

# Burnham and Highbridge Town Council Liberal Democrat Manifesto 2022

## Two towns



## Many people



## Introduction

Our two towns contain many communities –there are ones determined by geography e.g. the Morlands estate, the “Saints” roads; others by age –teenagers, senior citizens; others by interests –the arts, sport, physical activities; others by income –the comfortably-off, those who struggle to get by; and many more. These communities interlock so that we all belong to more than one. The Town Council’s role is to try to serve all of them as well as possible while recognising that some may need more support than others, and that what is important to one person or community may not be at all important to another. Inevitably this will mean that not everyone will agree with everything on which the Town Council spends money or resources.

For the last quarter of a century, Burnham and Highbridge Town Council has been run by the Conservatives. Their administration has been characterised by drift and lack of vision. For example, they initially opposed the production of a Neighbourhood Plan and only agreed to one when the Liberal Democrats were able to show community support. The Plan had many contributions from individual Liberal Democrats among others and, now it is in place after a confirmatory referendum, has proved its worth in guiding planning decisions and regeneration proposals. It also means that a higher proportion of CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) funds – 25% compared with 15% - goes to the Town Council for it to spend on local needs.

Do our towns show the benefit of twenty five years of progressive policies? We believe it is time for a new approach. Liberal Democrats will provide that change of direction and work with other Councillors to achieve it.

Looking back at our last manifesto from 2019, there are a number of things we have achieved, despite being the minority group. Amongst other things we have:

- i) worked to raise the profile of Highbridge and seek its regeneration. There is now a dedicated working party at Sedgemoor dealing with this and a multi-million pound bid will be made to the Levelling-up Fund in the summer.
- ii) opposed (ultimately without success) the sale of open space at Lakeside in Highbridge in order to retain it for community use.
- lii) supported grant-funded initiatives, especially at the Princess Theatre.
- iv) fought to open up the Town Council meetings to make them more meaningful – with some success.
- v) supported the move from paper to digital agendas and reports and the increased use of social media by the Council.
- vi) supported the giving of grants to community organisations – and proposed additional support of £5000 to the Food Bank during the pandemic.
- vii) fought for better provision of public toilets - now on their way.

However, there remain many things we have not been able to achieve – whether through internal factors such as not being able to persuade the majority group to back us or external ones such as the pandemic. There is much for us still to do.

## Local Government Reorganisation



The greatest immediate challenge facing the Town Council is that of local government reorganisation – the ending of the County and District Councils and their replacement with a new Unitary Council covering the whole of Somerset. How will this work? Will it be too remote? How will it relate to the town and parish councils? These are crucial questions which will affect all of us as the answers will determine how well local government serves us.

The new Somerset authority will set up “Local Community Networks” in which town and parish councils will have some input. However, the voice of parish and town councils in the LCNs will be a minority one. We propose that the Town Council should work with the other parishes in our LCN to set up a forum in which we can share ideas, problems, and proposals to put forward to the LCN for the mutual benefit of our communities. In addition, this forum would enable local parishes to co-ordinate their efforts more generally.

Liberal Democrats have, for decades, argued that services should be delivered, and decisions made, at the lowest appropriate level. The key word is “appropriate” Some services are better delivered and decisions made at a wider/higher level – some at a narrower/lower one. We will examine service provision on a case by case basis – asking ourselves “can the Town Council do this better? More efficiently? More effectively? More cheaply? More closely to our residents?” If it looks as if we can do something better but it would cost more – is the extra cost justified? We are not looking to “empire-build” – we will not take on a task unless we can see definite benefits for our residents and we will be looking carefully to ensure we do not take on tasks without adequate financial recompense from Somerset Council.

## Highbridge regeneration and development

Highbridge is the gateway to Burnham and the tourist areas of Cheddar, Wells, Glastonbury and the Levels. However residents often feel Highbridge is the poor relation of Burnham. It has hosted the majority of recent development but residents have difficulty in seeing what



benefits have been brought to their town as a result. Liberal Democrats have consistently argued the case for investment in Highbridge to overcome the chronic under investment of the past. While Sedgemoor remains in existence we will work closely with it on Highbridge regeneration.

Two of our Councillors, Mike Murphy and Phil Harvey, sit on Sedgemoor's Highbridge working party and have been active in putting forward ideas as part of the bid to the Levelling Up Fund. We are very hopeful that it will be successful. The bid will not contain all that is in the developing regeneration strategy as projects have to be largely delivered by Spring 2024. Liberal Democrats will ensure that this work is not lost in the transition to the new Somerset authority and that the needs of Highbridge are not forgotten.

