



THE BATTLE FOR BEDFORD

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The Liberal Democrat Bedford Borough Group of Councillors reviewed this booklet before publication together with other members of the local party ensuring that facts and timeline are accurate.

No election success is possible without a fantastic party agent, so thanks goes to Christine McHugh, who has been the local party agent for the Bedford Borough Liberal Democrats throughout Dave's and the local party's election successes. Christine also contributed to the accuracy of this booklet, helping the researchers get the correct facts, dates and timeline into order.

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We hope this booklet inspires all of you to run for election, get involved in local and national campaigning and continue the Liberal Democrats' journey to election success both locally and nationally.

FOREWORD

Over 20 years ago, as an aspiring Parliamentary candidate, I was sent to Bedford to learn more about campaigning. Under the tutelage of Dave Hodgson and Cheryl Green, the importance of target mail was driven home.

So I'm delighted to be asked to write the foreword for this booklet about Bedford; Bedford Lib Dems are in my view an example of one of the party's unsung heroes, achieving a great deal, even during the difficult Coalition years.

Of course Liberal Democrats in Bedford won the Mayoral election in 2009 because they kept to the campaign play book – delivering, knocking on doors and being local champions. Yet with the determined leadership of Dave Hodgson, and an amazing hardworking team, they promised action, delivered action and told people about their action.

You can read about how they did it here – and what's happened since. It's a hugely impressive example of putting Liberal Democracy into action.

To celebrate their eight years in power, the Bedford team have put together eight handy lists of eight things – from reflections on what they've learnt, to their plans for the future.

- 8 lessons learnt to win the Mayoral
- 8 campaigning musts
- 8 top achievements
- 8 things still to deliver
- 8 small things that we do that add up to a lot
- 8 things we will always stand up for
- 8 tips for making a good team
- 8 social events you could hold for your members

It takes me back to what I learnt 20 years ago in Bedford – **campaigning never ends!** I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I have: be inspired to keep on campaigning.



Sir Edward Davey
MP for Kingston and Surbiton

BEDFORD BOROUGH AT A GLANCE

Bedford Borough is a unitary local authority area, around 184 square miles in area, located 59 miles north of London. It became a unitary council in 2009, before which it was a district council.

It is made up of two towns – Bedford and Kempston – and around 60 villages, with 47 parish/town councils. The borough has strong transport links, with good access to the A1 and M1 and a regular train service direct to the capital – taking you into the heart of London in 35 minutes.

Bedford Borough has a population of 168,750, with around two-thirds living in the towns, and the remaining third in the surrounding villages. Just over 17 per cent of the population is aged over 65. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) estimates that Bedford Borough's population will increase to approximately 182,400 in 2023 (+ eight per cent on 2016) but the population of older people is projected to increase at a much higher rate.

Around 29 per cent of the population is from a black, Asian or minority ethnic community with up to 100 different ethnic groups living in the borough. Bedford is particularly known for its well-established Italian community, as well as significant communities from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Poland.

Bedford borough includes all or part of three parliamentary constituencies:

Bedford and Kempston:

Labour – Mohammed Yasin MP

North East Bedfordshire:

Conservative – Alistair Burt MP

Mid Bedfordshire:

Conservative – Nadine Dorries MP

Since April 2009, Bedford Borough Council has been a unitary authority, following the abolition of the Conservative-run county council. The council has been politically balanced for a long period, with no party having held a majority in recent history.

The council is made up of 40 councillors, and the elected Mayor. Elections are held on an 'all-up' four-year cycle, and currently the political balance is as follows:

- Conservative – 15
- Labour – 14
- Liberal Democrat – 10
(including the Elected Mayor)
- Independent – 2

Dave Hodgson was first elected to the Mayoralty in a by-election in October 2009, following the death of the previous, Independent incumbent. 2015 was Dave's second re-election, achieving an increased vote and increased majority.

In 2015 Mayor Dave Hodgson invited the Labour Group to become part of his Executive and they hold four of the nine Portfolio Holder positions. He has had councillors of all parties on his Executive at various times since 2009.



Dave Hodgson shopping locally at Bedford's thriving market

A BIT OF HISTORY...

