

Stockton Liberal Democrats

Manifesto for the Local Elections, May 2007

OUR THEMES

**FAIR, HONEST, OPEN and
GREEN**

*“Putting the Pride back into our
Borough”*

“BEYOND EXCELLENCE”

THE REAL ALTERNATIVE FOR A BETTER FUTURE

From the Preamble to the Constitution of the Liberal Democrats:

“The Liberal Democrats exist to build and 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. We champion the freedom, dignity and well-being of individuals, we acknowledge and respect their right to freedom of conscience and their right to develop their talents to the full. We aim to disperse power, to foster diversity and nurture creativity. We believe that the role of the state is to enable all citizens to attain these ideals, to contribute fully to their communities and to take part in the decisions which affect their lives.”



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“BEYOND EXCELLENCE”

Stockton Borough Council achieves “excellent” ratings in Government audits of its operations. It has an excellent record in implementing legislation and meeting Government standards.

Yet, amongst residents there is often dissatisfaction with the Council; with the way it operates and the policies it adopts.

This dissatisfaction is directed at the political leadership – not at the administrative officers of the Council.

Stockton Liberal Democrats applaud the officers for their success in meeting the standards required to achieve ‘excellence’.

However – for Stockton Liberal Democrats, this is not enough.

We intend to go further.

Our aim is to take Stockton Borough Council “beyond excellence” – to provide the people of the Borough of Stockton with a political leadership that will take our Council beyond the level where we tick the right boxes on Whitehall surveys.

Stockton Liberal Democrats will provide the political leadership that will enable our Council to go “beyond excellence” – to provide services of the highest possible quality.

“PUTTING THE PRIDE BACK INTO OUR BOROUGH”

Stockton Liberal Democrats will provide the political leadership which will make people proud to say they live in the Borough of Stockton. We will provide a quality of service – and a level of democratic openness – such that residents can feel part of their Council – a Council and Borough that they can be proud of.

A Liberal Democrat administration will be:

FAIR: making decisions without prejudice or favour, on the basis of genuine need.

HONEST: making decisions with respect for the people of the Borough – all of its communities and people

OPEN: making decisions only after genuine and full consultation with those affected

GREEN: making decisions which recognise our commitment to the environment and playing our part in reducing global warming.

1. THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

A Liberal Democrat administration will seek to change the culture of decision-making in Stockton Borough Council. We will make the Council accountable, open and welcoming to the people it represents. We will work in partnership with the community to deliver shared goals – across the Borough.

The need for local control over local services and local decision-making is greater than ever. Top-down solutions to problems – imposed from above without reference to local communities – usually fail.

The Council will recognise the diversity of towns and communities across the Borough – many of which currently feel excluded from decision-making.

We pledge to reconnect Stockton Borough Council with local people and local communities throughout the Borough – to empower them and encourage their skills and talents. We will devolve power so that decisions are taken at the lowest practical level – not dictated from above. Individuals must be able to make a full contribution to the decisions that affect their lives. We want to see residents being more involved in their neighbourhoods and, with Council support, raising standards to a level that we can all be proud of.

A key policy will be the establishment of Area Committees working with Area Partnerships and Parish and Town Councils where they exist, with all councillors for an area on their Area Committee. We will delegate to them budgets for such things as more environmental improvements and local traffic schemes.

We will support and encourage community development projects, which enable local people to play a more active role in their community.

We value our Parish Councils and will work closely with them, actively seeking to devolve power to them where they wish and where it is possible

For Liberal Democrats, public participation in the political process at all stages is a key goal. We will open up the structures of government – and listen to what people say.

We will hold all meetings in public, with proper advance notice of agendas, unless there are exceptional reasons for excluding the public. We will ensure that there is adequate advance notice of meetings and where they are to be held. We will ensure that members of the public are aware of how meetings work and, with appropriate guidelines, have the right to address meetings.

We believe in consultation with the public before decisions are made. We will be open and accountable before proposals are produced, giving options wherever possible, as well as during the decision-making process.

We will introduce regular ‘Question and Answer’ sessions for the public at Area Committees.

We will make full use of the Viewpoint Panel, as well as surveys and consultation forums.

We will establish more ‘user groups’ to feed back to the relevant committee.

We will hold “listening days”, where chief officers and leading councillors have open sessions with the public.

