

Mark Smulian meets the leader of the UK's only Green council and asks if there's more to the party than 'green' issues.

Jason Kitcat

There's a weight of expectation hanging on Jason Kitcat. As the only Green party council leader, can his administration convince the public that the Greens are not an eccentric fringe party but, as in some other European countries, in the political mainstream?

Green control of Brighton & Hove City Council rests on the unwillingness of the Labour and Conservative groups to work together, leaving Councillor Kitcat to run a minority administration, albeit as the largest party.

Clearly the Greens' main selling point is environmental policy and here Councillor Kitcat points to a record of measures informed by the concept of One Planet Living, a set of 10 principles developed by the World Wildlife Fund and BioRegional based on the concept that if the world lived as does the average European its resource demands would require three planets.

"It covers the whole gamut, it's not just about recycling, it covers everything the council does and we have committed to be a one planet council with the aim of being the world's first one planet city," he says.

"Councils do so much, how do you focus what you are doing? This is a great way to do that."

He is anxious though that the administration should not be seen as solely focussed on traditional Green issues.

"One planet living is about improving people's quality of life and that can be by, for example, improving council housing stock and addressing transport challenges."

New communal recycling and community composting are part

of the story, but Councillor Kitcat says: "One of the interesting things is that people have preconceptions about what 'green' means, but we have brought in a living wage at £7.20 an hour, and we have started building first new council houses in 20 years."

The Greens are not opposed to development as such, having approved a £14.8m loan to get the I-360 observation tower project started near the derelict West Pier.

He says the previous Conservative administration was "obsessed

"Instead of asking who our friends are and where our wards are, we will publish clear evidence based criteria for what we will do."

by underground car parking and car based travel generally, which is just not viable nor in tune with direction of travel.

"Many developers are coming for opportunities here because of the green reputation of the city.

"We have a focus on eco, new media and cultural and arts

businesses so that attracts a lot of investment and developers say 'we went to do something here because it has reputation as a forward thinking green city'."

Brighton & Hove has had to grapple with cuts like any council, but Councillor Kitcat says its approach has been to publish criteria for cutting services and stick to them

"Instead of asking who our friends are and where our wards are, we will publish clear evidence

based criteria for what we will do," he says. "We have to follow through those decisions."

The previous administration's 'intelligent commissioning' approach of outsourcing

to social enterprises has gone replaced by "a clear presumption against outsourcing and in favour of maintaining in-house capacity" tempered by pragmatism where cost or lack of expertise prevent this.

"I consider needs-based and data-driven decision making an essential part of what councils do," he says.



Jason Kitcat speaking at Brighton & Hove's People's Day - a community event designed to increase understanding and to celebrate the diverse communities that make up Brighton & Hove. People's Day 2012 took place on Saturday 14 July as part of the Olympic Torch relay weekend of festivities

Councillor Kitcat entered politics when he met members of the Green party, of which he was not previously aware.

"I'd always been interested in politics and the green agenda and had set up recycling campaign groups," he recalls.

"I found the Green party perfectly matched my beliefs and values and started by delivering leaflets, then discovered I adored knocking on people's doors and won a by-election in 2007."

He represents the city centre Regency ward and now has little time for his website building business, but has no ambitions beyond his present post.

"This is a dream role for me as I was personally frustrated wanted to change things, and what is so fantastic as a council leader is you are actually running something, and very few MPs get that chance," he says.

"How many other places can you get a job where you influence the running of a city? It's incredible to do that and bring green values to it." 

Mark Smulian is a freelance journalist