

Jet propelled

The architect of the 'easyCouncil' model - the possible blueprint for local government under the Tories - explains to **Hélène Mulholland** why it is more than just providing public services without the trimmings

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like Freer describes himself as the "architect" of a new Conservative concept on the local government block, easyCouncil. And he thanks the media for coining the term. "When you say easyCouncil, people get it," says the former leader of Barnet council in north London. "It's terrific shorthand."

The proposals for a radical new local government model of delivery that does not automatically provide blanket coverage of services, and which forges what Freer has called "a new relationship with citizens", came under the media spotlight last summer, 18 months after he and colleagues in Barnet first started working on the Future Shape of the Council document. In a nutshell, he says it is about "making the public sector work efficiently and eventually getting out of the way".

Manchester-born Freer, 49, now the Conservative parliamentary candidate for Finchley and Golders Green, Margaret Thatcher's old manor, reveals some tough intentions behind a policy seen as a possible blueprint for local government under a Tory government.

Barnet council's proposals for a major restructuring of service delivery, which brought him to national attention, is three-pronged. While the media, he says, focused just on the "easyJet model" of service delivery, based on the no-fills budget airline that charges customers extra for services once considered part of the standard fare, the second strand relates to streamlining and merging back-office functions of various public sector bodies to cut costs and create "one public sector" or organisation in an area - for example, higher and further education linking with local government and health. Other ideas in this vein include a "common database" on individuals that would prevent people being approached time and time again by "different arms of the state".

The third aspect relates to "targeted intervention" for families with complex needs, who cost the council dearest.

Drive for efficiency

At the heart of the first strand is an attempt to have a different relationship with local residents, a part of what Freer calls a "relentless drive for efficiency". He insists that he and colleagues "never said it would be a budget airline model of running the council", yet his subsequent comments suggest otherwise.

"All we said is that budget airlines shoo up a fairly fat and lazy sector, which is a good thing," Freer says. "They were also very transparent by saying this is what we do, this is what we don't do... We need to be honest with our residents and say we do that, we don't that, if you want something different it will cost you more, or it could cost you less."

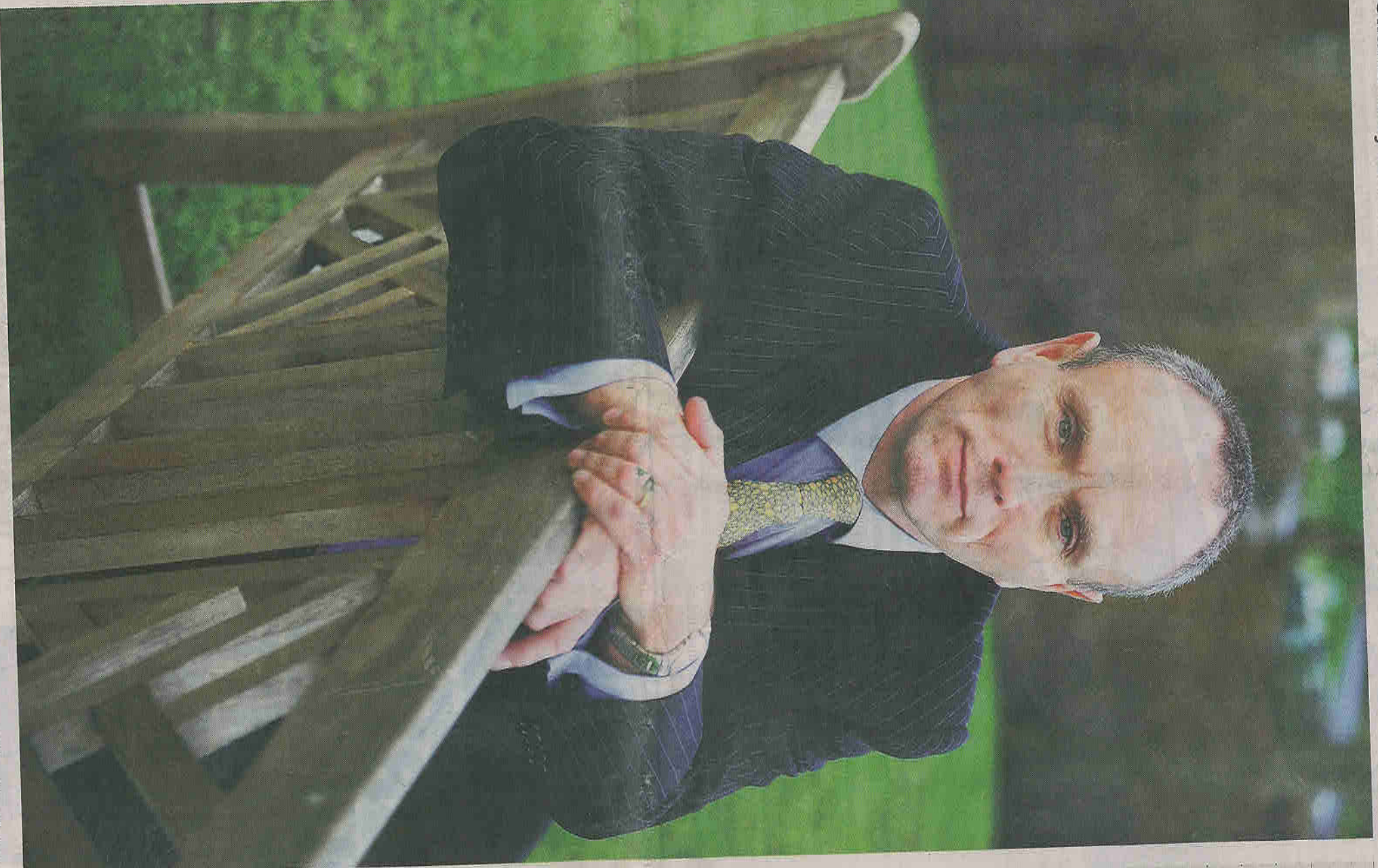
Less? He cites giving residents money back if they agree to a smaller refuse bin and a lot more recycling to avoid their waste heaping on to costly landfill sites.

