

Put the Pride back in Northampton



***The Liberal Democrat plan for
Northampton Borough Council
May 2007***

Summary

We have a vision for Northampton as a safe, attractive place to live with facilities matching or exceeding the best European cities of a similar size.

We want Northampton to provide an excellent quality of life for all its citizens while reducing its impact on the natural environment.

We want Northampton to be an exciting and diverse place where people of all ages, races and cultures can live and interact.

Our Action plan can be summed up by 8 key points.

1. Straightforward and honest leadership for our town. We will tell it as it is.
2. Sort out the financial mess, so residents have value for money public services.
3. Safe, clean neighbourhoods for people to live in.
4. Give people more say in their neighbourhoods.
5. Improve our town centre.
6. Build homes people can afford to live in.
7. Consider the future of the planet in everything we do.
8. Make Northampton people proud again of their parks, open spaces and their leisure and cultural heritage

Table of Contents

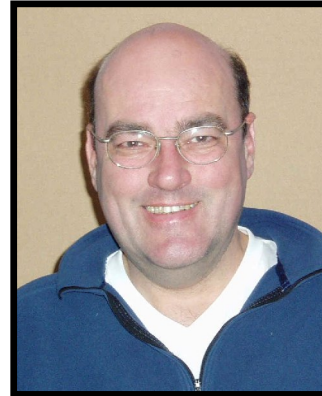
Time to Change and Improve.....	5
1. Leadership.....	6
a. A Clear Vision for Northampton.....	6
b. Ethos & Ethics.....	6
c. Promoting Northampton.....	6
d. Working for People.....	7
2. An Open & Efficient Council.....	7
a. Having Your Say.....	7
b. Accessibility.....	8
c. Publish Performance Results.....	8
d. Increasing Value for Money.....	8
e. Overview & Scrutiny.....	9
f. Unitary Status.....	9
3. Being Safe, Feeling Safe.....	9
a. Neighbourhood Wardens.....	9
b. Building a Safer Environment.....	9
c. Enforcement & Engagement.....	10
d. Facilities for young people.....	10
e. Facilities for older people.....	10
4. Cleaner & Greener.....	11
a. Increase Recycling.....	11
b. Alternative Energy.....	11
c. Streetscene and the Local Environment.....	12
i Graffiti.....	12
ii Litter and flytipping.....	12
iii Tree Management.....	12
iv Improved planting.....	12
v Parks and Open Spaces.....	12
5. Regeneration.....	13
a. Town Centre.....	13
i Market Square.....	13
ii Shopping.....	14
iii Night Time Economy.....	14
iv Arts and Culture.....	15
v Toilets.....	15
vi Get NCC out of County Hall.....	15
vii Riverside development.....	15
b. Outside the Town Centre.....	15
c. Access to the Town.....	16
i Parking.....	16
ii Public Transport.....	16
iii Encourage Cycling.....	16
d. People and Skills.....	17
e. Environmental Conditions on Planning.....	17
f. Investing in Leisure.....	17
6. Housing.....	17
a. Ownership.....	17
b. Management.....	18
c. Homelessness.....	18
d. Affordable Housing.....	18
e. Revenues & Benefits.....	19
7. Empowering people.....	19
Summary.....	2

A Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Northampton

Time to Change and Improve

For far too long, Northampton Borough Council has failed the people of Northampton. After 12 years of Labour failure and 4 years of Conservative muddle people deserve better.

In 2003 Labour were swept from power and became the third party after 12 years at the helm. A few months later, the voters' verdict on Labour was endorsed by the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment which rated the council as 'poor'. The council has struggled to improve ever since under a weak minority Conservative administration. As the main opposition party, the Liberal Democrats have repeatedly offered to work with other parties for the good of the town. Immediately after the 2003 election, our offer of a shared administration was rejected, as the Conservatives decided to form a minority administration with tacit Labour support. Our offer was repeated in 2004, but despite its rejection we have worked constructively behind the scenes to improve the quality of services of the council.



The Audit Commission's latest assessment of the council, published in February of this year said: 'Weak political leadership is undermining improvement. The administration has failed to provide clear political direction...'

At the same time the council has had to grapple with a financial crisis, due to poor financial management and planning, that has led to a major cutback in front line council services. Bluntly, council taxpayers in Northampton are getting an even worse deal than they had before.

The elections this May give an opportunity for a clear change of direction. Voters can elect a strong, stable administration able to give a lead to make the changes that are needed. Both Labour and the Tories have demonstrably failed. Liberal Democrats have the vision and the values to give the council a new start; this document sets out our programme to lead the council and to improve our town.

