

North Herts District Labour & Co-operative Parties: Manifesto 2021

Introduction:

In May 2019 Labour took control of the Council in a joint administration with Liberal Democrat councillors. Since then, we have proved that we can work co-operatively and make a real difference to the lives of our residents and the services they rely on in our District.

In this manifesto we first highlight our achievements in 2019-21 and put forward a set of policies that we believe will benefit everyone, as we continue to work in your interests despite continuing cuts by the Conservative Government. This has been exacerbated by its failure to fully support councils financially for losses in the last year, forcing councils to raise council tax more than necessary – in effect a stealth tax.

The pandemic has given our administration severe challenges, but with the support of our excellent staff we have risen to the challenge and worked tirelessly to keep our residents safe and our businesses supported.

Martin Stears-Handscomb

Labour & Co-operative Leader of the Council

February 2021

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1. Community Engagement

Judi Billing, Executive Member for Community Engagement

Engaging with all our communities across North Herts has never been as important as it has over the past year, finding the best ways to ensure that everyone is safe, housed, fed, has all the financial help possible and is looked after in every way. This has undoubtedly been the main mission for Labour in North Herts at the time of Covid-19.

Nobody doubts the huge importance of engaging with residents at a time when public services are undergoing fundamental change alongside funding threats from a government that has cut funding for vital services by over 50% since 2010.

At this time, more than ever before, 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, and we are unable to meet face to face? It is absolutely necessary to build and maintain trust when difficult decisions are being taken in times of unimaginable difficulties for individuals and families.

The Labour and Liberal Democrat Partnership Council has already made a considerable difference in this area. Specifically we have:

- Expanded the use of Town Talks and Councillors' Surgeries to places that had not had them before and translated them into Zoom events during the pandemic.
- Re-written the Council's grants policy to ensure that it can help small community groups that make a huge difference, and made grant funding available to a raft of local businesses and community organisations in order to help them help our communities in periods of lockdown.
- Changed the Council's structures by introducing a number of themed Panels that enable far greater participation by the public.
- Made the Council a welcoming place for visitors who wish to talk to us and present their ideas, in person when possible but also through Zoom meetings when we cannot meet.
- Worked with the local police to re-introduce regular public forums where local priorities can be discussed and established.
- Started to improve the ways in which we engage with young people by holding a Democracy week event and support for young people to establish a Youth Council.
- Held two Holocaust Memorial Day commemorations, one in person and the second on Zoom.
- Offered support to Gay Pride events planned for when this is possible again.
- Worked with Black Lives Matter groups to ensure our full understanding of, and support to help address, the extra disadvantage and risks suffered by some groups during the pandemic.

Our Commitments

If you elect The Labour Party to continue leading North Herts District Council, we will:

Continue to 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.

Review and improve the Council's website to make it more user friendly and easier to navigate.

Continue to listen to, and work with, local community groups about both statutory and voluntary services including the needs of those they represent.

Consult at every stage of new projects in an open and transparent way, acting on the results of consultations that we undertake. We recognise that sometimes there are difficult decisions to take, and conflicting views amongst the communities we serve.

Continue to co-ordinate the work of the local Food Provision Network to ensure that all our citizens have sufficient food and that waste from supermarkets and manufacturers is kept to an absolute minimum.

Build on the work of the Food Provision Network and look at establishing a Local Food Action Plan.

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 stand up for tenants in social and privately rented accommodation to ensure that their voices are heard and that they are treated fairly by landlords.

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

Support and work with voluntary organisations like Citizens Advice, North Herts Centre for Voluntary Service (NHCVS) and the North Herts Minority Ethnic Forum 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.

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 Central Government, such as Universal Credit, and services provided by the County Council as well as ourselves.

Work with the County Council, police and others to ensure the best possible public health provision in the District including the emerging Health Hub and support for those young and elderly people in need of safeguarding from domestic abuse.

Continue to work with *settle*, NHCVS and others to support those who face potential loneliness in old age through inter-generational and other local projects, both remotely and in person when that is again possible.

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.

Commit to the future provision of local government services and democracy and continue to ensure that the Council works pro-actively with schools and youth groups across the District.

Work with Youth Connexions to establish productive and active Youth Councils as appropriate to the geography and wishes of young people across North Herts.

Engage with local communities and neighbourhoods, building and expanding networks with partners to act on local concerns and ensure service delivery and economic recovery is inclusive.

