

Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Newcastle 2012

Summary

The Labour Council in Newcastle was elected last year only because of national factors, and it's **taking our city backwards**.

- Back to the days of decisions being taken in secret.
- Back to top-down, unaccountable, partisan politics.
- Back to a lack of leadership on economic development.
- Back to the days when the last Labour Council ignored environmental sustainability.

Labour has **created nothing**. It's been a year of vacuous politics, when the windbags have taken over. "Let's Talk" they say – but there's no action. Meetings all over the city but nothing to show for them. Setting up commissions and panels which have taken all year to deliberate but just happen to report after the elections. Reorganising the deckchairs at the civic centre.

Instead Labour has **scrapped plenty** – the popular neighbourhood charters, an effective process for scrutinising the council's decisions and policies, the £5m Myplace project for young people in the city centre, the joint economic development company with Gateshead, the Local Strategic Partnership (the platform for working with other key players in the city), and the Sustainable Communities Strategy which set out the needs of the city and guided the council – Labour still has no replacement plan. What have they been doing?

A year on and there's not only no plan for the city and no direction for the council, but no Enterprise Zone for Newcastle and no City Deal agreed with Government.

Others are stealing a march on us.

Instead there's been a hapless Labour budget that scrapped the mobile library service, park keepers and rangers, the collection service for garden waste and support for care home wardens, with disproportionate cuts to local environmental services and a disgraceful and an unjustified switch of resources for road and pavement maintenance to "Labour's areas". And there's been a crude and clumsy threat to the Green Belt of the city through the badly-handled Local Development Framework process.

Labour is obsessed with blaming the government for everything and taking responsibility for nothing. It's been a wasted year for Newcastle, a year of local government by slogan and no action.

Our message to the electors at this election is:

- Newcastle needs a strong Liberal Democrat Opposition to defend our legacy when in power and to hold Labour to account.
- Newcastle needs a council that will restore open and accountable local government.
- Newcastle needs a council that will protect the environment and promote sustainability.
- Newcastle needs a council committed to targeting resources on those most in need, with a focus on prevention, the closest cooperation between agencies and on value for money.
- Newcastle needs a council that will get on with kick-starting economic development and regeneration, in partnership with central government, and end the slogans and posturing.

Nationally we recognise that the huge deficit in the public finances left by an irresponsible and incompetent Labour Government needs to be tackled. However we continue to lobby for the burden to be shared more fairly across the country and in particular for cuts to local government to be more evenly apportioned.

The Liberal Democrats' commitment to community politics means we work tirelessly for local people - we are not beholden to either big business or the trade unions. Despite very difficult times, Liberal Democrats are dedicated to doing what is right for the country and right for local people.

Background

Newcastle Liberal Democrats were elected in 2004 and ran the City until 2011. We are proud of what we achieved during our seven years in control, creating a nationally recognised Local Authority. We governed the City according to six guiding principles that remain as important to us now as they did in 2004.

As we said last year: "Though the pressures and demands on councils are great – and often contradictory – we recommit ourselves to these principles and values:

- Be an open, accountable, listening, responsive council
- Put the customer and citizen at the heart of everything we do, delivering services in a caring and sensitive manner
- Manage resources in a coordinated way and with an emphasis upon sustainability
- Value the contribution of partners, employees and citizens, trusting each other and working collaboratively
- See the diversity of our people and communities as a strength

- Focus upon continuous improvement in the pursuit of excellence, setting and achieving clear priorities and embracing new opportunities”

We know that local voters felt the need last year to pass a message to national politicians through the local elections, retuning Labour for a year to run the City. We have seen Labour talk much but deliver little. Labour has not done enough to demonstrate that they are capable of leading this City in the future.

Newcastle Liberal Democrats have shown that we are the only party capable of making the council deliver excellent services to all of its residents. We present here a list of our commitments for our new administration when we are returned to power in 2012.

In the referendum for an elected mayor the majority of Liberal Democrats believe that a directly-elected mayor would offer no advantages over the existing leadership system, but may present risks to the stability of the Council, as has happened in neighbouring North Tyneside.

We are, however, of the view that there needs to be much closer co-operation between neighbouring local authorities, especially on strategic issues such as economic development and transport. We believe that the Greater Manchester city region collaboration points the way to what is needed in our area and will provide the ambition and robust governance that the Government is clearly looking for. It will need urgent and focused action but we believe that the North East Local Enterprise Partnership can provide the basis for this development.

