



Cambridgeshire
County Council
Liberal Democrats
Election 2009:
our manifesto

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LOCAL DECISIONS ARE BEST.....	3
BETTER COMMUNITIES.....	3
MORE OPEN GOVERNMENT	4
RESOURCES and VALUE FOR MONEY.....	4
MANAGING GROWTH	5
EDUCATION: QUALITY LOCAL SCHOOLS	5
SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE	7
SUPPORTING ADULTS THROUGH SOCIAL SERVICES	8
PROTECTING the ENVIRONMENT	8
IMPROVING TRANSPORT	9

Cambridgeshire County Council Liberal Democrats Election 2009: our manifesto

LOCAL DECISIONS ARE BEST

As Liberal Democrats we believe that decisions should be made at the lowest practical level ie closest to those most directly affected by them. We believe that central government should delegate to county councils and that these in turn should delegate to town and parish councils and other local, democratically constituted bodies. This delegation should not be hollow; it should include the funding needed to back up the decisions that are made and be fully supported by County Council advice and expertise.

Firstly, and within the next budget round, we will differentiate between spending that must be managed county wide and that which may be delegated to local councils. We will then establish a mechanism to enable moneys associated with the latter to be passed on to these councils. This will be in place for financial year 2010/11.

Secondly, we will explicitly give local councils the right to decide how they wish to work together. Current plans to implement a 'neighbourhood panel' template across the county are misguided. We will work through CALC to allow local councils to work together in ways which best reflects their needs. We will initiate this immediately with a view to it being fully rolled out in time for the 2010/11 budget round.

Thirdly, we will work towards a culture within the County Council which recognises that what local people request through their local Parish and Town councils for their communities is fair and legitimate and should be listened to positively. The presumption should be that local people know best and, wherever practical, the County Council should follow their wishes.

Fourthly, and to enable the above to work effectively, we will work alongside East Cambridgeshire, Fenland, Huntingdonshire, South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City Councils to raise the standards of local councils and to fully respect their democratic mandates.

BETTER COMMUNITIES

The present Conservative Administration sees most issues as only being its problem if they have a statutory responsibility

The Liberal Democrats have proposed for instance to take specific steps to build and sustain strong Communities. These include establishing a fighting fund of £500,000 to help threatened sub post offices across the County. These offices are in a number of cases the only shops left in some locations. The post office closure also means the closure of the associated shop, hitting particularly hard the elderly and those with no transport.

The fund would be a life-line alongside other funding to enable post offices to develop other business opportunities and diversify their business.

We see a strong Voluntary sector as crucial to the wider well-being of so many. We would seek to increase funding of voluntary organisations many of whom have suffered harsh cuts in the last

Cambridgeshire County Council Liberal Democrats Election 2009: our manifesto

decade but been asked to do even more. More investigation is needed to look at better ways of pump-priming organisations to get off the ground and find ways to work better with statutory bodies.

Concerns continue to be expressed both in rural villages but even in larger towns that the visibility of the police to detect and prevent crime, especially anti-social behaviour, is sparse. We would create a fund to provide an additional 30 police officers: a practical step to give re-assurance on one hand and also to prevent more low-level crime on the other.

MORE OPEN GOVERNMENT

A Liberal Democrat County Council will make the Council, its officers and members and its process more visibly democratic and more accountable to the residents of Cambridgeshire. We will make its dealings transparent, we will increase opportunities for residents to influence its activities and we will ensure that it responds promptly and fairly to inputs received.

Firstly, and with regard to the inner workings of the Council, we will abolish immediately the current system of Policy Development Groups whereby councillors of all parties meet in private to debate the Council's policies. Such debate should be open and public and subject to appropriate scrutiny. We will replace these groups by some form of pre-decision scrutiny after appropriate consultation and within 3 months of taking control.

