



BIRMINGHAM LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

Manifesto 2016

The Liberal Democrats this year have set out three priorities for the council. We believe they are priorities for the public also – that our city should have clean streets and pleasant neighbourhoods and that we should do our bit to tackle global warming by achieving a significant improvement in recycling.

.By down-grading these issues, the Labour leadership of the council has allowed poor decisions to be made and ruined neighbourhoods through petty cuts. Flytipping is rife and other kinds of anti-social behaviour – of many varieties – are on the increase.

However difficult the times, we should all be able to have pride in our city. Litter strewn streets and dumping on every corner strips our city of its pride.

In some areas, such as tackling some kinds of antisocial behaviour, small investments could make big differences.

Our priorities are:

- TACKLING FLY-TIPPING AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR
- IMPROVING RECYCLING
- BUILDING STRONG NEIGHBOURHOODS

In this manifesto we also begin a conversation about some radical ideas to modernise transport management and tackle congestion. And we also call for clear priorities, rather than maps which appear capable of meaning anything.

"I'm proud that the Liberal Democrats in Birmingham are taking the lead in challenging the city's poor recycling rates and worsening environment.

"Our councillors work in communities helping to make them strong and I hope that Birmingham will elect more of them."

Liberal Democrat leader Tim Farron MP

1/ Tackling fly-tipping and anti-social behaviour

In just one year reports of fly-tipping in Birmingham have doubled – and in five years they have trebled. On average 100 incidents are now reported daily.

For instance in December 2015 there were 3,663 reports compared with 1,201 in December 2014.

The causes of this increase are not hard to find – the withdrawal of household services and their replacement with chargeable services.

There is also a sense around that the council has cut so much it has become powerless and will not investigate and prosecute. This is not true – but there is not enough investigation and prosecution.

We propose:

- Restoring one free household bulk collection a year;
- Restoring the free garden waste collections;
- Purchasing mobile CCTV cameras that can rapidly be deployed to fly-tipping sites whether they are on street corners or industrial wasteland.

In pursuit of antisocial and criminal behaviour in all its forms we would:

- Employ more planning enforcement officers;
- Halt the withdrawal of the dog cruelty investigation service;
- Stop a £1.5 million cut to street cleaning, which, according to the council's own documents, show that some streets would be cleaned just twice a year;
- Ensure the housing department is enforcing tenancy agreements where there is antisocial and nuisance behaviour;
- Crack down on irresponsible landlords.

2/ Building Recycling

According to the latest available figures the city's recycling rate in December slumped to 29%. In the last year it has barely risen above 31% - in spite of a target being set of well over 40%.

Recycling of waste is a key objective for several reasons:

- To contribute to carbon reduction by preventing methane emissions and reducing incineration;
- To reduce the need for landfill facilities.

Labour made the misconceived claim that replacing recycling receptacles with wheelie bins would deliver a significant boost. While these are indeed more convenient for many people, they have not added any new kinds of recycling and the boost has not happened.

And indeed the council has reduced recycling by withdrawing the free garden waste collection. Even on a paid basis – with just 56,000 households subscribed – garden waste represents 10% of the city's waste compared with 7% for paper, which is a free collection.

Before 2012 when Labour took control, the council, run jointly by Liberal Democrats and Conservatives, had a clear plan to improve recycling. This administration had already successfully introduced household recycling and free garden waste collections after it took control in 2004.

We would implement this plan by

- Restoring free garden waste collections, including fruit and vegetable residuals;
- By 2019 introducing separate food waste collections;
- By 2018 introducing a rewards scheme for high recyclers, using the microchip technology embedded in the new wheelie bins.



3/ Building neighbourhoods

Birmingham is a city of well over a million people with hundreds of neighbourhoods. Residents want the area where they live to be pleasant.

Liberal Democrats have campaigned in the community in the city for 50 years, giving a voice to people who feel voiceless.

The recent Kerslake investigation confirmed how the city's communities feel disengaged from the city and feel that everything goes to the city centre or another part of the city.

Its recommendations mean that in 2018 the city will start again, with councillors representing much smaller areas and being expected to devote more time to those communities. Efforts at "devolution" have been ineffective because district committees have not always aligned with natural communities.

Yet the city's current plans will undermine this process by stripping vital facilities away from neighbourhoods.

Our key proposal is linked to the future of the city's community libraries. Although Labour is coy about its plans, it expects huge savings in 2019. This will mean significant closures.

Yet libraries have historically been placed closer to the centre of communities than administrative facilities.

We would support the modernisation of libraries – but propose that they take a role at the heart of our communities. Modernisation should not mean closure.

This new role will prevent closures – and help the council make sensible decisions about the shape of its local arrangements after 2018. Instead of being based on artificial political boundaries, the new smaller wards can be grouped into real communities with clear centres.

We would also reverse a series of small cuts that would have a big impact on neighbourhoods:

- The closure of play areas
- The closure of superloos
- The reduction in youth services
- Withdrawal of funding for school crossing patrols.