More? As the second busiest planning authority in London, the council wants to offer a single point of contact for businesses who juggle many applications with the council at the same time. But he insists that there are no plans to allow residents the opportunity to pay more to have their planning application fast-tracked. "It's illegal, you can't do it," he says firmly.

A single point of contact is also envisaged for families with multiple needs, under the banner of "targeted intervention". The council, he says, has 300 families in its area that cost between them £6m a year, have many social issues, and are known not only to the council "but, guess what, they are known to the police or primary care trust as well".

Freer wants each of these families to have a personal adviser - voluntary or paid - to act as a "gatekeeper" who would say to those wanting to help that family, "Why, and what's the outcome?" This is because he believes that targeted support "shouldn't be ad infinitum", and that the current system "isn't working".

"If both parents are out of work and that could lead to health problems, let's try to work on getting these people back into work," Freer says. "If they are not accessing the right bits of the health service, let's get sort out their health problems. Let's get



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kids back into school. It's trying to break that cycle of deprivation.

"Look, we are not taking over these families. The idea is that someone has an adviser who guides them, maybe a bit of cajoling, but to try to keep people moving towards breaking that cycle."

What if the family tells you to butt out? It's a matter of getting the right people, he says, nodding to the voluntary sector. "If it's not necessarily seen as the state, sometimes that trust is easier to build up. I'm not saying it's going to be easy. It might not work, but it's worth trying because the current system is not only expensive but it's not doing a very good job."

"We never said this was about rolling back the frontiers of the state. This is about making the public sector work efficiently and eventually getting out of the way."

One of the things all families need is a decent home. For the poorest, this means affordable homes for rent. But councils, including Barnet, are accused by Labour opponents and housing campaigners of limiting social housing for the poorest under the banner of "mixed communities", in effect deterring the neediest

social groups - and therefore the most costly - from their patch.

But Freer - who spent part of his childhood in council accommodation, which his parents subsequently bought under Thatcher's right-to-buy legislation - rebuts the "simplistic" suggestion. He says his council has big ambitions for regenerating estates and that there is a huge amount of affordable housing "on the stocks".

"My Labour opposition in Barnet are Stalinists," he says. "They just haven't moved on. All our housing surveys with social housing tenants say they want a housing journey."

The council has split its affordable housing quota in favour of intermediate housing available to anyone earning up to £60,000, so that only 15% of its new housing is for socially rented homes, compared with 35% for partial homeownership. Freer believes that while some people recognise they will only ever be able to have rented accommodation, many more aspire to own their own home by getting on the intermediary rung of the ladder. "Maybe only 20%, maybe only 80%, but they want that journey," he says.

Curriculum Vitae

Age 49.

Lives North London.

Status Civil partnership.

Education Chaddertron grammar school for boys, Manchester; St Aidan's school, Carlisle. 1979-84: read accountancy and business law at Strling University but did not take his finals; BT Vital Vision executive MBA, Harvard, Stamford and Berkeley US.

Career 2003-08: various positions at Barclays bank, from area manager to area sales manager. June 2002-March 2003: area director, South Down, Braddford & Bingley; April 2000-June 2002: regional director, London north, Inter-Alliance; January 1997-April 2000: regional sales manager, London north-west; September 1996-January 1997: field sales manager, central London, Barclays; May 1993-August 1996: area and sales manager positions, National & Provincial building society; May 1990-May 1993: management consultant, Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu; November 1989-May 1990: regional manager, Kentucky Fried Chicken GB; May 1989-November 1989: business development manager, William Hill Organisation; April 1988-May 1989: area manager, Pizza Hut UK; May 1984-February 1988: area manager, Pizzaland International.

Public life 2006-present: ward councillor, Finchley, Church End; May 2006-December 2009: leader, Barnet council; 2008-present: executive member, London Councils (health and adult social care).

Hobbies Running, learning French.

He adds that Barnet will still deliver "more socially rented housing than any other borough. It's the quantum that counts, not these artificial percentages.

Political ambitions mean Freer won't be overseeing the implementation of Future Shape. He quit as leader in December concentrate on contesting England's marginal parliamentary seat.

Decision backfired

Freer, who cut his management teeth working for fast-food chains before moving to the banking sector, found that being political leader did not always give him the kind of headlines he would like. A decision to retain the resources portfolio becoming leader backfired when after becoming leader backfired when he emerged that, on his watch, officers failed to follow correct procedures when depositing £27.4m in collapsed Icelandic bank. The money remains frozen in the system pending legal action. The Liberal Democrats called on him to step down over what he said was a symptom of the administration's failure to keep proper oversight of officers, and Private Eye magazine named him "Banker of the Year" in Rotten Boroughs Awards of 2008. He says he had set a sound policy but wasn't followed. "Two members of staff over the affair, but he stayed in post," he is not responsible for the operational matters," he maintains. "That's what you have as chief officers for."

Won't the exposure he has received during his three years as Barnet's leader be used as ammunition against him in the general election? He replies: "It gives me a profile, being leader of the council, so I am in the paper every week, which is a parliamentary candidate will beg, or borrow for. On the other hand, you can be in the local paper for doing something that people don't like." He points out that leader of the council, you do have to take difficult decisions in running a big organisation that is not awash with money. We shall soon find out if the pub afforded Mr easyCouncil will be a hindrance in his future political career.

Mike Freer speaks at this week's Guardian's Public Services Summit 2010. Details at guardian.co.uk/summit