Secondly, we will overhaul the Council's approach to petitions. Too often they are simply 'noted'. This is an insult to the people who have raised the petition and is a poor return on the work which they have put in. We will develop a protocol which guides petitioners in their work and we will insist that all petitions are followed up and that appropriate responses given and actions undertaken. We will develop this protocol and implement it within 3 months.

Thirdly, we will fully implement the Government's 'community call for action' mechanism whereby any community may bring an issue to scrutiny. This mechanism exists today but it has not been publicised. We will implement this immediately.

RESOURCES and VALUE FOR MONEY

Making the most of your money; planning well and spending wisely

'Providing the best possible services to the public at the lowest possible cost to the taxpayer' - that's our pledge if we are elected to run the County Council. It's not rocket science but it hasn't been happening for the last 10 years under the Conservatives.

Again and again it's been the Liberal Democrats who come up with the good ideas showing the Conservative-run Council how to plan well and spend wisely. This is especially important in the current severe economic downturn so that for 2009/10 we have promised a lower Council Tax rise than the Conservatives taking £1million off the bill.

Cambridgeshire County Council Liberal Democrats Election 2009: our manifesto

Under the Conservatives the Council lurches into the red every year leading to emergency cuts in services that people value most. For example: the Conservatives have mismanaged the £30million a year highway maintenance contract allowing the contractors to impose an outrageous 15% inflation increase this year so that important basic services like mending potholes and street lights and painting yellow lines have to be cut yet again.

Major projects like the Milton Road school and the Guided Bus have gone way over budget despite warnings from the Lib Dems.

To make things worse enormous sums are devoted to Public Relations and mountains of glossy documents and the Conservatives give every impression of being the only people to believe their own spin.

Under the Liberal Democrats the Council would be run with much clearer political direction and much firmer control. This will make it possible for the Council's staff to do their jobs better – using their professional skills to get best value from every penny of your precious money.

MANAGING GROWTH

What's happening to Cambridgeshire? Managing growth and change

Cambridgeshire's population and economy has grown hugely over the last 30 years and some growth is likely to continue into the long term.

Change can be very worrying for the people most affected, but we believe that it can also bring many positive opportunities such a wider choice of jobs, more affordable housing, better transport systems and more facilities for recreation and community life. To make sure these benefits are achieved our focus has been on making sure that the environment is protected and enhanced, on maximising financial contributions from developers and from government, and on improving design quality.

But we also believe there must be limits to growth – we will not bow to government pressure for ever higher housing targets.

EDUCATION: QUALITY LOCAL SCHOOLS

The framework for policy in education comes from central government. The Cambridgeshire Liberal Democrats support the principles of Every Child Matters (the child's right to be healthy, safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being). They also support the government's aspirations for raising educational standards, reducing the gap between the highest and lowest attainers and encouraging greater participation in education and training post-16. Just as important, Cambridgeshire Liberal Democrats recognise the critical influence of the Early Years phase and wish to see high quality provision provided equitably across the county.

As the tightly-defined curriculum and the restrictive testing regime are gradually relaxed, schools should make good use of greater flexibility so as to match teaching more appropriately to the needs

Cambridgeshire County Council Liberal Democrats Election 2009: our manifesto

of their own pupils. All schools should offer a broad and balanced curriculum and the adoption of 'specialist status' should not hinder the pursuit of quality and breadth.

In relation to the specific role played by the County Council, Cambridgeshire Liberal Democrats believe that:

- as far as is practically possible, schools should be given the maximum freedom to develop their own ethos, manage their own finances and make their own decisions
- schools should be locally accountable – to pupils, parents and the wider community – making sure that all groups have a strong voice within the school, in the governing body and thus to local government.
- the Local Authority should provide arms-length support, being a critical and constructive friend while fulfilling their statutory and financial responsibilities
- schools should be encouraged to see themselves as part of a collaborative network of establishments, working together to share good practice, raising standards in all schools, rather than in being competitive
- although some schools may want to exercise their right to have Trust or Foundation status, they should all be encouraged them to maintain productive partnerships with neighbouring schools for the good of all pupils, including those difficult to manage
- that 'quality and equity' are more important than the government's mantra of 'diversity and choice', enabling parents to have confidence in the schools nearest to their homes and thereby reducing unnecessary travel
- all schools should work with the local community, making facilities available wherever possible and thereby continuing the vision of Henry Morris and the Community School/Village College movement
- new schools should meet the diverse needs of their catchment area and new faith schools should be created only where there is a clearly articulated demand and that admission procedures should not discriminate on the grounds of an applicant's religion
- investment in high quality education and childcare for the first years of life, involving parents as educators and learners, is the key to long-term educational achievement
- as opportunities arise, separate infant and junior schools should be replaced by primary schools

Cambridgeshire Lib Dems will demand high standards of administration by LA officers and, while supporting and challenging employees at all levels in the service, hold the Executive Members to account for the performance of County Council employees.

Cambridgeshire County Council Liberal Democrats Election 2009: our manifesto

Cambridgeshire Lib Dems, while arguing the case for the main principles outlined above, will consult with pupils, their families and the wider community as issues arise and will not seek to exploit educational issues for political purposes if there is any risk of that endangering the education of young people.

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The best start in life

Future life chances depend on what happens at the very beginning. Our priority is to ensure that every child gets the very best start and we are committed to supporting families to make this happen. Children's Centres must be the true hubs of their communities. We need more health visitors acting as childcare and parenting outreach workers to ensure that local families are aware of the services available.

Resources should be targeted at those in rural communities, in poverty, or who do not speak English and those who require specialised support such as families where a parent or child has a disability.

Getting young people positively involved

Cambridgeshire is one of the lowest-spending Councils in England on youth work and activities. Having places in the community for young people to play sport, meet and chat helps to keep them happy, motivated and feeling part of the community rather than alienated from it.

Liberal Democrats would draw up Youth Community Plans for more youth activities, particularly in poorly served areas of Fenland and parts of Cambridge City. Seeking the opinions of young people themselves would be an essential part of our approach. We would give young people more say over how the extra money should be spent through local youth councils and the Youth Parliament. This would promote regular sport, drama or arts-based and vocational activities that bring skills, experience and constructive activity.

We believe that Parish and Town Councils should seek to involve young people more and should give them the chance to give something back to the community.

Young people should be challenged, supported and involved.

If things go wrong

More young people are being dragged into the criminal justice system for minor offences - getting a criminal record. We need to prevent young people from getting involved in crime in the first place.

Of those who do go to prison, 75% re-offend when released. Too often they are released from custody with no support or accommodation – no wonder they drift back into criminal or anti-social behaviour.

To break this vicious circle of re-offending, we would set up a Young Person's resettlement partnership with District Councils. Every young person released from custody would be provided

Cambridgeshire County Council Liberal Democrats Election 2009: our manifesto

with a rehabilitation package to meet his or her needs, including suitable accommodation and education or training opportunities.

SUPPORTING ADULTS THROUGH SOCIAL SERVICES

Over the coming years the proportion of the population in the older age bracket will increase. This will put more pressure on the Adult Social Services team and will require a more creative approach to providing care.

Lib Dems believe that the National Health Service and the County Social Services team should work more closely so that cost-effective and appropriate provision is made.

Prevention is better than cure – more should be invested in helping older people to live safely at home. Equipment and improved fittings should be provided more quickly so that accidents can be avoided. This would help to reduce emergency hospital admissions and expensive acute care.

We welcome the idea of Self Directed budgets – where people have more direct financial control over the care they receive – but we believe that it has to be carefully monitored so that people are not worse off than they were under the previous system. Support and guidance will be essential if this is to succeed.

Carers, both of older people and of the disabled, do a wonderful job. They should be valued and supported and there should be greater investment in respite care to give them the breaks they deserve.