Cabinet members will have surgeries for other councillors, staff, and the public.

We will consult widely when setting the Council budget.

We will work with our Youth Assembly to involve young people in the decision-making process.

We will make the remit and limits of the Cabinet and Executive Scrutiny Committee clear.

We will invite members of the community on to the Council's Select Committees, which take an in-depth look at services, when they can make a useful contribution on specific issues. While consultation with Officers and Cabinet Members (before select committees finalise recommendations) may produce better outcomes, we would ensure that when views diverged there would be clear, open accountability.

We will reduce the prescriptive rules about the way in which select committees proceed and explore further ways in which they may act more quickly where appropriate. Select committee Chairs will be drawn from across the political spectrum and be encouraged to provide challenge to the Executive and Management through the scrutiny process.

We will work constructively with all parties.

We will appoint an Internal Ombudsman to deal with complaints against the Council.

We will make clear who does what in our partnership arrangements. We will ensure the public knows where and by whom decisions are made.

2. WORKING WITH OUR PARTNERS

A Liberal Democrat Council will continue to develop constructive partnerships with other stakeholders in our Borough. These partnerships will work in an open and honest manner, consistent with the principles outlined above.

Partnerships will be real partnerships, not run on terms dictated by, or always led by, the Council. Our partnership approach will not just be about drawing big pictures and developing strategies, it will also be about service delivery, and about devolving decision-making to the lowest possible level.

The Council will receive regular reports from their representatives on our partnerships, as well as the formal minutes. In return, the Council will report back within nine months to partners on the progress of issues within the Council.

The Local Strategic Partnership, Stockton Renaissance, will continue to produce the community strategy after full consultation with Area Boards and other partnership bodies.

We will remain a member of the North East Regional Assembly and Association of North East Councils – though with better feedback and communication with members of the Council.

We will ensure genuine consultation with Parish Councils to agree a way of working together for the benefit of the people of the Borough. We will ensure that residents in the parished areas are not paying twice for the same service. The Parish Liaison Forum will be strengthened or replaced following consultation with the parishes.

3. REGENERATION:

3.1 Tackling Disadvantage – Promoting Achievement

Recognising that education is one of the main keys to success in the world of work we will:

- Work with schools, Surestart and Social Services to increase the number of children achieving their full potential both in and out of school.
- Seek innovative ways of encouraging disaffected young people back into learning.
- Improve Life Long Learning opportunities in all areas of life (basic skills, life skills, physical well-being, arts & culture)

At the same time we will:

- Play a full part in the Stockton-Middlesbrough Initiative and other regional and sub-regional regeneration schemes in order to ensure that Stockton attracts the maximum possible inward investment.
- Work with the people of Billingham, the new owners and the Northern Area Partnership Board to plan and implement the regeneration of Billingham Town Centre
- Continue the regeneration and replacement of below-standard housing in Hardwick and Thornaby.
- Recognising that deprivation can be an individual as well as a community problem, we will look for ways to mitigate the “post-code factor” in targeting help.
- Monitor very closely the spending of targeted funds from all sources to ensure that it is spent effectively and in consultation with the people affected by it.

We will support refugees & asylum seekers who are sent to Stockton, helping them to settle quickly into our community and welcoming the contributions they make to the diversity of our Borough. We will encourage them to become involved in the life of Stockton-on-Tees, volunteering their skills and talents in the most appropriate ways.

In Stockton there are high levels of disadvantage and a wide disparity in need. Stockton Liberal Democrats believe funding for regeneration initiatives should be on the basis of need, not the result of a bidding process (a ‘beauty contest’), and that specific local needs must be met.

3.2 Jobs/ Employment and Training/ Business and Enterprise

Unemployment is a depressing and disempowering state, which it is often beyond the power of governments to influence owing to global economic factors. Jobs give people independence and security and enable them to stay here and contribute to our economy.

Local Councils cannot directly influence the national economic climate, but they can affect local employment opportunities by helping to create the climate within which the local economy and local businesses can thrive and prosper, and contributing towards making the area an attractive place for people to move to.

We will continue to work with the Tees Valley Partnership and other local and regional agencies to attract, increase, and retain employment in the area. We will play our part in the Stockton – Middlesbrough Initiative to attract large inward investment.

