

# EAST HERTS DISTRICT LABOUR PARTY

## 2015 MANIFESTO

### INTRODUCTION

**East Herts is changing rapidly.** It is an attractive place to live because of its nearness to London and existing prosperity through a mixture of modern industries and fertile agricultural land. Many who choose to move here are increasingly from varied demographic groups adding to the cultural and ethnic diversity of the area. **However, in East Herts there are pockets of real poverty.** Housing of all kinds is in short supply and inadequate for modern household formation. Much of it is energy inefficient. **Recent reports show pressure on the shortage of primary school places is growing.** Councils at District and County level are failing to cope with the increasing pace of social, demographic and economic change affecting our local communities.

**The current Tory dominated District Council has chosen not to invest income received from housing development** to improve public transport, health/ community care services and educational provision. **A united and coherent opposition is needed to question the priorities of East Herts Council.** Only the election of Labour Councillors will give you the opportunity to successfully achieve transparency in decision making by the Council.

East Herts Council could have improved our communities but instead has decided to hoard income received from house developers. The Government's New Homes Bonus Scheme has been implemented far too slowly thus the opportunity for local communities to decide on the improvements for a better life for all have been delayed. **Labour District Councillors will work with our existing colleagues at County and Town and Parish Council level** to ensure we get modern community facilities so desperately needed by all those in East Herts.

### SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES AND BUSINESSES

**Labour supports sustainable communities and a pro small business environment in our towns and to that end will:**

- **Ensure East Herts Council and its Contractors pay the Living Wage and employ no one on Zero Hours contracts.**
- Promote cycling and cycle paths where appropriate.
- With community support promote pedestrian friendly environments and, where appropriate, pedestrianise or **set 20mph limits for shopping streets, around schools and other areas** where pedestrians should have priority. Also tackling inconsiderate parking.
- Investigate Park & Ride schemes for Hertford & Bishop's Stortford together with other people friendly transport systems as well as promoting affordable and enhanced bus services. >>>>>

- **Pay on Exit systems on car parks** when equipment replacements due.
- **First hour free in car parks to encourage in-town shoppers**
- Season ticket system for all day parking to aid employees (often on low wages with no alternative for getting to work), and co-operate with local Chambers of Commerce to achieve this.
- Full consultation with town/parish councils on local parking arrangements in smaller towns (e.g. Buntingford, Stanstead Abbots)
- Labour policy supports small businesses with proposals to cut business rates for small businesses. **Small businesses should also be encouraged to occupy empty shops in our town centres with a 50% cut in business rates for the first year.**

## ENVIRONMENT AND WASTE DISPOSAL

1. Environmental policies in East Hertfordshire up to now have been driven by Government and European regulations, rather than a real desire to minimise harm to the environment. This has resulted in great improvements in the recycling rate in East Hertfordshire, with a big increase in 2010. Since then, the increase has been marginal, the rate last year being just under 49%, according to the council, although DEFRA reports the rate as being 46.6%, a little above the national average. **Ways must be found to increase the recycling rate to the level of the best local authorities**, such as Rochford District Council in Essex at 67% or, in Hertfordshire, Three Rivers District Council at 62%.
2. The introduction of blue bins has, according to the council, increased recycling, but this has not yet been confirmed by published figures. **The system should be reviewed**, particularly in the light of the problems that some households have in accommodating three large bins. For example, the council no longer provides smaller bins for smaller households. The announcement of **the end of recycling of plastic bags was badly botched and the policy should be reviewed**. Bags and plastic film are only a small proportion of waste, but they are particularly harmful to the environment and dangerous to animals. Furthermore, only a small proportion is contaminated with food residue, allegedly the reason for exclusion.
3. **The council should use its powers through the planning system to encourage new houses to meet very high standards of insulation**, above those prescribed under building regulations, and to have solar panels or heat pumps installed when built. The cost of the technology for this has reduced significantly and would not hugely increase the price of houses, particularly in the more up-market sector. >>>>>

**4. Such technology should be installed on council-owned property and encouraged elsewhere.** Publicity for previous schemes administered through the Council has been very poor. The government has introduced measures which make planning permission unnecessary for retro-fitting of this technology in many cases. However, where this is not the case, planning permission, and sometimes listed building consent, is needed. East Hertfordshire has a large number of properties which are listed or in conservation areas. The cumbersome planning system is geared to larger projects and requires maps and plans which are quite unnecessary and the completion of forms which have little relevance and often duplicate information. Also, in such cases, as encouraged by government guidelines, the Council should announce a presumption of consent unless there strong reasons for refusal.

