

Raising the Bar 2018 Manifesto



 **Labour**
West Oxfordshire

Our manifesto is a list of priorities and promises. It includes plans for our councillors to work on this year, but also a guide for action by our over 1000 members and many thousands of supporters and local residents, who want to make West Oxfordshire a fairer and better place.

Our Priorities:

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Council Democracy

Council democracy is under threat because of changes to the way we deliver services, known as “Vision 2020”.

Two council-owned companies called Ubico and Publica now employ all our staff, in a shared structure we jointly own with neighbouring districts. The benefits are savings in management costs, more capacity particularly for specialist services like emergency planning, union recognition for staff, and services being brought back “in house” from outside contractors.

<http://www.westoxon.gov.uk/about-the-council/information-data/guide-to-the-council/management-shared-services/publica/>

Current Conservative Failure

Vision 2020 is a programme that involves significant sharing of resources, to cut costs without reducing levels of service. However, there are concerns about staff morale and ability to innovate in response to local need. There is a concern we might end up as a zombie district, or clone authority, providing the minimum locally and shorn of expertise. By looking only at costs, the Conservative approach loses sight of the value we can offer, or what more we can do to make our communities fairer, stronger and more vibrant.

What West Oxfordshire Labour Will Do

We value what our staff have to offer. We will:

- Insist that staff are represented in new structures, so their voice and experience is heard (including through trade union recognition)
- Apply a “West Oxon First and Last” test to changes and to shared services; checking that the council is more and not less capable to meet the needs of the district
- Insist on joint working with other public bodies who share our focus, in particular Oxfordshire authorities and local resident groups
- Scrutinise budgets and financial reports to make sure we are not leaking money to other districts in the shared service, and vice versa
- Conduct annual surveys to measure the effectiveness, and in particular the sense of local responsiveness, of our services, staff and management. This includes asking all staff anonymously
- Absolutely oppose any privatisation, and promote rules to prevent any future sale of council assets or service teams

Environment and Waste

West Oxfordshire is a lovely part of the world. Our towns and countryside are valued by all of us and by visitors all year round. Our health and that of the world depends on the actions of each of us, and your council should play a leading role.

Current Conservative Failure

Under this Conservative Government and Council, action has slowed to mere compliance.

What West Oxfordshire Labour Will Do

We want to save the planet and secure West Oxfordshire. Environmental priorities for Labour mean we will:

- 1) Tackling the growing air pollution crisis - Currently areas of both Witney and Chipping Norton far exceed UK government targets and EU legal limits. We will promote vehicle weight restrictions in key problem areas.
- 2) Invest in electric vehicle charging points in all council car parks across West Oxfordshire
- 3) Launch a fresh new recycling campaign and ensure all residents have sufficient waste and recycling bins that meet their household needs. This will include an urgent search for flyaway plastics recycling facilities.
- 4) Work with planners and house builders to ensure all new substantial housing developments are designed with nature in mind and incorporate wildlife friendly areas and dedicated spaces for nature.
- 5) Work with local cycling groups and other interested parties to create a safe complete cycle path network to improve cycling amenities and increase local take-up.
- 6) Provide waste disposal centres across the district, including replacing Dix Pit in the north of the district, partly funded by fees from neighbouring districts



A Local Plan for West Oxfordshire Development

The District Council is responsible for the local plan, which determines the future development of our towns and villages to meet the needs of our residents. The next plan is expected to be put in place in 2018 and lasts until 2031.

<http://www.westoxon.gov.uk/residents/planning-building/planning-policy/local-development-framework/>

Current Conservative Failure

Our communities are growing, as more people seek to live in our district. But development is out of control, thanks in part to the policy of the Conservative and Lib Dem Coalition which has led to chaos across the land. Our Conservative Council has been slow to react, and we are floundering without a sense of direction or a plan to follow.

What West Oxfordshire Labour Will Do

Support a local plan that creates jobs and puts the right homes in the right places at the right price:

- Put communities at the heart of planning, expanding the support for sustainable community plans at parish level
- Fight for infrastructure to support new homes and jobs
- Oppose the massive North Witney development and encourage more development and funding for Carterton
- Subject to the above, promote the adoption of the local plan as soon as possible, to take back control of new developments across the district
- Support strategic transport links, health and education investment and social housing
- Create a jobs strategy that reduces commuting and supports family life



Housing and Planning

Current Conservative Failure

West Oxfordshire District Council currently has over 2000 applicants bidding on available properties in West Oxfordshire. In the year since October 2016 we have housed just 402. There is an acute shortage of affordable housing in the District which needs urgent attention.

