

Services must be protected

By County Cllr Jeremy Hilton Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group

On October 27th, the Liberal Democrat legal challenge to the Tory proposal to “slash and burn” county council services, was defeated by the votes of Tory councillors.

The cabinet has embarked on a plan to cull at least 500 jobs, with scant regard to the quality of council services or to maintaining staff morale.

The council leader has instigated a plan under the inappropriate banner of “Building Our Future”, in which his administration has hired private consultants at a cost of £2.3m to deliver job cuts.

The Conservative administration has agreed that the consultants can blow £11m of the council’s £18m emergency reserves on redundancy payouts and early retirement costs.

The use of our emergency reserves could leave the council short of cash if Gloucestershire were to suffer another emergency of the magnitude of the 2007 floods.

This is madness and is one of the reasons why Liberal Democrat councillors mounted a legal challenge under the council’s own constitution.

In our county manifesto, we acknowledged that the council needed to make savings in the order of £30m after three years to balance the books, because of future shortfalls in government grants and mismanagement by the Tory cabinet.

In re-engineering services, Liberal Democrats would first have made sure that frontline services were protected – this the Tories have failed to do.

We would develop new staff structures that saved money, protected frontlines services and ensured that we had properly qualified and motivated staff in posts where they were needed.

The Chief Executive last week wrote to most staff over the age of fifty (members of the local government pension scheme) offering early retirement and announcing possible redundancies.

This letter has angered many who have loyally worked for the county council for years.

The council has started statutory consultation on redundancies before it has even decided what jobs will go and what the new council services and staff structures will look like.

I believe the Tories are involved in an internal party competition to see which Tory run council can “slash and burn” council services and by how much.

We now have a macho mantra running through this council where the more pain that can be inflicted on our loyal staff the happier the cabinet will be.

Keeping council tax rises down is important for local people who are affected by recession, but reducing spending to the point where frontline services suffer is wrong.

The Tory cuts will be greater than the £30m originally required (possibly £90m) and the consequence is that people will lose their jobs, and services will decline.

From vulnerable people including the elderly who rely on personal care, to counselling and support for young people with drug and alcohol problems, to basic county services such as libraries and buses in rural areas – these services cannot be risked.

Liberal Democrats will continue to support genuine savings but we shall oppose savage cuts that damage services – we say NO to this slash and burn approach.