

North Herts District Labour Party: Manifesto 2019

Introduction:

This manifesto was adopted by the North Herts District Labour Party Local Campaign Forum on 28th January 2019 after consultation with the local Labour Party and Co-operative Party branches and following chapter 5 being endorsed by the Labour and Co-operative Group of Councillors.

Yusuf Mayet Secretary

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The manifesto is organised in five possibly overlapping chapters outlining our approach, namely

1. Labour's Approach to Community Engagement
2. Labour's Approach to Housing and Infrastructure
3. Labour's Approach to Enterprise and Co-operative Development
4. Labour's Approach to Environmental Responsibility & Green Issues
5. Labour's Approach to Finance and Resources
6. Local project examples

1. Labour's Approach to Community Engagement

Foreword

Nobody doubts the huge importance of engaging with residents at a time when public services are undergoing fundamental change and funding threats from a government that has cut funding for vital services by 49.1% since 2010.

The risks of transforming, changing, reducing or re-designing services without giving people a genuine stake in that process are huge.

It has been said that engagement is everybody's responsibility in a local authority, but all too often it ends up being nobody's. In reality, good dialogue with residents and securing mutual trust between the council and the community needs to be part of the whole council's DNA.

So how do we effectively engage at a time when resources are scarce? How do we build and maintain trust when difficult decisions are being taken?

Our Commitments

We will engage in discussion with the public about whether our existing Council Structures are suitable to deliver services that are cost effective, fully localised and accessible.

We will take every opportunity to listen to and work with local community groups about both statutory and voluntary services including expanding the use of Town Talks and Councillors' surgeries and we will consult at every stage of new projects in an open and transparent way.

We will act on the results of consultations that we undertake, recognising that sometimes there are very difficult decisions to take, and conflicting views amongst the communities we serve.

We will make clear to local Housing Associations that they should have robust mechanisms for hearing the views of their tenants about the management of their homes, and we will stand up for tenants on social and privately rented accommodation to ensure that their voices are heard and that they are treated fairly by landlords.

We will equip local councillors to help residents sort out any problems with their living conditions and act as advocates for them when this is appropriate.

We will support and work with voluntary organisations like Citizens Advice and the North Herts Council for Voluntary Service to ensure that we are responsive to the lessons from their community engagement and encourage the synergies that can be derived from close engagement and partnership with local organisations.

We will work with all groups helping those with welfare rights issues to ensure that we hear about the issues being faced by our residents facing cuts in vital services provided by government, such as Universal Credit, and the County Council as well as ourselves.

We will continue to learn the lessons from local residents about the ways in which they have been let down by the current waste collection contract and continue to engage with them to design improvements and adaptations as and when they become possible.

As we amend the Council's failed Green Spaces Strategy which has let down and ignored the voices of residents, we will ensure that their voices are heard and fully taken into account in designing play spaces for communities, families and children with a variety of needs for flexibility and close to home play parks.

We will work with neighbourhoods, established and emerging communities to ensure that their voices are heard in establishing clean, safe and welcoming environments in which people live, work and socialise.

We will re-establish regular liaison meetings with police and community safety officers to ensure that residents voices are heard over issues of crime and anti-social behaviour wherever and whenever it arises.

In our commitment to the future provision of local government services and democracy we will ensure that the council works with schools and youth groups across the district to establish productive and active Youth Councils as appropriate to the geography and wishes of young people across North Herts

In all our work to engage with local communities and act on their concerns we will seek ways to ensure that all parts of our diverse communities are heard and listened to. We will ensure that this includes black and minority ethnic people, those with a disability or mental health issue, those of different religions and those from all LGBT groups.

2. Labour's Approach to Housing and Infrastructure

As a District Council, North Hertfordshire should be able to apply for the Additional Housing Revenue Account Borrowing Programme. This is a fund setup by the Government which we can apply to for extra funding to help build Council Housing. Unfortunately, we are unable to apply for this as in 2003 the Conservative run council sold all our publicly owned housing. This means we no longer have the resources, expertise, infrastructure or Housing Revenue Account needed to build Council Housing or apply for the Additional Housing Revenue Account Borrowing Programme.

The current definition of "Affordable Housing" imposed on housing developers is dubious, prone to fluctuation and largely debateable. Labour recognise the only way to truly provide "Affordable Housing" which is actually affordable, is to build the houses ourselves. Therefore, we are committed to restoring our Housing Revenue Account. We will investigate, plan and create the infrastructure necessary to build real affordable homes and explore the possibility of bringing former North Herts Council Housing back under public ownership. Labour offer an optimistic and transparent alternative approach to housing.

We acknowledge our plan for building Council Housing is a longer-term aspiration but note that several councils of varying political complexion are considering such a move. Right now, nationally, house prices are at an all-time high, home ownership has fallen to a 30-year low and homelessness is up 50% since 2010. The need is urgent. We will work to use the fruits of the Council's commercialisation strategy to kick start this plan.

In line with our commitment to engage with communities and work with our residents, we will seek opportunities to support new co-operative and community-led housing.

