

Liberal Democrats - Making a Positive Difference in Newcastle



A Review of the Past Year and a Policy Manifesto for the 2007 City Council Elections

Our policy document for last year's elections set out the achievements of the Liberal Democrat administration between our historic election win in 2004 and our first test at the polls in May 2006. We were delighted that the people of Newcastle endorsed the progress that has been made by giving us an increased share of the vote. We ended up with more councillors after the elections than before, which was increased further by a gain at the Lemington by-election in November 2006.

As promised when first elected, we have cut waste and contained council tax rises, overseen improvements in educational achievement and spent more on the services people say they want, such as community safety, street cleaning, recycling and the environment.

Early results from the independent residents survey conducted by the Audit Commission at the end of 2006 are very encouraging, with a 10 percentage points rise in satisfaction with council services overall. This gives us the fifth best score in the country and makes us the highest ranked local authority outside London. Naturally we are pleased with this response from residents, but we are not complacent and know that further improvements are needed and expected in a number of areas of service.

What we've achieved in the Past Year

This is an exciting time for the city. The Council is now managing an annual **capital programme** of between two and three times the level of the early years of the decade under the previous administration:

- Work continues on improving the city's **street lighting, roads and pavements** – and a bid for funding has been made to the Government for a major additional programme to improve all the city roads and pavements.
- The renovated Northern Stage and the new Dance City opened last year, and phase 1 of the refurbishment of the Theatre Royal is complete, with the Hancock Museum also being upgraded and extended with help from the Council.
- *Your Homes Newcastle* is well into the programme to bring all of the council-owned domestic property in the city up to **Decent Homes** standard.

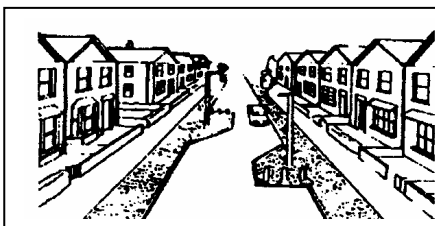
- Plans for the new **central library** were agreed and work has started on renewing our **schools**, including the new academy in Scotswood.
- £170m is going into improvements and an extension to **Eldon Square** shopping centre, with the new bus station just opened, the restoration of old Eldon Square taking shape and the redevelopment of the whole of the southern end anchored by the arrival of Debenhams and a new Greenmarket.

Our comprehensive **regeneration strategy**, replacing the failed and discredited Going for Growth programme, was developed, consulted upon widely and agreed by the Council. This strategy is totally different to what went before. It's not just about the bricks and mortar of regeneration but clearly linked to economic development, transport and accessibility, and it's about promoting inclusion, education and skills, improved health and a sustainable environment. In other words, it spans almost the whole agenda for the council and its partner agencies.

It is a totally joined-up approach that drives priorities right across the board. It is not inward-looking – it's set in a context that recognises how we must develop in what is a global economy. So as well as high profile, big developments like **Science City** and **Scotswood Expo 2010**, it covers areas such as graduate retention and attracting entrepreneurial migrant labour to help build our skills and our markets.

The strategy covers the whole city, not just the areas of greatest deprivation. It is about sustaining all communities and creating thriving neighbourhoods, with a good quality of life everywhere. Of course the sharpest focus is in the areas of highest need, where work has already begun, with new homes on the ground in Walker, and plans well-advanced in Benwell, Scotswood and Elswick, based on some innovative work with communities in shaping their future. There's also a new approach, with partners, to increasing economic inclusion and participation – **tackling worklessness**.

The council can't do everything – and shouldn't try to wrap its arms around the whole process. Regeneration will only work through open and honest partnership, with the council providing the strategic and visible leadership. More than anything else it's a bottom-up, community-based approach and not the sort where councils guard the chessboard and move all the pieces - that has been the cause of so much anxiety, frustration and failure in regeneration in the past.



