

A Year of Achievement

A report on the first year of Liberal Democrat control of Northampton Borough Council

Where we started...

'Don't let our town go down
the pan'

(Chronicle & Echo 10th January 2007)

Weak political leadership is also
undermining improvement. The
administration has failed to provide
political direction.

Audit commission Feb. 2007

In May 2007, the Liberal Democrats were elected to run Northampton Borough Council for the first time. We won 26 seats, gaining 9, the Conservatives dropped to 15, Labour 5 and a sole independent.

We were told that we had won the poisoned chalice. We inherited a council in crisis. The outgoing minority Conservative administration had passed a panic budget with £2 million of cuts in frontline services. Public toilets were to be closed, park rangers cut, graffiti removal reduced and Christmas lights axed.

The Audit Commission had given a massive thumbs down to the council, reporting that the council was failing to improve and was still amongst the worst in the country. The Council was failing in key services such as housing, revenues and benefits, and planning.

The Chief Executive had resigned, and the council came very close to full government intervention. An interim Chief Executive was appointed to take over the reins.

We said in our manifesto,

'We will start against a backdrop of systemic failure. We will be constrained by the financial crisis we will inherit, and by the appallingly low rating with government inspectors. This will involve some difficult decisions. Our prime motive though will be to ensure that Northampton Borough Council does better for the people of Northampton, and gives our town the leadership it deserves.'

That is what we have been doing. Not promising what we cannot deliver. Telling it as it is, and focusing on the things that really matter.

The big picture...

Let's give credit where credit is
due: Northampton Borough Council
is finally showing real signs of
improvement *Chronicle & Echo April 2008*

A year on, the Audit Commission have visited the Council again. This time they found a council that is improving. This is what they said:

"Northampton BC has set clear priorities that will contribute towards improving the quality of life for local people. Over the last year the council has begun to move forward with a more coherent focus. Strategic leadership has improved and the council is more willingly to engage positively with key partners. Performance is improving but it has some way to go before it is able to match the performance of similar types of councils."

The Audit Commission noted improvements in key services such as planning, revenues and benefits, housing and recycling but said that resident satisfaction with services continues to be poor.

In our first year we have significantly overhauled many of the internal processes and have gained recognition from the Audit Commission for these improvements. However, there will be a time lag before citizens and customers recognise the improvements. Public satisfaction remains very low.

Now we must demonstrate to the people of Northampton that the council is improving.

Getting the basics right

The first thing we have had to do is appoint a new Chief Executive. David Kennedy was appointed in August, with the support of all parties on the Council. He joined the authority in November and is initially concentrating on changing the culture of the organisation to become more focused on customer needs. He is restructuring the council's management to make it more effective and more understandable to staff and the public.

Sorting out the financial mess

The key priority has been to put the Council in sound financial shape. We had inherited the worst possible assessment of the council's use of resources by the Audit Commission.

We started with an excellent new Director of Finance, who has built a new team of finance staff to ensure we have proper control of the council's finances.

We have lived within our means in the first year, inheriting a tough budget, that wasn't ours, and ensuring we did not overspend. This meant difficult and unpopular decisions on charges for the balloon festival and sticking with the Tory decision not to subsidise the annual fireworks display.

We have introduced proper financial accountability, with monthly public reports on the financial position.

There had been huge public criticism for the pay-outs to departing council staff. We have cut the severance payment terms, protecting the public purse for years to come.

As a result, in our first budget we were able to stop the rot. It was the first 'No Cuts' budget for years, properly balanced, with increased reserves, and with additional investment in planning, regeneration, graffiti removal, park rangers and public toilets.

We found that, for years, the council had been letting down disabled people by failing to properly fund disabled facilities grants. We have put right this wrong in our first year by planning to spend one third of our capital budget this year to clear up the backlog and ensure disabled people have the facilities in their homes that they need.. Many other popular and desirable things have had to wait, but this injustice had to be put right.

Being accountable

We take our accountability to the public seriously. We have insisted on:

- Monthly public performance and financial reports, so that councillors and the public can see how the council is performing in each service against our targets.
- Written reports by each cabinet member to full council meetings, which fellow councillors can question and challenge. Our Tory predecessors just couldn't do it.
- Strengthened scrutiny of the council's work, with three committees of councillors supported by more staff resources to ensure that the decisions are properly scrutinised. The value of this to local services became clear when scrutiny evidence played a key part in the campaign to stop the closure of Gloucester Avenue Post Office.
- We have appointed a Faith Champion (Cllr Scott Collins) to ensure that the views of faith communities are properly heard.
- Increased opportunity for public participation in council meetings by strengthening the public's right to speak and to ask questions.