Liberal Democrats have a strong history in Bedford, having held seats on Bedford Borough Council since the 1970s. Unlike the county which was consistently Conservative-controlled, the Borough Council has been 'no overall control' since 1986. The Liberal Democrats worked with various coalitions at times and at other times acted as an opposition during this period. The period even included a time where the Conservatives had two parties with some of them standing as Independents.

In February 2002, a petition was submitted with signatures from over five per cent of the electorate for a referendum to be held about introducing a directly-elected Mayor to Bedford Borough Council. As you'd expect, we campaigned against, but we were very much in the minority with Frank Branston – the editor and owner of a local newspaper – working with representatives of the other two main parties, including the Labour MP, to get the petition signatures required.

October 2002 saw the first election for the new Mayoralty, and we of course put up a candidate. Christine McHugh stood, and in a surprise result came second with 17 per cent of the vote, with a lot of support from other areas of the party, in particular Liberal Youth.

Frank Branston became the first directly-elected Mayor, with his party 'Better Bedford' which at the time had no councillors, although later some were elected as Better Bedford. Soon after his election, a number of Tory councillors defected to Better Bedford and for his time as Mayor the local Tory vote was split. Later two Liberal Democrat councillors defected, and their seats were won back at the next opportunity.

The new Mayor invited all his election opponents who were councillors to be part of his Cabinet, apart from Christine. This combined with our second place in the election gave us public recognition as the Opposition.

In 2007, we saw the second Mayoral election in which Christine stood again – coming third this time, within 180 votes of second place – but this election was most notable for the abject failure of the electronic voting system that caused the count, which started on Thursday evening to drag on until Saturday afternoon.

But this third place didn't feel like a backwards step. We had become established as the opposition in Bedford borough, and through strong local action our local councillors and FOCUS teams were well-known.

The pace started to pick up in 2008. A contingent of enthused local

Liberal Democrats, including newly selected prospective parliamentary candidate Henry Vann, went to Autumn Conference keen to up our game and grow the council group.

After Conference, as part of Nick Clegg's Million Door Challenge, we held a 'Canvass a Ward in a Day' event on Saturday 20 September. It culminated with a barbeque at the local councillor's house. This was a lot of work, but a huge success, canvassing around 3,000 houses in one day and really building up steam in the run-up to the 2009 elections. This has been described since by Dave as 'the day I knew we could become the biggest party on the council' and that became our aim for the 2009 all-up elections, which were the first for the borough council as a unitary council.

June 2009 – success

We became the biggest group on the council for the first time with the following councillors:

Liberal Democrat – 12

Conservative – 9

Labour – 7

Independent – 7

We joined the Mayor's Executive, having worked with him on the shadow authority during the introduction of unitary status, and began to deliver

Liberal Democrat priorities for Bedford.

Frank Branston sadly passed away in August 2009, and a by-election was called for October 2009.

Winning the by-election

Thanks to our record of strong local action, community politics and our well recognised Lib Dem Focus team brand, we hit the ground running for the 2009 mayoral by-election.

This was in stark contrast to the other parties. The main opposition was the Conservatives, who were divided and held an open hustings to select their candidate. Their choice of candidate led to further divisions as he was not of long standing within the party, and was not from the rural area where the Conservative vote was and continues to be strongest.

At the start of the campaign, in addition to our fantastic local volunteers, we had help from nearby local parties in Bedfordshire and from Milton Keynes, with Colin Ross, a campaigning stalwart throughout our many elections and by-elections, providing invaluable support. Tea, sandwiches and cake were constantly available. Support expanded to receiving help from across the East of England region (who came with homemade cake) and a brilliant stake board team (Sal Brinton and Tim Whittaker). Then President



of the party Ros Scott visited to provide encouragement and join the campaigning. Hywel Morgan came and volunteered to set and print. In the last week or two we had help from across the country, including MPs: Simon Hughes memorably getting lost in a village and almost missing his train back and Jo Swinson and Duncan Hames coming to do a good morning – thank you all!

The national party helped by asking Shaun Roberts to set our main leaflets which as a result looked terrific. Nick Clegg came and did a town hall meeting – declared as an election expense – although it didn't give any exposure to our candidate.

We even got support from a former local Tory councillor, who created a lasting local favourite picture from that campaign, Dave in a field of sheep.

Despite having no member of staff and no office, the 2009 by-election was a major success. Dave pulled ahead by over 300 votes in first preferences, and then stretched ahead further with a final majority of over 2,000.

