



Ideas about the next local elections

Opportunities and challenges for a new working class party in May 2026

The phenomenal response to the announcement on July 24th by Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana inviting people to join in establishing “a new kind of political party” has transformed the political situation in Britain.

While it is not straightforward to move from the three-quarters-of-a-million or so ‘Your Party’ sign-ups to a democratically organised, mass vehicle for socialist, working-class political representation, the opportunities to do so are clearly there. Work must proceed urgently and the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) is giving the moves to a new party its full support (see <https://www.tusc.org.uk/21778/17-07-2025/tusc-offers-full-backing-to-moves-towards-a-new-party/>)

One immediate task is to get the new party ready for the elections that will be held on May 7th, 2026. Control of both the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Senedd will be at stake. In addition there are elections for at least 4,249 council seats in 71 local authorities with scheduled contests – including every London borough – and in hundreds more seats in those county councils or unitary authorities which had their 2025 elections postponed pending local government re-organisation.

There will also be mayoral elections in Watford and the London boroughs of Croydon, Hackney, Lewisham, Newham and Tower Hamlets. And in new combined unitary authority areas, the composition of which the government says will be finalised by the start of the year.

The local council battleground

The possibilities are enormous. The new party could win councillors in almost every authority. In some it could expect to hold the balance of power after May 7th. And even, in some of the particular councils that are up for election in this four-yearly cycle, win majorities and form administrations.

This, however, represents both an opportunity and a challenge. A substantial presence in local government for the new party could be a powerful bridgehead, a catalyst force, for a movement

against the Austerity II agenda that the Starmer government is set on, compelled by the perilous position of British capitalism to further attack public spending including local council services. But only if it is clear on what needs to be done.

As this discussion document explains councils can make a difference, and have the powers to stand up to central government austerity. Imagine the impact of even a handful of councils, and a bloc of new party councillors across the country backing them up, using their powers on housing, education, social care, leisure, children's centres, transport and so on to transform people's lives – and to combine together to demand the proper funding that local services need.

But the converse is also true, of the damaging impact that could be made if councillors go along with austerity, however reluctantly they do so. It happened under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, when council Labour Groups remained as strongholds of the right-wing within the party. The resulting continued experience of cuts being made by these town hall Blairites in the name of Labour undermined Jeremy's anti-austerity message, particularly amongst working class voters in 'left behind' Labour constituencies. The new party cannot afford a repeat, of the promise of a new politics turning into more of the same.

That's why a discussion on how to approach the 2026 local elections is a vital task; just as the new party supporters in Scotland and Wales will be discussing their election platforms for May.

No Cuts People's Budgets

This document published by the TUSC all-Britain steering committee is a contribution to the policy debate that's needed. Drawing on our previous work on how to prepare no cuts People's Budgets including the presentation of alternative budgets by TUSC-supporting councillors – and the experience of the different component parts of our coalition in the trades unions and in leading an anti-austerity council in Liverpool in the 1980s! – in the first part we argue that councils still have the power to challenge the government. If, that is, the political will is there.

In the second part we look at the policy pledges in the 2017 and 2019 Labour Manifestos which local councils have the power to implement now, without any new legal authority from Westminster, and ask: could they form the basis of a local elections manifesto for the new party candidates that we hope will be standing in May? They certainly form a positive offer to stand on, building on the absolute commitment to resist austerity that must be at the new party's core.

And lastly, we discuss how the work can begin now to prepare for May even before the name, structures and other details of the new party are finalised – through campaigning for People's Budgets to present to the January-February 2026 council budget-setting meetings.

Work which will still have value, even if the hurdles of legally registering a party and democratically agreeing candidates have not been overcome for May's elections – and, hopefully for just one more time if that is so, it will be necessary for a coalition of different socialist, trade unionist and community forces to carry the fight to the capitalist establishment politicians at the ballot box. ■

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Can councils defy government austerity?

Nobody can seriously question that local councils could be an important alternative power to central government. Around a fifth of public spending is done by local authorities, providing 800 or so different services. Many are statutory functions that they have to fulfil, others are discretionary. There are 1.295 million workers employed in total by local government in England and Wales, and 240,000 in Scotland. Who controls your local council then is not a matter of indifference.

