

The background features a warm orange color palette. In the upper left, there are stylized, overlapping leaf shapes in various shades of orange. The lower half of the image is filled with a bokeh effect of out-of-focus orange and yellow circles of varying sizes, creating a soft, glowing texture.

Going for gold

**The South
Cambridgeshire
story**

Written by Kevin Wilkins

March 2019

Foreword



Jo Swinson MP CBE
Deputy Leader
Liberal Democrats

Local government is the backbone of our party, and from Cornwall to Eastleigh, Eastbourne to South Lakeland, with directly elected Mayors in Bedford and Watford, Liberal Democrats are making a real difference in councils across the country. So I was delighted to be asked to write this foreword for one of the latest to join that group of Liberal Democrat councils, South Cambridgeshire.

Every council is different, and their story is individual to them. It's important that we learn what works and what doesn't, and always be willing to tell our story so others can learn. Good practice booklets like this one produced by South Cambridgeshire Liberal Democrats and the Liberal Democrat Group at the Local Government Association are tremendously useful.

This guide joins a long list of publications that they have produced promoting the successes of our local government base in places as varied as Liverpool, Watford and, more recently, Bedford.

Encouraging more women to stand for public office is a campaign I hold close to my heart. It is wonderful to see a group of 30 Liberal Democrat councillors led by Councillor Bridget Smith, a worthy addition to a growing number of Liberal Democrat women group and council leaders such as Councillor Liz Green (Kingston Upon Thames), Councillor Sara Bedford (Three Rivers) Councillor Val Keitch (South Somerset), Councillor Ruth Dombey (Sutton), and Councillor Aileen Morton (Argyll and Bute)

South Cambridgeshire Liberal Democrats are leading the way in embedding nature capital into all of their operations, policies and partnerships, focusing on meeting the housing needs of all their residents, and in dramatically raising the bar for local government involvement in regional economic development.

Their story is inspirational, as are many of the other stories I hear from Liberal Democrat councillors up and down the country. We should celebrate them all.

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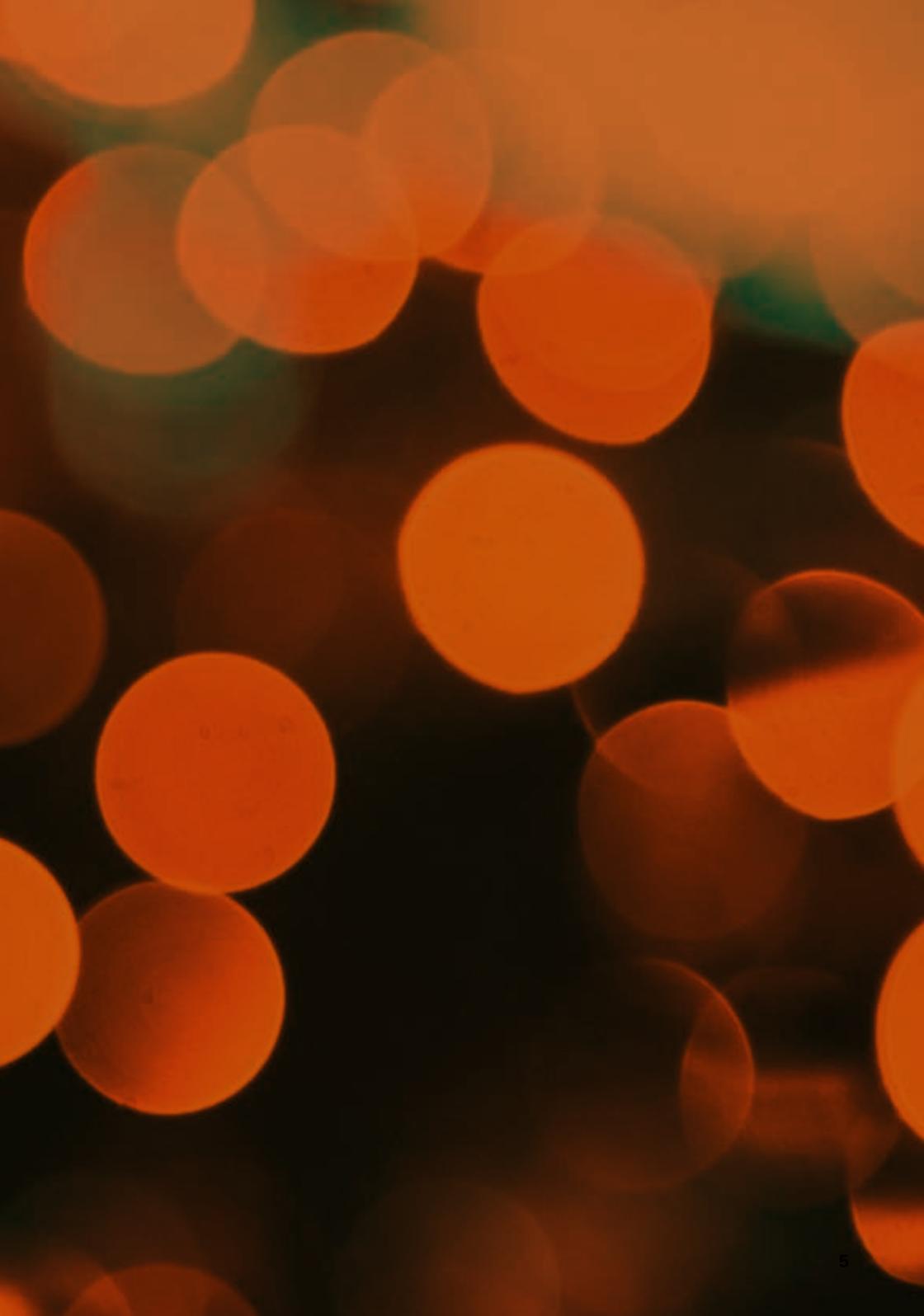
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South Cambridgeshire landscape – view of Linton
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The South Cambridgeshire area

