

A Liberal Vision for the East of England

Regional Policy Paper 2009

The elections of 2010 will take place in an uncertain political and economic context. The global financial crisis which has already caused job losses in the Region will continue to have ramifications, and the problem will be compounded by massive government debt which will have a long-term impact on public services. Thus, whichever party is in office nationally will undoubtedly cut funding to local government, which will constrain policy choices in the East of England.

Whereas Labour has consistently thrust more tasks at local government, turning it into a de facto executive arm of central government without the commensurate resources to ensure it runs effectively, the Tories are speaking a language of localism. However, it is not clear that this has any real substance and we are likely to find ourselves caught in a world where national leaders speak of 'choice' but where council leaders find there is none. Certainly, the introduction of parliamentary regional committees will not be representative and it won't make politicians in Region any more accountable. And, of course, all this is compounded by the fact we have multiple levels of local government rather than unitary authorities in much of the Region.

What would Liberal Democrats do differently? Firstly, we believe that it is essential to be as honest as possible with the electorate - there will be many things to which we aspire but which realistically we aren't going to be able to deliver in the short-term. Yet there are many changes we can bring about **now**, whether at parish, local or regional levels, which will make a real difference to people's lives, are affordable and are green. Secondly, we believe in creating a fairer and more equal society, and our policies are based on our principle that no-one should be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity.

In this paper we outline policies in six vital areas where Lib Dems, as councillors, MPs or representatives on other regional bodies really can make a difference in the East of England:

- Governance – devolving power to people not quangos
- The Economy – free businesses from unnecessary red tape and create green jobs
- The Environment – enhancing the natural environment and curbing environmentally damaging activities
- Transport – creating a joined-up green infrastructure
- Housing – ensuring everyone has access to decent, affordable housing
- Young People – empowering young people, not stigmatising them

I – Governance

In recent years local authorities have had to implement a growing number of central government initiatives for which inadequate funding has been provided, free bus travel for the over-60s being the most high profile example. Local authorities are increasingly serving more as the executive arm of central government rather than entities that can represent the real needs of local communities. Unlike the two largest parties, Liberal Democrats are committed to devolving power and resources. In particular, we will:

- review local government arrangements and consider extending unitary district councils, setting aside county boundaries where necessary in order to establish councils that have responsibility for communities with common interests rather than historical allegiances. Show the public how these might deliver better services.
- set up an Academy of Eastern Action; a forum to develop individual people and practical ideas that can be implemented by Lib Dem councils, be used to challenge Conservative-controlled regional and national decision-makers and be a part of public campaigning by the party.
- acknowledge for the moment that the Tories are taking control of the regional seats of power, despite the Lib Dems strong showing in local government in the East of England, but make sure that the public knows that the Conservative Party is responsible for all that transpires and hold them accountable for it.

II – The Economy

The East of England faces many different challenges as a result of the recession. While unemployment is not as high as in some parts of the country, there have been significant job losses in the Region and shops stand empty in many areas. We urgently need ways of getting the unemployed back to work, to stimulate demand and to free small and medium-sized businesses from red tape. There are already good examples in the Region. For example, the Harlequin Centre in Watford has agreed to reduce the profit on its outlets and others are reducing rent to small businesses; elsewhere, Bedford has axed car park charges on Sundays to try to improve trade. Drawing on these examples and in line with national policies, Liberal Democrats would:

- promote green jobs and local apprenticeships designed to fit local people for the jobs that are available;
- free businesses from unnecessary red-tape and give them incentives to reduce carbon emissions, including allowing staff to work from home where appropriate, improving broadband access where necessary;
- act to eliminate the practice of upwards only rent reviews, and ensure that business evictions could only take place when there is evidence that the business is unviable, not the rents too high for the economic cycle;
- encourage local authorities to support local businesses by being flexible about payments, i.e. not requiring three or six months' rent upfront

III – Making the most of our natural heritage

The state of the natural environment is key to our welfare, providing the natural resources on which our quality of life relies as well as the open spaces, landscapes and wildlife that do so much for our health and well-being. But too often human activity is degrading the natural environment. Liberal Democrats will reverse this process by:

- making waste disposal authorities responsible for ensuring a waste treatment infrastructure that can maximise resource recovery from municipal, business and (where appropriate) agricultural waste;
- moving to an ecosystems-based policy approach to issues affecting the natural environment such as planning and agriculture;
- all local authorities to adopt Natural England's Green Space standards to ensure that everyone has access to quality open spaces;
- increasing rights of access to the countryside and coasts;
- taking a more proactive approach to conserving biodiversity and enhancing its resilience to climate change, including insisting on wildlife-friendly features being incorporated into all new developments;
- introducing compensation for land lost as a result of decisions about managed coastal retreat;
- empowering individuals and groups to take direct responsibility for their own local environments, including managing open spaces and wildlife areas.

