

Ed Davey – Liberal Democrat MP for Kingston and Surbiton

1. What do you think are the main issues facing older people in Kingston?

There are a wide variety of concerns – not least because older people can differ widely in their own concerns.

For all too many local older people, there remain financial concerns such as the level of their pension, the cost of heating their homes and council tax.

For others, it is more about local services, from post offices closing to pressures on day centres, to concerns about the future of local health services like Kingston or Surbiton Hospitals. Healthcare obviously is a major concern for many older people – whether they are currently frequent users of the NHS or about how their care might be in the future. Some worry about the level of crime and anti-social behaviour, and want to be reassured by high visibility policing.

And there is a long list of other worries such as the future of the Freedom Pass, age discrimination at work or for public services, care for the elderly more generally, rip-off landlords the availability of public toilets, wider transport issues and so on.

2. How do you propose to address these issues?

Many of these problems can only be addressed by national policies, but locally I would of course wish to work with Kingston Age Concern, Kingston's Pensioner Forum, the local council, the local NHS and so on.

On finance, Liberal Democrats would immediately restore the link between the annual increase in the pension and earnings. Since this was broken by the Conservatives in the 1980s, this has cost pensioners hundreds of pounds. Restoration is critical to guaranteeing pensioners a fair share in the future improvements in living standards, so pensioners don't continually fall behind the rest of the population. In addition on finance, we want to increase the income tax allowance, which will mean up to an extra £100 for many pensioners, and scrap council tax. The Council Tax is an unfair tax which bears no relationship to the ability to pay. Liberal Democrats believe that it should be scrapped and replaced with a fair Local Income Tax. We believe that it is necessary to pilot this to resolve any practical issues of implementation before it is rolled out nationally. We would therefore invite local councils to put themselves forward to be involved in the piloting phase in the second year of a Parliament.

Finally on finance, we want fair energy prices for the elderly so would force energy companies to introduce "social tariffs", lower than other prices, for everyone struggling to pay their energy bills.

On local services, we would keep post offices open, ending Labour's closure programme, and create new sources of revenue for them, like a Post Bank. On the NHS, we would protect all frontline services, so locally I am campaigning to remove the threat to Kingston Hospital's Accident and Emergency and Maternity Department and to have Surbiton Hospital rebuilt - following a range of past successful local health campaigns on things like diabetes, digital hearing aids, funding for muscular degeneration, expansion of maternity services and so on.

On fighting crime, I have campaigned successfully over 12 years for more police in Kingston, and now every area has Safer Neighbourhood Police Teams, with far more visible policing. At the next election, Liberal Democrats will be arguing for 3,000 more police officers across the country. Although crime remains too high, at least our Royal Borough of Kingston is now London's safest Borough, with even Kingston town centre winning two national awards from independent bodies for the success in cutting crime.

On the future of the Freedom Pass, we have opposed Labour switching funding for free transport for pensioners away from London to other parts of the country and we have led the argument in Parliament against age discrimination. I have run a number of campaigns to improve care for the elderly, including a campaign against a large national landlord who in my view has been exploiting elderly leaseholders.

I'm currently leading a campaign to save the 514 bus service which is under threat from Conservative-controlled Surrey County Council. This service is critical for many elderly people living in the Lovelace area of Surbiton.

On transport more broadly, I'd like to see more investment in community transport from Transport for London. Recently we lost a local service for some of our most frail elderly and it became clear that such community transport services don't get any real help from the Mayor of London. People can't use their Freedom Passes on community transport for example. I think the services like Dial-a-ride, taxicard and Capital Call could be significantly improved too, and I've been alarmed by cuts to some of these services proposed by London's Mayor.

I would especially like the council to focus even more on helping older people heat their homes better, and I would like to see the council work with shops and businesses across Kingston borough, to see if any would be prepared to allow their toilets to be used by older people at least, and possibly the wider public too. This could vastly increase the availability of toilets when older people are out and about, with relatively little cost.

We need to think about everything from pavements, to reducing cycling on pavements, from getting Network Rail to clear up the pigeon mess under rail bridges like that over the Upper Brighton Road to elsewhere (something I'm working on) to improving pedestrian crossings.

3. Why should Kingston's older people vote for you? What are you proposing that the other parties aren't?

First, I believe I have a strong record standing up for local people, and local pensioners, over many years. From campaigning on Post Offices to helping a large number of individual pensioners when they've had problems with everything from pension credit to Equitable Life, from their housing to local health services, I have championed issues I believe local older people care about. I think the new Post Office in Tolworth Broadway that I successfully campaigned for is positive for local pensioners, as well as past campaigns to save Alfriston Day Centre for the elderly when it was going to be closed. Second, I believe the Liberal Democrat policies I've outlined - especially on pensions, scrapping the unfair council tax, saving post offices, reducing energy costs and protecting the NHS - are policies which help older people more than those put forward by other parties.

Third, there are a host of local opportunities for older people which I back and want to see continue - from the Day Centre on Devon Way in Hook to the new Amy Woodgate home for elderly people with dementia, with its residential rooms and its day centre. I think the U3A (University of the Third Age) is important, and more support for Adult Education, including leisure activities for older people, is important.

Finally, I hope I have a good understanding of the many issues that affect older people having been the nearest relative looking after my late grandmother, with my brother, for twenty years until she passed away a few years ago. Whether it's the centrality of services like post offices and public toilets, or the need to abolish council tax, my late grandmother was clear in her views!!

4. What do you think are the main issues facing older people nationally?

Very similar to the issues facing older people in Kingston - pensions, the NHS, crime, care, cost of energy and transport and other issues which face their families and friends - though Kingston pensioners face London's higher cost of living of course.

I think age discrimination is something that only can be fully tackled nationally, to ensure greater fairness for older people.

We need to look at a range of detailed issues that face *some* older people - from how older people are treated when in hospital, in terms of their dignity and how they are fed, to the

5. Do you think that organisations like Age Concern Kingston should be fully resourced?

I am a strong supporter of Age Concern Kingston, and have always been keen to see them properly resourced, and involved closely in local projects, be those run by the council, the NHS or others. By involving them in projects early on, some of their objectives and work can be jointly or even fully funded by other agencies

6. Transport barriers and their effect on the quality of life of older people in the capital and the local area are a hot topic at the moment. What do you propose to do to tackle the problem?

I'm keen to see the results of the current review and work on this. I'm concerned that Transport for London under the current Mayor is looking to reduce funding for transport for the elderly, making problems like the threat to the essential Freedom Pass even worse. I have a number of ideas for making things easier - including enabling older people to use their Freedom Passes on community transport buses.

I would especially like to see improvements in transport links to local hospitals and shops. While many are good, there are certain areas of the Royal Borough where these are not good enough.

While many bus drivers do a good job, I have had concerns about the training of some bus drivers as I have witnessed rude behaviour and poor, jerky driving, both of which are totally unnecessary.

Elsewhere I've covered issues such as street lighting, pavements, pedestrian crossings, etc.

Overall, we have still - in Kingston, across London and especially in Surrey - to do much more to "join up" transport links. We need to make all transport more accessible - whether that means lifts at train stations, non-functioning ramps on buses, and so on.