

# Liberal Democrat Manifesto for Rother District Elections 2011

## ***This is the manifesto of the Liberal Democrat Party on Rother District Council***

*This manifesto sets out the aims of the Party for the good governance of Rother District, based on its experience of the current Conservative administration since 1999 and campaigning experience throughout this period.*

### **The Financial Challenge**

These elections take place in the context of the challenge of coping with the worst ever financial settlement for local government. Not only has Westminster demanded that councils cut their budgets drastically, but this has to be done within two years. Rother District Council is no exception and is faced with having to find £1.7 million in cuts in its base budget. This represents a cut of 11%.

### **Meeting the Challenge**

Some decisions have already been made:-

- increases in fees and charges
- staff have a pay freeze
- vacant posts are not being filled
- The Council's office premises in Beeching Road, Bexhill are to be leased out and staff moved to the Town Hall.

### ***How would Liberal Democrats handle the budget cuts?***

Work with Rother's officers and other political parties. We have already committed ourselves to work on this challenge together.

We have also decided there are some services which should **not** be cut:

- Public toilets
- Street and beach cleaning
- Business and tourism support
- Housing and support services
- Waste collection and recycling

### ***How are Liberal Democrats different?***

**Lost connection:** It is our experience that Conservative-led RDC has lost connection with the views and needs of residents. There are numerous examples of where Rother has ignored their wishes because there has been little attempt to consult properly with the people affected by its decisions: car parking, public toilets, tourist information centres and most dramatically the revamp of Bexhill seafront.

**The Conservative group forced all their councillors to vote to spend £4.5 million on Bexhill seafront, a vanity project not appropriate for these difficult times.**

**Don't let the Tories do anything like this in the future!**

***Vote Liberal Democrat!***



**Priorities:**

We believe Rother District Council have got their priorities wrong. An example of this is the spending on computers. The IT department has 15 full time staff. The Regeneration Department has only five staff members to support tourism and local businesses and create new jobs. The budget in 2011/12 for capital and revenue in IT is £1.7 million, for regeneration £245,060.

With local shops and businesses struggling, this is an example of misplaced priorities. Studies show that investment in computers does not deliver savings nor does it improve performance.

**Decision-making:**

Liberal Democrats want to see an end to the arrogance, sterile confrontation and imposition of party dogma, which has been the stock in trade of the current Conservative administration. The unpopular cabinet system has been used by the Conservatives to impose decisions without knowledge and understanding of the effects on residents. It does not have to be like this as the best Councils up and down the country have allowed elected members, from whatever party, to influence and shape decisions.

**Vision:**

The aim of the Liberal Democrats is to offer the electors of Rother a comprehensive reforming programme of improvements which reflect the needs of residents, respecting the environment, whilst ensuring that services are delivered to Rother residents in an efficient and cost-effective way.

***Liberal Democrat councillors pledge to put their local community interests above party voting.***

**Liberal Democrat Key Aims:**

- To reduce waste and carbon emissions in every Rother service
- To make decisions as close as possible to the people who are affected by them.
- To involve residents in any decisions which have an impact on them.
- To devolve services to as local a level as possible, ensuring that funding follows any decisions.
- To support tourism and Rother's businesses to provide jobs locally.
- To open up the Council to the public to ensure informed decisions of 'no regret'.
- To make sure the money spent by the Council is giving good value.



### **Constitutional Matters:**

The Liberal Democrat aim is an administration closer to Rother residents, enabling everyone to connect with their District and play a part in shaping its future.

To that end we propose:

**Return to the Committee System.** The Coalition Government has now given councils the power to return to the Committee system. We believe this system gives greater opportunities for better debate and greater accountability for decision-making because all councillors, not just the Cabinet, are involved in decision-making.

**Scrutiny Committees** if continued, should be chaired by councillors who are not of the ruling party. In the new constitutional structure of the Council Scrutiny Committees exist as a balance to the Executive Cabinet and they cannot work effectively if the same ruling group leads the agenda.

**Public question time** If the Cabinet system remains we propose public question time at Cabinet meetings to allow concerns to be heard and any new information to be added to the debate. The Tories have always voted against these proposals.

**Meetings in the evening** to allow and encourage working people to become councillors on Rother District Council thus making provision for a wider range of views, experience and interests among councillors. At present many meetings (including Cabinet meetings) are in the daytime. Liberal Democrats say people should not be discouraged from standing because they work. This would also give members of the public the opportunity to see the Council in action.

