BEXLEY LABOUR LEFT

Making Bexley a Better Place to Live

A Policy Document and Manifesto

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Executive Summary

*(This document reflects the views of Bexley Labour Left regarding the governance of the council, and the country.)*

Bexley’s local election in May 2022 will provide the borough’s residents with a simple choice: to continue with disastrous policies by re-electing the Conservatives, or opt for a better and more sustainable future with Labour.

There is no area of local government in Bexley untouched by the Tories’ flawed ideology, or plain and simple incompetence.

From the dire financial position the borough is in, to the catastrophic effects of laissez-faire privatisation, which lead to a summer of discontent with the refuse and street cleaning strike, the Conservatives’ rap sheet is a long and sorry one.

Wherever residents turn their attention, there are serious problems including the drastic cuts being made to personnel and services across the board and the homelessness and housing crisis.

Finance

The 2008 global financial crash changed the economic and political landscape worldwide. The ramifications from that event are still being felt today.

Bexley Council, under the stewardship of the Tories, has endured its own fiscal meltdown in more recent times, and the borough’s residents are paying the price now and will continue to do so for years to come.

The Conservatives racked up a breathtaking £223 million borrowing debt as set out in Bexley Council’s audited accounts in 2020. That is almost £1,000 for every person in the borough.

Such is the trouble it is in, that it was one of four authorities to be offered an emergency bailout by the government. In Bexley’s case, up to £9 million was made available.

These are problems long in the making and cannot simply be explained away by the Covid-19 pandemic, which they, by and large, precede. The Conservative government’s assault on local authority funding since 2010 is a factor, but just as big a part of the picture is the local Tories financial mismanagement in Bexley.

**A Labour-controlled administration would do far more to attract businesses and investment into the borough, and thereby increase employment, local spending power and tax receipts available to the council.**

**Sensible financial management would include abandoning the pretence that services can be provided while insufficient money is raised, or wasted as debt piles up to satisfy bogus ideological claims of fiscal prudence.**

**And Bexley, in Labour’s hands, would not squander huge sums of taxpayers’ cash by pouring money into the pockets of private companies if it is not actually cheaper, and delivers inferior services – while council tax rates steadily rise.**

**Where it makes economic sense, services would be brought in-house under local authority control where possible.**

Health

**Bexley Council should work with local and national health professionals, organisations as well as trade unions to protect the NHS.**

**Labour will campaign vigorously, for and on behalf of the borough’s residents, to achieve this aim.**

**Any legislation or proposed law to monetise and privatise the NHS should be repealed, or rejected. Such an ambition would require working with an amenable government.**

Even in today’s highly financialised world, the dictum that “the first wealth is health” is an eternal truth.

It is a reminder, if one is needed, that the National Health Service is the cornerstone of British society, and has been so since its creation in 1948.

A public NHS that is fully funded and free at the point of delivery for anyone who needs it, is vital for the health of the nation. It is no exaggeration to say society cannot function properly without such a service.

The crucial and life-saving importance of the institution has been demonstrated in the fight against Covid-19.

Some degree of control was only gained after the service took on an increasingly central role, instead of disastrous and shockingly wasteful schemes like test, track and trace.

But the NHS should not be taken for granted. For many decades now, there has been a move to privatise aspects of the organisation, or open them up to market forces.

Starting from the Conservative Party’s drive towards internal market reforms in the late 1980s and early 90s to today’s NHS Bill, governments of all hues have introduced, extended or accepted the principle of competition and markets in health provision.

This poses enormous dangers. As healthcare providers seek to make or keep more money by restricting the breadth and quality of services available, patients’ health suffers unless they can afford private care.

It is unlikely any government will openly privatise or sell-off the NHS because that would be too politically unpopular. But there is an ongoing attempt to stealthily do precisely that via the back door.

The more the public service deteriorates as private providers gorge on taxpayers’ money while providing less and less, people will have to take out private health insurance to guarantee satisfactory healthcare provision.

A return to pre-1948 days when large numbers of people could not afford to pay doctors’ fees or insurance, may not be as far-fetched as it sounds.

Adult Social Care

**Labour would work towards an effective and efficient, publicly provided and accountable, adult social care service free to all at the point of need.**

**The steps required to achieve such a framework would require bringing residential, domiciliary and nursing care services back in-house at local and national level, and funding them properly.**

**However expensive this proposal is now, it will become necessary as private provision fails, and the cost will increase over time.**

**Adequate levels of properly trained and appropriately qualified staff will help to ensure a compassionate and caring service, which guarantees dignity and a high quality of life for vulnerable users.**

**Additionally, the service should be run by, and be accountable to its users, providers and elected public officials.**

**Local authorities could provide more of their own social care facilities if the government restores some of the billions of pounds of central funding that has been cut from the service since 2010.**

**Where providers remain in the private sector for whatever reason, there should be a stringent legal framework to ensure they adhere to strict ethical standards with effective monitoring and enforcement.**

**It should be noted that Bexley Council has a statutory duty of care to its residents.**

The unaccountable, underfunded, private service that currently exists has failed badly.

Residential, nursing and domiciliary care is mainly provided by the private profit-making sector.

The obvious contradiction here is that a labour-intensive service can only become profitable by driving down staffing levels, wages and conditions.

That inevitably leads to low staffing levels, poverty pay, appalling working environments which in turn results in poorer levels of care. No serious thought has been given to the devastating effects of widespread privatisation in the care sector.