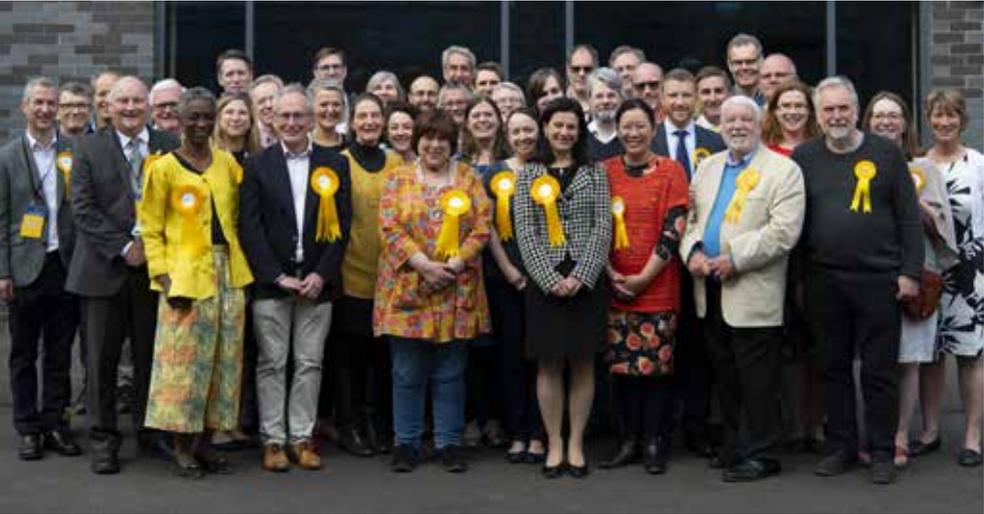
A rural district of just under 150,000 people at the last census, South Cambridgeshire contains no towns, though two new ones are under construction in Northstowe and Waterbeach. Its largest settlement currently is Cambourne, a large and growing village of 10,000 homes with a further 6,000 in the pipeline. Unusually, the district wholly surrounds another district – Cambridge.

The countryside is gentle and its hills, such as they are, could not even be described as rolling, nothing so extreme. But this isn't the flatlands of the fens; they are in the districts to the north. Its villages are mostly prosperous, though with pockets of deprivation, yet struggle with the 21st century pressures of online sales and poor public transport.

Many of its people, especially those living close to Cambridge, work in the ever-growing science-based industries in and around the city, the universities there, and Addenbrooke's Hospital. Or they commute to London. For all its rurality, South Cambridgeshire does not rely on agriculture for major employment but there are a wide variety of micro economies in the more remote villages.

South Cambridgeshire is frequently listed as one of the most desirable places in England in which to live. Life expectancy is three years higher than the national average and unemployment is low.

This apparently comfortable state was then blown apart, in people's minds at least, by the vote to leave the European Union.



Liberal Democrat councillors and campaigners in South Cambridgeshire

A political history

South Cambridgeshire was established as a district council under the Heath Government's reforms of 1972. For its first 20 years, it was run by Independents until a growing Conservative presence from the mid 1980s moved the council to No Overall Control in 1992. The Alliance made little impact but by the mid 1990s, the Liberal Democrat group had risen to double figures, as did briefly the Labour group.

Elections were held every year. Except in county council election years. One third of the council was up for election at a time, but a variety of one-, two- and three-member wards meant that some district wards went to the polls every year, while others did so only every other year or every fourth.

Throughout these years the district council as a whole, with its large vociferous group of independents, seemed to lack coherence and strategic vision, characterised by a planning committee that seemed determined to protect each and every village.

From the mid 1990s, the Liberal Democrat group grew further and emerged from the all-up elections of 2004 with 19 out of 55. The Conservatives, on 23, had become the largest party, overtaking the Independents in 2000.

Liberal Democrat councillors had joined a multi-party cabinet and in 2005, Sebastian Kindersley was elected as the first Liberal Democrat Leader of the Council. He brought a clarity and leadership to the council that it had previously lacked but with cabinet comprising the three large groups, he didn't have the votes to introduce significant Liberal Democrat policy changes.

The Conservatives however took every opportunity to attack his leadership and in 2007, they gained overall control of the council, which they held through to 2018. The new Tory leadership was neither as strident as fellow Conservatives elsewhere in Cambridgeshire, nor as parochial as the Independents had been. But it lacked dynamism and energy.

The Conservative rise was halted briefly in 2010, the Liberal Democrats winning a narrow majority of the 19 seats being contested. But the Coalition inevitably saw a decline in Liberal Democrat fortunes but a less dramatic one than many areas suffered.

Bridget Smith had taken over from Sebastian as leader of the group. Both were from Gamlingay in the far west of the district, an area that has a weaker relationship with Cambridge than most villages and also looks to Bedford. Sebastian's flamboyance was replaced by Bridget's engaging combination of a business-like approach and heartfelt compassion.

A large new intake of party members following Nick Clegg's admirable resignation speech was common across England but, while many areas only benefited from their membership subscriptions, South Cambridgeshire saw some significant new activists. The 2016 elections saw a net gain of three seats and a clear determination to change the way the Liberal Democrats fought elections locally.

New local government structures

The public has long been understandably confused by the separation of functions and responsibilities between district and county councils. But various British governments decided that things were too simple.

The Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) was created in the 2000s to promote the economic success of

the Cambridge sub-region and to ensure that housing growth met the huge local demand. It meant greater co-operation between the county council and the two districts, South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge, but it also recognised that the economic sub-region did not follow local government boundaries, extending into North Hertfordshire for example.

The new Coalition government introduced Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP) and then City Deals (the current one confusingly called The Greater Cambridge Partnership) but abolished the original GCP.



Bridget Smith and the team celebrate the moment victory is declared

The former was a curious body comprising not just all of Cambridgeshire but districts in Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Hertfordshire and Lincolnshire, plus the unitary authorities of Rutland and Peterborough, and in 2017, Fenland MP Steve Barclay questionably identified the LEP as a waste of money and had it abolished.

The current GCP was a smaller authority combining the districts of South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge with the county council in a three-way decision-making structure that required cross-authority agreement. Most people expected it to lead to a unitary authority in the south of the county.

But then, the Conservative government decided to extend elected Mayors and alleged devolution to East Anglia. Norfolk and Suffolk objected to a scheme for the three counties but Tory rural Cambridgeshire agreed while Labour Cambridge succumbed to the plan for a Mayor with Peterborough to be elected in May 2017.

