

A Fairer Kingston Labour's Manifesto for 2010 - 2014

Introduction

For the last eight years, Kingston Council has been run by a Liberal Democrat administration that has had the wrong priorities for our town. On 6 May, voters can send them a message.

The Council's management of its finances and assets was rated in December by the Audit Commission as merely meeting the *minimum* requirements. The commission also awarded the Council's housing service a "red flag", its worst possible rating. It was recently reported that the charity Save the Children had described the gap in GCSE results between the borough's poorest and better-off children as "scandalous".

Labour councillors will demand value for money, and with resources targeted at those in greatest need.

Labour stands for a fairer community. We will give priority to providing decent homes and public services, tackling poverty, and improving the life-chances of Kingston's poorest families. We will also work for a better deal for pensioners, by publicising their entitlements, pressing for more council discounts for pensioners, and maximising use of government grants.

We will work to make the borough a cleaner, greener environment, by improving and extending Kingston's recycling services, making council services more environmentally friendly and cleaning up local streets.

Labour councillors will fight to protect Kingston's public amenities, to keep all new developments to a human scale, and to open up opportunities for independent and local businesses, and for diversifying the local economy.

Kingston's Labour councillors have always worked hard to hold the council to account, and speak up for Labour values, fairness and openness.

Electing more Labour councillors on 6 May will strengthen this alternative voice, and bring a better deal from the Council for all residents.

Cllr Steve Mama

Kingston Labour Councillor
1964-68, 1971-82, 1986 to present

Max Freedman

Chair, Kingston Borough Labour Party



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Value for money

The Lib Dems promised to minimise the impact of council tax increases through a mixture of efficiency savings and robust budgeting: yet since the last council elections in 2006, they have imposed not only the highest council tax in London on the people of Kingston, but the second highest tax in the whole of England.

In a recent official survey, just over one in four residents said they believed that Kingston Council offers value for money, and less than half were satisfied with the way the Lib Dems runs the borough.

Councils up and down the country have been receiving excellent reports from official inspectors, but under the Lib Dems Kingston can only manage an adequate performance in managing the finances and resources of the Council and governing its business. This performance is just one step away from an assessment of performing poorly.

The Lib Dems promised to deliver a local theatre to the people of Kingston without relying on any subsidy from local residents through the council tax. They then went on to agree just such a subsidy for the theatre of £1.8m over three years. This is whilst they cut £7m from Council budgets for other services.

Kingston Labour will continue to expose waste, mismanagement, and wrong priorities in the Council's finances. To get better value for local residents, we will:

- Oppose all rises for senior staff in excess of rises for the lower pay tiers.
- Work to eliminate use of expensive and unaccountable consultants in place of permanent staff.
- Continue to oppose any above-inflation rises in Council payments to councillors.
- Encourage small community initiatives, instead of budget-busting Lib Dem vanity projects.
- Demand tougher monitoring of Council contracts and push for incentives for residents to report contractors' failures to meet standards.
- Provide all residents with a clear and simple guide to their basic services such as street cleaning, saying what they can expect, when they should expect it, and how to complain to the Council about any failures.
- Increase the focus on local streets in the roads and pavement repair programme.
- Campaign for a fairer system of local taxation, which is well thought out and workable, unlike the Lib Dem 'mansion tax' which had to be withdrawn within days.
- Refocus the Council's "communications" work on listening to residents, rather than using taxpayers' money to produce Lib Dem propaganda.
- Insist that there is genuine demand for expensive schemes before they can go ahead.

Quality of life

A cleaner, greener borough

The Borough of Kingston sits in an enviable position bordered by Richmond Park, the River Thames and the green belt. Also for many years it was the location of a popular Green Fair which drew people from all over London and the Home Counties.

Since 2006, the Lib Dem administration has improved recycling rates, but their changes leave many residents confused, and have yet to reach many residents in large blocks of flats. Recycling and disposal of many items remain over-dependent on residents' own transport for access to the central tip and other collection points.

Labour will always demand the highest standards for our environment, and will seek to make Kingston a green beacon for London and the South East, an exemplar authority providing the best possible sustainable living environment for those residing, working or visiting the Royal Borough.