IV – Transport

The UK is committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by a third by 2022, with Lib Dems and others committed to a 10% reduction in 2010, yet in the East of England 97% of freight, or 270 million tonnes, was carried by road in 2007, adding significantly to emissions, congestion and air pollution. Similarly for private individuals, the poor infrastructure in the East of England and absence of east-west links make driving the norm. Yet, there are there some positive stories to tell: Lib-Dem run Cambridge is a cycling Demonstration Town, with lessons from which other urban centres in the region could draw. Liberal Democrats recognise the importance of matching our green rhetoric with green actions. We would improve the rail infrastructure, reduce carbon emissions and ensure modal shift by:

- focusing on rail expansion rather than motorway widening, including upgrading rail links to Felixstowe and support for the Lower Thames multi-modal crossing; increased train and station platform lengths will be part of our integrated Liberal Democrat regional transport policy, which will protect and enhance the built and natural environment, support sustainable growth and regeneration and safeguard the health and well being of our residents;
- creating east-west rail routes linking Ipswich, Norwich and Cambridge with Letchworth, Stansted, Bedford, Milton Keynes, Bicester and Oxford, allowing links to Swindon, The Thames Valley, South West England and South Wales;
- pressing for provision of appropriate and necessary rail to rail freight terminals, with a presumption against them turning into large lorry parks;
- encouraging people to walk or cycle to work by improving the provision and maintenance of foot- and cycle-paths.

V – Housing

The Government is committed to a major expansion in the region. While recognising that more housing, especially affordable housing, is essential, Liberal Democrats believe that new developments must be sustainable, with due attention paid both to energy efficiency in the homes and to ensuring that new developments form part of a community served by shops, post offices and other services and linked to a reliable public transport system.

Liberal Democrats would:

- ensure that new housing will be by accessible sustainable method of travel, reducing the need for car ownership and supporting car free developments;
- use local development frameworks to ensure that new housing developments have access to a full range of local services, including shops, schools, healthcare and leisure facilities;
- endeavour to ensure that new social housing is integrated into existing residential areas, not located at such a distance that they effectively become ghettos;
- ensure all housing has access to broadband internet to facilitate home-working and ensure school children are able to access vital resources regardless of where they live.

VI – Youth

According to the latest NYA audit, the East of England spends less per head on youth services than any other region. And the per capita spend actually dropped £5, from £60 - £55, in the latest figures published in 2008. Particularly at a time of an unprecedented rise in youth unemployment, Liberal Democrats in the East of England believe it is more essential than ever to ensure adequate youth provision. The decision by the Royal Opera House to move its production work to Thurrock offers welcome opportunities for youngsters in the region. Yet problems of low aspiration persist elsewhere and more such initiatives are needed. Young people, particularly in rural areas, are often isolated because of a lack of access to public transport. They also find themselves marginalised through the inappropriate use of ASBOs and exclusion zones and the indiscriminate use of mosquito devices.

Liberal Democrats in the East of England will:-

- campaign to increase the per capita spend on youth services in the East at least to match the average for the country (from £60 - £84 in 2009);
- support initiatives that increase the number of places to go and things to do for young people across the region, so that young people have access to youth facilities at least within 3 miles of their home and improve local public transport to enable them to access facilities;
- create opportunities for cross-community and cross-generational work and supporting outreach work in deprived areas through youth service, sports organisations, theatre and other voluntary groups;
- ban the use of Mosquito devices, replace the use of ASBOs with ABCs (acceptable behaviour contracts) and end the designation of exclusion zones;
- ensure young people's representation as co-optees on relevant committees and in the allocation of budgets related to their service, for example - schools, youth services, after care services