6. In 2005, a study for the County Council identified East Hertfordshire as a suitable site for a medium scale wind farm of 5 - 30 MW. Yet in 2013 the District Council said that it could not set a target for new renewable energy provision. Plans for a small hydro scheme at Hertford Theatre were announced in December 2013, after many years of gestation. The complacent attitude on these issues must change.

**7. The council is responsible for monitoring air quality** and there are some places where this monitoring has shown problems for some time, notably Gascoyne Way in Hertford and the Hockerill junction in Bishop's Stortford. **There is a lack of urgency in dealing with these problems.** In addition to measures in the Air Quality Management plans, bringing traffic speeds down to the speed limit would help in Gascoyne Way and traffic management measures could help in Hockerill.

**8. All other policies that should be reviewed for environmental impact,** such as schedules for grass cutting to ensure wild flowers can seed and planting schemes in public places to encourage bees and other pollinators.

## HOUSING

**The situation in East Herts with respect to plans for house building is in a mess.** The responsibility for this situation lies with both the Coalition Government and East Herts District Council. In 2010 the national government abolished the East of England Regional Assembly, together with scrapping the strategic plans drawn up by the Assembly.

Responsibility for planning house building was given to local planning authorities, including the assessment of housing need. **In 2011 when the local plan expired East Herts Council did nothing for three years.** In spite of the fact that they were required, under new legislation to draw up a planning framework. In 2014 they issued a Draft District Plan for consultation but this has still not been finalised which means there is no District Plan against which to approve or reject planning applications.

To make matters worse, the National planning Policy framework, published in 2012, introduced a presumption in favour of development. As a result of this lack of an agreed Local Plan, developers have sought to obtain planning permission for houses on sites suitable to them, before they can be restricted by the District Plan. >>>>>

This means that the District Council is now being presented with planning applications which it cannot reject on grounds that they fall outside the District Plan due to fact that such a District Plan does not exist. If they do reject any plans, these may well be approved on appeal because of the presumption in favour of development. **This chaotic situation has been created both by the national government and by East Herts' failure to renew the District Plan in time.**

**It is certainly the case that across East Herts there simply aren't enough homes for rent or for ownership.** With more people wanting to move into the area and local families choosing to stay and grow, the need for more housing has become even more important. Whilst there needs to be a significant growth in housing stock, to meet the needs of our growing population, **your local Labour Party believes it is essential to develop an overall strategy which meets the needs of local people.** Labour Councillors on the District Council will seek to develop housing plans that make an important contribution to building strong neighbourhoods and improving the quality of life for local people throughout East Herts. To deliver this we need a coherent planning framework, to guide the long-term development of housing and social infrastructure.

**Building strong communities and providing excellent housing services will be at the heart of our Housing Strategy.** Good quality housing provides an important foundation for people's lives and contributes to good health and, cohesive communities.

**Whilst an increase in the number of houses built is essential, it is equally important that these developments are planned properly** and include the necessary infrastructure. This means not only the physical infrastructure such as roads and sewage but also the social infrastructure such as schools, health and care provision, meeting halls and shops.

**To deliver this we would engage with local people by listening to them and actively involving them in planning and shaping services** to provide the type of housing and services that meet their needs. We would also ensure that the Planning Department actively seeks the views of the local community before any developments proceed.

We are determined to meet the needs of all people who live in the area, and an essential part of this would be to ensure that any new housing developments includes at least **50% of affordable homes, in the form of Shared Ownership (see appendix 1), Social Housing (see appendix 2) and Housing Cooperatives.** The development of cooperative housing has proved particularly successful in other parts of the region and are distinctive forms of both ownership and tenancies.(see appendix 3).

**We will work with local housing associations,** who provide social housing, both **for the benefit of residents** and to develop a local lettings policy for any new build.

**We will also work with other agencies to support people to live in their own homes with dignity,** combating social isolation, loneliness and fuel poverty. Reducing hazards such as cold houses and falls in homes could save the NHS over £1 million in treatment costs.