Seek ways to ensure that all parts of our diverse communities are heard and listened to. We will ensure that this includes those in all ethnic groups, those of different religions, those from all LGBTQ+ groups and those with a disability or mental health issue.

Work with all minority ethnic community groups established both before and in the wake of the Black Lives Matter campaign to ensure that all of our services recognise the needs of all our citizens both in dealing with Covid-19 and as we hopefully emerge from it. We recognise the particular discrimination suffered by black citizens and will do all we can to counter that.

Support any initiatives to maintain the rights of EU citizens living in the UK to vote and stand as candidates in UK local elections, in order that they can participate fully in the local community.

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2. Promoting and Supporting the Arts in North Herts

We value the vital role the arts play in our local communities and economies, and recognise the need for government at all levels to do more to support them. In 2020 we have met regularly with arts groups to assess the effects of Covid-19 on them and will continue to do that. With the difficulties the arts face following the pandemic it is even more important now more than ever that your Council does all it can to support our vibrant arts sector.

Our Commitments

If you elect The Labour Party to continue leading North Herts District Council, we will:

- Create a North Herts Arts Partnership, bringing together arts practitioners of all types from across the District to work collaboratively with North Herts District Council. The Partnership will be outward looking, and connect with arts groups beyond district and county boundaries, sharing experience and working with others to secure better funding for the arts.
- Recognise that theatre, music, art and our cultural heritage attract visitors to our vibrant towns and if supported can contribute greatly to our local and regional economy, while providing a richness of artistic and cultural activity.
- The arts will be at the heart of town centre regeneration projects. We will establish regular forums to bring together museums, musicians, theatres, artists, performers and smaller groups to hear their concerns and enable us to make informed decisions to support them.

3. Celebrating and Supporting our LGBTQ+ Community

2019 was the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riots and the beginnings of the gay civil rights movement. We are proud that the first Hitchin Pride celebration will take place this year and fully support it. However, we also recognise that many LGBTQ+ people within our community still feel isolated and unsupported and recognise our role as a local authority in needing help.

Our Commitments

If you elect The Labour Party to continue leading North Herts District Council, we will:

Support Stonewall's Rainbow Laces campaign as we believe that sport should be everyone's game. We will promote the Rainbow Laces campaign in our sports and leisure centres and champion inclusion in sport.

Work with Herts Learning, local schools, youth groups, the LGBTQ+ community and the police to ensure that young people learn about the impact of hate crime and the importance of reporting hate incidents, and take steps to improve community safety.

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4. Housing and Infrastructure

Gary Grindal, Executive Member for Housing and Environmental Health

Ian Mantle, Deputy Executive Member for Planning and Transport

Labour is committed to the provision of genuinely affordable social housing. We believe that North Herts District Council should be able to build housing to meet local needs. In 2003, however, the former Conservative administration sold all our publicly owned housing to the housing association now known as *settle*. Although the need is great, this Council is thus held back and, for the provision of social housing, can work only through *settle* and other housing associations.

It remains a longer-term aspiration to restore our Housing Revenue Account to enable the Council to build our own housing. 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.

To address the housing need, we remain committed to, and will look to strengthen our partnership with, our local housing providers in North Herts - *settle* and First Garden City Homes. This will ensure that we do all we can to address the current housing crisis. Currently across the UK, it is estimated that there is a shortfall of 1 million homes (BBC study). This has resulted in a sharp increase in homelessness, overcrowding in smaller properties and homes for sale becoming unaffordable to many, with house prices having risen by 260% over the last 20 years, all of which has been reflected across North Herts. Despite these pressures, the current Conservative Government has no intention of providing the funds needed to address these problems and support the building of affordable homes.

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.

Since taking control in May 2019 in our joint administration, we have:

- Pursued the adoption of the Local Plan, which is being held up by the Government Inspector and preventing any significant housing being built.
- Added new sections to the Local Plan ensuring that major developments will be preceded by a Master Plan, allowing consultation and preparation for good infrastructure and facilities.
- Defended the Green Belt from unscrupulous development.
- Worked with *settle* to give the go-ahead to much needed social housing after long delays under the previous administration. This has borne fruit with the recent start to the major development at John Barker Place in Hitchin.
- Ensured all developments properly relate to existing communities.
- Ensured that all developers provide contributions to infrastructure and community facilities
- Developed Planning Guidance to address Climate Change, encouraging appropriate insulation and renewable energy, working towards "Passivhaus standards".
- Developed Planning Guidance to encourage high quality of design.