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

Our ambition is to breathe new life into Northampton, to put the pride back in our town.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tony Woods".

Tony Woods
Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group
Northampton Borough Council

1. Leadership

a. A Clear Vision for Northampton

We will breathe new life into Northampton, to make it a safe, attractive place to live with facilities matching or exceeding the best European cities of a similar size.

We want Northampton to provide an excellent quality of life for all its citizens while reducing its impact on the natural environment.

We want Northampton to be an exciting and diverse place where people of all ages, races and cultures can live and interact.

For too long Northampton has had to put up with mediocrity. A Liberal Democrat run Council will aspire for excellence in its own services and for very high standards for the town as a whole. As a 'poor' rated council, the Borough Council has been treated like a '7 stone weakling' by our partners and by government. We need a council with a good reputation to be able to pull its weight and stand up for the people of Northampton.

Safeguarding the planet will be central to everything we do. As Northampton grows, we want new developments to be at the cutting edge of environmental sustainability, with the whole town working towards a carbon neutral future.

b. Ethos & Ethics

A Liberal Democrat run Council will be honest and even-handed. We will say what we can and what we cannot or will not do. We will set and achieve very high standards of service. We will consult widely on key decisions affecting people's lives.

The Borough Council has particular responsibilities to protect some of the most vulnerable in our society. The Council has, rightly, been severely criticised for failing these people. A Liberal Democrat administration will give the highest priority to the most vulnerable people.

We will live within our means and will consult with citizens on the balance of services offered and taxes charged.

Councillors and staff will treat each other and the public with respect. We will not tolerate discriminatory or bullying behaviour towards staff or the public.

Management and decision-making will be devolved, where possible and practical, to local neighbourhoods. An individual Corporate Manager will have responsibility for each neighbourhood area, and we will work with our partners to develop the seamless delivery of public services at neighbourhood level.

c. Promoting Northampton

Our first task is to improve the poor quality of key council services. The council needs to rid itself of its poor reputation to speak with confidence and authority for the people of Northampton.

We will, with our partners, relentlessly promote Northampton as a great place to work, live, learn and play. We will be strong advocates for Northampton with government and government agencies; with businesses; with investors and with the public and potential visitors to our town.

We will introduce a series of measures and activities to build pride in Northampton.

These will include :-

- Citizen's Awards for outstanding service to the Public to acknowledge and celebrate those who 'go the extra mile' to improve life for others.

A Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Northampton

- ❑ Events to showcase local talent;
- ❑ Encouragement to residents' groups to raise the standards in their area (building on the Hood Street experience);
- ❑ Encouraging public participation in the management of parks open spaces, community centres and leisure centres to give people ownership of high standards.

Northampton Borough Council is the democratically elected voice of the people of Northampton. However, it is responsible for only a small proportion of the public services provided for them. We will persuade, inspire and cajole others in the public, private and voluntary sectors, working with them to get the best deal for the people and to achieve a shared ambition for our town.

We will be willing, but when necessary challenging partners with the public, private and voluntary sectors to best deliver services and improvements for the people of Northampton.

We will promote social enterprises to deliver public services, as pioneered by Liberal Democrat run Liverpool.

d. Working for People

Northampton Borough Council is rated as one of the poorest councils in the country. Liberal Democrats acknowledged and accepted the councils 'poor' comprehensive performance assessment rating confirmed in 2004 after 12 years of Labour control and have worked constructively for improvement without being part of the administration of the council.

Disappointingly, the assessment published in February 2005 confirmed that little progress had been made, and criticised the council's weak political leadership under the Conservative administration.

The Council must improve faster. Not for the sake of a better CPA rating, but for the sake of the people the council is elected to serve.

A culture of continuous improvement and performance management must become embedded in the council at all levels to ensure our staff are properly equipped for the work they need to do.

Outdated working practices must change. In all its work, the council must be focussed on putting the citizen first.

2. An Open & Efficient Council

a. Having Your Say

The opinions of local people are important. In preparing this manifesto, the Liberal Democrats have consulted people on their priorities for the council. Over 3300 people responded. This is their order of priorities:

- 1. Safer and Cleaner neighbourhoods**
- 2. Value for money and keeping the council tax down**
- 3. Improve the Town Centre**
- 4. Provide clear vision and leadership for Northampton**
- 5. Places for people to enjoy (parks, leisure, sports)**
- 6. Housing that people can afford**

A Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Northampton

We want to involve local people and local communities in the council putting public participation at the heart of what the council does.

