

Getting Communities Working

Labour's Local Election Manifesto 2009



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Leader of The Labour Party

INTRODUCTION

This recession has touched every community in Ireland. In every town, village, suburb and city, job losses, failing businesses, pay cuts and cutbacks are taking their toll.

In this economic crisis, leadership is vital. At national, and at local government level, we need decisive and imaginative action to stem job losses and to get our economy moving again. And we need a new, more democratic citizenship, based on fairness and respect.

To succeed, we must act together, as a community. The burden of getting our country back on its feet must be shared fairly, with everyone contributing according to their ability to do so. This collective effort should not simply be measured in monetary terms, but also by what we are willing to give back to our country and our communities, in the form of time, energy and shared commitment, be it social, sporting or cultural.

Local government can be a vehicle for change in our communities, our quality of life, and our democracy. Local government shapes communities. For Labour councillors, good local government means good quality housing, clean streets, safe parks, playgrounds and playing pitches, thriving businesses and a healthy environment. It means making our communities the best possible places to grow up and grow old in.

For the past twelve years, a Fianna Fáil-led Government has allowed speculative developers to dictate how our communities should look, work and play. It is time to take back control over our own future, and that of our children.

The Labour Party wants to put local people at the heart of local government. We want to empower people to contribute to the social, economic and civic life of their communities, so that they shape the place where they live.

Labour Councillors are ready to take action in their communities. And they are asking you to join them.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Eamon Gilmore". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Eamon" written in a larger, more prominent script than the surname "Gilmore".

LOCAL ECONOMY, LOCAL JOBS

Local authorities have a role to play in boosting the local economy, and stimulating the creation of local jobs. From promoting incentives that encourage start-up companies, to using their purchasing power to help create jobs, active local authorities can prove that there are local solutions to global problems.

Labour councillors will:

- Encourage the creation of local jobs through a new Rate Increment Scheme, which would allow new start up businesses to pay a discounted rate base over a specified period of time.
- Explore how libraries can be used as local resource centres for people who are unemployed, and looking for information on local jobs, training and CV or job-seeking advice.
- Help mobilise VECs to provide retraining opportunities for those who have lost their jobs. We will explore how further education institutions can best respond to the needs of their local communities through, for example:
 - a local analysis of the skills needs of people signing onto the live register
 - Extended night-time and weekend opening hours
- Extend the remit of County Development Boards to act as local jobs and training taskforces. This local taskforce would bring all local education and training providers, local chambers of commerce and local FAS offices together to coordinate an urgent response to local unemployment.
- Make sure the Council budget prioritises labour-intensive investment to help create local jobs.
- Establish a Socio-Economic Development Programme in every local authority.
- Encourage every Local Authority to have a tourism strategy, incorporating the quality of accommodation, signage, visitor facilities, visitor attractions, heritage, eco, arts and sports tourism potential, and the cleaning and maintenance of streets and roadsides to ensure they are as attractive as possible.
- Advocate that the details of companies who successfully bid for local authority-funded contracts be published on its website. As well as being fully transparent, it would allow companies looking for sub-contracting opportunities to know who to approach.
- Publish an annual breakdown of how rates that are levied on business are spent, so that local businesses know they are getting value for money. This information would be sent to businesses along with their rates bill.

The Rural Economy

The rural economy provides, directly and indirectly, a total of 230,000 Irish jobs. Local authorities can work in partnership with the agri-business sector to sustain the agricultural industry and our rural society in an increasingly competitive global economy.

Labour councillors will:

- Encourage and foster farmers markets, to incentivise farmers to diversify into local-need agriculture and horticultural produce. More locally produced produce would create micro economies in rural areas, keeping money and investment within the local economy.
- Encourage farmers to set aside some land, which can be rented out as garden allotments.
- Support partnerships between local authorities and farmers to provide Community Supported Agriculture, for example on land that is not in use by the local authority.