Our first priorities for the Council will be:

- Completing the roll out of recycling collections to **all** residents
- Finding ways to make recycling collections simpler and clearer
- Accelerating the use of renewable energy to power Council buildings and installations
- Improving reporting of dumped rubbish, blocked drains, etc, by Council staff and contractors
- Guaranteeing to clear graffiti, litter and dumped rubbish within 24 hours, with penalties for failure by contractors
- Carrying out a carbon audit of the Council's property portfolio and taking immediate action to reduce emissions while also increasing efficiency – for example, reducing thermostats by one degree can save 8–10% on heating bills.
- Ensuring that new social housing, and upgrades to the existing housing stock incorporate the latest renewable energy and power saving technology.
- Working with local retailers to eliminate plastic bags, and reduce other packaging
- Providing and promoting safe cycle and pedestrian routes to schools, town centres and shopping parades in local communities, as well as in major road projects.
- Working to raise environmental awareness, and supporting events with this aim, including a return of the Kingston Green Fair.

Safer neighbourhoods

During the last four years, the Safer Neighbourhoods Programme has seen local police teams established in every Council ward – following an initiative by Labour Mayor Ken Livingstone.

The teams provide a visible police presence throughout the borough, making it a safer place, and forging stronger links between local communities and the police service.

Despite this success, the Liberal Democrats have opposed many crucial measures, from extended sentences for knife possession, to the DNA database that has led to the conviction of dozens of rapists and murderers. Locally, Lib Dems continually choose not to use ASBOs and dispersal orders that can help people who feel persecuted.

Labour councillors will build on existing good practice. Our priorities will be:

- Investing in youth services with activities in the evenings, especially at weekends and during school holidays, so that youngsters have a safe environment and boredom does not lead to anti-social behaviour.
- Full use of ASBOs and the range of powers for local people to deal with nuisance, especially where people from outside the borough plague local communities.
- Improving street lighting and providing CCTV for troublespots, where there is local demand, to reduce fear of crime.
- Offering cash rewards for evidence that leads to convictions for enviro-crime, such as fly-tipping, to be funded by new government powers allowing local authorities to keep the revenue from fines.
- Using the new licensing regulations to crack down on problem pubs and clubs, and ensuring that local residents and ward councillors are notified automatically of license applications in their area.
- Using new powers to shut down problem properties where there is persistent criminal activity or serious anti-social behaviour.

The future of our town

There is a danger in a time of economic difficulties and the tightening of budgets that maintaining the regeneration of Kingston town centre and other local centres across the borough will be neglected. Labour believes that every Kingston Borough resident deserves to live in a safe, clean and healthy environment. The borough's future must be in diversity, and developments must be on a human scale.

We must not allow cuts to put at risk community facilities, such as the Searchlight Youth Centre, which can provide training to the borough's young and old to reskill as recovery follows recession.

Labour's priorities will be to:

- Defend and promote small and independent traders, and work to diversify the town's economy so it is not over-dependent on big retailing during the day and alcohol-based entertainment at night.
- Ensure that any major redevelopment projects include community facilities, such as a new library, as well as providing for vulnerable groups.
- Encourage walking and cycling by providing cycle storage facilities and paths, and ensuring that planning caters for cyclists and pedestrians.
- Consider the regeneration of the riverside from Surbiton to Kingston. The riverside is a key attraction to bring visitors into the borough, and should be maintained to a high standard to keep this attraction.

Decent homes

Increasing the number of affordable homes was described as "the biggest challenge facing us" when the Lib Dems took office but their administration has failed to face up to the challenge, with existing council housing neglected and new build completely inadequate. Their only effort to increase investment was to spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on a stock transfer ballot which they lost decisively.

Labour accepts the decision of the Council's tenants and is committed to investing in social housing and targeting all available resources at the borough's most deprived council estates. Our priorities will be:

- Promoting more affordable housing; 50% of all new developments to be rented social accommodation.
- Ensuring that the Decent Homes Standard is met for all Kingston Council's rented housing as a political priority, using capital receipts and all other available funding sources.
- Setting higher standards of cleaning and lighting in council estates
- Creating a larger number of affordable units for families with children, converting existing units to 3-bedrooms or larger.
- Encouraging sustainability in all new developments, and ensure transparency in dealing with developers.