A priority of Stockton Liberal Democrats will be to support local businesses and enterprise schemes, including the small and medium-sized concerns which mainly employ local people and which have the potential for growth.

Stockton Liberal Democrats will:

- actively promote inward investment to our Borough, in an innovative and co-ordinated way, to generate long term jobs and prosperity. We will seek to mobilise resources from regional development funds and the EU – acting primarily as an enabler and facilitator. We will help co-ordinate bids to the National Lottery, business sponsors and charitable trusts.
- ensure the Borough Council plays a key co-ordinating role in bringing public, private and voluntary agencies together to develop regeneration strategies
- ensure the Borough Council, as a large local employer and as a community representative, seeks partnerships with other local employers, training institutions and others to promote and develop local opportunities
- encourage the establishment of community co-operatives and social enterprises
- survey local businesses to ensure they have access to the premises and support services they need and work out strategies for improvement where possible.
- where possible favour local small businesses as suppliers of goods and services to the Council. We will pay our bills promptly.
- support community workshops and provide advice and support to help local businesses start. We will help establish better training links to ensure businesses get the workforce they need and that people get real jobs with a future. We will seek to ensure that employment and training opportunities exist for people who have suffered most from social exclusion and educational under-achievement
- support local credit unions, including those that can help small businesses to start up.
- Celebrate local success and achievement by giving awards for those businesses which make outstanding progress in areas like environmental improvement and social inclusion
- promote a local directory of locally produced products.
- encourage women to run their own businesses (the NE has lowest number of women entrepreneurs in country).

By being proactive and positive in promoting achievement and tackling disadvantage in our Borough, by energetically promoting regeneration strategies, and by encouraging small and community enterprise, Stockton Liberal Democrats will seek to unlock the employment potential in our local economy.

4. STOCKTON – A GREEN BOROUGH

4.1 Reduce, Re-use & Recycle

We will lead by example, encouraging everyone – residents and businesses alike - to re-use and re-cycle rather than discard and to cut down on unnecessary use of paper and packaging.

We will carry out an environmental audit on all Council buildings and Council operations in order to put in place a planned improvement in their environmental impact.

We will set up an Environment Forum consisting of staff and council members interested in promoting good practice across the Council and the Borough. The Forum will send reports to Council after every meeting.

We will put in place a paper reduction strategy and monitor it closely to ensure its success right across the Council's activities.

We will ensure a green and ethical procurement policy, where the extra costs of purchase will be offset in the long term by the savings from waste reduction and reduced energy consumption.

We will promote increased re-use and recycling by:

- Setting up local collection points for cardboard, plastic, working in partnership with supermarkets and other suitable land-owners, as another step in recycling. If the current trials show that kerbside collection of plastic and cardboard is viable we will roll it out across the borough as soon as possible.
- Encouraging community composting projects wherever practicable and maintaining green waste collections in other areas.
- Encouraging the setting up of inter-business re-use clubs.
- Developing cost-neutral ways of helping businesses on small industrial estates to improve their recycling rates.

4.2 Clean

We will

- explore different ways of dealing with bulky household waste, based on the principles of reducing, re-using and recycling such waste.
- have a regular cleaning blitz on estates where needed, working with Care for your Area cleansing teams, BT and other utilities, co-ordinated by the Area Committees.

4.3 Transport

We will aim to reduce the impact of travel on the environment in Stockton by:

- working with staff and unions to fully implement the workplace travel plan, including incentives to travel other than by car.
- seeking to improve the take-up of the safer routes to schools scheme. At the same time we will make a serious effort to source funding to provide free or very low cost school buses in order to reduce the perceived need for the “school run”.

In addition:

- Over the course of the normal replacement programme we will ensure that all council vehicles use the most appropriate fuel to minimise their environmental impact.

- We will make strenuous efforts to ensure that any geographical transfer of hospital facilities is matched with adequate public transport.

4.4 Planning & Development

We will ensure that the Local Development Framework has robust requirements for energy efficient building materials, heating systems and sustainable transport opportunities.