We would also increase the funding available to district engineers for small local projects – allocating £120,000 over three years (compared with about £10,000 a year now).

And maintaining street cleaning services is also vital to this plan – as clean streets give a community pride in itself. Grimy flytipped streets strip away pride.

We have supported and will continue to support local residents taking more power in their neighbourhoods through democratic means, such as parish councils or neighbourhood plans.

How would we pay for all this?

The council faces huge financial challenges because of the withdrawal of core government funding. We don't underestimate this and in our main manifesto will examine the challenge to social services

However we believe it has overreacted and set aside excessive amounts in contingency funding. We have identified at least £90 million of unused money in the business plan.

The need to clean up our streets, to boost recycling and to strengthen our communities is too pressing to be left until 2020.

We showed that by 2020 our proposals would no longer draw on contingency funding but would be feasible within the council's resources (based on its own projections). The cost of our proposals starts at £8 million and rise to £28 million in 2020 – when they would be fully funded within the council budget.

We also argued that the basic council tax increase should be tied to inflation. Residents are paying an extra 2% levy for social services and we proposed that the main council tax increase should therefore be 1% rather than 2% (giving a total increase of 3% rather than 4%). We showed this could be largely funded by the council keeping a tighter grip on its own inflation costs. Its generous inflation allowances mean managers have no incentive to ensure that the cost of supplies and contracts is not being over-inflated.

Further sections of this manifesto cover:

- **Transport and connectivity**
- **Education**
- **A public voice**
- **Public protection**
- **Housing**
- **Social services and health**

Transport and connectivity

Transport management in the West Midlands and Birmingham in particular is inefficient and out-dated.

There are too many key junctions where traffic sits waiting for lights to change - or where traffic queues lurch from one red light to another. Roadside information given to drivers is inadequate and hard to understand.

Sorting this out does not mean we are being "pro-car." It creates huge opportunities to smooth the passage of public transport and keep buses moving.

There is too much emphasis on physical infrastructure on the roads - and not enough on identifying new corridors for public transport.

The creation of a new Combined Authority creates new opportunities for transport investment and for new thinking.

The last four years since Labour took control of Birmingham City Council and of West Midlands Transport have mostly been wasted. Existing strategic plans were ripped up and then replaced with plans which said much the same - but without any sense of priority.

It has been evident that priorities exist in the heads of one or two individuals but not in the public domain.

An example is the Sprint bus system which was to be trialled as a super-bus system on one route. There is little sign of the trial route getting under way - while almost every major route, including the number 11, have been designated as Sprint routes. The result is a massive down-grading of the original concept.

Our priorities are therefore:

1/ Open the Camp Hill rail line through Moseley. This creates a new rapid transit corridor through the congested south of the city. The effect will be to reduce traffic on the roads, improving bus and vehicle reliability and allowing improved access to public transport for tens of thousands of people.

This is an issue of leadership as much as money and an opportunity for the new West Midlands Combined Authority. It requires the interests of Network Rail to be aligned with those of the city. Network Rail must understand it is a priority. Work on this project is so underdeveloped that there are no clear costs - figures of about £200 million have been quoted recently, and, even if it were to be this much, as the cost of a major transport project, this compares well with taking road space for a metro line.

2/ Invest in 21st century technology to manage transport systems. Our traffic management systems are out-dated and suffer from a notable lack of investment in IT. This is notable in everything from speed cameras to traffic lights. Modernisation has to be done with caution – a “big bang” won’t solve the problem and could leave us with even more costly and out-dated technology. But it must be done and can be done by observing success worldwide and observing, for instance, Bristol’s Smart City project. The important thing is to invest in future-proofed systems that, for instance, will be able to cope with the introduction of driverless vehicles. We would expect pilot schemes at some “smart junctions”.

In many areas a little investment in IT will be more effective than spending millions on the road infrastructure.

Other parts of the West Midlands are outside the scope of this manifesto but it should be noted that similar opportunities exist, for instance, to reopen the Wolverhampton to Walsall rail route as tram-train with intermediate stops.

Further measures:

The introduction of the Swift Card enables new ticketing offers. We would work towards a single Birmingham “ticket” for travellers.

We not support a congestion charge. Earlier studies have shown it to be unworkable in Birmingham.

Education and skills

The government's plan to convert all LEA schools into academies poses huge challenges.

The failures of the academy system have been evident in Birmingham. Academy schools were involved in the Trojan Horse scandal while another Birmingham-based academy group has been embroiled in financial scandal.

We will work with schools to keep them in the city family emphasising the benefits of:

- strong independent governors;
- directly elected parent governors;
- working with other schools to share good practice, innovation and curriculum development.

The council needs to recognise its own failings in education management and learn to work as a partner with schools rather than a boss.

By failing to acknowledge the benefits the non-LEA sector has offered in creating school places - at a time when in many areas there are growing shortages and demand is high for good schools - the council has contributed to schools isolating themselves from the city.

