



# THE REAL ALTERNATIVE

**LOCAL ELECTION MANIFESTO**

**2017**

All Labour candidates are committed to this manifesto and through their personal integrity can effect positive change to bring about much needed improvements to council services.



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# FOREWORD

By John Divers, Labour Leader on the Moray Council



I was first elected to the Moray Council in 1999. While the politics of Scotland in 1999 would likely be all-but unrecognisable to this year's first-time voters, the politics of Moray would look remarkably familiar. These voters would see a Council dominated by purportedly independent councillors, who form alliances of convenience when it suits them, but shirk responsibility whenever tough decisions need to be taken. They would see Tories (and closet Tories) who dominate the independents at every turn, and an SNP group more interested in grandstanding for their national cause than addressing local issues.

They might, however, recognise the Labour group. Back in 1999, we were as committed then as we are now to addressing the real issues that face Moray: low wages, lack of opportunities for young people, and poor transport links, to name but a few. These issues, too, are unfortunately familiar.

That is not to say that nothing has changed. After that election in 1999, Labour Councillors joined the Council Administration as the minority partner, and made education our top priority. Consequently, education is the one of the few policy areas from 1999 in which real progress was made. Today's first-time voters wouldn't recognise the schools their predecessors attended. Labour Councillors delivered the biggest real terms investment in local schools in the history of the Moray Council. This shows the real difference that even a minority of Labour councillors can make.

Far too many of the ideas contained in this manifesto were as applicable in 1999 as they are today. Moray Council needs fresh political imperative. We have shown that we are capable of providing that imperative.

I urge the voters of Moray to look at the ideas contained in this manifesto, and judge us on the basis of these ideas. If they do, I am confident that the voters of Moray will, once again, elect a strong group of Labour Councillors to press for the real alternative Moray so desperately needs.

# ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Moray remains the lowest waged economy in Scotland.<sup>1</sup> Labour Councillors will actively encourage inward investment in Moray to produce more and better paid jobs which are badly needed in Moray.

We will also seek to grow the economy locally through investment in skills and training. While it was once the case that local authorities trained their own skilled workers, councils have become increasingly reliant upon ready-made workers from universities. **Labour Councillors will seek to re-establish Moray Council training schemes, to encourage workers to develop their skills locally.** Not only will this reduce unemployment in Moray, it will also drive up the skills base, and therefore the value, of the local economy.

**Labour Councillors will continue to support a real living wage for all Council employees.**

While the Elgin Business Improvement District has made great strides in improving the town centre, the High Street remains a shadow of its former self. We believe that poor transport links to Elgin town centre, including the poor condition of Elgin Bus Station, diminish Elgin's attractiveness as a place to shop.

Moray Labour believes the Council was too quick to approve out-of-town shopping developments without adequate consideration for the future of town centres. Not only have these developments had a deleterious effect on town centres – Elgin in particular – many of these developments remain only partially occupied. **Labour Councillors will pursue a presumption against out-of-town retail planning applications** unless a compelling case to the contrary exists.

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<sup>1</sup> Office for National Statistics, 'Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings', Median Weekly Wage (2016) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/datasets/placeofresidencebylocalauthorityshetable8>> [accessed on 24 March 2017].

# TRANSPORT

Traffic remains a growing problem in Elgin. Moray Labour has always believed that the solution to Elgin's traffic problems lies in relieving the town of through traffic, by way of a genuine road bypass for Elgin. Moray Labour believes that a bypass of Elgin will substantially reduce traffic congestion, and, in particular, reduce the number of heavy goods vehicles, which pose such a danger to pedestrians, damage local roads, and pollute local air. **Moray Labour Councillors will continue to press SNP Ministers in Edinburgh to deliver a genuine road bypass for Elgin.**

Labour Councillors will continue to press for improvements to the A95, which remains unsafe in many places. We will seek to improve rural transport to reduce social isolation.

Of course, road building would not be so necessary were the Scottish Government invest in public transport in the North of Scotland. For the past ten years the SNP has steadfastly refused to intervene in the operation of buses, despite the fact that fares have increased far beyond inflation, routes have been terminated, and services have been reduced. Meanwhile, Scotrail services between Inverness and Aberdeen are few and far between. Passengers find themselves waiting for hours at stations in the middle of the day in Elgin, Forres, and Keith without a train ever passing. And when they do, they are far too often formed of too-few coaches and therefore overcrowded. **Moray Labour Councillors will campaign for genuine investment in public transport, including regulation of buses and increased rail services between Inverness and Aberdeen.**

Moray Labour is committed to sustainable transport. Far too many journeys within Moray's towns are taken by car, when sustainable alternatives exist. While great strides have been made in developing cycle paths within Moray, it remains the case that cycling in our towns is an unattractive proposition to many. **Moray Labour Councillors will continue to support the development of safer cycling in Moray.**

# FINANCE

When the SNP first came to power ten years ago they promised to scrap the unfair Council Tax. Ten years later we're still waiting. Not only has the SNP failed to deliver on their clear commitment to scrap the Council Tax, they're now forcing Councils to increase it!