We will introduce a range of new methods to engage and consult with local people so that they can express their opinions before decisions are taken.

In addition to the traditional Area Partnerships and Forums (which attract a relatively small proportion of the population) we will experiment with web forums, phone in sessions and regular radio phone ins.

In addition, we will make it easier for citizens to give their opinion through e-mail, text messaging or other technologies.

The Forums are, with the exception of the Youth Forum, largely self-selected. They need to be revitalised and given a more direct input into services provided for their communities.

b. Accessibility

We will trial Web Casting for Council and Cabinet meetings.

We will improve the quality of the Council's web site so that it has more relevant information on what is going on in the town and to enable citizens to interact with the Council day and night, seven days a week for many standard transactions.

We will seek to establish 'One Stop Shops' in the main areas of town (e.g. Kingsthorpe, Weston Favell, Duston, Mereway etc.) using Council local offices or partnering with others to use schools, libraries or other sites to provide a seamless access point for information on public services.

We will ensure that all staff engage with the delivery of services at a Neighbourhood level.

c. Publish Performance Results

An important tool in raising the standard of the council's performance is to set challenging targets and measure our performance against those targets. We will publish both the targets and the performance on a monthly basis on the web site and encourage citizens to challenge both the targets and the performance.

d. Increasing Value for Money.

A failure to deliver good value for money has led to major cutbacks in front line services in this year's budget.

We will raise the efficiency and effectiveness and value for money of Council Services. This may be by changing working methods or the way specific services are delivered. It will require investment in better equipment and systems for some services. It will devolve greater decision-making responsibility to front line staff.

For all council services, the key is not who runs the service, but the quality of the service, the value for money, and the accountability to users of the service.

The analysis of Value for Money of Council services is currently underdeveloped in Northampton Borough Council. We will learn from the best and implement a programme to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of services over a four year period.

We will work with our neighbouring District Councils to develop the ELGIN (Enhanced Local Government in Northamptonshire) model of co-operation between councils to implement best practice, combine back offices and to share services to reduce costs and improve performance. We hope the County Council will join this arrangement as an equal partner.

e. Overview & Scrutiny

Overview and Scrutiny can play a major role in developing policy and challenging the Cabinet. A confident administration will welcome that challenge. We will seek ways of involving the public and partners in the work of Overview & Scrutiny and ensure that opposition councillors continue to be able to fully engage with the scrutiny process.

We will review the operation and structure of Overview and Scrutiny and will seek to increase the resources available so it can be more effective.

f. Unitary Status

We believe Northampton is poorly served by two Councils. It is a natural community, a city in all but name though proud to be the largest town in England.

Liberal Democrats will campaign for a single, unitary Council, merging the powers of Northampton Borough Council with those of Northamptonshire County Council and the West Northamptonshire Development Corporation within the urban area of Northampton.

We believe the opportunity should be taken for limited expansion of the boundaries of the town to include new developments such as Grange Park and to reflect the government's Growth Agenda. The government are at present unwilling to allow local authority boundaries to be changed; we will press them to consider a review of existing boundaries.

We have not supported a single unitary Northamptonshire as this does not represent a 'natural community'. It would reduce the influence Northampton people have over public services and would see further resources transferred from Northampton to the rural hinterland. Northampton's status as a major sub-regional centre will be best served by a single unitary council for our town.

We opposed the creation of the un-elected West Northamptonshire Development Corporation. We remain committed to bringing the WNDC within the democratic control of local people, but as long as it remains we will work with it to secure the best possible regeneration and expansion of Northampton

3. Being Safe, Feeling Safe.

a. Neighbourhood Wardens

Liberal Democrats established the current Neighbourhood Warden scheme by making resources available for a pilot scheme in the 2004-05 budget.

Over the course of the next 4 years we will further extend the scheme so that all areas of the town have at least one dedicated neighbourhood warden.

Neighbourhood Wardens will work with local Police and Police Community Support Officers, Neighbourhood Watch Coordinators and local people to form a united team within local communities to reduce antisocial behaviour and crime.

Working with the Police we will ensure areas with high levels of anti-social behaviour will have wardens or Police Community Support Officers patrolling until at least midnight.

b. Building a Safer Environment

Planning policy is a key function of the Borough Council. Many problem estates were designed in such a way as to provide a mugger's paradise. Modern design standards can reduce opportunities for crime and, importantly, the reduction of the fear of crime

A Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Northampton

by ensuring active frontages, providing adequate lighting and reducing hiding places and escape routes for criminals.