The council must press for school developments to comply with the planning process and resist government attempts to by-pass the planning system. Schools can cause major congestion and expansions or new schools must explain how traffic will be managed.

We would create the post of cabinet member for education, skills and culture - allocating responsibility to a councillor to work in partnership with the education and skills sector.

We support moves to create more integration between so-called vocational learning and academic education. We will resist moves to "segregate" the two kinds of learning, enabling young people to find and develop their interests and abilities through a range of opportunities.

A Public Voice

The current thresholds for petitions are too high.

We would set the following thresholds:

- 500 signatures: a debate at a district committee meeting, if the topic is relevant to the work of the district;
- 2,500 validated signatures: referral to scrutiny to investigate using community call for action procedures.
- 5,000 signatures: petitioners to have choice of referral to scrutiny or short debate at Council meeting.
- 10,000 signatures: petitioners to have choice of a full scrutiny investigation or a debate at Council with a time limit of no less than one hour.

Volunteers – the lifeblood of the city

We will develop policies to encourage and support volunteers, often working alongside public services in Friends groups. We would develop policies to integrate opportunities for work experience through volunteering with traditional volunteering activities, creating a package of support for those on such programmes.

Many volunteers will work in local projects. However the city's strength is its size and we would encourage more city wide initiatives. For instance we would expect the Library of Birmingham to run a major volunteering project, helping to create outreach teams that can help support local libraries.

Public protection:

(This section supplements the key pledges under the Flytipping and Antisocial Behaviour campaign theme)

Crackdown on irresponsible private landlords. Seek to reduce the requirement from licensing from 6 separate tenants to cover the thousands of ordinary properties currently used for letting. Councils such as Newham have been much more assertive in dealing with irresponsible landlords, who let down the sector as well as the city.

Scrap metal collectors. These can provide a useful public service but may also create nuisance and provide cover for criminal activity. We will explore the use of zoning licences to manage this.

Pay-day loans. We have championed measures to tackle the problem of pay-day loan companies. Demanding they be refused access to sell their wares through council computers and pressing for the promotion of credit unions.

We will continue to investigate measures to ensure they cannot exploit people who cannot afford to repay their loans.

Gambling machines We will continue to press for restrictions on Fixed Odds Betting Terminals. We gained all-party support from the Council for our proposals on this.

Coroner's Office:

We will work towards offering families in Birmingham and the coroner's office the services of a digital autopsy scanner. This can enable non-invasive post-mortems, reducing distress and speeding up the process.

City centre:

Birmingham has not benefited as much as other city and town centres from the introduction of high quality charity shops. We will investigate the creation of a voluntary sector zone to support charities and third sector organisations able to provide high quality premises in opposition to the pay-day lenders clustering in areas such as Bull Street.

Housing

We will introduce improved incentives for people to move on from under-used properties, including “holding hands” projects providing practical support for moving:

- by making better use of sheltered housing and retirement villages
- by working with social landlords to increase the supply of single bedroomed lettings.

We will support the self-build movement by making land available. We would step up the drive to bring the city's 5,000 empty properties into use as living accommodation.

When we were in the Progressive Partnership, we supported the city's first drive to build new homes for a generation. The city needs more good quality homes and it is shameful that so much land is left blighted while people wait for homes.

We would step up insulation of existing council properties, especially the many unclad tower blocks.

Antisocial tenants

Rules are not enforced evenly around the city. We would step up enforcement of tenancy rules.

Social services & health

We have supported extra investment in Birmingham's failing children's services. We remain concerned about weak oversight and governance of the services.

The current cabinet member post for children's services would have the education components removed so the cabinet member concentrates on safeguarding and care (with continued involvement in education services where appropriate).

The current children's services scrutiny committee would establish a standing sub-committee to oversee care services.

Adult care is a different story. It is having to take the bulk of the cuts in council budgets - although it will be rescued by the arrival of substantial "Better Care Funds."

It is proposed that budget management will be achieved through much-needed integration with health services.

We support this process. It is time to end the "cliff edge" between council care and NHS funded care.

Council care is frequently inadequate and provided through minimal time windows. However where users have taken personal budgets they have gained much in the quality of care.

NHS continuing care can be well-funded and sometimes over-funded. But it is achieved through a process guaranteed to ensure that few people get access to this level of care. Once patients get care, money appears to be no object and the NHS has been slow to introduce personal budgets.

We need a care system that involves users and their families and that meets their needs.

The Holy Grail is to reduce hospital admissions by preventing crises. This applies to physical illness and mental health equally.

That is why the NHS needs to be involved.

Public Health

The Conservative government has gone back on pledges to protect health spending and reduced public health budgets.

Consequently we would examine spending on the BeActive project and the extent to which it is being used to subsidise council facilities.

We would extend the "framework" agreement with private companies to bring them in to manage "health and wellbeing centres" with a view to reducing the subsidy from the public health budgets to enable them to "stretch" further..