

2009 Manifesto
Northamptonshire
County Council Elections

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Make our county the Rose of the Shires again

Time for a Change

In just four years, the Conservatives have taken our County Council backwards.

In 2005, the Conservatives inherited a poor performing council from Labour. Since then, they have made things worse. Community services have been cut, successive re-organisations have failed, and financial procedures have deteriorated.

Education across Northamptonshire, particularly in our Secondary Schools, has fallen further behind national standards and the botched sale of school land has left the council with a black hole in its budget.

The Labour government has continued to strip powers from local councils, reducing democratic accountability and foisting more regulations and inspections on our ailing council. Labour sees local government as the poor relation to Whitehall. More and more power has been handed to quangos without any direct democratic checks.

The County Council has a vital role to play in giving the county's communities a voice. Liberal Democrats believe that by giving people a greater say in their lives, communities can flourish.

Apathy is on the up in Northamptonshire. Liberal Democrats want to see a county that people feel proud of and participate in. Our policies seek to revitalise our county's local communities by devolving power and decision-making to the lowest possible level.

The Liberal Democrat Way – Fair, Free, Green and Honest

Liberal Democrats want to see social justice, equality before the law and sensible investment in our public services.

Liberal Democrats believe in freedom from poverty, ignorance and conformity. Everyone should have the right to live their lives as they see fit, without trampling over others' freedoms. For freedom to be real – and relevant to everyone – we must also work for fairer communities.

Real freedom starts with a good education and endures through personal health and a safe, clean environment in which to live.

Real democracy demands decisions to be taken openly and locally, with as many people as possible having their say.

Putting our principles into practice, Liberal Democrat County Councilors will:

- 1. Increase local opportunity by driving up school standards.**
- 2. Find practical solutions to cut crime after years of broken promises from the other parties.**
- 3. Promote greener ways of living, involving people in work to protect the local environment.**
- 4. Build a fairer Northamptonshire by tackling disadvantage and championing local enterprise.**
- 5. Make County Hall honest again by providing the services that people want, free of any dogma about how they should be run.**

Closer to the people

'For the people' means 'by the people'

The Conservatives have taken County Hall further away from people, making it harder for people to have their voices heard in the corridors of power.

The Council's latest audit gave the Conservatives just one star – heavily criticising the council for its failure to understand and develop a sensible approach to peoples' different needs in the delivery of vital services.

Local people still see County Hall as a faceless bureaucracy. Liberal Democrats would involve residents in target-setting for customer satisfaction and would continue to oppose further moves to work in isolation from neighbouring councils and public authorities.

Liberal Democrats pledge to:

1. Make County Hall participate fully in area partnerships with District Councils and the Police, devolving budgets and decision-making where appropriate.
2. Work better with Parish Councils, delegating decision-making to the lowest appropriate level.
3. Improve the council's complaints procedures to ensure that problems are dealt with promptly and with a human touch.
4. Encourage public participation at council meetings by conducting meetings in a more welcoming way, with better training for committee Chairs to ensure they involve members of the public who attend meetings.
5. Make better use of the internet to involve local people by encouraging online contact with staff and elected councillors rather than just offering basic information about council services.
6. Appoint an internal ombudsman to deal with complaints against the council and promote user forums to monitor performance and complaints.
7. Work for proportional nominations to outside bodies and proportional voting systems in elections within the council's influence, such as school governors.
8. Support community development projects that enable local people to play a more active role in their communities.
9. Introduce 'shadow' programmes to encourage people from outside the usual circles to become County Councillors.
10. Strengthen the council's community leadership role by playing a more proactive role in holding other public bodies to account.

Quality Schools for all, not just the few

Under the Conservatives, standards in our county's schools are slipping behind.

In Northampton, five out of our nine secondary schools are now in government intervention for failing to get at least 30% of their pupils 5 GCSEs at grade C or above. Many primary schools are also giving cause for concern, leaving education in our county town in a state of crisis.

Good schools are essential to giving our children the widest and best opportunities in life. For too long, levels of education in Northamptonshire have fallen behind results elsewhere in the country.

