

## **Helen Whately - Conservative Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for Kingston and Surbiton**

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

I've seen a huge range of problems affecting older people since I've been the candidate here. Financial worries are often brought up, particularly the rising cost of energy bills and high council tax. Access to transport and the state of the pavements are two barriers to mobility which I'm very aware of. Though this is a low crime area, crime and anti-social behaviour can be particularly worrying for older people. In council estates people with difficulty getting up stairs are usually on the ground floor, but that's also where teenagers gather in the evenings; I've spoken to people too scared to open the door. The closure of local post offices particularly affected older people.

### **2. How do you propose to address these issues?**

The opportunity at the next election is to change who makes the decisions – nationally, the Government and locally, the Council.

If Conservatives are elected to Council, I'll work closely with them on improving care for older people at home, helping people to continue to live independently for as long as possible. Central to this strategy will be working closely with organizations like Age Concern, who already do such good work. There's no reason for the state to take over when non-state organisations have the expertise already.

Nationally, if the Conservatives win I'd be working with David Cameron and his team to make sure we benefit locally from policies to help older people. For example, making sure we benefit from the offer George Osborne made to help councils freeze council tax if the Conservatives win the General Election. Local Lib Dems have rejected this offer, but if the Conservatives win locally we will see council tax frozen for at least two years.

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

Voting Conservative is the only vote that will help change the Government. Only if we change the Government can we expect things to get better. As Chancellor and then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown has shown that older people are way down on his list of priorities. He has raided pensions and though he's made gestures towards helping pensioners on very low incomes, the reality is that the complexity of his credits system means thousands of pensioners don't claim credits they are entitled to. My party is committed to restoring our pensions systems and vastly simplifying the tax and benefits system. At the heart of the difference is a different attitude – while New Labour has idolized youth and 'cool Britannia' we believe in strong communities, and that means valuing every generation.

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

At a national level, many of the issues are the same as the ones I have come across locally. While few other areas have to pay such high Council Tax, financial worries are widespread. The cost of living has risen much faster than pensions. Means testing is deeply unpopular, and it's particularly unfair that it penalizes people who have been prudent and saved for their retirement.

Nationally the needs of older people are frequently overlooked, which amounts to discrimination; the closure of local post offices, higher costs if you pay bills by cheque (and the threat by banks to get rid of cheques altogether), the inaccessibility of so many train stations; these are just some examples of how older people lose out in a youth-orientated culture.

As a society, we often fail to enable people to continue to live independently for as long as they could (which is not to underestimate the hard work of many carers, who devote time and

energy to helping older relatives continue to have a good quality of life). Then there's often the trauma of selling a family home in order to afford residential care, and not infrequently the quality of care provided is poor if not scandalous. We fail people in the very end too; many people die in hospital even though their preference – to pass away at home – is very achievable. This is an area where the NHS could frequently do better.

**5. At a national level, what is there for older people in your party's manifesto?**

Our manifesto hasn't been published yet, but we have already set out several policies.

To tackle the financial problems faced by pensioners, for a start we'll raise the basic state pension in line with earnings. We'll enable councils to freeze council tax. We will give people more control over their retirement income by ending the effective obligation to buy an annuity at 75. We'll protect the Winter Fuel Payment and help reduce energy bills through a new entitlement for every household to be fitted with £6,500 of energy efficiency improvements.

To take away the worry of affording residential care, we will give people the option to make a one-off payment of around £8,000 at 65, and in return be guaranteed free residential care for as long as it's needed.

Tackling the discrimination against older people who don't bank online, we would expand the role of the Post Office Card Account so it could be used to make direct debit payments on utility bills. This could cut the energy bills of up to 4 million POCA holders by up to £100 a year.

David Cameron's commitment to protecting the NHS budget is also a huge commitment to help older people, who are the biggest users of the NHS.

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

I think Age Concern does fantastic work locally and deserves support from the community as well as from the council and Government.

**7. 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?**

Transport for people with mobility problems is inadequate and patchy. I've already been in contact with train companies calling for more stations to have step-free access, and have contacted Councillors several times about poor quality pavements. I'm worried by the complaints I've heard about Dial-a-Ride, and the drop in user numbers is real evidence that the service is failing people. Reliable door to door services are vital. Though a bus stop may seem a short walk away to somebody who's fit and healthy, I remember just how far away they suddenly became when I was heavily pregnant and realise how much further they seem if you have difficulty walking. I think buses that stop when hailed are an important part of the sort of integrated transport system we need. I know there's a challenge to deliver more accessible transport when public spending needs to be cut, but I'll be working with the Mayor of London to make sure despite the financial pressures we still get progress.