**Area Committees** comprising the centres of major population and their surrounding areas: Bexhill, Battle, Rye and Ticehurst. These committees can have responsibility for planning and deal with other council services in their area. As support for these local area committees, the roles of the Help and Advice Centres (a Liberal Democrat initiative) to be strengthened.

**Devolving power to Parish and Town Councils** with support for any District functions delivered by the parishes. This was introduced as a Liberal Democrat policy some years ago. The Tories support the principle without supporting the Parishes financially or with officer time. We support genuine devolvement of services, especially to Councils such as Rye and Battle

**Youth Council** representatives to have direct input into the Council's decision-making. Liberal Democrats initiated the Bexhill Youth Council. To engage young people, representatives from the Rural Rother Youth Council and the Bexhill Youth Council to be invited to attend and speak at all meetings.

**Bexhill Town Council** The Liberal Democrat initiative of creating a Bexhill Town Forum should now be taken forward to parishing Bexhill, enabling Bexhill to have the same rights as the parishes who can raise their own precept. There is positive enthusiasm for the idea with Bexhill residents whenever they are canvassed on this proposal. Conservatives have always opposed this idea in the same way as they opposed the creation of the Bexhill Forum.

**Reducing the number of Councillors** The business of the Council can be effectively done with fewer councillors. Also it is evident that a proportion of councillors do very little. This change would involve a boundary review and would come into effect in 2015 for the next elections.



## **Management**

The Tories in the past have failed to take advantage of government grants and subsidies, for example on recycling initiatives. Liberal Democrats would pursue vigorously bidding for Government and other funding to lift the burden from the taxpayer where it fits in with priorities.

Liberal Democrats, both locally and nationally, will continue to campaign for the introduction of a reformed local tax, to pay for council services. This should be based on ability to pay, and because it can be set to raise a bigger proportion of the total spend of the Council we will suffer less when national governments turn off the tap of funding to local councils. It would particularly benefit those on a fixed income and the young leaving home to live independently. Rother has one of the highest percentages of residents in this group.

Liberal Democrats have always said that business rates, which are currently controlled by central Government, should be returned to local authorities. This would replace the link between businesses and local council decisions, making the Council more accountable for creating jobs and supporting local businesses.

### **Liberal Democrats would:**

- **Strengthen the planning department.** Planning is such a vital issue for residents and the environment. 80% of Rother is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There is a mounting number of enforcement issues which at present Rother is not tackling.
- **Introduce meaningful contract penalties** on outsourced services. Private companies under long-term contracts provide many of the Council services. The contracts contain certain penalty clauses if the contract is in default. However, the levels of penalties are so low that the contractors simply pay up and fail to provide the standard of service set. Many hours of administration by Council officers are therefore wasted. More exacting penalties and a more vigilant monitoring of these contracts would ensure contractors provide the services we, as taxpayers, want.
- **Extend access to the Council** through supporting the Help & Advice Centres and using village facilities to provide better access to Council services. We would also cut spending on the Rother magazine, Rother Views and use the saving to allow webcasting of Council meetings allowing residents outside Bexhill see for themselves how decisions are made.
- **Work with neighbouring authorities** where it would save money and provide a better service. If the nearest recycling facility is in a neighbouring district, we should make arrangements with those councils for our residents' benefit.
- **Use sustainability indices** to measure Council performance. Liberal Democrats know that cheapest is not always best, nor in the long-term interest of the community. We are custodians of our environment for future generations.



## **Planning**

The proper and efficient management of planning is critical for an environmentally sensitive district like Rother.

### ***Liberal Democrats would:***

- **Set up area planning committees (see Constitution)**
- **Strengthen management resources (see Management)**
- **Allow Parish and Town Council Representatives to speak at planning committees.** Currently, like everyone else, they can only make written submissions on planning applications. Local councils are best placed to help the Committee reach the most informed decisions and so should be heard. Parish Councils should also be given the opportunity to attend planning inspection visits.
- **Give Objectors and the Applicant the right to speak at planning committee.** This will remove the frustration felt by all parties. It is a system run successfully in many councils without extending meeting times.
- **Press for sustainable design in all new developments,** Liberal Democrats want a greener Rother and planning can help by requiring, for example, sustainable drainage, reduced light pollution, houses positioned to benefit from solar gain, developers encouraged to access funding for low-energy heating systems, as well as design ideas to cut down on the opportunities for crime.
- **Ensure that Local Action Plans are fed into the Local Development Framework.** The LDF replaces the Local Plan. Many parishes have been working hard on the Local Action Plans. Liberal Democrats will support these plans, helping to achieve the proposals they contain, because the ideas they produce come directly from the communities affected.