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is vital to all borough residents, and to the community as a whole. Delivered properly, it can enable all residents to fulfil their potential, both at work and in their personal lives.

In recent years, the Labour government has provided funding for Sure Start centres throughout the borough, and for improvements to schools. This includes the rebuilding of Chessington Community College, and a programme of renewal of all the borough's secondary schools.

After years of inaction and excuses, the Lib Dems have finally given way to pressure from local parents, and agreed to build a new secondary school in North Kingston – also with funds from the Labour government.

Following school closures by previous Tory administrations, the Lib Dems were taken by surprise by surging demand for primary school places. They have launched a hurried programme to build new classrooms on existing school sites, diverting funds from improvements to existing primary school facilities.

During the next four years, Labour's priorities will be to:

- Make best use of potential for government investment in local schools, and rigorously monitor all expenditure for effectiveness.
- Further develop Extended School provision and Children's Centres, making full use of available funding.
- Provide guarantees for Special Educational Needs funding, allowing SEN provision both in mainstream schools and specialist schools.
- Give priority to raising attainments by children from Kingston's poorest families, and providing a broad curriculum.
- Ensuring high-quality provision for children whose first language is not English.
- Ensure that adult education meets the needs of local people of all ages, enabling them to make the most of employment opportunities in the businesses and services that will secure our future, and to broaden their intellectual and cultural horizons.
- Ensure that the new secondary school in North Kingston meets in full the needs of the local community, and is open to all local 11–18 year-olds.
- Consult fully with all stakeholders in designing all new school buildings, and maximise community use of school facilities.
- Encourage the University to focus on recruiting students from the local area in their expansion plans, and support dedicated sites for student housing in the borough to reduce pressure on the already insufficient existing affordable rented housing.
- Defend public libraries, and ensure that a new main library is part of any plans for redevelopment of Kingston town centre.

A Future Fair for All

A fairer community

The Liberal Democrats' manifestos have consistently neglected issues of poverty and inequality.

They have ignored these problems while in office, and even voted with the Tories to veto Labour measures such as requiring contractors to pay women equal wages to men, and to pay a living wage to its front line workers. While restricting front line workers' wages, they sank huge sums of taxpayers' money into sky-rocketing pay packets for the Council's top executives.

The most deprived neighbourhoods have been starved of investment, and council tenants neglected.

Kingston's Labour councillors will provide a voice for all those at risk of social exclusion, or who look to the Council to address challenges of deprivation or disability. Our priorities will be:

- Targeting all possible resources at the neighbourhoods with greatest social and economic deprivation, and using sub-neighbourhood statistics to identify pockets of poverty hidden within affluent areas.
- Drawing up an anti-poverty strategy covering all aspects of the Council's work, as an immediate priority.
- Creating a new Executive Member for Social Inclusion to co-ordinate this whole policy area and ensure it is at the heart of all Council policy.
- Poverty reduction and equality impact to be a consideration in all major Council agenda items.
- Pay all frontline staff at least the London Living Wage.
- Abolish the two-tier workforce by enforcing the same conditions on all contractors.
- Cracking down on employers who refuse to pay the National Minimum Wage to their staff in the borough.
- A stronger ethical procurement policy, enforced across all Council contracts, ensuring all purchases are environmentally sustainable and Fairtrade where applicable.
- Promoting new childcare provision from the Labour Government and prioritising extension of facilities in areas of greatest deprivation.
- Fighting to set up Child Trust Funds for all children in the Council's care.

Promoting diversity, protecting the vulnerable

Under the Lib Dems young, the old and the disabled have all suffered, with the youth service targeted for cuts and privatisation, the elderly hit by falling day care budgets and charges for home care that have also hit the disabled, who continue to be unable to access 95% of Council buildings.

Young people have not received the service they need from their local authority, especially in areas of the greatest social need. Safe youth facilities are required, especially in the evening, as well as street outreach work. But the Lib Dems have neglected youth facilities, claiming that “the street is where youngsters want to be” and offering cafes in McDonalds as an alternative to proper facilities.

Too often, ethnic minority communities are disproportionately hit by the problems of social and economic deprivation, as well as being the victims of racist bigotry in all its forms. More needs to be done to ensure that racists cannot get away with their behaviour.

