

# Local democracy



There's more to democracy than just a cross in a box

## What we stand for

Democracy involves real participation in decision-making, and we aim to increase this across York.

## What's happening now

The present administration has made an art out of sending out carefully crafted tick-box consultations to residents in the name of democracy.

Response rates are poor because we all can see that they have been designed in such a way that the results can be interpreted in whichever way is most convenient. This is a waste of paper and wastes council staff time. It breeds cynicism.

There is considerable cynicism about local government in general, with many people feeling that their views are never taken into account and that nothing changes for the better.

## What we will do

- Green councillors are more upfront about matters. We already have firm manifesto commitments about many aspects of council policy. If we have a firm manifesto commitment to do something, we will not make an empty gesture of sending out a tick-box consultation about it. We will just get on and do it, consulting on how to do it, not whether or not to do so.
- Our consultations will take the form of a public forum. Questionnaires posted through the letterbox amount to a consultation of individuals in isolation. Public fora allow a much more interactive debate about issues, and for more creative ideas to be aired.
- We will improve ward committees to allow local people more say in the agenda, and hand them more money from central budgets to allocate how they think is best. This will help get things moving on issues of key local concern.
- Our two Green Fishergate councillors elected in 2003 have been working to involve local people through the ward committee, the local planning panel, local residents' groups and individual discussions.

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- We will support existing parish councils and encourage new parish councils in inner areas of the city. We will offer local people the choice of devolving ward committee budgets to parish councils, and ensure that there are full opportunities for the public to speak at parish meetings.
- The level of council tax is a controversial topic. Some are concerned about cuts to services, others believe the council is very good at squandering and wasting tax money. We will attempt to build bridges by establishing participative budgets. These work by encouraging local groups of people to examine elements of the budget and to propose changes. These proposals are then fed in at a higher level and can result in substantial reallocation of resources. The benefits of this are that people get a better understanding of how money is currently spent, and it can help ensure that resources are prioritised where people want it.
- We want to open up the council chamber. It is a disgrace that councillors' individual votes are not normally minuted. We would also like to pioneer the recording of council meetings to be put on the internet as a podcast, so the public can hear for themselves what their councillors are saying. Independent journalists would be invited to do this, so that the content of the broadcasts is not mere propaganda.
- We will work to promote public participation in the business of the Council. We will review the Council's constitution with a view to promoting public participation, democratic accountability and better decision-making. We will consult on a return to a proper committee system. We believe the present constitution (amended in 2006) is a mess of bad practice, contradictions and a lack of accountability.
- We will promote a culture within the Council where the presumption is to provide full information to the public unless there are extremely strong reasons not to do so.
- We support the emergence of community based local news sources such as the grassroots 'Indymedia' project in York.

## **Green councillors have:**

- Opposed recent changes to the Council constitution, which have created more confusion and less accountability.
- Participated in the scrutiny committee examining confidentiality and transparency arrangements in the Council.
- Prompted the provision of information to the public on contentious issues whenever possible.
- Introduced an 'independent facilitator' to chair Fishergate ward committee meetings, and encouraged participation in local decisions by residents groups and others.