- Provided accommodation for homeless residents to protect them from the pandemic and developed more appropriate accommodation in conjunction with our partners.
- Supported a large expansion of Survivors Against Domestic Abuse (SADA) in the District.
- Engaged with other Hertfordshire and neighbouring councils to ensure that future growth has the right infrastructure and employment potential.
- Led County-wide work on reinvigorating our town centres in response to changes in retail and the effects of the pandemic.

Our Commitments

If you elect The Labour Party to continue leading North Herts District Council, we will:

Use opportunities provided by the Council's commercialisation strategy to provide social housing.

Seek opportunities to support new **co-operative and community-led housing**, in line with our commitment to engage with communities and work with our residents.

Strictly **enforce the requirement of 40% affordable housing** in all significant new developments.

Continue to promote **high standards in housing developments**, ensuring each home is built with real quality and appropriate insulation, moving as rapidly as possible towards zero carbon homes. This will reduce preventable winter death and ensure future residents live in comfort and are not burdened by unmanageable energy bills, while also helping to meet our climate change targets.

Ensure that facilities including schools, adequate parking, community open spaces and recreation facilities must be planned and provided alongside new homes.

Promote imaginative proposals that will improve air quality for new developments, such as car sharing arrangements, safe walking and innovative public transport.

Work with our partners to fund and support the development of new homes and initiatives or places that provide for the needs of those most vulnerable in our society, such as women's refuges, homelessness shelters, drug and alcohol abuse services and accommodation for the elderly.

Promote and encourage initiatives to improve the physical and mental wellbeing of our community. We 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.

Improve and simplify the means for Council car parking payments.

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5. Enterprise and Co-operative Development

Helen Oliver, Deputy Executive Member for 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 left behind by a decade of austerity cuts. Co-operative Councils have a proven record of making a difference, creating community wealth from the bottom up so that everyone can benefit. By changing the way we spend money, generate income and build up our local economy, we can improve the lives of everyone in our area.

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.

Credit Unions are Co-operatives that focus on providing a benefit to the community and can be particularly helpful to those who might struggle to get the best deal from a traditional bank or building society. We're proud of the success of the Black Squirrel Credit Union, started during the last period of Labour control of NHDC, but enjoying support from all the main parties.

The joint administration has already made a considerable difference in this area. Specifically we have:

- Joined the Co-operative Councils' Innovation Network, making NHDC a Co-operative Council.
- Opened our world class North Herts Museum and held an independent review of the project, ensuring that lessons are learnt for the future.
- Reached out to work with local partners, including the Local Enterprise Partnership, the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation in our common work of protecting the local economy and local businesses, particularly during the pandemic.
- Engaged with other Hertfordshire and neighbouring Councils to ensure that future growth isn't hemmed in by artificial boundaries, but has planned infrastructure and employment.
- Made sure that our more commercial focus moves forward to real action and that this action will be for the benefit of our local communities.
- Worked with local community groups and community cafes to keep food out of landfill, while helping tackle the serious issue of food poverty.
- Continued to raise the profile of, and investigate support for, Co-operative Businesses, through presentations to the Cabinet Panel and working with neighbouring authorities.
- Continued our partnership with the Black Squirrel Credit Union.
- Ensured that all our staff are paid the Real Living Wage, supported apprenticeships and promoted staff development to address the Gender Pay Gap and barriers to development for any group of staff.

- Kept our promise to encourage our contractors to work with their Trade Unions and opened channels to raise concerns and seek positive solutions to industrial problems.
- Signed the Co-operative Party's Modern Slavery Charter and redoubled the Council's efforts against Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking
- Maintained our financial support for Citizens Advice, the Centre for Voluntary Service and the Minority Ethnic Forum
- Introduced concessions for garden waste charges.

Our Commitments

If you elect The Labour Party to continue leading North Herts District Council, we will:

Build on the commercial progress we have made, ensuring 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.

Continue to promote the interests of local businesses in our District, working with the Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and other business initiatives, ensuring that local businesses including microbusinesses are given access to procurement opportunities.

Support initiatives to provide flexible workspace and business "incubators".

Support the fight against corporate tax avoidance which disadvantages local businesses.