What West Oxfordshire Labour Will Do

- Meet this unmet need by:
 - using Council reserves to directly deliver construction and maintenance services that can guarantee high quality council housing, or facilitating Housing Associations to do so, with secure lifetime tenancies and genuinely affordable rent (i.e. social rent at between 50% to 60% of market rents).
 - ensuring a sustainable means of meeting our local housing need by retaining ownership and control of available public land.
 - prioritise the providing of homes at social rents and to cease disposing or transferring of public land, council estates and commercial property for the benefit of private-sector housing and investment opportunities for the few.
 - requiring at least 1:1 replacement, within the same neighbourhood of Housing Association homes sold under right to buy or otherwise
 - prioritising brownfield sites for the building of new homes.
- Ensure all new homes in West Oxfordshire are built to the highest safety, environmental and construction standards. We should consider setting new ultra-high standards for new homes. We will follow the example of Exeter City Council who insist new homes built under their auspices must:
 - be low energy matching Passivhaus standards to reduce energy demands by up to 90% compared to standard UK buildings
 - be healthy, adhering to German “Build Biology” principles which specify natural and unadulterated building materials that don’t release toxins
 - use building materials with the lowest radioactivity and protect against noise, vibration and pollution
- Reduce homelessness by offering incentives to private sector landlords and letting agents where appropriate by way of rent in advance payments (up to 4 weeks), damage waiver guarantees and rent guarantees. WODC is finding it increasingly difficult to secure privately rented accommodation as landlords and letting agents are reluctant to accept people who are claiming housing benefit. In addition, Housing Associations are now doing thorough income and expenditure checks with prospective tenants and will not offer a property if the property is not affordable. All such properties benefitting from the scheme would need to pass a full health and safety inspection undertaken by the Council and the Council would need to decide whether there should be a limit on the rent charged. The potential benefit for the landlord is that the council will help to ensure that the tenancy is conducted satisfactorily and that rent is paid regularly. The City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council has a successful Private Sector Lettings Scheme which incorporates some of these elements.

- Support the expansion of the Council’s *Local Partnership* Purchase Scheme (LAPP) to help first time buyers. This is a new form of Shared Ownership Scheme where an individual can buy a property on the open market and buy up to a 70% share of that property with West Oxfordshire buying the remaining 30%. Occupiers would pay rent to the Council to cover its stake. The difference from traditional Shared Ownership is that you are not restricted to choosing from designated Housing Association owned properties or sites – it could be any open market property of your choice that WODC would contribute to. Conditions include the following:
 - There is a price ceiling of £375,000
 - You must buy with a mortgage of up to 90% loan to value on the share
 - Deposit must be 10% of the share you buy
 - Each applicant is assessed and awarded points based on a range of criteria focusing on:
 - a. First time buyers
 - b. Local residents
 - c. Key workers
 - d. Those with dependents
 - e. Applicants in social housing or on the Council’s housing waiting list.
 - The current budget for the scheme is £500,000 and this should be extended.

- Investigate whether development of a scheme that offers interest free loans to owners of empty properties to bring them back into residential use (for renting at an affordable rate) would be beneficial in West Oxfordshire. Cambridge City Council have an effective scheme that offers up to £25,000 for this purpose.

- Initiate a “Parish Sustainability Scheme”. For a generally affluent area, there are remarkable declines in economic and social activity in some towns and villages. These are the result of a number of pressures and changes. One of these is clearly a huge but hidden decrease in population, caused by the purchase of homes as investments, not for family use. The number of second homes is not clear, though those officially declared are a minority. Empty homes are a concern, but empty communities, on weekdays affected by commuters and weekend-only residents, are a driver of failure for village shops, pubs, churches and schools. To combat this, we propose research into a new Parish Sustainability Scheme, as follows:
 - Every Parish Council will be asked to produce a neighbourhood plan, outlining the sort of place they aspire to be in 20 and 50 years
 - Each plan will include suggestions for new parish homes for local people to promote community vitality, including an idea of where and what sort of homes might be provided
 - WODC will explore funding mechanisms and powers to enable building truly affordable homes without placing taxpayer funds at inappropriate risk
 - Homes from the Parish Sustainability Plan will be included in the Local Plan numbers as an additional 500 on windfall numbers
 - Further work from WODC to support Parish Sustainability, like giving Village Halls or alternative single chosen building such as a pub or church hall a zero rating, is essential
 - This, we believe, will offer controlled and consensual development, at a pace and in a place agreed by local people, for places including Bampton, Aston, Standlake,

