



Cross-Party Working in Brighton and Hove

**Notes from the Brighton and Hove Compass group event on
16 March 2021**

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Programme of the event

- Welcome and introductions by the Chair: Professor Ivor Gaber, University and Sussex
- Introduction to Brighton and Hove Compass: Ian Chisnall, member of the B & H Compass Steering Group
- Presentations by speakers from Lewes District Council (LDC):
 - Stephen Gauntlett, Liberal Democrat, Chair of LDC May 2017 to July 2020
 - Zoe Nicholson, Green, Deputy Leader of LDC and Leader of the Green Group
 - Chris Collier, Labour, Cabinet Member LDC
- Responses by speakers from Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC)
 - Nancy Platts, Labour, Leader of the Opposition of BHCC and Leader of the Labour Group
 - Sue Shanks, Green, Deputy Leader of BHCC
- Questions and discussion
- What next for Brighton and Hove Compass

Lewes District Council (LDC) presentations

Speakers described the development of LDC's highly innovative co-operative structure in which the Greens, Liberal Democrats, Labour and Independent councillors have collaborated on a joint corporate plan [add link].

This new approach was developed after the local government elections in April 2019, which shifted the political balance so that the Conservatives lost overall control as Labour took three seats for the first time and the Greens became the largest opposition party.

After some months of negotiation, the Corporate Plan was drafted (with input from all parties) and the annual rotation of leadership between the Greens and Liberal Democrats was agreed. Zoe Nicholson, Green, was the first leader of the Co-operative Alliance from July 2019, followed by James MacCleary, Liberal Democrat, from July 2020. There are nine Cabinet members: 4 Green, 3 Liberal Democrat, 1 Labour and 1 Independent.

Points raised in discussion and in response to questions included:

- Creating a shared vision, content, policy, strategy and implementation of the Corporate Plan by the Alliance were not difficult. However, history and tribal loyalties did create difficulties getting over campaigning against each other – both in terms of the oppositional mindset and also what had been said about each other at elections, and in terms of party issues. Policy issues were less of a problem.

- There is a specific context in Lewes – a district council very different from BHCC as a unitary authority.
- The benefits of cross-party working to avoid Conservative control or No Overall Control included that agreement could be reached on the Green New Deal in Lewes, Community Wealth Building and other issues.
- A strength of the arrangements was that the Cabinet met every week, so they got to know each other well.
- In spite of the agreements to date, there is no guarantee that all those involved will not oppose each other at the next District Council elections, or by-elections. While it is not impossible that a progressive alliance could be developed for elections, it was not there yet. At the moment, there are no plans for such an alliance “before the electorate has spoken” at elections.

Brighton and Hove City Council (BHCC) responses

There has been no overall control (NOC) on Brighton and Hove Council since 2003, nearly 20 years. At the last elections in 2019, Labour had one more seat than the Greens (Labour 20, Greens 19, Conservatives 14, Independents 1 and Liberal Democrats 0), and led the council.

During this period, the Labour administration led the development of a Memorandum of Understanding to allow cross-party working between Labour and the Greens: together they identified common ground on the two party manifestos and developed a shared corporate plan on the issues on which they agreed (including the climate emergency and housing and homelessness).

In 2020, resignations, retirements and suspensions of councillors resulted in the Greens holding the most seats (19 Green, 18 Labour, 13 Conservative, 4 Independent) and the Greens took over in leading the Council.

Both the Greens and Labour had worked very hard to gain find common group and define practical co-operative working between them. The Green Party leadership continued to support the Memorandum of Understanding when they took over the leadership of the Council in July 2020.

In his speech on taking over the Leadership for the Greens [add link to Argus], Phelim MacCafferty said they remained committed to Labour and Greens “shared intent” on “the climate crisis, housing and homelessness, the impact of austerity and commitment to equality”. The corporate plan was seen to reflect those shared values and the parties continued agreement to work together.

Points raised in discussion and in response to questions included:

- The cross-party working arrangements in BHCC had allowed a number of positive developments to go ahead (e.g. building new affordable homes and the Climate Assembly). Avoiding purely party political opposition had allowed the council “to get things done” that might otherwise have been endlessly delayed and lost.

- However, there was opposition to this cross-party working from the Conservatives and also from councillors and members within both Labour and the Greens: certainly “mixed feelings” among many. For those who thought in Westminster terms, old party loyalties and old conflicts remained powerful.
- As in Lewes, councillors in BHCC found little difficulty in agreeing on values, policies and strategies – the difficulties came from historic animosity, tribal loyalties and party rules.

Points made in general discussion included:

- On the doorstep, voters are much more interested in what the Council (and Governments) will do for them than hearing parties simply attack each other. Cross-party working allows progress to be made on improving life for people rather than constant party opposition. That case can be made to voters.
- Labour Party policy at present is to stand a candidate in every seat which makes pre-election progressive alliances difficult. Various options were discussed including partial slates (where certain parties don't stand), and informal arrangements including not investing resources in certain seats to allow other parties a clear run.
- There are also Labour Party policies which require any arrangements to power share to be approved by the National Executive Committee (NEC) – both BHCC and LDC had to go through this lengthy process to get their cross-party working arrangements agreed: they were agreed in both cases.
- Discomfort over progressive alliances among some parties remained but there was strong support across all parties represented for Proportional Representation (PR) to be brought in to replace the current First Past the Post (FPTP) system. This is formal policy for the Greens and Liberal Democrats and it is gaining increasing support across the Labour Party: Pavilion CLP has voted to support PR recently.
- However, it is currently hard to see how any of the progressive parties could get into power and enact such electoral reforms without a pre-election progressive alliance in the first place and this continues to be a battle within parties.
- The progressive parties should continue to work together on progressive campaigns, and do more of that, to get to know and trust each other more, as the basis for closer working in future.
- It will need continuing pressure within parties to push for these sorts of changes, making the case that this is a better way to do politics and it is something that needs to be done.

Next steps

Colin Miller, from the Steering Group of Brighton and Hove Compass, thanked all participants for such a stimulating discussion.

BH Compass will continue to work on these issues, and take the points raised to Compass nationally – which is working on developing action groups for each of the progressive parties to find ways of working for change within as well as between parties.