A national jobs and training strategy

At national level, Labour wants to:

- Mobilise our education and training system to meet the re-training needs of the unemployed. This includes:
 - Introducing a new work and training initiative called 'Earn and Learn', which would enable people to work two or three days a week, and be paid to train for the remaining days.
 - A Graduate and Apprentice Job Placement Scheme, where new graduates and trainees can receive the equivalent of a Jobseeker's payment while undertaking an internship.
 - Reducing the waiting period for eligibility for Back to Education Allowance and Back to Work Enterprise Allowance to 3 months.
 - Enabling unemployed people who want to go back to education, and who are funding their own studies, to claim back up to two years of their income tax.
 - Lifting the cap on places in Further Education colleges.
 - Using spare capacity in our universities and Institutes of Technology for re-training opportunities.
 - Providing training to equip people to find employment in the emerging Environmental Goods and Services Sector.
- Incentivise job creation through a temporary PRSI exemption for employers who have filled a new job with a person who has been unemployed for more than 6 months.
- Incentivise career breaks and flexible work options to facilitate parents, carers or others who want to take time out of the workforce.
- Generate green jobs through a major home insulation scheme.

- Redraw the National Development Plan to prioritise labour-intensive investment. We can begin with a nationwide programme of school building and refurbishment to improve the quality and energy efficiency of our schools.
- Re-tool our industrial policy to preserve skilled jobs, even when the original employer has left the country.
- Create a Universal Service Obligation (USO) for broadband, to ensure a high quality, universal broadband network.
- Expand the function and job creation capacities of County Enterprise Boards, and give greater discretion to these CEBs to contribute to employment creation, including raising the threshold on the number of jobs that they can support.

PLANNING FOR A BETTER PLACE TO LIVE

Labour would put an end to developer-led planning, and put the needs of people and the environment at the heart of how we grow our communities.

Labour councillors take seriously our responsibility to plan for safe, sociable and sustainable communities, and not just houses, estates and apartments.

Labour councillors will:

- Ensure that housing estates are taken in charge in a timely manner by strongly enforcing existing rules.
- Incorporate transport provisions into city and council development plans.
- Encourage clustered rural and urban regeneration to provide sustainable communities.
- Provide a one-stop shop facilitating local residents who want to contribute to the planning process.
- Consult with local communities in advance of drawing up local development plans.
- Maximise the public green spaces belonging to the local authority for recreational use.
- Promote allotments through the planning system, and by examining how under-utilised land might be used for this purpose.
- Enforce existing legislation to enhance access to public buildings for people with disabilities.
- Disability-proof services and facilities provided by the Local Authority or its contractors, such as waste and recycling services, recreational facilities, walk ways and pavement repairs.
- Promote high-quality, sustainable design through Councils' procurement process.
- Initiate pilot projects that will involve community stakeholders in developing designs for future landmark buildings, street furniture and common shop fronts.

At national level, Labour wants to:

- Require planning permission for housing estates to be linked to the provision of schools, public transport, healthcare, community centres, recreational areas and sources of local employment.
- Require permission for big commercial developments to be linked to public transport provision.
- Strengthen legislation to refuse future planning permission to developers who have failed to finish off housing developments in the past.
- Substantially increase existing enforcement penalties for those who break planning laws.
- Ensure consistent application of planning laws across local authorities.
- Tighten restrictions on sale of public land and enable Local Authorities to preserve green spaces.

- Amend the Planning and Development Act 2000 to require a flood risk report to be carried out as part of the preparation of County and City Development Plans.
- Prioritise capital investment in flood relief measures, and legislation that requires local authorities to manage flood risk through sustainable planning and development.

Transport and Traffic

How we get around is central to our quality of life. Most of us spend at least part of our day in gridlock – including those who take public transport.

Many parts of the country have no access to public transport at all. And the public transport we do have is patchy, and doesn't join up. The result? Our streets and roads are congested, dangerous, slow and dirty: frustrating for motorists, cyclists, pedestrians and bus users alike.