Ensure that support is put in place to advise those wishing to establish Co-operative and Community Businesses.

Continue to work with Credit Unions and advice organisations to tackle financial exclusion.

Work with local groups to develop community energy schemes.

Continue to value our staff and the staff of our contractors, who are also part of our community.

Insist that companies bidding for NHDC contracts pay the Real Living Wage, whilst encouraging them to take on apprentices and develop their staff as appropriate.

Ensure that all our residents can access our services. Whenever possible, local people will have a voice in the decisions that affect them.

Review all charges for Council services with a view to introducing concessions where they are needed and where it's possible.

Support and work with local communities to protect valued community assets like local pubs, community buildings and other community assets as these are vital to the vibrancy of our District. We will consult residents in order to map and list the assets they value in our District.

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6. Environmental Responsibility and Green Issues

Kay Tart, Deputy Executive Member for Environment and Leisure

Adem Ruggiero-Cakir, Acting Deputy Executive Member

The importance of the Climate Crisis has been fully acknowledged by the joint administration. We take the impact on the environment seriously and know that we must act quickly and decisively. We immediately declared a Climate Emergency, then worked to set up an environment strategy and identify structures through which councillors can engage with residents about how the Council can respond to this great challenge. The Cabinet Panel for the Environment has already proved to be a good tool for community engagement.

We believe that air quality is a serious issue that has been exacerbated by the building of developments without sufficient infrastructure to cope with potential increased vehicle use by encouraging instead the use of public transport, cycling and walking.

We have already made a considerable difference in this area. Specifically, in this area we have:

- Set up a Cabinet Panel for the Environment, which engages with residents and local groups to help to affect real change.
- Led by example, by NHDC switching to green electricity and gas and banning single use plastics in its buildings.
- Eliminated single use plastic in our leisure centres and swimming pools.
- Replaced the Council's Community Safety team vehicles with ultra-low emission vehicles.
- Brought back the WEEE recycling events for small electrical items.
- Brought in reduced fees for taxi licensing of electric vehicles and established no idling points and taxi ranks restricted to environmentally friendly vehicles.
- Completed a Green Space Audit to identify areas within the District to make biodiversity gains.
- Stopped the closure of play parks.
- Begun a programme of tree planting, with 450 trees planted in January 2020 and budgets put in place to plant 10,000 trees.
- Installed water fountains in public places.
- Made a successful bid for Hitchin to be part of the Intalink Feasibility Studies that will see bus priorities introduced to Hitchin from 2022/23.
- Ensured that North Herts towns are included in the first round of the Sustainable Travel Town Programme.
- Introduced new bicycle stands across the District.
- Updated, and made more challenging, our Climate Change Strategy drawing upon what we have learnt from the Cabinet Panel for the Environment and our carbon footprint assessments, amongst other things.

- Become the lead authority for biodiversity on the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership, which will establish a biodiversity baseline and explore how we can increase biodiversity.

Our Commitments

If you elect The Labour Party to continue leading North Herts District Council, we will:

Further involve local people in the discussion around the Climate Crisis and the necessary plans to tackle it, with Town Talks around the District focussed on Climate Change. This will allow residents to input and discuss issues, ideas and solutions with councillors.

Set up a Climate Change Partnership, working with schools, businesses, faith groups and community organisations to develop and promote schemes and ideas to deal with Climate Change.

Oppose the expansion of Luton Airport, scrutinising all new developments for possible environmental impact on North Herts.

Continue to reduce the Council's footprint, by examining on-site generation for electricity generation from solar and wind, and reduce travel with more digital meetings and support for staff working from home.

Ensure that any refurbishment of Council buildings must include renewable energy plans.

Continue to support the Local Energy Bill, allowing the development of community energy schemes to serve local communities.

Actively work with Hertfordshire County Council to use the smart technology it has introduced to control LED streetlights in order to help us increase the number of air quality monitoring sites.

To improve community transport, we will investigate the possibility of a dial-a-ride scheme for rural communities for whom public transport has been significantly cut or removed, and promote and support car sharing schemes.

Work with the County Council to improve the provision of on-street charging for electrical vehicles, provide more electric car charging facilities in car parks and offer lower car parking charges for electric and hybrid vehicles.

Rewild areas of Council land, develop more wildflower verges and bee corridors, seek alternatives to herbicides, and support the setting up of community orchards and gardens.