Scottish Labour has an alternative plan. Scottish Labour will scrap the Council Tax and replace it with a fairer alternative, based on actual property values, and not arbitrary bands determined 25 years ago. **Under Scottish Labour's proposals, a property of average value in Elgin<sup>2</sup> allocated to Band D would save £200.25 a year.** Most households would end up paying less than they do at present, with only the most valuable properties seeing modest increases. Not only is a more progressive system fairer, it also raises more money overall.<sup>3</sup>

We believe that the present system of financing local government is unsustainable. This is not simply our opinion, but the opinion of the Scottish Government's own Local Tax Commission.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, the arrogant SNP have elected to maintain the status quo, and attempt to foist blame onto local authorities when this inadequate system of financing local government comes up short.

Effective change can only be brought about through concerted action by local government to compel the SNP in Edinburgh to pursue real reform. **Moray Labour Councillors will press the Council to join a collective campaign by local authorities to change to a fairer and more sustainable way of financing local government.**

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<sup>2</sup> Rightmove <<http://www.rightmove.co.uk/house-prices/Elgin.html>> [accessed on 24 March 2017].

<sup>3</sup> MacLennan, 'Grasping the Third Rail: Reforming Local Taxation in Scotland' [2016] *British Tax Review* 208.

<sup>4</sup> Commission on Local Tax Reform, *Just Change: A New Approach to Local Taxation* (APS: 2015).



# EDUCATION

When Moray Labour held the education portfolio in the Moray Council we secured the greatest investment in school buildings and estates, in real terms, in the history of the Council's history. That legacy can be seen today in the new and renovated school buildings in every community in Moray. However, the present Council Administration's failures to adequately staff these schools is a betrayal of that legacy.

Moray presently has 33 vacancies for teachers<sup>5</sup> – vacancies which are proving increasingly difficult to fill. To lay the blame entirely on the Council Administration, however, would be unfair. The root cause of the problem is the failure of the Scottish Government to adequately train sufficient teachers to fill vacancies, and their failure to provide support for more remote authorities to attract teachers to their area.

Insofar as the Council is concerned, we believe that more needs to be done to identify prospective teachers locally. Support and information should be made available to encourage people who live and work locally to retrain as teachers. In particular, we believe that owing to the parlous state of the North Sea oil and gas sector, shortages in maths and science could be met by retraining highly skilled workers from the oil industry as teachers. More flexible ways to train as teachers should be encouraged, in particular for individuals who wish to change career, including options for part-time study and on-the-job training. **Moray Labour Councillors will propose the establishment of a scheme to encourage local people to train as teachers.**

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<sup>5</sup> MyJobScotland <<http://myjobscotland.gov.uk>> [accessed on 25 March 2017].

# SOCIAL CARE

In 2014, 'Scotland Against the Care Tax' research found that charges for social care in Moray were among the highest in Scotland.<sup>6</sup> Moray Labour regards this as scandalous. The continuous upwards trend in social care charges needs to be reversed. **Moray Labour has consistently opposed the imposition of charges for social care and will continue to do so.**

Furthermore, there are wild variations in these charges across Scotland, resulting in a postcode lottery in which Moray's most vulnerable residents always appear to lose. This can, partly, be explained by differences in local demography. Authorities, such as Moray, must bear a greater burden for social care provision owing the fact that we have a higher-than-average age profile. This, ultimately, is a failure on the part of the Scottish Government to adequately co-ordinate and support a genuinely national system of care in the community. **Moray Labour will campaign for a genuinely national system of social care.**

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<sup>6</sup> Inside Moray, 'Moray disabled workers paying highest care tax rate in Scotland' (13 November 2014) <<http://www.insidemoray.com/moray-disabled-workers-paying-highest-care-tax-rate-in-scotland/>> [accessed on 25 March 2017].

# ACCOUNTABILITY AND GOVERNANCE

In the last elections, Labour Councillors promised to pursue the establishment of a formal public petitions process for the Moray Council. In 2012, Labour Councillors delivered on this pledge and a public petitions process has now been established. While this is a welcome step forward, there remains a culture in the Council that public opinion is regarded as somewhat of a nuisance. The Council's leadership only appears interested in consulting the public when they don't want to take the tough decisions themselves. **Labour Councillors will ensure the public is genuinely engaged and consulted in Council decision making, whether it's convenient for the leadership or not.**

Furthermore, the independent group that runs the Council is unable to take and implement collective decisions for themselves. The independent councillors in the administration have adopted an *à la carte* approach to leadership, with the result that far too many decisions in the Council are taken by officials, and not elected members.

Moray Labour believes that whatever the composition of the next Council administration, all members of the administration should be bound by decisions taken collectively, and vote accordingly. Members of the administration who cannot support a collective decision should resign and should not be readmitted to the ruling group. Only then will voters be able to see clearly who bears responsibility for Council decisions. **Moray Labour will vote against any administration that doesn't include a binding commitment by its members to stand by collective decisions.**