Labour councillors will:

- Advocate that local authorities in rural areas facilitate the establishment of local transport services, such as daytime services for elderly people, and late night 'disco buses' at weekends.
- Promote park and ride facilities for commuters.
- Eliminate bottlenecks and gaps in bus lanes.
- Introduce lower speed limits in residential areas.
- Expand the number of safe, high quality cycle lanes.
- Ensure schools have secure cycle stands, and a tailored 'Safe Cycle to School' route.
- Increase the number of secure cycle racks around the local authority area.
- Take action to enhance the safety of cyclists on the roads.
- Promote the use of local 'walking buses' for children to enable them to walk to school safely.
- Ensure coastal local authorities have an effective harbour policy.

At national level, Labour wants:

- To create regional and city transport authorities, whose responsibilities would include managing traffic flows, procuring, funding and operating joined-up public transport projects, integrated ticketing, and real-time bus information.
- A reversal in the cuts to Bus Eireann and Dublin Bus services. Investment in additional and improved bus services is the most flexible, affordable and timely way to provide more people with the opportunity to use public transport instead of a car.
- Formal coordination of coastal zone management and protection policies between coastal authorities, including those north of the border

HOUSING

Labour believes that everyone has the right to decent, safe and affordable housing. This is true whether a person owns their own home, or is renting in the public or private sector. And we have practical suggestions to make this a reality.

Labour councillors will:

- Limit the time a tenant of a local authority house has to wait for a repair or modification of their home to three months. This could be done through the creation of a fund to purchase repairs privately, where the local authority has failed to provide the service within three months.
- Encourage the expansion of an 'empty nester' downsizing scheme, which allows older people to sell their homes to the council, and be re-housed in more suitable accommodation.
- Privilege the ownership of social housing by the local authority over long-term renting of accommodation.
- Ensure that 10% of all housing is suitable for people with a disability.
- Support ring-fenced funding for the homeless, based on a local assessment of local needs.
- Advocate that every local authority area has a local strategy to eliminate homelessness.
- Promote supported housing, backed up with appropriate funding, to help people at risk of homelessness to stay in their homes.

At national level, Labour wants:

- To increase the stock of social housing through the purchase of suitable unsold houses and apartments from developers at cost price, and to transfer development land from Anglo Irish Bank for affordable housing purposes.
- To progress the regeneration of social housing.
- To end the use of private management companies and charges in private housing estates as a precondition of planning permission, and regulate them for apartments.
- To introduce a "Right to Buy" policy, which would extend the Tenant Purchase Scheme to tenants of local authority apartments.
- Local authorities to be empowered, and resourced, to regulate standards in private rental accommodation.
- The Private Residential and Tenancies Board to act as an 'honest broker' between tenants and landlords in the private rental sector, through the establishment of a rental deposit scheme.
- To ring-fence the new property registration tax of €200 for use within the local authority where the property is situated.
- The return of the home security scheme for rural senior citizens.

ENVIRONMENT

Climate Change

The challenge posed by global warming is immense, and it can sometimes feel overwhelming. But there are many things we can do at local level that allow us to play our part in reducing harmful greenhouse gases, while saving money and improving our quality of life.

Labour councillors will:

- Enable local authorities to facilitate voluntary group insulation schemes. If a group of neighbours in similar houses want to retrofit their homes to make them more energy efficient, they can contact each other through the local authority. Their local authority would act as a link between the residents and an energy services company, which would design a one-size-fits-all package of measures suitable for that type of house, reducing the cost and hassle of retrofitting.
- Ensure every local authority has a strategy to reduce carbon emissions in its area, including a transport plan that maximises cycling, walking, car pooling and public transport.
- Incorporate micro-generation of heat and electricity in new residential and commercial developments into Area Development Plans where appropriate, so that new developments can produce some of their energy needs themselves.
- Require the local authority to conduct an energy audit of its own properties, to assess how best to reduce its energy usage, and to pilot renewable energy schemes, such as solar panels, in its own buildings.
- Promote the planting of urban forests.