Good quality popular **housing**, in thriving communities where people are happy to live and feel that they belong, is at the heart of our wider regeneration plans for the city and our new housing strategy sets ambitious targets to build 15000 new homes, of which at least 6000 will be affordable to those who

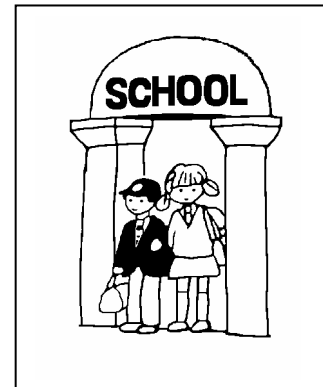
don't have the benefit of large and rising income. The first phase of new housing at Walker Riverside was completed and planning permission gained for other sites. And plans were approved for the building of the first council houses in the

city for well over 20 years. Action is in hand with *Your Homes Newcastle* to bring long-term voids (empty properties) back into availability. Issues arising from students living in residential areas are being addressed by the licensing of larger houses in multiple occupation and by the use of planning controls which make it more difficult to convert family homes into student houses.

The past year has seen the launch of the Newcastle Plan for **Children and Young People** (and its engagement strategy) and the positive, but realistic and challenging, outcomes of the external inspection of services for young people.

It's been good to see improvements in:

- Key Stage 2 results for 11 year olds (reducing the gap between Newcastle and national averages - one of the most improved authorities)
- 16 year olds achieving 5 A*-C GCSEs (or equivalent) – the improvement over the past three years is the second highest in the country
- A-level (or equivalent) attainment, with increasing numbers staying in education
- Outcomes for young people looked after in foster and residential care, including educational attainment and access to mental health services.



A new childrens' safeguarding unit was set up, and extra resources earmarked for youth services.

The Joint Area Review of how the Council and partners provide the range of services for children and young people was encouraging in that it recognised the good progress that is being made. An action plan is being drawn up to consolidate the improvements and address outstanding issues.



Although there's much yet to do, it's good to know that incidents of **crime and anti-social behaviour** in Newcastle are falling. According to national police figures, Newcastle is one of the safest cities in the country. We welcome the initiatives by Northumbria Police that have helped our city centre and neighbourhoods to become safer, but we are concerned that Home Office funding restrictions are preventing plans for a fuller complement of police community support officers being achieved. Safe Newcastle (the Community Safety Partnership)

is proving to be an effective and innovative vehicle for partnership working. The record of the council and partners to tackling problems has resulted in a "green" traffic light rating by Government Office and in the city being recognised by the Government as a "Respect Action Area" - with some welcome (though modest) extra resources to help develop work with parents and young people. According to a residents' survey, more people now feel safe in Newcastle during the day and at

night. The new SNAPS (Safe Neighbourhood Action and Problem Solving Groups) are a multi-agency approach to community safety, focusing on early interventions and improved resident communications; they are being rolled out progressively into all wards.

We've continued to promote the independence of **older people and vulnerable adults**, and helped them to live at home by providing faster delivery of services. New procedures have been agreed and introduced, with partners, to help ensure that vulnerable adults are safeguarded. We've also increased the number of people receiving direct payments to that they can have direct control over the services they receive.



For young and old, in many parts of the city, our ground-breaking **Year of Exercise and Sport 2006** was an unqualified success, with many new projects and programmes developed, and a considerable increase in the number of people participating in fitness and sport.



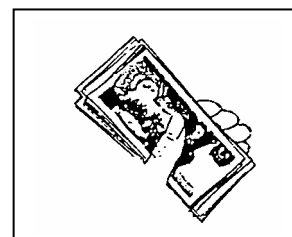
We are now in the forefront nationally for **devolving decision-making to local communities** and for **decentralising** our services. Revitalised ward committees, with new powers and increased budgets, are the springboard for local people to genuinely influence decisions and services that affect them. We are experimenting with participatory budgeting, where local groups decide on priorities and spending for their own projects. Localised working for neighbourhood environmental services is working well and is being extended, and Newcastle was recently recognised nationally as being among the cleanest cities.

Through a range of actions and initiatives, we've managed to push up **recycling** rates in the city to 25%, more than three times the level when we came into office. There should be no doubt that this Council is committed to a green agenda to ensure the sustainability of all we do.