The result has been completely shambolic.

The new knowledge economy and its politics

The 'Cambridge Phenomenon', the extraordinary economic boom that started in the early 1970s with the expansion of Britain's computer industry and has more recently produced much of this country's biotech industry, started as a series of university spin-offs and initially coalesced in 1970 on the Cambridge Science Park founded by Trinity College, Cambridge. Ironically most of the land is in South Cambridgeshire.

While the British government of the 1970s worried about steel production in Ravenscraig and Port Talbot and car plants in Longbridge and Cowley, a variety of clever and enterprising people here made inventions and developed businesses that owed much more to forward-thinking college bursars than to government.

Government policy boosted R&D but it contained little that helped local government cope with the change brought about by the new, fast-growing knowledge economy. At the very least, funding settlements for councils and the NHS based on census information

Going for gold

that could be almost 10 years out of date caused significant problems in one of the fastest growing areas of the country.

The knowledge economy also brought a different set of problems: those of success. People's quality of life is morally no more or less important here than anywhere else in the country but well-educated people in jobs that depend on their knowledge and adaptability can simply take their pick of well-paid jobs elsewhere, not merely if they can get more money but if their children's school isn't good enough or traffic congestion is too great.

Politically, the result is that voters have been particularly concerned about maintaining the quality of life in their village which on the surface feels not so different from many rural areas. As in large parts of the south of England, they are not worried about economic failure. But here a large part of the adult population is connected to science-based industry, the two universities and the extraordinary research hub that is Addenbrooke's Hospital.

A generation ago, there was a belief that differential migration was encouraging liberals to move to live in a vibrant successful city like Cambridge, whereas small 'c' conservatives chose a quieter life in rural South Cambridgeshire. If there has been some truth to that, it missed the fact that incomers in both well-educated

groups were more liberal than the English population as a whole.

Equally strong has been the wave of liberal university graduates and science workers moving out of Cambridge, especially as they start a family, when their child outgrows the small second bedroom of the city's terraces or when the second child arrives.

Over 50 years South Cambridgeshire has been getting relentlessly more liberal – but with a small l.

Shock

Nothing prepared the people of South Cambridgeshire for the result of the 2016 EU referendum.

In addition to its general prosperity and high levels of liberal education, the University of Cambridge has been the single biggest recipient of EU science funding in the whole of Europe and countless companies here have benefited from such money. One consequence was a huge influx of new, cross, Liberal Democrat members.

In most of the county, the Liberal Democrats then were organised by Westminster constituencies and so South Cambridgeshire District was split between two local parties: 65 per cent South Cambridgeshire and 35 per cent South East Cambridgeshire, with the former taking in one ward of Cambridge and the latter three quarters of East Cambridgeshire.

The biggest change then came within the South Cambridgeshire local party.

Fresh from the relative success of the 2016 elections but reeling from the referendum result, South Cambridgeshire made a huge effort to contact its members, especially the new ones. Organised by Mary Regnier-Wilson, members received phone calls or visits. Yes they received welcoming emails too, but it was individual phone

or face-to-face conversations that made the difference. Faced with the Conservatives running the district and county councils, having both MPs and now intent on taking Britain out of the EU, the new members could indeed be persuaded to get involved.

That summer of 2016, James Lillis, then Liberal Democrat Deputy Director of Campaigns and recently elected as a councillor in Peterborough, decided that Cambridgeshire could elect a majority Liberal Democrat county council in 2017. The Liberal Democrats had won only 14 of 65 seats in 2013 down from a peak of 23 in 2005 and 2009 but the referendum had shown southern Cambridgeshire to be a strong 'Remain' area so significant gains there, decent results in pre-coalition strongholds in East Cambridgeshire and isolated wins elsewhere might take us to 31 seats (new boundaries meant the new council would have 61 seats).

In addition, the new Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough was to be elected on the same day as the county elections.

The challenge of the task ahead loomed. Arithmetic dictated that control of the county council depended on winning a minimum of 45 per cent of the vote in 51 per cent of the wards, whereas winning the mayoralty required winning an average of 40 per cent of the vote across all of the wards.

The former ought to be much easier than the latter. But carried away by the success of the Richmond by-election campaign and enthused by the selection of Cambridge Councillor Rod Cantrill as Mayoral candidate, unspoken assumptions started to shift.

Such a campaign had not been tried systematically in South and South East Cambridgeshire and it showed. Most rural county divisions struggled to get close to the target of one Focus newsletter per month and many buckled under the pressure of three leaflets plus copious target letters in the election campaign itself.

The leaflets themselves, art-worked on an industrial scale to common designs, didn't quite connect with the voters at either a county/district level or a ward level. Attempting that level of organisational expansion proved way too difficult in one year.

The door-knocking was heavily data-driven for the first time in a countywide election here but as the most recent data had been gathered before or during the coalition it proved too unreliable to enable the new techniques to pay dividends.

Despite all the difficulties, and although majority control had long been privately written off, everyone nonetheless had reason to be confident of making significant gains.

Then Theresa May called a General Election for 8 June and everything changed.

The evening of the announcement, canvassers reported a significant hardening of the Conservative vote and so it proved on election night. One county division that we had hoped to gain was lost by just two votes but many more were lost by significant margins.

More encouragingly, Rod Cantrill had come second in the Mayoral election, coming first in both Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire. All observers had correctly predicted a clear Tory win but it had not been clear who would come second and thus make it through to the second stage of the count. We had not been second in the two previous PCC elections.

The best news however was hidden from public view. The South Cambridgeshire box counts had shown that the boundaries of the new divisions had made a significant difference to the results. Despite the overall disappointment, South Cambridgeshire's new district ward boundaries soon to be contested in the 2018 all-up elections had the potential to produce significant gains. A strict interpretation of the figures put us within striking distance of overall control, with another group of seats level on election day but lost on the postal vote and another small group



Bridge over the River Anker at Caldecote
© Stephen McKay creative commons licence

held by Liberal Democrat district councillors but in divisions we hadn't tried to win. Put these three groups together, add in a somewhat poorer night for the Conservatives nationally and majority control was feasible.

