

The party manifestos: What's in it for the cities?

Jonathan Seager, April 2010

The manifestos are out but what do they mean for our cities? One thing is clear; the battle to win over the UK's cities is not yet decided. What might the vote look like across our cities? What are the hot issues which will swing urban voters between now and May 6? Join us for our [Urban Vote Event](#) on 26 April to find out.

The three main parties' policies on the big issue of cutting the deficit are well known. The Conservatives want to reduce public expenditure this year, Labour would hold off making cuts until next year and the Liberal Democrats would start chopping away when they feel it makes "economic sense".

But beyond the headline announcements, there are some significant differences emerging on key policy areas which will affect cities and towns across the UK.

On **the built environment**, planning policy recommendations are conspicuous by their absence in the Labour manifesto whereas the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats propose fairly radical changes. The Conservatives want to introduce a whole new localist planning agenda and the Liberal Democrats propose greater power for communities to stop development through a third party right of appeal.

- *We support the democratising intent of Conservative and Liberal Democrat planning proposals but we would like to see planning dealt with at the right spatial level and in a natural economic area. There is a danger that the localist agenda ignores this point and could end up constraining economic growth.*

Devolution is in vogue, with all three parties offering to hand more powers to local authorities, but with some subtle differences. The Liberal Democrats are the most radical on financial devolution, with their reforms for local taxation and the relocalisation of the business rate. Both the Conservatives and Labour support the concept of elected mayors but differ on the spatial level – the Conservatives support mayors for the 12 major cities, Labour supports mayors across city-regions.

- *We welcome the Conservatives' clear intent on mayors, but do have doubts about a single-authority Manchester mayor inside Greater Manchester. We prefer Labour's proposal for metro mayors, but the procedures around this policy make it less certain to happen.*

The Liberal Democrats and Conservatives are thinking along the same lines with regard to RDAs. Both parties would scrap or reform them if there is local support for this. The Conservatives plan to replace **RDAs** with business-led local enterprise partnerships.

- *We are not concerned about the precise architecture at the regional level – see our more [detailed note](#) on this – but we would like to see economic development policy made and implemented at the right spatial level.*

When it comes to **supporting business** there are the usual commitments from all the parties to cut red tape, however, some clear dividing lines do emerge. The Conservatives clearly differentiate themselves by stating that they will not introduce all of Labour's planned increase in national insurance tax and will also cut the headline rate of corporation tax and the small companies' rate. Labour focuses its attention on targeted help for SMEs and establishing a fund to invest in growth sectors – the Liberal Democrats suggest a similar policy calling for the creation of local enterprise funds.

- *Given the looming cuts on public sector spending, cities need private sector jobs. So any policies that make it easier for businesses to grow and create jobs are welcome ones. However, in the past as [our analysis](#) shows, policies like these have made little difference – are these proposals any different?*

With regard to **transport policy** all three parties support greater train use, with specific commitments from Labour and the Conservatives to push ahead with high-speed rail. A Liberal Democrat-Conservative consensus is apparent on preventing further airport expansion in the South East.

- *We think that high-speed rail mustn't come at the expense of targeted improvements in the urban transport infrastructure that is holding back many of our cities – see our [note](#). Some particular policies we like are Labour's plans to make greater use of Oyster style ticketing arrangements and the Liberal Democrat proposal to introduce road pricing in a second parliament.*

For more on the Centre for Cities' policy recommendations for the next government, please see www.citiesmanifesto.org

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