

Northumberland Liberal Democrats

Priorities for a Liberal Democrat-led County Council



Towards a brighter future

Foreword

A Liberal Democrat County Council would look significantly different from the current centralised, remote and mismanaged Labour run Council. From the controversy over closing care homes for the elderly, to plans to close all middle schools, to slashing road maintenance, Labour Councillors have proved themselves inept, incapable and utterly lacking in leadership and vision. Over the past few years they have alienated elderly care home residents, middle school parents, and others through a basic failure to properly inform and involve people in the decision making process. We have also seen Labour at war with themselves as they battled over who would survive reorganisation after the regional referendum.

Liberal Democrats believe things can be done better, and should be done better, for the benefit of Northumberland residents. This document is our plan to deliver better services and improve the quality of life for all in our beautiful county. **We have a united team, with a common message across Northumberland – Labour have failed, it's time for a change, and Liberal Democrats have the vision and the ability to deliver. *Liberal Democrats are the REAL alternative.***

Northumberland Liberal Democrats Priorities for a Liberal Democrat-led County Council

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- Improve accessibility of council buildings, facilities, and publications
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- Support inclusion, and reduce the risk of isolation and loneliness
- Support residents in their own homes wherever appropriate
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- An Open Council, open access and right to speak
- Plain English in all documents, and access to translations
- Improved customer service and individual response
- Improved media relations and information service
- Using e-government opportunities
- Joint working with other authorities, including access to service centres

Education and Young People

Putting the Learner First

Liberal Democrats do not support the ‘Putting the Learner First’ proposals advocated by the current Labour administration. We have grave concerns over the funding arrangements for changing the school system. The financial implications of Labour’s plans are severe in their effect on all other services provided by the County Council. There is a clear expectation that large council tax increases, cuts in services and redundancies among staff, or both, will occur as a result of implementing these proposals.

Northumberland Liberal Democrats believe in meeting local needs and aspirations as far as possible, and will work with communities to achieve the best outcome in terms of educational provision for our children. **We will seek local solutions to the problems of surplus places and crumbling school buildings, not Labour’s ‘one size fits all’ proposal.**

A Liberal Democrat-led County Council will review plans for school re-organisation, where there is strong local demand or particular circumstances, to ensure that any educational reform is consistent with local needs and priorities.

Liberal Democrats in Islington have turned around a poorly performing education service to deliver the most improved school results in the country, after ousting Labour two years ago.

We will draw on their experiences in aiming to make Northumberland one of the best performers.

Putting the Learner First – A Liberal Democrat Response

1. We reject the 'one size fits all' approach that appears to dominate these proposals, and call upon the County Council leadership to ensure that final plans reflect local needs and circumstances over administrative convenience. Schools, parents and pupils should be given the opportunity to be involved in the decision making process, with full unbiased information on all options.
2. The issue of surplus places and crumbling school buildings is not new, and it is the failure of successive Conservative and Labour Administrations to adequately fund education that has led to today’s crisis.
3. We regret the confusion that is caused by linking separate issues into one by the current Building Schools for the Future (BSF) bid proposals. Issues include surplus places, old school buildings, raising educational standards and a preferred system of education provision (that is, two or three tier.)
4. We note the answer given to Alan Beith MP in the House of Commons when it was confirmed that BSF money is not dependant on switching to a 2 tier system, and that Middle schools would still be eligible for improvement funds.
5. We note the very real concerns of parents with children who will be affected by the proposed changes, and regret that, to date, they feel ignored and let down by the consultations with the County Council.
6. We regret the uncertainty and disruption these proposals are already causing to pupils, parents and staff. We call for close monitoring of standards and an improvement in school support from the Education Authority. This will ensure that pupil welfare, educational achievement, and staff morale does not suffer during any proposed changes to school organisation.
7. We note with grave concern the recent reports that there will be a shortfall in the BSF money provided by the government, and call upon the Secretary of State to honour his government’s commitment to education by properly funding quality schools for our children.