Working with Partners

We are rebuilding the Council's relationship with key partners in the public and private sectors. In our manifesto we described Northampton Borough Council as being like a '7 stone weakling' – almost invisible in the key partnerships that should deliver real benefits to our town – and weakening those partnerships by our lack of strength. Since taking control we have been working to put that right.

Improved partnership working has produced real benefits for Northampton people

There is now a **Police Desk in the Guildhall One Stop Shop**. We are also co-locating the Safer, Stronger Northampton team into our Fish Street offices **bringing together the Police and the Council's Anti Social Behaviour Unit**.

The **West Northamptonshire Joint Planning Unit**, responsible for planning policy across Northampton, South Northamptonshire and Daventry District Council areas is located in our Cliftonville offices. We took a leading role in creating a Joint Strategic Planning Committee with councillors from Northampton Borough, South Northamptonshire, Daventry District Council and Northamptonshire County Councils to control and oversee their work and to ensure that Northampton has a strong voice in any growth beyond our borders.

Another example of improved partnership working is the potential conversion of Robinson House, in partnership with a Housing Association, government agencies, the County Council and the voluntary sector, from a troubled Single Persons Accommodation block into a state-of-the-art **Reception and Support Centre for Homeless and Vulnerable People**. Further details are below in the Housing section.

The Venezia Festival, launched on 25th April, is a success for partnership working; with professional and amateur artistic and community groups, schools, and venues across the town, all with generous support and involvement of our sponsors.

Consider the planet in everything we do

Our first public initiative, launched by Ming Campbell within a month of the election, was to introduce a **carbon management programme** to reduce the council's carbon footprint. Supported and partly funded by the carbon trust, we have set an objective for the council to be carbon neutral by 2020, with a funded four year plan to reduce the council's carbon emission by 35% by the year 2012. Not just saving the planet, but saving costs for the council tax payer.

We are making it easier for Northampton people to recycle by:

- Introducing a pilot programme for the door-to-door collection of glass** to 4,000 properties which we intend to extend over the whole town.
- Introducing recycling nodes for people who live in flats**, who up to now have not had the facilities to separate their waste for recycling
- Introducing a recycling node into the town centre** on the Market Square
- Working with the County Council to plan for the introduction of a **door to door kitchen waste collection service**.

We have taken a strong stand against fly-tippers and litter louts, with **more prosecutions against offenders**, targeted to areas with particular problems. Liberal Democrat councillors have taken the lead with local residents in organising community clean-ups in **Eastfield, Thorplands, Parklands, Kingsley and Kingsthorpe**.

We are investing in our parks, with 200,000 of capital investments planned this year. In addition we have won a **£450,000 Big Lottery award** to support our play strategy, which will include new play projects and improvements to play facilities in public parks

We have improved access to the riverside in **Beckets Park** and **Midsummer Meadow** with external funding and we have supported the CASPAR Plus project which has successfully won funding for improvements to **Victoria Park** and **Foot Meadow**.

Quality & Choice in Housing

Our housing service supports some of the most vulnerable people in our town, and too often in the past it has let them down. There are over 6,000 people on the waiting list, while properties have been standing empty and the council has failed to meet people's needs. Meanwhile, the benefits service had been leaving people in dire straits while they waited for it to process their benefits applications.

In our first year, we have **reduced the average time to re-let a vacant property from 71 days to 25**. That means more houses have been available to let.

Our revenues and benefits service has been turned around, now processing applications promptly and taken out of intervention by the government.

There are too many homeless people on our streets, while at the same time we have difficult to let rented accommodation in need of better use. Subject to public consultation, **we have won a £1.42 million government grant to restore a block of single person accommodation**, Robinson House, as a properly managed home for people to get their lives back together before moving on to permanent accommodation. It will reduce nuisance for neighbours and help homeless people.

Giving people control over their lives is a key Liberal Democrat principle. This summer we are introducing **Choice Based Lettings**, so people can look at the home that most suits their needs, instead of being allocated a house not to their preference by the council.

The quality of our repairs service still needs to improve. That is a key priority for the year ahead.

Good neighbours make up successful communities. **The Blackthorn Good Neighbour declaration** is the first of its kind in Northampton. People living in Waingrove, Harefield Road and Kirton Close signed a Good Neighbour Declaration agreeing to be more community spirited, look out for each other and take responsibility for making their area cleaner and safer.

The Town Centre- a special place

Any town or city's reputation is made by its centre. But Northampton is not "Anytown". It is a place with great history, great buildings and unique spaces. We need to play to the town centre's strengths to make it a special place to live, work and enjoy. Lib Dem councillor **Andrew Simpson** has led a town-wide survey of opinion on the town centre, and we have listened to what people have said. Some things we have been able to do straight way, but others will take 2, 4 or 10 years to achieve.

The first thing we did was **put some pride back into the town centre with flowers and re-painting** for the summer. This will be repeated this year.

