Housing, Local Government & Transport

1. *How do we open up local democracy to give people a bigger voice over the communities they live in and the public services they use? How do we overcome the barriers to more open, participative local democracy?*

2. *What is national government for, what is local government for, and what should the future relationship between the two look like?*

3. *How can we make local government more democratic and accountable? What examples can we draw on, and how will this increase people's ability to influence the decisions that affect their lives?*

4. *How can we use digital technology to promote innovation in local services and open up power and decision making more widely? Can we learn from examples elsewhere in the world and what are they?*

5. *How can we make sure that local authorities have the resources to deliver the level of services needed for communities?*

Coronavirus and the future of local government

The coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has exposed the deep inequalities that scar our country. Poor people, older people and BAME communities have all suffered disproportionately from infection just as they suffer disproportionately from other forms of inequality.

Many of our lowest-paid workers are those now cheered by the public for getting the country through the crisis. This includes NHS workers, delivery drivers, shop workers and council employees. If the Conservatives pursue a further wave of austerity after the pandemic, these are the very workers who will face job losses and real-terms pay cuts – something the public may now be less willing to tolerate.

We do not yet know how Covid-19 might change our politics, our society and our economy, but the changes could be dramatic. The global financial crash of 2007 crystallised a growing sense that the system had failed too many people, holding back individuals, communities and whole regions from sharing in the growing wealth of the country.

The Covid-19 crisis could create an upheaval even more dramatic as it sharply demonstrates to the public how the current system has failed to protect them. Labour must show how we can tackle the inequalities of power, wealth and opportunity that scar our country and are reflected in the disproportionate impact of Covid-19.

The Conservatives have spent the past ten years deepening divisions and widening inequality. They left the country woefully unprepared to cope with the pandemic. Shortages of PPE have put workers and vulnerable people at risk, the underfunding of the care sector has seen rates of death and infection soar, and many more people have now experienced the failures of Universal Credit. Poorer communities have suffered far deeper cuts in council funding than the wealthiest and local government workers have suffered real-terms pay cuts of 20% since 2010.

As we start looking towards the end of the crisis, there is a growing feeling that instead of going back to what we had before we must build back better. Our country is approaching a political crossroads and Labour's task is to create a compelling vision of a better, fairer and more equal future.

The challenges

Inequalities of power underpin the inequalities of wealth and opportunity that visibly scar our country. This creates a big challenge for Labour – how do we open up power to more people? Can we reshape our society to give people a real voice at work, in their neighbourhoods and over the public services they use, so we can build fairer communities as part of a fairer country? In particular, how do we make sure the most vulnerable – those who often have the weakest voice – are able to influence the decisions that affect their lives instead of being subject to decisions taken about them by others? At a time when trust in politics and politicians is broken, can Labour rebuild trust by showing that we trust people to take back control and have a bigger say for themselves?

This opens up a debate about the future relationship between citizens and the state. Britain is one of the most centralised states in the world, and many people feel that model has failed them because it is too top-down, remote and unresponsive.

Does Labour believe decisions are best taken as close as possible to the people affected by them so those people can better influence them? If so, which decisions should be taken centrally, and which should be devolved? How do we ensure devolution isn't just about shifting power from one tier of politicians to another, but is instead about giving people a real voice over the decisions that affect them at work, in their communities and over the public services they use?

This debate challenges us to ask what national government is for, what local government is for, and what the relationship between the two should be. At present, local government exists on licence from national government which can impose cuts and changes as it sees fit, with or without the consent of local communities. Are we content with that, or should local government have its own constitutional basis and

its own secure funding system independent of national government? How do we make sure any future funding system makes sure resources are distributed fairly?

For some, their engagement with local democracy will begin and end at the ballot box. For others, it's about active participation through campaigning, lobbying, or working with neighbours to improve local communities. More vulnerable people find it harder to engage, but there are plenty of examples of co-production to ensure they can be guaranteed a say in the decisions that affect their lives. If we believe people should have a bigger say over such decisions, then should they be able to choose the kind of service they want and who should provide it and should they be able to replace failing service providers with an alternative?

Labour can choose to remake politics around people, creating a more open, participative and responsive democracy that gives people a voice and the power to make it heard. There's evidence to show that more empowered communities are happier and more resilient in dealing with the challenges they face. Instead of seeking power for ourselves, should Labour instead seek power to empower everyone else as part of a more democratic society?

The way forward

Ever since Labour was first founded we have talked about giving power to the people. But often, that's translated into giving power to the state. In former decades, that may have been the best way to create a fairer society, but is that still the case or should we be looking at alternative forms of common ownership, participative models of decision-making, and approaches based on co-production where power is shared? The world has moved on, communities are more diverse and less deferential, so we must adapt to a world that operates in very different ways and where people demand and expect a bigger say for themselves and the communities they are part of.

The digital revolution is opening up data, information and people's ability to connect with each other in ways that were unimaginable even a few years ago. It's transforming the way we work, socialise, shop, learn, and even how we meet new people. Politics cannot be immune to this change. There is a growing global movement of innovative cities using new technology to open up participation, decision making and tackle the problems communities face. The UK has been slow to embrace these innovations – how do we support Labour in local government to make greater use of them?

The world is changing fast. It will change again as we rebuild after the Covid- 19 crisis. People will be less tolerant of the inequalities that have deepened over recent decades and been thrown into sharp relief during the crisis. Workers who were once

disregarded are now seen as the best of us. But the threat from the right has not receded. They will seek to exploit this crisis and its aftermath for their own ends. Labour's challenge is to shape a vision of a fairer future. And part of that will be rethinking the role of local government as part of a renewed democratic settlement in a more secure and sustainable world.