

# Chair's report for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr Liberal Democrats

## November 2024

The local party's organisation and compliance with Liberal Democrat procedures remain in good order. Executive members and activists have had a busy year and, despite challenges and well mannered disagreements, group cohesion remains strong. Our councillors commitment to their wards and to council work remains extremely admirable. The general election result was extremely disappointing and there is much campaigning and organisational work to be done to achieve better results in the next round of Senedd elections in 2026.

### **Management of the party**

The Executive Committee (Vice Chair Simon Spencer, Treasurer David Collington, Secretary Cynthia Jones, Powys County Council representatives David Selby and Richard Church, Membership Secretary Tim Saul, and Ordinary Members Ric Wegener, James Harris, Patrick Adams and Glyn Preston) has met monthly, outside of the election period. The local party is compliant with party procedures and election law - software usage and financial reporting being of the utmost importance in this regard.

Membership team Tim and Ric have been keeping a watchful eye on member comings and goings, reminding people to renew their memberships and welcoming new members. Hard copy newsletters have been deemed a poor return on investment given the increasing cost of postage and have been abandoned. Members have received occasional email news, less than in previous years, for which I bear responsibility. Open gardens, social gatherings and team delivery sessions have been held in Llanfyllin, Llanidloes, Newtown, Dolanog and Welshpool.

### **Election Campaigning**

At the time of writing last year, the federal party had invoked emergency procedures leaving the selection of our general election candidate in the hands of the Chair, therefore the usual selection meetings were rendered unnecessary. As the Exec members were unanimous in their support of Llanidloes Councillor Glyn Preston, it was a straightforward decision. Glyn's candidature was announced on January 23<sup>rd</sup>. The launch party was held in Llanidloes with Jane Dodds MS on Friday, February 9<sup>th</sup>.

A literature delivery schedule was immediately put into action with the first constituency-wide postal mailing in February and a mixture of hand and postal delivery thereafter at regular intervals with activity gearing up naturally after the election was called on May 22<sup>nd</sup>. Simon Spencer, Richard Church, Adam Kennerley, Danny Bebb and others produced and distributed stakeboards. A donation allowed for the temporary employment of Harry Baldwin as election organiser, managing stakeboards, volunteers, delivery coordination and literature bulk distribution.

Unfortunately, Wales Campaign Manager Kevin Wilkins's employment came to an end on the eve of the election announcement and Glyn was made Campaign Manager for Brecon and Radnorshire, the top constituency focus for the national party. Our activists contributed a small amount of time to B&R but focussed action here in Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr – due to geography, a lack of enthusiasm for telephone canvassing and a desire to succeed locally. Glyn's performances at all the hustings were exceptional. It was therefore doubly saddening for activists that he was called away to B&R for the final four weeks of the campaign. National party organisers and campaign advisors are convinced of the correctness of their approach, that having at least one MP in Wales will reap dividends. Let's hope time proves them right. As it stands, in Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr we finished a poor fourth behind Reform and a disgraced former Conservative, activists' morale was challenged and membership numbers were not boosted to the extent that would normally be expected during an election period.

In addition we have had two county council by-elections, in Machynlleth and Rhiwcyonon. Both are areas where our activity has been low in recent years and each had a number of very popular candidates on the ballot. Competition was stiff. In both places, Glyn led a delivery programme at a scale that would have been likely to achieve wins in areas where latent activity had been higher and both candidates were extremely active in campaigning. Although we failed to win, the campaign activity marked a significant uptick in voter engagement in both places.

### **Regular Campaigning**

The outline five-year campaign plan for the party, developed last year, will need revision and updating by the new committee. The first annual plan adopted at a meeting in Newtown last year has been partially followed, with some councillors, notably in Welshpool, Llanidloes and Churchstoke ( heartfelt thanks to Heather Kidd and colleagues in neighbouring Shropshire for the latter), producing regular Focus newsletters. Far greater activity in terms of Focus deliveries, campaigning and member development is needed across the constituency, particularly in Newtown, if we are to return Senedd members in 2026.

The campaign committee reconvened after several months' breather post election, thanks to Glyn Preston. He has taken responsibility for reinvigorating campaigning, creating a costed constituency-level literature plan for 2025 and producing a first publication focussing on the winter fuel payments scandal that is being hand delivered in key areas now.

### **County Council group**

Much of this report remains unchanged from last year. Councillors Danny Bebb, Richard Church, Kelly Healy, Adam Kennerley, Gareth Morgan, Glyn Preston, Carole Robinson and David Selby are a credit to us all. The councillors are remarkably assiduous in their committee and ward duties. Sadly, due to high levels of deprivation, their caseload is weighty and the dedication required to care for their residents represents a significant time investment alongside their own busy lives. Richard Church and David Selby carry out their duties as cabinet portfolio holders with the seriousness, wisdom and commitment that we would all hope to see from politicians in administration but so rarely do; the same goes for Adam Kennerley as a cabinet assistant with additional responsibilities but no additional remuneration. The scandalous underfunding of local government makes this an

exceedingly difficult time to be in administration and unfavourable headline news is set to continue as the financial position deteriorates year on year. Our councillors have managed to keep PCC books in the black, a not inconsiderable achievement.