Climate Change

The evidence has been steadily building in front of the world’s eyes for decades. Today, only a crank, a fool, or someone who puts material consumption above all else, would attempt to argue about the reality of climate change and humankind’s desperate need to halt or even reverse the process.

The argument has never been about whether human activity is negatively affecting the Earth’s climate; the question is to what extent is it doing so. The evidence is abundantly clear, and stacking up on a daily basis.

From droughts, freakish rainfall, storms and floods, wildfires to melting ice caps, humanity is experiencing events never seen before, or with greater regularity and intensity due to the warmer air created by burning fossil fuels.

But, it is not just down to governments to tackle this problem; everyone has to play their part.

**Introducing a policy to ensure that every and all decisions undergo a Sustainability and Environment Impact Assessment, to determine if any proposed action or development is good for the borough’s residents and our planet, would be an utmost priority for a Labour council.**

**Such an administration would also vigorously lobby central government to effect appropriate legislative changes.**

**If the Earth’s temperature rises in line with current predictions in the absence of any remedial action in the decades ahead, sea levels could rise by an extraordinary amount.**

**Abbey Wood, Crayford, Erith, Lower Belvedere, Slade Green and Thamesmead could be under water in such a scenario; while millions of people could be displaced around the world.**

Homelessness and Housing

One of the biggest problems the nation faces is what is sometimes referred to as the national housing crisis.

Throughout the country, millions of people cannot afford to buy a home or even find somewhere to rent. For those who need social housing and the homeless, the situation is even bleaker. These problems are alive and well in the London Borough of Bexley.

The nation’s failure over decades to build enough homes in the right places, and rising house prices because demand outstrips supply, lie at the root of the problem.

**Bexley Council should develop a comprehensive and systematic plan to build homes and social housing in the borough.**

**Those in temporary accommodation or who are homeless far exceeds the authority’s available housing stock, not to mention the exorbitant costs of paying private landlords to house such people. A false economy if ever there was one.**

**Central and regional government grants are available to councils with social housing, and to facilitate building initiatives in that regard. And all housebuilding must be environmentally sustainable.**

Community

Conservative mismanagement runs right across the spectrum in Bexley. From the disastrous refuse strike, which created a health hazard throughout the borough, to the spectacular near quarter-of-a-billion pound debt the Tories have conjured up; such stunning ineptitude has real consequences for residents.

The council has to scale back the services it provides and reduce staff numbers as it grapples with its self-inflicted financial wounds. Libraries, Leisure, Highways and Environmental Services are areas where staff are being sacrificed.

Bexley’s voluntary sector partnership development, involving many organisations, will also take a hit as a result of the retrenchment.

**Any authority’s first duty to its residents must be to run its financial affairs, partly funded by local council tax payers, properly; and adequately fund essential services.**

**A second obligation must be not to become transfixed by economic ideology and dogma even when it produces inferior, less efficient services at greater cost.**

Education

Education is a social good, or what some people refer to as being for the common good.

In a market-based society, it is very easy to think of education as being nothing more than training for work. But, its importance far exceeds that requirement alone.

Of course, any education system needs to teach the skills and impart the information that is necessary for the economy and society, more generally, to function properly.

Ability and talent come in many forms: academic, creative, sporting and technical. An education system must be broad in scope to cater for all. It can help everyone to understand himself or herself, other people, the world and reach self-actualisation.

For all of these reasons, education is far too important to be left in the hands of profit-making or sectional interests, or to be allowed to meet the needs of some children but not others.

The highest quality system, fully accountable to the community, should be available to all children no matter their background, or the status of their parents.

**Academisation should be stopped in Bexley with all of the borough’s schools returned to local authority control. This would mean they are run with community-oriented goals that benefit children, teachers, families and the whole borough.**

**Rejecting academisation would also help to ensure that each school’s governance structure has places for community members, councillors, parents and unions.**

**Research shows individual academy schools or those in multi-academy trusts fragment the education system, and do not perform better than local authority schools.**

**But ultimately, there is no way currently of returning an academy back to public control, so the Department for Education will have to be lobbied to introduce such a mechanism.**

**The eleven-plus, the practice of stigmatising and condemning many youngsters to a less well-resourced education, should be abolished.**

Equality

**An important step in tackling equality matters in the borough would be to set up a Bexley Equality Council. Its work would be to oversee all issues relating to disparities and inequalities concerning age, disability, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation and transgender rights. The body would monitor, collect data and report on the aforementioned areas. Such an organisation should also act as a forum for anyone who wants to flag up something that would require looking into by the council itself, or referred elsewhere as appropriate.**

Disparities and inequalities, of various kinds, remain stubbornly persistent in Bexley and nationwide. One area that gives a window into some of the attitudes that remain deeply ingrained in society concerns the racist abuse black footballers, in particular, receive. These attitudes exist in all spheres of daily life, and not just in sporting arenas, which typically are the venues for the outward expression of such bile.

There remains much work to be done to tackle racism, prejudice, discrimination, bias and the ways in which they manifest themselves to the detriment of various groups.

1. Adult Social Care

Key Objectives:

To provide an effective and efficient, publicly provided and accountable, adult social care service, free to all at the point of need. This can be achieved by:

1. Bringing residential, domiciliary and nursing care services back in-house at a local and national level, and properly funding them.
2. Delivering a comprehensive service with adequate levels of properly trained and appropriately qualified staff, capable of providing a compassionate and caring service.
3. Guaranteeing dignity and a high quality of life for vulnerable service users.
4. Ensuring the service is run by, and is accountable to service users, providers and elected public officials.

