

Keeping it local For a better Scotland



Scottish Local Government Elections May 2017

Introduction

This paper is UNISON Labour Link Scotland's contribution to the Scottish Labour local government election campaign strategy for 2017.

It sets out the steps we believe Labour groups and campaign forums need to take now and outlines some of the policies that we believe will resonate with our members and the wider electorate. Our key message is that Labour in local government must act politically, not administratively, and show what a force for good local government in Scotland could become.

Making the case for local government

All of us rely on the services delivered by local government. From childcare to care for our elderly and vulnerable, keeping our streets lit and emptying our bins, helping us to stay fit and our children to learn, local government is at the heart of Scottish society.

Councils and the collective provision of services did not arise by accident, they developed from an acknowledgement that private provision and markets would not deliver the services and facilities necessary to sustain a modern society. Councils represent more than service delivery bodies, they are also a tier in our democracy. They should have the capacity to take meaningful and accountable decisions about local areas, to make a real difference to their areas, responding to the needs and wishes of their citizens.

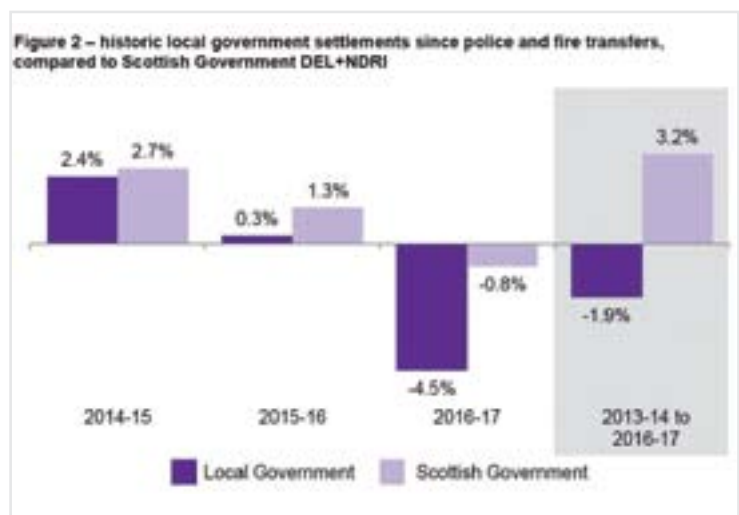
Administering Austerity

Tory austerity has damaged Scotland's economy and public services. In real terms, Scotland's budget will be 12.5% lower by 2019-20 than it was in 2010-11, equivalent to a cut of £3.9 billion.

However, the Scottish Government now has the powers to take a different course and they have chosen to administer austerity, rather than end it. They have pushed austerity down to local services. Council revenue funding will reduce by 4.5 per cent in 2016/17 bringing the real terms cut to 11 per cent since 2010 – twice the cut the Tories made in the Scottish Government's budget. The workforce consequences are stark. A staggering 87% of the public sector job losses in Scotland since the crash have been in local government.

Councils have been unable to respond because of the regressive council tax freeze, which has taken £3.5bn that could have been spent on local services. Instead of abolishing the council tax as they promised, they are tinkering around the edges. Even then they are taking £100m of the proceeds for their own budget decisions. A tax based on 1991 property valuations is unsustainable.

Austerity does not simply impact on public service budgets; it also fails to address the deep-seated inequalities that are the biggest challenge to Scotland's public services. The Christie Commission estimated that as much as 40 per cent of all spending on public services is accounted for by interventions that could have been avoided by prioritising a preventative approach.



Combating Austerity

Labour councils should be leading the attack on austerity.

The impacts of cuts are highlighted in UNISON's 'Damage Series' of reports – from time to care for our elderly relatives, to staff and materials for children in our schools. Staff doing large amounts of unpaid overtime, increased levels of stress related illness and concern for their clients over the corner cutting they are forced to deliver. They paint a depressing picture of a committed, yet demoralised workforce. People, not robots, deliver most public services. This means a highly motivated, fairly remunerated workforce is an essential element of public service delivery.

Labour councils should not be administering austerity either. They should be explicitly linking the cuts to the austerity policies of governments. Undertaking local economic impact statements and publishing parallel or citizens budgets. Showing what good properly funded local services could do in our communities.