A Liberal Democrat run County Council will:

- ✓ Work to unlock the potential of children in Northumberland by ensuring school leavers possess a range of skills that employers want
- ✓ Work to raise aspirations among our young people, and enthuse people of all ages to view learning as a lifelong experience
- ✓ Support efforts by the region's universities and colleges to increase participation and diversity in further and higher education
- ✓ Introduce recyclable waste collection at all schools and educational establishments, and encourage individual school environmental projects
- ✓ Lobby for improved funding allocation from central government that will recognise the diversity of education provision in the county
- ✓ Improve access to information technology for children, and promote innovative schemes to utilise ICT in delivering an enhanced curriculum
- ✓ Review provision for children with special educational needs and ensure sufficient resources are made available to schools and used effectively, including provision for gifted and talented children
- ✓ Make adequate provision for extra curricular activities and invest in youth services to engage with our young people out of school hours. We will seek to reduce alcohol abuse and perceived anti-social behaviour by encouraging young people's sporting, musical and other interests
- ✓ Support and encourage community involvement in schools, including quality community education to meet the needs and aspirations of our residents, and investigate multi-use of school facilities
- ✓ Recognise the quality of our teaching staff and classroom assistants, and we will support headteachers and staff, and improve morale by ensuring that support services from the education authority are effective and readily available, with minimum bureaucracy and interference
- ✓ Keep 'travel to school' time to a minimum and resist government pressure to charge for school transport
- ✓ Ensure adequate resources are allocated to meet and improve standards of care and outcomes both for children looked after by the Council, and for families in need.
- ✓ Replace all temporary classrooms as soon as possible, and bring all buildings up to a suitable standard for our children as soon as funding allows.

Alan Beith MP supports Northumberland Liberal Democrats plans to raise aspirations, and boost life chances for our children.



Efficiency and Effectiveness

Making effective use of resources is the key to success in local government. As 'guardians of the public purse', Liberal Democrats would always seek to spend taxpayers money wisely, in accordance with our priorities and vision for the Council, and in an open and informative way. Wherever possible, residents views will inform the budget setting process to enable the council to meet our objective of being a customer focused, responsive organisation. We will take particular care with our staff, as they will be the key element in driving forward our plans for improvement to services. We will continue to campaign for a fairer allocation of funding by central government, and an end to the unequal Barnett formula.

A Liberal Democrat run County Council will:

- ✓ **Use taxpayers contributions effectively:** The Council has an annual budget of over £300 million, and reserves of more than £10 million. Taxpayers in Northumberland have seen their contribution to the County Council double in the last ten years. In any organisation we believe there is capacity for efficiency savings, and Liberal Democrats would seek to keep bills as low as possible while delivering the services residents require. We will be proactive in pursuing European and external funding to deliver specific community improvement projects. Liberal Democrat-run Newcastle and Liverpool City Councils have taken action to reduce the council tax burden on their residents since they took control. We support the national Liberal Democrat aim of replacing unfair council tax with a fairer local income tax that is cheaper and easier to collect, and requires no costly benefit system.
- ✓ **Become a responsive organisation:** We believe the council should focus on being responsive to Northumberland residents, whose council tax pays for council services. We want residents to understand what their money is spent on and to receive in return efficient and effective public services. We will change the current '9 to 5' culture to one that is available to residents at evenings and weekends, including council meetings so that councillors will lead by example in being more easily accessible to the community, and more reflective of modern life that requires greater flexibility and availability.
- ✓ **End the 'culture of outside consultants':** Current Labour councillors seem unable to take decisions without an endless stream of expensive external consultants reports. Liberal Democrats would only use consultants where absolutely necessary, and would instead be prepared to take decisions in accordance with our priorities and after proper consultation with residents. We would seek to 'build capacity' in the council and our communities, enabling our own staff and residents to develop the skills necessary to manage our own affairs more effectively.
- ✓ **Use proper budgeting and set priorities:** Through proper planning and budgeting for our priorities, we will avoid the poor financial planning of the current Labour administration, who seem to lurch from one crisis to another, have slashed road repair funds and are planning to invest nothing for capital improvements to care homes, roads and all other services for the next 15 years, in order to fund their controversial education plans to close all middle schools. We recognise the sparsity factor in delivering council services to rural areas, and will press the government for fairer funding.
- ✓ **End duplication of service between County and District Councils:** Under Labour we have seen the relationship between County and District Council sink to an all time low with bitterness and mistrust between the Councils. We would introduce partnership and co-operative working wherever possible to end wasteful duplication between the councils, and work effectively with our partners to deliver quality services to residents.
- ✓ **Value council staff:** Under the current Labour administration, many council employees are uneasy about their future, with job cuts looming to pay for Labour's plans to close all middle schools, and we note that they were recently on strike. Liberal Democrats understand that the council's staff are our most valuable asset, and that staff who are motivated deliver a better service. Our objective would be to ensure staff understand the new direction of the council as a responsive organisation, and we will help staff to deliver the service that residents deserve.