Current Service

The unaccountable, underfunded, private service that currently exists, clearly isn't fit for purpose.

At present the provision of residential, nursing and domiciliary care, is mainly provided by the private profit-making sector.

This is entirely inappropriate as a labour-intensive service can only become profitable by driving down staffing levels, wages and conditions of service.

That inevitably leads to low worker numbers, poverty pay and appalling environments, which in turn results in poorer levels of care. This is a national and local reality.

Recent History

Care workers, and the elderly and vulnerable people who rely on them, have been abandoned and betrayed by successive governments.

The neoliberal dogma of cuts and privatisation has been ruthlessly pursued without consideration for the inevitable consequences.

The privatisation of care has meant there are now more than 25,000 care organisations providing services in Britain, most of them in the private profit-making sector.

This, coupled with the dramatic cuts in the levels of finance provided to local authorities from central government, has led to a disastrous deterioration in levels of service.

The horrendous catalogue of exposures of cruelty and neglect in recent years, that have been highlighted in adult social care settings, threw a light on the appalling abuse and neglect that has intensified as a result of cuts and privatisation.

The Covid-19 Pandemic

This atrocious situation was underlined before the Covid-19 pandemic laid bare, the chaotic and uncoordinated state that adult social care in this country has been reduced to.

Services were totally unprepared, disorganised and ill-equipped to deal with the crisis, which the government quickly turned into a catastrophe.

Underfunded local authorities, with dozens of different care providers, found it almost impossible to ensure that staff and service users were tested. It was also not possible to ensure that adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) was provided. Authorities were not even in a position to know, and report accurately the number of infections and deaths in their area.

Councils were incapable of throwing a protective shield around care homes, as the government falsely claimed was being done at the time.

In fact, quite the opposite was happening. In the early stages of the pandemic, elderly hospital patients were discharged and sent back to residential homes, without being tested. This despite the World Health Organisation’s advice to governments to test, test and test again.

It was done to make way for the huge number of Covid cases, and the resulting hospitalisations that were to come. Elderly people were discharged from hospital and sent back to the places where those most vulnerable to the virus were residents, without being tested.

Grotesque irresponsibility is the mildest description that could be given to the government’s incredible level of incompetence. Criminal neglect, leading to the unnecessary death of tens of thousands, is another.

The failure to test care workers and vulnerable residents and provide adequate PPE was inevitable, given the atomisation and the break-up of the care system in recent decades.

The free market dogma of cuts and privatisation that led to that rupture, is the mantra of the current and previous governments.

Underpaid, overworked care staff, working for penny-pinching private companies, are society’s unsung heroes at the best of times.

The pandemic, which we are not out of yet, has highlighted the plight of adult social care in Britain for all to see. We should not return to business as usual.

As an essential prerequisite to dramatically improving the level and quality of service, and making it more accountable; residential, domiciliary and nursing care services should be brought back in-house at a local and national level, and be properly funded.

2. Community

Key Objectives:

1. To run a fiscally prudent budget for Bexley Council.
2. Fund essential services properly.
3. Resort to in-house provision where it makes sense to do so.

The mayhem and devastation wrought on Bexley’s community and social infrastructure over the past 11 years of Conservative central and local government misrule, is plain for all to see.

This is epitomised by the near two-month long refuse and street-cleaning strike by workers heartily sick of the practices of the council, and its former contractor Serco.

Crows, flies, foxes, maggots and rats enjoyed a veritable weeks-long feast as piles of food waste; garden, household and recyclable rubbish went uncollected.

Furious residents, who rightly pointed out they pay their council tax for a refuse service to Bexley and not its contractor which was in dispute with workers, endured a living hell amid hot weather.

The hopeless saga even attracted coverage from BBC radio and television.

Bexley’s refuse collectors were the lowest paid in London. A derisory one percent pay offer was flatly rejected.

The non-payment of back pay owed to employees, differential rates of pay for staff doing the same job added to claims of bullying and intimidation, made for a long list of grievances Serco failed to address.

That Bexley Council awarded the contract to another firm, Countrystyle, is recognition of the substandard service that was being provided.

Ultimately, it is the Tory-run authority that is responsible for ensuring an effective and efficient service. But, it helped to prolong the industrial action.

The council decided to adopt the ludicrous position that the dispute was nothing to do with them, and it was a matter for Serco and Unite, the workers’ union, to resolve.

This was of course, a complete nonsense. To make matters worse, instead of using its position to apply pressure to ensure the dispute was resolved, the local authority put all of its efforts into working as a propaganda machine for Serco.

It sought to trash and undermine the strikers, and their union, at every opportunity. Eventually, enough pressure was brought to bear by the workers, their union, activists, residents and others to force a resolution satisfactory to staff.

Bexley Labour Left believes the service should be brought in-house and run properly.

Communities/Places

All community amenities and facilities have been heavily impacted by the imposition of austere financial conditions over the past decade.

The initial onslaught came from the Conservative-led coalition government, which substantially cut local authority funding in a bid to tackle the deficit created during the 2008 financial crash by the recklessness of bankers and traders.

In Bexley, this has been compounded by a Tory administration that has had to cut wide-ranging services after racking up a £223 million borrowing debt.

The authority’s financial woes have led to it shedding 20% of its workforce. The Tories have been in power locally since 2006.

A Labour government would not cut the benefits and services that are vital to millions of Britons on ideological grounds.  
And just as importantly, a Labour-run council in Bexley would not be doctrinaire about the market and contracting out services, even when that leads to poor performance and/or greater costs.

