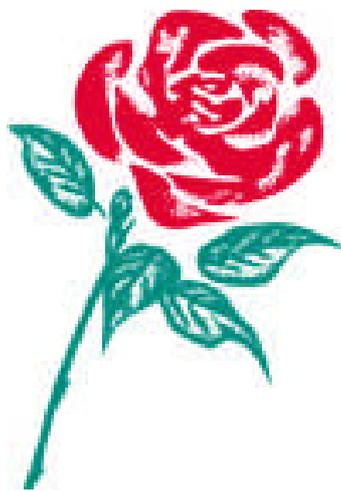


East Hertfordshire District Labour Party

Labour Manifesto



**District Council Elections
2011**



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EAST HERTS DISTRICT LABOUR MANIFESTO - 2010

INTRODUCTION

The District of East Hertfordshire offers a challenge for local government. There is no obvious natural centre of commercial, leisure, social and political activities despite Hertford being the seat of local government. The needs within the District are split between extensive rural areas and relatively small, separated urban areas. Transport within the District is poor. However the larger towns are well served by road and rail connections to London. Bishop's Stortford is close to Stansted Airport and its population has grown significantly in recent years.

Slow rates of economic growth in the region, driven down by Coalition cuts, are likely to compel those displaced from public and private employment to seek work in the District over the medium and long term. The past inability of the District Council to formulate coherent visions and plans for East Herts means that they will find limited available work, little affordable housing and difficult journeys to hospitals and schools as well as fierce competition for secondary school places.

The Tory-led government would fool you that their key objectives are delivering high quality local services at the lowest possible cost to the tax payer. Do not believe a word of it: these objectives are incompatible, and in East Herts District we have poor local services at a higher cost than in surrounding Districts. Not all of the people in East Herts are cushioned by affluence, there are pockets of deprivation, expected to increase as the Coalition's cuts bite deeper.

Labour believes that value for money is the key objective. People expect a good level of services together with promotion and support within the District for commercial, business and leisure activities. Above all, residents in the District want a quality of life that reflects their needs and that does not jeopardise their children's and their own prospects for a sustainable future.

Our position is summarised as follows:

We believe that a better society can be made by acting together to improve the conditions of individual lives. This can be achieved by active, accountable and sensitive government that is responsive to local needs, by challenging prejudice and helping the disadvantaged and by unlocking individual potential through education and opportunity. Above all, belief in the necessity and value of social justice for all must underpin our policies and actions.

THE LEGACY

East Herts has been a Tory fiefdom for many years, and it shows! They are secretive, fail to be truly democratic and are their own judge and jury. An example of the latter is Councillors' personal allowances, which are considerably higher in East Herts than in surrounding Districts despite the calls for austerity.

Even the Coalition would agree that a viable opposition in Council is necessary. In East Herts it is essential to curb their worst excesses (they have wasted millions) and ensure that decisions taken on your behalf are fair, just and equitable. A vital aspect of local government is the ability for every resident, employer and employee to feel that their views can be taken into account in a dialogue with the Council, Committees and Officers. Far

too often the Tories in East Herts have notably failed to provide such dialogue, preferring instead to announce a decision, often when it is too late to oppose it.

Labour, with access to many experienced Councillors throughout the region, is well able to provide the much needed opposition in Council. Labour recognises the need to participate in all aspects of the District, rather than the purely local concerns of non-aligned independent Councillors.

The small number of Liberal Democrat councillors has not proved a very effective opposition in the past and is now further compromised by their coalition at national level with the Conservatives.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FUNDING

The Government will be cutting the funding of local authorities by 27% over four years, with the bulk of the cut falling in 2011/12. In the case of East Hertfordshire, the first year cut is 13.6%. This “front-loading” of the cuts makes it extremely difficult for councils to find ways of improving efficiency and it is very likely that they will have to cut some services and make some staff redundant. The cut is also larger than the cuts being imposed, on average, on Whitehall departments.

In particular, the budget for social housing will be halved, so that housing waiting lists will almost certainly lengthen.

A Labour controlled council would have to operate within this financial straight-jacket and would, no doubt, have to take some very unpalatable decisions. However, Labour pledges to do everything possible to protect the most vulnerable within East Hertfordshire. It is in the choice of what to cut that the difference between the parties lies.

