

Onwards and upwards?

He's one of the most high profile and controversial council leaders, but Stephen Greenhalgh decided to stand down, mid-term. Mark Smulian asked him why and about his record as leader.

There are council leaders who nominally belong to a political party but whose actions give little clue as to which one. There are others who come and go without leaving much impression on their constituents' lives.

Not even Stephen Greenhalgh's loudest detractors could accuse him of these failings.

Since becoming leader at Hammersmith and Fulham in 2006 he has been at the forefront of a distinctively Conservative approach to radical change and is an unabashed partisan figure.

His decision to step down mid-term raised eyebrows, but it will not have gone unnoticed that prime minister David Cameron and communities and local government secretary Eric Pickles paid tribute to him – not something they trouble to do for every departing leader.

Councillor Greenhalgh has perhaps more influence in the higher levels of his party than he lets on.

He has been active in politics since he was 12, when his “Monster Raving Loony Party with a sci-fi twist” resoundingly lost to the Tories in the 1979 mock election at his school, he recalls.

“I reckoned there was something about being a Conservative that beat trying to launch your own party and I shoved a Conservative poster in my bedroom window and have been a loyal Conservative ever since.”

The presidency of the Cambridge Union brought him into contact with a generation of Tories now in the cabinet – though he says he has a positive working relationship, rather than a close friendship, with ministers – but it took him a decade or so to be elected.

He won a by-election in 1996 (“not a great time to be a Conservative”) onto a council that had been Labour since 1986.

As group leader from 2003 he used time in opposition to think through how and why the Tories would run the borough differently

First things first, though. “When we won, my first act was to get on roof and pull down the red

flag and replace it with a union flag. It was the symbol of socialism and I pulled it down, it gave me the biggest lift I needed.”

More seriously, at 9am the day after the 2006 election he presented the borough's then chief executive Geoff Alltimes with a paper that set out his programme. This had been long thought through.

“When we won, my first act was to get on roof and pull down the red flag and replace it with a union flag”

“I always believed politicians should spend some time thinking about what is in interests of electorate,” he says.

“I spent 10 years in opposition and I think my career was based on a solid foundation of failure in not winning elections, but I was thinking about what mattered to the electors of an urban inner city environment, and the Conservatives do not win many inner city councils.”

Councillor Greenhalgh attributes the Tories' victory to three particular manifesto points.

“We discovered crime was the number one issue and that zero tolerance policing and 24/7 neighbourhood policing played well in our patch, so we were the party of law and order,” he says.

“Also, we stressed value for money being the party that would cut council taxes, and the third was cleaner streets and better parks, cleaner and greener.”

Crime is not solely under a borough's control and the approach was to do what it could.

“We paid for more cops to police our town

centres and took a more intensive model than the usual neighbourhood policing,” he says.

“The focus was maintaining law and order, frankly Shepherds Bush was more like Dodge City when we started.”

Hammersmith and Fulham has cut council tax with vigour, so that next year it will come in £1 below neighbouring Kensington and Chelsea, and hopes by 2014 to get down to Wandsworth's levels.

This has left Councillor Greenhalgh open to criticism by opponents that he has delivered savings that are rather minor at individual taxpayer level at the cost of cutting services on which many depend.

He bristles at the idea. “When you cut a few percent people can say it is only a little, but look at historic increase under Labour.

“From the day council tax started their average increase was 7.7 per cent, against our 3 per cent cut. Within three years we have saved the average taxpayer, not just band D, £1,500.”

Councillor Greenhalgh rejects claims that this has been achieved simply by cutting services.

“It's been done very simply in three ways. The first is to focus on reducing debt because if you have debt you spend a lot of your revenue repaying and servicing it.

“For every million pounds, £100,000 goes in servicing debt and interest and we have paid down debt from £170 million to £90 million, which allows us to put £8m into services.”

This has been done in part, he says, by selling surplus council property, which yields both a capital receipt and a reduction in running costs.

“There are arguments about ‘selling the family silver’ as you can only sell assets once,” he says.

“But you only have one debt too, and once its paid down you are not spending a lot of money on servicing it. Property has been the key to getting that money into revenue.”

There has also been reform of service delivery. Some have been relatively small but

have a cumulative effect, such as moving family support to locality based teams “rather than a lot of disparate services”, separating assessment from delivery in adult care and undoing “potty ways in which the council was structured, for example, we found we had an adaptations service for private housing, and another for public, which created two overhead structures unnecessarily”.

The other main prong has been reducing overheads by combining services with either or both of Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster.

This has seen the ‘triborough’ take over adult care, children’s services, libraries and associated back office functions, while the borough shares a chief executive and some environmental services with Kensington and Chelsea.

“The focus was maintaining law and order, frankly Shepherds Bush was more like Dodge City when we started”

Councillor Greenhalgh recognises the argument that if councils share so much there may be little purpose in maintaining separate political entities, but responds: “I think very important to maintain a democratic accountability.

“Sharing allows you to reduce overheads, it is nothing to do with choices about the kind of service you deliver.

“At the same time as sharing overheads we are very keen on neighbourhood devolution, pushing power from Whitehall and town hall down to make decisions at neighbourhood level.

“It’s like a complex algorithm, if you want to cut overheads you combine, if you want to deliver more responsive services you get close to the people you serve.”

All this has made Councillor Greenhalgh a high profile figure in Conservative circles, and his decision to now immerse himself in the White City pilot for neighbourhood community budgets has puzzled some.

This seeks to pool central and local government spending, in a deprived area facing extensive new development, and to involve residents in decisions on its use.

An interesting venture certainly, but why swap the leader’s role for this?

“Too often when you get regeneration projects the physical regeneration, the housebuilding and economic development outstrips social renewal, and there is a chance here to ensure change that benefits local



Stephen Greenhalgh with a giant number 3 – part of the council’s council tax cutting campaign

residents,” he explains.

“That is best delivered by putting local residents in driving seat, understanding their hopes, needs and aspirations and that means in politics letting go.

“I’m keen to apply what I’ve learnt at White City, understanding what we can do in areas of opportunity but also of limitations. The problem with a lot of regeneration projects is that we have over-promised an under-delivered.”

He adds that he wants residents to guide spending by understanding how finances work

and the options available, rather than simply make spending decisions, an approach he derides as “an infantile way of empowering people”.

Councillor Greenhalgh says he still has “huge political ambitions, I’m not finished as a politician”, but declines to elaborate.

“I’ve understood that what is needed to be an effective politician spending a big budget in a very political environment is the mind of a manager, the soul of a leader and the art of a politician.”

It seems unlikely that politics has heard the last of Stephen Greenhalgh. 