Such an administration would save money where possible without being dogmatic about whether services are in-house or not, be prudent about raising revenue through council tax and other means, and invest in the facilities and services that will transform residents’ lives.

Places

Bexley approved plans to drastically cut back library services including reducing staff and opening times, alongside a greater emphasis on self-service.  
There will also be fewer events, and the council anticipates these measures will save over half-a-million pounds annually.

Bexley has six council-managed libraries, and the belt-tightening will also involve cutting the funding given to six community-run libraries by a fifth. The Conservative-controlled authority has tried to dress up these steps as a response to the changing behaviour of library users who typically borrow fewer books, and rely more on online services.

But make no mistake, they are part of a desperate attempt to arrest a calamitous financial situation.

Overall, around 110 full-time employees will or could go under Places. This includes 32 jobs in the library service; 11 in highways, traffic and infrastructure; ten in leisure, parks and open spaces; and four in environmental services.

One departing officer reportedly said he was “... becoming increasingly frustrated with the way the services I have been proud to lead are being changed and dismantled to such an extent, that I consider the end result will not be one that the residents and businesses of Bexley rightfully deserve or expect”.

Cemetery and parking charges have, or will increase as will the standard price for garden waste collections and residents' allotments.

Communities

Significant reductions in full-time employees will or have been implemented in areas such as public health, housing, community safety and community partnerships teams.  
The consequences of these cutbacks, as laid out in a document produced by the Tories setting out their proposals, include: “Significantly reduced capacity to carry out voluntary sector partnership development, and the council and local care partners will need to look at alternative modes of delivery.”

Bexley’s 850 registered charities, their users, the clinical commissioning group, police and the council itself, will be affected by the authority’s team no longer being able to provide strategic oversight for council or partner investment in the local voluntary sector.  
“Alternative arrangements will be made to ensure minimum standards are met by the local authority when awarding grants,” according to the policy paper. It adds local care partners will need to consider how this work is managed collectively.  
The document also notes: “There will be no standing resource within the local authority to carry out community engagement. The council will need to use its existing workforce more flexibly to respond to dynamic situations which may require community engagement.”

Policing

Over the past 11 years three police offices or stations that were based in or served the borough of Bexley – Belvedere, Sidcup and Thamesmead – have been closed.

The Conservative government cut police numbers by more than 20,000 over a decade as part of its austerity drive. It has now done a volte-face, and is repeatedly talking about investing in policing again.

In London, about three-quarters of the policing budget comes from the government.  
And yet, in 2020, Bexley Tories were disingenuously trying to heap blame on the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, for not supposedly investing sufficiently in policing in the borough. It was a clear example of local Conservative councillors failing to lobby their own government and acknowledge its mistakes, while trying to lay blame where it does not belong.

1 ‘Communities’ and ‘Places’ information comes from the Bexley Labour Group Budget Briefing 2021

3. Equality

Key Objective:

1. Set up a Bexley Equality Council to deal with all areas of equality.

No community or society can regard itself as truly equal or just if some people suffer adverse outcomes of any kind because of their race, ethnicity or other characteristics.  
The demand for racial equality has come to the fore after footage showing George Floyd, a black American man, being murdered by a white police officer in Minneapolis, was seen around the world and sparked global protests.

In the United Kingdom, the scandal of black footballers being subjected to racist abuse on social media is ongoing.  
The issue of race runs through every facet of life in western countries including education, employment, health, housing, sport and the criminal justice system.

And the London Borough of Bexley is by no means immune to this problem.  
It is a matter that has gone unaddressed for far too long, or has not been tackled with sufficient vigour.

Calls for Bexley Council to take action and tackle disparities and inequalities in the borough, in the wake of Floyd’s death in the summer of 2020, have gone unheeded.

No substantive action has been taken by the authority to enact or implement policies to combat racism.

In November 2011, the Runnymede Trust, a leading race equality think tank in the UK, published a report titled ‘Are You Saying I’m Racist?’

The study evaluated three projects that worked to tackle racist violence in three areas of London.

Leap Confronting Conflict, a youth charity that works with young people from disadvantaged and excluded backgrounds to explore the causes and consequences of conflict in their lives and find solutions, carried out work in Bexley.

The report noted:

*“Leap’s Fair Share project has been based in the London Borough of Bexley. The reasons for this choice were firstly that Leap, through initial desk research, had identified Bexley as an area in need of and appropriate for anti-racism work, and secondly that they had already developed a successful working relationship with Bexley Youth Service (BYS), built around delivery of a training programme for staff on race and diversity issues.*

*“The Borough of Bexley is predominantly white in terms of population, but the area has a history of serious racist incidents and of BNP activity. At the last Census, 91% of the population of Bexley classified themselves as white, and only 8.9% were ethnic minorities – compared to 29% across Greater London as a whole. However, the proportion of ethnic minorities in the population in Bexley has been increasing sharply, particularly in the Thamesmead area. Leap had noted that academic research indicated that 'areas most likely to support racism are those, which are racially homogenous, but near to others where there is dramatic change’.”*

The Way Forward

Bexley Council, under a Labour administration, would set up and fund a Bexley Equality Council as a primary body to address all matters relating to equality.  
Crucially, it would monitor and pursue any necessary corrective action on matters of race and other areas relating to equality such as age, disability, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation and transgender rights.

The Local Government Association’s Equality Framework for Local Government, which seeks to help authorities meet their obligations under the Equality Act 2010, could guide the work of such a body for Bexley.