Liberal Democrats in Northamptonshire want every child to have the best opportunities. We strongly support the plans to introduce a national Pupil Premium to target extra funding at the children who need it most.

Early years

Liberal Democrats would:

1. Work towards the party's national targets to keep Primary School classes under 25 and infant class sizes under 15.
2. Reform education for 5-7 year olds to recognise the importance of extra-curricular activities in developing sound learning skills.
3. Support a more diverse curriculum, supporting schools-based assessments at seven and reducing national testing to the very minimum.

Secondary education

The provision of secondary education in Northamptonshire isn't good enough.

The huge divide between our county's high and low-performing schools only intensifies parents' anxieties to get their children into the best schools they can.

In Daventry, there is no provision for 6th Form education at all, meaning parents send their children to school outside Northamptonshire. This means less money from the government for children across Northamptonshire.

Liberal Democrat County Councillors would:

1. Continue to oppose Labour and the Conservatives' quick fix Academy programme as a means of improving schools, unless the benefits to pupils can be clearly demonstrated.
2. Continue to press the Labour government to make academies accountable to parents and local councils.
3. Roll out a Secondary Education Policy for Northamptonshire to achieve a more balanced mix of schools providing greater choice for students, particularly those seeking vocational alternatives.

The future of our schools

Liberal Democrat County Councillors have already called for better countywide planning to ensure that the number of schools and teachers matches our growing population. We must have the right schools in the right places to cut travel times to school and stop overcrowding.

We believe in a single, open admissions policy for all our schools so that pupils countywide are guaranteed a good education. Every child has the right to be educated within easy reach of their local community.

We need to ensure we recruit and retain good teachers for the long term, teachers who are qualified to degree level in the subject or age group they want to teach.

We will plan ahead to train enough qualified teachers to cope with Northamptonshire's growing population by setting up training partnerships with local colleges and Universities to encourage talented students to train and teach in our schools.

We will seek to free teachers from excessive bureaucracy and form-filling to spend more time teaching our children.

With the expansion of our county town, the location of its schools has become skewed, with more schools being built around the edge of the town. Liberal Democrats would look to provide a better choice of schools in Northampton's older communities, improving schools in our more deprived areas by making new schools hubs of urban regeneration.

Rural areas too face pressure from greater growth. South Northamptonshire alone was among the top 6 places in the U.K. for growth in the last 6 years. The County Council must now respond to mounting pressure on our rural schools by lobbying government to ensure that school provision is linked to planned growth.

For the future, Liberal Democrats want to see all schools become Community Schools where parents and pupils can access services provided by agencies like the police and social services. In many areas, particularly rural communities, access to these services is thin on the ground. By making our schools community hubs again, we can begin to redress this imbalance.

Behaviour in schools

Poor behaviour at school by a few too often hurts the education of the majority.

You can expect Liberal Democrat County Councillors to:

1. Work with School Heads to re-evaluate existing support to improve discipline.
2. Improve behaviour in schools by supporting Inclusion Zones to allow disruptive pupils to be removed from the classroom and directed to specialist on-site facilities to address their specific needs.
3. Crack down hard on bullying. We would address the issues that matter most to children to boost their sense of security and confidence at school.
4. Give our children a dignified education by providing clean toilets with working locks and secure personal lockers.

Special Education Needs (SEN)

Many children with SEN often go undetected by schools.

As Liberal Democrats in County Hall, we would:

1. Make sure that pupils with Special Educational Needs benefit from the full range of proper support to meet their needs, whether in mainstream or in special schools. There is a place for SEN education both in mainstream and special schools depending on the needs of the student.
2. Take steps to ensure there is equal access for SEN assessments and that parents are better advised as to the entitlements of their children.
3. Give students with SEN the right to go to school in their local communities.

School transport

Affordable and reliable public transport is vital to school choice, especially in rural areas.

Liberal Democrat County Councillors would:

1. Resist the imposition of charges for transport for students living more than 3 miles from school.
2. Scrap charges on school buses for Sixth Formers where buses already serve local residents.
3. Work for better public transport to colleges so that location is no longer a barrier to post-16 education.
4. Make better transport to school a real priority in County Hall both to improve our environment and reduce traffic on our roads.