But equally nobody could dispute that councils and the local services they provide have been at the frontline of the austerity offensive. The core spending power of local authorities, for example, is down by around 18% per person compared to 2010, the Institute of Fiscal Studies calculates. The GMB union estimates that councils across England and Wales – Tory and Labour alike – have cut nearly 600,000 jobs since 2012.

And the situation will not improve under the current spending plans of Starmer and the chancellor Rachel Reeves. Some additional grant funding was announced for local government in the June 2025 Spending Review but completely insufficient to meet its needs. Dr Jonathan Carr-West, the chief executive of the Local Government Information Unit, a membership organisation of over 200 different authorities, argued that “we have made some progress” because, whereas in 2024 half of councils were “telling us that if nothing changes in terms of how they’re funded they are going to go bust within five years”, now it was one third! (BBC News, 26th August)

‘Funding formula’ changes and re-organisation

In fact, the future position of local government is even worse than the already desperate headline figures suggest. Also announced in June was a new system for allocating central government funding between local authorities, to be in place for the 2026-2027 council budgets after ‘consultation’. Redistributing around £2.1 billion in annual funding, including the income councils can keep from growing business rates revenue, the estimate is that 186 councils will lose out.

Some councils, obviously, will gain some additional funding; but one-in-four will see a real-terms fall in overall funding over the next three years with 30 facing cuts of 11-12%. And although the exact details of how the new funding formulas would apply are still unclear, the biggest losses are set to be inflicted on inner London boroughs and slow population growth areas, such as South Tyneside and Sunderland in the North East.

Ominously the changes to the funding arrangements are also being accompanied by a ‘review’ of what statutory duties councils should have, and whether and how much fees can be charged for certain local services.

One set of rights certainly in the government’s target line are those of school pupils and their families requiring special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) services. Up to now councils have been able to incur deficits to meet their SEND spending needs – deficits which currently total over £5 billion combined – through a government ‘statutory override’ of the requirement for councils to produce a ‘balanced budget’ each year. This has recently been extended until April

2028 but on the implicit basis that SEND services rights will be reviewed and cuts in provision made. What other statutory functions will be cut, or charges imposed for?

And all this is taking place against the backdrop of the biggest reorganisation of local government in England since the 1970s, as Labour aims to merge many districts councils into larger, less accountable, single bodies – known as unitary authorities – and increase the number of directly-elected mayors.

Larger, more remote councils are favoured by the Starmer government because it fits with their aim to weaken local democratic accountability. Whereas people living in towns and cities like, for example, Exeter, Basildon, Worcester, Crawley or Norwich, can currently vote every year for who runs their local public services – in district council elections, for one-third of the seats each time, and a county election in the fourth year – under the new plans they will only have a vote once every four years, and then only for distant mega-councils with populations of half a million or more.

With this erosion of local democracy, topped off by US-style directly-elected mayors, it will be easier to take unpopular decisions to cut or privatise services – or to favour special business interests – than to win support for pro-business austerity policies amongst a wider group of regularly-elected councillors, who have to justify themselves to local people.

Will it make local services ‘more efficient’ or ‘save money’? The latest estimate from the County Council Network, which had previously supported reorganisation plans on the latter grounds, is that the government’s plans could actually increase costs by £850 million over five years. (BBC News, 29th August) But what does that matter to Starmer and co as they look to get the ‘best’ arrangements in place to push through their austerity agenda?

So is resistance futile?

No, it’s not! Since its inception TUSC has pioneered an anti-cuts strategy of councils using their prudential borrowing powers and reserves to set needs-based budgets as part of building a mass campaign for proper government funding for local services, explaining exactly how that was possible. Not by ignoring the legal requirement for a council to set a balanced budget each year before it is able to spend money or issue council tax bills, but by formally ‘balancing’ it by the use of borrowing powers and reserves.

What powers councils have and how they could be used to this end has been detailed in previous TUSC documents, including the 55-page briefing *Preparing a No Cuts People’s Budget*, available from the TUSC website at <https://www.tusc.org.uk/txt/450.pdf>. There really has been no excuse for local austerity policies. But, until now, there has not been the prospect of electing councillors on a sufficiently large scale who are prepared to fight them.