We will protect green wedge land, recognising that this requires higher density housing elsewhere. To ensure that we leave our grand-children the legacy of a green and pleasant Borough we will:

- Include more stringent requirements for the planting of long-lived trees in new developments of over 12 dwellings.
- Do all in our power to maintain the bio-diversity provided by the large gardens characteristic of some parts of the Borough, by developing planning policy guidance and working with developers to reduce the impact of infill and replacement buildings on the trees and shrubbery of those gardens. This will include campaigning at Parliamentary level for the revision of PPG3 and the VAT rules to encourage conversion rather than demolition of large houses.
- Ensure that a minimum number of trees, agreed by the Area Committees, are planted in Stockton in 2007-11

Liberal Democrats have been in the forefront of the campaign to make Stockton a Fairtrade Town by May 2007. However, we recognise that this is just the beginning and will continue to promote the use of Fairtrade goods wherever the Council has influence especially through its partnerships and in its schools.

5 PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT CONTROL

We will do all in our power, within the restrictions of central government guidelines, to ensure that the Stockton-on-Tees Local Development Framework gives us sustainable, high quality development for the future. As part of this strategy we will:

- look for opportunities to invite developers to include emerging alternative energy technologies, such as photovoltaic cells, wind turbines and ground source heat pumps, within the design of appropriate new development schemes.
- bring forward planning guidance to increase the requirement for affordable housing in new developments.
- support "Planning Aid" to redress the balance of people against developers.
- improve communication with parish councils on applications in their parishes.
- continue to encourage public involvement in planning decisions by improving the level of consultation and public participation before decisions are taken.
- offer public information sessions on common planning issues such as telecommunications masts and PPG3. (Government Planning Policy Guidance requiring higher density housing)

6 ROADS & TRANSPORT

Area Committees will consider issues around roads and pavements, including:

- Looking at alternative ways of dealing with road and pavement repairs.
- Looking at the causes of cracked pavements and working on initiatives to discourage pavement and grass verge parking. Council vehicles will be expected to set an example.
- Giving more support to communities wanting to work out solutions for traffic problems.
- Reviewing blind spots for street lighting.
- Review the extent of the Borough's cycle network and plan to fill in the gaps.

We will work with voluntary groups, Shopmobility and others to draw up maps of dropped kerbs in shopping areas and keep them under review. We will ensure that such maps are readily available to residents and visitors.

Recognising that public transport is outside the control of the Borough council we will

- campaign for rail links to the rest of the country and better local and regional links.
- work for better integration of railway stations with bus services.
- press for better public transport links between all parts of the Borough & Durham Tees Valley Airport.
- Work with other Tees Valley Authorities to establish a robust service agreement with the bus companies so that timetables cannot be changed without due notice, subsidies will be earned only on services which perform as promised, and proper consultation will happen.

7 EDUCATION

Liberal Democrats believe that young people should be at the heart of our educational system. We believe that good quality education should be equally accessible to all.

We will

- continue to work with schools to maintain existing high standards and improve where necessary so that all schools in the Borough give children the opportunity to reach their full potential.
- look at all possible means of using school facilities for out of hours activities such as sport, IT, art, drama and music. We will encourage all schools to embrace the Extended Services initiative, working with Health and other professionals in order to ensure that every family has access to top quality services for children.
- strive to ensure that Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision fully supports the children and young people who need it.
- ensure effective support for Gifted and Talented students in all our schools.
- build on the links between schools and the University and Colleges in the Borough.
- Build on our existing relationship with our University, at every level within the Council, making us a true University Town
- actively promote safer, healthier and greener ways of travelling to and from school. We will look for sources of funding for free school buses to make a serious attempt at reducing the "school run".

- actively encourage schools to provide healthy and nutritionally balanced meals, using locally sourced produce wherever possible. Where necessary we will offer help with training and equipment to make this possible. We will encourage education in nutrition and simple cookery as part of every child's right to learn to eat healthily.

8 LEISURE

We will:

- monitor closely the working of TeesActive Ltd to ensure that it continues to improve the opportunities for people of all ages & abilities to participate in physical activity. Ask them to look at increasing uptake by using special offers and targeted information.
- consult with the people of our Borough to help determine the priorities for the library service in order to increase the number of people who use our libraries.
- look at new ways of providing the library service within the community, especially amongst young people and in those areas with no easy access to library buildings using innovations like taster collections in workplaces, pubs and supermarkets.
- encourage more people to be involved in a wide variety of community based sporting and outdoor activities.
- build on Town's rail heritage, and revamp the "Rail trail" working with any interested voluntary organisations.
- Look at ways to preserve and promote our heritage, including collecting information from local people.
- promote more participation by local people in our International Festivals.
- do all in our power to ensure that in the regeneration of Billingham town centre we retain an arts venue worthy of our Borough, complementing the facilities at ARC but not duplicating them.
- we recognise the value of live theatre, classical music and dance in the cultural life of the Borough and will do all in our power to ensure that a suitable venue is retained. We will also work within the Stockton Middlesbrough Initiative to promote the provision of a larger scale events arena in the sub-region.
- Work with the Friends of the River Tees Heritage Park to preserve and enhance the environs of the River for the benefit of the residents of the borough.