Inevitably, such a body would be, or assumed to be, concerned with the public sector. Measures would need to be considered or taken to make its services accessible, perhaps as a reporting service as a minimum, to individuals in the private sector too – wherever appropriate and feasible.

The 2010 Act essentially requires organisations to:

1. Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the act.
2. Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
3. Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

In 2011, Bexley Council decided to withdraw its funding for the Bexley Council for Equality and Diversity and replace it with a voluntary forum.  
At the time the local authority said the then new forum, consisting of members of voluntary groups representing various minorities, would consider council policies and services in light of the protected characteristics outlined by the Equality Act 2010.

A decade on, not very much, if anything, has changed in Bexley. No substantial progress has been made.

Serious questions must be asked about an equality impact assessment carried out by the council before the change to the forum.

It would seem the council did not understand that the single equality act did not reduce the importance of race, gender and disability equality, but elevated other potential discriminations to the same level of protection.

4. Health

Key Objectives:

1. Maintain a National Health Service offering local provision for the health and well-being of Bexley’s residents free at the point of use.
2. Resist further attempts to monetise or privatise the NHS by using all available local means – administrative and procedural.
3. To ensure Bexley Council collaborates with other local service providers to put systems in place to deal with the current and any future pandemics.

Bexley Council canwork with local health professionals and organisations alongside trade unions to effect change through the current Clinical Commissioning Groups and borough-based boards, to protect the NHS locally.

Labour should campaign vigorously for, and on behalf of, residents to achieve this aim.

The coronavirus provided for a year like no other for the NHS, and the country generally in 2020.

The government wasslow to respond to the pandemic. Its decisions were also self-serving for the Tories, their friends and donors; rather than the population being foremost in their minds.

This was highlighted with the allocation of £37bn on the abject test, track and trace system.1

All of our local agenda items are impacted by national decisions, and we have to ensure that Bexley has the best 'voice’ in every venue and forum to bring about the best outcomes for residents.

The Pandemic

Despite having a significant early warning of what was to come as Covid-19 rampaged through part of China and areas of Europe, our own Conservative government chose to ignore the relevance of events overseas.

Worse still, the government, at the early stages of the pandemic and then latterly at the widely-demanded daily briefings, clearly showed it did not understand the nature of the outbreak, or have the ability and competence to think through problems and take the right decisions.

The virus exposed the Tories’ privatisation of United Kingdom health provision in stark and deadly fashion.

The 2012 Health and Social Care Act, which meant marketing all processes within the NHS to ready them for sale to private providers, began the demise of the institution.

In the United States of America, private health provision proved incapable of dealing with Covid-19, as each state’s health provider’s bid against one another for personal protective equipment and the drugs necessary to treat patients.

Prices escalated as a result of this auction, and, even more appallingly, some health providers were able to buy large amounts of PPE, while others, with smaller budgets, could not get the needed supplies, which exposed their workers and patients to the contagion and potential death.

The NHS is not quite at that point. However, the Conservative government took the decision to ignore the World Health Organisation’s guidelines to test, test and test some more. The executive failed the nation.

Even when testing stations were set up four months into the pandemic, many frontline workers were turned away from them.

This was firstly because they often did not have typical symptoms of the virus, and secondly, the tests were very expensive.

It seemed as though the short-lived idea of herd immunity – quickly dropped after an outcry from all quarters of the UK – was still in place.

This is cynical politics at its very worst. Bexley and the country can, and should do better when evaluating and deciding on processes that will affect people’s lives.

At every turn in 2020, the Conservative government’s inaction, indecisiveness and drift became a serious concern for everyone else.

Frontline health professionals selflessly continued to work in unsafe environments without PPE. Ministers kept saying they would get this equipment and it was just a “logistical issue”. However, all hospitals experienced this failure and, in some cases, staff were threatened with the sack if they determinedly exposed these failings.

Many also began to understand how the government was ‘gaming’ the system to reward friends and associates, while ignoring specified systems for tendering and assigning contracts for much needed products. The result of such cronyism, contrary to the Nolan Principles, was often overpriced and substandard quality items such as PPE.

Privatisation

Remarkably, the marketisation of the NHS continued apace even in the thick of a pandemic. Accident & Emergency units, hospitals and GP practices continued to close.

Where once A&E units were open all hours every day of the year, there are now Urgent Care Units in some places, which operate a reduced service and close at night.

Whilst they are badged as NHS, they are in fact privatised services. The taxpayer pays the same, but gets a lesser service.

The Labour Party in Bexley and nationally should be committed to working with others to end privatisation and the destruction of the NHS, by repealing the Health and Social Care Act at the earliest possible opportunity.

Each of its provisions implemented locally in the form of primary care networks, ongoing closures of GP practices, and the NHS England five-year plan should be abolished forthwith.

The current bill going through parliament is also of concern because if it gains royal assent, it will:

1. End the NHS as a provider of services.
2. Create new legal entities called Integrated Care Systems thereby denationalising the NHS into 42 public-private partnerships, dominated by private corporations with the autonomy to decide on service provision, cuts and closures of hospitals alongside the incentive to create surpluses from fixed budgets to be taken as profit.
3. End national pay bargaining.
4. Remove legal protections to prevent dangerous patient discharges out of hospital.
5. Deregulate health professionals by allowing less well-trained and cheaper staff to replace qualified and experienced health professionals, with an inevitable impact on patient safety.
6. Enable control of NHS budgets to be handed to US private insurance giants who will use data analytics and patient health records, to deny care and maximise profit.