We will use planning policy to ensure that the design of new estates is to the highest possible standards. We will ensure that when new estates are built appropriate community facilities are considered.

We will ensure that older estates are retro-fitted with upgraded lighting fencing and other security measures to bring them as close to modern standards as possible.

c. Enforcement & Engagement

Much antisocial behaviour is caused by people who simply do not appreciate that their behaviour is annoying to others or who do not care.

We will attempt to educate and engage with offenders - for example using Acceptable Behaviour Contracts. However, if their behaviour is not quickly and sustainably modified we will use whatever enforcement measures are available.

We will work with the Magistrates and probation service to encourage the use of Community Service Orders so that those convicted of antisocial behaviour recompense the community that they damaged as part of their punishment often referred to as Community Payback.

We will educate and empower victims of antisocial behaviour - providing them with monitoring and measuring equipment to help them gain evidence and (with the Police) assistance in providing evidence (where possible in an anonymous way) to build a case against persistent offenders.

We will, when possible, strengthen the Borough Council's investigation and enforcement capabilities.

Northampton's CCTV system is one of the most extensive in the country. It is also one of the oldest. Staff simply cannot monitor more than a tiny minority of the cameras. We wish to continue to invest in CCTV but will review and modernise the overall system and include a greater number of mobile units so that the system provides the benefits of crime reduction and public safety with higher quality evidence for the police but at a lower overall cost.

d. Facilities for young people

Young people need opportunities to gather, interact and socialise. When doing so they can appear threatening or annoying to others. Many young people do not have the financial resources to go to commercial clubs and entertainment facilities on a regular basis which is why Liberal Democrats worked to save Radlands, the Roadmender and the County Council Youth Service).

The Council will work with young people (through the youth Forum, Youth Clubs and organisations and through informal groups of youths in particular areas) to enhance the facilities available for youths. These might include:-

- Youth Shelters
- Multi Use Games Areas
- Skateboard Facilities
- Access to Club and Community Rooms.

e. Facilities for older people.

Older people can become isolated and lonely in their homes, fearing to go out and fearing crime. We will work with the Pensioners and Disabled People's Forums, the

voluntary sector and others to deliver a wide range of activities for older people to help them remain fit, active and independent and to support those who no longer are.

This will include extending activity programmes for the over 50's, opening sports and community centres for community and voluntary groups etc.

We will particularly support activities that bring old and young together.

4. Cleaner & Greener

a. Increase Recycling

We will increase recycling rates. Northampton under the Liberal Democrats will be one of the best performing recycling authorities in the country.

We appreciate that we must lower the high costs associated with the current recycling scheme by increasing the efficiency of the service.

As efficiency improves and resources permit we will:

- Extend recycling to terraced houses and flats that currently have only a partial system in place.
- Add kerbside recycling of glass.
- Introduce recycling schemes for batteries, redundant electronic goods and other items.
- Introduce a regular programme of Community Skips where flytipping is a problem to enable residents to recycle large items locally.
- Introduce dual (or triple) bins for recyclates and rubbish in town centre, other key locations and during events such as the Balloon Festival.
- Launch a pilot programme to recycle kitchen waste on two estates.

b. Alternative Energy

The Council should take the lead in installing alternative energy systems.

We will look to add wind-turbines, passive solar heating, photovoltaic cells, ground source heat exchangers etc. to Council properties - including some Council owned homes – where it is possible and practicable. The Council should set an example to others in demonstrating the benefits of alternative energy, using prominent buildings such as the Guildhall if appropriate

We will investigate and promote the availability of grants or other government or EU funded schemes that citizens could claim in order to install similar equipment in their own homes.

Introducing higher environmental standards to new buildings is desirable. However, we currently have a stock of some 80,000 homes within the borough plus associated offices, commercial buildings etc. To maximise the impact of environmental improvements we will investigate schemes to encourage home and building owners to 'retrofit' these environmental improvements to existing buildings. This may include increased insulation, solar heating schemes, grey water schemes etc. Separate schemes will be investigated for:-

- Social Housing
- Private housing
- Offices & Shops
- Commercial buildings

A Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Northampton

□ The Council's Vehicle Fleet

A Liberal Democrat Council will maximise the use of 'bio' fuels for its fleet of vans, lorries etc. and will seek to establish a viable market within the town for such fuels.