An essential part of any housing strategy must be to improve the condition of rented housing in both the private and social sectors in order to prevent accidents and ill health. >>>>>

## To ensure this a Labour Council will:

- Introduce a tenants' hotline where tenants can pass on information about inadequate housing conditions safely and anonymously. The council will then investigate the report and take action if necessary.
- License all privately rented properties at least in those Wards in the town with the largest proportions of privately-rented accommodation.
- Require all houses in multiple occupation (HMO's) to be licensed, currently this only applies if it's rented to 5 or more people who form more than 1 household, it's at least 3 storeys high and tenants share toilet, bathroom or kitchen facilities.
- We will require a planning application to turn any individual dwellings into HMOs. There will be a presumption of refusal where there is already a surfeit of these properties.
- Introduce an East Herts Housing Standard which will be higher than the minimum housing standards legally required of rented property. We will work with local landlords, encouraging them to raise the quality of their properties to the East Herts Housing Standard.
- Clamp down on rogue landlords, using our housing enforcement powers, including closure notices preventing properties from being let until they meet basic standards and challenging individual landlords who the council feels do not meet the 'fit and proper' person test.
- Introduce a compulsory purchase programme of long-term empty properties. Bringing each of these back into occupation ensures another family has a home, council tax is paid on the property and the damaging effect of a blighted, decaying, empty building is lifted from the neighbourhood.
- Seek to find money, both from the government and within the council's own resources, to help housing associations to build social housing.
- Insist that all developments should include 50% of affordable homes a target we'll stick to, unlike the current Tory Council who haven't even stuck to their own 40% rule. In 2013-14 East Herts had a target to build 200 affordable homes. In fact they only built 76.
- Encourage Developers to bring forward sites which already have planning permissions. This is in line with Ed Milliband's statement, that sites should be taken from developers who leave them abandoned for long periods.
- Require that all publicly subsidised housing is built to the 'Life time home standard' and that a proportion of these are built to allow full wheelchair access.

## Appendix 1: Shared ownership.

This is a scheme for those unable to buy a home on the open market. Through this scheme purchasers buy a share of between 25 per cent and 75 per cent of the home's value from a Housing Association. It is necessary to provide a deposit and to raise a mortgage for whatever percentage of the home's value is being purchased.

The housing association owns the remaining share of the value of house and rent is paid on this amount. The rent is up to three per cent of the value of that owned by the Housing Association. The larger the share bought by the homeowner, the less the rent that is payable. When able to, the homeowner can buy additional shares in the property until they own it outright.

## Appendix 2: Social housing.

Social housing is let at low rents, on a secure basis to those who are most in need or struggling with their housing costs. Normally councils and not-for-profit organisations (such as housing associations) are the ones to provide social housing.

A key function of social housing is to provide accommodation that is affordable to people on low incomes. Limits to rent increases set by law mean that rents are kept affordable.

It is allocated on the basis of need. Unlike the private rented sector, where tenancies are offered by the landlord and letting agent to whomever they choose, social housing is distributed according to the local council's allocation scheme.

Housing stock is owned and managed by registered providers. Registered providers (often known as social landlords) are the bodies that own and manage social housing. They tend to be non-commercial organisations such as local authorities or housing associations. Housing associations are independent, not-for-profit organisations that can use any profit they make to maintain existing homes and help finance new ones.

## Appendix 3 Cooperative housing

Housing cooperatives fall into two main categories:

**Non-ownership.** This is usually referred to as 'non-equity' or 'continuing tenancy'. In these types of cooperatives, occupancy rights are granted subject to an agreement which is similar to a lease. The advantage of this over other types of tenancy, is that each tenant has a vote in electing a management committee of the cooperative and therefore has a direct stake and voice in management issues.

**Ownership.** This is referred to as 'equity' or 'strata'. Here occupancy rights are granted by way of the purchase agreements and legal instruments registered on the title. The main advantage of ownership is the pooling of members' resources so their buying power is combined. This lowers the cost per member in all the products and services associated with home ownership

For further information, examples of housing cooperatives can be found on the following sites.

Large scale. The Cooperative Development Society at '[www.cds.coop](http://www.cds.coop)'

Small scale. Argyle Street Housing Cooperative, Cambridge at '[www.ash.coop](http://www.ash.coop)'