We've introduced another sixteen **20mph zones** in the city, including the first of the "twenty's plenty" advisory schemes that have been so successful in reducing speed in Scotland.

Almost a million calls have been taken at the new **customer service** contact call centre since it opened last year, and we became a call-taking partner for the new 101 service. Customer service centres continue to operate to high standards of customer satisfaction.

Most of all we have maintained a commitment made before the 2004 elections to hold **council tax** to no more than the rate of inflation. In fact it has been below the prevailing rate of inflation in both years and will be so again for the year ahead. We have brought discipline to council spending and investment and at the same time protected those on low pay, pensioners and others on fixed incomes who were so



disadvantaged by the previous Labour Council's imposition of council tax rises two and three times the rate of inflation.

The Liberal Democrats remain resolute opponents of the current system of council tax and would replace it with a system based on ability to pay, such as local income tax. We are very disappointed at the failure of the Lyons report to deal with any of the real issues for local government funding, after three years of waiting,

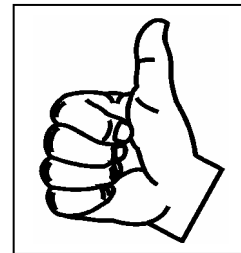


We are grateful to the dedicated and hardworking **employees** of the Council whose commitment has made these achievements possible. We are pleased at the progress made, with unions and staff representatives, in taking the Council through a time of change, and at the way we are working together to promote workforce training and development.

Both inside and outside the Council we are committed to the cause of **equalities and diversity**. We are one among the leading councils in making progress against the Local Government Equality Standard. We have recently issued new commitments on age, gender and disability, and we will continue to oppose racism and homophobia in Newcastle.

Our Pledges

1. Reinforcing our commitment on Council Tax – we will continue to keep the level of council tax at no more than the level of inflation over the period to 2010.



For this year, council tax will rise by only 2.7% (2.8% after adding the precepts from fire and police), despite a second successive year of being short-changed by Government. Revenue support grant is at the lowest (“floor”) level made available by Government to local councils, and in addition the Government recognises that it has undercounted the population of the city by several thousands. Newcastle’s population - people to whom we provide services - has been rising in the past two or three years but Government refuses to adjust the level of grant support accordingly.

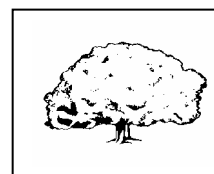
Despite this imposed “double whammy”, and because of our success in reducing wasteful spending, the Council is increasing spending on adult social care by nearly 7%, on services for children and young people by almost 6% and on local environmental services by 4%. We are setting aside some of the £6m efficiency gains we are making to provide **extra resources** in key areas such as:

- an additional £1m to fund adaptations to help disabled people at home
- £750,000 on early intervention and fostering for some of the most vulnerable children in the city
- more resources for community safety and to tackle domestic violence, and extra to increase the coverage of the popular night-time noise reduction team

- £600,000 for carbon neutral work and other energy-saving projects to help safeguard the environment
- more to help deal with homelessness.

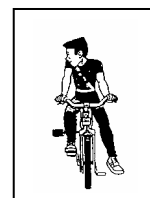
Each Band D council tax payer in Newcastle has saved £168 over the three council tax years 2005/6 to 2007/8, a total for the city's council tax payers of £12.5m, compared to the average increase for all local councils for the period. However, comparing these increases in Lib Dem Newcastle with the average 8 % rate of council tax increase under a Labour Council and Labour Government between 1997 and 2004, each Newcastle Band D council tax payer has saved £485 over the three council tax years of 2005/6 to 2007/08 – a total for the city council's tax payers of over £35m.