We will seek to minimise the use of vehicles without affecting the quality of service offered.

We will investigate the use of 'carbon credits' to mitigate any residual vehicle usage.

We will look to provide water filters rather than water coolers in council premises.

c. Streetscene and the Local Environment

i Graffiti

Most graffiti is vandalism and criminal damage. It will be removed as quickly as possible. Any racist or abusive graffiti will be cleaned within 24 hours.

Some graffiti can be art. If young people want we will provide a small number of 'graffiti walls' for their use.

ii Litter and flytipping

We will make more use of fixed penalty notices and prosecution for littering and flytipping, but combine it with education and encouragement to keep our neighbourhoods cleaner.

iii Tree Management

The original Development Corporation planted thousands upon thousands of trees. While many of these make a very positive contribution to the environment of our town many, particularly in the Eastern Districts, many are poorly located, have an overbearing impact on homes and contribute to the fear of crime. We will thin trees in these areas to improve light and sight lines in consultation with local residents..

Where possible we will plant replacement trees in more appropriate locations.

There is a particular problem with Horse Chestnut trees - similar, in many ways, to the problems of Dutch Elm Disease a generation ago. Many are located in key positions within our parks. We will put in place a programme to replace these trees with appropriate indigenous species though sadly the appearance of our parks may be changed for a generation.

iv Improved planting

High quality planting is expensive but provides a very favourable impression of an area. We will seek to significantly improve the quality of planting and maintenance in certain key areas. These should include the town centre, major gateways to the town and within appropriate principal parks.

v Parks and Open Spaces.

We will develop a parks strategy to ensure that our premier parks are maintained to a high standard. Northampton is fortunate to have a very large number of parks and open spaces, but these cost the Borough Council and its taxpayers more than most other towns to maintain.

Each Premier Park will have a clear and individual plan. Where possible this will be agreed with local groups (e.g. the Friends of Whatever Park) park users and local residents. We will consider all options to release or attract additional resources to improve our parks, such as the creation of parks trusts, while ensuring that access to parks must remain free.

A Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Northampton

Maintenance on key areas of our premier parks will be significantly enhanced with better planting, while we will use natural planting and management techniques in other areas to encourage wildlife

For our secondary parks and open spaces we will seek alternative management arrangements, by involving local communities and schools. In places this may result in changing the maintenance regime to encourage a wilder, more natural environment -- or to increase the tree cover within the parks and open spaces to produce more wooded areas.

We will encourage the establishment of other Friends Groups, such as those that exist for the Racecourse and Abington Park and work with them to enhance their areas.

Northampton has some excellent allotment fields. We also have some that are neglected and underused. We will develop a clear strategy, promoting self-management of fields where this is wanted by gardeners.

Northampton currently has more allotment space than government recommendations - but it is often in the 'wrong place'. Liberal Democrats would consider selling some redundant and underutilised space and use this money to provide new facilities and for improving existing fields.

Establishing 'green gyms' within our parks and allotment gardens can introduce people to a healthier lifestyle and can contribute directly to the maintenance of our town.

5. Regeneration

a. Town Centre

The Town Centre is central to the regeneration and expansion of Northampton. Bringing more people into the town centre to live, increasing the shopping and entertainment offer for people of all ages and increasing the diversity of entertainment are all necessary to revitalise the town centre.

Our town centre will not thrive if we just try to replicate what is done elsewhere. We must promote and improve the things which make our town special, if our town looks just like all the others there will be no reason for people to visit. Our built heritage, our open spaces (particularly the market square) and our cultural offering are all things that make our town centre special.

i Market Square

The Market Square is central to projecting a vision of the future for the whole town centre.

The Market Square is the heart of our town centre. It is the biggest town centre Market Square in England, with an 800 year old history which has seen it used as a livestock market, a fairground, a place for political demonstrations, celebrations and military parades and a place for the sale of a wide range of goods. The demand for a six-day market covering the whole square has declined. It currently dies at about 4:30pm when the market traders go home. We will extend the range of activities in the square in terms of :

- Time - so that the square is the hub of the town into the evenings and weekends
- Season - so activities happen all year round
- Range - so the market square becomes a multi-purpose, multi-use space.

A Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Northampton

We will seek funding for the resurfacing of the Market Square to provide an attractive and versatile surface appropriate for street cafes, leisure and market uses.

We will, however, ensure that a traditional market is central to the activities of the Market Square and we will seek to celebrate the history of the square through signage and events.