There will, of course, be opportunities to make savings in the council's costs. The Tory administration of East Herts has an unenviable record of wasting money. They made the chief executive redundant, with a hefty pay-off, and then found that the running of the council suffered, so that they had to recruit a new chief executive, with all the attendant recruitment costs. They managed to hand over leisure services to a company that very quickly went bust, leaving the council to pay the staff in order to keep the service going. And, of course, they pay themselves bigger allowances than other comparable councils.

THE MAIN PROPOSALS OF THE MANIFESTO

The following sections detail what Labour would hope to achieve in the District and the policies that would be followed to make this happen. These are the directions in which Labour wants to influence and steer the District Council.

VALUE FOR MONEY SERVICES

Waste, excessively high salaries and high allowances for top Officers and Councillors and cosy arrangements with suppliers and developers must be brought under proper scrutiny.

- Effective, value for money services are key to quality provision.
- Priority spending areas should be determined in consultation with (and in dialogue with) the public and not just with vested interest groups.

- Performance and satisfaction levels must be monitored by 'citizens' panels' and customer surveys carried out in a fair and unbiased manner.
- All service areas must be reviewed to seek out or introduce 'best practice' to underwrite effective and efficient ways of delivering quality services.
- Procurement processes for all supplies and services must ensure best value is achieved, not just lowest price.
- Improve contractual arrangements, publish service commitments so the public can monitor provision.
- The Council and responsible Councillors should be tasked with reporting to the public each year what has been done and what has been achieved in delivering greater value for money
- Transfer funding from allowances and 'perks' to local funding of schemes and projects.
- Improve the response to enquiries from the public and institute processes so that they can be tracked until dealt with. Implement a scheme similar to the 'trouble ticket' used by commercial organisations for this purpose.
- Provide demonstrable monitoring of contracted services to ensure that commitments are fulfilled.

OPENING UP THE COUNCIL

Openness and transparency are vital for effective Council operation and for confidence in the Council.

- Expand the range of Council services available over the internet.
- Roll out joint 'one stop shops' in the smaller towns and larger villages using mobile offices with internet links where appropriate.
- Investigate video links to economise on travel and time to improve availability of access to Officers and Councillors from the more remote parts of the District.
- Introduce area planning committees so local Councillors decide local plans.
- Give Parish Councils a greater role within the District.
- Provide effective and visible monitoring of Council decisions.
- Publish via the web site a coherent set of 'How the Council does things', 'How to access services', 'How to complain/contact officials pertinent to particular services' and 'What citizens can expect to receive in the provision of each service'.

HOUSING

East Herts towns are expensive to live in, rural locations have poor transport links and many people commute to London with little participation in the community. The District relies on workers unable to compete for housing in this situation, and many families see their children moving away, unable to remain with their relatives and friends. More housing is needed, and a higher proportion of affordable housing .

- New housing developments must include a minimum of 50% affordable homes
- Brown land sites and land in public ownership must be fully utilised by housing associations
- Parish Councils should be asked to identify potential 'exception sites' giving local opportunities for smaller family homes
- Compulsory Purchase Orders should be given greater weight in providing sites.
- Monitor empty properties within the District with a view to bringing them back into occupancy.

- Housing Co-operatives should be used as a means to provide affordable housing within the District. Several forms of co-operative can be used:
 - **Ownership** – owned, managed and controlled by members and tenants
 - **Tenant Management Organisations** – managed by the tenants
 - **Self-Build** – tenants contribute labour and receive a share in equity in exchange
- These schemes are funded by mixed public and private funding.
- It is important to maintain green areas within towns and, if necessary, it may be better to build a relatively large number of homes on one site with suitable infrastructure, including shops, schools and doctors' surgeries.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND GREEN ISSUES

The Council should be tasked with planning for anticipated changes in weather, including summer drought, flash flooding and ecological change. East Herts Council has not had a good record in recycling compared with surrounding Districts: this must change.