Labour will campaign for:

1. World-class training facilities for health professionals and the development of new doctors and nurses, and to enable established medical practitioners to upgrade their skills.
2. A shift away from an ever-expanding bureaucracy and to redirect resources to the frontline, including the adoption of artificial intelligence systems. (NHS administration costs have risen from four to 15%)2
3. Every local health provider to have a legal requirement to provide adequate PPE and allocate the necessary funding for that, with appropriate sanctions for any failures.
4. An end to the financial tyranny of Private Finance Initiatives and other financial instruments, which essentially destroy health provision through excessive charges.

1 The Good Law Project legal cases  
2 ‘The Great NHS Heist’ documentary

5. Homelessness and Housing

Key Objectives:

1. To build homes and social housing and not just produce glossy brochures about growth strategies.
2. Develop a dedicated, coherent and sustainable housebuilding strategy. BexleyCo’s target of 500 homes to be built in five years is lamentable.
3. Construct adequate flood defences to protect new and existing homes in parts of the borough that are at risk of flooding.
4. To drastically reduce the budget for homelessness and temporary accommodation which has steadily risen from £2 million to nearly £14 million in 2020. This money largely goes to private landlords who charge huge rents for substandard accommodation in some instances. Building social housing would serve the borough better.
5. Make sure viability reports – required for many large proposed developments, which specify a required amount of affordable housing or a Section 106 payment in lieu of such an allocation – actually produce good value for residents.

Bexley Council can build more social housing stock and thereby open up access to national and London regional grants. Reducing its reliance on temporary accommodation will significantly cut the costs borne by council tax payers.

The authority should revamp all aspects of its approach to housing, and move away from what appears to be a silo type arrangement for different areas.

Housing provision, like all areas of local government, has suffered because of central government’s austerity agenda. A key priority must be to reverse these measures.

The governmentcan rapidly introduce legislation, which local plans must adjust to. Residents’ needs, particularly with regard to housing and community building, must be at the heart of an overarching strategy that will be have to lobbied for on behalf of Bexley.

Housing Problems

All housing administrative processes need clarity and transparency, while still complying with data privacy legislation, so that residents, administrators and councillors can easily see legal requirements are being met.

The London Borough of Bexley currently owns 223 properties as part of its temporary housing stock, and a number of these will be vacant at any time and are referred to as ‘voids’.

However, if there are several hundred people in temporary accommodation, there is a clear problem.

According to Bexley Council’s figures or statements from the Tories, there were 2,500 people in temporary accommodation in 2019, and that fell to 1,325 in 2021.

These numbers, perhaps somewhat ‘economical’ in the eyes of some, illustrate the scale of the crisis.

And what should not be underestimated is the impact unsatisfactory living conditions can have on the mental health of individuals and families caught up in this unfortunate merry-go-round.

Relying on private landlords to relieve this problem is socially and financially unsustainable, and has led to the costs of temporary accommodation skyrocketing from £2 million over the last few years to £14 million. This is not a good deal for council tax payers. A sensible and long-term solution is needed.

Homes are needed for those in temporary accommodation and other families too.

BexleyCo’s plan to build 500 homes over five years is a pitifully small and unambitious target that will do very little.

A bigger ambition, a bigger plan, and the drive to see it come to fruition is needed to provide the social housing and temporary accommodation needed by many residents in or connected to Bexley.

A developer is currently building 1,250 homes in Belvedere at an estimated cost of £300 million, with the project due to be completed in ten to 12 years time. Two or three such developments are needed right now, with the attendant implications for cost and land.

Build the Future

Bexley Council should employ an in-house architect team to devise a sustainable, environmentally friendly housebuilding plan for the borough.

Local authorities with social housing stock can access central and regional grants to assist building initiatives.

Where a developer produces a viability report that states a proposed development would make a loss as a consequence of affordable/social housing provision, such an application should be deemed as an instant fail. A good developer should be able to meet these needs without losing money.

Brownfield sites would have to be used, and lobbying at national level is essential to repeal right-to-buy legislation.

In large part, the Bexley Growth Strategy earmarks areas for new homes that the National Aeronautical Space Agency (NASA) has predicted could be under water in the coming decades. They are Thamesmead, Lower Belvedere – including the new Belvedere development, Erith, Slade Green, Abbey Wood and Crayford.

There are nearly five miles of river frontage in the north of the borough and suitable flood defences, and a sustainable strategy, will be required to protect at risk areas.

6. Education

Key Objectives:

1. End academisation and direct funds on schoolchildren, not high-salaried individuals and businesses.
2. Return schools back to local authority control with greater community focus and accountability, and no private involvement.
3. Abolish the eleven-plus.

Education makes our economy stronger, our society richer and our people more fulfilled. Whether it is businesses finding people with the right skills, a tech start-up making our economy more dynamic or more people in better-paid work and able to contribute to public services, we all benefit from an educated society.

But education isn’t just vital to our economy – it lets people develop their talents, helps to overcome injustices and inequalities, and enables us to understand each other and form social bonds.

The Conservatives have starved our education system of funding, transferring costs onto students, staff and communities. They have lost sight of its value.

From cutting school budgets, disproportionately in deprived areas, to closing Sure Start centres and underfunding support for those with special educational needs and disabilities, Tory policy has meant those in most need have lost out.

Bexley now has more academy schools that are free from local authority oversight than at any time in its history. These schools are subject to the whims and diktats of an all-powerful headteacher.

When we are discussing the futures of our children, this is unacceptable. Oversight and scrutiny must be returned to local authority control.