At national level, Labour wants:

- To facilitate a national home insulation scheme, with accountable and approved contractors, to create green jobs and reduce our carbon footprint.
- To include the installation of renewable technologies in the Warmer Homes Scheme
- To ensure Local Authorities have sufficient trained building inspectors to enforce energy efficiency regulations.
- A national climate change adaptation strategy as a matter of urgency. Every local authority should be given clear guidelines to develop their own climate change adaptation plan, and be required to implement it.
- A National Climate Change Forum that would involve all stakeholders, including local government, to generate a national consensus on the measures we need to take to meet existing and future greenhouse gas reduction obligations.

Waste

Waste is a growing problem we cannot afford to ignore. We produce too much of it, recycle too little, and are running out of places to put it.

Just focusing on how we dispose of waste will not solve the problem: we need to focus on creating less waste in the first place, and recycling. Labour wants to use our waste to create jobs. We want to establish a home-grown recycling industry, which would see us process recyclable waste here, and kick-start a market for recycled goods.

We can start by providing incentives for people to reduce packaging and waste, and to increase the amount they recycle.

Labour councillors want a fair, sustainable, joined up waste policy. This includes:

- Pricing waste collection so as to promote recycling.
- A price structure for waste collection based on weight.
- An expansion in door to door collection of organic waste.
- More bring centres, composting facilities and local schemes that incentivise the return of used bottles and cans.

At national level, Labour wants:

- A nation-wide waiver scheme for domestic waste charges for low-income households in every local authority.
- The establishment of a National Recycling Agency, charged with setting up a recycling industry in Ireland.

Water

Everyone has the right to free, clean, safe drinking water. The scandal of unsafe drinking water in Galway in 2007, which had serious health consequences, should never have happened, and must never be repeated. Local authorities have a duty to ensure that water infrastructure keeps pace with housing development.

Labour councillors will:

- Urge Local Authorities to develop strategic water plans for their area, to make sure there is sufficient capacity to meet demand.
- Oppose moves to privatise the public water supply or to introduce domestic water charges.

- Use existing legislation to require developers to make a contribution towards investment in water infrastructure, as part of their planning permission.
- Ensure the timely preparation of River Basin Management Plans, which are required under the Water Framework Directive.
- Seek to ensure that all waste water treatment plants have a Phosphates Control Plan.

At national level, Labour wants:

- Sufficient funding and staffing for local authorities to ensure compliance with the EU Waste Water Treatment Directive.

Pollution

Labour believes present and future generations deserve to live in a healthy environment with clean water, fresh air and a rich abundance of wildlife and fauna.

Labour councillors will:

- Strongly enforce existing legislation on environmental crime, such as illegal dumping and graffiti.
- Step up enforcement of laws against dog fouling, and ensure better provision of bins for this purpose.
- Ensure Local Authorities fully enforce existing regulations and laws dealing with noise pollution, and enable them to mediate noise-related disputes between neighbours.
- Encourage every Local Authority to have a Biodiversity Officer and prepare local biodiversity plans.

At national level Labour wants to:

- Bring in legislation to implement the Environmental Liability Directive, in order to hold those whose actions cause damage to the environment to account.
- Ratify the Aarhus Convention and implement the European Union Public Participation Directive to give citizens the right to access information, to public participation and to justice in environmental matters.
- Harness the high level of interest shown by Irish school pupils in environmental issues, as demonstrated in OECD studies, by increasing the number of learning activities in the science curricula that relate to the environment, climate change and biodiversity.

RECREATION AND AMENITIES

Children and Young People

Local authorities have the power to make their communities better places to grow up in. Our aim is to make our communities, wherever they may be, the best places to bring up a family.

