



‘New Times, New Challenges’

St Albans Liberal Democrats Manifesto 2014



8 challenges for St Albans District:

- 1. Save the environment together**
- 2. Get a grip on parking**
- 3. Get planning for the end of the recession**
- 4. Collect your bins properly**
- 5. Make St Albans business friendly**
- 6. Make decisions locally not centrally**
- 7. Provide a new deal for parks and play areas**
- 8. Make sure there is a fair deal for all**

1. Save the environment together

The responsibility to use less energy and cut the district's carbon footprint belongs to us all and it is time that the council became more active in helping people change their lifestyles.

It is vital to reduce the level of car use in order to cut congestion and pollution: many major employers, including the district council itself, are content to see no significant changes in how their staff get to work.

Equally, cyclists are put off both by road layouts and by the fact that many cycle users live in dwellings which contain no cycle storage.

We will:

- work constructively with the county council to find ways of improving bus services and road use
- encourage more businesses to devise travel plans and reduce the car usage of district council staff
- devise a scheme under which existing blocks of flats can acquire cycle sheds at reasonable costs
- provide funding to Transition St Albans and similar organisation to encourage people to use energy more efficiently in their homes and in how they travel.

2. Get a grip on parking

We are never going to solve the basic fact that in many parts of the district there are more cars than roadspace to park them on. But we can make sure that requests by residents for review are dealt with promptly and competently: this is not the case at the moment – the Conservatives have allowed a staggering backlog of 80 schemes to pile up while residents fume and fail to get answers.

Meanwhile a new car park at Harpenden station is long overdue.

We will

- make sure that there are adequate resources dedicated to this area so that the backlog is reduced
- press First Group for action over the Harpenden station car park.

3. Get planning for the end of the recession

When the Conservatives took control of the Council one of their first actions was to cancel the all-party meetings that had been progressing the Local Plan. Since then they have sat like rabbits in the headlights, masterfully combining doing nothing with hoping that shoving the problem to the south of the district and away from Harpenden would result in a plan that would be found 'sound'.

Meanwhile, the planning department operates as a barrier to sensible development – failing to engage with much needed development in the city centre and making it needlessly difficult for people trying to extend their houses even where none of the neighbours object.

We will

- Work with all of the other parties on the District Council, with the County Council, with Parish Councils and with residents' groups to put a sound Local Plan in place that enables the building of affordable housing whilst preserving every piece of Green Belt that national policy will allow.
- Improve the speed, clarity and quality of the response to local residents putting in household planning applications.

4. Collect your bins properly

The district council's reorganisation of recyclable collections is partly driven by market forces but has been incompetently handled in this district with the result that recycling is actually going down.

The introduction of the unwanted food caddies and the mishandling of changes to cardboard collection are just the most recent examples of where the district has got it wrong over recycling. Far too often change is introduced without consulting councillors or the public, with the result that bins are left uncollected and the public loses faith in the system.

We will

- ensure that any further changes to the recycling are properly tested with the public
- act to put recycling back on an upward course like neighbouring Lib Dem Three Rivers council.

5. Make St Albans business friendly

Anyone who glances at our shopping centres realises that there is something wrong. The economic conditions don't help but St Albans is notoriously unfriendly to business. This makes St Albans less attractive as a place to live – and means the council does not get the level of business rates that it otherwise could.

The St Albans Food and Drink Festival in 2013 descended into chaos as key local businesses pulled out - and we still don't have a summer arts festival worthy of the name. The Christmas Market was a decent start but much needs to be done to bring it up to scratch.

The Conservatives want to increase car-parking charges on Sundays. They continue to overcharge for street trading licences and in office have had no workable ideas for making our high streets thrive again.

Meanwhile the Lib Dems have taken action to force the Administration to reduce the outrageous licensing fees charged to street traders by the station and in St Peter's Street.

We will

- Regularly consult the retail and other sectors about what's best for the area
- Set car parking charges to ensure that they encourage rather than discourage trade
- Make sure that the car park information signs installed at great expense are actually working

- Revamp the city's festivals to make sure that local people and traders are in the driving seat – not council officials
- Revamp the St Albans festival to make it nationally renowned.

6. Make decisions locally not centrally

Local charities and citizen's groups can find the district council remote and bureaucratic: elected councillors have next to no influence on the monies handed out and the criteria are to say the least opaque.

We will devolve a proportion of community budgets (around £2,000 per councillor) to ward level so that your local councillors are the decision-makers about which organisations and projects are supported.

7. Provide a new deal for parks and play areas

There has been a catalogue of high-handed mismanagement. Clarence Park was threatened with commercial development. Verulamium continues to suffer from poor decision-making. Local residents consulted on play areas have found that their desires were entirely set aside by officials who would not speak to them.

It is time for a new deal.

We will ensure that all principal recreation areas will have a local management committee led by local councillors (including parish councillors) rather than council officials and involving local residents. This will have the main say in what is spent where.

8. Make sure there is a fair deal for all

The Conservatives have consistently shown that they aren't very interested in those on lower incomes – content to see their council tax bills and housing costs raise faster than the rest of the population. Little account is taken of the views of young people.

At the same time, the council continues to be more costly than it needs to be.

We will:

- Seek to increase the proportion of new affordable homes being built in the district
- Continue to freeze council tax as long as possible
- Protect those on lower incomes
- Cut the council's costs by 3% every year by merging 'back office' functions with neighbouring councils and reforming working practices
- Ensure the council's policies are tested with young people before reaching councillors.