Facilitating diverse, multi purpose use of the square requires that the current market stalls are replaced with systems that can be erected and dismantled quickly and economically. Ideally traders will remove not just their goods but also the stalls themselves each evening.

Music, theatre - both 'street' and conventional, exhibitions and discourse are vital and traditional uses of a market square and will be encouraged.

The introduction of visiting French, German and Italian markets has been a success. We will seek a wider range of specialist markets, encouraging markets which reflect the diverse cultures living in Northampton, such as Asian, African and Polish markets.

Farmers Markets are popular and help contribute to the local economy while reducing the 'food miles' associated with supermarket shopping. We will seek to establish a regular and vibrant Farmers Market.

ii Shopping

Retail is changing fast. Most food shopping is now from out of town supermarkets - and these are increasingly diversifying into a wider and wider range of products. The internet is growing in importance and many British towns have a similar look and feel (Clone Town) due to the dominance of large retail chains who are demanding larger and larger shop units.

We cannot buck these trends. We can, however, seek to marry the advantages of Northampton with the needs of retailers to create the right mix to generate a vibrant shopping offer for the next generation.

The redevelopment of Grosvenor/Greyfriars is central to attracting and retaining the major multiples to Northampton. A Liberal Democrat Council will be proactive in realising the redevelopment of Grosvenor/Greyfriars - while ensuring that any development fits within the wider aspirations for the Town Centre (and beyond) and that the proposed development provides facilities which encourage activity throughout the day and evening with a safe environment for users day and night

New developments should complement and enhance existing streets, by providing new streetscapes to create a busy but safe environment.

Shopping in Northampton is dominated by low cost, 'pile it high, sell it cheap' offers targeted on the less affluent shopper. Only St Giles Street and some isolated retailers cater for more affluent or aspirational shoppers. We need to increase the quality and diversity of the retail offer in the town centre to serve the needs of all shoppers.

iii Night Time Economy

Northampton has a wide range of nightclubs and a national reputation as a 'night-spot'. Up to 30,000 people, mainly 25 years old or less, visit the town centre every Friday and Saturday evening. This is a fantastic economic and cultural boost for the town bringing jobs, business opportunities, a vibrant night-life and, of course, some problems.

Problems include those associated with drunkenness which places a particular strain on policing. Many residents believe the suburbs and residential areas are stripped of policing on busy nights in the town centre to deal with the problems there.

A Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Northampton

A major 'problem' is the very success of the clubs leads to a 'mono-culture' completely dominated by young people and drink which makes the town centre appear a threatening place to anyone who does not 'match the profile'.

Liberal Democrats will continue to encourage the nighttime economy within the 'Leisure Zone' and will work with the police, club owners, taxi and cab operators to make this important part of our economy even safer.

We are particularly keen to diversify the evening economy -- encouraging activities for young families and middle aged and older people (particularly earlier in the evenings).

The Market Square and the Guildhall offer locations for a much wider range of events. The Great Hall offers an excellent concert space; the Guildhall courtyard might host an alfresco restaurant while many German town halls make use of the Cellars for clubs and pubs.

iv Arts and Culture

Arts, culture and the creative industries will be encouraged and promoted. We will work with partners to encourage artist, craftspeople and creative individuals and companies to establish in Northampton

Derngate and the Royal Theatre are vital to the cultural life of the town. Over 60% of the users of the theatres come from outside Northampton, and it is unreasonable to expect council tax payers in Northampton alone to continue to subsidise the theatres at the level that they have. We will support a planned reduction in the level of subsidy from the Borough Council and encourage the County Council to contribute more.

v Toilets

The council needs to work with others to ensure that toilet facilities are available at key locations, and provide them in key public places where there is no other provider.

vi Get NCC out of County Hall

The County Council's use of County Hall and its associated buildings establish an obstacle to the development of the land behind County Hall by introducing a barrier in the movement desire lines. Relocating the County Council's offices would enable the current buildings, including the Sessions House to be utilised in a more interesting, diverse and exciting way, and would remove this barrier.

vii Riverside development

We will encourage diverse development on the riverside to open up this massively underused resource for the benefit of the town. We will investigate setting up a small marina on the canal system with space for some houseboats.

Any riverside development must include housing, shops, riverside pubs and restaurants and entertainment/leisure facilities.

b. Outside the Town Centre

Northampton is set to grow by nearly 100,000 people over the next 20 years. Where possible we will encourage new housing, employment, leisure and infrastructure development on 'brown field' sites. However, some urban extensions on green field land will be required.