Stanton Harcourt, Burford, Clanfield, Long Hanborough, Bladon, North and South Leigh, Ducklington, Cassington, Finstock, Freeland, Eynsham, Leafield, Charlbury, The Wychwoods, Enstone, Chadlington, Dean, Kingham, Churchill, Minster Lovell, Hailey, Over Norton, Rollright, Combe, Shilton, The Bartons, Stonesfield, and Tackley.

- Encourage the adoption of innovative Shared Ownership, Social Rent and Key Worker Schemes with private developers that encourage access to low cost home ownership for local people along the lines being explored with Blenheim Estate. This includes affordable rent properties at 60% of market rent and shared ownership/shared equity properties with a ceiling of 80% staircasing so that they could never be bought outright and transferred to the private sector and always remain part of the affordable housing offering.
- Support a National Policy programme to build the public homes we need. This would involve the following policies:
 - Give councils the freedom to borrow against their assets. Currently councils are restricted in their ability to borrow and build up to established prudential limits. This change would allow councils to be run like the uniquely accountable, enterprising public institutions that council leaders of all political colours want to be. When Labour helped councils get building again after the global economic crisis we found councils were able to gear up quickly. 60,000 additional homes could be built over five years as a result of this policy change, half of which would require grant funding.
 - Tighten the obligations of developers to fund more social rented homes. The planning system was blamed at the start of this decade for the lack of new homes, and the Coalition government made it easier for developers to get away with building fewer affordable homes by introducing a test of project viability. No substantial adjustments to this test were introduced as the market recovered. The granting of planning permission can be hugely profitable for developers, and it's essential that some of this added value is retained for the wider public benefit. It's also a vital way of putting private finance to work in building public homes. Rather than running down the number of homes provided, increasing the number of homes delivered through developer obligations to their pre-2010 peak would enable 16,000 new homes a year. 20% of these should be able to be delivered grant free.
 - Reform right-to-buy to actually deliver one-for-one replacements. Right-to-buy has been a boon for some council tenants, but has had a huge negative impact on the stock of public homes and proved a big disincentive for social landlords to develop. Instead of the nine-to-one replacement ratio achieved so far, Labour should adopt a policy of a genuine one-to-one replacement. This would reduce the number of



homes sold, and bring in 6,000 additional replacement homes per year compared to the status quo.

- Use the power of the government balance sheet to bring down the cost of finance for housing associations. One of the good innovations that has become established in this country, though used for some time abroad, is the use of government guarantees to help bring down the cost of finance for private and charitable organisations. A modest extension of the current guarantee programme could help to build an additional 2,000 homes per year. We also propose the capitalisation of a housing investment bank which would enable further additional units to be built.
- Fund a significant HCA grant programme to allow councils and housing associations to build at scale, and lever in private finance. In addition to the grant funding for the programmes above, a significant additional contestable amount of grant funding should be disbursed to councils and housing associations through the Homes and Communities Agency and the Oxfordshire Growth Board. The grant per home could be £60,000 per unit, the same level as under the National Affordable Housing Programme from 2008-11. This would enable an average of 30,000 additional units per year, weighted towards the final years of the Parliament to enable the sector to gear up for this level of building.

Implementing this set of housing policy changes could see the building of substantial numbers of affordable homes which due to the substantial long-term savings to housing benefit could pay for itself in 26 years.

Homelessness

Current Conservative Failure

A snapshot last August showed 8 families in emergency accommodation, often far from friends, schools and support. The cost in one year, 2016-17, of emergency accommodation was more than £65,000; almost 100 homeless applications were made to the council. We know over the last few months the problem has got far worse. Rough sleeping in Witney is now commonplace and it is visible everywhere in Oxford where many of our homeless former residents go. Exploitation and violence, alongside addiction and mental health issues, are rife.