- The Council should be tasked with achieving and reporting on its own energy conservation measures and carbon footprint reduction. Publish the carbon footprint of the District Council and then target reduction year on year.
- The Council should review the carbon footprint of the District as a whole and propose measures for reduction ahead of legislation.
- A thermal imaging service should be offered to businesses and private properties to facilitate energy conservation
- Green Belt must be protected and more play and amenity areas made available.
- The Council should review its recycling services and plan to achieve a target of 60% (currently only 35%). Collection points/times should be re-examined: having to drive to the current disposal sites makes a nonsense of recycling.
- Invest in tree maintenance and planting.
- In contracting out, seek suppliers with lower carbon footprint, for example, use of electric vehicles.
- Promote energy conservation measures for industrial and commercial premises.
- Actively promote domestic and community energy saving schemes, replace the Herts and Essex Energy Partnership, which expires in March 2011, and set in place facilitating planning guidelines for the installation of renewable energy systems within planning laws and Government guidelines.
- Seek out and support cycle routes, especially to schools.
- Promote mobile shops and service units to support non-car users and reduce car journeys and town parking.

PROTECT THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT

Towns and villages in East Herts have long histories and varied architecture and, whilst still attractive places to live, their ambience is being eroded by unsympathetic development and planning decisions.

- Look for opportunities to assist the development of tourism and recreational opportunities, particularly in rural areas.
- Encourage the procurement of public art to enhance the appearance of the District.
- Encourage local initiatives for walking, cycling, sporting and cultural activities.

- Consult young people to identify their needs for provision for sporting and cultural activities.
- Seek opportunities for the provision of social facilities for young people and for senior citizens.
- Review all planning decisions for impact on the environment, on traffic movements, availability of public transport and convenient access by pedestrians and cyclists.
- Seek ways to counter the loss of shops and amenities in rural areas by providing and encouraging mobile facilities.
- Investigate and facilitate ways of extending internet and broadband access to all parts of the District.
- Maintain a rapid response team for cleaning up problem areas.
- Actively protect and enhance conservation areas.
- Protect the green belt and open spaces.
- Actively support 20 mph limits and traffic calming in residential areas.
- Seek opportunities for off-street parking in older residential areas.
- Pay greater attention to street cleaning during leaf and snow fall, particularly in residential streets

CRIME AND ORDER

The District is not a serious hotbed of crime and disorder. Nevertheless measures should be taken to reduce occurrences and to improve public perception and confidence.

- Support Neighbourhood Watch and Safer Neighbourhood panels.
- Extend CCTV to other trouble spots to tackle anti-social behaviour.
- Tackle graffiti, fly posting, vandalism and fly tipping to reduce 'feeder crimes'.
- Support campaigns against litter and take a harsher line with people who drop litter.
- Identify where there are known problem areas, work to eliminate the causes and engage the knowledge and support of local people.

ECONOMIC STRENGTH

The District has seen a slow decline in industrial and commercial activity. In future, the ability to commute will become increasingly circumscribed by higher transport costs, fewer parking opportunities, and an inadequate alternative public transport system. Therefore, the District Council has a duty to nurture and strengthen the economy of East Herts.

- Support schemes to promote investment and economic activity in the towns but also to strengthen the rural economy.
- Review Planning in the District to revive industrial and commercial activity and counter the rush by developers for private 'we-have-arrived' housing estates.
- Encourage Farmers' Markets in the District and promote local grown produce.
- Actively market the District to provide alternative employment opportunities for commuters.
- Support the provision of 'incubator units' and parks for business start-ups.
- Encourage industrial and commercial uses over retail schemes.
- Encourage community-run shops to serve village communities.
- Support retailers by moving to 'pay on exit' charges for relevant car parks, consult local shops and town/parish councils before changes in tariffs are decided.
- Improve public lavatories and make arrangements with suitable shops, restaurants and public houses for the use of facilities by non-customers.

- Make better use of electronic and internet communication to make contact with the Council and its services and to reduce the need for officers to travel to meetings.

SUSTAINABILITY AND COMMUNITY

There is a lack of partnership between the public and the Council. All too often decisions are taken without public consultation at a time when decisions can be modified. The Council needs to be aware of long term effects of its decisions on the community. It must be conscious of its role of stewardship of the infrastructure of East Herts and the well-being of its residents into the future.

- Where local organisations and associations exist, the Council should endeavour to work in partnership with them.
- Where such groups do not exist, the Council should encourage their formation so help provide an avenue for the public to voice its concerns and approval.
- Demonstrable monitoring and enforcement of compliance with planning conditions is needed.
- Planning applications should include a statement of their impact on the rest of the community and how the existing infrastructure supports them.
- Planning decisions should be reviewed and reported in the context of long term plans and strategies.

30 January 2011 (revised 5 March 2011)