Local issues

18 MONTHS TO PROVE OURSELVES: BUILD-UP TO THE 2011 ELECTION

Prior to 2009, Bedford had an independent Mayor for seven years, and the Liberal Democrats were best known as the voice of opposition in Bedford Borough Council. In addition, the next election was only 18 months away. This meant we had to make an impact quickly and our message was 'Work Starts Here for Bedford'.

We focused on showing Dave as the Mayor for Bedford Borough, rather than anything party political (a decision that served well when the Coalition Government happened), and what we were going to deliver for Bedford – a programme of tangible projects and successes.

Nick Clegg came to Bedford to celebrate Dave's victory, signing a pledge about money for our Bypass; a pledge we kept, making our celebrations the start of our re-election campaign.

Then we simply worked flat out – Dave was only allowed out of the borough five times in those 18 months. We rented an office, kept delivering and won the by-election to retain Dave's old seat. We worked as the administration to get things done. Michael Headley put our first council budget together in just 84 days including Christmas and New Year. We planned for new infrastructure to benefit the residents of Bedford such as a new bypass and a brand new bus station – while at the same time



New restaurant opening in Bedford town centre

proving that a local council can deliver at a time of austerity cuts.

In essence our campaign strategy has always been the same – whatever it is you're delivering for local residents, be it a fixed pothole or a brand new bus station, make sure you tell them about it. Tell them as many times, and in as wide a variety of styles of literature, as you can.

ACHIEVEMENTS FOR BEDFORD BOROUGH COUNCIL

We knew we had to make an impact in that 18 months, and start delivering tangible projects, showing we could make a real difference on things that were important to local residents, as well as delivering on important Liberal Democrat priorities.

In Dave's first 100 days as Mayor, we made significant progress in a number of Liberal Democrat priorities such as green issues, town centre improvements, the local economy, transparency of the council and keeping our borough moving. The improvements we made were:

Green

- we signed up to the national 10:10 Climate Change Campaign, and launched the Mayor's Climate Change Fund to make grants to community groups to support projects to help tackle climate change and save energy
- we rolled out recycling litter bins in the town centre, and provided more recycling facilities for local communities.

Town Centre

- we signed an agreement with Stagecoach to deliver investment to improve our town centre bus station
- we gave support to our local retailers and shoppers with a week of free parking in December.



Mayor Dave signing new bus station deal

Local economy

- the council coordinated a project to provide 200 new local jobs to help unemployed young people
- work began on the first phase of the Church Lane Neighbourhood Centre redevelopment.

Transparency and opening up the council

- we started to publish payments to suppliers over £1,000 online, and the sale of the former County Council limousine went on eBay.

Keeping the borough moving

- the council was widely praised for its response to the 'Big Freeze' as it worked to keep the borough moving through the coldest weather for 30 years, and £200,000 was allocated from emergency funding to deal with damage to the road network.

In addition, Dave's first proposed budget brought the council tax rise down from the projected 11.5 per cent to 2.3 per cent through a rigorous efficiency programme which identified over £9 million of savings while protecting frontline services.

Campaigning

We quickly learnt the key lesson – which applies in opposition too, but is easier to fall prey to when in administration – do not get stuck in the town hall, or Borough Hall in our case.

The work and decisions made in the town hall are hugely important, but it is too easy to simply get stuck in that building. People will only vote for you if they like what you're doing in the town

hall, and crucially – they know that you are doing it. To make that happen you need to get out, talk to people, deliver FOCUS, hold surgeries; elections are not won by staying in the town hall.

Dave did a lot of work to get out and talk to voters across the borough, and particularly in the rural areas. In May 2010, 'Pints in the Parishes' was started, and that summer saw the first Mayoral Village Tour – we had held a village tour before the 2007 election, as challengers; Dave held surgeries in 55 villages in 16 days and has done the Village Tour every year since, increasing the number of villages that he visits.

In the 2011 and 2015 elections all Borough Council candidates recognized that re-electing a Liberal Democrat Mayor was the top priority and worked towards this. Having been in opposition in a mayoral system for seven years, councillors recognised the value of having a Liberal Democrat Mayor.