Central government funding now goes directly to these academies and in many cases this results in excessive salaries being paid to the ‘business hierarchy’, rather than going towards the children and the equipment needed to help drive their educational attainment.

Various reports also show that such institutions do not automatically improve children’s attainment.1

Schools should be properly resourced with increased long-term funding, alongside a fairer funding formula that leaves no child worse off.

Pupils should always be taught by a qualified teacher, and every school should be open for a full five days a week with maximum class sizes of 30 for all primary schoolchildren.

Labour would fund more non-contact time for teachers to prepare and plan.

Bexley’s two-tiered education system has resulted in unequal education outcomes for a long time. Bexley Labour Left advocates short-term remedial measures to address this. In addition, we put forward the idea that the long-term goal should be to get rid of the antiquated practice of putting children through the eleven-plus selection test, as it leads to asymmetric outcomes, and entrenches inequalities in our borough.

Most importantly, enacting these policies will require strong resistance to further academisation of Bexley’s schools, and to take existing academies back under local authority control.

Not only would this be much to the benefit of the teaching profession and unions, having schools in the public realm would also mean they are run with community-oriented goals, benefitting children, families and the whole borough.

By resisting academisation and taking schools back under local control, we will be able to:

1. Put in place means by which schools are accountable to Bexley’s communities; for instance with practices that ensure each school’s governance structure has places for councillors, parents, unions and independent members of the community.
2. Put in place measures to make certain that intake into Bexley schools is under local control. Setting school catchment areas – especially for secondaries, will make sure that the number of children coming from far outside the borough of Bexley falls. That would ease pressure on school spaces in the borough – particularly at the highest performing grammar schools.
3. Ensure, in the short term, grammar school places are more open to everyone. Data comparing grammar and comprehensive intake, paints a picture of segregation. Take for instance, the free school meals indicator (which serves as a proxy for household income). All of Bexley’s grammar schools have a FSM (free school meals) intake well below the borough and national average (see table 1).

Reform Bexley secondary school intake by:

1. Mandatory quota requirements for selective schools in Bexley in line with borough averages on FSM places, SEN (special educational needs) and EAL (English as an additional language) spaces.
2. Reforms to the selection test to put less emphasis on tutorable skills.
3. Giving more support to improving the running and outcomes of some of the borough’s less well performing schools, to ensure they all improve, in the expectation that less time in EYFS (early years foundation stage) education needs to be factored into eleven-plus exam preparation.
4. Equalising standards in all schools, putting an end to the culture of pass/fail at the age of ten that our current school system perpetuates, and remove the need for a selective system.

Conclusion

The key area to concentrate efforts on is to resist academisation and take schools back into local authority control. There is also a need to push for short-term measures to reform selection in Bexley’s secondary schools, which only serves to entrench inequality and alienate children at a damagingly young age.

In the long-term, we need to end selective schooling in our borough, and ensure Bexley is run in a way that prioritises funding and support for schools – guaranteeing every child has access to the best education in institutions that are accountable, and serve community interests.

Table 1. FSM intake in selected Bexley Secondary Schools.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Outer London Average FSM intake | 13.7% |
| Bexley average | 11.3% |
|  |  |
| Chis and Sid | 3.4% |
| Townley | 5.8% |
| Bexley Grammar | 2.2% |
| Beths | 7.7% |
|  |  |
| King Henry School | 29.6% |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Bexleyheath Academy | 22.1% |
| Welling School | 21.7% |
| Cleve Park | 23.6% |

Pupils Eligible for Free School Meals, Borough - London Datastore

1 https://neu.org.uk/policy/neu-case-against-academisation

7. Bexley and the Climate Emergency

Key Objectives:

1. To reduce the climate temperature and prevent it rising to 1.5 degrees centigrade above pre-industrial levels.
2. Implement environmental and sustainable measures to improve residents’ lives.
3. Develop a strategy now to address potential sea level rises and the knock-on effect on the Thames River.
4. Subject every Bexley Council decision and all development plans to a rigorous Sustainability and Environment Impact Assessment, to ensure they do not detrimentally affect residents and the environment/planet.
5. Robustly lobby central government for appropriate legislative change.

Even allowing for the COP26 summit in Glasgow, the pace and scope of change being considered by the countries involved, isn’t as fast or comprehensive enough to deal with the climate crisis.

The Earth’s temperature currently stands at 1.25 degrees centigrade (1.25C)1 above pre-industrial temperatures.

If it gets to 1.5C, significantly worse weather changes than those currently being witnessed will follow.

Should there be temperature increases of that order in the next 100 years, it is predicted that sea levels will have steadily risen by 16 feet.

That would mean Thamesmead, Abbey Wood, Belvedere (Lower), Erith, Slade Green and Crayford would be under water.

It would also be an international phenomenon. Bangladesh, huge swathes of India, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and many other nations would have millions of displaced people. A global reckoning would be upon us.

All of those people would want a home and have to move inland.

In May 2019, the Labour group placed with the London Borough of Bexley a climate emergency motion for discussion at full council.2 To date, it has yet to be brought forward to top the agenda for discussion.

Bexley Tories have interposed many motions since then – one on the emergency of Covid-19. And while that is having a huge and negative impact on us all currently, coronavirus is but a minor preamble by comparison to the climate emergency.

The Labour group has pointed out the negative consequences of inaction, some of which is already happening in the form of flooding, subsidence, damage to buildings and infrastructure, rising energy and food costs in addition to increasing social injustice and inequality.