9 HOUSING

The Council's role in housing is much more than just ownership of some social housing, but working with others so that there are decent quality homes available that people want to live in, in communities to which they are proud to belong.

We will

- encourage more affordable housing in new developments through the planning process.
- give more support to homeless people whilst in temporary accommodation and in new tenancies where needed. This will involve partnership working with children's services and housing, health & adult social services, and the voluntary sector. The quality of temporary accommodation will also be improved.
- Work to prevent homelessness in partnership with other agencies, schools and colleges.
- use short-life housing imaginatively for occupation by those in housing need (particularly young people) but with high levels of support and security, drastically reduce the use of Bed and Breakfast for homeless people.
- accepting that just evicting families with anti-social behaviour problems moves the problem elsewhere to other neighbours, we will urgently look at alternative models for giving intensive early support and intervention to such families to change behaviour and prevent eviction or help them to move back to a normal tenancy.

- introduce handyman / caretaker schemes for private sector as well as council tenants, with a sliding scale of charging for people according to their means.
- encourage Tristar to regularly monitor repair services and check contractors for customer satisfaction with work standards.
- explore with Tristar ways to give tenants rent incentives in return for them taking responsibility for their own repairs and maintenance.
- support new and existing tenants' associations and encourage them to get involved in the running of housing and other services.
- work with landlords to ensure that their housing is of an acceptable standard, including promoting existing grants to them as far as we are able. We will continue to take responsibility in monitoring and improving the condition of all private housing.
- encourage, through partnership with the voluntary sector and the business community, "care and repair" schemes to help elderly people and people with disabilities keep their homes in good repair.
- Implement Choice Based Lettings for allocation of Council owned housing following the necessary financial appraisals.
- Create a forum for tenants associations of both Tristar and other Social Housing providers.
- Lobby central government to provide better support for mortgage payers to enable them to stay in their homes during periods of unemployment or long term sickness.

10 ACTION ON CRIME AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Crime, and the fear of crime, affects residents throughout our Borough – though recorded crime varies greatly between the different areas. Low-level crime, such as drunkenness and anti-social behaviour, is a scourge that affects the quality of life of too many of our residents in all of our communities.

Community safety will be a priority of a Liberal Democrat Council. This means dealing with those who indulge in crime and anti-social behaviour – but it also means dealing with their underlying causes. Prevention, support and enforcement are the key tools for dealing with these issues.

The causes of problems will be tackled at every level:

- Alternative activities for young people and opportunities for them to positively interact with responsible adults must be developed. Young people should be included and they should be seen as part of the solution rather than the problem.
- We will build on existing work being done with our partners: the police, the youth, social and probation services, and with housing associations. We will promote sharing of information and resources and working within a common framework in order to both prevent and combat problems.
- We will encourage and lead partnership working to deal with Anti-Social Behaviour, working with any agencies and organisations that can help.
- We will work to build stronger relationships with the Police at every level, from the Superintendent to local policing teams, and across Council services to include planning, environmental health and other services.
- We will do our utmost to find funding for an out of hours noise service

While we support the current framework for action, we believe that by devolving decision-making to Area Committees we would expect to achieve a more responsive and relevant approach to problems affecting particular neighbourhoods. The Area Committees will provide more direct access for local people to the police and crime prevention agencies. Area Committees will also help to build up a sense of community and involvement for both those threatened by and committing anti social behaviour.