Good food, healthy schools

Liberal Democrats believe our schools must set an example to children by promoting healthy living and providing parenting classes, where appropriate.

Liberal Democrats in Northamptonshire would:

1. Support free swimming for schools at council pools and affordable school access to council owned sports facilities.
2. Expand facilities for swimming and other sports and leisure pursuits.
3. Work to link school provision of sports facilities with local needs, tackling the lack of public pools in places like Kingsthorpe.
4. Encourage the use of 'walking buses' to get to school.
5. Expand the Safer Routes to Schools scheme to make walking and cycling to school safe.

Young People

During their four years in office, the Conservatives have scrapped the County's youth service and relied on the voluntary sector to do it for them.

By contrast, Liberal Democrats would:

1. Improve the provision of Youth Services countywide by working with youth clubs and other providers to offer young people facilities they will want.
2. Make sure that changes to youth services are driven by the needs of young people, not bureaucrats in County Hall.
3. Make disadvantaged young people the focus of Youth Services countywide to reduce petty crime and anti-social behaviour. 'Hard to reach', disaffected young people too often fall into

criminal activities. Youth Services have a vital role to play in building self-confidence and social responsibility by breaking down existing cultures of drug dependence and alcohol misuse.

4. Work with District and Parish councils to make better use of community facilities already in place.
5. Target resources at preventing young children suffering poor care and abuse at home, rather than reacting after problems have surfaced.
6. Provide better quality, more responsive support to Foster Carers to reduce the number of children living in institutional care. We would also ensure that fostering applications were promptly processed so that Foster Carers can be matched to children.
7. Support an increase in payments to Foster Carers countywide. The Conservatives took our advice this year and made some changes, but there is a long way to go.
8. Improve the retention rate of Foster Carers and convince former carers to return to care by making more flexible arrangements available.
9. Make sure that caseworker posts are not frozen to meet budget shortfalls. Caseworker vacancies are more than a number on a report – they are home visits to troubled homes that are not taking place.

Safer communities

Liberal Democrats believe that everyone has the right to a safe and secure place in which to live.

Stronger communities, in which young people are valued and respected, make for safer communities. Liberal Democrats would seek to strengthen communities through smarter community policing and by involving people in local decisions about community safety.

Liberal Democrats locally would therefore:

1. Support community police work by working with partners to ensure that council staff, Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) and Neighbourhood Environmental Wardens work as a cohesive team to address issues leading to crime.
2. Support Neighbourhood Watch, Shop Watch, School Watch, Farm Watch and others to encourage communities to work with police to tackle problems.
3. Expand the use of traffic-calming measures around schools and in residential areas by providing sensible alternatives to road humps, such as chicanes, on-street parking and mini roundabouts.
4. Expand the gritting of roads and pavements and put enough away to guard against future cold snaps.
5. Work with District Councils to put in place managed sites for travellers to reduce unauthorised encampments.
6. Use Community Justice Panels and Restorative Justice measures to make criminals face up to the consequences of their actions and give victims a say in righting wrongs.

These measures would be supported by 10,000 extra police on the streets nationwide – a Liberal Democrat pledge at the next General Election.

Caring for elderly and vulnerable people

The County Council's independent social care scores are an indictment on four years of Conservative rule.

Under the Conservatives, adult social care has fallen from 3 stars to just 1, according to the impartial Commission for Social Care Inspection. Today, the Conservatives are excluding many people who were entitled to support by raising eligibility criteria and cutting respite care.

A key reason why hard-working people pay their council tax is to support people who need a little extra help. Only the Liberal Democrats will put elderly residents and members of our communities with physical or mental health needs at the heart of their plans to improve County Hall.

Liberal Democrats have always promoted independent living to allow people to live as valued members of their communities, with sensible support available when needed. Support services must be tailored to meet individual needs and there can be no 'one size fits all' model of social care.

The County Council must be ready for the demographic time bomb that will hit Northamptonshire, as more and more people are living longer.