People told us that good car parking was important to their visit to the town centre. So we have:

- Introduced Pay on Foot car parking** at St. Michaels & St Johns car parks, so you only pay as you leave for the amount of time you are parked for, making shopping and leisure in Northampton more convenient.
- Reduced Sunday car parking charges** – with outer car parks free.
- Frozen car park charges** for another year.

People have told us that we need to attract bigger and better stores into our centre. The Grosvenor centre is outdated, while the bus station is an ugly eyesore.

The replacement of the bus station and the expansion of the Grosvenor centre has been on hold for years. We have taken this further forward than either Labour or Tory administrations have been able to do in the past, with a **heads of terms agreement with owners, Legal and General, now in place**, and a full development agreement subject to negotiation with lawyers. This is a long term project, the biggest investment ever in our town centre and the key to attracting more people to the centre and winning further investment.

Northampton people value our Market Square, the largest open air town centre market in the country. We've won **£100,000 grant aid to help us draw up a plan to improve the Market Square**, enhance its heritage and ensure it is better used.

Meanwhile we have been attracting more special events to the square, including the launch of a monthly **farmers market** and a skating rink at Christmas.

We are working to bring something special to the St. Johns area of Northampton, with plans for a **business start-up centre**, a new hotel, and more employment.

We are investing in a **Town Centre Regeneration Team** to help us deliver key improvement projects.

The Northampton Arts Collective have done a fantastic job with the Fishmarket. We have given them the confidence to plan for the future with a proper lease and the security of tenure to enable them to attract grants from other bodies.

The former Tory administration axed funding for the town centre Christmas lights. **We have ensured that our town is not dark at Christmas** by restoring a modest budget. We are encouraging town centre traders to contribute to a more extensive display in future.

Planning for the future- protecting the past

The Government have said that Northampton must grow by 50% over the next 20 years to a population of 300,000. The Lib Dems have opposed both the level of growth and the creation of the West Northamptonshire Development Corporation to deliver it, but it is going to happen. Our town has been here for over 1,000 years, and will be around for another 1,000 years after WNDC has gone. We need to do all we can to deliver quality new homes that will last for generations, and to miss that opportunity would be let down our legacy to future generations. That's why we are working closely with the WNDC.

Our planning service has been desperately under resourced. This year, with government help, **we are investing £600,000 in improving our planning service.**

We have already improved the time taken to determine planning applications from amongst the worst in the country to amongst the best.

We are working with our neighbours in South Northamptonshire and Daventry District Councils to ensure that Northampton's voice is properly heard in new development on our boundaries.

We have adopted an **Economic Regeneration Strategy** that sets out clear targets to improve the choice and quality of employment opportunities in our town, and to attract dynamic new businesses.

We are working to offer new opportunities in Sixfields, while ensuring that the town centre is not harmed by new out of town retail development. We have reached agreement with Northampton Town Football Club for the a new hotel at the stadium.

The former Tory administration were planning for a quick sale of council owned land at **Dallington Grange** for development. We know how difficult development there will be, and have deferred a sale until we know that key problems with traffic, flooding and improvements to Kings Heath have been sorted out.

Our town's heritage has been undervalued for years. Heritage led regeneration will help put right the mistakes of the past and create a special place to visit.

We have

- Appointed a Heritage Champion** (Cllr. Jean Hawkins) to work with English Heritage and others to raise the profile of heritage.
- Commissioned, with the Delapre Abbey Conservation Trust, an options appraisal for the future of Delapre Abbey**, to help us secure funding to restore this historic gem.
- Worked with the new Heritage Forum** to establish key buildings in the town centre for a heritage trail.
- Commissioned a study of shop frontages in the Market Square and Abington Street** to enable the best to be sympathetically restored.

A year of achievement- A promise of more

Our first year has not just been about solid achievement, it has been about planning ahead. There is much more to be done to achieve our goal of making Northampton Borough Council one of the best performing councils in the country.

A place of over 200,000 people, rising in a few years to 300,000, isn't just a town- it is an emerging city. Putting the pride back in Northampton means being ambitious, ensuring that we offer facilities as good as any other medium sized city in Europe. The council will be publishing a prospectus, **Fresh Thinking**, that sets out its ambitions for Northampton, and we will want to know what you think.

Meanwhile, we have much more to do to ensure that Northampton people get the quality of services that they deserve.

We have only just started.

In the year ahead we need to:

- Ensure that what we have achieved is sustained.**
- Do more to improve key services, particularly housing.**
- Do more to secure clean, green and safe places for people to live in.**
- Ensure that there is strong and effective engagement with the communities and neighbourhoods of Northampton, so that we are working more closely with local people.**
- Progress plans for our town centre, based on a vision for Northampton as an emerging city.**
- Ensure that people know the council is improving, and that they can take pride in our town.**

There's no time to rest.



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