

Local Election Manifesto 2019

Sunderland Conservatives

Introduction

The Sunderland Conservatives believe that our city has the potential to be an attractive destination for businesses, professionals and tourists.

It is also our belief that the Labour Party is holding our city back and making poor decisions which are not taken in the best interests of its people. From spending £41m on relocating the Civic Centre to a £50,000 subsidy for a Spice Girls concert, Labour in Sunderland is out of touch and out of control.

We recognise the frustration of Sunderland residents: they are told that there is no money for frontline services by the same group of Labour councillors that voted to spend £10,000 of taxpayers' money on their free meals while claiming around £1m allowances.

The Sunderland Conservative councillors are a strong voice of opposition to the Labour administration, but – unlike the city's Liberal Democrats – we are also a trustworthy and professional one.

At the time of writing, the Lib Dem Deputy Leader is facing two investigations for misconduct: one for the misuse of public money and the other for libellous accusations against another councillor. Elsewhere in the region, the Lib Dems voted to impose massive cuts on our fire service (including Farringdon station) while Councillor Robert Oliver voted to postpone them.

Only the Sunderland Conservatives will put the people of the city first – and this manifesto highlights our priorities for Sunderland.

The City Centre

The Sunderland Conservatives regret the state of the city centre. We recognise that high streets across the country are facing challenges because of internet shopping, supermarkets and retail parks, among other things, but we also feel that much of the blame in Sunderland lies at Labour's door.

The Labour Party has been in control of Sunderland for decades and its leadership has become complacent. The Sunderland Conservatives believe it is time that we have a positive, long-term vision for the city centre.

Policies

- **Oppose Civic Centre move** – we oppose Labour's plans to move the Civic Centre to the Vaux site, costing £41m. Not only is this an admission of Labour's failure to attract businesses to the site, it is a self-indulgent decision by a Labour Party that puts politicians before people. The Sunderland Conservatives would invest £11m of the capital funding in a leisure centre on the sea front and explore cheaper alternatives to move the Civic Centre into empty buildings in the city centre.
- **Free city centre car parking** – the Sunderland Conservatives have long supported free car parking schemes, such as "Free after 3" in the city centre. We repeat this year our long-standing commitment to reinvigorate our city centre by offering shoppers, workers and visitors more attractive parking schemes.
- **Extend the metro to Washington** – as well as our commitment to free parking, we again reiterate our support for the extension of the Tyne and Wear Metro to Washington. This would provide better access for Washington residents into Sunderland city centre and beyond.

- **Reduced business rates** – naturally, as Conservatives, we support a reduction in business rates to help improve the city's retail offer. We would also seek to make clearer to small business owners when and how they can request a rate valuation. Combined with our free parking policy, this would help turn Sunderland into a more vibrant city.

A Cleaner and Greener City

Sunderland, Washington and Houghton residents are proud of being from here and feel a strong attachment to our city and the distinct communities within it. However, no amount of pride can mask the fact that our city has suffered at the hands of incompetent Labour administrations for decades.

In 2017/18, Sunderland Council's record on environmental enforcement was poor compared to other North East Councils. Sunderland Council issued just 14 fines for littering, 35 for fly-tipping and a mere one fine for dog fouling.

Policies

- **Protection of parks and cemeteries** – the Sunderland Conservatives would direct money from the five Area Committee budgets to create new city-wide Park and Cemetery Wardens. These people would be responsible for securing parks and cemeteries on an evening and opening them on a morning. We see this as necessary step after anti-social behaviour and vandalism in Roker Park, Barnes Park and Bishopwearmouth Cemetery among others.
- **Reintroduction of weekly bin collections** – the Sunderland Conservatives have long supported the reintroduction of weekly bin collections. We support without reservation Environment Secretary Michael Gove's plan to introduce a scheme for councils to bring back weekly collections.
- **Improvements to cycle lanes** – we fully support the improvement of the city's cycle lanes. At present, the cycle route along the riverside is dark and littered with rubbish. We believe that cleaner, brighter and safer cycle lanes would promote a healthier, cheaper and sustainable

alternative to driving – as well as providing a better experience to those many cyclists who already use them.

- **Enforcement of littering and dog fouling** – in the last year, Sunderland Council has issued just one fine relating to dog fouling. Enforcement of penalties relating to litter and fly tipping is also inadequate. While we recognise that some progress has been made in recent months, we believe that much more must be done in this regard. We would therefore intensify the council's enforcement efforts to tackle the dog fouling, littering and fly tipping incidents that blight our communities.

Slashing Allowances

At a time when Labour claims our council is facing a funding crisis, we do not believe it is right – morally or economically – that its councillors take over a million pounds in allowances. Some Labour councillors receive more in allowances for chairing meetings than somebody working a full-time minimum wage job earns in a year. We would oversee deep cuts to the Council's gravy train and introduce a fairer system that voters have faith in.

Policies

- **Reduce councillors' allowances** – we would radically cut Special Responsibility Allowances including those for the five Area Committee Chairs (who received £10,350 each), the ten Area Committee Vice Chairs (£6,277 each), the four Scrutiny Chairs (£12,556 each) and the Mayor (£17,205 per year). We would cut Leadership allowances for all parties and remove both SRAs from the Minority Party in Opposition.
- **Scrap Policy Advisor roles** – these are unnecessary positions and the postholders are paid £12,556 a year (in addition to a basic allowance) for next to no work. We would get rid of these positions entirely.
- **End free meals for councillors** – scrapping free meals after meetings of the full council, saving £10,000 per year. Conservative councillors will pay for these meals for as long as the scheme continues.
- **2 councillors per ward** – we support reducing the number of councillors from 3 per ward to 2.