To tackle these problems, Liberal Democrat County Councillors would:

1. Develop community-based services, such as 'care-at-home', domestic repair and adaptation schemes to meet people's needs.
2. Support healthy living programmes to promote active ways of living for our older people by recognising the role of sports and fitness clubs in keeping people of all ages fit.
3. Work to ensure that elderly residents are not left in their own homes where they, their families and friends can no longer cope.
4. Fight to make the County Council the lead authority for purchasing community and health care equipment and services to break the arbitrary divide between health services and social services.
5. Ensure that advice and support is on hand at all times so that customers feel able to talk about their experiences of council services. We would also improve the availability of advice as recommended by the Audit Commission's recent Access to Services report on council services.
6. Provide better support for carers by developing respite care services.
7. Work co-operatively with providers of residential care to ensure that there is adequate care for those who need it.

Helping charities, helping people

Voluntary organisations play a vital role in providing care and support to vulnerable people. Liberal Democrats recognise this role and would work to support them, both as providers of frontline care and education and information services to people who may suddenly need care and support.

Too many charities and voluntary providers go without council funding despite their good work. The council currently operates a 'no money, no problems' policy, with frontline charities not funded by the council being excluded from discussions about the role of the third sector in local service provision. Liberal Democrats applaud the hard work done by charities of all sizes and would work to make sure that they are all listened to in devising future plans for countywide care.

Our Environment

Liberal Democrats believe that concern for the environment doesn't stop at our own backyard. Green policies are vital for the planet and for the future of our local economy.

Growth and the Local Economy

Northamptonshire is facing huge pressures from development and population growth. At the same time, the recession makes it more important than ever that our county attracts new investment to create skilled jobs. In some areas, regeneration and investment in new developments are welcome, while in others we must stop further green field development to preserve the character of our villages and market towns.

Liberal Democrats believe that development must bring with it proper investment in infrastructure and public services to ensure that urban and rural communities alike benefit from housing more people.

Liberal Democrats strongly oppose the government's unrealistic targets for new development in the so-called Milton Keynes & South Midlands Growth Area, which includes our county.

Liberal Democrats consistently opposed the imposition of the West Northamptonshire Development Corporation (WNDC) on Northampton, Daventry & Towcester. We will though continue to work co-operatively with WNDC to attract the investment and infrastructure needed to support new development.

Accordingly, Liberal Democrat County Councillors would take steps to:

1. Force developers to fund infrastructure projects by levying a 'roof tax', where required.
2. Consult local residents in plans for new development by going beyond statutory requirements.
3. Promote Northamptonshire's unique heritage creating jobs in tourism and leisure.
4. Reduce dependence on cars in new developments by forcing firms to contribute to public transport infrastructure and to provide more cycle and pedestrian routes.
5. Press for public transport, education and health services to be in place as new homes are built.
6. Promote the use of recyclable materials in construction to reduce demand for gravel extraction and promote energy and water efficiency measures in new developments.
7. Actively promote the establishment of community-based 'Pocket Parks' in both new developments and among existing communities.
8. Make sure our county's town centres are valued by heritage led regeneration rather than out of town retail development.
9. Establish a countywide Archaeological Advice Service funded from new developments to ensure that our archaeological heritage is properly recorded and conserved.

Transport

Northamptonshire's public transport infrastructure needs improving and improving fast.

Liberal Democrats locally would:

1. Create a more reliable public transport network by setting up bus partnerships with the bus companies.
2. Encourage public transport operators to use green fuels.

3. Promote dial-a-ride and other door-to-door transport services, particularly in our rural areas and encourage community-based transport initiatives.
4. Encourage buses, especially in our more rural areas, to carry bicycles.
5. Take control of existing bus route subsidies, including those provided by District and Borough Councils so that taxpayers in across our urban and rural areas get a fair deal.
6. Support the introduction of Park and Ride systems, where appropriate, to reduce congestion in our town centres.
7. Support a direct bus service between Northampton and Kettering.
8. Actively encourage the transfer of freight transport from the county's roads to the railways.
9. Support bus links to all rail stations to make give our county an integrated public transport network.
10. Look at ways to introduce a single Smart Card covering public transport across the county.