In the next few years, many more houses are due to be built. These will bring pressures on the local facilities but also provide finance to provide additional infrastructure. It is important that, where possible, the infrastructure is provided at, or before, the development itself. Too often there is a time lag which puts increased demand on the existing infrastructure – to the detriment of existing residents.

Development also brings benefits e.g. it means more residents to support local shops and other retailers which will help the viability of the town centre. By investing in regeneration, private funding will also be levered in to enable further schemes. We can take advantage of this extra population and spending power and bring Highbridge back to a thriving community again. The Town Council has made a small start on this in backing Liberal Democrat plans to give grants for improving shop fronts in the centre of Highbridge. This made use of some of the CIL money passed on to the Town Council as a result of the recent development in the town. Liberal Democrats will continue to seek ways of gaining benefit from development, Government grants, local authority money and private investment for the residents of Highbridge.

## **Burnham**

Although Burnham is larger and generally more prosperous than Highbridge, there are still issues it needs to face. What does Burnham mean to the people who live here? How do they see its future? What do they want from the Town Council?



The recent grant from the Hinkley Point fund has helped refresh both the Princess Theatre and the Esplanade –and a smaller one from Sedgemoor Council is smartening up some of the High Street shopfronts. Nevertheless there is no doubt that some parts of the central area are looking tired. Government is beginning to recognise that seaside towns face particular problems and if this recognition is followed by funding the Town Council needs to ensure that the needs of Burnham are highlighted to Somerset - which will probably be the

authority able to apply for funding.

Recently, Sedgemoor has been chosen to receive help from the High Street Task Force and the Liberal Democrats have argued for this to be allocated to Burnham. Separately we got £50,000 included in Sedgemoor's budget to implement any proposals arising from the Task Force if Burnham should be chosen, or to be used for local ideas if not.

The Town Council needs to work with residents, retailers and the Chamber of Commerce to build on the Neighbourhood Plan and any recommendations from the High Street work. Consultation is key and a programme needs to be developed to achieve this, making use of both new and existing opportunities such as the monthly farmers' market.

### **The Princess Theatre and Princess Street.**

We make no apology for believing that the Princess Theatre is an important asset for the towns and welcome its recent refurbishment and the efforts of our Business Development Officer to increase the range and number of events occurring there. All the evidence shows that a thriving arts centre is an important ingredient of many successful economic regeneration schemes, as well as a focal point for the community and a contributor to the well-being of its users and audiences. This means we should strive to maximise and broaden its usage – but also that we should continue to seek ways of reducing its cost to our residents.

The decision to reorganise local government has meant that the negotiations with the County Council over the future of the Skills and Learning Centre have stalled. All the indications are that the County Council is not interested in a swap arrangement by which they take over the existing Town Council offices and hand over the Princess Street property. Nevertheless, it is our intention to pursue this proposal with the new Somerset Council to see if we can reach a satisfactory solution. If we cannot achieve this, we will seek to persuade them to find a use for the Skills and Learning Centre such that we can jointly

work to develop a Town Square to provide a focal point at the northern end of Burnham town centre. Together with the Princess Theatre and the Library, there is an opportunity to develop an Arts and Public Service Quarter and for the Arts to be a major draw to visitors and residents of the surrounding area and, in turn, to act as a catalyst for improved facilities in the town centre.



If we are not successful in the Town Council re-locating to Princess Street, Liberal Democrats believe that the time has come

to decide on whether the Council should remain in Jaycroft Road or sell the site and re-locate. For too long this decision has been put off.

## Tourism, Health and Leisure – Walking and Cycling

In addition to the traditional tourist attractions of our own beach, Wells, Glastonbury and Cheddar, our location by the sea and adjoining Burnham Moor means an increasing number of tourists are attracted by the opportunity for walking and cycling and to visit the Somerset levels, Steart nature reserve, the Mendips and the Quantocks.

These opportunities are also enjoyed by our residents. As well as providing safer ways for people to get around, such activities are beneficial to both our mental and physical health. Investment in footpaths and cycleways can actually save money by reducing the demands on our health service. In addition, every journey that takes place on foot or by bicycle instead of by car is an environmental bonus.



