

# **Working with Our Communities Responding to Local Needs**



## **A Manifesto for a Liberal Democrat County Durham**

**County Elections 2008**

## **Introduction**

Liberal Democrats believe that Local Government is about our local communities whether towns, villages, neighbourhoods or even single streets.

Providing services at these levels should not be a 'one size fits all' approach as imposed by the Labour government of the past ten years. Different ways of doing things may suit different communities; what matters is that services are of the best quality at a price residents are prepared to afford.

As a county, we must also look to the future. The current Labour administration at County Hall lacks the leadership and inspiration to move the County forward. The way they have moved to bring in the new unitary council, *against the wishes of the communities that it serves* shows just how out of touch Labour now is.

The elections on 1 May provide the first genuine opportunity in living memory for the people of County Durham to rise up and vote for the sort of change that can move our communities to embrace the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Respecting Local Communities**

A unitary council serving an area as large and diverse as County Durham cannot be run by central diktat from County Hall. Liberal Democrats will insist that real power resides locally with Area Boards having the ability to take the decisions that lie close to their own communities.

While the power must lie with the elected councillors, local stakeholders will have the right to be heard.

To reinforce this localism, Liberal Democrats believe that establishing parish and town councils across the remaining unparished areas of the County will provide strong local accountability and will empower communities to shape their local environments. Even so, the way forward must be by consent and we shall consult widely with those communities to help them make their own choices on how to move forward.

Liberal Democrats will then develop the concept of Community Contracts with parish and town councils and possibly other local community organisations to deliver appropriate services to their areas.

## **Crime and Policing**

Key partners in this local agenda will be the Police. Liberal Democrats will give wholehearted support to Neighbourhood Policing, working with the Police and the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership.

Several district councils have introduced neighbourhood/street wardens who have been able to deal with many of the minor irritations that concern the public to the great benefit of our communities.

A Liberal Democrat council will ensure that this approach is maintained and where possible increase activity in partnership with the police and other emergency services in order to build community cohesion.

## **Youth Services**

There is currently an atmosphere of fear in many communities, promoted in part by lurid reporting of a few awful cases in the tabloid press, but also by the sight of young people hanging around with little creative to do.

Under Labour in County Durham, services to such young people have been grossly neglected, with spending in 2007-08 at only one-third of government recommendation. We shall be firm in dealing with groups of youths who cause problems. Liberal Democrat run Durham City has shown the way by supporting local communities via dispersal zones that have made a big difference.

But while being firm we must also reverse the decline in youth provision by bringing spending on youth education to the national average by 2010. This will protect existing youth clubs that do so much to combat youth crime and provide resources to extend the provision across our communities.

## **Education**

Liberal Democrats believe that education is the key to unlocking the talents and abilities of our young people to enable them to achieve their full potential. Indeed we all want them to succeed as far as is possible.

But education is more than simply achieving government-driven targets that encourage pupils to jump through hoops rather than develop as individuals.

Successful schools are embedded in their local communities, and have strong leadership allied with inspirational teaching.

Liberal Democrats will seek to support schools as community hubs. We shall also work to identify the future school leaders and to develop their potential.

Schools may struggle to achieve or maintain their success in old and dilapidated buildings. We therefore welcome the long term programme to renew or rebuild our secondary schools.

But Liberal Democrats also believe that schools serve local communities and it follows that they should be governed by those local communities. Giving the power of an individual or group to buy their way into the running of a school is both immoral and potentially dangerous. In addition, the transfer of the control of admissions to the school will destabilise the overall provision of education in the remainder of the locality.

For these reasons, Liberal Democrats will resist vehemently the introduction of Academies into the structure of schooling in the County.

## **Environment and Climate Change**

Addressing the issue of climate change has not been a serious issue under Labour at County Hall. The issue is core to Liberal Democrat beliefs and we shall reverse this position.

All new policy areas will be assessed for their environmental impact.

We shall start a programme of investment in council buildings to reduce the carbon footprint of the council. This will in turn lead to savings on energy use. In the medium term we would also investigate the use of renewable micro-generation at council owned sites and combined heat and power schemes within communities.

A Liberal Democrat council will enter into partnership arrangements to promote “warm zone” home insulation schemes across the county, in the same way the Lib Dem run Durham City Council has with Domestic Energy Solutions to create the ‘Go Warm Durham City’ initiative in the district. This is particularly important in rural areas where sparse populations can be difficult to reach.

Recycling across the County must be a high priority. At the moment, the demand from residents for doorstep-recycling of a broader range of items (e.g. cardboard, plastic and green waste) is not being met and provision across the County is patchy and inconsistent.

Liberal Democrats will bring doorstep-recycling to the level of the best and constantly seek ways to improve the service to everyone.

## **Roads**

The effects of transport impact on all our lives. The ability to move easily between locations is what enables us to fulfil our potential through work and leisure. On the other hand the impact of traffic and congestion can blight our communities. Our policies must combine to enable the first and mitigate the second.

The introduction of controlled parking in Durham City is now accepted generally to have struck a fair balance between the needs of local residents and those who work in or visit in the City. As traffic grows, we would look favourably at introducing similar schemes in the larger towns around the County.

Even so, enforcement of normal parking regulations is now haphazard at best. There are no longer any traffic wardens in the County and the police will only deal with illegal parking when there is a particular issue to do with obstruction or the like.