But before thoughts could turn to 2018, there was a General Election to fight. The South Cambridgeshire constituency campaign team, motivated by their first proper election campaign together, started with great hopes for Susan van de Ven. The campaign for Lucy Nethsingha, the Liberal Democrat

County group leader, never really got going in South East Cambridgeshire as people and resources were sucked into the Cambridge campaign to get Julian Huppert back into Parliament. He had lost by just 599 votes in 2015 making it the closest Liberal Democrat target in the country. But 2017 was a General Election best forgotten.



10 of the 13 victorious women in the new group of 30

The recovery, the build up

What was remarkable amidst the raised and dashed hopes that followed dismal defeat, was the way the South Cambridgeshire local party then pulled itself together.

A clear and crucial decision was taken for the party to run a common campaign across the district, without regard to constituency boundaries. The Campaign Co-ordinating Group (CCG) that had been set up to run Susan's campaign was expanded to accommodate people from South East Cambridgeshire. The South East Cambridgeshire local party executive, to

their credit, agreed with the change of approach and left it well alone.

Crucial to the development of the South Cambridgeshire local party had been Clare Delderfield as Chair, someone who understood the importance of taking people with you. The group had obviously crossed constituency boundaries but the local parties had rarely done so successfully. Indeed, antagonism between the Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire parties had been a frequent feature of the previous 25 years. But Clare had brought everyone together with campaign manager Aidan Van de Weyer and they looked after a team of people with different skills and who liked working with each other.

But the post-mortem after the general election needed to find a way for the local party to emerge from its disappointment. Strangely, it developed an irrational loathing of Liberal Democrat tabloid newspapers but in practice this seemed to be an effective, if somewhat random, way of scapegoating an aspect of the recent disappointments, enabling people to move on.

Nonetheless, that summer was hard for many activists and the autumn saw rather less campaigning than might have been hoped. Most of the staff from the various 2016 and 2017 campaigns had dispersed but two were employed from late autumn to push the campaign forward. Yan Malinowski was to continue his county campaign work to mobilise the activist base while Kevin Wilkins, architect of Cambridge's success in the 2000s, was to write the literature and organise the campaign with Aidan.

Early 2018 saw yet another delay in the long-running saga of South Cambridgeshire's Local Plan. Developed in partnership with Cambridge, the new plan was heading into its fifth year of debate, inspection and amendment and villages were under siege from developers pushing forward with unsuitable plans that would win planning permission on appeal after the five-year land supply had been shown to be insufficient.

Villages across the district felt the heat and our criticisms of the Conservatives' mistakes began to hit home. Of course some of the local feeling was against development in general but there were enough examples of developments in clearly unsuitable locations for our line to work without being NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard).

A few South Cambridgeshire villages also had a whiff of, well, Conservative councillors looking after their own property interests. The problem seems far greater in other nearby districts but even parish boundaries here became a hot issue where a dispute was believed to involve a councillors' land.

This of course came against a backdrop of Conservative county councillors awarding themselves a 30 per cent pay rise in the summer of 2017 and they were rewarded with the first of Cambridgeshire's several recent appearances in Private Eye's 'Rotten Boroughs'.

In the years since its creation, the City Deal had not succeeded in anything much. It had proposed a road closure programme in Cambridge that had had to be withdrawn and had managed to change its name to the Greater Cambridge Partnership (the original GCP having been abolished) but there was no solution to the area's traffic problems in sight. Ironically perhaps, the opening of the new Cambridge North railway station near the Science

Park in 2017 had raised popular expectations about solving or at least ameliorating the transport situation.

The Conservative County Council, though deserving credit for its important role in the new station, had inflicted the worst bus cuts in England on rural Cambridgeshire and commuters into Cambridge knew that simply building more roads could not ease the congestion problems into and out of the city. A congestion charge would certainly be controversial but while firmly against the idea the Conservatives failed to give any positive solutions.

Any rural area can debate to what extent its villages are similar to or different from each other. Needless to say, residents, and councillors in particular, are keen to stress how their village is different.

As the campaign approached and as the issues faced by each ward campaign became clearer to everyone else, it became obvious that the problems the villages had were very similar indeed; they all suffered because of the local plan failures and they all suffered, albeit in different ways, because of the failure to provide solutions to the transport problems.

The messaging problem had been that the residents of village A are not actually very interested in stories about village B, unless perhaps they share an arterial route to Cambridge.

South Cambridgeshire Liberal Democrats

FOCUS

on Over and Willingham

Standing up for two villages



Our villages need Bill Handley and Dawn Percival on the council, speaking up for us.

Over and Willingham have been down by the current Conservative Councillors.

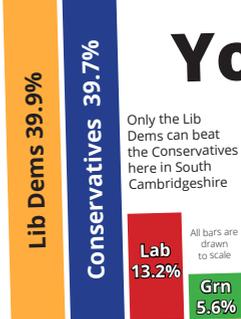
On the key issues that matter:

- Inappropriate housing developments in Over
- Too much traffic going through Willingham

we need two new councillors to a fair deal for our villages.

Bill and Dawn will make sure people in Over and Willingham have a say about what's being done by the council – not kept in the dark.

You have your say



Lib Dems	39.9%
Conservatives	39.7%
Lab	13.2%
Grn	5.6%

All bars are drawn to scale

Bill Handley

Dawn Percival

Bill and Dawn stand up for Over and Willingham



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Conservatives put own pay rise ahead of keeping children's centres open

Your money in their bank accounts

Key public services starved of cash despite Council Tax rise

Your taxes **Up 4.9%**
 Children's Centres **18 to be closed**
 Road & path maintenance **No extra money**
 County Councilors' pay **Up 30%**

But there's money for councilors' own pay rise

Local people could lose say on planning decisions

Council should plan for Brexit impact on local businesses

Out of touch with reality

South Cambridgeshire is not a place where Labour does well in local council elections

How South Cambs voters voted in the council elections last year

Lib Dem	39.9%
Con	30.7%
Lab	13.2%
UKIP	13.2%
Green	2.3%

Conservative rule of South Cambs under threat from Lib Dems

South Cambridgeshire is not a place where Labour does well in local council elections

How South Cambs voters voted in the council elections last year

Lib Dem 39.9%
Con 30.7%
Lab 13.2%
UKIP 13.2%
Green 2.3%

This could even be true within wards. But the fact that they all shared the same two overarching problems made everything much easier.

