



Borough's recovery plan a huge success



Ponteland's Long-serving Lib-Dem councillor and former Mayor of Castle Morpeth, Sheila Campbell, has been made an MBE by the Queen. Full story — Page 2

In December 2002, after an estimate had indicated a shortfall in the Castle Morpeth Council's projected reserves, the Borough's Independent/Liberal Democrat administration gave full backing to a tough "recovery plan" to ensure continuing improvement in the council's financial position — unlike the Labour and Tory groups who chose to criticise. In the May, 2003, local elections both the Independents and the Lib Dems lost seats to Labour and the Tories, whose election campaigns grossly exaggerated the true financial strength of the borough council.

Following the May 2003 election, after protracted discussions between the council's political groups, Labour and the Lib Dems agreed to form a joint administration on the basis of full support for the "recovery plan" and the financial strategy upon which it was based.

Implementation and strict adherence to the "recovery plan" has proved a huge success.

At March 31, 2004, the Borough's audited General Fund reserves stood at £707,000 — a substantially higher figure than when the Independent/Liberal Democrat Administration was formed back in May 1999.

Borough residents then benefited by seeing their Council Tax rise by only 1.9% in 2004/5, which was the third lowest increase in the country.

Liberal Democrats are justly proud to have been the major force behind the implementation and strict adherence to the hugely successful "recovery plan".

What a contrast to the three years before May 1999 when, with a Tory chairman of the Policy and Resources Committee and despite annual rises of around 10% in Council Tax, the Borough's General Fund reserves plummeted by more than £500,000 to £340,000.

Are you on a roll . . . ?

May 5 this year will see elections to choose new Northumberland county councillors — and there is a strong chance that the next General Election will be on the same day.

Will you be able to vote?

A new register of those eligible to vote is produced every year. Visit Ponteland Library to check the list to ensure that you will have the right to vote.

If you discover you are not registered, contact Castle Morpeth Borough Council as soon as possible to ensure that your name is added to the roll of eligible voters. See P2, col 1 for council contact details

How to get in touch

Your local Liberal Democrat Councillors are all here to help you should the need arise. Please use the list on the back page to find out how to contact them.

Ponteland Liberal Democrats also have a website, which can be viewed on www.pontlibdems.org.uk. It will help keep you up to date with what we are doing.

Other useful websites include www.pontelandonline.co.uk and www.pontelandparishcouncil.org.uk www.hexhamlibdems.org.uk

People without a computer can use "free to use" computers at Ponteland Library and Stamfordham Village Hall.

New Year's honour for Sheila

Long-serving Ponteland Liberal Democrat councillor, Sheila Campbell, has been recognised in the New Year's Honours List, and will shortly be travelling to Buckingham Palace to be made an MBE.

A former teacher at the renowned Northern School for the Deaf, Sheila has served with distinction as Liberal Democrat councillor for Ponteland East Ward for almost 20 years, on both Ponteland Parish Council and Castle Morpeth Borough Council.

Sheila also served a successful and enjoyable term as Mayor of Castle Morpeth and is currently parish council vice-chair.

Her father was transport manager for Courage Brewery and the family lived at the foot of Tower Bridge in London, where she used to enjoy feeding the horses.

She was educated largely at Hove and Chertsey in Sussex, where she was evacuated for six years during the Second World War.

Like her father Sheila is keen on motor sport and taught her children to ride motorbikes. She also enjoyed cricket — a good alternative to homework! She was a member of the school team and also enjoyed watching games at the Oval and Lord's.

She moved briefly to the North East in 1947 and permanently in 1963.

Sheila has built up a tremendous reputation over the years as a councillor who DOES get things done.

Her passion for better access and facilities for the disabled has been her flagship, as has her attention to the minutiae. A born educator, she abhors "make do" solutions, and continually campaigns to get things right.

Her dedication has seen Sheila serve on virtually every main committee of the borough council as well as many prestigious outside committees. And her commitment to the residents of her ward has seen her top the poll in virtually every election she has stood for.

'One stop shop' eases council move

Visitors to Castle Morpeth Council's old headquarters at the Kylins were well aware how shabby and inconvenient the old building was. So the decision to sell and move to better facilities at Longhirst was sensible and economically sound.

However the new offices are situated outside Morpeth, so it is difficult to reach for those relying on public transport.