Development and Enterprise

Newcastle Liberal Democrats will continue to support the wishes of local people to maintain the Green belt in Newcastle through Sustainable Development.

Economic growth is vital to our City's survival but associated development should be limited to those parts of the City best able to support it. Concerted action across the City has led to a 'U-turn' from the Labour administration to use more Brownfield land for development. Liberal Democrats will ensure that the Environment will be continued to be protected.

The Regional Growth Fund is designed to rebalance the economy away from the City of London and funds private sector projects in areas where there is currently a heavy reliance on public sector jobs. The national investment in the RGF has increased by £1bn to £2.4bn and the third round of investment will be announced later in 2012. So far, the RGF has funded over 50 projects across the North East, creating almost 40,000 jobs in new businesses and the supply chain.

We are pleased that Newcastle has been selected by the Government to become a "super-connected city" and will receive £6m to deliver ultra-fast broadband to up to

7,600 residents and 7,400 businesses and high-speed wireless connectivity to up to 15,000 residents in key areas.

Newcastle needs new businesses. The North East region has one of the lowest rates of new business formation. We know the importance of adding more Private Sector jobs to the existing Public sector to rebalance the economy.

An important barrier to new businesses is the availability of finance, particularly so when the main centre of finance is in London.

Liberal Democrats believe that local problems require local solutions. Investment finance can be locally organised to support local businesses. Significant tax advantages follow eligible Venture Capital trusts.

- We will establish a Newcastle Investment Fund, with money from local people and organisations to invest in new and existing businesses established in Newcastle or those wishing to relocate their head-offices here.
- Large amounts of invested money generated in the North East is invested in London by the big public-sector pension providers; we will work with other Local Authorities to require that a significant proportion of the investment (20%) is made in businesses supporting jobs in the North East.
- Over the last ten years the significant growth in new businesses has come from student start-up companies coming from our two universities. We will support these new businesses through a commitment to additional dedicated incubator provision to start-ups and improved services to all new business.
- Businesses that trade together succeed together. We will promote businesses in Newcastle trading with each other; not allowing the money to leak from the North East to other parts of the country.
- Rebalancing the Economy doesn't have to be about big-business. Small co-operatives and social enterprise have a vital role to play too, so we will develop a Social Enterprise Compact to support those new groups just starting out.

Newcastle City has a fine tradition of craftsmanship, creating products that are the envy of the world. Too much, short sighted investment decisions have led to businesses removing the competitive edge from our offerings to the world.

Above all, Newcastle Liberal Democrats will support creativity. The production of high-value products and ideas that will make a real difference to the world and bring prosperity to the City. Creative products can be physical but can be also be a style, fashion or software. Anything where the real value is in the thought and skill behind its creation.

This is why we are supporting the provision of real three year apprenticeships, where young people learn a skill that will support them and our City for the years to come.

City Centre

When in Opposition Labour opposed most of our city centre development and regeneration of key sites such as East Pilgrim Street and the Stephenson Quarter. Now they have to change the plans or deliver. We believe that they are essential to the future prosperity of the city. Supported by tax incremental financing and advanced business rate income, introduced by the Government, there is the prospect of getting these schemes moving.

We have seen how retail businesses in the City Centre have been able to prosper by banding-together to form NE1, the business improvement district under the Liberal Democrats. We will continue to support the work of NE1 to promote Newcastle city centre's attractiveness as a business, retail, cultural and entertainment destination, including continuation of Alive After Five. We will establish an industrial equivalent to NE1, with the working title "Find-it-in-Newcastle" that will promote and signpost businesses trading successfully in the City.

We will actively support initiatives to promote retail distinctiveness, including the High Bridge Quarter initiative and opening of the Grainger Market on Sundays, and will actively explore the possibility of setting up an "independent retail hub" along the lines of Afflecks Palace in Manchester to cater for small independent businesses, such as artists, fashion designers, jewellery, etc. We will continue to support efforts to develop city centre workspace and business premises.

We will carry out an immediate review of pedestrian safety at key city centre crossings, including Neville Street (Central Station) and St Mary's Place, and will launch public consultation on traffic proposals for Percy Street. We will support efforts to develop a second entrance to Central Station from South Street and will support the refurbishment of the Monument Metro Station.

