

Do they deliver on homelessness?

Analysis of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat manifestos, 2019

Overall, there's a lot to celebrate in the three main party manifestos, but there are also plenty of missed opportunities to end homelessness for good.

The impact of the [Manifesto to End Homelessness](#) – which Homeless Link helped to develop - on the Labour and Liberal Democrat manifesto commitments was clear to see, with Labour delivering on all three of our top line asks for truly affordable housing, strengthened welfare support and long-term, guaranteed funding for services. The Conservatives, however, had a disproportionate focus on home ownership at the expense of social and truly affordable housing.

While all parties made reference to plans to improve the supply and quality of social housing, the Conservatives offered few specifics beyond a future Social Housing White Paper. On the other hand, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have made impressive commitments to new house building programmes for those on low incomes, with Labour setting aside £75bn for 100,000 new council homes and 50,000 affordable homes a year and the Liberal Democrats pledging to build at least 100,000 homes for social rent annually.

Labour and the Liberal Democrats also set their sights on the Right to Buy scheme, with the Liberal Democrats planning to devolve full control to local councils and Labour pledging to scrap it altogether, as well as to give councils money and power to buy back former council homes.

The Conservative commitment to renewing the Affordable Homes Programme is a missed opportunity to create truly affordable housing – Labour's commitment to adjust the definition of 'affordable' to better reflect local incomes is one to be welcomed, rather than the current unrealistic level at 80% of market rates.

The commitment to end rough sleeping within five years has been reiterated by all parties, with the Conservatives reaffirming a commitment to the Rough Sleeping Initiative and Housing First. Labour and the Liberal Democrats both pledge to scrap the Vagrancy Act, an issue Homeless Link has campaigned on alongside many of our members.

The Conservatives are silent, too, on future funding of homelessness services, which contrasts with strong Labour promises to expand and upgrade hostels and deliver an additional £1 billion a year for council homelessness services – matching the funding requirement put forward by [research](#) we commissioned with St Mungo's last year. Labour will also make available 8,000 additional homes for people with a history of rough sleeping, equating to the [estimated drop in bedspaces](#) from Homeless England in 2018. On the other hand, the Liberal Democrats stand alone in addressing further investment and expansion of the HRA, pledging to extend the duty to refer to providers of asylum support accommodation and promising to ensure "sufficient" resources for local authorities to deliver the Act.

We warmly welcome all the parties' commitments to tackle insecurity in the private rented sector – the Conservatives and Labour pledge to put a stop to 'no fault evictions' and Labour and the Liberal Democrats prioritise lengthening tenancies and limiting rent hike. However, Labour take a stronger position, promising to cap rents with inflation. Both parties favour the introduction of a national licensing scheme to clamp down on rogue landlords, and while the

commitment to scrapping the hostile environment is shared, only Labour explicitly commit to doing away with discriminatory ‘right to rent’ immigration checks that force many people into homelessness.

Labour has gone further than other parties on improving safety and quality of housing in a number of ways, including a £1 billion Fire Safety Fund, a Decent Homes programme for all council and housing association homes, new minimum standards for private rented homes and funded renters’ unions.

Improved multi-agency working and cross-departmental strategies to support people with multiple disadvantage are crucial to tackling homelessness and this was especially visible in the Liberal Democrat manifesto, for example with their plans to develop a cross-Whitehall plan to tackle homelessness, and to ensure mental health support in schools and the criminal justice system, and provide continuity of mental health care and addiction treatment for offenders in prison and the community.

Shared intentions across parties to expand and increase support for refuges and rape crisis support, as well as to reintroduce the Domestic Abuse Bill (Labour and Conservatives) and bring the Istanbul Convention into law (Liberal Democrats), will help to protect survivors and prevent women being forced into homelessness. Labour and Liberal Democrats’ pledges to restore legal aid support will also be key to ensuring access to justice for vulnerable people, though only Labour has committed to making early legal advice available for housing, social security, family and immigration cases.

Welfare support

Labour is the most radical in this realm, calling for the scrapping of Universal Credit (UC). Under their proposed new regime there will be no five week wait for initial payment, but instead an upfront payment of half the expected entitlement. There would be no benefit cap, a suspension of the sanction regime and an employment support system built on positive engagement. Also included is a return to fortnightly payments as standard. As for processing, Labour would move away from the principle of digital by default and make sure claimants have an option to communicate with the department providing welfare support via phone, letter, face-to-face or outreach services. Payment would be split between partners, ensuring that those in coercive relationships still have access to an income. In terms of paying for housing specifically, Labour would ‘...stop housing costs running away from benefits ...’ and to this end would increase the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) to cover at least the cheapest third of rents.