What West Oxfordshire Labour Will Do

Simply, we will end rough sleeping and waits for emergency accommodation in West Oxfordshire and work with Oxford to contribute to a county- and countrywide solution. We will do this by:

- Buying or renting homes so the council provides emergency accommodation directly
- Publicising the Streetlink website to alert authorities promptly to homelessness
- Developing a twelve-point plan so residents can help homeless people, as done by Oxford City Council
- Working with housing providers and landlords, and advice agencies, to cut evictions to a minimum
- Training volunteers to report rough sleeping and talk with homeless people
- Enter into a strategic partnership with NHS, charities and campaigners to tackle underlying issues



Sustainable West Oxfordshire for us and our children

Current Conservative Failure

Our Conservative councils are too unambitious for our communities. They can provide an inspiring lead to make sure that our district is not just fairer and better in the short term, but is contributing to a sustainable world and healthier communities now and in future. We want to hand on our world in a better state than when we inherited it. That's why we need urgent action and our Council can lead.

What West Oxfordshire Labour Will Do

- Make West Oxfordshire a zero-carbon district by 2028. Our plan for this will continue to grow as community groups and campaigns contribute ideas. However in 2018 we wish to explore:
 - Establishing a way to measure our carbon footprint, with targets to reduce it to zero by 2028. Our beautiful trees and countryside contribute on the plus side, and our human activity on the minus, and we need to champion more plusses!
 - Regulations about solar cells on new housing, with enhanced standards of insulation
 - Increase the number of electric / hybrid vehicles by accelerating council provided charging points, with all council vehicles to conform, and public transport contracts to include this requirement
 - a 1 – 5 star framework of assessment for local firms to show their carbon footprint – with rate rebates for those scoring highly
 - End the sale and use of single-use plastics, including straws, cosmetics, packaging and unrecyclable materials by persuading and giving incentives one home and one business at a time



Health, Safety and Wellbeing

Current Conservative Failure

The NHS is on the brink, thanks to “reforms” and cuts by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in coalition. At the same time we are all more at danger from lifestyles threatening our mental and physical health. The Conservatives have underspent the meagre public health improvement budget and show no imagination when it comes to giving us all a chance to live healthier lives. At the same time, crime is on the increase for the first time in a generation, thanks in part to deep cuts in our police service.

What West Oxfordshire Labour Will Do

- Fight, fight and fight again to stop closures like the Deer Park Medical Centre and threats to other services in our district.
- Work in close partnership with the County Council to develop and safeguard local social care
- Improve the health of people living within district, to reduce demand on medical services and improve quality of life
- Tackle air pollution in parts of Witney and Chipping Norton (see plan for more electric / hybrid vehicles above and use the local plan to reduce traffic congestion that causes it)
- Improve leisure, fitness and sports facilities throughout the area, making them accessible to all (i.e. not excluding those on low incomes, and ensuring attractive and varied provision)
- Invest in new leisure facilities, including promoting outdoor and informal opportunities, alongside schools, parish and town councils, and the NHS
- Encourage walking and cycling by providing safe routes
- Champion a health promotion campaign designed specifically to help our residents
- Tackle the effects of austerity (poverty is a major contributor to poor health) and campaign for a government that will end austerity and invest in growth. We will continue to highlight the effects of austerity, and take all possible actions to mitigate them
- Monitor the introduction of Universal Credit, and the use of food banks, and work to end the scandal of hunger and poverty in West Oxfordshire
- Build a solid and strong support network for victims of domestic violence
- Work more closely with county, parish and town councils, and the police, to cut crime and reduce vulnerability

Roads and Traffic

Current Conservative Failure

As the planning authority, and with capability and knowledge of the local area, West Oxfordshire District has the ability to make our roads better, but in the last eight years they have got worse; much worse. Latest estimates show around a £30 million backlog in urgent maintenance in West Oxfordshire alone! Residents are paying the price in vehicle damage and accidents.

What West Oxfordshire Labour Will Do

By working together with the County Council, the highways authority, using powers which are already in use in Oxford City, we can target resources at the most urgent fixes and guide a better use of scarce resources. Labour will:

- Set up a joint working approach to fixing our roads
- Target work at the most urgent areas more effectively
- Cut road damage and traffic problems by closer monitoring and better oversight of utility company digs
- Use planning powers to ensure a joined-up approach to building new roads and renewing existing roads
- Prioritise footpaths and cycle ways to keep users safe
- Tag all essential roadworks to be paid for by landowners and developers