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Enterprise

Enterprise and an active economy are vital for a thriving Northumberland. Jobs give a sense of purpose to people's lives, possibilities for improvement, incentives to learn and develop new skills. They benefit families and communities, not only those directly employed. A diverse enterprise culture is required to produce maximum benefits for all.

We believe that the focus on attracting large 'inward investment' that has prevailed in the past has been misdirected, as all too often these firms have taken large subsidies only to close and shed jobs a few years later.

We will direct regeneration efforts towards assisting with business start up, and help grow our small and medium sized businesses.

Liberal Democrats believe good business is founded on trust, knowledge, goodwill and community based social cohesion. There is a "social capital" that is increased by successful enterprises as well as financial gain. We are genuinely pro-European and believe in fostering effective connections to Europe both geographically and online. Northumberland is well placed to trade with the recently joined Baltic countries, as well as Scandinavia and Northern Europe.

A Liberal Democrat run County Council will support local enterprise by:

- ✓ **Procurement policy:** The Council will seek to obtain goods and services from the local area, supporting local farmers, businesses and services.
- ✓ **Service provision:** The Council will explore methods of service provision that encourage local solutions to local needs; we will seek to end the duplication of effort at Regional, County and District level, and will press for a single team for economic development in Northumberland.
- ✓ **Education:** Work with employers to provide relevant education, vocational training and lifelong learning fit for the 21st century. Foreign language skills will be particularly emphasised.
- ✓ **Tourism and leisure industries:** The Council will work with businesses to support their marketing and develop both physical (on the ground) and virtual (on the WorldWideWeb) tourist information centres in partnership with District Councils. We recognise the anger that recent changes in tourism support have brought to our tourism businesses, and we will work more effectively with One North East to promote tourism in our County.
- ✓ **Joined up thinking:** We will work with the Northumberland Strategic Partnership (NSP), the various Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), District and Borough Councils, voluntary sector and private sector to maximise the gains for our local economy. We will seek to influence and develop the Regional Economic Strategy to meet the needs of Northumberland. We will promote effective and innovative measures to improve economic performance and participation.
- ✓ **Farming and fishing:** We recognise the challenges faced by our farming community, particularly over the reform of the Common Agriculture Policy; and equally those of fisherman in our coastal communities who still fish our waters, and face their own difficulties. The Council will take steps to ensure their voice is heard when decisions are made that affect their livelihoods, at whatever level necessary.
- ✓ **Environmental:** Encouraging good waste management, business recycling and reduced packaging will help provide jobs, reduce costs and safeguard our natural environment; we will seek to encourage eco-tourism and environmentally responsible behaviour by our local businesses and industry.

