

## UK Independence Party

### Local Government Policies 2006

#### *What's wrong with local government?*

Over the past few years, there have been large increases in council tax without noticeable improvements in local services. Instead, we see decision making behind closed doors (the 'cabinet' system), local planning decisions taken by bureaucrats in Whitehall, the protection of pensions for council employees while private sector employees lose theirs, and money wasted on the creation of a whole range of new politically-correct jobs. People are as disillusioned with local government as they are with national government and voting at all levels is seen as a waste of time. It doesn't seem to make any difference who you vote for.

The reality is that, as with all public services, councils have been suffering from growing central control. Our nanny-state, with its culture of performance targets and endless regulatory interference with our police forces, hospitals, schools and local authorities has made it increasingly difficult for these services to function. Extra cash is more than absorbed by the growth in bureaucracy and inefficiency. There is no longer any trust in our councils nor in the professionals who run our services.

This local manifesto outlines the UK Independence Party's view of how some key areas of local government can be improved.<sup>1</sup> We recognise that many of the policies will require not only changes in national legislation but also a change of mindset about the purpose of local councils – **councils should serve the people, not the government**. Just as we believe that Britain must leave the European Union in order to reclaim the powers to make UK law from unelected bureaucrats in Brussels, so we believe that powers over local affairs should be returned from Whitehall to Town Halls, including greater control over their budgets.

UK Independence Party Councillors will be part of the campaign to achieve these results. In the meantime, since they are not tied to the policies of the old political parties, they can genuinely listen to the concerns of the local electorate and behave accordingly.

#### *Let towns and counties run their own affairs*

The UK Independence Party sees serious flaws in the new system of local government in which most decisions are made by an 'executive cabinet' consisting of a few of the elected council members, with the remaining members serving mainly in an advisory capacity through the various committees. UKIP believes the interests of local democracy and accountability are better served by having all elected Councillors fully involved in major decisions and we would promote appropriate reform of the cabinet system.

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<sup>1</sup> For the full range of UK Independence Party policies, please see our national manifesto 'Manifesto 2005' on [www.ukip.org](http://www.ukip.org).

A far greater threat to local representative government comes, however, from regionalisation. The government's objective is to bypass our councils in favour of bodies established in the 9 English regions, in conformity with the European Union's preferred structure. Already, a large number of administrative functions are dealt with by the Government Offices of the Regions and the Regional Development Agencies, with more functions recently added such as emergency services and museum services. The latest addition to the list is our police forces, which are now being regionalised with great haste on spurious arguments about efficiency and the ability to combat terrorism.

The concept of *elected* regional bodies was overwhelmingly rejected by a ballot in the North East in 2004. Nonetheless, the shadowy 'Regional Assemblies', which were created in order to assume this role, continue to be kept alive by support from government and local authorities and they now play a major part in local planning.

The UK Independence Party rejects this regionalisation programme outright. It has no popular support, it adds more bureaucracy and more cost, it is being imposed insidiously and consultation has been dominated by those with vested interests. People identify with a town and a county – don't try and make them feel part of an arbitrarily defined Euro-region, and stop meddling with the structures and the administrative boundaries.

As regards the 'West Lothian Question' (the anomaly that Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish MPs take part in legislation that only affects England), UKIP would create an *English Parliament* to debate English-only legislation. This would be composed only of English MPs, and it would meet one week out of four in the existing Westminster building. The complete UK parliament would debate UK-wide legislation during the other three weeks.

Finally, as a further measure to reconnect with the electorate and in line with our policy for national referendums, UKIP proposes that local referendums should be held on issues of major local concern whenever there is sufficient popular support. Specifically, if 10% of electors in a given local authority area sign a petition calling for a referendum on any matter of local policy, then the relevant local authority would be obliged to hold such a referendum and be bound by its result.<sup>2</sup> Councils would be encouraged to call referendums on their own initiative when they see this as appropriate. Examples of specific issues that might be put to a popular vote are large business and housing developments and significant changes to local transport infrastructure.

The UK Independence Party is in favour of Parish Councils, and would aim to maximise their powers and their ability to influence the decisions of relevant Borough and District Councils.

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<sup>2</sup> We suggest that the threshold of 10% is high enough to deter misuse yet low enough to be achieved when major interests are at stake. Regarding the terms of the referendum, a majority vote with a minimum of 15% of the electorate voting in favour may be deemed sufficient to cause the authority to act according to the result.