The Lib Dems would extend the support given to voluntary groups who support the frail and elderly, the disabled and those with mental health difficulties. We value the work given so unselfishly by volunteers and we believe the Council should contribute more generously to support the administration of these organisations.

The Lib Dems would encourage more people to bring their concerns to the Health and Social Care Scrutiny Committee so that grievances can be investigated and resolved.

PROTECTING the ENVIRONMENT

We take climate change extremely seriously, and would match words with action. In respect of the County Council's own operations, and in respect of the County as a whole, we would:

- Measure annually greenhouse gas emissions, including CO2 emissions.
- Set targets for the annual reduction of these emissions.
- Develop a detailed plan which shows how these reductions will be achieved, in terms of geography and sector. This plan would concentrate upon those reductions which are most economic to achieve.
- Monitor the annual reductions against the annual targets.

Cambridgeshire County Council Liberal Democrats Election 2009: our manifesto

A serious approach to climate change, exemplified by many forward-looking businesses, requires a carbon accounting process which is taken as seriously as the financial accounting process. This we would do.

We would also stringently evaluate all major new projects for their carbon reduction implications. These include transport projects such as the A14 improvement, building projects such as the Building Schools for the Future Programme, and other projects such as the waste management and street lighting Private Finance Initiatives. In the past such programmes have been evaluated solely on economic grounds. This is not good enough. They need to be evaluated also for the carbon effects.

Cambridgeshire has established itself as the leading County in the UK in household recycling ratios. That is good, but it is not good enough. Household recycling is a very small part of an overall environmental strategy. It would be our aim to establish Cambridgeshire as, overall, the most environmentally responsible County in the UK.

IMPROVING TRANSPORT

As Liberal Democrats we believe that transport strategy should be guided by three co-equal objectives: economic, environmental, and social. We believe that current transport strategy in Cambridgeshire is overly driven by economic considerations, and does not give sufficient weight to environmental and social considerations.

In terms of the environment, we would take practical steps to restrain CO₂ emissions arising from transport in the County. These include:

- Greater emphasis on rail. We would re-instate the post of Rail Development Officer, abolished by the current Conservative administration. We would press for investment in, and improvements to, rail services including rail freight. We argued that part of the investment of more than £500m being made in widening the A14 should have been re-allocated to rail investment.
- Incentives for low-emission vehicles. We would provide incentives for the use of smaller and low-emission vehicles. This could be achieved, for example, by differential car parking charges (as is already being done by Cambridge City Council) and by differential charges for the use of the Guided Busway. Differential charges could also be applied to a Cambridge congestion charge, as in London, if such a charge is introduced.
- More stringent air quality measures. We would apply more stringent conditions to operators of buses which pass through city and town centres, to ensure that their vehicles conform to the highest current pollution standards.

Cambridgeshire County Council Liberal Democrats Election 2009: our manifesto

We would also place greater weight on social considerations in transport strategy, in the following ways:

- Greater emphasis on public transport than on car use. Although extremely convenient for those that have them, cars are not available to many groups, including the low paid, the young, and the elderly. We would adopt a bolder and more imaginative approach to rural bus services, including the creation of efficient interchanges in the larger villages. We would also expand community transport services, such as Dial-a-Ride, which make a particular social contribution to disadvantaged groups.
- Reducing the impact of traffic on communities. We would reduce and enforce speed limits in residential areas, including the reduction of many 40mph limits to 30mph, and the introduction of 20mph limits in urban areas. We would also develop and implement a Lorry Management Plan to reduce the impact of heavy commercial vehicles on communities.
- Local money for improvements to streets and pavements. We would empower communities by devolving, for example to Parish Councils, decisions on improvements to local streets and pavements.

A full colour version of this manifesto with graphics is available at www.libdemfuture.com or from Martin Land (martin.land@ntlworld.com; 01480 390143)