## Environment

***Many of our proposals in the planning agenda will improve our environment, but in addition Liberal Democrats will work on:***

- **Zero waste plan** to tackle our growing waste problem and the reduction of carbon emissions. Rother has signed up to Lib Dem proposal to be a 'Zero Waste' authority but have done little about it. The Tories' key aims make no mention of sustainability. The need to reduce, reuse, recycle is now accepted by the public, but people must have the means to do this. We will work on these principles first within the Council's own activities and then by supporting residents in reducing waste.
- **Waste collection and recycling:**. After years of voting against any form of doorstep recycling, the Tory group were finally shamed into introducing doorstep collection of recyclables: too late to attract government grants, too half-hearted to capture the spirit of our residents who in local survey after local survey want to recycle more. The contract started badly with little or wrong communication. It has now settled down and the number of complaints has reduced. However, the contract comes up for renewal in 2014. We support the officers' work in reducing the cost through working with other authorities, but recognise that we must plan for any increased cost and ensure strong contract compliance.
- **Composting food** Those Councils who deliver best practice in recycling, collect food waste which can be used to create energy. In 2018 green waste will no longer be considered as contributing to recycling targets. We would introduce food collection and re-introduce a modest charge for collecting green waste.
- **Improve recycling points.** We continue to receive complaints about Rother's recycling points – often overflowing and surrounded by litter. Residents still use them and we will review the use. We will also work with the County to extend and improve the civic amenity sites.
- **Use innovative schemes to inform and educate the public how to cut down on waste.** Education is the key investment needed to make recycling waste part of every resident's daily routine. Liberal Democrats will fund officer-time to do this by creating savings in other departments.
- **Encourage businesses to adopt green transport plans.** By adopting its own green transport plan, Rother District Council will set an example, cutting down on the use of cars, improving road safety and reducing congestion. The problems at Glyne Gap could be reduced significantly, by everyone from businesses to schools committing to green transport plans.
- **Landfill proposals at Ashdown Brickworks.** Despite local protests, the Conservatives on the County Council supported the original inclusion of Ashdown Brickworks for landfill. Some Conservative Councillors voted one way at County and another on Rother. Our Liberal Democrat County Councillors all voted against the scheme.
- **Encourage the use of renewable energy** by applying for available grants and supporting residents who apply for grants for their homes.
- **Press ahead with first-time sewerage in the rural areas,** costing projects to agree a forward capital programme in conjunction with Southern Water. Rother has over a 100 complaints a year about pollution from sewage – this is not acceptable in a first-world country



## **Housing**

When the Conservative government was last in power they made it impossible for Rother to provide social housing directly. Liberal Democrats led the way in a successful housing stock transfer to Rother Homes, now Amicus Horizon, which has meant that social housing in Rother is now better maintained than many owner-occupied homes.

***There is an urgent need for affordable housing, which we believe there are ways to deliver:***

***Liberal Democrats will:***

- **Work closely with the partner housing associations** to use every opportunity to find funds to build new homes to allow the elderly to stay in their own homes or in the community and to provide affordable housing for young people.
- **Target empty flats above shops.** This would not only provide rented accommodation but also bring life back to centres of population.
- **Challenge developers who maintain they cannot deliver 40% affordable homes on developments.** These homes should not be tucked away in the least attractive parts of sites.
- **Use the planning system** to ensure developers make the maximum possible contribution to the community when they get a housing consent.

## **Safer communities**

Although Rother does not have the same high level of crime and disorder as other local areas, such as Hastings, we do have a high percentage of vulnerable residents.

- **A greater visible police presence on the streets.** Liberal Democrats have long campaigned that police presence reduces the fear of crime and reduces incidents. We support the recent restructuring of the local police to give more community policing.
- **Community Police Support Officers.** Residents have applauded the benefits that these officers bring. We will campaign to keep the funding for these.
- **Contact Details.** We will make sure every household has the name and contact number of their community police officer and is able to contact them directly. In addition we will make sure every household has information about crime prevention measures.
- **Improve emergency planning,** whether from flooding or accident. Liberal Democrats will ensure there is better co-ordination between all the services and local government.
- **Work with the police, the licensees and the communities** to use the existing powers to control drunken behaviour especially among under-age youths. Liberal Democrats want to see stricter controls applied when licensees seek renewals.