Since 2010, real term government funding has been cut by 49.1%. Despite the pressure that these cuts cause, we will as far as possible continue to fund and support institutions which provide for the needs of those most vulnerable in our society, such as women's refuges, drug and alcohol abuse services, and homelessness shelters.

Labour's priority as the Local Plan has been developed has been to seek the highest possible percentage of affordable housing, protection of the Green Belt and high building standards. We will therefore strictly enforce the requirement of 40% affordable housing in larger new developments.

Housing developments will be required to meet strict standards, ensuring each home is built with real quality and appropriate insulation. This will ensure future residents live in comfort and are not burdened by unmanageable energy bills. This will reduce preventable winter deaths and help meet our climate change targets. All new housing will be regulated, certifying developments are built with sufficient infrastructure, taking account of the need to improve air quality. Facilities must be planned and provided alongside new homes such as doctors' surgeries, adequate parking, corner shops and community spaces.

For many years, Labour has campaigned for children play parks to remain open for the benefit to our communities. We will therefore review and amend the Council's Green Spaces Strategy to ensure that safe and accessible play parks continue to be provided where children live and go to school.

Reports show regular exercise can reduce stress and helps to boost energy levels for those suffering from depression. Labour sees the importance of promoting and encouraging a healthy community and are truly committed to tackling mental health. Labour will work with the County Council to ensure the implementation of Cycle Routes in our towns, encouraging exercise and good health, and providing a safe environment for all.

3. Labour's Approach to Enterprise and Co-operative Development

Working in partnership to develop Community Wealth

Our communities and council services have been damaged and too many of our residents have been left behind by the failed policies of austerity. Labour and Co-operative councils have a proven record of ameliorating this, creating community wealth from the bottom up by changing the way they spend their money and developing a more inclusive local economy that distributes rewards more fairly. We will draw on the best practise of such authorities by joining the Co-operative Councils Innovation Network, making NHDC a Co-operative Council.

Co-operatives, Community Businesses and mutual enterprises need to be at the heart of this - by existing to provide a service for their members rather than generate profits for external shareholders, they're the key to creating an economy that puts people before profit.

We will promote the interests of local businesses in our District, working with the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and other business initiatives and support the fight against corporate tax avoidance which disadvantages local businesses.

We support the Council's intention to conduct its business on a more commercial basis. We will ensure that co-operative solutions are a full part of this approach, for example in investing in renewable community energy schemes and possibly promoting a not for profit energy supply, especially for vulnerable residents.

Credit Unions are financial co-operatives that work for all, but particularly benefit those with limited financial means. We are proud of the growth and success of the Black Squirrel Credit Union, started during the last period of Labour control of NHDC and supported by all parties. We will continue to work with Credit Unions and advice organisations to tackle financial exclusion.

We recognise that Council staff and the staff of our contractors are also part of our community and so we will pay Council staff the Real Living Wage and insist those bidding for contracts commit to that too. We will support apprenticeships, graduate development programmes and opportunities for mature workers to progress within the Council and encourage our contractors to take on apprentices and develop their staff as appropriate.

It is also important that all NHDC contractors allow and encourage Trade Union membership, so that staff receive fair recompense for their work and work in good employment conditions.

We are committed to ensuring that all our residents can access our services. As far as possible, we will give service users a voice in the decisions that affect them. We will review all charges for council services with a view to introducing concessions where appropriate and possible.

We will also support and work with Citizens' Advice, the Council for Voluntary Service and other essential advice and welfare rights services.

Modern Slavery is the one of the great evils of our time and it's happening under our noses in North Herts. We will follow up the work already being done against this scourge by signing the Modern Slavery Charter and redoubling our efforts against Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking.

Local pubs, community buildings and other community assets are vital to the vibrancy of our District. We will support and work with local communities to protect valued community assets.

4. Labour's Approach to Environmental Responsibility and Green Issues

With austerity comes much damage to our public services, our wellbeing, and our pride in the area we live in. Our environment has not escaped the cuts that have decimated our way of life.

As a district council, we have a responsibility to nurture and invest in our environment, to ensure our future generations have access to clean air, renewable energy and diverse green spaces, free from exploitation, contamination and destruction.

How can we promote Environmental Responsibility and work together to find Green Alternatives?

Waste & Recycling

Collection of waste and recycling is the largest and most expensive service NHDC provides. It therefore must be a service which meets the demands and needs of all residents in a cost-effective manner.

We will undertake an urgent review of the current waste contract and assess whether it is providing real value for money to residents. If not, we will make any variations necessary to make the contract work for the district. We are also committed to working with partners in East Herts to looking at viable alternatives if the current provider is unable to deliver the service residents deserve.

Our environment matters. A key part of protecting it for future generations is having an effective recycling strategy which engages residents and is supported by them. We will consult with residents on what works for them and how we can make it easier for them to recycle more of their household waste. We will build this feedback into the waste collection contract to deliver improvements and aim to exceed the 60% target of all household waste being genuinely recycled.

Energy and Caring for our Environment?

The Labour approach includes working with partners to support and invest in community renewable energy schemes, whilst investigating not for profit community energy supplies, which may help lessen the burden of energy costs on vulnerable residents.