The Lib Dems’ endorsement of poverty pay for the Council’s contract workers will hit the poorest the hardest, particularly among these vulnerable groups. Women have also been traditionally underpaid in public service jobs.

Labour will strive to ensure that everyone is included and valued in a community we can all be proud of. Our priorities will be:

- Better information campaigns to ensure pensioners are aware of their entitlements
- Supporting more discounts for pensioners from Council charges
- Participating in national schemes to give grants to pensioners for insulating their homes better
- Disabled facilities at the Guildhall and in the Town Centre redevelopment, with more public toilets for the disabled
- Using the government’s Youth Opportunity Fund and Youth Capital Fund to create facilities that young people want
- A guaranteed future for facilities for local young people such as Searchlight, and targeted investment in youth activities for the borough’s council estates
- Opposing racism by protecting and promoting the work of Kingston Race and Equalities Council, and fighting racists and their propaganda
- Ensuring that racist incidents are dealt with as a priority by council officers and estate offices
- Support for civil partnerships, and LGBT-friendly policies
- A pay audit to evaluate any gender pay gap within the Council’s staffing
- Compulsory pay audits for contractors and refusal of any contract to a company that does not pay equal wages for equal work
- Establishing the proportion of senior council officers from minority backgrounds or female, to ensure these reflect the local community and London benchmarks

Working for you

Democracy and transparency

Since 2002, Kingston has been run by a Liberal Democrat administration that promised to “open up the Council and encourage participation” and has boasted of “greater accountability”, but has centralised its strategic decision-making, reducing backbench and opposition councillors who were elected to represent their constituents to neutered, marginal figures. They have ignored clearly stated public concerns and forced through controversial plans behind closed doors.

Kingston Labour is committed to greater openness and transparency. We believe that councillors should be individually and collectively responsible to their constituents and that the Council executive should be more transparent and open to scrutiny from elected representatives. To make the Council more effective in representing local people, holding the administration to account and setting the agenda, we will fight for:

- More prominent advertisement of opportunities to question the administration at Council meetings, and greater openness, transparency and friendliness to the public when they attend
- Wider and better public consultation on major issues, such as changes to road schemes, and in processes such as licensing, including pro-active attempts to consult the more vulnerable and those less likely to have access to the internet
- A recognition that those impacted by a local scheme are not simply the nearby residents, with the appropriate increase in consultation
- A strengthened role for Neighbourhood Committees to deal with local concerns
- A more effective role for backbench councillors and for full Council meetings, so that important local issues and decisions are fully debated
- Forward-looking committees, with the power to call experts and order public consultation, and with their own dedicated support staff who do not also answer directly to the administration.
- A greater presumption towards openness on freedom of information
- A better attempt to communicate fully with the public, including a more accessible and user-friendly website
- A process for awarding and monitoring key Council contracts that allows the right level of input and scrutiny from elected councillors, separating political priorities and accountability from the administrative process
- Tightening up rules on declarations of interest and lobbying, and on commercial appointments for former Council executive members
- Prominent and accessible display of councillors’ allowances and expenses, broken down to set out transparently how much has been claimed, and for what

Representation and responsiveness

Although Labour's presence is small, over the past term we have worked hard to be effective representatives and to justify the hopes and trust that voters have placed in us. There has been a Labour representative at every full Council meeting since 2006 asking questions about subjects which matter to residents of Kingston. Labour have also regularly attended meetings of the decision making Executive to hold the Council leaders to account.

Labour surgeries have been held on a regular basis at venues within the community to allow residents to easily access advice and help with their problems.

We have made sure that we are easily contactable by residents and have made public all our telephone, email and home contact details.

Labour is rightly proud of its record of representation in Kingston and is keen to continue to serve, to make Kingston the best borough it can be for all its residents.

Kingston's Labour councillors pledge to continue to:

- Hold regular local surgeries at venues convenient for local residents
- Keep in touch with voters through regular newsletters
- Be accessible to constituents by telephone, letter, and email
- Make home visits where necessary
- Attend community meetings, such as tenants' and residents' association, and the Kingston Pensioners' Forum
- Maintain the Labour Group's exemplary record of attendance at Council meetings
- Remain rooted at the heart of the community