The latest version of the TUSC briefing was published in 2021 and obviously things have moved on since then. One of the last pieces of legislation passed by the Tories to get royal assent, for example, was the so-called Levelling-Up and Regeneration Act which gave greater intervention powers to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government over council borrowing. The implications were analysed by TUSC – at <https://www.tusc.org.uk/17679/24-07-2022/tory-clashes-show-more-austerity-is-on-the-way-as-councils-face-new-rules/> – with the conclusion drawn that, while the battleground was being reset, councils still retained the capacity to resist austerity diktats. And recent developments have only confirmed the broad point of the flexibility that still exists in council budget-setting and funding decisions.

Not just in the council chamber

The alternative budget amendments moved by TUSC-supporting councillors and explored in the TUSC material were not recommended by council finance officers when they were presented, although they were not ruled as 'illegal' either.

In particular there was debate over whether a council budget could include borrowing which could arguably be used for 'current' spending, to pay for day-to-day services, rather than 'capital' spending, and whether the possibility of increased government support could be built into budget projections. In one case a QC's opinion was sought by the Labour-led council, which was inconclusive. Yet, confirming our arguments, this year, for example, 30 councils have been given 'capitalisation directions' by the government explicitly enabling them to take out loans to pay for current spending. The 'statutory override' on SEND deficits is another example of this elasticity in the system, on a massive scale.

Meanwhile, in August the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government agreed to provide funding towards repaying the £2 billion debts that had been incurred by Woking Borough Council in Surrey.

A ministry official was quoted as saying "it is not typical for a council's debt to be addressed or written off centrally. However, the government accepts that there are exceptional circumstances in Woking". (BBC News, 6 August) In this case it was because the borough council's debts were potentially derailing the government's reorganisation plans – none of the other ten councils in Surrey, the county or the districts, wanted to be burdened with Woking's debts when they were merged.

But couldn't a councils' revolt against austerity spearheaded by new party-led councils and councillor groups create 'exceptional circumstances' too? 'Circumstances' that could also force the government to 'accept' it has to pay up? The 'technical' means to fight back can always be found, if the will is there.

Local austerity, it must be said again, will not be defeated by action in the council chambers alone but by combining such defiance with building a mass movement.

But that is the potential which is opening up in the new political situation in Britain and which must be seized. ■

Ideas from Jeremy Corbyn's Labour manifestos

An absolute commitment to resist austerity – not voting for cuts or privatisation in the council chamber – must be at the core of the new party. But what else should its local election candidates in May stand for?

The Labour Manifestos produced for the 2017 and 2019 general elections, under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, included numerous policy pledges that would still radically improve people's lives – and which local councils have the power to implement now, without new legal authority from Westminster. Could these form the basis of a local elections manifesto for the new party in the 2026 elections?

The policies range from breakfast clubs and free school meals for all primary school pupils without means tests; local replacements for the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for 16-18 year olds in education; free bus travel for under-25s; a council house building programme; rent controls for licensed landlords; the end of '15-minute maximum' home care visits; to a mass home insulation energy efficiency programme to fight climate change and much more. The full list of these 40 'locally implementable policies' has been broken down below:

Early years, schools and education

- 'Poverty-proof' schools, by the introduction of free school meals for all primary school children, funding for breakfast clubs, and grants for school uniforms.
- Reverse cuts to Sure Start centres to provide a genuinely universal service, available in all communities.
- Ensure that all two, three and four-year olds will be able to access 30 hours of free pre-school education per week and access to additional hours at affordable, subsidised rates staggered with incomes.
- Introduce a local arts pupil premium.
- Restore funding for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses.
- Introduce grants for adapting foster homes for disabled children.
- Introduce additional education entitlements for workers in industries that are significantly affected by industrial transition.
- Establish a cross-council teacher supply service with proper rights, contracts and pay for supply teachers.

Housing

- Use councils' powers to compulsorily register private landlords and set-up council-run lettings agencies, as the means to tackle repair standards, high rents, over-occupancy, extortionate letting fees, unfair evictions etc for private rented homes.
- Providing funding and support to renters' unions.
- Expand and upgrade hostels for rough-sleepers, turning them into places where people can turn their lives around.