Environment and Community

Northumberland is a beautiful county. With a National Park, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, World Heritage Site, 114 Sites of Special Scientific Interest and a dramatic coastline it is a wonderful place to live. It is also blessed with a rich and varied built environment, with historic towns and villages and many reminders of its rich heritage. The county offers a great environment for people to live.

The environment is the poor relation in terms of priorities at Northumberland County Council. Spending on local infrastructure is often cut, whilst the council does not put forward a positive enough agenda to safeguard the quality of life in the county for future generations. Nationally, Liberal Democrats are leading the way amongst the main parties in championing environmental issues, with a green strand running through our manifesto. We will liaise closely with our MEP for the North East, Fiona Hall, on European environmental initiatives.

We recognise the challenges ahead in addressing the recent floods in the Hexham and Ponteland areas, and will press for a more coordinated response to similar events. Improved transport links benefit residents and encourage business in an area of low business start-ups. We recognise the historical significance of mining to the County and residents of Northumberland and regret the decision to close Ellington Colliery. We call on all involved to ensure the employment and welfare needs of the miners and their families are met.

A Liberal Democrat run County Council will:

Infrastructure

- ✓ Campaign for dualling of the A1 north of Alnwick and the A69 west of Hexham
- ✓ Prioritise the reopening of the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line for Passenger services for environmental, social and economic reasons
- ✓ Lobby for improved services on the Tyne Valley line, Morpeth line and East Coast main line
- ✓ Decentralise minor road maintenance to the district councils where practical
- ✓ Support a new Tyne River crossing to Prudhoe to replace the Ovingham bridge
- ✓ Ensure rural populations can access facilities by upgrading rural routes to our market towns

Public Transport

- ✓ Resist pressure to charge for transport for pupils who live up to 5 miles from school
- ✓ Support car-share schemes in rural areas, and community transport schemes across the county
- ✓ Support non-car use where appropriate, e.g. Sustrans cycle routes in our communities
- ✓ Encourage the integration of different public transport networks to improve ease of use
- ✓ Work on introducing a common concessionary fare structure with other parts of the North East to simplify the system and encourage more commuting by public transport

Sustainability

- ✓ Support development of technology for the conversion of organic products to electricity
- ✓ Implement more carbon trading policies and make the Council carbon neutral by 2020
- ✓ Target the development of a green energy sector with specially grown crops used as fuel sources for small scale power sources (biofuels), and encourage micro-power and CHP projects
- ✓ Ensure local food sources are encouraged and supported and that fair prices are paid
- ✓ Ensure all major council policies are subject to a green audit
- ✓ Re-energise the Local Agenda 21 strategies to ensure that they are taken seriously
- ✓ Avoid adverse environmental effects from any expansion of Newcastle Airport
- ✓ Encourage a joined up approach with our neighbouring authorities and the districts
- ✓ Lead by example by converting all council vehicles to alternative fuels
- ✓ Carry out an immediate environmental audit of all council buildings and activities
- ✓ Reduce paper use, source supplies of recycled or sustainable stationery, and minimise waste as a first step towards a 'zero waste' strategy

Community

- ✓ Work with partner organisations to improve quality of life for residents and actively support Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships across the County
- ✓ Extend use of Acceptable Behaviour Contracts as a first step before ASBOs, and seek to address these behaviours before they start by ensuring adequate facilities exist for young people

Elderly and Disability

Liberal Democrats take our responsibilities towards our elderly residents and those with disabilities very seriously. We live in an ageing society where an increasing number of elderly people are also living longer. That means services for the elderly will be in greater demand.

We recognise that disability comes in many forms, not just physical but also those with mental health needs. The Council will work with partner agencies to ensure their needs are met.

We will promote a healthy lifestyle and active community engagement by our 'young elderly', and recognise the skills and experiences they are still able to contribute to our communities. We recognise and applaud the huge efforts made by voluntary organisations to support our elderly residents, and will seek to build capacity in our communities through assisting such organisations to become established across the county.