We will insist on very high environmental and design standards for both these brownfield redevelopment projects and urban extensions.

Given that government targets are based the percentage of new homes built on brown field land, there will be a strong incentive for the WNDC and developers to build homes on existing employment or infrastructure land and then to build replacement

A Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Northampton

employment and infrastructure developments on green field sites. We will resist this. Apart from being dishonest it will encourage longer travel to work distances that will adversely affect our environment.

We want to see employment, shopping, leisure and infrastructure developments integrated with housing developments to minimise dependence on the private car.

As the town grows additional District Centres will be needed. . The Council must ensure that there is full public involvement in deciding where these new centres are located and that the needs of the users and the community at large are put ahead of commercial and property interests

In applying this principle to Northampton Town Football Club's bid for an expanded stadium at Sixfields funded by adjoining retail development, we will seek a decision on the way forward as quickly as the planning system will allow.

c. Access to the Town

i Parking

We will develop a car parking strategy aimed at enhancing the economic, social and cultural vitality of the town while maintaining the income of the Borough Council.

We will establish a car parking pricing structure that encourages shop and office workers to use alternatives to the private car or to car share where possible. We will work with employers to offer season tickets that meet the needs of low paid workers and clearer designation of car parks for visitors (shoppers) and commuters

We will seek to differentiate charging in favour of environmentally less damaging vehicles.

We will expand secure cycle and motorcycle parking within our town centre multi-storey car parks and at other key locations round the town.

We will experiment with free parking on Sundays and on an increased number of evenings to encourage business into the town centre.

We will extend the hours of all car parks to meet the needs of users. For example, if approached by a local event organiser we will keep particular car parks open for extended hours.

ii Public Transport

We will work with NCC & WNDC to establish a viable park and ride system for the town.

We will work with the bus companies to obtain the best possible network for the town.

The bus station is an eyesore and fails to provide a modern safe and attractive place for bus users, in addition it has above it offices which have proved unlettable and are retained at considerable cost to the council.

We support the demolition of the bus station and its replacement. While building is underway, we have to ensure that bus users are adequately provided for in temporary accommodation.

We will press for a proper bus interchange at the railway station.

iii Encourage Cycling

We will encourage the wider use of bicycles and in order to reduce traffic congestion and consequent pollution. We will also encourage motorcycling to reduce congestion.

d. People and Skills.

Northampton is dominated by low skill, low wage employment. We want to attract high skill, high technology, arts and cultural opportunities. To do this we need to raise the basic skills levels in the local economy.

Education is not an NBC function. However, raising the skills base is vital to the economic and social prosperity of the town.

We will work with partners to achieve a long-term improvement in educational standards.

We will use the resources of the Borough Council to encourage apprenticeships and work experience to deliver real help to individuals.

We will seek the establishment of a science park in Northampton to attract high skilled, high tech employment.

e. Environmental Conditions on Planning

We will seek to use planning conditions to deliver significant environmental benefits - for example insisting on zero carbon impact from large new developments (RSS8) and, if possible that such developments make a positive contribution to reducing carbon emissions. Likewise we will seek higher standards with respect to water efficiency. We will again investigate the use of commutable sums for environmental improvements and affordable housing for smaller developments.

We will seek to enforce the very highest building standards on all developments. In particular, we will demand high insulation, heat efficiency and water efficiency standards (Ecohomes Excellent) on all new build. In addition we will demand a high standard of public realm and aesthetic design

f. Investing in Leisure

Our leisure centres, particularly Lings, are outdated and in need of modernisation. We cannot allow them to continue to decline to the point they will be forced to close. We will consider alternative ownership or management models including private/public partnership to achieve the best possible leisure facilities at prices affordable to Northampton people.

Watching sport is a popular pursuit. We are fortunate to have professional Football, Rugby and Cricket clubs in Northampton with a long and proud record. We also recognise the enjoyment provided to spectators and supporters of the many semi-professional and amateur teams in these and other sports. We will work with them to enhance the facilities for sports within the town and to provide opportunities for young Northampton people to realise their ambitions at sport.

6. Housing

a. Ownership

NBC currently owns and manages approximately 11,000 homes in a traditional Council Housing style. The Housing Revenue Account is believed to be sufficiently well funded to allow the delivery of the Decent Homes Standard by 2010 (or 2011 if the government relaxes the targets).