Use our publications, social media and online presence to promote NHDC schemes, to inform and signpost and to ensure residents are aware of the positive changes that are happening.

Explore opportunities to establish awards for green and sustainable local businesses.

Continue our work on biodiversity through the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership.

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7. Recycling and Waste Management

Elizabeth Dennis-Harburg, Executive Member for Recycling and Waste Management

Since May 2019 we have worked tirelessly to return your waste collections to a service that can be relied upon across the District. We know there's still much work to be done but are proud that we have:

- Maintained weekly collections from flats.
- Returned the waste service to something resembling 'business as usual' taking the steps necessary to protect the service through the pandemic.
- Reintroduced the collection of small waste electrical items, or 'WEEE' (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment) across the District – this will recommence once Covid-19 restrictions allow.
- Implemented a concessionary rate for garden waste collections.
- Made life easier for residents wishing to take advantage of garden waste collections by introducing direct debit payments.
- Launched split recycling litter bins in Royston to encourage better recycling in our town centres.
- Hired a Waste Awareness Officer to support residents improve their recycling habits and support our environmental objectives.

Our Commitments

If you elect The Labour Party to continue leading North Herts District Council, we will:

Show our commitment to running WEEE events by holding them regularly in each major town across the District.

Continue with our commitment to reducing and reusing.

Take on board feedback from the Cabinet Panel for the Environment to set ambitious targets to reduce the proportion of our waste that goes to landfill.

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8. Finance and Resources

Ian Albert, Executive Member for Finance and IT

Since 2010, real term Local Authority funding to Councils like North Herts has been cut by the Conservative Government by over 50%.

The world is a very different place compared to when the Labour and Liberal Democrat joint administration set the budget last year. The pandemic has had a significant impact on North Herts District Council finances, despite promises from the Government that it would fully fund local authority shortfalls.

Our current forecast is that the cost to the Council over this year (2020/21) will be over £2m in additional costs and over £3.5m in lost income. After taking into account what we did receive from Central Government, it leaves a funding gap of around £2.2m just this year. We will also need to cover similar amounts in future years.

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 the vital services that councils provide to residents.

Under our leadership, North Herts District Council has joined the nationwide Co-operative Councils' Innovation Network. We are continuing to work with other Co-operative Councils on a project funded by the Network to test trailblazer neighbourhood pilots that demonstrate the value of further working at a localised level with residents.

Building on the considerable achievements of our joint administration, we will get on with the day-to-day work of running North Herts District Council effectively and imaginatively on behalf of our residents.

We have an ambitious programme of work in this Manifesto. However, this will always be set alongside the need to balance our budgets, provide value for money and prioritise what needs doing first. We have started to put right the neglect of over 20 years of the previous Conservative administration. Help us to continue that work.

Our Commitments

If you elect The Labour Party to continue leading North Herts District Council, we will:

Build back better for our residents and businesses and community organisations as we move forward from this dreadful pandemic.

Thoroughly review every area of expenditure to ensure that they **meet the priorities** we have set out in our Council Plan.

Carry out a public consultation on those services that are most valued by residents.

Support the Council's 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.

Ensure that we value our most vital resource, **our staff**, and work with them to ensure we get value for every pound we raise in Council Tax.

Seek to use the skills and expertise of all Councillors and draw too on the **undoubted expertise in our community**, in contrast to the previous administration, which far too often took the “we know best” approach and didn’t listen.

Set out new initiatives we will take in support of key priorities like the Climate Change Emergency, greener transport and effective Town Centre Strategies to keep our towns vibrant and better engage our community.

Continue to look for areas where we can work with other councils through the Co-operative Councils’ Innovation Network, the Growth Board and other collaborations, which achieve our aims through sharing resources or external funding.

Strengthen co-operation with Parish and Town Councils, the County Council and councils in neighbouring boroughs and districts to **encourage well co-ordinated local services**, in line with our collaborative approach.

Ensure that technology is fit-for-purpose, as public services are becoming increasingly online so that residents can **conveniently access the information they need**, and decisions can be made democratically.

Ensure that charges for services are affordable and make sure that all our services are accessible to all by introducing **concessions for services** as we have already done for garden waste collection.

Continue to find ways to support vital community organisations across our District, including Citizens Advice.

Look to create new community and business grant funds and support our vital arts and culture sector.