Coming into the 2011 election, we had of course gone into Coalition nationally with disastrous consequences for our popularity. The Conservatives were fighting hard to win the Mayoralty with national figures including the Prime Minister coming to Bedford. In addition, boundary changes had a bad impact on our numbers.

Pledges

To win the election, we knew we had to promise something different from the other parties against us.

We went into the 2011 election with **six pledges** from Dave:

1. Regenerate Bedford town centre

This would include a new riverside development, a revitalized High Street, refurbishment of our council-owned car parks and a redeveloped bus station area.

2. Invest in our children and young people

We wanted to invest in education which would include investment of £41million for new school classrooms and facilities.

3. Keep the council tax down and protect services

We knew that savings could be made in Borough Hall, not out in the community, even though at this point austerity had started and central government funding was starting to be reduced.

4. Create jobs

We wanted a plan for Bedford to attract the best businesses to the area and give residents more choice, especially where they shop. We only had two supermarket chains in the borough before 2011, with one chain having up to 11 stores and we knew that there was potential to develop business parks, help small businesses and help residents find work.

5. To get Bedford moving

Bedford had been waiting for a western bypass for a long time. We gave a commitment to deliver the final section of the Western Bypass.

6. Resurface more roads and pavements

The previous Conservative County Council had neglected roads in Bedford borough prior to 2009. We wanted to fight back against years of neglect and provide the roads that residents deserved.

With the boundary changes probably going to impact our numbers and the Conservatives fighting hard to win the Mayoral election, we retained the Mayoralty increasing Dave's overall majority, and kept 12 council seats while Labour and Conservatives both also won 12 council seats, with four going to the Independents.

THE FIRST FULL TERM 2011 TO 2015

After Dave's win in 2011 and the retention of the same council group size we went into this term in a strong position.

Dave's first Executive after the election in 2011 was cross-party, including the local Conservatives. But, this was short-lived when the Conservative Group didn't vote for the Budget – refusing responsibility on the most important decision of the year – despite being involved throughout the process of it being written. Since that point, Dave's Executive has been formed of Liberal Democrat, Labour and on occasion Independent councillors.

The priority for the next four years was to make sure that we delivered on the pledges we had made. We needed to show that we could get projects moving in Bedford that had been stalled for decades.

And we did.

Some of the things we delivered in Dave's first full term as Mayor included:

Regeneration of Bedford Town Centre

- Bedford's much-needed and long-awaited brand new bus station, along with regeneration of the surrounding area including a 440-space council-owned town centre car park



**Redevelopment of Bedford town centre
Allhallows car park**

- construction began on a new riverside development, which would start to turn what had been the old Borough Council's Town Hall and a car park into restaurants, a new public square and new foot and cycle bridge over the river, alongside the return of town centre cinema to Bedford
- the Town Centre was regenerated with improvements to Bedford High Street, funded via the Heritage Lotteries Townscape Heritage Fund.

Investing in our children and young people

- we built a programme of maintaining school places which resulted in opening a new school every year and invested in scrapping temporary classrooms with permanent buildings – an initiative that is ongoing
- continued, and still continue, to fund the school improvement services in the council.

Keeping council tax down and protecting frontline services

- we froze council tax for four years in a row while reducing the council's budget in a time of austerity cuts
- we kept, and are still one of the councils that provide, a 100 per cent council tax reduction scheme for the poorest and most vulnerable households in Bedford
- our plan to protect frontline services included and has achieved zero closures of libraries, children's centres or leisure facilities
- we continued to deliver weekly bin collections
- to meet the government funding reductions, we delivered massive efficiencies within Borough Hall, saving millions on senior management costs while getting rid

of free meals for councillors before council meetings, and even little things like getting rid of bottled water in meetings all played their part.

Creating jobs

- we invested to make sure Bedford residents got the most possible out of the limited Government's superfast broadband scheme.
- we started and continue to work with businesses and economic development experts to ensure that companies think of Bedford when looking for new premises – creating more jobs and opportunities for local residents.

Getting Bedford moving

- construction also began on the final phase of the Western Bypass which had featured in local and national plans for decades with construction continuing through the 2015 elections
- we retained and improved our bus timetables – particularly keeping rural bus services
- speeding was our number one issue on the doorstep, so we became the first local authority to install average speed cameras
- we introduced the Mayor's two hour Free Saturday Parking Deal in council-owned town centre car parks
- we improved cycling routes, around the town in particular.



