Fairlands Valley Park. Fairlands Valley really is the jewel in Stevenage's crown and the recent improvements are already making a real difference. The environmental lake and the sailing lake have been drained and relined, the dams have been repaired, the clubhouse and cafeteria have been improved at a cost of £1.8m. We are replacing the paddling pools with a state-of-the-art aqua park. This opens in May and will be free of charge. I am delighted that we have been able to upgrade the Park – this alone has cost approaching a million pounds but I know that the children of Stevenage will certainly thank us for this venture for years to come.

Each neighbourhood now has a Neighbourhood Action Team. The branding; So Stevenage, So Bedwell, So Broadwater – has now become well known. At the heart of its team is the area committee chair, the lead officer, the community development officer, an environmental officer and officers from Stevenage Homes Ltd. They are supported by partners from police locality teams, education, health, the voluntary sector and faith groups.

Each neighbourhood has set its own local action plan and the neighbourhood action teams are now bringing those plans to reality. I want to take this opportunity to praise the ward councillors who give so much of their time for the good of the community, doing those thousands of small tasks which contribute to making the town such a great place to live.

We continue to invest in services for the elderly, in 2009/10 we will spend over £1.5m. We were delighted that the government decided to introduce the national bus pass scheme last year. We have led on negotiations to ensure that Stevenage people can continue with any-time travel within the Hertfordshire boundary and we are pleased to be investing £2m in this scheme again this year.

Our meals on wheels service has changed dramatically in the last year. They are now being provided by a social enterprise scheme delivering better quality and value and creating local jobs. We will continue to subsidise the hot meals by £2.60 per meal, more than our neighbouring councils, recognising the importance of this facility to our older people.

I want to comment briefly here on the thorny issue of bus services, especially the SB10. You will remember that with great regret and because of rapidly increasing costs, we removed our bus subsidies last year and consequently Hertfordshire County Council withdrew some of the services with lower usage. In particular the later afternoon services of the SB10. This has been particularly problematic for older people in Bedwell and Old Town who use the service for access to the doctors surgeries.

We had understood that even if we reinstated the whole of the increased funding for contract bus services, there would be no guarantee that the SB10 late

services would return as they were underused. Yesterday, a petition of over 800 signatures on this service was presented at County Hall (I wish all those 800 people had used the service and it would still be here). Mr David West, who presented the petition reported on a meeting with Keith White of the passenger transport unit at HCC where he was told that if £14,000 could be found, at least 2 of the afternoon services could be restored. Although we are not making budget proposals on that this evening, if that is the case we will do all in our power to find that money from a county source or our own, to fund the restoration of the service for a year or so until we have worked out with the Primary Care Trust a longer term solution to the issue of access to health care.

At the other end of the age spectrum, for our younger people we will continue to invest directly over £1m in play and youth services. We run four of the town's six Children's Centres which are all now accredited by Sure Start – we are ahead of most of the country in achieving this. Our total investment in services for young people during this year will be £2m.

We recognise the value that our voluntary and community groups add to the town and we are investing nearly half a million pounds in voluntary grant aid to them this year – more than any other council in Hertfordshire.

I am interested in any project that will help improve standards of literacy among our schoolchildren and so we are continuing with sponsoring the One Book for Stevenage project again this year. Last year's book was, "The No1 Ladies Detective Agency" by Alexander McCall Smith and it proved to be very popular. The film version of our previous year's book Q & A, retitled "Slumdog Millionaire" recently won 8 Oscars, so I hope authors will be queuing up!

Sadly our outstanding Chairman of "One Book", Ken Follett has had to stand down this year due to other work commitments, however Cllr Simon Speller has 'volunteered' to take over and we wish him success. Ken Follett has agreed to be our President and I should like to publically thank Ken for the initiative to start "One Book" and for the drive and infectious enthusiasm with which he has led the project.

Another outstanding success for this year has been our Fairtrade campaign. I would like to offer my personal thanks to the steering group, especially Alex Lang and Jasmin Gupta. As the world rides out the economic storm, it is even more important that those in developing countries receive a fair price for their goods and the Fairtrade initiative plays an important part. We expect to get our Fairtrade accreditation this year so I am proposing to invest a further £2000 to take us to the finishing line.

This Labour council has committed to continuing with weekly kerbside waste collections. Although some councils have moved to fortnightly collections, and there are environmental reasons for considering this, we do not feel it is right for Stevenage at this stage, the feedback we have received on this suggests that Stevenage people agree. People have also asked that we increase the kerbside recycling scheme, and I will be delighted to see the introduction of cardboard and food waste recycling in the summer. When these new recycling streams are introduced (and not before!), we will be withdrawing the provision of black sacks

from the council. Everything put in a black sack goes to landfill so we need to do all we can to discourage that and promote recycling. We will of course continue to collect black (or any other colour) sacks, that people wish to purchase to contain their landfill collection.

Housing remains one of our key priorities. We have continued to implement the Affordable Housing Strategy Action Plan. In 2007/08 we delivered 276 new affordable homes – 58% of the houses built in the town. Over the last seven years, we have delivered 529 affordable homes – 36% of the houses built in the town. In both of these periods, we produced the highest percentage in the Eastern Region. This is the sort of performance that makes a real difference to those in the community who need our help the most. I am proud of this council for many reasons – and this action strikes at the core of why I take such pride of being the Leader of this Labour authority.

We have recently completed a review of temporary accommodation provision together with Stevenage Homes Limited. The number of families in temporary accommodation continued to reduce from 202 to 125 in the last year - a reduction of 38% following a 23% reduction in the previous year.

