

Paul Bettison won a special award for his contribution to local government at this year's c'llr achievement awards. Mark Smulian spoke to him about his unusual entry into local government and his work on housing and the environment.

Winning ways

Health bodies issue all manner of warnings about excess consumption of alcohol, but none has yet said that drinking too much can lead to winning a special award for one's contributions to local government.

Bracknell Forest leader Paul Bettison took that award from the LGiU and c'llr this year, and is quite open about the unusual route that led him into local government.

"I was drunk," he admits. At the end of a social event he was aware he'd had an interesting conversation with a man present but "also that I'd drunk a lot of red wine and couldn't recall any of it".

While at work the next day, his wife phoned to say that a group of Conservative party officials were at the house "as you've agreed to stand for the council".

He rushed home and "paid my first ever subscription to a political party at the same time that I filled in the nomination paper for Sandhurst Town Council".

A year or so later he was on the then Bracknell Borough Council and became leader of its unitary successor Bracknell Forest on the same day that Tony Blair became prime minister.

This is where his connection with the LGiU began. "I think we were almost the only Conservative council in membership then," he recalls.

"The previous Labour council had been members so I decided to give it a year and see what the LGiU did, and I found its clear briefings on government policy a complete godsend, and I've been a strong supporter ever since."

Over a succession of roles in the Local Government Association, Councillor Bettison has been most

closely associated with housing and the environment.

He was its housing chair just as large scale voluntary stock transfer gathered steam in the late 1990s, and remains convinced of the concept's merits.

"I think it has been a success as the new landlords are specialists in social housing," he says.

"As for selling off individual council houses, I support it and those who oppose it on political grounds always say homes sold are a loss to the rented sector, well they take a family out of the rented sector too so the overall effect is zero.

"It also brings in money from sales and in any well-run council that money will be used to build more homes."

He moved from housing to environment "just at the right time if you like being in interesting places".

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"The environment was peripheral when I was first there but people were just starting to realise that the planet we live on might be in trouble," Councillor Bettison says.

"People used to get in a large car and drive several miles to a bottle bank to dispose of half a dozen old wine bottles and think they had done their bit, when any good they did was more than cancelled out by the trip. Now people think more widely about what they do."

The increase in recycling over



that time is a source of pride as "we were simply running out of holes in the ground for landfill", but he cautions against councils taking the credit for recycling, saying that success depends on individuals changing their habits and ways of thinking.

Councillor Bettison is also a robust defender of alternate weekly collections, despite communities secretary Eric Pickles' strictures to councils.

"They are still weekly, we just collect different things each week,

people have accepted it although some red top newspapers get excited."

He remains leader of Bracknell Forest after 16 years and still serves the LGA as its lead Conservative for peer improvement and as champion for regulation.

He chairs the Improvement and Efficiency Social Enterprise, formerly the South East REIP, which has also recently conferred an achievement award on him.

"When you start getting these lifetime awards people think you must be about to call it a day," he says.

"But at 59 I'm still a few years younger than the average age for councillors, and I'm not giving up." 

Mark Smulian is a freelance journalist