For the convenience of residents the council has opened a "one stop shop" in Bridge Street, Morpeth — directly opposite Northern Rock. All planning applications are available there for inspection and trained staff respond to residents' queries and complaints.

The council has also launched a "First Call" system so incoming calls are connected directly to the appropriate department.

Improved I.T. makes contact with the council easier and many forms can be downloaded on to computers, including those needed to request postal votes.

To contact the Council phone "First Call" on 01670 535000

E-mail: firstcall@castlemorpeth.gov.uk

Website: www.castlemorpeth.gov.uk

Twin-bin boon

A "twin bin" system introduced by Castle Morpeth Council has produced results far better than predicted. Before the launch of the system, Castle Morpeth residents recycled an above-average 16% of waste. That figure has now rocketed to 36%, one of the best recycling rates in the country.

Social housing is the way we should go



Coun Peter Charleton (pictured, left, with Berwick-upon-Tweed Lib-Dem MP Alan Beith) reports:

In our last edition of *Focus* we welcomed the news that a new Ponteland First School is to be built in the grounds of Richard Coates Middle School.

Since then plans for a new health centre, to be built on the former Dobson's sweet factory site have been exhibited.

It is likely that the new first school and a new public library will be located in the grounds of the Coates School. This will leave three large adjacent plots for development virtually in the heart of the village.

We trust that future plans for residential development of this large site include social housing.

Lib-Dems back 'clean' Bill

Conservative MP for Hexham, Peter Atkinson, has voted against giving councils powers to tackle fly-tipping, litter, graffiti, fly-posting, dog fouling, nuisance noise and abandoned cars. The Tories claimed the measures in the Government's Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Bill were unnecessary and that the Bill focused "predominantly on urban areas".

But Mr Atkinson's bizarre stance has been undermined by the revelation that the Bill has received the backing of the National Farmers Union, as well as all three main parties, including the Tories, at the Local Government Association!

Lib Dem Parliamentary Candidate for Hexham, Andrew Duffield, commented; "The Clean Neighbourhoods Bill has the support of the Liberal Democrats, although the committee stage will need to sort out Labour's jumble of pre-election populist measures and ensure it really is effective environmental legislation.

"Peter Atkinson and his tiresome Tory colleagues are wrong to reject this Bill, which will give much stronger protection to our countryside as well as urban areas.

"All the evidence I have seen suggests that penalties are not strong enough to deal with problems such as fly-tipping, graffiti and the sheer volume of rubbish on our streets."

Mart-site homes scheme will alter whole village

By David Butler
Ponteland Parish Councillor

The recent decision by Castle Morpeth Borough Council to allow 42 new homes to be built on the Mart lairage fields at Meadowfield Road should be seen as a natural extension of Ponteland's growth — but the case has highlighted some disturbing aspects.

Yes, the council has stipulated that 10 of the properties must be 'affordable homes', to be sold at 70% of the going market price to local people who meet the qualifying criteria.

But the whole scheme is totally out of character with the style of nearby homes and creates unhealthy and unwelcome precedents with regard to transport and village facilities.

Our village is a super place to live — just eight miles from the centre of Newcastle with its lively night life, excellent shops and nationally famous landmarks, yet within a matter of minutes from wonderful open countryside and fabulous coastal scenery.

No wonder people wish to live here. The village boasts good schools, a wide range of sporting facilities and pleasant surroundings. It is just these attractions which generate the demand for homes.

But the Mart site development will alter the whole character of the village. Current residents will see their present superb country views replaced by rows of two- and three-storey town house terraces. And the new houses will be crammed together, more like a townscape than a village.

Let's remember that Castle Morpeth Council approved the plans by the narrowest of margins (six votes to five) even though:

- Ponteland Parish Council objected to the application
- There was a large number of constructive objections by local residents, led by Liberal Democrat councillors;
- And there were strenuous and vocal efforts to oppose the plans by some local Ponteland councillors on Castle Morpeth's Planning Development Committee.

Liberal Democrats pledge that they will always listen to local people and attempt to reflect their views when local issues are considered. We believe that councillors are elected to serve the community rather than the financial interests of developments.



Rural village, rural views — under threat by crammed-together homes on the old Mart site.