2. Positioning Newcastle as a Green City:



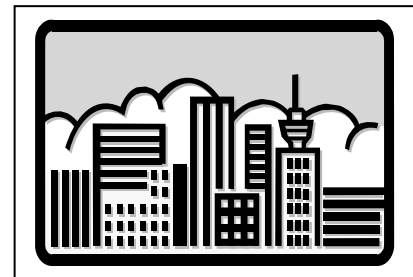
We believe that 2007 will be a momentous and significant year in which the Council will:

- Approve and begin operating to a Sustainability Charter, Environmental Policy and Environmental Sustainability Action Plan.
- Set out and approve a climate change strategy for the Council – and a strategy for the city during 2008.
- Become a campaigning body that during the year will focus attention and gear resources – for improving recycling and waste reduction (April-June); for civic pride and neighbourhood environmental action (July-Sept) and for climate change awareness and action (Oct-Dec).
- Set demanding new recycling and composting targets – rising to 43% within three years.
- Exploit opportunities created by our new Groundwork Trust in Newcastle, particularly for neighbourhood-based projects.
- Provide additional resources to promote and develop cycling, with dedicated staffing resource; begin work on the Ouseburn Parks regeneration project.
- Explore opportunities for a range of new projects:
 - Introduce car clubs
 - Set up an energy services company for the city
 - Set up a green business award
 - Support, encourage and promote solar panels for new housing.



3. Building on the progress that is being achieved in principal target areas:

- Key priorities for children and young people – raise levels of educational attainment in all stages (and rolling out the pioneering work on listening and speaking skills in primary schools); reduce the rate of teenage pregnancies; reduce obesity in children under 11; extend effective anti-bullying initiatives, safely reduce the number of children looked after in foster and residential care; finalise and implement an early intervention strategy to support parents, carers and families.
- Continuing to reduce disorder and anti-social behaviour in the city centre and local communities through specific programmes through youth work, domestic violence interventions and expanding the racist incident reporting scheme to cover homophobic incidents and bullying and harassment within schools.
- Supporting the planned expansion of the universities (but restraining the impact on already stressed neighbourhoods). The Council wishes to see purpose-built provision for 6000 places over the next few years; a range of sites have just been identified and will now be discussed with the universities.
- Giving pace to the delivery of the regeneration and housing strategies. In particular, we expect to proceed to set up a city development company, in partnership with Gateshead, but private-sector led, to boost economic growth of the city centre, attract investment and oversee delivery of regeneration and business projects.
- Note: much of the additional detail of our policy commitments is set out in the council's new regeneration strategy, the development of which was councillor-led.



4. Specifically, working towards an improved position among local authorities for adult social care provision.

We will implement, with partners, the new older people's strategy following consultation, as well as the new health improvement strategy and the White Paper *Our Health, Our Care, Our Say*. We will direct a particular focus towards providing accessible community-based activities and services for people with learning and mental health difficulties and towards support for carers.

Additional Policy Pledges

We will build on the Year of Exercise and Sport, improve health opportunities and respond to the youth agenda by providing **free access** to the Council's **leisure** facilities for primary school children, with their parents/carers, at the end of the school day, starting mid-2007/08.

We will develop proposals for a **Newcastle Festival and Carnival** for 2008

5. Responding positively to evolving national agendas.

Although we believe the **Local Government White Paper and Bill** to be a timid and fundamentally disappointing document, we will accept the challenges within it, specifically:

- To strengthen partnership – and in particular commit to making a success of the Local Area Agreement and the Sustainable Communities Strategy.
- To empower citizens –we welcome the community call to action and ensure that it is a genuine tool for use by the community and not manipulated by politicians, PLUS
- More responsive services, shaped increasingly by the expressed needs and priorities of local people, and reviewed and monitored locally.
- Local control of byelaws
- Single, simplified performance management operating to fewer key targets.
- Strengthened overview of scrutiny of the council and other public agencies.
- Strengthen and support the role of councillors as local advocates, champions and representatives, encouraging more women, younger people and members of ethnic minorities as candidates.
- Work vigorously with neighbouring councils in the context of the city region, seeking increased local powers for transport (including bus re-regulation), skills, planning, and determination of housing need.

We are not persuaded about the case for elected mayors or elected executives, all-out elections every four years or single-member wards, but we believe that there ought to be a public debate. We are therefore committed to consultation on the options.