The work undertaken in 2023 to put in place better group communications among councillors and to build team cohesion has had some success. The group has regular meetings prior to full council and the WhatsApp group chat is a valuable source of useful information and moral support. Communications between the council group and local parties could still be improved significantly. The two local party chairs and Council Group Chair Claire Hall have started monthly meetings to try to make relations more productive. The first job has been to review the council group's standing orders, which sounds dry but actually should be a useful distillation of the expectation of how the group should function of its self and in collaboration with the parties. It is notable that the current standing orders allow for a number of local party executive members and unsuccessful county council candidates to be included in council group meetings as non-voting members. This could be a useful sense check of potentially unpopular changes to policy and could also energise activists if they feel their input is having a material impact on improving life for the county's residents. It could also help with communications to and from the group.

Communications between the council group and local party activists and members remain one of the biggest challenges, in my view. Councillor representatives give a rich account of their activities at the monthly executive meetings and the Chair is invited to the council group meetings. However, decisions that affect residents are made on a daily, not monthly basis. The Chair can rarely make the group meetings due to family commitments. Some information is shared between the council group and local party WhatsApp groups (non-confidential information, obviously) but it is haphazard. Councillors post information to their Facebook pages – who sees their posts is dependent on Facebook's algorithms so is outside proper control. Agreeing a mechanism for timely sharing of important decisions would a) avoid activists (and in some instances councillors) learning about contentious decisions via social media or the local news b) make activists feel valued c) make it possible to condense the information into more regular email newsletters to members so that they feel there is more of a point to their membership d) open up the possibility of members being engaged in a two-way exchange about the development of council services e) give the councillors an opportunity to celebrate their successes – a much needed counterbalance to the regular bad news that inevitably comes with managing a local authority in times of appalling local government funding – and in the face of a Conservative- and Plaid-supporting local newspaper. Responsibility for communications is within the role description of the council group leader.

## **Policy development**

The policy working group agreed in 2023 mostly fizzled out within weeks, with the notable exception of the Montgomery Canal. The canal has proved a thorny and divisive issue. This Executive Committee voted 7-2 against supporting public funding of works - above and beyond the £14 million already ear-marked by the Levelling Up Funding under the previous Conservative-Independent administration - whose eventual aim is to open the waterway to motorised boats. It is the Committee's view that fewer than 250 boats a year would be allowed to enter the canal due to ecological constraints, thereby either constituting a poor return on investment for the tax payer at a time when essential services are being lost or putting the canal's uniquely rich wildlife in danger. According to the curious permutations of local government organisation, our cabinet members will

be given officers' recommendations on how to proceed, limiting their say on the matter. Thanks are due to Adam Kennerley for setting up the Canal Ecological Forum, a group of independent ecologists who meet to oversee plans and monitoring of works, with your Chair as Secretary. The situation remains difficult.

A more thorough consideration of policy issues would help provide a clear and unified message as events unfurl and give motivation to members and activists. As with communication, I recognise that council group members are working extremely hard at case work, committee meetings, cabinet work and many are also actively campaigning for the party, all without paid staff to support any of their efforts. Conditions are tough.

### **Coordination with other local parties**

County councillors continue to work productively and closely with Brecon and Radnorshire councillors and councillors and activists of neighbouring Shropshire. B&R councillors joined in campaigning for the two by-elections in Mont. The Chair maintains good working relations with B&R, N and S Shropshire, and Wrexham and Clwyd South.

### **The future**

This marks my final year as your chair. It has been a tremendously interesting and enjoyable three years. Despite some policy disagreement, the good humour and fellow feeling of our group remains undented. Our values of fairness, respect and equality unite us. Time spent with you all is always spirit lifting and heartwarming. Family commitments have somewhat curtailed my activities in the latter part of this year and I leave the committee now to take up employment. I hope to see you all regularly. For those continuing there is much to be done. In my view the national party has a job to do in inspiring passion for Liberal Democrats. Locally and nationally, two simple questions will be key. What do we want to achieve? Then, how do we communicate – who needs to know what when and how?

### **Thanks**

The Chair would like to thank the executive members for their conscientiousness in attending to the good governance of the party and wise expenditure of members' much valued contributions, most notably Treasurer Dave Collington, Secretary Cynthia Jones and Membership Secretary Tim Saul; county councillors for their work; party members for their generous donations of both money and time, here a special mention to Patrick Adams and Simon Spencer for their research support; Ric Wegener for planning and many, many thousands of steps; James Harris for developing organisation locally in the northerly Glyndwr area; Glyn Preston for his campaigning leadership; Sali Ann Preston and Dewi Hughes for translation; the organisers of social gatherings, particularly Nick Semper, Tim Saul, Richard Church and Simon Spencer; Harry Baldwin for his enthusiastic commitment during the General election; and our two by-election candidates Richard Amy and Dylan Owen. We are incredibly fortunate to have David Collington as treasurer and agent, leaving the rest of us comfortable in the knowledge that finances and electi2on reporting are first class.