

Stroud Constituency Labour Party

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Stroud District Council Election Manifesto 2015

Since 2012 the Labour group on Stroud District Council has led an administration that has helped residents to lead more secure lives in these difficult times of government austerity. We've done this by securing jobs in the district, providing more affordable houses on brownfield sites, working with health authorities to improve vulnerable people's health and well-being and taking measures to safeguard the local environment. At the same time the amount that residents pay in council tax has not changed over those 3 years.

In Stroud district Labour is leading the way through

- Building 150 new council homes over the next 3 years
- Enabling new affordable homes with a further 450 more in the pipeline
- Installing 400 renewable energy appliances in the council's properties
- A £23 million repair programme to the council's housing to meet the Decent Home Standard
- Tackling fuel poverty by promoting energy efficiency in the home and advising home owners, tenants and landlords
- Increasing prevention of homelessness
- Helping to fund the Citizens Advice Bureau to give financial advice to households facing eviction or repossession
- Helping to fund the CAB, Credit Union and Foodbank to support individuals through problems due to welfare reform
- Supporting our elderly tenants with daily practical help, combating loneliness and social isolation
- Working with local doctors to help local people cope with physical and mental health problems
- Building new facilities for active recreation and fitness
- Investing to help businesses; apprenticeships and skills training to support more jobs in the district
- Opposing predatory planning applications on green field sites
- Managing brownfield sites for new employment and housing
- Working with other local councils to reduce costs and grow the county's economy
- Introduced the living wage in the council and encouraging other employers to adopt it
- Protecting our natural environment from the effects of climate change and promoting biodiversity in the district.

Our manifesto this year shows not only what we will do but what we are doing. With your help we can do much more!

Stroud Labour is -

- ✓ Supporting people to live safe and productive lives
- ✓ Actively promoting equality of opportunity for women
- ✓ Promoting economic well-being, creating more jobs and supporting sustainable businesses
- ✓ Supporting sustainable development, building affordable homes and fighting to protect our environment and people from unwanted development and uncaring government policies.
- ✓ Fighting to protect those in our society, including the young and the old, most affected by local and national cuts in public expenditure
- ✓ Promoting healthy lifestyles, supporting more play areas, green spaces, local food and allotments
- ✓ Ensuring the Council is run by a rigorous efficient and innovative leadership; making savings and efficiencies to deliver results without wasting tax-payers money

Effective Leadership

LABOUR HAS taken the lead for the benefit of all residents and communities - working with Councillors from all tiers of local government, alongside businesses and the voluntary sector to make cohesive and overarching plans for the economic, social and environmental well-being and future prosperity of the district.

An independent review by other councils said it is a testament to effective political leadership and management and the good relationships across all groups that the joint administration is delivering the council's agenda and the focus on jobs and growth remains evident.

"The Council can, we think, be held up as an example of what local government can achieve for its communities, when it has the capacity, freedom and vision to act. We believe that Stroud's ability to continue to act in this way can be strengthened further, to ensure that the Council's capacity matches its ambition and that some of the risks which may naturally arise from the extent of that ambition are further reduced"

Jobs

LABOUR WILL work to increase jobs and training opportunities across the district, particularly in areas worse hit by unemployment, such as Stonehouse, Dursley, Cainscross and Stroud town. We believe there are opportunities for more jobs on the Littlecombe development site in Dursley and we have put aside funds to find ways of bringing back sites for jobs in the Stroud valley. There are further opportunities for jobs in Berkeley and Stonehouse.

We shall continue to provide apprenticeships within the council and are setting up schemes so that more local employers can take on more apprentices. The council is a living wage employer and we shall encourage more employers in the district to do the same.

We are working with the other councils in Gloucestershire to ensure more inward investment in the county that benefits all districts, like the new engineering training centre at Berkeley, and will increase the local supply of goods and services for the council.

Housing and affordable housing

LABOUR RECOGNISES the importance of its tenants' opinions and will continue to build a stronger working relationship, supporting their role in service development groups. We have put in place new measures to include more, as well as hard to reach, tenants. Providing more on-site staff for sheltered housing has met in part the residents' needs. We shall do more to make sure these premises meet today's standards.

In December 2014 the keys to the first council house to be built in over 20 years in Stroud district were handed over to tenants. The current programme of 150 affordable council houses will provide better, warm homes and create local jobs.

Labour's management of the council's housing finances will allow it to expand the build programme by 50 more houses over the next 5 years and at the same time we shall look for opportunities for other innovative ways to provide more houses for local people.

Housing conditions are a major factor in people's health and wellbeing. We will work with other agencies to support people to live in their own homes with dignity, combating social isolation, loneliness and fuel poverty. By reducing hazards like cold houses and falls in homes we could save the NHS over £1 million in treatment costs. The Labour-led council will continue to fund better conditions in both private and council homes to prevent accidents and ill health.

Health and Wellbeing

LABOUR WILL continue to work with local surgeries and other health service bodies on schemes for alternative prescriptions to combat ill-health and to improve the health and wellbeing of residents. For example, last year over 1300 residents took part in the Healthy Lifestyles scheme and 600 patients were referred by GPs to our exercise scheme. Labour will appoint a councillor as the mental health champion to monitor and report on the state of mental health services for residents, tenants and staff.

Labour will work to ensure that the large changes in the National Health Service inflicted by the Conservative and Lib Dem government do not worsen the delivery of local services. We are particularly concerned with possible changes to the out of hours services provided by Stroud hospital and will work to maintain them for local people.