- A key factor will be addressing core problems early, with early identification and intervention with appropriate support services.
- we will push for more police on the beat and for more resources to reduce the administrative burden on officers – to free up their time to fight crime;
- we will seek extra funding (from Europe and elsewhere) to allow the Enforcement Service to continue to work wherever needed across the Borough;
- we will ensure that Trading Standards works closely with anti social behaviour teams to deal with traders who sell alcohol to those that are under age.
- we support the further development of 'restorative justice' where offenders learn what effect their crimes have had by being brought face to face with their victims.
- We will work to develop a "professional witness" scheme to help victims of anti-social behaviour and will set up a system, in partnership with other agencies, to ensure that victims are kept informed.
- we will develop further the Parenting Skills programme by helping and supporting parents to provide better guidance for their troubled and troublesome children;
- we will ensure that Acceptable Behaviour Contracts are a contract agreed with the offenders and their families and we will give support to them to try to change people's behaviour before it escalates into criminality and antisocial behaviour;
- we will ensure that all new Council developments 'design out' crime, in consultation with local people and local police
- we will continue to support the inter agency work being done with those suffering from domestic violence.

Our aim will be to make our Borough a safe and pleasant place for people to live and work – free from the fear of crime.

11 HEALTH / SOCIAL SERVICES / PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES.

- we will provide effective support for people in particular need, such as older people, people with disabilities and people with special needs. We want to ensure that all people are treated with dignity and respect. Providing appropriate help and care through Social Services, the private sector, the Health Services and Council is an important part of enabling people to lead the most independent and fullest, possible lives.
- we will aim to support independent living for vulnerable people and will be flexible and innovative to meet people's needs.
- we will continue to develop community-based services including Care Call, domestic repair & adaptation schemes and the use of new technology such as tele-assistance for all who require them.
- we will seek to involve people fully in decisions about their care needs, aiming to be flexible and innovative in order to support independent living for vulnerable people.
- we will involve users in planning for services and look at ways of extending advocacy and self-advocacy schemes in conjunction with the voluntary sector.
- to establish a more client centred approach we will set up a carer and customer panel. we will have a Social Services Charter, guaranteeing minimum standards people can expect from the service.

- we recognise the vital role played by informal carers and will continue to support and work with the Carers Centre. We will assess the needs of informal carers at the same time as assessing the needs of the person for whom they care, and at intervals thereafter. We will consult carers (as well as the person for whom they care) before producing any care plan or proposing any change in the pattern of care.
- we will work with others to raise the profile and esteem of those working in the caring professions.
- we will work with the North Tees & Hartlepool Trust, Primary Care Trust and the police to increase awareness of preventative health measures for elderly people to increase their safety and security.
- we will co-ordinate and look for ways of filling the gaps in handyman and gardening schemes for those who need such help. To do this we will work with the voluntary and private sectors and offer a range of payment options.
- we will work with the PCT, fire service and Trading Standards amongst others to provide safety checks on the homes and property of vulnerable people. This would include checks on electric blankets and other electrical equipment.
- we will establish and support a Disability Care Forum, made up of people with disabilities, their representatives and carers, which will have direct access to Council Officers and committees. We would encourage it to set up 'Access Audits' to ensure easy access is available for disabled people throughout the Borough.
- we will look for more flexibility in the Dial-a-Ride service to allow for needs outside the Borough boundaries.
- we will establish a Disability Champion within the Council, to ensure that issues affecting people with disabilities are effectively followed through and dealt with in all departments.
- we will bring in a training scheme in disability awareness for taxi drivers.
- review leisure services, in conjunction with Tees Active, to enable greater participation of people with all abilities.

We recognise the provision of aids and adaptations as a vital element in supporting independent living. We will

- develop a single equipment service, speeding up assessment and delivery.
- ensure that all apparatus is bar-coded and work with our partners in the health service to reduce loss
- ensure that appropriate training in the use of equipment is given to carers, including family members, at the point of delivery
- look at innovative ways of attracting and employing more occupational therapists

12 CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Children are our future and deserve the best start we can give them in life. To this end we will:

- work with Surestart and voluntary groups as well as Town & Parish councils to improve safe play opportunities for younger children. We will work with Area Committees to maximise opportunities for safe physical activities right across Stockton-on-Tees, including supervised play for young children.
- look at ways of assisting children before they are at the stage of being identified as being formally at risk and work with their parents and other carers.
- increase child and parent activities in conjunction with relevant council services and the voluntary sector.
- Work with the relevant officers and partners on the Play Strategy for the Borough, ensuring that it covers all forms of play, not just play areas. We will then strive to see it implemented as soon as possible.

