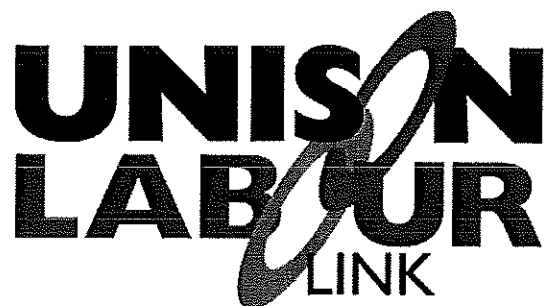


# **UNISON Labour Link**

**Submission to Labour Party  
Partnership into Power 2012**

## **Sustainable Communities**



## **UNISON Labour Link**

### **Submission to Labour Party Partnership into Power: Sustainable Communities**

UNISON is the largest public services union in the UK with 1.4 million members. We represent more than 850,000 staff delivering local government services and 450,000 healthcare staff employed in the NHS and local government, and by private contractors, the voluntary sector and general practitioners. UNISON is the largest education union representing staff in early years and schools, as well as higher and further education.

#### **Housing**

*What could be done to increase the supply of affordable homes to buy and rent?*

UNISON is currently considering a number of ideas to increase the supply of affordable homes, along with partner organisations working together as part of the Housing Voice campaign alliance. Housing Voice is currently finalising the report of its inquiry into the affordable housing crisis and hopes to be able to share this report with the Labour Party in the coming months.

Recommendations are likely to include:

- A credit easing / quantitative easing scheme, whereby the Bank of England buy bonds from social housing providers and the income is used to finance a significant increase in new affordable homes
- Speeding up and simplifying the release of public sector land for the development of affordable homes (based on a mix of Community Land Trusts, intermediate and social rent)
- HM Treasury and all other relevant government departments recognising the significant multiplier in construction and mainstream housing provision in the UK's policies for economic growth and recovery
- Adapting the NewBuy scheme to all parts of the owner/occupier market
- Creation of a new co-operative housing tenure in law
- Support for the development of mutual retirement housing, and provide greater help to older households to move into more suitable accommodation at the point when they no longer require larger family homes
- Adopt the General Government Financial Deficit (GGFD) approach to accounting in line with other European countries. This would provide far

greater freedom for local authorities to raise revenue and facilitate a new wave of building quality council housing

- Revisiting and updating the introduction of an 'investment allowance' to provide a revenue stream to support prudential borrowing for the construction of new public housing.

*How can we improve quality and tenants' rights in private and social rented housing?*

UNISON is particularly concerned about conditions in the private rented sector (PRS), where a growing proportion of our members and other families on low to middle incomes are now housed. We note that in most cases this is not a choice - it is because there is no alternative. Our strong belief is that in this context the private rented sector has to be made fit for purpose. To such ends:

- The Government should legislate for a new system of PRS regulation that a) provides increased and swifter protection for tenants from abuses including the establishment of a new housing court to deal more expeditiously with landlord-tenant disputes, repair claims and possession hearings; b) guarantees tenants safe homes and minimum standards, including increased security of tenure with twelve months the norm not six, and also prevents extortionate rents by allowing Councils to refer excessive rents to the Rent Assessment Committee; and c) regulates residential property letting and management agents as well as encourages the setting up of not-for-profit lettings agencies.
- The Government should also a) reintroduce Repairs Grants and b) review the tax treatment of private landlords to incentivise repairs, improvements, better management and longer tenancies.
- Local Government should as soon as practically possible - using existing legislation - introduce accreditation, licensing or registration schemes for their boroughs, targeted initially at the areas of poorest housing. This would include a regular 'MOT' style certificate showing that the property is free of serious hazards and meets a new minimum decent homes standard.
- Local government should be the primary regulator of the private rented sector including property letting and management agents, bringing together the skills of environmental health officers, tenancy relations officers, and housing advice workers.