## **Jobs and Services**

The Rother area suffers from being a low-wage / high housing-cost economy. Its main sectors are tourism and service industries.

### ***Liberal Democrats will:***

- **Use every opportunity to seek funding from regional, national and European bodies.** Funds are available for many regeneration projects – if we apply. Conservative dogma has seen many chances to apply for money spurned and many voluntary groups have failed to get support from Rother in their efforts to access funding.
- **Ensure the realisation of Bexhill’s Spirit of Place initiative.** Bexhill has a host of elegant Edwardian buildings, as well as the De La Warr Pavilion. Dynamic town centre improvements will bring life to the town, day and night, if traffic is managed, key buildings re-furbished and flats above shops re-occupied.
- **Ensure the Regeneration of Bexhill Town Centre** is led by an inclusive body of Bexhill organisations, not by a closed group of councillors who meet in secret.
- **Work to improve the quality of hotel accommodation.** It has long been a complaint there are not enough bed spaces, particularly in Bexhill. We need the economic boost overnight visitors bring. Recent attempts to provide a sea front hotel failed miserably. Liberal Democrats will work to support projects to provide more bed spaces.
- **Support Rother’s businesses** large as well as small. Many local small businesses struggle with business rates and red tape. Village shops, including those at Little Common, Sidley and Old Town, need to be informed of the support available from RDC and other agencies. We will enhance this form of support and develop a policy on how local businesses can be better supported.
- **Support the public transport initiatives** in the Hastings-Bexhill Regeneration Plan. Liberal Democrats will campaign for the Cooden to Ore metro, an every 15-minute service, and for improvement in the services to London. We need a service similar to the one Brighton enjoys.
- **The Link Road:** There are serious questions over the funding of this proposal. The cost has escalated and it has been shown to be very poor value for money. The Government shelving of the Baldslow Down link to the A21 brings a further question mark to the road. County Councillors have reserved the right to cancel the project. We recognise the need to ease traffic congestion on the A259. We have always said it is in the wrong place and is not simply a reason to draw a new development boundary.
- **Work for small-scale road improvements to ease congestion.** There have been a number of proposals to ease traffic congestion along the A259. None has been implemented. We would welcome a review of these proposals with a view to implementation
- **Work with the parishes to agree environmentally acceptable solutions to the improvement of the A21.** Liberal Democrats oppose the creation of a dual carriageway to Hastings. Small-scale improvements need to be made to remove danger spots and to bring relief to villages like Hurst Green and Flimwell.



## Tourism, Culture and Leisure

Liberal Democrats have always maintained that protecting our countryside makes Rother an attractive place to live and to visit. We have championed our unique heritage in Rye, Battle, Bodiam and Bexhill and will continue to do so.

### *Liberal Democrats will*

- **Promote the De La Warr Pavilion locally, regionally and nationally.** We have always recognised the importance of the De La Warr Pavilion as a potential engine for regeneration. The original lottery bid initiated by the Liberal Democrats has meant the De La Warr is now refurbished to its former glory after years of neglect. We will campaign to ensure that the original vision for the De La Warr as a community asset as well as an international cultural centre is realised.
- **Improve Tourist Information.** The Conservatives did everything they could to demolish the superb service provided by the TIC in Battle. They have reduced the funding to Rye TIC and the only service for Bexhill, is an ineffective provision in Battle Abbey. Tourism is the lifeblood of this District. We support the creation of one dedicated TIC with hubs and information points located in the best places around the District.
- **Campaign for safer cycling throughout Rother** to encourage the use of the bicycle as a chosen form of transport. Cyclists whether touring or local bring benefits to the district. We will provide a dedicated cycle track along Bexhill seafront which would complete the Sustrans network in the area. Thanks to Conservative opposition we have consistently lost out on lottery money to implement it.

- **Liberal Democrats will encourage rural areas** to promote and build on existing tourism, sports and cultural initiatives such as festivals and touring theatre and create links between the rural areas and the De La Warr to bring cinema, theatre and music to villages.

### **We will also support**

- **The Campaign for Quiet Lanes in Rother** . Liberal Democrats support the Campaign to Protect Rural England in their proposals to put a speed limit of 20mph on some of our country lanes giving priority to walkers, cyclists and riders.