- Meet the costs of raising the Local Housing Allowance in line with the 30th percentile of local rents.
- Use councils' borrowing powers for capital spending to begin a mass building programme of eco-friendly affordable council homes.
- Fit sprinklers and other fire safety measures in all high rise council and housing association tower blocks and enforce the replacement of dangerous Grenfell style cladding on all high-rise homes and buildings, by resourcing sufficient fully trained Fire and Rescue Service fire safety officers to inspect and enforce building standards and guidance.

Youth provision

- Introduce a local replacement for the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for 16-18 year olds in education
- Stop the sell-off of playing fields and sports facilities to developers and private leisure companies, and invest in sports and recreation facilities and services.
- Re-open closed youth centres and restore lost youth services, starting now to put into place the foundations of the promised National Youth Service.

Work and pay

- Ensure that any work undertaken by or for councils is done by workers paid at least the TUC's minimum wage rate demand (currently £15 per hour).
- End the use of zero-hour contracts by councils and any company undertaking work for them.
- Provide facilities and public support for trade unions fighting in their local authority area for such standards in the private sector.
- Immediately begin to reduce the working week for council workforces with no loss of pay.
- Resist the extension of Sunday trading and the working day – by using trading standards powers.

Decent public services

- End outsourcing and return all outsourced and privatised services to council control, restoring them to an even better standard of service than before. Take back all PFI contracts.
- Reopen closed libraries and other community assets.
- Remove the barriers constructed by society to ensure that disabled people can participate fully and equally in our society. Provide the extra support for severely disabled people without a formal carer that they need to enable them to meet the extra costs they inevitably face.

Health and care

- Provide community-based, free person-centred adult care support, underpinned by the principles of ethical care and independent living.
- Provide additional care packages to support both older people and working-age adults living independently in their own homes.
- End 15-minute care visits and provide care workers with paid travel time, access to training and an option to choose regular hours.
- Top-up the Carer's Allowance for unpaid full-time carers.

Climate change & the environment

- Draw up local Climate Emergency plans with targets based on the carbon footprint not just of council-run services but capturing total emissions for the local area, giving a real picture of what needs to be done to tackle the climate crisis.
- Ensure councils buy green energy for their premises and that their pension funds disinvest from fossil fuels. Oppose all fracking applications within the council area.
- Use council powers over emissions from buses and taxi licensing and road building schemes.
- Create safe and usable cycle routes.
- Use council powers through park and ride schemes, school buses and pedestrianisation schemes to reduce transport emissions.
- Use councils' capital borrowing powers to fund tram networks, electric charging points and a widescale home insulation energy efficiency programme. And park improvements, nature reserves, sports facilities, local farmer food markets, and tree planting.
- Enforce environmental standards in public and private housing and buildings – stipulating energy efficiency standards above building regulation requirements for new builds and social housing programmes.
- In setting conditions for procurement and contracts with suppliers, ensure good employment conditions, union recognition, service standards – and environmental and ethical practices.

Transport

- Use the powers that local authorities have to intervene in the provision of bus services, to ensure they are run in the interests of local people.
- Introduce free bus travel schemes for under-25s.
- Use the powers of council representatives on regional rail transport boards to ensure accessibility for disabled people, safe staffing levels, and the ending of driver-only operation.

This is not by any means an exhaustive list of powers that councils have and could use or policies for the new party to campaign on. There are other policies on disinvestment, for example, that councillors who have declared in support of the new party have successfully pursued. But we have pulled them together in this report to give a glimpse of what a positive local elections manifesto for the new party candidates that we hope will be standing in May could look like.

And all of which local councils have no excuse not to implement now, without any new legal authority from Westminster. ■

Preparing for the May elections: local People's Budgets

Discussing policy amongst supporters of Jeremy and Zarah's new party call is vital preparation for the May elections, certainly to ensure that those who put themselves forward as candidates are committed to an absolute, no cuts, anti-austerity stand.

But building a movement that could back councillors taking such a stand beyond those who have already declared their support for a new party is equally important, if not more so. And that must start now, well before the election period begins next spring.