We have worked in partnership with Stevenage Homes Limited to establish their 'Short Steep Climb to 2 Stars Programme' and to implement the Council's Decent Homes Programme. A total of 641 homes were improved to decent homes standard last year and we are on track to meet our target of another 720 this year. SHL are currently undergoing their inspection and we wait anxiously to hear the results. Both staff and the board of SHL have worked incredibly hard to achieve the improvements in the housing service that we are all so happy to see and I send them our thanks and congratulations for all they have done.

The economic climate has, understandably, slowed progress on our two flagship schemes – Stevenage West and the Town Centre regeneration. However, we remain confident that both schemes will go ahead, they will bring jobs, homes and new energy to the town and may prove to be the "green shoots" of recovery that we all hope to see, I know that Baroness Vadera thought she had already seen some but her eyesight must be better than mine.

One scheme which is not being delayed is our regeneration of the neighbourhood centres. Our officers have produced an exciting, imaginative and comprehensive scheme which will see all of our 23 neighbourhood centres being upgraded to a greater or lesser degree in the next decade. The total cost will be £100m and it will be largely self-financing through partnership with the private sector. However I am delighted with the £3.3 million which our government has given us to kick-start this scheme. In addition, they have given us £300,000 to upgrade our cycle network which accounts for the big smile on Cllr Speller's face, I hope it does not account for the fact that he is on holiday in Madeira.

Our revenue budget consists of total spending of £90m across over a hundred services.

The Council tax increase we proposed gives an increase in spending of 2.48% However we have absorbed budget pressures including loss of negative subsidy,

loss of investment interest, inflation and growth of £2.8m and we have made savings and efficiencies of £2.1m. In total we have made £4m of efficiencies in the last three years largely without impacting on front line service delivery.

We are confident that our revenue budget is both investing where Stevenage people put their priorities and giving value for money.

Lastly moving on to sport, Moving swiftly to the international level, that final Formula One Grand prix was one of the most exciting sporting events I have ever seen. It was so good that the correct result came out, with Stevenage's Lewis Hamilton becoming the youngest ever world champion. Added to that, he was awarded an MBE in the New Year's Honours List.

And we hold our breath as Stevenage Borough draw ever closer to a second visit to Wembley.

Oh dear, I nearly forgot to mention those rabbits. You will be pleased to know that the finance team and the Chief Executive can relax. This is an initiative which will be funded from the Labour Group.

Pin Green Play Centre have just been cleared to keep rabbits in their splendid new "rabbit world" enclosure. They are looking for sponsors to pay a small sum each month for the upkeep of these rabbits and Stevenage Labour Councillors are happy to take up this offer and will be contacting Pin Green to make the necessary arrangements. I don't know if sponsors are responsible for the upkeep of the offspring, but bearing in mind they are rabbits, perhaps we will start with sponsoring two.

Conclusion

Mr Deputy Mayor, Members of the Council

We find ourselves in difficult economic times. However, the skill of our officers and the enthusiasm of our members have meant that we have made huge progress in the last year, improving performance while closing the budget gap. Our ability to deliver better services for less money is impressive and this has made a real difference to the people of Stevenage.

The budget I am proposing this evening emphasises our confidence in the town and people of Stevenage. Our townspeople are resilient and resourceful, and will prove equal to the challenges we face – and Stevenage Borough Council will be here to provide the community leadership that is even more important in difficult times. This year we have again focused our budget on those areas which the people of the town have said are most important to them and we have produced a balanced budget for the next five years. In spite of this challenging exercise, we have still found capacity to invest further in exciting initiatives for the town.

I would also like to thank the Executive Councillors, especially Joan Lloyd, the Scrutiny Members and the other Councillors and Officers, particularly Scott Crudgington and Clare Fletcher who have been involved in the budget exercise.

I have already confirmed that our Band D Council Tax for 2009/10 will be £188.52. The average property in Stevenage is just below Band C, and the Band C council tax will be £167.57 an increase of £6.29 per year.

The Council tax for Hertfordshire County Council is £994.52 at band C an increase of £33.52 or 3.49%.

The Council tax for Hertfordshire Police will be £126.95 at Band C an increase of £5.47 or 4.5%.

The impact of these increases from the County and the Police Authority means that the total Band C Council Tax in Stevenage will be £1,289.04, an overall 3.64% increase.

I need to make it clear that out of the total increase of £0.87 per week, the County Council rise equates to 65p per week, the Police to 10p per week. The Stevenage part of the rise is 12p per week.

I spoke at the beginning of my speech, Mr Deputy Mayor about the steps being taken to weather the economic storm. Labour leadership at national and local level.

Of course Stevenage has a head start on other areas where perhaps the Thatcherite dogma of "every man for himself" that got us into this crisis has prevailed.

In Stevenage we have never let go of our true sense of community, knowing that working together achieves more than any of us can on our own.

This foundation stone of community values is what Stevenage has been built upon, a town that we can all be proud of.

As we face these difficult times, it is that solid foundation of community which will get us through, helping each other, growing stronger as we have through past difficulties.

Mr Mayor, we do – and continue to – believe in a bright future for Stevenage, this budget gives us the solid financial foundation to go out there and build that future.

The formal recommendations relating to the Council Tax and General Fund Budget for 2009/10 have been circulated and I am pleased to move those recommendations this evening.

Against a difficult backdrop, once again we have been able to produce an imaginative and affordable budget which will serve the town well. I formally move the resolutions and commend it to you.