School buses 'stealth tax' to cost N-E £9.3m

The School Transport Bill, which completed its passage through the Commons in December, will introduce a massive stealth tax on working families in Northumberland with school age children, research by the Liberal Democrats has revealed.

The Bill will, for the first time, introduce measures to charge children for using school buses on trips over three miles. This will apply to all children currently not eligible for free school meals and could cost parents more than £212m nationally.

Across the North East it could leave families £9.3m worse off.

Hexham Parliamentary Candidate for the Liberal Democrats, Andrew Duffield, said: "We have already had a decision from Labour-run Northumberland

County Council to charge over-16s for school transport, hitting families of A level students.

"Now the Government has given the green light to the county to charge for all pupils' transport needs. This will have a real impact on families across the county. And the situation will be made even worse by plans to close middle schools, which would mean more children having to travel further to get to school."

He added: "The Government continues to undermine the principle of free education. This Bill makes access to good schools a lottery based on the size of parents' purses rather than the child's educational needs.

"The Liberal Democrats have tabled a Parliamentary motion to scrap these charges and will campaign to keep school transport free."

'Highway robbery' — Duffield

Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Candidate for Hexham, Andrew Duffield, has slammed Northumberland's Labour Administration for its cavalier attitude towards the county's middle schools — and now its roads as well.

In the wake of its second disastrous failure to secure "Building Schools for the Future" money from Government, the Labour controlled County Council now plans to slash investment in other vital services by as much as £10m in order to fund its ill-judged education reforms.

Hardest hit is likely to be investment in the county's crumbling road network — already badly underfunded for years.

Andrew Duffield, a Liberal Democrat county councillor himself, said: "This proposal is nothing less than Highway Robbery — robbing Pete the Potholer-fixer to pay Two-Tier Paul.

"The financial implications of Labour's plans are severe and may mean council tax hikes, cuts in services and job losses among staff. Unfortunately, the Tories seem content to impose 2-tier schooling come-what-may as well."

A day in the life of a Euro-MP

Fiona Hall and Lib-Dem leader Charles Kennedy.



Fiona Hall, Lib-Dem MEP for the North East, on a typical day in the powerhouse of the European Parliament

It's a brisk 12 minute walk into the European Parliament from my flat in Brussels and most days I'm in by nine o'clock, either for an early meeting or to catch up on paperwork. My in-tray is like the magic porridge pot — it never stops filling up.

The other morning I was startled to come across a red double decker bus as I approached the Parliament building. It had been hired by the WI, who were over in force to lobby MEPs about the proliferation of dangerous chemicals in the environment.

Tests have shown traces of many hazardous substances in people's bodies and the levels are rising. New legislation to tackle the problem is coming before the European Parliament soon. It's known by the acronym REACH, standing for Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals.

Later on that day I talked to a WI member from Gateshead and showed her around the Parliament building.

It's always good to welcome visitors from the North East. Last week was a committee week, so in addition to a hearing on the REACH chemical legislation and a meeting with lobbyists from the Food and Drink Federation, I squeezed in a Development Committee discussion on recent elections in Mozambique.

Recently, I was appointed the Lib Dem rep on the panel which decides which elections the European Parliament should monitor. Fortunately, there were no evening meetings that day so at 7pm it was back home for a bowl of pasta and a read of another pile of paperwork for the following morning.

Parliamentary colours

There are four different kinds of week in the European Parliament - and to keep everyone straight they are colour coded on the calendar.

■ **Blue** weeks are group weeks, when UK Lib Dems meet with other members of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE) to discuss policy.

■ **Orange** weeks are committee weeks, when the nitty-gritty work on legislation gets underway.

■ **Red** weeks are when the Parliament sits in full session in Strasbourg. They are unpopular, because MEPs, assistants and officials all have to travel to Strasbourg.

■ **Yellow** weeks are rare and welcome. That's when there are no parliamentary meetings and MEPs can spend time in their constituencies.

YOUR LOCAL LIBERAL-DEMOCRAT FOCUS TEAM

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The philosophy we work by

From the Liberal Democrat Constitution: "The Liberal Democrats exist to safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community and in which no-one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity."

Lending a hand

If you would like to help deliver *Focus*, make a financial contribution, or join the Liberal Democrats, contact Mary Winter, Secretary, Ponteland Liberal Democrats, 1 Meadowvale, Ponteland NE20 9NF. Tel: 01661 823354