Mayor Dave checking a road resurfacing project

Resurface more roads and pavements

- we tackled years of roads neglect with our own Pothole Hit Squad
- we made sure that we allocated monies towards road improvements in every year of our budget cycle.

Our pledges were worked on and added to. We looked at opening the council up and becoming more transparent, improving the environment and keeping Bedford a fun place to visit.

Openness and transparency

- we made the council open and transparent in 2009; we wanted to continue this and make it more

accountable to residents in allowing access to meetings and have the ability to ask questions, with no prior notice, to each individual council member

- we protected the petition scheme – requiring only 30 signatories for an item to be discussed at full council
- we made meetings more accessible agreeing that meetings could be filmed and put online for public use
- we published payments to suppliers over £250
- we introduced Dave’s regular surgeries, continued Pints in the Parishes and the Village Tour during the summer months.

Environment

- we set ourselves a Carbon Reduction Target of 40 per cent from council buildings
- Installed over 1,000 solar panels on buildings across the borough, through both the Mayor's Climate Change Fund and the Council's RE:FIT project
- we opened the Bedford Hydro Power Station on the River Great Ouse which generates 130,000kWh per year
- introduced the use of mechanical and biological treatment of our black bin waste to reduce the amount going to landfill
- introduced a team of enforcement officers to tackle 'enviro-crimes' such as littering, dog fouling and fly-tipping
- we managed a change programme of restructuring the council's management team with the aim of delivering results to achieve savings targets and helping to reduce waste.

Leisure and culture

- any place needs leisure and culture to flourish even while cuts are being made, so we continued to support events such as the bi-annual River Festival and annual Kite Festival
- our vision was, and still is, to promote Bedford as a town of events and somewhere people will come to spend their leisure time beyond just the retail offer.

Our local hospital, Bedford Hospital, has also been a hugely important issue since before the 2007 election, during Dave's time as Mayor and today. The hospital has been under threat of downgrade through multiple NHS Reviews, and Dave had consistently fought and campaigned to protect vital services here in Bedford.

Campaigning

As we all know, the national party's popularity had taken a big hit by going into coalition, and by breaking the tuition fees pledge. In Bedford we had all-up council elections on the same day as the General Election in 2015 as well as the Mayoral, so the election was going to be doubly challenging.

We had always focused on Dave as the Mayor of Bedford Borough first, who is a Liberal Democrat, and that is a strategy that continued to serve us well.

Our strong platform of delivering on town centre regeneration, school buildings and placements, council tax, frontline services, jobs, transport, the environment, roads, leisure and being open and transparent served us well for the upcoming elections in 2015.

We made good use of a consistent message grid that focused on Dave fighting for the borough, getting things done, and as the Mayor for Bedford Borough – standing up for local people.



'Saving Bedford Hospital' – our local campaign to protect health services

2015: 1 DAY 5 ELECTIONS

Thursday 7 May 2015 in Bedford borough saw five different votes:

- General election
- Mayoral election
- Borough Council elections
- Parish council elections (in some places)
- Police and Crime Commissioner council tax referendum

At that time, all three parliamentary seats were Conservative and remained so after the election. The Conservatives were also the main opposition for the Mayoral election, although the former editor of a local paper also stood – aiming to recreate the previous Mayor’s success – and came fourth out of five candidates, beating only UKIP. Dave went nearly 6,000 ahead of the Conservative candidate in first preferences votes, and won with a majority of nearly 9,000 votes.

In contrast, our wards were a mix of Tory and Labour facing. We put candidates up in all seats across the borough, but returned councillors only where incumbents were restanding. This was partly an outcome of the rule we all know – where if you don’t work; you don’t win – but also potentially a sign of how important incumbency was in overcoming the national trend. We returned nine councillors, while the Tories and Labour returned 15 and 14 respectively, with two Independents remaining.

POST-2015

Becoming the largest party again

Since winning the Mayoralty, retaining it has always been the first priority of our campaigns in Bedford. However, that does not mean that we do not recognize the importance of a strong council group. That is why our aim for the 2019 election is to become the largest party on the council again.

The importance of not just retrenching in our safe wards cannot be overstated – if you don’t go out and campaign in other wards you leave yourself wide open to other parties moving in to your wards.

