

'If you want to change things, get involved'...

... that's what 25-year-old Community member Rory Palmer did, and the people of Leicester put him on the city council.

Fed up with dirty streets, graffiti and anti-social behaviour? Well, why not do something about it? That's exactly what 25-year-old Community member Rory Palmer (pictured) has done. In May this year he became Leicester City Council's youngest councillor.

'I was determined to do something to improve our city, especially around the outer estates,' said Rory. 'To change things, you have to get the powers to do it.'

But Rory faced one huge stumbling block - the council seat he was contesting as a Labour candidate was firmly held by the Lib Dems who were in coalition with the Tories.

'It was a Conservative and Lib Dem city council, and if we were ever to improve our city we had to wrest control from them,' he declared. So for a year Rory and his colleagues went door to door in Eyres Monsell ward and did what few politicians do - listened to what the people said.

'They told us exactly what they needed to improve their lives and we formulated an action programme to implement those improvements if we took over,' Rory recalled.

The result was the best one in Britain for Labour who gained 18 seats and took control of the council. 'It was a remarkable result. The former council had made a mess of regenerating the city, run out of ideas and failed to invest in key local services. We ran a direct, honest campaign and won - but now the hard work begins.'

One of the first things Rory and his fellow Labour councillors will introduce is uniformed wardens to patrol streets throughout the city and reassure residents. 'Our wardens will have powers to tackle people who litter our streets, write graffiti, fly tip etc. Working alongside the police the wardens will clamp down on all aspects of vandalism and anti-social behaviour,' explained Rory.

The former council had also brought residents nothing but despair - with cuts in a wide range of services, including libraries and adult education courses. Now there is new hope. 'We'll be dealing with the mess left by the Lib Dems and Tories,' Rory added. 'One of the most important things we need to ensure is that Leicester retains a skilled workforce to face the economic challenges of the future.'

'We are pledging to enhance our communities so they are strong and prosperous again. The people of Leicester know this. We made our plans clear to them day after day knocking on doors for over a year. We took on board people's concerns and ideas for a better quality of life. We now have to work with the local community to deliver it.'

The British National Party (BNP) was also threatening to take

Leicester council seats. They specifically targeted the seat Rory was contesting and while they increased their vote there, Rory beat them.

'I don't believe most of the people who vote BNP are racist. The BNP homed in on a number of issues and ran a campaign of outrageous scaremongering,' Rory said. 'We challenged them head on. People listened and we won. But we have a massive challenge to engage with more people in their local communities. It's this isolation from decision-making that the BNP thrive on.'

'I'm a very young councillor,' Rory adds, 'with a lot to learn. I have to walk before I can run, but I received a huge amount of support from our union, Community.'

'I want to keep listening to the people. That's why I am going to have lots of opportunities for local people to drop in and tell me what is worrying them.'

One of Rory's personal aims is to ensure Leicester gains all it can from the 2012 Olympics. 'There will be all kinds of opportunities from encouraging the city's young athletes, to people adopting healthier lifestyles. Leicester is a great sporting city and we want to help develop our future Olympians.'

'We want to ensure people have proper sports facilities. In the ward I represent there has been a total lack of things for young people to do. I'm going to talk to youngsters hanging around street corners and ask what they'd like to have. It's a question of listening again.'

Rory will prove in years to come that it's possible to make a difference in your community but you have to get involved.

'I'd say to anyone who wants to get involved and, like me, become a councillor, let our union help you,' says Rory. 'It offers all kinds of support - just speak to your branch officials or regional office. If becoming a councillor isn't for you, then what about becoming a school governor (see page 9), going on an NHS Trust, or taking a community leadership position?'

'It won't always be easy, and you'll have to be resilient, determined and take advantage of all the support there is. I think you just have to stay focused, stay positive.' That's what Rory has learned from the two Labour MPs he now works for - John Mann and Sir Peter Soulsby.

As well as his new role as councillor, Rory was also the TUC's youth award winner last year for his work among young Community members. 'All that's been great experience, but I'm still learning,' Rory concluded. 'In Leicester I could see that so much needed to change. Now, as a Labour councillor, I have a chance to do that.'