Housing and Regeneration

The Liberal Democrat Council completed the new build of almost 200 new council houses, the first in the city for over 25 years, and identified a pipeline for a further 600-1000 properties. We would continue working through Your Homes Newcastle to add new stock and to complete the upgrade and improvement of our existing stock, but there needs to be an emphasis on providing more family affordable homes for purchase, rent or shared equity.

We welcome Government initiatives to kick-start the housing market, such as First Buy, and low deposit schemes. There is a need for more empty homes in the city to be brought back into use and would set targets. We want to see the council take a more pro-active role with housing providers such as YHN, Housing Associations and private landlords in the city, to explore ways in which more homes could be brought back into use for those awaiting family sized accommodation.

We would maintain a high priority on homelessness prevention work – under the Liberal Democrats we were a champion council for the North East in this area, there have been no bed and breakfast for the homeless since 2006, and repeat homelessness had been reduced to a very small number of cases.

A Liberal Democrat Council would be committed to finishing what we have started in Scotswood and also in Walker Riverside, despite the collapse of private sector funding to support new building. We believe that developments of mixed tenure schemes remain the key to the long term sustainability of communities. We want to ensure the highest grade 'eco' standards are in place for new and refurbished properties.

We will support efforts to increase licensing of private landlords citywide, and will extend special management zones to Arthurs Hill, St Anthony's and Lemington village.

Adult Care and Health

Liberal Democrats would maintain the very high standards of services we achieved when running the Council. These were reflected in our "excellent" rating by the Care Quality Commission. We would continue to retain services for users in both "critical" and "substantial" assessment areas.

We are concerned that many of the cuts put forward by the Labour Council this year have particularly affected older people, such as the rise in the cost of Meals on Wheels, the withdrawal of the mobile library, the loss of the subsidy for wardens in sheltered housing schemes, the closure of public toilets and the reduction in funding for bowling clubs and other leisure activities. We would in future make sure that services for elderly and vulnerable residents are substantially protected.

We would extend the use of personalised budgets and build upon the re-ablement service introduced under the Liberal Democrat administration, which provides intensive support to people coming out of hospital to try to ensure they can get back to coping at home as quickly as possible.

We would ensure carers have help to deal with stress, with swift access to therapeutic services, emergency and crisis cover which is planned, reliable and accessible, more control and choice over how services are planned and delivered, some free time to pursue leisure and social activities, regular breaks to re-charge their batteries and access to good quality information regarding benefits and finances.

The Health & Social Care Bill has now been passed and we would make sure that the changes work in the interests of Newcastle residents, by being a critical friend to the Clinical Commissioning Groups, by encouraging integration between primary and secondary care and between the NHS & social services and by enthusiastically

taking on our role in public health. We would do more to tackle issues such as alcohol and drug abuse, smoking and obesity.

We particularly welcome the Government's decision to introduce a minimum price for alcohol and would work with partners on improving alcohol awareness strategies, reducing advertising and tackling alcohol related issues such as domestic violence and anti-social behaviour. We also welcome the new Wellbeing for Life Board.

We would ensure the Council's response to the imminent White Paper on Social Care supports a social care system that is a comprehensive national model based on a partnership of state and individual funding, which still allows for local flexibility and which encourages and supports greater collaboration between local Government and health services. It needs to provide a proper safety net, as currently the threshold for support is too high for many people to qualify.

The council should continue to prioritise early intervention and prevention, to support people in their own homes, help with social isolation and ensures access to a wide range of services, and we hope that any changes to the social care system are based on these principles.

Children and Young People

We are committed to the priorities for agreed by all partners in Newcastle Children's Trust:

- Keeping children and young people safe and supporting families
- Reducing inequalities and promoting equality
- Raising aspirations, achievements and opportunities

In recent years under the Liberal Democrats the city received national recognition for our approach to tackling child poverty, saw significant improvement in educational attainment, offending rates and health outcomes for children and young people, and was commended as robust in our arrangements to safeguard vulnerable children and young people. National performance measures show that the very large majority of outcomes have been in line with or above the averages for England or for similar areas.

An important issue of the future is to ensure that the Council and its partners continue to invest in early intervention and prevention services which will ensure that outcomes for children continue to improve. Liberal Democrats in Newcastle helped to refocus services in this way to support children better but more needs to be done and we need to challenge the Council to ensure that the right investment is made.

The costs of children's social care are phenomenal. Children must always be protected – and this is the first priority no matter what the financial cost – but we

must also invest in early intervention and prevention to help control budgets. But this is a big ask for Children's Services to achieve alone. We must ensure that all agencies working with children play a role in sharing strategies to bring down the number of Looked After Children and children with child protection plans.