Locally, the Conservatives had two jobs and they had failed dismally at both.

Brexit was bound to be an issue of course. No-one, presumably, imagined that winning control of South Cambridgeshire could stop Brexit but a motion from Aidan to South Cambridgeshire District Council in early 2018 called for the council to examine the likely impact of Brexit on the businesses and residents (including EU citizens) of the district and to plan to help them adapt to the changes that would ensue.

No voters angry at the prospect of Brexit would have been persuaded to the Liberal Democrats simply because of the motion but it did make the district council elections relevant to them rather than merely being an opportunity for protest. And it did show that if Brexit went ahead they would want the council run by people who shared their values and wanted not only economic survival but to protect EU citizens living here.

Many of the campaign leaflets made good use of overprinting in black on pre-printed stock

It might have persuaded some Remainers to vote in a local election rather than being a national voter only but it certainly helped some Liberal Democrat activists feel confident that they could campaign on Brexit in a local election. Of course when the Tories voted to defeat the motion, our case was made all the stronger.

If Focus production speeded up in January, door-knocking took off in March. London borough campaigns had been well ahead of South Cambridgeshire in their canvassing throughout the autumn and winter but by March active wards were beginning to match the weekly activity levels of busy parts of London (adjusting for size).

Monthly emails were sent out to voters in many wards from data collected from surveys and door knocking. They were deliberately a mixture of generic district-wide material, centrally produced, and ward stories locally written. They were clearly less party political than Focus but they were not apolitical. One story would contain something for which the Tories were to blame. But once approved by the candidates, the emails were sent out centrally; we could not possibly have relied on the technical skills of each ward to do this.

We continued to look for candidates, even in wards we had high hopes of winning. We were fortunate in one ward where a deselected Tory and former

leader of the council had announced his intention to stand against his erstwhile colleagues. We eventually found two good candidates there, one of whom only agreed to stand after nominations had opened and the first election leaflet had gone to press.

How many to target?

For experienced campaigners, the most difficult question became 'How many wards can we target to win?'

The new council would be 45 councillors strong. By mid March we were delivering leaflets and knocking on doors in wards electing 32 councillors between them, way more than the 23 we needed for majority control. (The current Liberal Democrat council group was 14).

The decision was taken that the 32 would get the full literature campaign (although one councillor in a single-member ward refused) and we would defer a decision about targeting door-knocking. We did however agree that the 13 seats not getting the centralised literature campaign would receive absolutely no leaflet or door-knocking activity from us at all and we were grateful to the local candidates who accepted that decision with good grace but regret.

It is important to remember here that our failure to reduce the 32 to a more 'sensible' target came in large part from our knowledge of the 2017 box counts. We had real evidence that, apart from one or two parishes, all of the wards we aimed to gain had performed well just 12 months earlier despite a good night for the Conservatives. The question was not whether we could win these wards this year but whether we had the capacity to win all of them on the same day, ie whether by extending ourselves too thinly and trying to win too many we would win fewer than we might have done if we'd targeted more strictly.

These questions were all the more difficult to solve as, by historical accident, some of the most promising wards demographically had the least developed ward organisations and vice versa; in some of the less promising areas, the Tories were in particular disarray; and in one of our best organised wards the threat came from a popular Independent and his former Liberal Democrat sidekick.

Candidates and activists had been coming together every month to discuss the campaign and from mid-March these meetings moved to weekly. They highlighted the campaign successes that we had enjoyed, praised the wards that had done the most and kept everyone informed about campaign plans.

The literature campaign would have three main colour leaflets prior to

the final week, each to a common template but with each ward having enough space for their content to hit the right local buttons. Unusually for a Liberal Democrat campaign they largely featured attractive pictures of Liberal Democrats smiling rather than grumpily looking into a pothole (though there was obviously some of that). Hand-delivered direct mail letters would be delivered with Focus, they would highlight the ward issues and one would major on Brexit.

The data-driven approach to canvassing was happily adopted by everyone, as was miniVan. Without getting technical as to what data-driven meant to us, if you're knocking on doors of people who never vote or people who'll never consider voting for us then you're wasting your time. Some people think it's important to call on those people too but our advice is that if you really want to, you'll have even more time to continue doing so after you've failed to gain your seat.

Every fortnight, printers Park received the 16 wards worth of artwork and delivered it back to us as planned the following Friday. Lacking a central location to stuff our own letters by hand and deeply scarred by attempts in 2017 to push overly ambitious volumes through temperamental machines, we got all our letter stuffing done commercially. Election Workshop didn't let us down.

The 2017 campaign had been very painful organisationally but despite, or perhaps because, of its ambition, it had shown us clearly what we needed to change to make everything work smoothly the following year. Many campaigns have been bigger than South Cambridgeshire 2018 but few have gone more smoothly and that was crucial to our ability to fight so many wards.

What's more, the smoothness minimised the amount of canvassing time that candidates had to lose to other activities. It would be easy to exaggerate this, wholesaling the leaflets to deliverers still had to be done, but the fact that every leaflet turned up on time made everything much easier.

In a few wards, the fortnightly literature schedule allowed us to produce more conventional ward leaflets on the local Riso for the off-weekends. But this was driven by the ward politics; it worked well in the wards where big local issues blew up and we could really hammer home our popular line by doing so.

In one ward, Duxford, our candidate was opposed by a Tory who was also a councillor in a district in Suffolk and where he was already a Cabinet member. The voters didn't think much of this when it was pointed out to them.

In another, a planning application for a new lorry depot on the edge of Sawston was hugely unpopular. In another, the Highways Agency chopped down a row of trees shortly before the election and the issue appeared on TV a week before polling day.