### **Local government**

*How should we work with local government to devolve powers while ensuring they are enabled to deliver high quality services?*

*What are the right structures to support local government in taking on these devolved powers?*

UNISON strongly believes that the current government's reform agenda will have an increasingly detrimental effect on service quality, the provision of decent jobs in our communities and the values that underpin public services.

The localism act and the open public services white paper, for example, both pave the way for more privatisation, fragmentation of services and too often create a race to the bottom in terms of service provision and the terms and conditions of public service workers. This has negative consequences for our society and economy. Devolution of powers should instead privilege service quality, democratic accountability and user/provider relations based on shared values rather than market transactions and profit seeking.

*How can we ensure a fair distribution of resources to local authorities?*

UNISON is concerned at the growing regional differences in the allocation of public funds in England, which is adding to deprivation, widening social and regional disadvantage and creating social division. We also believe that proposals contained in the welfare reform bill will result in the loss of thousands of local government jobs and significant additional financial costs to local authorities as a consequence of: increased demand for resources from the local welfare fund; homelessness costs caused by housing benefit changes; costs associated with the localisation of council tax benefit; higher collection and debt recovery costs.

An alternative model needs to be developed that promotes the value and contribution that local services make to social and economic wellbeing with greater investment in local public services. This alternative should recognise the need to address regional disparities and emphasise the value of local government services as part of a wider citizen entitlement to a protective and sustaining welfare state.

## **Transport**

*What powers do local transport authorities need to ensure reliable and affordable bus services and to what extent should transport decision making and funding be devolved?*

We note that The Local Transport Act 2008 gave Passenger Transport Executives (PTEs) and local transport authorities a new suite of powers and options for improving bus services. This has:

- made it easier to negotiate voluntary partnerships between authorities and operators and given more powers to Traffic Commissioners to protect these arrangements;
- expanded the scope of Statutory Quality Partnerships (SQPs) to allow for binding agreements to be voluntarily entered into between PTEs and bus operators, providing for improved infrastructure (such as bus lanes), and

negotiated arrangements for the use of that infrastructure by bus operators (maximum fares, frequencies and timings);

- made Quality Contracts (QC) a more realistic option under which the existing deregulated bus markets (outside of London) are replaced with a franchising system where the local transport authority specifies what the bus network will provide and the private sector competes for the right to provide it. We note that in many places (West Midlands, Sheffield, Merseyside) PTEs are investing in voluntary and SQP arrangements. However, funding and legal barriers mean Quality Contracts are still very difficult for local authorities to implement. We recommend that a future Labour government take a more proactive approach to overcoming obstacles and enabling transport authorities to ensure the bus services our communities need are delivered. We also believe that the cuts to the financial support provided to bus services need to be reversed. These include:
  - the 20 per cent cut to bus service operators grant;
  - reductions in DCLG grant to for local authorities putting pressure on supported bus services;
  - halving integrated transport block funding;
  - abolition of rural bus grant.

### **Low carbon economy**

*How can we best support low carbon growth and promote sustainable development?*

The transition to a low carbon economy has to be allied to an active industrial policy and the decent jobs agenda. Essential components of such an approach should be a state investment bank, a comprehensive package around skills development and reform of the energy market. UNISON also supports feed in tariffs that support community scale renewable schemes. We note that, prior to coalition cuts, local authority led schemes underpinned by feed in tariffs, have been effective in generating low carbon power, creating jobs and reducing energy bills. As such we believe that such schemes should be revisited by a future Labour government, with a view to maximising the benefits such incentives have been shown to provide.

*In tough times, how can government make it easier for families and organisations to adopt low carbon lifestyles?*

UNISON supports the reinstatement of the Warmfront scheme, a clear strategy on tackling fuel poverty, and a more systematic, community led, approach to domestic energy efficiency, which again can also help to generate employment. UNISON has previously called for energy tariff reform, to reverse the current system of paying more for initial units of power consumed. A 'reverse block tariff' could incentivise low carbon lifestyles by rewarding lower levels of consumption with a cheaper rate. We believe there would be value in modelling different progressive options for tariff reform.