We are interested in improving services for children and young people with disabilities. The Government's plans to enable more parents and children to purchase services themselves are welcome as is the proposed 'local offer' with a menu of services agreed locally with parents and children. Newcastle needs to be prepared for changes and should seek to try to model its provision on the lessons emerging from the pilot authorities. Newcastle has moved substantially in the direction of giving parents and children more say in local provision but there will be much more to do in conjunction with the local offer.

The Liberal Democrats set in train an ambitious £250m programme of investment in our schools, by acting early to access central funds. Our young people will have the benefit of this for years to come.

We are disappointed to see how the Labour Council is turning schools governance into a political football. There has always been diversity in educational provision and it was the Labour Government that set off on the road to academies and foundation schools. The most important judgement is what outcome will be achieved. We acknowledge that some of the Government's education changes give opportunities for more innovation with more diversity in the education provision to help raise achievement, although we would expect new providers would seek to work collaboratively with colleagues in other educational settings. We would not support arrangements any proposals for new schools which did not involve collaboration with the local authority and nearby schools.

The debate nationally has become polarised over the extent to which free schools or academies will bring benefits in mainstream settings, but we should not ignore the fact that free schools offer possibilities where there are insufficient school places, particularly for children with complex needs. We would welcome discussion with parents about their aspirations for schools in their local area.

In particular we want to encourage schools to maintain co-operation in our city over admissions, hard-to-place students and school improvement and we are encouraged that many schools already on the pathway to academies have made this commitment.

The Government is investing an extra £1.25bn in schools this year and this will double to £2.5bn a year by 2014. In Newcastle, it means that through the Pupil Premium schools will get a total £7.3m this year to support almost 13,000 pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. This money is making a real difference because schools are spending it in the way they believe is best for their children: reducing class sizes, hiring additional teaching assistants or getting better IT equipment to help those who are struggling.

It comes in addition to the expansion of free early-years education for the 40% least well-off two year olds and other measures aimed at helping families in difficult circumstances.

Under Labour, young people's skills in the work place were neglected. In a balanced economy, we must ensure that people can get the skills necessary in the way that best suits them and meets the demands of employers.

That is why there has been a record expansion in apprentices in the North East: last year alone, nearly 35,000 people across the region were learning and earning on an apprenticeship, which was up 87% on Labour's record, with a commitment to an additional 250,000 apprentices nationally by 2015. We want to see the City Council do all it can to ensure that the new Youth Contract and the additional apprenticeships and work placements are a success for our city and for our young people.

University Technical Colleges will be opening across the country, with one expected to open in Newcastle this year, assuming that political dogma by the Labour Council isn't allowed to frustrate the ambitions of Newcastle College. They will give 14 to 19 year old students the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in the workplace by integrating technical, practical and academic teaching.

Liberal Democrats are committed to ensuring that across the city there are a network of opportunities to access services for children and young people in their local area. We are supportive of the development of Sure Start centres as family centres for a range of service provision. We would seek to move services into such local centres away from other buildings, building on the work we started when in power.

We would work with the voluntary and community centre to explore ways of ensuring more neighbourhood provision of services, particularly activities such as play services and youth clubs, whilst recognising that there is a need to supply detached and outreach services, particularly in more disadvantaged parts of the city.

Environment

The Liberal Democrats' record on environmental and sustainability issues was unparalleled, having won the accolade of "UK's most sustainable city" twice. Unfortunately since May 2011, Labour has largely dismantled the structures that delivered these achievements. As a result projects have drifted, partnerships have stagnated and opportunities have been missed. The Liberal Democrats would reverse this damage and get Newcastle back onto the front foot on sustainability.

On regaining power, the Liberal Democrats will:

- Restore a written commitment to sustainability to the Council's highest priorities;

- Reinststate the political infrastructure to deliver this: a dedicated Cabinet post and a scrutiny panel to hold that Cabinet member to account;
- Rebuild relationships with key partners in the city to tackle issues like carbon emissions;
- Aggressively pursue energy savings within the council with the resulting savings being used to protect frontline services;
- Protect the city's key nature reserves and ensure brownfield development sites are given the highest priority;
- Continue to improve the recycling system including, if still viable, restoring the free garden waste collection service;
- Drive forward the Council's cycling strategy (formulated by the Liberal Democrats), with a focus on safe cycling in and through the city centre;
- Support residents in reducing their own domestic carbon emissions including the uptake of the Green Deal, Feed In Tariffs, community energy switching with a particular focus on helping those in fuel poverty.
- Require the council's Local Development Framework to consider designating additional nature reserve territory in the north and west of the city to protect important local habitats and biodiversity. We will also require the LDF to designate new allotment sites in the north, west and east of the city, and will require developer Community Infrastructure Levy contributions to fund the establishment of new sites.