Being anti-cuts is not the same as being against sensible savings that do not impact on services and jobs. Using UNISON's 'Combating Austerity' toolkit, Labour councils should be refinancing borrowing contracts, monitoring and restructuring PPP schemes and using pension funds and bonds to deliver infrastructure that supports the local economy. These are better than the often unworkable, half-baked privatisation or shared services plans that are presented to councillors as theoretical savings.

Labour councils should use the £5.5bn of local procurement spending to promote fair work, including the Scottish Living Wage, ending insecure work and ending blacklisting and tax dodging. They should be an exemplar employer, setting the benchmark through measures like Living Wage accreditation and UNISON's Ethical Care Charter. The idea could be developed into a 'Fair Work' city/town/area.

Keep it local

Centralisation and austerity has made councils institutions where far from being drivers of wellbeing in their localities, they have often been more concerned with limiting the damage of decisions taken elsewhere.

The Scottish Government has centralised services like police and fire, ring-fenced council budgets and taken powers of direction – treating councils as the administrative arm of government rather than a level of government with its own democratic mandate. 50 years of centralisation hasn't worked – so it's time to try something different as recommended by the Commission on Strengthening Local democracy.

Councils in Scotland are the biggest in Europe and so they must show the way by devolving services to real communities. Designing services in co-operation with communities and the staff who deliver them. Showing how local government can help deliver seamless, integrated services that people value.

Putting councils at the heart of the Green economy

The Challenge of climate change is one that cannot be avoided but it also represents an opportunity. Councils are key to tackling climate change as they are involved in so many of the areas where changes will have to be made if we are to make the shift to a low carbon society.

Local authorities should be leading by example in areas including energy efficiency, procurement (including food), transport and workplace policies. Councils are well placed to lead and support the creation of green jobs in local communities. The green economy is not just about the countryside. Cities, towns and rural communities have the potential for job creation around energy generation, recycling and energy efficiency measures including home insulation.

UNISON supports councils establishing energy companies that generate renewable electricity helping households to install energy efficiency measures, funded from the long-term savings in their energy bills.

Labour supports the re-regulation of buses, a policy that would address the loss of routes and above inflation price rises. Cuts in council budgets have resulted in reductions in road maintenance that damage vehicles and generate costly legal claims.

Caring services

One of the most important services councils deliver is social care. This, as many UNISON Scotland reports have shown, is an underfunded service struggling to keep up with demand, putting unsustainable demands on the workforce and the quality of care is suffering as a result.

The extra government funding for social care may not have been well managed, but councils should ensure they use their procurement powers to deliver the living wage, better training and most importantly, time for staff to care. Bad care employers can't recruit and retain staff and cut corners in care delivery. Labour councils should ensure they have adequate in-house teams. Labour's Quality Care Commission sets a clear agenda for better services.

Labour councils should understand the importance of preventative care. Cuts in social work mean less support to families where children's school attendance and educational attainment is a concern. Increasing charges for older people's day care centres and closing centres for people with learning disabilities increases the likelihood of hospital admissions. Reductions in care in the community services place greater pressure on young carers.

Councils can play an important role in shifting the focus of health care from acute interventions to community services. Local services like housing and education play an important role in tackling health inequalities. Councillors should be important advocates for local services through their places on health boards. Labour's Commission on Health Inequalities highlights the sort of actions councils could take.



Education

Labour's commitment to the modern comprehensive principle is rooted in our belief in a decent society. Every child should have an equal chance of the best education. Investment in the whole team of professional, technical and administrative staff, not just teachers, is the only way to ensure that schools play their role in improving educational attainment.

Early years are the key to tackling inequality, so Labour councils should welcome the expansion of free childcare. However, the promises of expansion must be accompanied by firm commitments to deliver the resources and funding to make that happen. It has to be more than just child sitting, undertaken by a poorly-trained private sector workforce, 80% of whom are paid below the Scottish Living Wage. Public service delivery through early years centres, ensures qualified staff are able to make meaningful interventions that prepare children for school.

On schools, the Scottish Government uses the language of devolution to schools, when in practice it is proposing centralisation and removing local democratic accountability. Labour should make the case for schools to remain under the control of local authorities to ensure the best balance between local democratic control and economies of scale.