- ensure that the mobile skate park becomes genuinely mobile by working with Area Committees to establish safe sites in their areas as far as funding rules allow.
- ensure that when new housing developments are planned there is adequate informal safe play space as well as equipped play space as part of the local development framework.
- establish “Child Safety Zones” around schools, to ensure safety when walking to school.
- Set up an exit panel for children leaving care so that we can learn from their experiences.
- Have increased investment in preventing drug, solvent and alcohol abuse, including providing education and advice through schools, the youth service and Children’s Homes and developing specific projects to help those affected.
- work with all relevant agencies to reduce the impact of substance misuse on individuals, families and communities.
- produce an up to date list of all available activities including, where possible, those from voluntary and private sector providers. This will be made available on the Council web site with contact e-mails and phone numbers and, where possible, will include out of office hours contact details.
- Work to ensure that the Youth Assembly is as representative as possible of all the different communities in the Borough, has a delegated budget for which it is accountable and has proper channels of communication with Council..

13 VOLUNTARY SECTOR

The voluntary sector plays a crucial role in the life of our Borough, and we want to work in true partnership with them.

We would :

- review the roles and relationship with the voluntary sector
- organise a conference with them to listen, share ideas and to discuss ways forward together.
- respecting the role of the sector, enable volunteers to be both campaigners and advocates as well as service providers
- ensure a rolling programme of funding to help them to plan financially.
- continuously review grant aid for community projects and ensure that exit strategies are planned for those schemes supported by time-limited external grants.

14 RESOURCES

We recognise that Council Tax is a burden which is often borne disproportionately by those with less ability to pay. The Council Tax has to increase if the cost of local services rises faster than the Borough’s central Government funding.

While as Liberal Democrats we campaign for a fairer system, such as Local Income Tax, we realise that at present the quality services needed by the people of this Borough cannot be provided without the income from the Council Tax.

In order to keep down future increases in Council Tax to no more than is necessary, we pledge to look after YOUR money by:

- having a line by line review of budgets.
- strengthening the effectiveness of Select committees to question constructively officers and Cabinet members:
- giving our full support to these Committees and the officers serving them in calling spending departments to account.

- reviewing procurement to ensure that major contracts (like school building) give best value.
- holding public consultation on budgets in an honest and meaningful manner. We realise that this is a complex subject. Councillors ultimately have to make the decisions and answer for them. However, modern electronic technology opens up exciting new ways of conveying information and bringing it, with interactive participation, into homes, schools, libraries and Stockton on Line centres, etc.
- cutting back on glossy leaflets and concentrating on giving people the real information they want/need in a way which they want.
- making sure that Scrutiny & Select Committee chairmen will come from all parties – they will not be selected as a ‘safe pair of hands’ to support the controlling party.
- ensuring that the relevant committees will automatically receive and consider all reports from internal and external audit and all reports from the Local Ombudsman about the Council.
- having reports of complaints about Council services brought regularly to scrutiny committees – not only response rates, but the duration of unresolved complaints, frequency of complaints on the same service and the lessons learnt. We would ensure that there would be a right of complainants to take unresolved complaints to the Appeals and Complaints committee for a full hearing, as well as those wishing to appeal against a decision.
- support public involvement by improving IT access in community and other buildings for out of hours access to services.

15 COUNCIL WORKFORCE

We will be equal opportunities employers and involve, inform and consult our employees, facilitate membership of trades unions and create forums for discussion between officers, councillors and staff.

We will use our staff (not only the managers) as the Council's greatest resource by listening to them:

- what it is really like “at the sharp end”
- how they might suggest doing things better
- what training they want or think that they need.
- meaningful dialogue with them and their unions while ideas and plans for change are being developed.

In addition:

- we will encourage flexible working practices such as flexi-time, term-time working, job sharing, home working and out-of-school care to enable a wider range of people with caring or other responsibilities to be part of the workforce. We will encourage contractors to provide staff training, implement fair wages and equal opportunities provisions and uphold trades union rights.
- where we make council facilities available outside normal working hours, we will take care to ensure that staff are not forced to work at anti-social times and that those who choose to are suitably remunerated.

We will ensure that Councillors are fairly treated when internal complaints are made against them by instituting a right of appeal to the Standards Committee against decisions to withdraw the use of any facility from a Councillor.