The Conservatives would have residents believe that all will return to ‘normal’ after Covid. However, the new normal is increasing temperatures, more violent and unpredictable weather patterns, and the huge fires that swept across California, Greece, Turkey and Italy.

Flash floods have detrimentally impacted towns and villages across Europe. Residents in London, whose homes have been waterlogged or had belongings washed away, have also felt the consequences in several slightly less severe ways.

As part of the global community, Bexley can no longer pretend, as the Tory administration is doing, that the climate emergency is happening elsewhere. Token gestures, like a couple of electrical car charging points dotted around the borough, are not enough. We have not even been told how that electricity is being, or will be generated. If it is by fossil fuels or their by-products, then these charging points and the cars they serve, will be part of the problem and not the solution. This would simply be public relations driven “greenwashing”, when we need substantive change.

Labour will work with communities and residents to develop a vision for a sustainable future for our children and grandchildren.

Around 98% of youngsters are educated in schools based in areas with toxic air. This is bad for developing minds and bodies. Teachers and pupils have to deal with this toxicity daily.3

An administration run by Labour will gather data to measure and understand what can positively effect change for our borough and the planet.

When Bexley Labour attended the public inquiry meetings about the extension and increased development plans for the Cory Waste Management incinerator in Belvedere, they raised many issues not least of which were the air quality impacts of around 100 additional articulated lorries per day.

With inefficient diesel engine burning, part of the negative effect of this is the deposit, on roadsides and on transport links of Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAH).

Less than efficient burning of fuels such as petrol, diesel, biomass, and other industrial processes can create PAH.4

These hydrocarbons have very harmful effects, including causing cancer, if absorbed into the body.

Whilst the secretary of state approved the planning permission for the Cory incinerator, which Bexley Labour Left considers to be a retrograde step, it does not reduce our concerns regarding air quality and the impacts of toxic exhaust fumes from whatever source they come.

1 Professor David King in an interview on Channel 4 News in July 2021.

2 Notice of the meeting of Bexley Council, 21 July 2021, Agenda item 8.

3 https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/23312845/

4 https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11133396/

8. Finance and Budgets

Key Objectives:

1. Sound financial management
2. To stop wasteful and inefficient privatisations
3. To lobby for a fairer deal from central government

The financial chaos in Bexley was reflected in a number of demoralising statistics in 2020. The Tory-run council has a borrowing debt to the tune of £223 million.  
This is equivalent to almost £1,000 for every resident in the borough.

A fifth of the council’s workforce was made redundant, owing to the monetary crisis. That amounted to 265 jobs.

Despite this, and the inevitable deterioration in levels and standards of services that ensued, there was a five percent increase in council tax.

Residents are forced to pay more for significantly less.

Cuts and Privatisation

Over many years of Conservative control, the majority of council services in Bexley have been systematically hived off to their friends in the private sector.

Running council services on the principle of maximizing profit, as opposed to providing for need, has had a devastating effect on their quality.

Even residential and domiciliary care, are now run by the private sector on the basis of maximising profit, and not providing a service based on need.

Privatisation, combined with dramatic cuts in funding from central government, has meant the quality and level of basic services has declined dramatically in Bexley in recent years.

Housing Crisis

In addition to this grim situation, there has been, and is, an appalling housing crisis in the borough. People in desperate need are being denied any chance of housing.

Bexley chose to hand over all of its council housing stock in the 1990s to the housing associations Orbit, and London and Quadrant.

Inevitably this, and the complete failure to build any more affordable housing to rent, has resulted in a chronic shortage.

For the last few years the council has had to place desperate and vulnerable families, into temporary accommodation.

That came at a cost of £14 million to the authority in 2020.

The cost-cutting solution that the callous Tory council has surreptitiously chosen to adopt is to force those families out of their temporary accommodation, and make them homeless.

On the Brink of Bankruptcy

These horrendous cuts, privatisations and cost-saving measures, have heaped misery onto the most vulnerable residents.

Despite this, so desperate was Bexley's financial situation, and so close had the Conservative administration brought the council to the verge of bankruptcy, that central government was forced to intervene with a bailout deal of up to a value of £9 million.

Bexley was one of four councils in the country to be offered such emergency assistance.

Luton was one of the others as it had lost a massive amount of income, as a result of its airport being at a standstill because of Covid lockdowns.

Eastbourne was another council that had lost enormous sums of revenue due to the devastating effect of the pandemic on its domestic tourist trade.

Bexley has no such extenuating circumstances. But despite this, the Tory leader in Bexley, Teresa O’Neill, has still tried to shift the blame for the council’s financial woes on the Covid-19 lockdowns.

Only one other council in the country received or was offered an emergency government bailout for no reason other than a lack of financial acumen, and that was Peterborough.

It is quite clear that Conservative incompetence in Bexley has exacerbated the problems all councils have experienced because of the pandemic, and central government cuts.

Bexley now only has £12 million in reserves, and will be facing bankruptcy before long.

Central Government Cuts

It is crystal clear that the dramatic cuts in local government funding, by central government, over the last decade, as part of the policy of austerity, has had a ruinous effect on levels of service, provided by nearly all cash-strapped local authorities.

Not that any Tory council would ever have the courage or honesty to put any of the blame where it belongs: firmly at the door of Conservative governments.

The austerity policy, following the massive bailout of the banks after the so-called credit crunch of 2008, has pauperised millions, the length and breadth of the country. It has caused untold misery as vital services could no longer be financed and had to be withdrawn.

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