Transparency for Sunderland

The Sunderland Conservatives believe that Sunderland City Council is insufficiently transparent and avoids scrutiny. We believe that greater transparency would help repair the relationship between the people of Sunderland (many of whom believe the Council's leadership is corrupt) and its elected representatives.

Policies

- **DBS checks for councillors** – following the Paul Middleton scandal, we acknowledge that voters wish to know more about the people they are electing. We therefore support DBS checking for councillors and have proposed a motion to Council to ask the Chief Executive to explore the means by which this can be introduced.
- **A more responsive press office** – in recent weeks we have seen the Taxpayers' Alliance produce a study of how much councils across the country spend on awards and award ceremonies. Sunderland Council refused to disclose the figures. We have also seen this behaviour in the past, with the Council refusing to be up front about the many problems relating to the Aquatics Centre. We believe that this damages relations between Councillors and the people we serve: the Sunderland Conservatives would therefore introduce a much more open, transparent and honest way of dealing with the press and making information available.
- **'Gagging orders'** – the Sunderland Conservatives recognise that members of the public are rightly concerned with how much Sunderland Council pays its own staff to keep quiet. Not only would we end the

practice of using 'gagging orders' entirely, but we would disclose the details of all historic 'gagging orders' issued by the Council.

- **Remove cabinet members from the scrutiny calculation** – at present, members of the Labour cabinet are included in the overall calculation of how many positions on key committees are allocated to opposition councillors. We do not believe that members of the cabinet should be allowed to scrutinise themselves and would therefore discount them when allocating committee positions to backbench councillors.
- **An end to propaganda** – the Conservatives voted against funding for the Community Vibe magazine, but Labour supported it. We were assured that the magazine would not be used for Labour propaganda, but the magazine was used to promote Labour's Stuart Porthouse as he faced re-election. We do not believe that taxpayers' money should be used to pay for de facto Labour campaign literature and would therefore cut the £9,000 a year the Council puts towards the magazine.

Housing

The Sunderland Conservatives support the development of more executive housing in the city. With the development of the new medical school at the University of Sunderland, we believe it is essential that we provide the housing and infrastructure that will keep professionals – such as doctors, nurses and medical educators – in Sunderland.

Policies

- **Executive housing** – build more executive housing to increase council tax receipts and thereby alleviate the need for future council tax hikes.
- **Protect green spaces** – while we believe in a need for executive housing, we do not believe that these housing developments need to be at the expense of the greenbelt. Instead, we favour using brownfield sites for future developments of this kind. We only promote using greenbelt developments in exceptional circumstances, such as the construction of the International Advanced Manufacturing Park.
- **Fill empty homes** – we share the Labour council's ambition to fill empty properties, but we regret that progress on this front has been so slow. We promote speeding up the process of occupying empty properties.
- **Better preservation of listed buildings** – we believe that the council has a duty to support the preservation of the city's listed buildings. At present we do not think that its provision in this regard is sufficient and we encourage more action around the protecting the city's architectural heritage.

City Events

Sunderland is host to numerous regional, national and international events. We wish to continue to attract event organisers to the city but believe that much more can be done to highlight the events we have and to improve the city's events offer.

Policies

- **Oppose pop concert subsidies** – while we are committed to bringing internationally successful artists to Sunderland's Empire Theatre and Stadium of Light, we oppose the £50,000 subsidy that Labour has given to the Spice Girls for their upcoming concert. The Council has previously given subsidies of the same amount to Beyoncé and One Direction.
- **International Air Show** – we recognise that the Sunderland International Air Show is enjoyed by many, but the Council's own feedback has indicated that many Sunderland residents now feel it is a tired and dated format. In addition, the Council has had to subsidise the event in recent years due to a lack of sponsorship and because it has been run at a loss. The Conservatives would therefore seek to hold the International Air Show once every two years instead.
- **Promotion of lesser-known events** – Sunderland is or has been host to multiple events which are less well known, such as the Coast to Coast bike ride. We would seek to highlight these events and put Sunderland on the map as a city known for its cultural and sporting offer, without the need for taxpayer-funded subsidies for millionaires.

Conservatives in Government

The Conservative Association in Sunderland works with the Conservative Government via its Conservative Policy Forum contributions. In recent months, we have contributed policy ideas on issues such as Global Britain, healthcare, education, and the digital age.

The Conservatives are the only party on the ballot paper in Sunderland this May to oppose a so-called People's Vote (i.e. a second referendum on our membership of the European Union). A majority of Sunderland, Washington and Houghton residents voted to leave, and Labour and the Lib Dems should (but don't) respect that.

Local Conservatives continue to be proud of much of what our party has achieved nationally:

- Proscribing the terrorist organisation Hezbollah.
- Record high employment and record low unemployment, with wages growing faster in the last year than in any year in the last decade.
- The introduction of a Domestic Abuse Bill which gives new protections to adults (especially women) and children affected by domestic abuse.
- Stamp duty cuts have led to a 12-year high in first-time buyers – with more young people owning a home of their own.
- Training school children to look after their mental health and to support their peers with mental health issues, following a series of teenage suicide and self-harm cases.

The policies in this manifesto were proposed by members of the Conservative Party based in Sunderland at a Conservative Policy Forum meeting.