### ***Financing local government***

Around three quarters of the funding for local authorities currently comes in the form of a grant from central government. This is problematic for two reasons. First, it is the root cause of the very large recent increases in council tax. Central government has increased the financial obligations of councils without sufficient increases in funding and the councils have had to find the difference from their own resources. Secondly, we cannot expect councils to treat the interests of their local electors as their priority when so much of their finance is provided by central government.

To give councils greater financial autonomy, UKIP proposes that they should retain business rates rather than passing them to the Treasury and should directly receive the transfer duty on purchases of property. They should also have freedom, within limits, to choose the levels of transfer duty and business rates. We believe this will help them to encourage the sort of commercial development that they consider is appropriate for their locality – for instance, the regeneration of high street shopping as against out of town retail parks.

A further change which UKIP is currently considering as part of its overall tax reform agenda is to replace VAT with a sales tax, which would be collected locally and would completely replace the government grant. This would give local authorities total control over their own finances.

Finally, as explained in our national manifesto, UKIP would aim to cut council tax by 50% by means of greater funding from the Treasury. This would reverse the recent increases that have caused so much hardship, particularly to pensioners.

### ***Housing***

The UK Independence Party is unconvinced about the government's declared 'need' for large numbers of new housing units. To the extent that there is such a need, this is largely driven by immigration, since the population would otherwise be static or falling. Consequently, rather than aiming for massive increases in the housing stock, the government should first exert proper control over immigration, both legal and illegal, as detailed in our national manifesto.

However, as property prices have risen faster than incomes, it has become harder for first-time buyers and the rural population and this has led to greater calls for subsidised 'affordable housing'. Unfortunately, this arrangement is open to abuse. When homes are bought for prices that are lower than market prices, it is hard to ensure that they remain occupied by those they were intended for, and not subsequently sold for the profit of individuals or companies.

In order to ease the pressure on the housing market, UKIP believes that more land should indeed be made available, but that this should be predominantly on brown field sites. It is vital to protect what is left of our green belts. To this end we would provide financial assistance for cleaning up old industrial sites where necessary.

We are strongly opposed to urban regeneration schemes that involve the compulsory purchase and demolition of old houses and their replacement with new estates, where refurbishment of the properties would not only be cheaper but also less socially disruptive. One factor that drives this unfortunate practice is the anomaly that Value Added Tax is not charged on new properties but is charged on refurbishment – a result of European Union rules. UKIP would remove this anomaly by changes to the tax rules. Where compulsory purchase orders are genuinely necessary – for whatever reason – UKIP would ensure that that a fair market price is paid.

Above all, we insist that planning decisions over housing development must be left largely to local authorities, not over-ridden by regional or national government.

An altogether more intractable problem is the provision of social housing for the homeless and a rising number of those who are ‘vulnerable’ – a term which includes those with mental health, drug and alcohol problems. In providing social housing, our councils have to cope with continually changing government objectives, the usual barrage of performance targets and quality assessments, a complicated and ever-changing benefit system that too often rewards dependency, and rising costs from unnecessarily strict health and safety regulations applied to their properties. The current trend is towards covert privatisation of social housing using Housing Associations and Private Finance Initiatives – which enable the government to postpone finding the necessary funds.

A further problem lies in dealing with tenants who display antisocial behaviour.

Proper attention to these problems will require a thorough overhaul of the benefit system (which UKIP would undertake – see our national manifesto) with the emphasis on helping those who are trying to stay in work, and acceptance that privatisation of support services and PFIs usually turn out more expensive.

As regards dealing with unruly tenants, while we believe that unlawful behaviour must attract appropriate penalties, rehabilitation and retraining must also be part of the solution. Eviction without these sorts of measures merely moves the problem elsewhere.

### ***Law and order***

The essence of UKIP’s policy on law and order, as in other policy areas, is that policing can be much improved by greater local control and we would make Chief Constables and other senior officers directly accountable to local government. We need to relieve our forces from too much central direction, including performance targets, the mass of paperwork and politically correct rules that ignore the realities of the job. We recognise the part played by Community Support Officers and Neighbourhood Wardens but we still need to get ‘bobbies back on the beat’ which means allowing them to do the work for which they are trained.