Liberal Democrats have consistently pressed the government to allow a level playing field in the ownership of social housing (the fourth option) so that councils which retain ownership of their housing stock have the same opportunities to invest in improved housing for their tenants as other social landlords. We will continue to press the Labour Government to change its unfair policy towards council tenants.

A Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Northampton

There are some very significant challenges that need to be addressed. The Decent Homes Standard is a relatively low minimum standard and tenants have aspirations for higher levels of equipment in their homes. A significant proportion of the Borough's stock is in the Eastern Area, built about 30 to 35 years ago, much using timber framed and other unconventional construction, with a 40 year design life. Many of these properties will need major refurbishment within the next 20 years.

New models of management of estates, including Tenant Management Organisations would provide greater control over their homes to tenants and should be investigated.

Alternative ownership models, including small-scale stock transfers and (potentially) a large-scale stock transfer to an Registered Social Landlord might realise much greater funding for maintenance and improvement. Any such transfers would only be considered where real improvements in the quality of housing can be made, the rents remain affordable, there is tenant participation and there is majority support from those tenants affected for any change.

b. Management

Good customer service must be the council's over-riding objective in its management of the council's housing stock.

To ensure that the options for the future of our housing stock are as wide as possible, we need to get achieve a 'two star' rating of the management of our housing stock as soon as possible.

We will review the working practices of our housing repairs division, and seek best practice from other authorities to offer a more prompt, reliable and efficient service to our tenants.

Some improvement has been made in reducing the number of council owned properties standing empty. We will ensure that this improvement is maintained and will look at new ways of working to secure further improvements.

Housing officers must be enabled to work more in the communities they serve, working with neighbourhood management teams to resolve problems. They must be empowered to make decisions, and full training and support needs to be in place to give them the confidence to do this.

c. Homelessness

We will seek to reduce homelessness by earlier intervention to avoid people getting into the spiral of problems that lead to homelessness.

We will minimise the use of Bed & Breakfast. B&B should only be used for emergency intervention and should never be used for more than a few days before a long term solution is in place (though it may require a longer stay before the longer term solution becomes available).

Temporary accommodation such as Briar Court at Cliftonville needs updating. We will look at its replacement as part of a review of the whole Cliftonville House site.

d. Affordable Housing

Liberal Democrats were instrumental in raising the required percentage of affordable housing to 35%. We will continue to try to establish a system of commutable sums to ensure that developers of smaller sites contribute to the total quantity of affordable properties built in the town.

We will dramatically improve the standard of our Housing Repairs Service, making it more customer-focused and efficient. We will multi-skill staff so that they can tackle the majority of repairs on a single visit. Where they cannot complete the work they will be

A Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Northampton

able to 'estimate' the job (say 75% of the time) -- identifying what work, materials and resources will be required.

We will introduce an appointments system which gives residents a 4-hour window, within which craftsmen will arrive to complete their repairs. Wherever possible they will also be told how long work will be expected to take

We will actively seek to train craftsmen and women to increase the pool of skilled labour within the town. In doing so we will seek to co-operate with house builders and developers who will be delivering the growth agenda to increase the overall skills level within the town and to retain the economic benefits of growth within the town. Sheffield Council has an excellent scheme we can learn from here.

The Borough Council has been very poor at reletting properties. In recent months performance has improved with the number of void properties and the time taken to relet properties have both reduced dramatically (thanks, in part to work undertaken by Overview & Scrutiny). The result is that more families are now housed in Local Authority homes and the Borough is benefiting from the rental income.

Liberal Democrats will continue to actively work to reduce the levels of void properties until we achieve top quartile performance.

e. Revenues & Benefits

The most telling line in the original CPA report was that the Council was letting down the most vulnerable in our society. This was a massive condemnation of the previous Labour administration, demonstrating that the local Labour Party is unfit for power. The time taken to determine an application for Housing Benefits was in excess of 100 days. Now it is around 28 days and improving. Liberal Democrats will ensure the time required continues to reduce and, if possible, reach a point where anyone contacting the Council with all the necessary documentation can have their claim determined within 24 hours.

Poor performance in revenue collection costs the Council and our partner's money and cash flow. We will raise the percentage of money collected to at least 99%.

7. Empowering people

We need strong communities, where people are able and willing to take responsibility for the management of services in their area.

We will encourage the self-management of community centres and allotments.

We will explore options for tenant managements of housing.

We welcome the Government's intention to make it easier to create parish councils, and we will use that power to create new parishes where people want them.

We will seek user involvement in any new arrangement for the management of our leisure centres.

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