Liberal Democrats have long argued for investment in walking and cycling. It was part of our contribution to the Neighbourhood Plan; was in our 2019 Town Council manifesto; and we successfully argued for it in the Town Council's Core Strategy. At Sedgemoor we have been pressing officers for improvement to our facilities and so we are delighted that Burnham and Highbridge has been chosen by the County Council as the

next place to develop a Local Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). This increases the chances of successful capital bids as it enables us to put forward a strategic, evidence based case for investment.

LCWIPs are 10 year plans and it is therefore vital that we get them right. Liberal Democrats will work to ensure that wide-ranging consultation takes place – neighbouring parishes, tourist information centre, ramblers, runners, cycling groups and disabled groups (so that as many facilities as possible are usable by mobility scooters). Although LCWIPs concentrate on urban connectivity they can provide the catalyst for developments in rural links of use to leisure users and rural commuters.

### Public transport

Public transport is not a responsibility of parish and town councils so all we can do is to try and influence decisions of others. What follows are some ideas Liberal Democrats would like considered.

The restoration of buses to Highbridge station. This would make it more useful to both residents and tourists. Highbridge station should be the transport hub of our area, where buses and trains meet in a coordinated timetable.

Improvement of the bus route to and from Wells so that it is possible to spend a day in Wells or Burnham and still get home by bus. In addition, running buses that coincide with the school times of Hugh Sexey's School would reduce car traffic.



Improvement of the summer bus service to Cheddar. An all-year round one could also serve Kings of Wessex school.

Introduction of a circular bus route (or routes) to link the estates in Burnham and Highbridge with the town centres and the railway station.

## Climate change

Although Local Government Reorganisation is the most immediate problem facing the Town Council, that of Climate change is the most important. Finding ways to mitigate our emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases is essential.



Liberal Democrats made a start on this when they successfully proposed the installation of photo-electric panels at the Princess in 2011. These have saved tons of carbon dioxide over the years, have now paid for themselves, are continuing to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, and generate both electricity and income. Many of the lights at the Princess have been replaced by LEDs, saving yet more carbon dioxide emissions. We believe the Town Council needs to continually audit its energy use to ensure that it is minimised.

Active travel and public transport improvements –as detailed above –will also reduce carbon dioxide emission. The switch to electric vehicles is accelerating. Sedgemoor has allocated £408,000 in its budget this year for the provision of charging points, a move supported by all political parties on the Council. The Town Council needs to put pressure on the new Somerset Council to continue with this programme, to provide charging points in car parks and to require them in new developments -both commercial and residential. In addition, the installation of lamp post charging points (or some suitable alternative) needs to be made for those properties that do not have off-road parking.

Carbon dioxide emissions will also be reduced if people shop locally rather than drive further distances. Improvements in the retail offer of both towns will help to achieve this.

Carbon sequestration is also important. Tree planting is the best known method of doing this. The only open spaces the Town Council owns are the three cemeteries and tree planting is occurring here. Opportunities should be taken to encourage residents, businesses and other landowners to plant trees on their own properties where possible. We support the Town Council's effort to kickstart this process with the community planting of 70 trees (suggested by Lib Dem Cllr Phil Harvey) to commemorate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee.

Across Somerset local Councils are taking action on climate change and there is much we can learn from others' efforts. In particular, the Town Council should work closely with the Somerset Climate Action Network to identify what actions it can take to alleviate the effects of climate change on our towns and surrounding areas.

### The cost of living crisis



The official rate of inflation at the time of writing is around 5% but the real rate for less well off families is higher as the price rises in food, clothes and energy exceeds that figure. The Town Council needs to support these families either directly where appropriate or indirectly e.g. by grants to organisations such as the CAB and the Foodbank. In addition it can put pressure on support organisations to provide services face to face in Burnham and Highbridge. Many less well off families do not have access to computers and the need

nowadays to fill in forms online is expensive and time consuming using a mobile phone. If face to face help is only available in Bridgwater, Weston or Taunton families are faced with high (unaffordable in many cases) transport costs. Help needs to be available in our towns, not miles away.

### Conclusion

In these changing times the future for our two towns is uncertain. There are both opportunities and challenges. We need a Town Council that is adaptable and responsive to the new Unitary Council. The present Conservative administration is tired and dominated by a small inner-group. This needs to change. The Liberal Democrats can provide a fresh start. You can give us the opportunity on May 5<sup>th</sup> by voting Liberal Democrat.