The other problem is that sentencing is often seen as too lenient, leading to the reluctance of police to tackle low-level crime knowing that the penalty will be a ‘slap on the wrist’. This is the main reason why antisocial behaviour orders (ASBOs) have become ineffective. UKIP would review sentencing, strengthen the powers of lay

magistrates and reopen local magistrates' courts. And if more prisons are needed, they must be built.

We are confident that these measures will succeed in reducing crime by making it more likely that it leads to an appropriate penalty. But the largest impact on crime will come from UKIP's programme of improving job opportunities, reforming education, restoring local democracy and reinforcing family values. With a greater sense of purpose and belonging, the crime problem will become easier to manage, even drug-related crime and the antisocial behaviour associated with binge-drinking.

Above all, UKIP will never accept being 'harmonised' into the European Union's system of *Corpus Juris* which would abolish trial by jury, establish a European Public Prosecutor and allow imprisonment without trial. We shall also expose the specious argument that, as with identity cards, these measures are necessary to protect us against terrorism.

### ***Transport***

There are always going to be calls for better and cheaper public transport and while UKIP welcomes improvements that have been made, we believe there is scope for greater local influence in the operation of bus services, including the provision of services to out of town areas. One particular policy would be to improve security on buses, particularly in the late evenings, as an aid to the safe dispersal of crowds from town centres.

For many journeys, however, the private car will remain the cheapest and most convenient means of transport. To improve the lot of the motorist, UKIP believes local authorities should be granted more autonomy over local traffic management. And while we recognise the conflict between road building and environmental concerns, we regard adequate spending on roads as essential. We would also return the administration of parking to local authorities, since the recent wave of privatisation has led to the accusation that parking charges are being used for raising cash rather than optimising the use of available space.

The UK Independence Party notes serious doubts about the experiment with congestion charges in London and we would halt any further congestion charging schemes. The preferable alternative which is in use in many town and city centres is pedestrianisation.

UKIP would confine the use of speed cameras to locations where there is an established safety risk, removing those that do not cut accidents. Maintaining unrealistic speed limits and arbitrarily trapping offenders only brings the law into contempt. And there are other dangerous motoring offences that also merit police attention.

### ***The environment***

The UK Independence Party is committed to the protection of our environment and the promotion of recycling. However, the pace of national legislation, largely driven by EU directives, has tended to exceed the capacity of local authorities to cope. Local

conditions and the practical difficulties of implementation have often been ignored. The continuing consequences in the case of waste disposal are stock-piling of waste awaiting treatment (fridge mountains), long distance transport of certain classes of waste, and widespread fly-tipping to avoid landfill charges – which defeats the point of the legislation.

As in other policy areas, UKIP believes that greater local control is the key to success. Allow local authorities to determine the best way of dealing with waste, within the national guidelines, and to persuade their communities of the importance of recycling. Allow them to have more say over local environmental issues, including planning decisions over developments. And allow them and their communities to take a pride in the results.

### ***Conclusion***

Over the past 30 years, the Whitehall straitjacket on local government has tightened immensely. Centrally driven agendas, targets and inspection regimes have smothered local government accountability, to the extent that local government now exists largely to do the bidding of central government, delivering ministerial, not local priorities, and tied to Treasury funding.

Unfortunately, the government, ever conscious of electoral damage if it is not seen to be ‘doing something’ in response to public concerns, tends to react with a stream of ever-changing ill-considered short-term policies. It then embarks on consultation exercises – for example, over the amalgamation of police forces – which are widely perceived as a sham. The government is not really interested in hearing views and the purpose of consultations is to sell decisions that have already been made.

Moreover, it is seldom realised how much the agenda stems from European Union directives. The closure of post offices, the reorganisation of our railways, the building of wind farms – which are unlikely ever to be a viable energy source, and the huge number of over-strict health and safety regulations all have their origins in the EU. As regards local government structure, the regionalisation programme, the growth of quangos to cope with EU funding of projects and town twinning arrangements are all products of the EU, co-ordinated by the Committee of the Regions in Brussels.

The solution to these problems, after reclaiming powers from the EU, is to shift the balance of national power back towards local democracy – to undertake genuine devolution. In this way, local authorities will reconnect with local communities and councils can answer to those who pay the council tax. This is the way to address social exclusion and its accompanying problems – by convincing people that they have a part to play in society and restoring civic pride. It is also the way to revive interest in voting.

The alternative, in which powers continue to move upwards and away from those they effect, is ultimately unsustainable.

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