Pedestrians and Cycling

Pavements, particularly in our larger towns, have been neglected by County Hall for too long. Priority from the council's Highways budget must now be given to pavement repairs, starting with those that are most frequently used by elderly and disabled residents.

Liberal Democrats would replace damaged paving slabs with 'like for like' stones in conservation areas, rather than patchwork tarmac repairs.

Liberal Democrats would also work to create a fuller network of cycle routes to support both leisure and ride-to-work use. Accordingly, we would seek developer contributions and extra public investment to fund these changes.

Roads and sustainable travel

Persistent under funding of our roads has created an unacceptable backlog of road repairs. This will take years to catch up. Liberal Democrats would work with new highways contractors to get best value in improvements and maintenance of our roads, whilst also keeping the council's contract under constant review.

Liberal Democrats in County Hall would also:

1. Support community-led car-share schemes, including employee driven schemes, starting with the council's own employees.
2. Create safer routes to schools by reducing congestion and improving safety on our roads.
3. Support measures to tackle speed on residential roads and country lanes, where appropriate.

Waste

Disposal of waste in landfill brings huge financial and environmental costs to the County.

Liberal Democrats would:

1. Campaign against unnecessary packaging in our shops and using minimal packaging and reusable containers on council premises.
2. Relax regulations on the use of recycling centres. Regulations currently make it difficult for small businesses to dispose of their waste, leading to more fly tipping.
3. Support the council's choice of Mechanical Biological Treatment (MBT) of waste in preference to incineration.
4. Promote trading standards in Northamptonshire to ensure that consumers are treated fairly.
5. Set a long-term goal of zero municipal waste through waste minimisation, re-use and recycling schemes. A Liberal Democrat County Council would hold producers responsible for the disposal of products and materials that were overly difficult to reuse or recycle.

Finance and performance

Like other Liberal Democrat-run councils across the country, we would base our approach to managing budgets in County Hall on principles of sound financial management to deliver local taxpayers with the very best value for money.

We would work to make services run in more flexible, cost effective ways either by working with the private sector, in public-private partnership or by the council directly.

The Council Tax

The Council Tax is an unfair tax. It unfairly hits pensioners and those on low and fixed incomes. Until it is scrapped, a Liberal Democrat County Council would aim to keep it at the level of inflation, whilst recognising that council tax is largely dependent on government grants set in Whitehall.

Efficiency

Liberal Democrats would clamp down relentlessly on waste and largesse in County Hall. We would seek to make full use of unwanted or under-used assets held by the council or dispose of them.

Liberal Democrats reject the notion that cheapest is always best. Sensible investment can sometimes mean spending more to maintain assets, rather than allowing them to fall into disrepair and building up larger bills in the future.

Liberal Democrats are realistic about the council's finances. Employing people takes up the bulk of the council's budget and ensuring that the organisation employs the right people to deliver the right services is essential.

A Liberal Democrat-run County Council would also:

1. Monitor vacancies at every level to make bureaucrats justify their decisions to fill empty posts.
2. Introduce a 'Contracts Gateway' to scrutinise all large capital expenditure projects and safeguard fair procedures surrounding contracts.
3. Make further savings through better procurement and use of commercial standards in council buying practices.
4. Review the structure of the Council's Management Board to ensure greater accountability.
5. Review PFI schemes to allow greater accountability and achieve better value-for-money and expect service contractors to allow flexibility to respond to local decisions and needs.
6. Examine every outsourced service to make sure they are providing quality services at a lesser cost to the taxpayer, returning them to council control where they do not meet reasonable criteria.
7. Work with Borough and District Councils to explore shared services.

The Lib Dem 'Six to Fix' in Northamptonshire:

- 1 Action to improve school standards
- 2 Tackle waste to keep council tax down
- 3 Fix our roads and pavements
- 4 Better support for elderly & vulnerable people
- 5 Community payback for offenders
- 6 A council closer to people, not a faceless bureaucracy