Labour would also pay childcare costs up front so that parents aren’t forced to turn down work or get into debt to pay for childcare. And they would split welfare support payments and pay the child element to the primary carer to protect women in abusive relationships.

Disabled people would also gain from Labour’s proposals, with the ending of Work Capacity Assessments (WCA) and Personal Independent Payment (PIP) determination of ability and an increase in Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) by £30 a week.

The Liberal Democrats too would address the five week wait, but in their view the solution is to reduce the wait to five days. The Liberal Democrats also propose replacing the current sanctions regime with a system that incentivises. They would also increase the work allowance and introduce a second earner work allowance. There is recognition too of the

inadequacy of the current LHA rates with a pledge to increase them to equate to average rents in an area. The Liberal Democrats also echo Labour in their proposal to scrap the WCA and switch to a real-world relevant determination of ability.

And finally to the Conservatives, who recognise that for many the cost of living is too high. In response, the Conservatives will continue the roll-out of UC and ‘... make sure that Universal Credit works for the most vulnerable ...’. There is no mention of an increase in LHA rates.

For disabled people specifically, the Conservatives will reduce the number of reassessments under gone. In addition, next year will see the publication of a National Strategy for Disabled People, looking at ways to “...improve the benefits system and opportunities and access for disabled people in terms of housing ...”.

We know from you, our members, that in many ways the current welfare support system simply doesn’t work for people experiencing homelessness. Given this, we would very much welcome a revised regime that better reflects the needs of claimants experiencing homelessness. We, like the Trussell Trust, believe that the five week wait for a first welfare payment should be scrapped, so that claimants aren’t immediately plunged into debt. We also know from you that sanctions are problematic for many people experiencing homelessness. A lack of literacy skills, digital skills and no ready access to the internet all mean that claims management is much more difficult for those experiencing homelessness. The people who use our members’ services experience the sanction system as a punitive regime that pushes them into debilitating debt. A fully funded, responsive, effective incentivise system would vastly improve the experience of those claiming Universal Credit.

Health assessments too are very often a negative experience and a switch to real-world-relevant, timely determination of physical and mental health is long overdue. We also welcome the proposal to increase the work allowance and the introduction of a second earner work allowance.

The current rates of LHA are simply not fit for purpose, which is why we support the position of Crisis to increase the rates to at least the cost of the cheapest third of rents.

Health and social care

Labour intend to return the responsibility for the provision of a comprehensive and universal healthcare to the relevant Secretary of State. They would also plan to restore the public health grants, invest £1 billion in public health and address drug and alcohol-related deaths. They also have plans to provide holistic care or, “... interdisciplinary, patient-focused services across primary care, mental health and social care.” which will include free NHS dental check-ups.

The Liberal Democrats are specific in their commitment to raise £7 billion a year to spend exclusively on the NHS and social care. In addition, they propose reforming the Health and Social Care Act to better provide for more efficient and joined-up health services. The Liberal Democrats would also end the GP shortfall by 2025 and support them and other health care practitioners to provide multi-disciplinary health and care services. They propose shifting to place-based budgets for health and social care, to increase collaborative working.

As well as curative healthcare, the Liberal Democrats also propose a National Wellbeing Strategy to mainstream health and wellbeing across policy areas and restore levels of public



health funding and ensure universal access to addiction treatment. To reflect their framing of problem drug use as a health, rather than criminal justice issue, the Liberal Democrats would also move the departmental lead on drugs policy from the Home Office to the Department of Health and Social Care.

The Conservatives also emphasise prevention and reducing health inequalities. They commit to maintaining an NHS free at the point of need, and to providing simplified and more joined-up access to care for people with multiple conditions.

The shared commitment across parties to achieve parity between mental and physical health services is another welcome goal, backed up by Labour with an additional £1.6 billion a year (including £845 million for children and adolescent mental health services) and by Liberal Democrats with ring-fenced funding from a 1p income tax rise.

Whatever the outcome of the 12th December, we are committed to helping the new Government enact their plans and be ambitious in their actions. Until then, we continue to promote our calls to end homelessness and invite all our members to sign up in support of this so that together we have a strong collective vision for how this might be achieved.

Let's end homelessness together

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