In these cases, it would have been almost impossible to change the standard templates we were using to adequately accommodate these issues properly while also sticking to the external printing deadlines that meant the campaign ran so smoothly. It was in fact easier to use the extraordinary flexibility of an in-house Riso printing low volumes of extra leaflets to make real political capital. Of course, in-house Risos could theoretically have coped with the whole campaign but their great flexibility could all too easily lead to slack deadlines, late leaflets and whole weekends of planned volunteer delivery missed.

As April progressed, the canvassing volumes took off – at least in some wards. Put simply, it all seemed to be going very well, implausibly so. We tried to get more canvassers to canvass out of their normal ward so that we could measure or discount the optimism bias with which some of our door knocking team seemed to be infected.

'We've set an ambitious plan for the district - it will really stretch us'

BIANCA WILD
biancowild@cambsccdc.co.uk

Protecting and enhancing the environment to cut carbon emissions has been put at the heart of South Cambridgeshire District Council's plan to "improve life for local communities".

Councillors backed a 'business plan' at a meeting on Thursday last week where the council's budget for the next financial year was also agreed.

Council leader Bridget Smith, described the plan as "ambitious" and said that it will stretch the Liberal Democrat-controlled authority to meet the needs and priorities of local people.

The priority areas agreed included growing local businesses and economies - which will see a single point of contact put in place to support businesses through the planning process and make it easier for small local businesses to bid for council contracts.

Another priority area is having housing that is affordable for everyone to live in - which will see the SCDC double the number of council homes built each year.

The authority will also make a plan for a carbon neutral future in the district, exploring opportunities for green energy generation and improving air quality.

Another priority area is to be a "modern and caring council", by being an employer of choice for people with disabilities and ethnic minorities, generating an income from investments to offset cuts to national funding and improving the way people can carry out transactions online.

At the meeting the council's budget was also agreed. This included plans to generate a quarter of the money the council spends on services from investments within five years.

By the end of March 2021, council investments are forecasted to return an income of just over £5



SCDC's leader Bridget Smith says the council wants to 'double the number of homes we build for people on our waiting lists'.

million a year - which it says will be used to protect the services people want and need.

The council's administration has said that they want a range of investments in the district to generate a return in a way that also delivers on the priorities of local people and makes a positive contribution to the area.

Investments could include investing to help provide space for small and growing businesses which will fill a recognised gap and make a return for the council. This will also help new jobs for local people.

The council also wants to invest to deliver improvements in communities that have not been delivered commercially by the private sector. This could help deliver more homes or facilities for communities or improve the green credentials of a development to make sure it is of the highest standard.

Ahead of agreeing the business plan, the council unanimously pledged to support an ambitious target of cutting local carbon emissions across the district to zero by 2050. Solar panels are being installed this week on the council's waste and recycling depot at Waterbeach and further green investments are expected on council buildings to improve environmental standards and deliver a financial return.

The authority also wants to explore new opportunities for green

investments in the district. In the same meeting, councillors agreed a £5 per year increase in council tax for the average band D home. This is the equivalent of 10 extra pence per week.

Even with the increase in council tax, SCDC must save a further £3 million over the next five years.

The council's average band D charge for 2019/20 will be £145.31, which it says retains its place as one of the lowest taxing district councils in the country.

The council's total budget it has available to spend on services in 2019/20 is nearly £21 million.

Councillor Smith said: "We have listened to our communities and set an ambitious plan that will really stretch us."

"We are not simply about meeting the targets set nationally on environmental issues, we want to make sure we are green to our core and the environment is considered as a key part of everything we do. Our future generations deserve nothing less and their passion to help us create a cleaner, greener and low carbon future was demonstrated only last week when national protests were held to demand more action on the issue."

"As expected, the affordability of housing and lack of transport alternatives to the car are big issues people have told us need to be addressed and we want to start by doubling the number of homes we build for people on our waiting lists."

We didn't really succeed with that until the final weekend where a month of extremely positive figures from the candidates in one ward were replicated by experienced canvassers from elsewhere.

Two things came back in the canvassing stories, one explicit, one not. Firstly, people were repeating our messages: yes the council had failed on planning, yes it had failed on transport. Voters told us that the map of all the unwarranted developments in the district looked like an outbreak of measles, as our leaflets had suggested to them. Secondly, but equally importantly, no voters seemed to be saying anything that might be a Tory message.

While voters repeating our messages and slogans was encouraging, the failure of Tory messages was not surprising. Developing a message grid for South Cambridgeshire had proved strangely difficult in the run up to the campaign because it was not remotely clear what the Tories could or would say. This was a product not so much of their council's failure, though it can't have helped, but about the lacklustre nature of their local leadership. Tories in nearby East Cambridgeshire are strident in their determination to cut public services in order to keep taxes down. It may not be popular but at least it gives them something to say. South Cambridgeshire Tories genuinely seemed to have nothing to say that would resonate with people and so it proved.

✉ info@sclibdems.org.uk

Facebook icon @SouthCambsLibDems

South Cambs takes longer to produce Local Plan

The Slowest in England?

Government figures show that the South Cambs and Cambridge local plan has already taken the longest time of any local plan in the country – ever.

The South Cambs plan started nearly four years ago in March 2014 and it's still got several months to go.

Only when the Local Plan inspector has given her approval will the speculative building frenzy stop, and this won't happen until May at the earliest.

Clr Aidan Van de Weyer, Lib Dem spokesperson for planning said:

"The ruling Conservatives in South Cambs have failed our villages by permitting this planning loophole to continue. Thousands of houses are being dumped in villages with no thought to their impact on local services like doctors and schools."



Building in the wrong place: Lib Dem Councillors An Bradnam and Ingrid Tregging outside an inappropriate development off Bannald Road, Waterbeach.

Children's Centres can be saved say Lib Dems



Liberal Democrat campaigners trying to stop the Conservative-run County Council chopping £900,000 a year from the Children's Services budget and closing Children's Centres across Cambridgeshire.

"Keep our Children's Centres open say the Liberal Democrats."

The County Council will be voting 2018/19 budget in February and the Lib Dems will propose that the Conservative £900,000 cut to Children's Services be reversed in the coming year.

Children's Centres are an important valuable service for parents of young children.

The Lib Dems are looking for the support of Conservative and Labour Councillors for the plans after more than 3000 people signed the petition to save the Children's Centres from closure.