Labour councillors will:

- Work with schools to explore how local authorities could manage safe supervised community facilities, open before and after school, for parents to drop and collect their children on their way to and from work.
- Enable local authorities to act as brokers for parents seeking to set up childcare cooperatives
- Promote the expansion of playgrounds, particularly in or close to young communities.
- Facilitate the use of libraries by parent and toddler groups.
- Ensure greater monitoring of playgrounds and parks by park wardens to combat anti-social behaviour.
- Promote 'night basketball' and 'night football', as well as other sports and recreation facilities, to give teenagers other options for socialising.
- Encourage local authorities to engage with youth and community groups to provide youth cafés.

At national level, Labour wants:

- An arts, cultural and sports based summer recreation programme for young people, run at local government level. This would be coordinated by a full-time youth recreation coordinator, and staffed in part by third level students employed under a revived Summer Jobs Scheme.

Older people

- Labour councillors want to establish a Senior Citizen Forum in every Local Authority Electoral Area, which would give our seniors the opportunity to give their views on matters that affect them. For example:
 - Better public transport facilities.
 - Options for socialising locally, such as active retirement clubs.
 - Personal security.

Learning Communities

Through libraries, and the links between local authorities and Vocational Educational Committees, local government has played an important role in the provision of education in the community and the promotion of Life Long Learning. Labour will expand the role of local government in education, as it is the key to building a sustainable economy and enabling people of all ages to reach their full potential.

Labour councillors will:

- Propose the establishment of Local Education Forums to facilitate discussion between local representatives, school boards, parents and council management, and to plan effectively for the needs of schools in the area.
- Work to achieve the goals of Labour's Right to Read campaign. This includes:
 - Advocating that local authorities provide homework clubs, run by Community Development Workers.
 - Ensuring future social housing takes account of children's need to have a quiet space to do their homework.
 - Encouraging literacy among young parents with the promotion of 'Baby Books Bundle' through the local library service.
 - Extending library opening hours and outreach services.
 - Introducing more 'Family Learning Through Football' schemes, which encourage positive parenting and family literacy.
 - A greater roll-out of schemes like Dublin City Council's 'Beano Comic Initiative'.
- Work to mobilise VEC colleges of further education to meet the retraining needs of those who have been made unemployed.
- Facilitate the provision of outreach centres that link up to third level institutions, and facilitate distance or online learning, where available.
- Work with VECs and Institutes of Technology to provide training opportunities for local authority employees, to help equip them for their roles in public service delivery.

Libraries

Labour councillors will:

- Advocate that libraries remain open six days a week, and extend evening opening hours.
- Ensure all libraries publish community outreach plans, and work with schools and community groups to maximise participation in library services by all age groups.

- Work to expand the mobile library service, and to provide outreach hubs of libraries in community buildings.
- Facilitate libraries to become community resource centres for the arts and education, as well as hubs for those seeking localised advice on job-seeking and employment opportunities.

Healthy Communities

Labour councillors will:

- Promote the development of 'Green Gyms' in public parks and green spaces.
- Promote the development of non-profit walking and jogging clubs.

Art and Culture

Labour councillors will:

- Encourage local artists and help regenerate communities by facilitating artists to exhibit in the windows of vacant retail premises, possibly in return for renovating and repainting the shop front to make it more appealing to potential investors.
- Actively support the arts in their local area, through providing accommodation for the arts where possible, supporting local festivals, and working with the local arts industry to develop cultural tourism opportunities.
- Provide more exhibition space in community and civic buildings.