The County is in the process of applying for permission to de-criminalise parking enforcement across the Durham District, and we would see this as a first step to extending this approach to other communities across the County.

County Roads and footpaths are in a shoddy state across the County with a backlog of over £70M in repairs. Under Labour, the state of our roads and footpaths has been in steady decline. A Liberal Democrat Council will prioritise this issue.

Radical initiatives have been placed on the national and local agenda. Road pricing has been spoken of, and while it has been effective in dealing with a particular situation on the Peninsular in Durham City, we see no benefit from its introduction elsewhere on the County road network.

Similarly, major road schemes can be used to relieve pressures in localities, but we must be aware that all the evidence shows that building new roads attracts more traffic. The balance between the potential benefits and the impact on the environment must be carefully weighed. Supposed quick-fix schemes such as the mooted Durham inner-relief road will be opposed.

## **Transport**

Ideally we wish to see much greater use of public transport which has both environmental benefits and can enable access into the wider community for those who are less mobile.

Bus deregulation has been an unmitigated disaster for many communities that now find themselves isolated and unable easily to access important facilities.

The new Council like the old will have to balance lack of resources against the need to maintain a public transport network that meets these needs. Liberal Democrat priority will be to use these scarce resources to support communities in creative ways. Innovations such as dial-a-ride are barely off the ground in County Durham, while more progressive councils have forged ahead.

We must put old ideas away and be much more creative and flexible, introducing where possible 'on-demand' services in association with other services and voluntary groups.

Road transport is not everything, however. Liberal Democrats have spoken loudly for many years about the need to reinvigorate our rail network as well. The East Coast Main Line is virtually at capacity, and we have been advocating, along with many other North east Councils, the re-opening of the Leamside Line to provide both an alternative freight route and a frequent commuter route linking the central spine of County Durham with the Tyne and Wear Metro.

### **Adult Services**

Labour's policy on services for the elderly at County Hall has become a mockery as the Labour Group is ravaged with splits and beset with weak leadership.

County Durham desperately needs a way forward and Labour will not provide it.

Liberal Democrats will construct a policy based on the principles of supporting people to remain in their own homes where possible and ensuring that quality care, respite and rehabilitation are available to those where it is not.

The decision whether the Council makes the provision should be based solely on whether or not these principles can be met. Labour is currently dithering leaving elderly residents and their families in limbo.

The name of the provider on the front door is not important. The quality of what lies behind it is.

### **Leisure Services**

Over the past 35 years, leisure services across the County have been delivered mainly by the District Councils with a view to what is seen to be appropriate in their areas. Given the diverse nature of our County, this is entirely appropriate and is another example where a one-size-fits-all approach cannot work.

On the other hand, there are some cross-cutting issues such as health and fitness that are of vital importance for the well-being of all our communities.

Liberal Democrats will therefore work with local partners, parish and town councils, sports associations, and the rich plethora of voluntary groups and organisations to support what works locally, and to the management of activities based at local level.

It is seldom possible for many leisure and cultural activities to operate financially without central support, but supporting such activities must be a priority as they form a key part of the social glue that prevents our society from fragmentation.

That being said, we would aim to ensure that the quality of local management, across the county is raised to the level of the best to deliver a locally accountable, socially cohesive and quality experience for all sections of the community.

### **Housing**

Integrating housing services across the new authority is going to be a major challenge.

The seven district councils have all gone their own separate ways in developing the future of their stock of council housing. We now have a mixture of housing associations, arms-length management organisations and the traditional council management voted for by tenants in Durham City.

There is no off-the-shelf solution to this situation, but as Liberal Democrats we believe firmly in the need to work in partnership with tenants, to allow their opinions to make a difference and to deliver the best services possible.

## **Planning**

The issues that cause most concern and controversy are often those involving planning. It is a fact that, under both Labour and Conservative administrations, government directives have given planning committees less and less discretion over what they can do.

No wonder the public's confidence in how decisions are made is so low; removing the decision-making to a remote County Hall, will only make matters worse.

Liberal Democrats believe that as far as possible local voices must be heard locally. We shall ensure that most planning decisions are made locally by the councillors that represent their communities while reserving those that are strategic or clearly impact across more than one locality to County Hall.

## **Council Tax**

The County Council has just drifted from year to year with the setting of the council tax. Some years finance has seemed very tight, but things were managed. Occasionally, as now, the Council is awash with cash.

But policy decisions on finance have always been ad hoc and responsive. The time has come for a fresh start, especially with the need to mesh together the services of the districts and county.

Liberal Democrats will institute a bottom-up review of council spending across all services (widely recognised as best practice). The new council must decide what it wants to do and create the budget around that. Drift is dangerous.

## **Economic Development**

Economic Development is last in this list but in many regards it is the most important area of all.

For too long County Durham has rested on a glorious (but now faded) history of coal and its related industry. Looking back to the past is only holding our communities back.

We have immense talent that is untapped, but too much of that talent seems to lack the confidence to look outward to the world.

We have a world-class research university in Durham City. NetPark has the potential to create world class innovation and thousands on highly skilled jobs.

County Durham is an amazing place which we can promote much more effectively to the outside world both for business and for tourism.

Our task is to weave a set of policies that say that sitting back and looking back is unacceptable, so here is the training for the exciting new industries of the twenty first century.

Liberal Democrats at County hall are up for the task.

Are you?