...but there's money for Conservatives' own pocket

While the Conservative County Councillors vote through cuts to important public services, they nonetheless find the money to give themselves a huge pay rise.

The Conservatives voted down an independent report on what they should

receive and instead gave themselves an incredible 30% rise.

The Lib Dems voted against the rise and will again be proposing to scrap the budget meeting in February. Waterbeach space.

Published & promoted by Aidan Van de Weyer for and on behalf of the Liberal Democrats, all at Park Communications Ltd, Alpine Way, Lonsdale

@scilibdems 01223 967420

...than any council – ever!

Council

South Cambridgeshire Liberal Democrats

FOCUS

on Longstanton

The local team that stands up for our village

- 1** We need more good medical facilities as the population grows
- 2** The promises made about Northstowe must be stuck to
- 3** Longstanton needs more buses to let residents get where they need to go.

You have 2 votes on Thursday

OR

Sarah Cheung Johnson

Alex Malyon

Standing up for Longstanton

Vince Cable calls for better funded NHS

Lib Dem Leader Vince Cable has called on the government to fund the NHS properly.

"We would invest £6bn per year in our NHS & Social Care system, paid for by a penny on income tax."

30%

...ets
rise for councillors,
forced through by
the Conservatives

Labour meanwhile posed some concerns. They had been buoyed by their second places in the two constituencies in 2017 and tried to argue that they were now the challengers to the Tories in 2018. It wasn't true but we had to keep pushing the line and using the magic bar graph to get the point across. The Labour group on South Cambridgeshire had long been just a single councillor, whose seat, rightly or wrongly, we would not try to take from him: we had enough other targets.

Despite the nervousness of some longstanding councillors not used to bar graphs and the like, we stuck to our squeeze line and pushed it at every opportunity. And it was no great surprise that it worked. If there is to be a Corbynite revolution, only the true believers think South Cambridgeshire will be at its vanguard.

Throughout the campaign, core team members had poured over canvassing figures trying to work out what was going on. One big difference compared to 2017 was that we now had reliable past canvass data with which to compare the current figures. But unlike most campaigns, all the figures said the same thing: everything is going well – everywhere.

Those core team members who went to the postal vote openings tried not to grin too much afterwards and somehow managed to keep up the pressure on

people to up their game for the final week. Activists responded and plenty of letters with hand-written envelopes made their way to people's letterboxes.

For polling day, Mary divided the 32 between five active committee rooms, all geared up to use miniVan properly (ie so committee rooms didn't need a printer) and with a separate operation for entering telling numbers. Everything went smoothly once again and we knocked on as many doors (over a much larger area) as the established machines of Kingston and Richmond.

And so did the count.

The count proper would be on Friday, but at the Thursday night verification the team poured over spreadsheets analysing the tallies and were confident by the end that we had an outright majority. For fear of hubris, statements hadn't been prepared but they did let Liberal Democrat HQ inform the press that South Cambridgeshire would see a change of control.

We ended up winning 30 of the 32 targets. One councillor had failed to win re-election by five votes after failing to accept most of the planned leaflet campaign and the only other defeat was the third seat in a ward where one key activist had done his duty for the party and stood at the last moment despite not living in the ward but thereby ensuring the election of his two local running mates.

What to conclude

Some experienced campaigners, especially some from deeply political cities, will read this tale and think South Cambridgeshire Liberal Democrats have had it easy.

There is certainly an element of truth in that but there are more interesting points too.

There can be little doubt that the campaign concentrating on the two great failures of the local Tories, on planning and transport, resonated with voters across all types of villages in the district. It was not clear until March that 'They had two jobs and they failed' would so dominate our messaging. Indeed, it would have been easy to run an OK campaign based on elements of these issues that would have undoubtedly produced some gains but would not have resonated so strongly.

Our messaging, for all the brutal simplicity of some of it, tried not to exaggerate. Scarred by the mistakes of 'project fear', once we had settled on the essence of it, we knew that real cases would exemplify the top issues sufficiently well for people to be able to feel, 'Yes they're right. Look at x.... Something much like that happened in this village too. The Tories have failed.'

The other aspect of messaging that confuses some people is that messages are not slogans. ‘Yes we can’, ‘Make America great again’ and ‘Britain’s not working’ were hugely successful slogans but they are memorable in part because of their rarity. Our campaign had some natty headlines: ‘They had two jobs’, ‘It’s like the measles’ and ‘It’s not a transport hub, it’s a car park’ but nothing that could be called a campaign slogan. It did not matter. A few Focuses can hardly begin to generate the sort of recognition that slogans achieve in a British General Election or an American Presidential campaign and we shouldn’t worry about it. The purpose of a message is to give an impression to a voter for her to connect with and like. She does not even need to verbalise the impression, but merely to nod her head and feel warm (or angry) in agreement.

Controlling the messages, the central production of Focus by Kevin and Aidan ensured that one ward did not say something that contradicted what we said in another. When there was such a risk, they escalated the issue so that problems could be dealt with in collaboration with Bridget. Nor did we stray into NIMBYism when complaining about inappropriate developments in the villages, though draft copy from wards could occasionally have laid us open to that charge.

We did not have a public manifesto as such, though Bridget had privately done much work on priorities and themes if we won. The consequence was that the leaflet writers had to consciously constrain their freedom to make promises, explicit or implicit, given that there was a prospect of us taking control. We did not want to win power at the price of our own version of tuition fees. But that did not stop us making campaign promises that we would be determined to stick to afterwards; we just made sure we knew what they were and that there weren’t too many of them.

The work done to mobilise members between 2015 and the election campaign was considerable. E-mails and letters are an important part of the campaign armoury but they only produce low response rates. If someone has gone to the trouble of joining or signing an anti-Brexit petition, you need to speak to people individually and have a proper conversation. If you invest the time in mobilising them it will pay off handsomely.

Don’t let the potential complexity of all-singing, all-dancing data-driven campaigns stop you running a simple data-driven campaign. By following only the most basic rules you can improve the effectiveness of the time you put into canvassing by at least 25 per cent. That can’t be bad.