Local History and Heritage

Labour councillors will:

- Encourage the publication of local histories, and histories of the county.
- Celebrate the lives of famous inhabitants of the county, both past and present, who have made a distinguished contribution, in the naming of landmarks.
- Promote the placing of plaques on historic buildings of local importance.
- Encourage every Local Authority to explore how it can best showcase its historical heritage for tourism, for example through the development of 'historical quarters'.
- Preserve the character and heritage of historic villages by preparing Village Design Statements that would inform future planning and development in and around those villages

Community Spirit

Labour councillors will:

- Encourage local authorities to provide information about local volunteering opportunities, for example through their website.
- Promote the development of family-friendly street festivals.
- Promote North-South cooperation and stronger international links through town twinning, cultural exchanges and local inter-community activities.
- Ensure local authority policy making is underpinned by the need for social inclusion.
- Hold events that promote our increasingly multicultural society, and encourage integration and inclusion in local communities.

Safer Communities

Labour councillors will:

- Prevent the development of anti-social behaviour 'black spots' by planning for safe and well-lit public spaces.
- Promote, in addition to Joint Policing Committees, local policing forums at neighbourhood level to reconnect local people to their local Garda.
- Enable local authorities to play a role in community mediation to resolve disputes between neighbours before they escalate.
- Ensure the effective enforcement of Council bye-laws that relate to anti-social behaviour, such as the possession or consumption of alcohol, or the use of public spaces.

LOCAL DEMOCRACY

The best people to plan and manage local services, such as planning for the environment and housing, the amenities that make our local community work, schools, transport, policing, and care for the young and elderly, should be the locals who use them.

However, local people have very little say in the services that affect their everyday lives. Labour wants to radically overhaul local government, so that it is more democratic, more efficient and delivers better value for money.

Local Government Reform

Labour has published the most comprehensive blueprint for a modern system of local government.

To make local government more efficient, Labour is proposing:

- A more sensible approach to delivering public services. If a function of government, such as building schools, employment services or the distribution of National Lottery Funds, can be done better, quicker and cheaper at local level, then it should be transferred to local government.
- To do this effectively, we need two levels of local government, with powers appropriate to the scale of their remit:
 - City or Regional Authorities, charged with strategic planning for their city/region, transport and traffic, economic development. Other functions, like education, could also be delivered on a regional basis.
 - Local Authorities (including County, Town, and District Councils) would retain their existing functions, with other appropriate functions to be devolved over time.
- The exemption of State-owned property from rates should be abolished. There is no justification for exempting State property from the rates regime which applies to privately-owned business.
- The transfer of functions from central to local government should be accompanied by an appropriate redistribution of funding and redeployment of staff.

To make local government more democratic, Labour wants:

- A directly elected mayor for every major city or city-region.
- Councils to have a consumer protection role in the public service remit of private sector service providers. Councils should also be able to question, in a public forum, public service providers, like school managers.

- Democratic accountability to be returned to local councillors. The County Manager should be abolished and replaced with Chief Executive with a limited range of executive functions.
- The voting age in local elections to be reduced to 16, so that teenagers have more of a say in local services.

Local government that serves the people: what Labour Councillors will do

Labour Councillors will:

- Open more decision-making to the public, for example, through the use of county or city-wide referendums.
- Champion a binding Citizen Service Charter, which ensures Councils respond efficiently to queries.
- Encourage every Council to have a 'Spot and Report' facility on its website and a dedicated phone hotline, which allows local residents to report repairs relevant to the local authority, for example, potholes, graffiti, dangerous pavements etc.
- Advocate that all local authorities publish a user-friendly annual breakdown of how their income was spent.
- Promote the involvement of local community groups and residents' associations, and facilitate the formal recognition of residents' associations under the Local Government Act 2001.
- Ensure that all policy decisions are taken in plenary session.
- Promote e-democracy. For example, we will ensure all Council meetings are broadcast live over the web, and that the maximum amount of information that is relevant to local residents will be published regularly on Council websites.
- Ensure that residents who feel they have been treated unfairly by their Council are fully informed of their right to refer their complaint to the Ombudsman.
- Advocate that every local authority would have a disability officer, and that all staff receive disability awareness training.
- Ensure that we protect the human rights and dignity of those whom we represent, particularly with regard to housing, education and health services.