Labour will aim to reduce poverty and inequality in the district's population in the light of the current government's austerity measures. We shall talk to local communities to find out their views on these problems and their solution in a true consultation.

Home Care for elderly and other vulnerable residents is undertaken by private agencies and funded by the county council. The care staff are often paid below the minimum wage, on zero hours contracts and no pay for travel time. Labour will bid for a contract to pay staff a decent wage with a clear career path for them.

Supporting people in tough times

LABOUR WORKS with agencies such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, the Credit Union and Foodbank to help them cope with the increasing number of people needing advice and relief from debt crises resulting from austerity and the badly implemented universal credit scheme that will be introduced in the district in 2015. We will continue to do so by ensuring people are supported when they need housing and benefit advice, and of course a Labour government would scrap the inequitable bedroom tax.

Policing and community safety

LABOUR WORKS with Gloucestershire's Police to help people feel safe and secure in their homes and surroundings. We do this by reducing anti-social behaviour that can include noisy neighbours and unsocial use of vehicles, but also developing a closer relationship with residents so that there is early warning of problems. The District's Neighbourhood Wardens also continue to provide a valued service to residents in preventing and reducing problems with litter, graffiti, dog fouling and fly tipping.

Planning

LABOUR HAS opposed the large changes made by the Conservative and Lib Dem government to planning law that have allowed predatory developers to apply for permission to build houses on unsuitable greenfield sites throughout the district. Our Local Plan is now being examined by a government inspector, but the time taken to produce a Plan lets predatory developers submit applications that when refused by the council then obtain permission on appeal to an inspector.

We will continue to work with other affected districts to reduce the impact of this one-sided arrangement on our towns, villages and countryside. A Labour government would move to a planning system that is based on the consent for community benefit from new development and that communities can use to shape their local area.

Young people

LABOUR HAS helped to restore youth services in the district after the cuts by the Tory county council. Young people are consulted on budget proposals, and with reductions in funding elsewhere we have increased our funds for local youth services

We shall continue to provide work experience to students, currently more than 70 a year, from local secondary and special schools, and collaborate with further and higher education institutions and over 50 local companies with the biggest annual careers guidance event in the county.

We are delivering the country's first social prescribing scheme for 14-18 year olds, and our information pack on mental health services has been adopted as a county standard.

Recycling and waste management

THE LABOUR LED council is now making the arrangements to join a local councils' waste collection business in July 2016. Under the new contract there will be more waste recycling, and for the first time a district-wide food waste collection.

Labour will continue to oppose the development of the incinerator at Haresfield that is planned by the Tory county council cabinet despite its planning committee rejecting the plan. We shall pursue legal means as far as practicable to overturn the government's decision in favour of the incinerator. With all the political groups on Stroud council we have offered a joint commission to look at other options.

Environmental issues

LABOUR IS dramatically improving the council's record on energy saving. More than 1000 properties have had renewable energy installations that will reduce fuel poverty and provide greater energy efficiency. We will continue to oppose development where it is detrimental to the environment and we will champion cost effective renewable energy schemes.

But we need to do more. The effects of climate change are now being felt worldwide, Labour will work with other local public and private organisations to help prevent further global warming gas emissions and reduce the harm from current emissions. It's clear that the most vulnerable will suffer most from climate change. Labour will focus on the effects and will work to prevent those who will be most affected.

Our Stroud Valleys Initiative would not only provide more brownfield sites for jobs and houses, but will alleviate flooding problems along the Frome valley. The district council is part of a national project sponsored by the Environmental Agency working on rural sustainable drainage schemes.

As well as these wider schemes SDC will work alongside local people helping them to care for their local surroundings. Labour will also continue to seek cleaner streets, adequate numbers of parks and allotments and protect our biodiversity.

Working with local communities

LABOUR WILL work with local communities to provide effective engagement with the council. We believe traditional models of consultation do not meet the current situation with its drastic budget reductions to local authorities.

Many of the district's residents live in rural areas. Labour will aim to rural proof the council's policies to ensure they meet the needs and interests of rural communities and businesses, in order to take account of the differing social and economic circumstances resulting from distance to services, population sparsity and social isolation. For example, we need to improve broadband and mobile phone connections for both residents and the increasing number of firms in rural areas.

Cutbacks and changes to bus routes and time tables have affected many people. It's time to look at the provision and connections for public transport as a whole. We shall use our influence to make sure there is good well-connected public transport with adequate facilities at train stations for all users.

Financial management of Stroud District Council

LABOUR HAS again made savings while maintaining essential council services as well as putting money aside to help protect those worst hit by benefit cuts all with NO increase in council tax in the last three years. An independent body has commented that the council has delivered its ambitions from a strong financial position

Labour will make sure that the Council's land and buildings are used efficiently and where possible provide an income.

We know funding from government will continue to be reduced but we shall invest for the longer term, as has been shown by our regeneration projects, to produce a stronger and more resilient local economy.

The Future of Local Government

LABOUR IS taking part in the county's Strategic Economic Plan with other local authorities and the business-led Local Enterprise Partnership. We shall look for opportunities to work more closely with other neighbouring councils. We are joining with other districts in a joint waste collection organisation, and will share building control services with Gloucester City and the council internal audit role with the city and county councils.

We shall monitor with interest the current debate on devolution in England. Our aim will be to take opportunities which lead to a better financial and self-governing basis for local government, and which would reduce government interference and central control of local matters.

Geoff Wheeler, Leader, Stroud District Council Labour Group
25 March 2015