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Budget Comment: Professor Peter Latchford

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-In the short term I recognise that steps must be taken to address the consequences of the recession. These understandably have been framed around a trade off between cuts in public spending and tax increases.

-The real challenge is to make every pound of money in the public sector a pound well spent. The public sector has many talented and committed people who are being constrained by the environment in which they work. An environment which stifles them in exercising their judgement, being enterprising and creating new solutions to the myriad of problems they face. Nitty gritty problems faced in delivering critical services to some of the most needy and most deserving in our society.

-I am however, concerned about the Chancellor's planned cap on housing benefit and I fear the extent to which the poorest will be hit hardest by this and by other departmental cuts.

-The tax rises against cuts debate has to be broadened to cover real reform of how the public sector does its job. Not cosmetic restructuring of closing a quango here and rebranding a service there but a fundamental review of how millions of people are doing their jobs day in and day out. How can that talent be unleashed? How can they be set free to work more closely with the people who need their support, so that we invest in prevention as much as cure?

-Big Society is a concept with real potential ' but great danger that 25 per cent cuts in public services prevent government departments and local authorities from investing in greater civic enterprise and resilience. This is where real fairness starts and ends ' with the attitudes of the people as a whole, not with the imprecation of those in government.

-The fairest societies are the most healthy, for everybody, poor and rich. We need an investment in fairness, which is an investment in mutual support and responsibility. In the long term, this reduces the problems which require public sector intervention such as unemployment, educational underachievement and obesity.

-There is a danger that this budget results in an underinvestment in the empowering themes that will deliver efficiency and fairness ' resulting in a medium to long-term rise in the social morbidities which cost the public purse so dear. We will only know whether we are eating the seedcorn in this way when we see how the government departments react to the reductions in budget ' with imagination or with the traditional protection of existing structures.'