To address the effects of Climate Change, we will revise and update the Council's policies to investigate new ways the Council can be trail-blazers for North Hertfordshire residents, demonstrating the benefits and importance of caring about the environment, but also practicing what we preach. We will work with local initiatives such as Transition Town, Letchworth as well as with the Garden City Heritage Foundation, sharing and expanding our knowledge and connections to the benefit of the District.

We wish to develop an Energy Strategy to support our work in transforming the way we generate, consume, and purchase our energy, demonstrating clearly how we intend to utilise 100% renewable energy.

Energy inefficient properties make a substantial contribution to climate change. We want to introduce initiatives to fulfil our obligations to the Home Energy Conservation Act and support all fuel-poor homes to achieve an Energy Efficient Band C Target by 2030. This will also have an impact on those who struggle with energy costs, helping them and the impact on the environment. We will also encourage developers to install solar panels on all new builds.

We believe that it is important that as a society and a council, that we do not rely on unsustainable forms of energy.

We are lucky to be surrounded by many beautiful parks and land in North Herts. These areas need to be cherished and nurtured. We want to encourage bio-diversity by carrying out audits as well as investigating the possibility of introducing bee corridors and wild flower meadows, maximising biodiversity in our parks and open spaces. We will encourage other landowners to do the same.

We want to ensure that Council-owned parks and land thrive, not only to promote wildlife, but also promote pride in our area. Where possible, we would like to enlist the help of schools and other youth organisations to carry out audits to assess the level of variety in wildlife in our open spaces.

We believe that air quality is imperative to our way of life, therefore we pledge to continue air quality monitoring, and lobby for action where pollution reaches unacceptably high levels. We also want to commit to a target of zero carbon emissions by 2030. We also strongly oppose any new unsustainable energy projects or programmes such as hydraulic fracking, gas or oil extraction.

Fossil fuel powered cars will one day likely be a thing of the past. To pave the way for this we will improve the infrastructure of our towns for electric alternatives of transportation. We can do this by increasing the number of council owned vehicles that are electric and encouraging the public to consider the move to electric vehicles, through installation of more charging points, or free parking for electric vehicles in our towns.

5. Labour's Approach to Finance and Resources

Since 2010, real term government funding has been cut by 49.1%. We are threatened with further cuts in 2020-21. We will work with the Local Government Association and Labour and Co-operative colleagues to campaign for an end to cuts and proper funding for Local Government.

Our approach begins with valuing our staff and working with them to ensure we get value for every pound we raise in Council tax. We will seek too to use the skills and expertise of all Councillors and draw too on the undoubted expertise in our community, in contrast to the current administration, which has far too often taken the "we know best" approach and not listened.

We will support the new Commercialisation Strategy, bringing urgency and political direction to ensure that a balance of income generation and provision of quality services and environmental improvements are achieved. Where necessary we will recruit and/or train staff to pursue our priorities.

Working with Councils in the Co-operative Councils Innovation Network, the Labour Group has secured funding for a joint project "to test trailblazer neighbourhood/locality pilots to demonstrate the value of co-operative councils further developing their mechanisms to work at a very localised level with their residents as co-producers of local communities and neighbourhoods", which will start in the Civic Year 2019-20. We will use this funding to advance our Community Engagement Agenda. (See Chapter 1)

In line with our collaborative approach, we will strengthen co-operation with Parish and Town Councils, the County Council and neighbouring Districts to encourage well-co-ordinated local services

Outsourcing services to contractors has often proved costly or has been at the expense of safety, quality or the conditions of our workforce. Where possible, we will investigate opportunities to bring services back in-house.

As public services are increasingly accessed online, we will ensure the technology is fit-for-purpose, so that residents can conveniently access the information they need, and decisions can be made democratically.

Our approach to charges for services will be to ensure increases are affordable and make sure that all our services are accessible to all by introducing concessions where this is practicable.

6. Local project examples

a) Hitchin Station access

For many years the walking, cycling and driving routes to Hitchin Station from Walsworth's residential areas have been totally unsatisfactory. They are particularly unsafe for those who need access for wheelchairs and pushchairs. Additionally, many students arrive in Hitchin by train to go to North Herts College Hitchin site and find themselves in a cramped and totally unsafe route under the railway bridge with totally inadequate footway provision.

We consider this to be totally unnecessary when Network Rail owns a huge amount of fenced off land at the back of the station which could be opened up for pedestrian access as well as further car parking spaces.

Labour Councillors in Walsworth will work with their County Councillors, Hitchin Initiative, the local MP and Network Rail to find a cost effective and much needed way to open up the land at the back of the station for travellers who live in Walsworth or work and study in the area.

This can only be done through co-operation with all parties and Labour's Walsworth District Councillors are keen to play their part in a project which has been in effect ignored by local Tory District Councillors for many years.

b) Royston Town Centre and Infrastructure

Working with the Royston Business Improvement District (BID) we will examine and create a long-term business plan, with the support of residents, to provide the local community the improved access to the Town Centre, facilities and environment it urgently needs.