One bright side of the EU Referendum last year was the people it brought out. Knowledgeable and enthusiastic people are crucial to any campaign, and we are seeing more and more people getting out delivering, on the doorstep and taking roles in the local party.

Conversations are happening with ward teams, making members aware what they need to be doing to help the campaign and selections will be starting later this year. We have several enthusiastic new members who are creating teams in wards that we haven’t held before and in ones we haven’t held for a number of years – which is brilliant to see.

However, like all places that have all-up elections, we do suffer from a lack of constant data collection. It is easy to think that canvassing isn’t high priority

when the next election is three or four years away – but we’ve now got less than 18 months to go.

Government cuts are the biggest challenge we face, both locally and nationally. We are continuing to work on tangible, visible projects in the borough; our ongoing work includes the following:

- a town centre traffic decongestion project
- creating jobs
- refurbishing all of our care homes
- changing our Bedford school system from three-tier (lower, middle, upper) to two-tier (primary, secondary)
- defending our train services
- campaigning to make sure that Bedford has the best local health services.

However, it is a fact that simply keeping the council running, providing statutory services while continuing to try and protect frontline services and the vulnerable is a massive challenge.

It is hugely important that the public understand the level of cuts we continue to face.

Despite the extremely tough climate for local government, we believe we as Liberal Democrats can serve the people of the borough better than our

opponents, and so we are continuing to campaign, working not only to return a Liberal Democrat Mayor in 2019, but also Liberal Democrat councillors as the largest group.

We hope you’ve enjoyed reading our story so far – and that you will feel encouraged to start, or continue, your campaign. Good luck!

LISTS OF 8 TO REFLECT 8 YEARS IN POWER

8 lessons learnt to win the Mayoral:

1. Don't get stuck in town, district or county hall
2. Work 365 days of the year
3. Deliver something tangible
4. Tell people about it
5. Always have the next plan ready
6. Work as a team and support each other
7. Keep members engaged with briefings eg budget, local plan
8. Stick to your messaging with a message grid – even if you are sick of it, others will not be

8 campaigning musts:

1. Have a literature timetable
2. Knock on doors
3. Send regular emails and social media posts
4. Use effective knock and drop surveys
5. Hold a village (or similar) tour
6. Use a message grid
7. Make ward surgeries regular and timetabled
8. Don't stay in your own wards

8 top achievements:

1. Retained 100 per cent council tax reduction for the most vulnerable
2. Riverside Bedford entertainment complex
3. New bus station
4. Pothole Hit Squad
5. Removing all temporary school classrooms into permanent buildings and changing to 2-tier
6. New bypass for the town
7. Reducing carbon footprint by 43 per cent
8. Protecting frontline services with savings in Borough Hall

8 things still to deliver:

1. Town decongestion project
2. Marston Vale Business Park
3. A successful housing company
4. Making culture venues cost-effective for the council
5. Retention of hospital & health services – A&E, paediatrics and maternity in Bedford
6. Infrastructure including new railway stations and retention of train services
7. Continue Economic Growth and bring new companies to Bedford
8. Balanced budget in the face of continuing government austerity cuts

8 small things we do that add up to a lot:

1. Town centre flower planting
2. River Festival – every two years
3. Open and keep park cafes
4. Enable a Park Run – to improve fitness levels
5. Hold a town Christmas firework display
6. Introduce enforcement officers for littering
7. Introduce and expand Average Speed Cameras for safety
8. Introduce free car parking (two hours every Saturday)

8 things that we will always stand up for:

1. Protecting the vulnerable
2. Looked after children
3. Care for the elderly
4. Creating jobs
5. Looking after the environment
6. Health services and the local hospital
7. Train services
8. Schools and improving education

8 tips for making a good team:

1. Regular meetings
2. Support volunteers to get involved in the way they want
3. Thank You parties, free and no raffle
4. Portfolio Holders and Mayor availability to members
5. Action days, throughout the four year cycle
6. Social events
7. Regular communications
peg email and posted updates
8. Always thank volunteers

8 social events you could hold for your members:

1. Quiz nights
1. Thank you parties
2. Mince pie and mulled wine event
3. Wine tasting evening
4. Industrial visits eg Chilli Farms
5. Town guided walks
6. Members policy events
7. Annual dinner with guest speakers







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