Collecting email addresses so that you can email hundreds of your likely/potential voters every month (and on eve of poll) works. Of course it does, but it's also far more effective than other social media in a relatively low turnout election.

On targeting, it is difficult to learn lessons when you didn't obey your normal rules but everything turned out fine anyway. The lesson not to learn is that the normal rules aren't right. What we can say though is that it was the hard evidence of the box counts from the year before that gave us the confidence to pursue such an ambitious plan. Without that reliable evidence we probably would have licked our wounds after 2017 and not even contemplated a campaign to win control in 2018. More subtly, it was the box count evidence that gave the core team and candidates the determination to keep going with the ambitious plan throughout the autumn, winter and spring because they, rightly, had no doubt that control was plausible.

Who can learn from this?

Places that are used to robust political battles might have little to learn from South Cambridgeshire's experience save the value of a smoothly-run election campaign. Few areas too will have a set of box counts showing how important the placement of boundaries can be.

But many areas of rural or suburban England have failing Tory councils with the Liberal Democrats some distance behind. The message here is not an absurd one: that power is within your grasp in a year's time.

Rather, the first is that a team of people who get on well, have a clear plausible goal and work well together can achieve a lot. Second, that identifying a small number of key messages that resonate with people is crucial to significant success. And third, that lots of leaflets, emails and canvassing repeating those messages works if your messages are good ones.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Mary Regnier-Wilson, Yan Malinowski, Nick Pentney, James Lillis and Dave Hodgson for all their help and continuing advice as we take the Liberal Democrat agenda locally forward.

Our great group of councillors, under the leadership of Councillor Bridget Smith.

To all the Liberal Democrat members from neighboring councils who helped canvass, deliver leaflets and write letters – without you we would not have won.

All our unsuccessful candidates, we are sorry you didn't win.

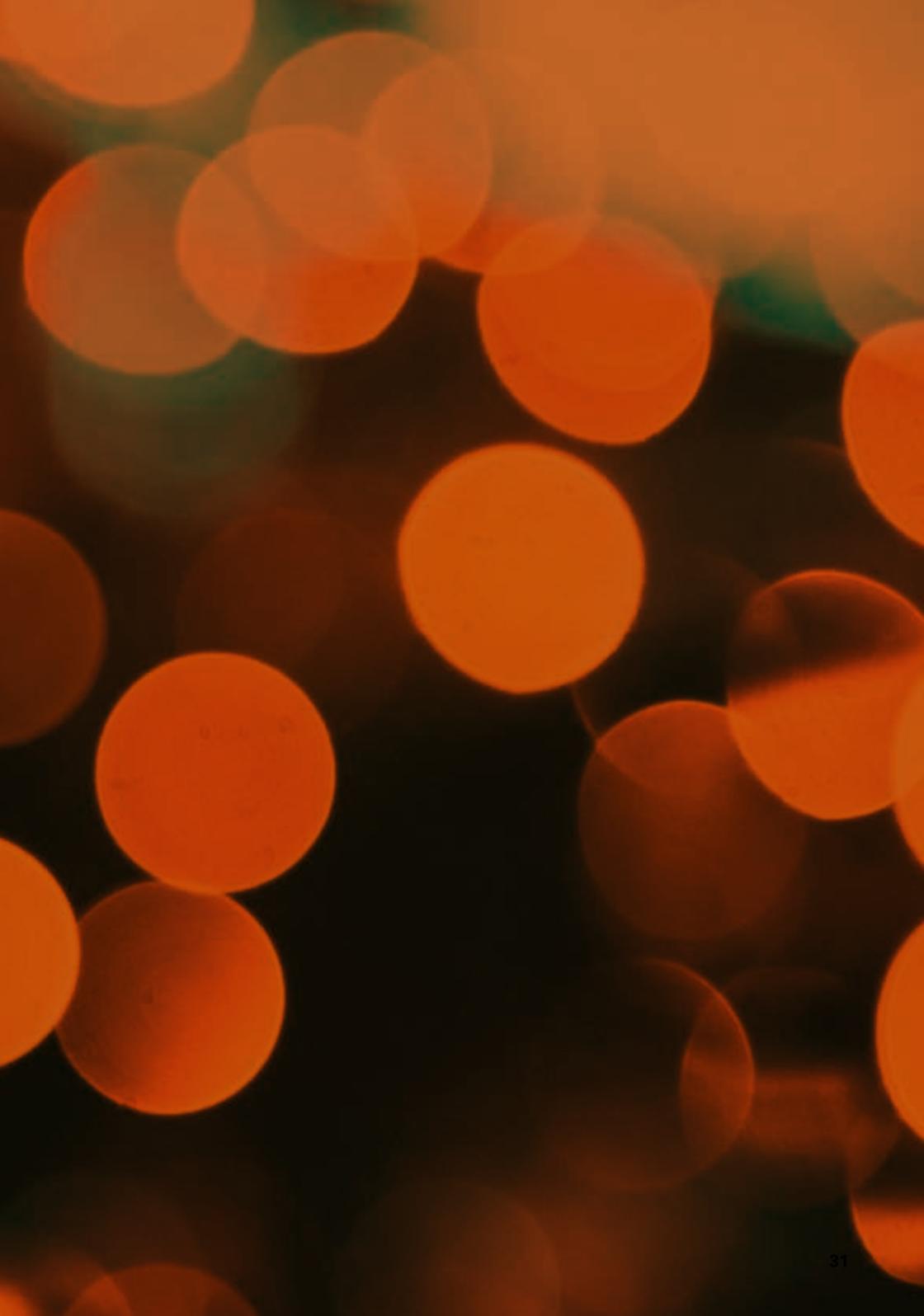
All our activists and unsung heroes including our families and friends, thank you for your support.

Everyone at Liberal Democrat HQ, the team in the Liberal Democrat Office at the Local Government Association, especially Terry Stacy who encouraged us to write this booklet.

And lastly ALDC for their support and advice, and for their inspirational Kickstart weekends. If you haven't been on one, book up now and GO!

We couldn't have done it without them.

Going for gold





Published by the Liberal Democrat Group at:
Local Government Association
18 Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

www.local.gov.uk/lga-lib-dem-group

March 2019

REF 6.103