Transport

We enthusiastically support the improvements to the Metro network under the current reinvigoration programme and DB-Regio operation, and will support the extension of this process to suburban stations.

We will seek to implement a more consensual approach to bus operation in the city, seeking to secure the best deal for the passenger, rather than the ill-advised and unhelpful "turf war" being conducted between NEXUS and the bus operators at present. We are open to the concept of Quality Contracts to secure an effective and integrated bus network in the city, but feel that the bus companies need to be active participants in this process rather than antagonists.

We support steps to increase use of sustainable transport, including car clubs, further use of electric buses in the city, discounted annual payments for taxi operators converting their vehicles to electric operation, and continued roll-out of electric freight servicing of city centre businesses.

We will uphold and extend the city's cycle strategy, with particular focus on widening participation in cycling, making the city centre safer, and implementing key cycle improvement "spokes".

We will support efforts to extend HS2 to Newcastle and to create a “North Eastern” rail franchise assuming responsibility for Northern Rail’s services in the region, and will lobby for the “cascading” of surplus Cass 158/159 stock from electrified TransPennine routes to serve the Newcastle-Sunderland-Middlesbrough and Newcastle-Carlisle lines.

We will implement a citywide pavement parking strategy to address nuisance parking.

Culture and Leisure

- We will seek to ensure that Newcastle continues to enjoy the highest standards of cultural events and venues of any regional city.
- We will work with city and regional partners to support the development of more employment and self-employment in cultural and digital businesses and seek to support business clusters in areas like the Ouseburn. We will seek to implement planning and property policies which support provision of suitable accommodation and premises.
- We will continue to support the diversification of Newcastle's night time economy by encouraging a greater range of entertainment and music venues, and encourage development of clubs, galleries, and performance cafes. We will oppose the council's proposals to impose restrictions on Newcastle's LGBT venues.
- We continue to place a great value on encouraging greater participation in active sport and leisure opportunities, using the Olympic Games as a springboard. We will seek to safeguard initiatives such as the Fusion card scheme which offer children and young people a wide range of schemes and facilities. We are particularly supportive of efforts to ensure that all ages and groups have access to appropriate leisure and healthy activity provision, especially the old and young.
- We are strongly supportive of efforts to encourage "co-operative" or "community-managed" local leisure facilities, but recognise that in some cases this may not be a feasible alternative to council-delivered activity.
- We will seek to develop a "Bowls Strategy" to support the sustainability and management of local bowls facilities, which have suffered significant cuts under Labour, and will consider other cases which may arise.
- We will explore post-Olympics Lottery funding opportunities for continued investment in the restoration and improvement of the city's parks. We will seek grant funding to extend the installation of outdoor activity and exercise equipment ("green gyms") in city parks and will seek to abolish charges for using parks for general fitness and exercise purposes (excluding facility hire for pitches, courts etc.).

- We recognise that greater community involvement in running of library facilities is potentially beneficial and will support the role of volunteers and community management arrangements in addition to ensuring that the traditional role of the library service is retained. We will encourage local libraries to continue work to promote literacy and reading with local schools. Not enough of our schoolchildren use libraries: we will implement an initiative to increase take-up.
- We opposed the withdrawal of the mobile library service which provided an important social service for older and less mobile residents. Given that the library vehicle is still owned by the council, we will seek to restore it to operation if possible.

Equalities and Inclusion

We are proud of the Council's record as being one of the leading authorities for promoting equality and inclusion but disappointed that Labour has scrapped the Equalities Committee which was overseeing this development, without replacement.

We are also disappointed that the Fairness Commission has taken so long to reach even interim conclusions and recommendations compared with other authorities who have established such bodies. We will support all reasonable recommendations but would like to have seen greater transparency and inclusion in the carrying out of its work.

We support the concept of City of Sanctuary to bring together all agencies and programmes working with asylum seekers, refugees and new communities.