One way of doing this in each council district would be to use the budget-making timetable that local authorities will begin in the autumn before they set their 2026-2027 spending plans in January-February. Councils will publish initial spending plans – and any new cuts – including 'consultations' with the council trade unions, local groups whose services might be affected, and sometimes public meetings, before they reach their final budget proposals to be voted on in the new year. This can provide a framework to produce an alternative 'People's Budget' for the area, involving the widest possible input from the local community.

Almost certainly, by doing this – inviting local community organisations, trade union branches, campaign groups, student groups and others to contribute their ideas on what services the council should provide – more policy proposals would emerge even beyond those raised in the previous section. And that really would establish the foundations to pull together the broadest possible anti-austerity electoral challenge in May.

How to start?

Drawing up a local People's Budget can sound daunting – but it doesn't have to be. Getting across the idea that council budgets should start from what local communities need – not what central government austerity policies demand – can begin with just one local campaign. In fact, all the alternative budget proposals presented by TUSC-supporting councillors in previous campaigns, explained in more detail in the *TUSC Preparing A No Cuts People's Budget* briefing document, started in this way. A local People's Budget can be as broad or as specific as local campaigners make it.

But an open meeting to make sure it genuinely reflects the local community's needs will be vital – ideally a specific 'People's Budget conference' to draw together the local set of demands and campaign issues to take to the council ahead of their 2026-27 budget-setting meeting.

To prepare for that, Your Party supporters could draw up a list of trade union branches, campaign groups, community organisations, residents associations, students unions, student societies and so on, to take part. Ask them about co-hosting the event. But certainly invite them to contribute with their ideas and proposals for what the local community needs. Local authority websites, by the way, should have information on all the organisations that receive council funding or grants. Track this down and go through to see what relevant organisations may be good to contact to see if they want to be involved.

A draft 'suggested People's Budget of demands' for the local council area could be discussed at an initial meeting of Your Party supporters. This could act as a starting point that could then be debated, added to and amended from the local, broader, conference.

If it does achieve wider input from the local community a resulting 'People's Budget' could, in itself, be the local manifesto for Your Party candidates in May's elections; underpinned, of course, as it needs to be, by a clear no cuts commitment. And really, what better way could there be to create unity across working class communities against the divide-and-rule propaganda of the establishment politicians, including Reform?

Think local, aim big

Other campaign opportunities could also come from the process of bringing together a People's Budget ahead of the council's official budget-setting meeting. All councils, for example, accept petitions from residents, although they have different rules about what happens then. Some petitions on a defined issue (opposing a specific council proposal) may require the council to respond in a report following consultation. Petitions reaching a certain threshold may mean the council has to debate the issue at a full, public, council meeting, often with the lead petitioner having speaking rights.

Check the petition rules for individual local authorities to see what is possible but the main point is to use every avenue to build momentum for a real anti-austerity alternative before the May elections. To build the base in the community for the constant campaigning that will be needed after May if a new party councillor is elected – or, thinking big, if the new party wins a majority in the council!

And who is to say that is not possible in at least some of the councils that are being contested in this particular four-yearly cycle of elections next May? If, that is, there is a properly organised national stand. ■

Preparing for the May elections: what if registration is delayed?

To fully maximise the opportunities that have been opened up by Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana's call for a new party, TUSC believes that a banner with a clear working class and socialist identity must be registered with the Electoral Commission in time for the May 2026 elections, for a nationwide challenge to the capitalist establishment parties. This means that the new party name and at least an interim constitution that allows a democratic process to select candidates needs to be agreed and submitted to the Commission by early 2026, before the register of political parties in place for the May elections is finalised in March.

At this point it is not clear, however, that the organisers appointed by the 'Independent Alliance' group of six MPs – who are now acting as the interim leadership of Your Party to bring the new party into being – will be able to successfully achieve that goal in that timeframe. Instead the possibility is that there will be an array of local groups contesting the elections under different banners.