Liberal Democrats believe the provision of high quality care for the elderly and those with disabilities is an essential requirement for a civilised society. We will support national campaigns for a decent basic state pension, and national Liberal Democrat policy of introducing free personal care across the country. We will campaign to improve take-up of benefits under the present system, as many elderly residents are missing out.

A Liberal Democrat run County Council will:

- ✓ Campaign to make free personal and social care available in England, as it is in Scotland where Liberal Democrats are in the administration. We support the principle that no one should be forced to sell their home to pay for care. We will review the level of care provided by the Council, and seek to raise the minimum standards offered as soon as funding allows
- ✓ Support efforts to include elderly people, who often feel isolated and cut off from the rest of their community, for example by visiting schemes from schools
- ✓ Ensure that residents in need of services are supported in their own homes wherever appropriate, and work in partnership with local authority and other social housing providers to ensure there is an adequate supply of affordable sheltered housing where it is needed.
- ✓ Investigate the possibility of utilising the home help service more effectively, by for example providing services to fee paying clients to generate additional income
- ✓ Seek to maintain an adequate supply of quality residential care places in the public sector, and also in conjunction with other providers. There will be a presumption that existing care homes will remain open unless physical or economic factors require replacement, when the principle will be that similar sized more modern facilities will be provided at minimum disruption to residents
- ✓ People of all ages with disabilities require additional care and modified facilities. The Council will work with partner organisations to ensure their needs are met
- ✓ All obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act will be implemented, and the Council will actively seek to improve access to facilities and services
- ✓ Seek to introduce a common concessionary fare scheme in partnership with district councils for elderly residents, and those with disabilities, to enable them to access services and their communities, and reduce the risk of isolation and loneliness.
- ✓ We support the national Liberal Democrat campaign for free off-peak travel for elderly residents and those with a disability

Effective Communication

Liberal Democrats believe that most of the residents in Northumberland consider that the County Council operates too much “behind closed doors.” Liberal Democrats believe openness and transparency is the best way to run any Council. We therefore believe that establishing, sustaining and reviewing a range of effective two way communication systems between the County Council and the residents of Northumberland is an integral part of efficient service delivery. The aim must be to ensure as many residents as possible have an understanding of the role of the Council; how and why it establishes priorities; how to make contact and obtain information about services and how public concerns are addressed.

A Liberal Democrat run County Council will:

- ✓ Encourage and facilitate Open Access by the public to Executive meetings and other Committees
- ✓ Promote a public ‘right to speak’ in Planning and Scrutiny Committees
- ✓ Make plain use of the English language, with prompt access to translations and alternative formats whenever needed, and enabling those with disabilities to have effective access to Council services
- ✓ Ensure prompt replies from officers to all forms of correspondence and telephone calls, to be followed through to completion of the query or request
- ✓ Set up a responsive Complaints process
- ✓ Conduct regular news briefings for local and regional media on council activities
- ✓ Review the provision of the County Council magazine, and ensure it offers value for money
- ✓ Make full use of e-government opportunities, for example by harmonising links between the Council and main stakeholders
- ✓ Encourage councillors to act as a channel between local residents and County Hall, and promptly action any concerns raised
- ✓ Promote greater co-operation between County Council, District Councils & Parish Councils, for example through sharing Access to Service centres (One Stop Shops)
- ✓ Set up regular consultative groups throughout the County, and act on feedback received

Liberal Democrats recognise that some of these issues can be addressed more quickly than others, whilst some existing practices and procedures need to be reviewed and updated. Notwithstanding budget restrictions a Liberal Democrat County Council will always place Effective Communication at the heart of policy development, day-to-day practice and in its review of procedures.



Liberal Democrats in Northumberland, including Alan Beith MP, Baroness Maddock and Fiona Hall MEP are planning for a ‘brighter future’