Local authorities are best placed to manage education provision, capital spending, the procurement of goods and the provision to schools of support services such as social work and educational psychologists. Reducing the role of councils will both create more bureaucracy at school level, as head teachers and others spend more time on administration than teaching.

Leisure trusts and libraries

Although culture and leisure services are amongst the most visible and high profile of services associated with local authorities they are seldom these days delivered directly by Councils. Arms Length Organisations (ALEOs) and specifically Leisure Trusts may look like a good tax dodge, but they have done little for services.

We have a national strategy for Scotland's public libraries, with a mission to be part "of a shared civic ambition to fulfil the potential of individuals and communities".

As UNISON members in libraries have said, this is very far from being the reality as they cope daily with increasing workloads, widening responsibilities, and a more demanding set of customers. Councils need to invest in library services and facilities and consult with their staff as to how the service could be delivered better and adapted for the future.



Housing

Scotland is in the midst of a housing crisis. There are over 180,000 people on local authority waiting lists, almost 60,000 homes are overcrowded, and the vast majority of these are families with children. Home ownership out of the reach of a huge number of people and in recent years private sector rent increases have far outpaced earnings growth.

Labour councils should understand that housing is a key policy for any country that aims to reduce poverty and inequality, and their long-term effects on health and wellbeing. The investment we need to make in housing would provide a massive boost to our economy by creating skilled jobs, increasing labour mobility and increasing the disposable incomes of ordinary workers. Labour councils should be making the case for a massive programme of social housing working with pension funds as a source of investment. UNISON Scotland's report 'Funding and Building the Homes Scotland Needs' shows how this can be done.

As well as creating much needed jobs, action to refurbish our housing stock would also help to tackle fuel poverty. 940,000 homes in Scotland need to be taken out of fuel poverty. This would improve health and wellbeing, improve energy security, and deliver substantial emissions reductions. Action on energy efficiency is a clear win-win. At the same time councils should crack down on poor quality private landlords who are ripping off tenants.

Conclusion

A fairer more equal Scotland requires a greater investment in and expansion of local services. Ensuring that councils are empowered, resourced and capable of meeting the demands placed upon them should be the priority for everyone in Scottish public life.

Scottish Labour's local campaigns should develop an inspiring vision for their communities, based on quality services, local democracy and reducing inequality.

Useful links

- UNISON Inquiry into the flexibility and autonomy of local government (<http://bit.ly/2ec9DvW>)
- UNISON's evidence to the Scottish Parliament on proposed changes to the council tax (<http://bit.ly/2d543e0>)
- UNISON damage series reports on the impact of austerity on our public services (<http://bit.ly/2dGBGBU>)
- UNISON e-briefing: PPP - cracking down on costs (<http://bit.ly/2dSIeP>)
- UNISON's combating austerity report and toolkit (<http://bit.ly/2dSIStc>)
- UNISON's ethical care charter (<http://bit.ly/2eobrkn>)
- Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy (<http://www.localdemocracy.info/>)
- UNISON survey of homecarers 'We Care, Do You?' (<http://bit.ly/2d56IK2>)
- Commission for the provision of quality care in Scotland (<http://bit.ly/2dK2IMN>)
- UNISON briefing: Why we need local government to deliver good health (<http://bit.ly/2dUOFT>)
- Commission on health inequalities (<http://bit.ly/2djEm7M>)
- UNISON Scotland Childcare Charter (<http://bit.ly/2dK3zaL>)
- UNISON survey of leisure staff 'While we work, you play' (<http://bit.ly/2e8k2oT>)
- UNISON survey of library staff 'Read it and weep' (<http://bit.ly/2d6CwZt>)
- UNISON policy paper 'Making homes for a fairer Scotland' (<http://bit.ly/2dUO1kb>)
- UNISON report 'Funding and building the homes Scotland needs' (<http://bit.ly/2dbxOoF>)
- UNISON's Public Works blog 'Eliminating fuel poverty by November 2016? I think not' (<http://bit.ly/2eetkmG>)
- UNISON's evidence to the Scottish Parliament on the Private Housing (Tenancies) (Scotland) Bill (<http://bit.ly/2dKQXE8>)
- UNISON Scotland's Green Workplace (<http://bit.ly/2dKP0Yq>)
- UNISON's Public Works blog 'Municipal energy - time for radical action' (<http://bit.ly/2dPQcGE>)