There are already a number of locally-based parties registered with the Electoral Commission who are supportive of the idea of a new party, but each with their own name. These include, in North East England, the Majority party, led by the former independent mayor of the North of Tyne Combined Authority, Jaime Driscoll; Aspire in Tower Hamlets in London, who have led the council there since 2022 and are up for re-election next May; the Black Country Party, based on a group of ex-Labour councillors in Dudley; the Broxtowe Alliance (in Nottinghamshire); Arise (in Harrow); the Independent Oxford Alliance and Oxford Community Socialists; as well as a dozen or so separate parties registered as 'Community Independents' in specific local authority areas, including Birmingham, Ealing, Enfield, Kirklees, Liverpool, North Tyneside, Southport and Walsall.

These are all important steps forward towards breaking the grip on political representation of capitalist parties and politicians which, if it had a democratic 'federal' structure which allowed them to maintain their own identity if they wished, could be incorporated in the new party. But just a network of such groups – which may well be what emerges for May's elections – will not project an all-Britain profile of an alternative force to the establishment parties, or be likely to achieve the same results that would be possible with a new party in place. Not to establish a new party in time would be a missed opportunity.

If registration is delayed, what are the ballot paper options?

But that might happen. And if the hurdles of legally registering a party and democratically agreeing candidates have not been overcome in time, TUSC will still be encouraging the widest participation of new party supporters in the 2026 elections – and offering its banner for use by candidates.

Because while TUSC enthusiastically welcomes the rise of candidates prepared to stand independently against the establishment parties it is also right to ask: is the 'independent' label clear enough to differentiate those genuinely independent candidates fighting for working class people and their communities, from others using the word to hide their often right-wing views?

It's a fact. Nearly one in eight councillors already sit in town halls as 'Independents' – not too far behind the number of Liberal Democrats – participating in council administrations and making cut after cut to local public services. Why would those of us who want to see a new party of the working class not want to distinguish ourselves from those 'independents' on the ballot paper?

Another factor to consider is how would the results of candidates standing as independents – even under locally registered 'Community Independents' descriptions – be reported by the media, in comparison say to the almost certain Reform surge? The broadcasting authorities are only legally obliged to report on candidates who appear on the ballot paper using a description of a registered party (if there enough of them to reach a qualifying threshold number). Standing as an independent, or under the name of different local parties registered with the Electoral Commission, does not count towards the threshold, even if they all declare they are part of an independent alliance. What will be the message from the elections on May 8th after polling day if the results won by new party supporters are buried in the 'others' column?

The TUSC offer

That was why, in welcoming the call for a new party back in July, the TUSC steering committee offered to 'hand over' our registration with the Electoral Commission to Jeremy and Zarah as an interim measure if that would help the process along. And the offer still applies, including for the May 2026 elections if a new party has not been able to be registered by then.

TUSC has a number of registered descriptions available that Your Party supporters could use on the ballot paper, including *Independent Trade Union and Socialist Candidate*, *Socialist and Trade Union Candidate*, *Trade Unionists and Socialists Against Cuts* as well as the registered name, *Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition*. They may not be the preferred option of many Your Party supporters but they do have the advantage of saying clearly which side of the class division of wealth and power the new party's candidates would be on.

Using a registered description also entitles a candidate to use, if they wish, an accompanying distinguishing emblem on the ballot paper too. Otherwise there can only be a blank space next to the candidate's name and the word, 'Independent'. But this is optional. If someone just wants to use a description without an emblem, they can. It's the candidate's choice.

TUSC has operated as an inclusive umbrella alliance with its registered descriptions and emblems available to every working-class fighter prepared to stand up to the capitalist establishment politicians at election time. The only qualification that has been made is that prospective candidates agree to abide by the minimum TUSC core policies platform for the relevant election if they were to be elected. These are a list of basic commitments that voters could expect from someone using the TUSC banner – while leaving room for every individual candidate to keep control of their own campaign with their own additional policy priorities. Our current core policies platform for local elections – 'the six guarantees' – can be seen at <https://www.tusc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Local-elections-core-policies.pdf>.

To conclude. TUSC enthusiastically welcomes the prospect of Your Party supporters standing in the May elections, however they present themselves on the ballot paper if a new party name has unfortunately not been registered, as an important first step to a new mass workers' party. But if supporters of Jeremy and Zarah's call for a new party want to use an independent trade unionist and socialist identifier on their ballot paper for the May local elections, the option is there! ■